

The Parenting Dilemmas Of Transracial Adoption

MAY 11, 2011 1:00 PM ET

NEAL CONAN, host:

This is TALK OF THE NATION. Im Neal Conan in Washington.

Any kid who's adopted can probably expect worries about identity and about how they fit in with their new family, concerns that only grow bigger when their adoptive parents don't look like them or come from the same culture.

At one time, many parents in such adoptions rejected racial categorization and tried to raise their children as if racial differences did not matter, raise them colorblind.

As those kids have grown up, research shows they've emerged more confused about identity and that colorblindness created discordance rather than unity. And with more and more kids being adopted by parents who don't look like them, the question of how best to raise these children will not go away.

So tell us: If you were adopted in a trans-racial adoption, what role did race play in your upbringing? Give us a call, please, 800-989-8255. Email us, talk@npr.org. You can also join the conversation on our website. That's at npr.org. Click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Later in the program, a preview of the Arctic Council Meeting in Nuuk, Greenland. But first, growing up colorblind. Gina Samuels is an associate professor at the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago. She is multiracial, with black and white heritage, and she conducted research with others, like herself, who were raised by white parents. She joins us now from a studio at the University of Chicago. And nice to have you on the program today.

Professor GINA SAMUELS (University of Chicago): Thank you, nice to be here. Thanks.

CONAN: And I wonder if you could tell us about one of the people you interviewed, Crystal(ph), a 24-year-old woman with black and white heritage who remembers one of the first times she went into a hair salon.

Prof. SAMUELS: Right. So many of these everyday situations that most folks take for granted become cultural venues to learn about how others experience you and read you as black or white or something else.

And so in Crystal's case, she was outed as potentially a trans-racial adoptee when the person asked her if she was raised by a white person because she could tell, based on how she talked and how she carried herself and also not part of that, quote, how she wore her hair.

And so in those moments, that person is recognizing and picking up cultural cues that you're something other than what you might look.

CONAN: The stylist said she didn't even know what a hot comb was.

Prof. SAMUELS: Right, right.

CONAN: And this was someone who had grown up in a white family, in a largely white area and didn't walk, talk or act like most African-Americans.

Prof. SAMUELS: Right, and so we have these assumptions that how you look in a racial way, then you should match culturally. And when people don't, then the world oftentimes asks you questions to explain yourself as to why those things don't match in your case.

CONAN: There's another woman you spoke of named Marsha(ph), who explained: I often tell people up front I'm biracial and trans-racially adopted because instead of thinking that she's stuck-up and acting white, they say her parents are both white, that's why she talks like a white girl. So I think sometimes it diffuses the situation. They're like: Oh, she's not trying to be something; she is that thing.

Prof. SAMUELS: Right, right, and so there's sort of an assumption that blackness is something that one would want to escape because it's a devalued and stigmatized status.

And so when we see African-Americans who are acting in ways that we might read as culturally white, it's automatically interpreted as a choice of trying to pass or escape or be white.

And so sometimes for people who are biracial, who are living in multiracial families or who maybe grew up in suburbs, there's an explanation for it: No, no, no, I'm not actually trying to do this. This is a reflection of who I am and how I grew up.

CONAN: And this is not to say that there were not some advantages to growing up raised by white people, too.

Prof. SAMUELS: Yeah, I think a lot of the adoptees talked about ways in which it was useful in the workplace or to connect with white people, to have a sense of closeness and familiarity: White people weren't the other.

And so that certainly played out in place where they were, in adulthood, having to negotiate predominately white contexts.

CONAN: This is another quote from some of the people, one of the people you interviewed: I remember there was a girl named Ebony(ph), and she could not believe I had been adopted by white people. She was like: Wow, you were adopted by white people. Are they nice to you? Do they treat you well?

And that was a shock to me because it was the first time I realized that black people might not get treated well by white people. I was teased by white people, but at the same time, I had white people sticking up for me. You know, I didn't feel like all of them were against me.

Prof. SAMUELS: Right, so when you live up close to any group, right, you're able to see the pros and the cons and the advantages and disadvantages. And here, she's talking about really becoming aware of I think a couple things: first, another group's perception of people who she's very familiar, a group that she's very familiar with; but also making the point that being a trans-racially adopted person is a very political existence that people have very powerful opinions about, even though they themselves have not lived that experience.

And so you oftentimes, when you're not with your family, and automatically outed as a trans-racial adoptee, you have these opportunities to really hear how strongly people feel about that.

On the other side, there are often times when you go out with your family, and people will come up to you and voice their opinions, as well. So many adoptees talked about those experiences, also.

CONAN: Sure, and feeling that even though they felt loved by their white parents and felt very comfortable in what amounted to a bubble of suburbia, those who were raised there, I think there was this one, Steven(ph), again who said he would have felt adrift, dead somehow, had he not connected with the outside world.

Prof. SAMUELS: Right, and so there's a part of many of these adoptees where, especially as they grow older, and their worlds broaden and expand, where they start to realize that there is a part of them that they may not have had the opportunity to experience.

And that oftentimes is, in part, a collective experience of their racial self and their racial heritage. And so that's certainly not true of all adoptees, but many of the ones that I talked to talked about how very important it was for them to access more than just books or dolls or a festival but a community that they felt they were a part of and that that was an experience that oftentimes was taken for granted that wasn't a part of their childhoods growing up.

CONAN: We want to talk today with kids who were adopted across racial lines and tell us what their experience of race was like growing up, 800-989-8255. Email us, talk@npr.org. Carmen's(ph) on the line, Carmen calling us from St. Louis.

CARMEN (Caller): Hi.

CONAN: Hi, Carmen, you're on the air. Go ahead, please.

CARMEN: Yes, I grew up with an African-American brother, and I now have an African-American son, and we are a Caucasian family. And the one thing that I try to do differently that my parents were not able to do is talk to my biological children about what other kids might say to them and what negative experiences they may have because we weren't prepared for that.

My parents tried to raise us in a colorblind sort of utopia, and we weren't prepared for the negativity that we were going to get about our brother. We didn't understand it, and we didn't know how to handle it.

CONAN: So you were raised to think that things had changed greatly when, well, there may have been changes, but there were things that didn't change.

CARMEN: Unfortunately yes. We had some...

CONAN: Go ahead.

CARMEN: We had some negative situations that we just, you know, we didn't expect. We thought that everybody loved everyone, and color didn't matter, and...

CONAN: When did it come home to you?

CARMEN: Probably in middle school. In middle school, when I heard racial comments, and - you know, I lived in Oklahoma. I'm not shocked that I heard racial comments. But it just never occurred to me that I would hear them about my brother. It just didn't occur to me.

CONAN: And it's interesting. Gina Samuels, there are any number of motivations that people have to raise their adopted children colorblind or in that situation. But one of them that you cite is a feeling that this is endorsing the aims of the civil rights movement.

Prof. SAMUELS: Right, and so it's oftentimes with the best of intentions that parents do this and reflects maybe how they hope the world will be someday.

But as your caller just indicates that oftentimes what this ends up doing is having children be meeting the world, the real world, unprepared. And then there's not a family norm of having the ability to come home and talk about it because it's real.

And so kids are met with some hurtful situations that they're unprepared for and therefore unprepared to deal with in a healthy and strength-based way.

CONAN: Carmen, thanks very much for the call.

CARMEN: Thank you.

CONAN: Let's see if we can go next to - this is Rachel(ph), Rachel calling us from Grand Rapids.

RACHEL (Caller): Hi, thanks for taking my call.

CONAN: Sure.

RACHEL: So yes, I grew up, my parents adopted nine of us, and they had one. And we have seven different cultures, you know, ethnicities in my family. But because my family is Chinese-American, and my mother is Caucasian, we also grew up with a very strong Chinese, you know, Chinese culture.

So when explaining to people, like, what I am, I would say I'm Vietnamese-Italian, but I'm Chinese, even though I'm not Chinese by race but by culture.

CONAN: And that is - that can get complicated.

RACHEL: It can get very complicated, especially since the majority of my family is Korean-black. And we also have Chinese-American, Italian-Vietnamese and Guatemalan. So it was very interesting growing up.

A lot of times, because we're right around the same age, people would think when we would go out to dinner that we were at a birthday party. But in all reality, it was just me going out to dinner with my family, with my brothers and sisters.

CONAN: I wonder, given that many of you, whether you sort of bonded together as your own little tribe.

RACHEL: We did. We did. We are very much so, very close. And, you know, it really didn't matter. Like, we were all different colors, and we were different cultures, but at the same time, we were in the same family. And, you know, that's one thing that my father really put into us is that, you know, we're family here.

And so even though other people would look at us different, you know, we thought we were all the same.

CONAN: Rachel, thank you very much for the call.

RACHEL: You're welcome.

CONAN: Appreciate it. And Gina Samuels, you were studying largely people who were biracial African-American and white, raised by white parents. Gina's call suggests that this is - well, can be a little more complicated than that.

Prof. SAMUELS: Absolutely. It gets very complicated, as this caller indicates. And I love how she made the distinction between, you know, what one is by racial heritage and then the identity that the full family forms.

And that's really important that in any multiracial family, regardless of how complicated the mix is or isn't, that the family can come together and find a way of identifying, connecting that includes everyone in the family. And that's great.

CONAN: And this research as in part due to your upbringing, no?

Prof. SAMUELS: Right. So it was largely due to my upbringing and also having been a child welfare worker and feeling very dissatisfied with some of the ways in which these issues were grappled with, as either it's a terrible thing, and we should never do it, or it's really, really great, and everybody should do it.

And just like with any family constellation or experience, it's far more complicated than that. And so when I decided to go - leave practice and go back to school, I decided that this would be something that I would want to contribute to as a scholar.

CONAN: We're talking about trans-racial adoptions. If you were adopted by parents who look different from you, did they address the different parts of your background? How? 800-989-8255. Email us, talk@npr.org. Stay with us. I'm Neal Conan. It's the TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

(Soundbite of music)

CONAN: This is TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News. I'm Neal Conan.

The majority of overseas adoptions are trans-racial or trans-ethnic. For example, one in every 10 Korean-American citizens came to the United States through adoption. That makes them the largest group of internationally adopted persons in the United States.

In a survey of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute about trans-racial adoption and identity, adoptees, including hundreds born in South Korea, said they considered themselves or wanted to be white as children.

They cited racism and teasing as reasons for confusion about their identities in childhood and said contact with other Asian people helped them learn to identify as Korean-American when they were adults.

So if you joined your family in a trans-racial adoption, how did your adoptive parents address your background as they raised you? Tell us your story, 800-989-8255. Email talk@npr.org. You can also join the conversation on our website. That's at npr.org. Click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Gina Samuels is with us. She's the author of a report called "Being Raised by White People." Joining us now is Adam Pertman. He's at the studios of our member station in Boston, WBUR. He's executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute and author of a newly revised book, "Adoption Nation." Nice to have you back on the program.

Mr. ADAM PERTMAN (Executive Director, Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute): It's good to be here.

CONAN: And we think of trans-racial adoption. Some may think of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. They have three biological children, along with Zahara from Ethiopia, Maddox from Cambodia, Pax from Vietnam, families like that.

Mr. PERTMAN: Well, you know, trans-racial families aren't just adoptive families. I think it's interesting to think about some of the lessons that Gina's talking about, some of the lessons than in eRA research which is very extensive across all the races and all the types of adoptions.

And to realize that this applies to lots of families in America that were formed through marriage. That - you know, Barack Obama was raised by a white mom. What did she do? What do we need to do? What do all families need to do to help kids feel comfortable in their own skin?

CONAN: And that is a conundrum. It's hard enough with the biological children.

Mr. PERTMAN: You betcha, it is. And what we have to realize, I think, is that it's sort of like marriage. When you marry someone who's of a different race or ethnicity, you don't pretend that it didn't happen: I just happen to be white with a black husband. You know, you become a multiracial or multiethnic family. And I think in adoption in particular, that's a useful model in which to think about it.

We become a multiethnic or multiracial family when we bring in a child who is of a different race or ethnicity, and that really helps define, as Gina was saying earlier, the family as a unit, because we understand each other as being a whole and not just those separate parts.

CONAN: And when we talk about this, the idea of trying to raise kids who are colorblind, was this something that was more predominate a decade or two decades ago than it might be now?

Mr. PERTMAN: Oh, you bet. Social workers used to tell parents: You just raise your child - adoptive parents - you just raise your child as though you gave birth to her. Well, you're white, and she's Korean. That's an interesting trick you've got there.

So the result was things like what you said, what showed up in our research, than an extraordinary majority of trans-racially adopted kids, as kids, grew up wishing they were white or thinking they were white, not wanting to look in a mirror.

That wasn't good for anybody. So we don't live in a race-blind society. You know, per your caller earlier, you know, if she never left her house, maybe they could pull that off. But you leave your house. And the real world is not colorblind.

CONAN: Gina Samuels, I wonder if, in talking to some of the people who experience this, if there wasn't a difference given different ages. Somebody when they're six, seven, eight, nine years old might identify very strongly with their parents and their adoptive family. That might change, though, when they're in high school or college.

Prof. SAMUELS: Well, I think you would assume that, although you have to remember a lot of these kids' contexts, in terms of race, don't change until after they're done with high school, and then they leave to either go to college or move out of the town.

And so many adoptees grow up in predominately white contexts, where people know them since they were in first and second and third grade. And so they develop an identity and a way of surviving and living that incorporate being known by the people who are around them and oftentimes wait until they're 18, 19, 20 to have some of their first-time cultural immersion experiences.

CONAN: And that can be quite a shock.

Prof. SAMUELS: It can be quite a shock if you're not prepared for what that -for all of the questions that come and all of the assumptions about who you are and what your life experience has been like.

And then when you meet that, also with a desire to want to be accepted, that can be a very traumatic experience for some people.

CONAN: We should note it is not universal. We have this email from Michaela(ph) in San Francisco: I am mixed, half-black, half-white, adopted by Swedish parents in 1972. Growing up, race was never really discussed, and even though I did not grow up learning and understanding about my African-American culture, I was able to fulfill this as I got older.

Adoption is not about race. It's about who can provide the love, compassion and consistency that a child needs. That's the priority, not issues of race. I would not have changed a thing about my upbringing and feel lucky and blessed to have the parents and family that I have.

Prof. SAMUELS: Yeah, I think - oh, go ahead, Adam.

Mr. PERTMAN: Sorry. I just - I feel very good for your writer. Having great parents and being raised well is a blessing for anybody. One really easy way to think about it - and I am not equating the two - is if your child has some issue, you know, it could be a positive or a negative, it could be a disability, or she's unusually bright, you deal with the kid you get.

And you have to - you have to acknowledge whatever difference that child has, and you nurture it, or you fix it. But you deal with it. You don't pretend it's not there.

That doesn't mean that everybody has to deal with it in exactly the same way, but pretending that race or ethnicity is not an issue in this country or in one's own family is not necessarily the optimal formula for success.

CONAN: Let's see if we can get Kelly(ph) on the line, Kelly calling us from Charlotte.

KELLY (Caller): Yeah, hi. I just wanted to put a little bit of unique spin on this experience. My African-American husband and I adopted a trans-racial child who is Latino and black.

And there is, in my experience, very little court information, research out there, to help us in our struggle to get him to be culturally aware and culturally sensitive to the part of his life that we kind of don't get, as black people and him being Hispanic.

So really there are all types of different aspects of this trans-racial adoption issue. It's really quite complex.

Mr. PERTMAN: I'd like to just jump in for 30 seconds with an advertisement. I really do recommend that the caller and anybody else who is sort of interested what are the things we can do to get this - your child comfortable in their own skin, to understand the issues better - please do take a look at the Adoption Institute website.

It's adoptioninstitute.org. Look at the study called "Beyond Culture Camp." It's pretty specific in the recommendations it makes and I think is genuinely useful for families as they grapple with these issues.

CONAN: And if you didn't scribble that down as he said it, we'll put a link to that on our website. Just go after the program to npr.org, click on TALK OF THE NATION. We'll send a link there for that. Kelly, thanks very much for the call.

KELLY: Thank you.

CONAN: Here's an email from Amy(ph) in Anchorage: I'm a white female. Years ago, I had an African-American friend who had been adopted as an infant by a white family. She struggled with her race and even resorted to taking classes on being black in America.

Now I have an adopted son who is Alaska Native. My relationship with my friend has made me more aware of my son's potential need to know about his heritage, and I work to provide contact with other Alaska Natives.

Our adoption is open, and we have contact with his birth mother, for which I am thankful. As he gets older, he's six, I'm hoping to be able to send him to a village for some time.

And Gina Samuels, that kind of awareness did not exist in a lot of families maybe 20 years ago.

Prof. SAMUELS: Right, right. So what you're seeing is sort of this next generation that, as a trans-racial adoptee, makes me very happy that some of the message has gotten through about a couple things in that email: one, just, you know, taking seriously a friend's experience and thinking through as a parent now what can she do so that she doesn't repeat that experience.

And two, also that idea of open adoption, which is becoming increasingly more important. I think it's really going to produce, not just for trans-racial adoptees but for all adoptees, hopefully, a very different sort of experience as an adopted person who is able to retain some level of connection with their own biological ties, be they racial, cultural, but just understanding biologically where you come from.

And three, reaching out to communities that can provide those supports and missing pieces that may not be within the family is a great shift and change in trans-racial adoptive parenting.

CONAN: I wanted to read another of the stories you tell in your study, Gina. This is a man named Steven(ph), who recalled attending his family's church when a visiting black minister preached about the importance of racial socialization for black children, and his parents not including him as having those same needs.

I remember him talking about how it's really important to immerse black children in their culture, and my parents were smiling and agreeing, and I was just sitting there, bobbling with anger, bubbling with anger because I was, like: that's not what we had.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Prof. SAMUELS: Yeah, yeah. So, I mean, some of this, I take, is a quote of -this is sort of the disconnection that oftentimes happens between parents and kids, where parents are thinking they're doing something and totally lost on the kid, and then, on another level, questioning whether or not his parents were not thinking of him as black because he was biracial.

And so sometimes that happens also where people think of people who are mixed race as not having the same sort of needs for a connection to culture or to a racial ethnic group that isn't white, as do children who don't come from racially mixed or obviously racially mixed background. And so, in that case, he's having to really think through, how did I get here that we're in this position where my parents are ascribing to a belief that is not practiced in our home?

CONAN: Let's go next to David, David calling from San Francisco. David, you're there? And David, I guess, has left us. Let's go instead to Nick, and Nick on the line from Sacramento.

NICK (Caller): How are you guys doing today?

CONAN: Good. Thanks.

NICK: Yeah. Actually, I grew up in a really small country town, and I grew up -I'm white. And my dad was actually a drug dealer, and as a result, I got taken away. But what ended up happening is I got put in black foster home, and I grew up with black people. And when I went back to my home, my birth parents' home, I got chastised a lot because I talk black and I act black. In fact, I had to teach myself how to act more white as I got older and got into the business world so that we're actually accepted more.

And the one thing that I just really would like to drive home here is regardless of the color of the parent or the child, each child will always recognize love coming from somebody. If you give that child the love that it really knows that is from your heart, they'll grow up knowing that, and that has nothing to do with race. Thank you very much.

CONAN: Nick, before you go...

NICK: Sure.

CONAN: ...was there something that was particularly challenging to do to learn to be a white person?

NICK: Well, it's funny because like I'm more comfortable today even around black people than I am around white people. And my wife, who's also white, she constantly tells me like when I get around black people, all of a sudden my dialect changes and everything else. And she doesn't understand that that's more comfortable for me.

So it is hard because you feel like you're becoming another person when you're around, like, elements, like when I deal with my customers or anything. It's difficult because you feel like I have to be this person in order to, you know, to maintain in the business environment. But the truth is, it's almost like you're fighting with yourself just to be who you really are.

CONAN: It's interesting. Adam Pertman, enough of us feel all the time as if we're faking it and just getting by and just fooling people. And boy, this must add a whole another layer to that.

Mr. PERTMAN: Well, you know, there is a small - there's a minority of adoptions from foster care - mainly from foster care these take place - that are African-Americans or blacks, maybe sometimes Latinos, who adopt white kids. So this is not - this is an unusual phenomenon, but not really rare. It is a very good example.

Again, forgive the pun, but the subtitle of my book is "How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming Our Families." This is a really good example of how families are changing. They're becoming multiracial, multiethnic. It's black parents with white kids. It's a lot of white parents with kids of every color.

And that has a really genuine transformative effect, not just as with this caller, not just on him and his family, but, you know, he's part of a larger community. When you have white parents with African-American kids and their last name is Irish and they're at St. Patrick's Day parade, you know, this forces us to think about who we look like, what we - who we are as a nation and where we're going with it.

CONAN: We're talking with Adam Pertman of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, author of "Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming Our Families and America." Also with us, Gina Samuels, an assistant professor at the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration, author of a recent report, "Being Raised by White People." You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

And, Gina Samuels, I just wanted to follow up on what we were just talking about. It also reinforces, as some of your research suggests, that we be careful about making judgments about people who don't act as if in - or speak in the ways that we anticipate that they will or expect that they will.

Prof. SAMUELS: Right. So we have really simple ideas about what race means. And yet there are very...

CONAN: You call them folk theories.

Prof. SAMUELS: Right. And so we sort of assume that when somebody checks a box African-American, they're going to have this matching way that we've stereotyped what an African-American is; where maybe they live, what their family structure is and definitely how they talk, how they wear their hair, et cetera. And so this caller earlier, who has that - is articulating that experience of what it's like to grow up with a cultural context and a racial context that does not match his racial appearance, and how you navigate that if you decide that you need to make other people feel comfortable with who you are or if you just go ahead and be that and watch other people's discomfort. But it's not an unusual way of coping as somebody who's lived in a mixed race or multiracial or multicultural context.

CONAN: Let's go next to Roger, Roger calling from Nashville.

ROGER (Caller): Yes. I'm calling - I think my son is probably listening to the radio right now. He's being driven home from school by his mom, and I'm picking up my other child. My son, David, is Hispanic, and we recently had an interesting experience. He was pulled over walking down the street in our neighborhood, pulled over by the police exclusively on the basis of his skin color. And it's a white neighborhood, and somebody called in and said there's a kid who don't belong here. And that brings up the whole negative side of racism. I mean, I think if you're raising a child, you know, you need to - they need to know about the history of racism in this country because I think some of it still exists.

CONAN: They need to know about it. I'm not sure there's a positive side to racism.

Mr. PERTMAN: You're right.

CONAN: I'm not sure you meant to say it that way, Roger.

ROGER: No. I mean, they need to know about the negative history of racism.

CONAN: Oh, absolutely.

ROGER: For example, you know, my daughter, who's Caucasian, I wouldn't think twice about her leaving the house with a red bandana on. But, you know, David now knows you don't walk out of the house wearing something that might look to somebody like a gang color.

Mr. PERTMAN: Well, this is a really great example why we can't be colorblind. If a white parent is raising a kid of color, the responsibility is not just to make this person feel comfortable in their own skin, which is obviously essential, but also to empower that child, and then growing up as a youth and an adult, empower them to deal with the society around them. And that does mean letting them know you can't wear that red

bandana. You may be followed in a store. That knowledge is not going to come from personal experience for most white people in America.

CONAN: Coming up, more with our guests, Gina Samuels and Adam Pertman and more of your adoption stories across racial lines. Stay with us.

We'll also look ahead to the Arctic summit that gets underway tomorrow in Greenland. The United States is sending its highest power delegation ever to this conference. The secretary of state and the secretary of the interior will be there.

Stay with us. I'm Neal Conan. It's the TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

(Soundbite of music)

All right now. We're continuing our conversation on transracial adoption and the largely discredited theory of colorblind - raising the children colorblind. Our guests are Gina Samuels, an assistant professor at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration and author of a report called "Being Raised by White People: Navigating Racial Difference Among Adopted Multiracial Adults."

And Adam Pertman is with us, executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, author of the book "Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution Is Transforming Our Families - and America."

And let's see if we can go next to - this is Molly, Molly with us from Canton in Michigan.

MOLLY (Caller): Hi. Thank you for taking my call.

CONAN: Sure.

MOLLY: I am 18. I'm the oldest of eight children. And when I was 13, two of my siblings were adopted from Guatemala. So they are both Latino and the rest of my family is Caucasian. And the comment that I wanted to make is, I think that living as part of a transracial or a mixed race family is really a process. And we keep a really open dialogue about race in our house. You know, we talk about it. We're very conscious of it, but we're still navigating it. And I think that it's going to be something that we're going to have to work really hard to talk about and make relevance, kind of, as we progress, you know, and move forward as a family.

CONAN: And it's interesting. How old are your Guatemalan siblings?

MOLLY: Sam and Maria are five.

CONAN: So they're going to have a lot of growing up to do.

MOLLY: Yes, definitely. And I think that we, you know - given that we recognize how important it is, I think that, you know, hopefully, obviously, they're going to do really well, at least in issues of race. But I think that the most important thing that I would want to say about this topic is, you know, while we address race in our home and while, you know, we're conscious of it, it is nowhere near the most important part of our family. And, you know, we really believe and I really believe that, you know, our family, for whatever reason, you know, wasn't in the same place, you know? Sam and Maria were born in Guatemala, and they made their way to us. And, you know, this is the place where they belong.

And the fact that they are different race from the rest of us really has no bearing on our relationship, you know? I am their sister and, you know, I love them whatever race that they are.

CONAN: Do they have older siblings that will stick up with - for them when they get to school?

MOLLY: Oh, they already do, and that's already been a bridge that we've had to cross. You know, it's not really an issue for our family. You know, we -although we address it, I really believe that it doesn't make any difference to us. That said, you know, it does seem to make a difference to other people. People make comments about it, you know, and that's something that we've already had to address and we, you know, we're trying to figure out.

CONAN: Yeah. Gina Samuels - and Molly, thanks very much.

MOLLY: Thank you so much.

CONAN: The kids you talked to were no longer kids, said, you know, we always understood we were different.

Prof. SAMUELS: Yeah. And I think, you know, you're caller is making an important point that I think underneath that is, if you address race and you talk about it, then it doesn't have to be the big issue. But if you don't talk about it at all, then it becomes the big issue. And so...

CONAN: The elephant in the room, yeah.

Prof. SAMUELS: The big elephant in the room that nobody can talk about and all of a sudden it grows to be far bigger than it needed to be. And so it's great when the family can talk about it. And I also think that, you know, when children are five, there are certain issues that happen. And then when children are 15, there's other issues that happen. And, as she said, you know, the family grows and will grow through this issue.

And I think the point of my paper is just that - it's hopeful that we have parents that are a little bit further along than their kids in that growth process, so that they can be the adults and be a little bit forward-thinking in anticipating some of these things rather than playing catch-up with their children, as their children go out in the world and experience a version of it that they have yet to experience.

CONAN: Let's...

Mr. PERTMAN: It's worth adding - I'm sorry.

CONAN: No, go ahead.

Mr. PERTMAN: It's worth adding that when we think about the family that's dealing with these kids as they grow up, it's not just the parents and the siblings. A lot of the discrimination in our research that we found, or that the adult adoptees reported in our research, was from other relatives, extended family, schoolmates. So we - that education process, that conversation really has to be pretty broad if we're going to get it right.

That said, I have to agree wholeheartedly. You know, it should not be the sole topic. It shouldn't be the biggest topic. But it should be a topic. And it needs to be out there. And people have to be talking to each other if we're going to try to get it right.

CONAN: Jason is on the line, one last caller, from Cleveland.

JASON (Caller): Hi. I was - I'm adopted by two white parents. I live in Cleveland. And my dad - I'm a mixed race. I'm half black and half white. And my dad I feel like sometimes overcompensates for the racism he sort of saw growing up. His high school in Shaker Heights is one of the first in the country to actually accept black

students. And so he wants to distance himself from that. And I'm always sort of thinking that maybe that was one of the reason he adopted my sister and I.

For example, like we'll get in an amusement park or something growing up and he'll say hi to black families, but he'll sort of just ignore white families. And it's sort of, from my sister and I, it's a little awkward, because it's sort of like an overcompensation kind of a thing.

CONAN: Hmm. Gina Samuels, did any of the people you spoke with have that experience?

Prof. SAMUELS: Sure. I think what he's illustrating is that, you know, as much as this is about adoptees' identity process, that there is a racial identity process that is also going on for the parents. And parents will talk a lot about what this means to have a mixed race child or what it means to have a black child or a Guatemalan child or whatever. And much of the meaning-making that they attribute to what it is to be a white person who has adopted Child X is really important, as your caller indicates, because children are listening and that has implications for them, the role that they feel they're playing in their parent's life.

So this isn't - I think this is true of all parents. All parents referenced their children as an extension of who they are. And when you add race to that, there's ways in which that extension can be a less than helpful framing for kids to understand why they were adopted, the purpose of their adoption in their parents' life.

CONAN: Thank you, Jason, very much for the call. And thank you both very much for your time today. A fascinating discussion. Gina Samuels joined us from a studio at the University of Chicago, where she is at the School of Social Service Administration. And Adam Pertman, the executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, with us from WBUR, our member station in Boston. And again, thanks very much to both of you for your time.

Prof. SAMUELS: Thank you.

Mr. PERTMAN: My pleasure.

Copyright © 2011 NPR. All rights reserved. Visit our website [terms of use](#) and [permissions](#) pages at www.npr.org for further information.

NPR transcripts are created on a rush deadline by a contractor for NPR, and accuracy and availability may vary. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Please be aware that the authoritative record of NPR's programming is the audio.