Coalition
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Partners

The Newsletter For Wisconsin's Adoptive & Foster Families

A publication of the Coalition for Children, Youth & Families

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Inside

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Exploring Culture

In the world of adoption and foster care, we often talk about transracial and transcultural families; those families made up of members representing different ethnic groups or racial backgrounds. But, in truth, while many adoptive families are transracial, *all* families are transcultural. Even in families where there is no history of foster care or adoption, no two individuals are identical (not even "identical" twins!). There may be overlap, at times, in the way family members think about or respond to something, or how they identify themselves (e.g., "We're Smiths!"), but each person's individuality sets them apart.

For families who have adopted, the cultural differences are sometimes subtle, as in the case of a family who has adopted a child of the same race as their own. While they may share the same race, there are often differences in socioeconomic status, ethnic background, or customs and traditions. In other families, those differences may be more apparent, say, for example, when a family has adopted a child of a race or ethnic group that is visibly different from their own. While race, heritage, and ethnicity are all components of culture, there is much more to the definition of culture.

Culture is something that is crafted by and comprised of people. A nation can have a culture, as can a religious group, a business, or a family. Culture can include language, food, art, gender identity, and sexual orientation, among other things. It is the structure that forms how a particular group of people behave or live.

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From the Corner Office

Welcome 2016!

I hope this new year has welcomed all of you warmly and that, as February begins, things are going well in your homes and that you are all feeling a sense of the renewed energy for the year ahead.

In this issue of *Partners*, we have chosen to talk about "culture" and the many ways it forms and shapes our lives. We hope that what we have shared will encourage all of you to think about and explore ways to continually recognize, learn about, and appreciate how culture shapes your own families.

As you use our services throughout the year, please know that we are always interested in learning more about the ways we can serve you better. I want to open the invitation to you all to send us your feedback, your thoughts, and your ideas. That way, we can always be looking forward to new ideas and opportunities to learn together.

Warmest Regards,

Oriana Carey
Chief Executive Officer

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With a definition so broad, it is safe to conclude that culture is all around us. It is in the way we speak, how we approach adversity or happiness, and it helps to define the way we carry ourselves day in and day out. Culture can look different depending on where we are and who we are with. Cultural differences are not always tangible, but they can be. And there may be times when we need to step back to explore how we can understand and embrace differences between our own culture and the culture of another.

So, where do you begin to explore culture with your own children and family members? While there is truly no "right answer," it's often recommended to introduce the topic as soon as possible. There are so many points of exploration when it comes to culture, you will likely spend a great deal of time exploring together as a family, in addition to the time you each may spend individually. You could use a variety of methods to explore culture, both your family's as well as others, including books, movies, food, discussion, visiting familiar spaces and places, creating new traditions, or recreating and incorporating celebrations of other traditions and holidays.

In the pages of this issue of *Partners*, we hope you'll find stories and ideas that will help you and your family begin to explore more about your own cultural roots – as individuals, and as a family unit. Together you can all learn to embrace your individuality, your family culture, and the cultures of others. Be prepared to be surprised, inspired, and to let your children and family lead and teach you new things. Just as, in the words of Ghandi, "a nation's culture resides in the hearts and soul of its people," so does a family's culture reside in the hearts and souls of each family member – birth, foster, or adopted.

Diversity through *Food and Fun*

As our world becomes increasingly diverse, so do our families. Helping your child develop a positive identity means instilling a respect for the ways we are both the same and different. This means weaving a love of "differences" into our everyday lives. Below are some ideas for activities that can help you teach your child to appreciate the richness of diversity.

- **Visit a local ethnic grocery store.** Have you ever seen a banana blossom? How about a jicama? Exploring a grocery store that offers never-before-seen fruits, vegetables, or even baked goods is a wonderful way to explore a new culture. Make it an adventure by preparing a scavenger hunt list ahead of time.
- **Cook or bake a new food.** Make cooking together a family activity and try something entirely new and different. If your child is hesitant to try a new food, perhaps ease him into it by baking a dessert specific to a particular culture. Who doesn't love a pupa cu l'ova or mulva pudding? There are many wonderful kids' cookbooks* available with easy-to-make recipes from a variety of cultures.
- **Fun with fruit.** Apples come in a variety of shapes and colors, but they're all pretty much the same on the inside. Conversely, two watermelons may look the same on the outside, but one can be yellow on the inside while another is red. Some have seeds, some don't. Fruit offers an opportunity to combine snack time with important lessons in diversity.
- **Take day trips.** Wisconsin offers endless opportunities to experience a wide array of cultures and experiences. Start with your own backyard and expand from there. What are the differences and similarities between neighborhoods, cities, and counties within Wisconsin? All within a couple hours' drive, you can experience everything from big city life to Amish country, an underground railroad site to a Scandinavian settlement, and everything in between.
- **Purchase a map or globe.** A map is a great springboard for exploring differences in cultures, climates, accents/languages, foods, customs, and lifestyles of people and places.
- **Attend cultural events.** There are a host of opportunities to experience free and low cost events through churches, community centers, ethnic festivals, and cultural centers.
- **Story telling.** Asking people of different ages, cultures, and experiences to share their stories is a powerful way to teach your child about diversity.
- **Watch movies that introduce new people and places.** A Disney movie or foreign film can introduce new worlds.

* The Kids' Multicultural Cookbook, The International Cookbook for Kids

"Ice Cream" *Around the World!*

Worldwide, people enjoy local takes on creamy, frozen treats - especially on hot days. We think that a great way to showcase to kids how big and diverse, yet similar in ways, the human population and landscape is, is through yummy ice cream! Try out some recipes, and enjoy learning about ingredients and flavors around the world. And at the end, savor a cool treat with your family.

KULFI is a creamy frozen dessert with roots in India and neighboring countries. It often features locally popular ingredients like pistachios (pista), almonds (badam), rose water, and saffron. Here's a great video recipe to try.

GELATO is an Italian treat made with similar base ingredients (cream and sugar) but enhanced with Mediterranean flavors from ingredients like lemon and other fruits. If you've ever seen a gelato stand, you know there are a lot of vibrant varieties to try. Here is a basic strawberry gelato recipe (gelato alla fragola).

MOCHI, a modern Japanese treat, is a sticky rice ball which is sometimes filled with ice cream in the center. They can also be filled with a sweet bean paste (anko). Try out this recipe!

If you're having trouble finding ingredients in your local grocery store, you may have an easier time on the Internet, or at ethnic grocery stores in your community.

Heritage, Culture, and Family

"We are prospects, not suspects." Imagine eight teenage boys dancing and chanting this mantra in front of 72 transracial adoptive families. For me, this was the highlight of Umoja–A Black Heritage Experience's nine years in operation.

My husband, Bill, and I have two beautiful African American children. We are white. When my husband and I were preparing to adopt, we had a wonderful social worker who helped us understand that adopting a child from a different culture wasn't about what we would accept; it was about what we could offer. We learned that loving our child meant more than providing a happy home, it meant that we had to help them develop a sense of pride in their birth culture. As white adults living in Appleton, WI, that was a tall order. We had no black family, friends, neighbors, or colleagues. Our house looked like a "white person's" house. The task seemed daunting, but we were committed to our children. Today, if you visit our home, you'll see afro-centric art work, and you'll find books featuring main characters who are black. These are just a few of the visual changes we've made.

One of the resources we knew was important was a heritage camp, an opportunity for all members of the family to have a better awareness of, understanding about, and pride for the heritage of the child who as adopted. But, at the time, there were no camps for children of African descent in the Midwest. If you knew me, you'd know that I am a "mama bear" when it comes to my kids. I wanted them to have the experience of a heritage camp, so I approached a professor from St. Norbert College, Dr. Bola Delano-Oriaran, about starting one. I knew that I could handle the logistics, but

was no expert on black culture. Dr. Delano is an amazingly generous woman, and she immediately agreed to work with me. With a hope and a prayer, we began planning the first Umoja.

One of the first decisions we made was to make Umoja a family camp. We wanted to provide an experience where everyone in the family was welcome and committed to the black children in the family. That meant offering programming for adults and including siblings of other ethnicities. Dr. Delano is in the education department at St. Norbert, and she told me that children begin to develop a positive or negative identity by age three, so it was essential that we provide programming and interactions for even the youngest children. After a year of planning, we held our first Umoja weekend in the fall of 2006. We had (and continue to have) programming for children aged four through parents/grandparents and babysitting for the younger kids. The babies and toddlers play with dolls that look like them and listen to books with pictures of black children.

I cried as I drove to the first Umoja weekend. I had wanted something like this so badly for my children and was humbled that other families were taking a risk that we were going to provide a meaningful experience. We had around 20 families back in 2006. In 2015, that number grew to 72 families. Some Umoja families have come all nine years; for others, this was their second through eighth experience. And others still were attending for the first time. One of the most rewarding things has been the friendships the children have made. My children text with their Umoja friends all year long. And I rejoice in the reunions I see every October as the families gather. Some families have become very close and get together all year round. These are some of the results we had hoped for and the interaction for our children with children in similar circumstances is important.

For parents, Umoja provides an opportunity to get to know and establish friendships with parents of another race or ethnicity. Tweens and teens have the chance to meet and learn from positive role models, someone who is "cool," but who also brings a powerful message to them. At Umoja, they are lifted up by adults who have experienced the same challenges and still thrived. They are exposed to how rich and meaningful their heritage is, and they learn and talk about struggles they'll encounter.

About a week after the 2015 Umoja ended, I received a note from a family, along with a drawing. The picture had hearts and little brown stick figures with the caption: I miss Umoja, where brown people can be whatever they want to be. This six-year-old boy's picture said it all. He knows there's a place where he is valued and we hope he grows up to be a healthy, happy black man some day. And just maybe, Umoja had a small contribution in making that happen.

Our thanks to Julie Ryno for contributing this article for Partners.

UMOJA
A BLACK HERITAGE EXPERIENCE

UMOJA FACTS:

Date: Oct 15-17, 2016

Where: Green Lake Conference Center

Web Site: www.umojabhe.org

Beverly Willer attended Umoja for the first time last year with her son Tyler, age 11, along with a close friend of his and his mother. Tyler and his friend were led to the teen group, while their mothers attended programming for parents. Led by dynamic motivational speaker Keith L. Brown (Mr. I'm Possible), the youth spent the empowering weekend forging relationships, bolstering their self-esteem, and connecting with their inner sense of possibility. Beverly says that the message of the experience for Tyler and the other youth was that, "they don't need to be defined by what society says, but by what they want in life."

By the end of the weekend, Beverly was delighted to see her son, the youngest of the teen group, leading the pack in a dance and spoken word performance. Other highlights of the weekend for Beverly include attending presentations by several informative and uplifting speakers, and realizing that, "there are a lot of families that look like us, which was encouraging."

Beverly adds, "I think that there is no getting around the fact that we live in a world divided by race and there are things you can't teach your child as a white person; things you don't have a level of understanding about. That can only come from someone who has walked the walk. That's what Mr. I'm Possible did for the kids at Umoja. I wish there were more opportunities for kids to have positive interactions with adults who have walked the walk. I think it's absolutely critical for a parent of a child of a different race to be able to provide some community for them."

The Importance of Hair and Skin Care

Self-image or self-esteem is the sum of the beliefs or feelings we have about ourselves. For all children, the development of self-esteem begins in infancy. Babies have needs and express them; hopefully, a parent or caregiver validates and fulfills those needs. The infant develops trust in the caregiver, and has a sense of well-being. If parents continue to respond positively to the child and make him or her feel important, this lays the groundwork for a healthy self-image. If there have been gaps in this early foundation through abuse or neglect, the child's sense of self becomes distorted. Children with low self-esteem experience anxiety and frustration. They may struggle with problem solving and many other life challenges.

The experience of entering foster care or being adopted might further complicate a child's self-image. Children may feel they are to blame for being removed from their homes. They may look back on their family of origin and have complex feelings about their role in the family. At the minimum, the child knows she is now labelled as "different" from other children. As parents, we want to do what we can to boost our children's self-esteem – especially when there have been factors that have chipped away at it over time. We want our child to feel good about the person he or she sees reflected back in the mirror; to feel cared for and nurtured, from head to toe. A big part of that equation is hair and skin care.

In the context of adoption and foster care, you have likely seen a number of resources for parents who are caring for the hair and skin of an African American child. However, even if your child has no special hair or skin care needs, taking the time to attractively style hair and give skin a healthy glow will set the stage for your child's interactions with the world. Your well-groomed child will stand taller and walk out the door with an added sense of self-confidence.

There are some additional benefits of spending time and energy on hair and skin care, too, such as:

- Hair that requires careful shampooing, blow-drying, combing, and styling means more time spent together. You're building happy memories. (Caution—combing that snarl can mean pain and tears. Gentleness and patience are other virtues you'll be honing!)
- Learning about your child's cultural background and how hair and skin care regimens fit into his identity is a bonus. By focusing on these tasks, you're demonstrating your commitment to weaving your child's culture and race into the fabric of your family.
- Your child is learning alongside you and developing a life-long skill set. These are abilities that will enhance cultural, as well as personal pride.
- In essence, by paying attention to hair and skin care, you're telling your child she is important to you. You're sending a message loud and clear that whatever challenges she faces, you've got her back.

Resources

Tip Sheets

wiadopt.org/resources/tipsheets

- **Twenty Ideas for Keeping Connections to Racial and Cultural Identity**
- **Honoring Your Child's Racial and Cultural Identity**
- **Caring for the Hair of Your African American Child**
- **Advocating for LGBTQ Youth**
- **We Are Family! How LGBT Parents Can Support Children**

Additional Resources

- **Umoja – A Black Heritage Experience**
  http://www.umojabhe.org/
- **Blurring the Line:** In this personal essay, one more describes her fears that her family won't accept her babies through transracial adoption, and her relief at one reaction
  https://www.adoptivefamilies.com/transracial-adoption/returning-to-hometown-with-history-of-racism/?utm_source=eletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Jan16
- **Travel Wisconsin: Arts & Culture**
  http://www.travelwisconsin.com/things-to-do/arts-culture
- **StoryCorps**
  https://storycorps.org/
- **Hair and Skin Care for African American and Biracial Children**
  http://www.chw.org/~/media/Files/Childrens%20And%20Community/Training_workbook.pdf
- **Hair Matters by Sherri Gragg**
  http://www.rainbowkids.com/adoption-stories/hair-matters-514
- **Chocolate Hair Vanilla Care**
  http://www.chocolatehairvanillacare.com/

From Our Library

- ***The Interracial Adoption Option*, by Marlene G. Fine**
- ***Comparing Cultures: A Cooperative Approach to a Multicultural World*, by John W. Pickering**
- ***Somewhere Between* (DVD-Documentary)**
- ***Making Cultural Connections: Hair & Skin Care for Children of African Descent*, by Jeanne Costa**
- ***I Love My Hair*, by Natasha Anastasia Tarpley**
- ***It's All Good Hair: The Guide to Styling and Grooming Black Children's Hair*, by Michelle N-K Collison**
- ***African-American and Biracial Hair Care: A parent's practical guide*, by Adoption Accents (DVD)**

HOME TO STAY:

Family of Pride and Joy

Stacie Jackson is a warm and loving woman who says she always wanted to be a mom, but was doubtful that her dream would ever become a reality. She first explored private adoption, but was discouraged by the cost. Instead, she and her husband, Michael, decided to become licensed as foster parents.

Like many other families hoping to adopt, the Jacksons originally wanted to open their home to young children under the age of five. The family had recently purchased a four-bedroom home, and Stacie still dreamed of being a mom and filling the house with the noise and laughter of children. Once licensed, Stacie and Michael received several calls to accept placement of children that were outside of their preferred age range. The Jacksons did not think these children would be a good fit, so they said 'no' to the requests. Then one day, Stacie received a call about a 14-year-old girl named Tonisha. It was a call that changed her life forever.

The Jacksons first met Tonisha at a restaurant, and Stacie says that, from the moment she saw her, she knew Tonisha was meant to come live with them. Stacie cannot explain what it was about Tonisha, just that she felt called to say 'yes.'

At first, it was just Stacie, Michael, and Tonisha. After a year, two-year-old Nasyr also joined the family, though foster care at first, and eventually as a permanent member though adoption. Although Tonisha was happy with the Jacksons, an opportunity arose to move up north to live with her biological aunt and uncle. If she moved, Tonisha could be reunified with her identical twin sister, with whom she had lived her entire life before entering foster care. Stacie fully supported Tonisha's move to live with her biological family, yet says it was like losing a best friend and child all at once. "It was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. I was devastated. I felt like I wouldn't be able to breathe."

Social workers told Stacie that, more than likely, she and Tonisha would stay in touch for a little while, but, eventually, drift apart. In reality, Tonisha is as much a part of the Jackson family now as she was when she lived in their home. They talk at least once a week and Tonisha still calls Stacie, "Mom."

These days, Tonisha is a student at UW-Stout studying human development and family studies. She is on the dean's list and part of the National Honors Society and eventually hopes to become a social worker. Tonisha feels that she truly will be able to relate to children in out-of-home care, since she has been there, and also because child welfare is close to her heart. Although her childhood was challenging and forced her to grow up too fast, Tonisha says that it made her into the person she is today. She adds that, with Stacie and Mike, she found a place to call home and, "so much love I could never appreciate it enough."

Tonisha credits the Jacksons for giving her structure, love, and support, and for changing the rest of her childhood – and her life. Tonisha recently got married, and the entire Jackson family was there to help celebrate her big day.

The Jackson's foster care journey started with Tonisha, but it did not end there. They continued to foster and, by doing so, they have grown their family. Stacie and Michel have adopted four children, who currently range in age from two to seven years old. Three of the children are biological siblings, but Stacie says that it feels like all four of them have always been together. Each child has a different personality and interests: Theodore and Amari both like to play sports, Nasyr is soft-spoken and enjoys playing with dolls, and Tyreanna likes to play dress-up and put on makeup. When the family is all together, they like to watch movies, play board games, and bake cookies.

For Stacie, being a mom is tremendously rewarding and fulfilling. While she cautions that being a foster/adoptive parent is not easy, she also hopes that those looking to adopt will explore adoption from foster, since there are so many kids out there in need of an adoptive home. Stacie encourages families to consider older children and teenagers, although she understands why many families are hesitant to do so. While teenagers are often set in their ways and can present some challenges, they need just as much love and stability as younger children.

Stacie shared that she has heard people say that they just don't think they could foster a child, because it would be too hard to "give them back." But she counters by saying that every child deserves love and to be part of a family, no matter how long they stay.

Today, the Jackson can reflect on their journey and take pride and joy in being the parents of four wonderful children. Stacie and Michael will always be grateful for the opportunity to build their family through foster care and adoption and encourage other families to consider getting involved and helping children in their community.

The Jackson family took part in our Jockey Being Family® Home to Stay™ program. If you have recently completed an adoption from the child welfare system and would like to take part in the Home to Stay program, please contact us at 414-475-1246 or 800-762-8063.

For the Jackson family and Tonisha, the issue of race was never a significant challenge. Of course there were and continue to be cultural differences, but they've been able to adjust and talk about them together. Other than a few odd looks and stares while out and about, they didn't experience any other problems related to race and culture. Unfortunately, for some families, the issues of race and culture are larger factors. If you need additional support for your transracial or transcultural family, please reach out to the Coalition at any time.

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wifostercareandadoption.org
postadoptccyf.org

An umbrella of services over foster care and adoption; information and referral; recruitment; training, education and support for families and professionals.