Biracial Families
Crossing Boundaries, Blending Cultures, and Challenging Racial Ideologies

This interdisciplinary volume surveys the diverse experiences of biracial families, both across and outside the black/white binary. The book examines the deep-rooted social contexts that inform the lifespans of interracial families, from dating and marriage through the stages of parenthood, as well as families’ unique responses and realities. Through a variety of structures and settings including blended and adoptive families, contributors describe families’ strengths and resilience in meeting multiple personal and larger social challenges. The intricacies of parenting and family development are also revealed as an ongoing learning process as parents and children construct identity, culture, and meaning.

Among the topics covered:
• Social constitutionality of race in America: some meanings for biracial/multiracial families.
• Interracial marriages: historical and contemporary trends.
• Racial socialization: a developmental perspective.
• Biracial families formed through adoption.
• Diverse family structures within biracial families.
• Racial identity: choices, context, and consequences.

Addressing lingering gaps in the existing literature and highlighting areas for future study, Biracial Families gives readers a fuller understanding of a growing and diversifying population. Its depth and breadth of coverage make the book an invaluable reference not only for practitioners and researchers, but also for educators and interracial families across the spectrum.
Parenting Mixed-Race Children

Fabienne Doucet, Marcella Runell Hall, and Melissa Giraud

My eight year-old son, Sebastian, is Guyanese, Japanese and white. Among his nearly all-white classmates, he's perceived as a dark-skinned boy. The color he chooses for self-portraits drawn in school are always 2 or 3 shades darker than his actual skin color. On his all-black basketball team, he's called the light-skinned team member. In our Puerto Rican family (I remarried a Puerto Rican man) he looks Puerto Rican. Sitting next to me, it's clear that he's part Asian.

While Sebastian can't fully process these racial identity realities yet, this ambiguity, this fluidity, is a common experience among racially mixed people. To borrow from W.E.B. Du Bois' notion of "double consciousness," many racially mixed people learn to see themselves through their own eyes and through the eyes of others.

—Excerpt from "5 things to know if you love a mixed race kid" by Sara-Momii Roberts (Roberts, 2016, June 7)

Introduction

In recounting her son's experiences navigating the world as a mixed-race child, Sara-Momii Roberts underlines a familiar reality for people of color in the United States—that of walking through the world always conscious of how their bodies are

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being read by others. As his mother notes, Sebastian, at 8 years old, may be too young to comprehend the long-term implications of his multiple racial identities, but he is not too young to know that race matters in this society, or that people are treated differently based on the color of their skin (Chang, 2016; Doucet & Adair, 2013). Thus, as he endeavors to find crayons to represent his skin tone or to make sense of being read as dark-skinned among one group of friends and light-skinned among another, his mother’s keen awareness of Sebastian’s experiences and those that potentially await him is an important protective factor in his development (Rockquemore, Lasloffy, & Noveske, 2006; Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017). As it happens, Sebastian’s mother identifies as a mixed-race person herself—she is Japanese and white—and it is perhaps for this reason that she is able to articulate what her son may be feeling so precisely. Scholars of biracial identity have argued that monoracial parents cannot identify with their biracial children’s experiences (Csizmadia, Rollins, & Kaneakua, 2014; Rockquemore et al., 2006; Rollins & Hunter, 2013; Snyder, 2012; Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017). However, this should not be taken to mean that many monoracial parents do not recognize the importance of teaching their mixed-race children about race. Indeed, how monoracial parents go about engaging in these conversations is of paramount importance to their children’s development of a healthy identity that accounts for both (or all) of their racial and ethnic heritages in their full complexity (Chang, 2016; Collins, 2012; Csizmadia et al., 2014; Nishimura, 1998; Robinson-Wood, 2010; Rockquemore et al., 2006; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002a; Rollins & Hunter, 2013; Roth, 2005; Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017).

So, what, if anything, is different about parenting mixed-race children? What are the questions, quandaries, promises, privileges, and joys of parenting children who live and move through the world in ways we, their monoracial parents, may never fully understand? If we are mixed-race parents of mixed-race children, how is our experience different from that of monoracial parents? And if we are white parents of mixed-race children, how do we negotiate conversations about our own race and identity with our children of color? In this chapter, we focus on how parents of mixed-race children can, and do, approach child-rearing in ways that feel responsible, safe, authentic, and grounding. We use the term “mixed race” as a broad umbrella term that encompasses people that might identify themselves or be identified as biracial, multiracial, inter racial, or other similar terms, recognizing that the very concept of race is a social construction and thus that there is no such thing as a “pure race.” We also narrow the focus of this chapter to biological (or step) parents of mixed-race children since Chap. 9 in this volume speaks to the experiences of adoptive families.

In a white supremacist hegemony, all parents must be vigilant (or “woke,” in common parlance) regarding the insidious toxic impact of racism, and parents raising children of color must provide them the psychological and cognitive resources necessary to maintain a healthy sense of self in the face of such racism (Caughy & Owen, 2015). The term “Critical Race Parenting” has been taken up by some scholars interested in an approach to raising children that actively and deliberately acknowledges the role of race in shaping social dynamics. For example, DePouw and Matias (2016), applying the tenets of critical race theory, articulated that “a critical race perspective on parenting includes a critical analysis of systems of oppression, including institutional racism, and is embedded within the lived experiences, knowledge systems, values, and pedagogies (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009) of families and communities of color” (p. 237).

We argue for such “parental wickedness” in this chapter, bringing together (1) the academic literature on mixed-race parenting; (2) the stories and experiences of parents raising mixed-race children and of mixed-race people themselves; and (3) our experiences as mothers of mixed-race children. We engage such topics as racial socialization; negotiating parenting with spouses; navigating relationships with extended family members and in-laws; and what we wish we had known about parenting mixed-race children at the start of our journeys. We conclude by proposing a set of guiding principles for rearing empathic, aware, proud, and self-assured mixed-race children.

It should be noted that as authors of this chapter, we enter the conversation about parenting mixed-race children as mothers of mixed-race children ourselves. Fabienne is a black Haitian immigrant to the United States married to a white American man from North Carolina of Scots-Irish heritage; Marcella is a US-born white American of Irish heritage from New Jersey married to a black man with roots in Barbados on his father’s side and St. Kitts and Nevis on his mother’s side; and Melissa is a US-born mixed-race American with a white French-Canadian mother and a father from Dominica of African and French heritage; she is married to a black man from Jamaica. In addition to our shared “Caribbean connection,” we also all have two children: Fabienne has a 12-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter; Marcella has two daughters, aged 7 and 4; and Melissa also has two daughters, aged 9 and 7.

While as cisgender women in heterosexual black-white mixed-race relationships we are by no means a representative sample, the range of experiences we bring to this subject based on our varied adventures walking through the world as immigrant/nonimmigrant, black-white/mixed race, multilingual/monomilingual, and Gen X women affords us a rich set of lenses through which to interrogate and speak to the issues we will raise in this chapter. We invite readers to consider their own intersectional identities as they find points of convergence and divergence in their experiences with mixed-race children (or as mixed-race persons), whether as researchers, practitioners, parents, or some combination of the above.

Framing the Chapter

A growing number of “self-help” and children’s books, toys, blogs, commercials, and television shows depict mixed-race families. Supermodel Garcelle Beauvais and actor Taye Diggs, who are parents of biracial children, have written children’s books about being mixed, while others, like President Barack Obama, singer Mariah Carey, actress and activist Yara Shadidi and her on-camera Mom, Tracee Ellis Ross, and wrestler/actor Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, by being multiracial public figures, embody, challenge, and push boundaries of race beyond a white racial frame (Chang, 2016; Feagin, 2010). A Google search for “mixed race parenting” yields
hundreds of personal testimonies, compilations of “best practices” tips, and even links to organizations where parents of mixed-race children can find one another. Sid the Science Kid, a beloved preschool television character, has parents with different “skin” color; character Princess Pea of Super Why? fame has a black mother and white father; Nickelodeon has biracial character Nella the Princess Knight; the Disney channel has the new show Andi Mack which portrays the main character as being white and Asian; and American Girl’s “Truly Me” dolls have various combinations of skin tones, eye colors, and hair textures and hues that have made them popular among mixed-race families.

Ye: in the academic literature, there is a dearth of research on mixed-race parenting (Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017). Further, a disproportionate share of the research that exists focuses on heterosexual white mothers raising black-white children (Caballerio, Edwards, & Puthussey, 2008). And while there seems to be more societal acceptance of mixed-race families and their children, the image of the “tragic mulatto” is still alive and well in the popular imagination (Cismera, Brunma, & Cooney, 2012; Garton, 2003; Johnston & Nadal, 2010), as also evidenced by the number of studies examining the psychological well-being and risk vulnerability of mixed-race people (see, e.g., Barn, 1999; Binning, Unzueta, Hoo, & Molina, 2009; Bolland et al., 2007; Jackson, 2012; Jackson, Yoo, Guevarra Jr., & Harrington, 2012; Lusk, Taylor, Nanney, & Austin, 2010; Rautkis, Fusco, Goodkind, & Bradley-King, 2016; Udye, Li, & Hendrickson-Smith, 2003). Indeed, many studies of mixed-race children and families are conducted with clinical samples of some sort, whether they are part of the social welfare system or receiving counseling services (Barn, 1999; Buckley & Carter, 2004; Fusco & Rautkis, 2012; Fusco, Rautkis, McCrae, Cunningham, & Bradley-King, 2010; Jackson et al., 2012; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). This further perpetuates the discourse of distrust around mixed-race identity and experience and thus leaves many questions unanswered about what mixed-race parenting looks like in populations that are not clinical, ostracized, or vulnerable.

For this chapter, we take an expanded approach to the “review of the literature,” weaving in stories and experiences from the first-person testimonies of parents raising mixed-race children and mixed-race persons themselves, drawing especially from the online support community EmbraceRace.org, co-founded by Melissa and her husband. The EmbraceRace.org website describes it as “a multiracial community of parents, teachers, experts, and other caring adults who support each other to meet the challenges that race poses to our children, families, and communities” (www.embracerace.org). Furthermore, EmbraceRace.org pledges to identify, organize, and create “the tools, resources, discussion spaces, and networks we need to nurture resilience in children of color; to nurture inclusive, empathetic children of all stripes; to raise kids who think critically about the why and how of patterns of racial inequity”; and “to support a movement of kids and adult racial justice advocates for all children” (http://www.embracerace.org/leadership-team). In addition to these stories, the three of us interviewed one another about our experiences raising mixed-race children, and we add our voices to the conversation we will curate here.

Based on our search of the literature and our own experiences parenting mixed-race children, we organize this conversation around five central topics: (1) the ethnic identity of mixed-race children; (2) racial and cultural socialization in mixed-race families; (3) navigating extended family relationships; (4) external pressures and perceptions of mixed race families; and (5) mixed-race parenting beyond the black-white binary.

Ethnic Identity of Mixed-Race Children

Composite Soul

by Kelly Bates

Today, I declare that I will not keep the races separate within me
I will polish off my veneer of black and white, and dare you to see
All that is ME.

All that is REAL, and

All that is misunderstood, even by the ones that love me the deepest and love the
“uniqueness”

Can you handle it?

You’ll watch my wild curls spring from my head, every frizz uncovered, every strand
untamed, every piece unstretched

You’ll watch me jump, bend, sway, and lift up my fist to fierce soul and hip hop, deep
defiant rock and the sounds of steady African drums and off-key Irish bagpipes

You’ll watch me over my lifetime love black men, white men, and women of every hue
because I won’t fight their beauty or humanness

Can you handle it?

You’ll see me wearing big J Lo hoops on my ears with a long Janis Joplin dress hanging
from my tan body

You’ll hear me talk trash with an urban roots accent, slapping my hands in loud laughter,
and nest talking quiet with plain words and no inflections, as the freckles rise from my
face to yours

Will you accept this freedom and smile with joy?
Watching ME be ME

Watching me discard YOUR images of what you see, or want me to be
And still love me?

I carve up the black and white versions of me
And toss them to the fire
And take back out my true composite soul
Glistening, warm, and never fading

Today, the races are no longer separate within me
And I am ME,
And FREE

Can you handle it?

In the poem above, posted on the EmbraceRace blog, Kelly Bates (2016, June 5) asserts her claim to be both black and white—a composite who is not one thing or another, but two things at the same time. The need for such a declaration is rooted in a long history of the rule of hypodescent in the United States wherein any person with “one drop” of African-American blood was automatically considered African-
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likely than parents of black-white or Asian-white children to adopt the rule of hyperdescent by identifying their children as white only.

Researchers also have looked at mixed family identity in a holistic sense—i.e., not simply how the children are identified/identify, but how a family identity gets built around the ideas that the parents come from different backgrounds (ethnic, racial, religious, etc.) and that their children thus “carry” those diverse backgrounds (Byrd & Garwick, 2004). In their qualitative study of black-man/white-woman mixed-race couples, Byrd and Garwick (2006) found that most participants developed a family identity around what they called “one interracial voice” developed over time whereby “[t]he Black-White couple incorporated the Black man’s view of race and racism with the White woman’s racial transformation into an integrated racial worldview that framed their family life” (pp. 30–31). They identified four primary undertakings in the development of a family identity for mixed-race families: (a) understanding and resolving family of origin chaos and turmoil, (b) transcending Black-White racial history, (c) articulating the interracial family’s racial standpoint, and (d) explaining race to biracial children across the developmental stages” (p. 26). Stone and Dolbin-MacNab (2017) jointly interviewed white mothers and their adult black-white mixed-race children and learned that these mothers felt proud of being in an interracial family and passed that pride on to their children explaining, “In many interviews, mothers and their children expressed the sense that being a part of an interracial family was being a part of something bigger, both culturally and socially” (p. 104; see also Robinson-Wood, 2010).

Root (2003) argued that even though mixed-race children might grow up to identify themselves differently from the ethnic or racial labels their parents use to identify them, it is still important to give children language for talking about their heritage. Indeed, several studies have found that the self-identification of mixed-race people can change over time, prompted by a number of factors (Hitlin, Scott Brown, & Elder, 2006; Root, 2003; Tomishima, 2003). For example, Doyle and Kao (2007) analyzed the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth) for changes in the self-identification of adolescents as they transitioned to young adulthood. They found that while some adolescents who identified as multiracial switched to identifying as monoracial, the reverse was also true—some who identified as monoracial changed to identifying as multiracial. They noted that Native American/white mixed young people were most likely to shift identification and that mixed black and mixed Asian young people were most likely to identify as monoracial. Interestingly, they found that maternal education was strongly associated with stability in self-identification. As a potential explanation, they offered that mothers with higher levels of education may have more choice over neighborhoods and schools for their children, and thus they may be more likely to choose racially integrated communities where children would not necessarily be pushed into rigid categories. The idea that higher social class opens more identity options for mixed-race persons came up in other studies as well (Brunsma, 2005; Herman, 2004; Mahtani, 2002; Qian, 2004; Roth, 2005).

Flagen-Smith (2003) discussed the experiences of mixed-race children in middle childhood (ages 8–11), proposing that racial salience and racial evaluation could become more important for children at this stage, compared to younger children

American (Anderson, 2015; Bley, 2014; Brackett et al., 2006; Brunsma, 2005; Fusco et al., 2016; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002b; Roth, 2005; Shih & Sanchez, 2009; Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017). In demanding to have their whiteness recognized as well as their blackness, Bates defies the rule of hypodescent and other antiquated ways of constructing racial identity. Rockquemore’s (1999) groundbreaking work in this area yielded a conceptual model of biracial identity with four options: (1) a singular identity (i.e., just black or just white); (2) a border identity (i.e., just biracial); (3) a protean identity (i.e., shifting between black, white, and biracial); and (4) a transcendent identity (“beyond” race). This model has been used by a number of scholars to examine mixed-race people’s self-identification (see, e.g., Coleman & Carter, 2007; Doyle & Kao, 2007; Lou, Lalande, & Wilson, 2011; Lusk et al., 2010).

Fewer studies have focused on how parents of mixed-race children identify those children, but those that do reveal interesting findings. For example, Qian’s (2004) analysis of the 1990 Census (the last year that an interracial option was not available to respondents) revealed that black-white couples were the most likely to identify their children as nonwhite whereas Native American-white couples were equally likely to identify their children as Native American or white, and Asian-American-white couples were the least likely to identify their children as Asian-American. He also found that children were most likely to be racially identified according to their father’s race. Brunsma’s (2005) analysis of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study data showed that parents of multiracial children seem to be moving away from the norm of hypodescent and identifying their children as multiracial or white (particularly white-Asian and white-Native American children), rather than automatically defaulting to the ethnic identity of the minoritized group (e.g., black or Latino). Roth (2005), analyzing both 1990 and 2000 Census data, likewise found that some parents in black-white intermarriages were not defaulting to the dictates of the one-drop rule in how they racially identified their children on the 1990 Census. Specifically, although 60.6% of these children were identified as black, about 40% were not, with 25% being identified as white, and 14% being identified as “other,” which Roth argued was a stand-in for interracial. Once the interracial option was made official in 2000, 53.1% of black-white intermarried couples chose that option to racially identify their children.

Adding another layer of complexity, Bratter (2007) studied how parents who identified themselves as multiracial in the year 2000 US Census identified their children. She reported three main findings: First, when both parents in an interracial couple have an overlapping racial background, the child was more likely to be classified according to the shared background (e.g., white spouse with white-Asian spouse = child identified as white); second, the child was less likely to be classified as multiracial when the father was himself classified as multiracial, particularly if the spouse was black or Asian, suggesting a gendered component to the transmission of a multiracial identity; and third, multiracial parents could be engaging in “a form of reshuffling racial hierarchies” (Bratter, 2007, p. 842) by violating the rule of hypodescent when they identify their part-white-part-something else as simply white. As noted in the first finding, this pattern was most likely when both parents had overlapping white racial backgrounds. Gullickson and Morning (2011) relatively found that parents of part-white part-Native American children were more
who tend to use color terminology for self-description (e.g., I am brown). Flagan-Smith defined racial salience as the degree to which racial markers or characteristics are part of how children describe themselves and racial evaluation as children’s feelings (positive, negative, or neutral) about their racial group and physical appearance. As children continue to grow and develop their identities, then, we should expect that factors related to racial identification, such as salience and evaluation, among others, will change in importance over time. Siblings also may identify differently based on their physical appearance and/or other individual differences (Aspinall, 2002; Root, 2003; Tomishima, 2003).

**Lived Experience**

We have seen such developmental changes and sibling variations play out over the course of our own children’s childhoods as well. Fabienne’s children, who are read as white or Latinx by most strangers, have shifted their descriptions of themselves over the years. Her son went from describing his color as green as a 3-year-old (also asserting that his father was purple and Fabienne was blue) to describing himself as white around ages 5 or 6, to the present day when he calls himself a “black and white milkshake.” Fabienne’s daughter identified herself as having “skin like dad” or as white when she was a preschooler, to describing herself as “really light” while expressing a desire to have brown skin like Fabienne around age 5, to identifying now as either a “person of color” or as “Haitian and North Carolina [sic].”

Something about which all three of us (authors) have tried to be cognizant is how we react or respond to our children when they share their identities. Fabienne remembers feeling extremely uncomfortable and upset when her children identified themselves as white. She knew rationally that they were not rejecting her or her/their Haitianness or blackness, but she also knew that messages about the undesirability of being black and the desirability of being white are loud, strong, and pervasive, and that children receive and understand those messages from a very early age (see Doucet & Adair, 2013 for an overview of this research). Yet, another important point relative to mixed-race children developing a healthy sense of themselves is that the way parents identify themselves makes a difference in how children perceive themselves. When parents feel shame about their racial or ethnic group, or feel animosity toward other groups, children pick up on it (Root, 2003; Tatum, 2017; Tomishima, 2003). Thus, by continuing to share messages about her pride in being Haitian and being black, Fabienne modeled a healthy racial and ethnic identity for her children, which her husband supported by also expressing respect and love for, and knowledge of, Haitian history and black history.

**Ethnic and Racial Socialization**

Research has found that the messages parents of color communicate to their children about what it means to belong to a given racial or cultural/ethnic group, known as ethnic and racial socialization (ERS) messages (see Chap. 8 for more information), tend to fall into four categories: (1) ethnic pride, or messages about the positive aspects of belonging to a given group; (2) preparation for bias, whereby parents of color psychologically equip their children to live in a world where they may be discriminated against; (3) egalitarianism, or messages about the equal value and worth of all people, irrespective of their race; (4) warnings that members of other racial or ethnic groups cannot be trusted (Hughes et al., 2006; Lesane-Brown, 2006). Other researchers have added to this list the absence of ERS messages (i.e., silence around issues related to race and ethnicity) (Caughy, Nettles, & Lima, 2011; Rollins & Hunter, 2013; Snyder, 2012), as well as messages that are about the individual child’s character (Caballero et al., 2008), or what Rollins and Hunter (2013) called “self-development socialization” (p. 146). These forms of ERS have been found in mixed-race families as well, and a number of researchers have provided useful summaries of the literature on racial and cultural socialization in mixed-race families (Csizmadia et al., 2014; Rollins & Hunter, 2013; Snyder, 2012; Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017).

One area of consensus in this body of literature is around the importance of racial and cultural socialization for the psychological health and well-being of mixed-race children (Tatum, 2017). Most parents of mixed-race children seem to understand that their children will encounter messages about race, ethnicity, and culture in the wider world (we expand upon this point further in the section on external pressure) and that, therefore, what their parents have to say about these topics is important (Byrd & Garwick, 2006; Csizmadia et al., 2014; Rollins & Hunter, 2013; Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017; Tatum, 2017).

The literature also demonstrates that a number of factors impact the content, frequency, and timing of racial socialization in mixed-race families, ranging from the age of children to neighborhood and school racial and ethnic composition, to the gender of the socializing parent, to the racial identities parents assign to their children (i.e., as white, nonwhite, or mixed), and to parents’ own racial identities (Caballero et al., 2008; Csizmadia et al., 2014; Lesane-Brown, Brown, Tanner-Smith, & Bruce, 2010; Rockquemore et al., 2006; Rollins & Hunter, 2013; Snyder, 2012). For example, mothers tend to take primary responsibility for racial socialization (Caballero et al., 2008; Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017); parents of mixed-race children who are part black are more likely to discuss issues of race, racism, and discrimination than those whose mixed children do not have black heritage (Rollins & Hunter, 2013; Snyder, 2012); and Asian parents are the least likely to actively engage in racial socialization (Chang, 2016; Rollins & Hunter, 2013).

Byrd and Garwick (2006) interviewed eight black-white couples raising school-aged children and found that the couples expressed a great deal of uncertainty about the best way to talk to their children. However, this did not keep them from broaching the topic. Parents seemed primarily anxious about whether they were doing a good job of explaining race to their children—a sentiment to which we as authors can
relate. While we wish we always had ready answers for our children’s many questions, we are not often prepared to provide a straightforward response and have found, as has been addressed in the literature as well (e.g., Byrd & Garwick, 2006), that race and racial issues are best handled as an ongoing conversation in our households. In this way, our responses to our children’s questions are attuned to both their developmental levels and our increasingly refined ways of articulating and explaining these complex issues to our children.

**Lived Experience**

Melissa remembers how confusing and unsettling it was growing up and being asked often “what ARE you?” or being confidently mislabeled by strangers. She found that it made all the difference to understand that how we’re identified racially by others and how we self-identity don’t have to be the same and that how we self-identify can change (Tatum, 2017). For example, Melissa proudly identifies as alternately, multiracial, biracial, or mixed race, but, socially, she is more often perceived as white or of ambiguous ethnicity. Her husband identifies as black and is socially identified as black. Both her daughters currently self-identify as biracial or multiracial. But the 9-year-old is generally socially identified as black and the 7-year-old is socially identified as mixed race or black. Melissa’s daughters are accustomed to differentiating between social- and self-identification, and, unlike Melissa at that age, they aren’t thrown when those identities don’t match.

Colorism is another aspect of racial socialization that Melissa and her partner find important to address early and often with their mixed-race daughters. To be antiracist, kids and adults need to learn to detect and reject white supremacy, antiblackness, and all racial hierarchies. But when there is a big range of skin colors within a family, as is true for many multiracial families, colorism can not only impact how you value yourself in the world, but also inform a subtle or not-so-subtle color hierarchy within the family. Melissa’s immediate family of four has four different skin colors. Melissa and her partner have made it a point to find positive representations of black girls and people of color in books and movies, and to have a diverse friend group in which positive messages about blackness are part of everyday conversations. They talk about skin color with their daughters, notice it aloud, describe it, and delight in the gorgeous range of browns that get significantly less affirmation in popular culture and outside their home.

Melissa’s 7-year-old daughter called this approach into question when she asked her, “Mommy, do you not like your [light, white-presenting] skin color?” This question allowed the conversation to evolve. Melissa explained that she says “the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice” not to put down lighter skin tones but as a corrective to the foundational idea in the United States that the lighter the better, the darker the worse. Melissa and Andrew have taught their daughters that many people push back against that idea and that we rust, too. Thus when her daughters saw only white dolls in a toy aisle, push back they did. Melissa wrote about this experience on EmbraceRace in a piece called Why are all white dolls sitting together on the Target shelf? (Giraud, 2016, August 5). She calls it: “the true tale of how my girls pushed back against racial injustice they saw over a month’s errands at Target and how I supported them. It is an imperfect on-the-ground example of how to help young kids counter racial injustices and slights they inevitably witness, no matter how curated their lives.”

Melissa’s story also corroborates assertions in previous research about the importance of intentionality when it comes to the racial socialization of mixed-race children (Chang, 2016; Rockquenore & Brunnsm, 2002a; Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017). Indeed, actively and deliberately creating space to work out what it means to be a mixed-race child is one of the most important—and “woke”—parenting practices in which parents of mixed-race children can engage.

**Navigating Extended Family Relationships**

Extended family relationships can be tricky for all kinds of families. Spouses may not get along well with their in-laws, parents may be concerned about their child’s choice of a partner, or a newly married couple can feel pressure from both sides of their family regarding where to spend the holidays. Such issues can feel particularly fraught for mixed-race couples (Byrd & Garwick, 2004; O’Donoghue, 2004), and when children enter the picture, additional tensions may arise (see Chap. 6 for more information), though it is also important to recognize the many strengths multiracial couples report as part of their marital and parenting experiences (Rosenblatt, Karis, & Powell, 1995; Tutwiler, 2016). A number of scholars note a pattern of initial resistance from either both sides of mixed-race couples’ families that is, typically, eventually followed by support (Byrd & Garwick, 2006; Rosenblatt et al., 1995; Tomishima, 2003; Tutwiler, 2016). In her qualitative study of biracial adults, Tomishima (2003) found that all of her black-white biracial participants reported that their white grandparents had rejected them initially, though most grew to accept them with time. On the other hand, intermarriage and arrival of children can actually elicit increasing racism from family members (Chang, 2016; O’Donoghue, 2004). Research has documented the microaggressions that extended family members can inflict, such as showing favoritism for the lighter skinned among biracial siblings, or attempting to measure mixed children’s racial makeup, such as pointing out one child as the “more Asian/white/Latino one” (Chang, 2016; Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Tutwiler, 2016; Nadal, Srikent, Davidoff, Wong, & McLean, 2013; Nadal et al., 2011; Nishimura, 1998; Root, 1998).

**Lived Experience**

A contributor to the EmbraceRace blog, Casey Dupart (2016, October 24), shared painful stories from her childhood. She identifies as Mexican-American and Nigerian, but her older siblings are Mexican and African-American. She wrote,
Any time we watched a television program as a family I would become uncomfortable if the program included any safari-esque wild animals. Because then my siblings might remark, “There are some of your cousins!” It was humiliating, and I hated feeling different.

Among other examples of how her physical appearance was a source of scrutiny and commentary—from her weight to the shade of her skin—Dupart also shared,

My oldest sister was the prize since she was lighter in complexion with a looser wave pattern, according to my maternal grandmother. My hair was thicker, curlier, darker. My sister said I would always “need” a relaxer. I began using relaxers at age 6.

Interestingly, these stories reveal tensions within constructions of blackness as problematic (i.e., too African; “bad hair”), even as such interactions within her family led Dupart to feel she was alternatively too black, not black enough, too Mexican, or not Mexican enough (cf. Chang, 2016; Nadal et al., 2013; Roth, 2005). Chang (2016), Roth (2005), and Snyder (2012) also discussed part-black biracial (e.g., black-Latins, or black-Asian) children’s feelings of exclusion from black communities, adding complex dimensions to our understandings of the experiences of mixed-race individuals. Stories such as these also underscore the importance of “parental wokeness” mentioned earlier, such as that illustrated in Sandra Chapman’s (2016, September 8) story on the EmbraceRace blog:

A practice that caused some controversy for my family was my hard and fast rule that she only receive and play with brown-skinned baby dolls, preferably with no hair but if there had to be hair it had to resemble her kinky tight curls. Despite my “rule,” my daughter received her first peach-skinned Barbie doll from a friend for Christmas when she was six. The next peach-skinned baby doll came from a relative. By the time she was seven she had at many brown-skinned dolls as she had peach-skinned dolls. Every time she reached for a doll that did not resemble her skin tone, I made a frustrating groan and comment about the impact of her choices. My biggest concern was how was she going to feel great about her skin if she choose (sic) to play with a doll who had a skin tone she would never have, and came with skin privileges she would never experience.

In spite of her family’s ideas about how she should handle race-related matters with her daughter, Chapman, who identifies as Afro-Latina and describes her daughter as African-American, Dominican, and Puerto Rican, chose to follow her own instincts about how to instill confidence in her daughter about her skin color and hair texture. Chapman’s resistance to her family’s attempts to marginalize blackness sent an important message to her daughter about the beauty and importance of blackness while also affirming it as an identity her daughter should feel proud of and free to claim.

External Pressures and Perceptions of Mixed-Race Families

Just as extended family members can exert pressure on mixed-race families, messages from the outside world also can impact the experiences of mixed-race children and their parents, especially as children grow older and have increased exposure to the outside world (Byrd & Garwick, 2006; Rockquemore et al., 2006). Root (2003) called this “community socialization” (p. 38) and also pointed out the importance of identifying hidden factors that impact ethnic and racial identity, such as generation, social class, and regional traditions and variations. Other studies have noted that neighborhood composition seems to have an impact on how children in mixed-race families are racially identified and treated (Caballero et al., 2008; Collins, 2000; Csizmadia et al., 2012; Doyle & Kao, 2007; Harris & Sim, 2002; Herman, 2004; Jackson, 2009, 2012; Lorenzo-Blanco, Bares, & Delva, 2013; Qian, 2004; Townsand, Fryberg, Wilkins, & Markus, 2012). Most of these studies identified the racial and ethnic composition of schools as an important factor as well.

Interracial relationships and the children they produce have long been framed through deficit lenses or with an assumption of inevitable pathology for those involved (Gatson, 2003; Jackson et al., 2012; Jackson & Samuels, 2011; O’Donoghue, 2004). As noted previously, one reason for this in the academic literature is that many studies of mixed-race families or mixed-race people are conducted with clinical populations or people receiving support from social welfare programs. But the US racial hierarchy and accompanying legacy of racism are critical to this history of deficit framing and the anxiety mixed-race children provoke as well (O’Donoghue, 2004). After all, mixed-race children are the product of sexual relations between people of different “races” (Gatson, 2003) and therefore undeniably represent a transgression of the white supremacist construction of racial purity. Indeed, the rule of hypodescent was meant to ensure the enslaved status of the biracial children born from the sexual assault of enslaved African women by their white owners (Rockquemore, 2002; Shih & Sanchez, 2009), and anti-miscegenation laws forbade interracial marriage between whites and people of other races (Anderson, 2015).

As a result of these deficit lenses, people who form romantic relationships across racial lines arouse suspicion on all sides, from whites framed as race traitors (O’Donoghue, 2004) to people of color suspected of internalized racism (Chang, 2016). One manifestation of this suspicion is the pervasive assumption in the literature that white mothers of mixed children are unable to teach them about race since for the most part they have not grown up being socialized about their own race and/or they may not have a strong racial or ethnic identification/connection (Harman & Barn, 2005; Lorenzo-Blanco et al., 2013; O’Donoghue, 2004; Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017). However, as will be discussed more thoroughly later in this chapter, this assumption does not account for generational differences or other factors impacting how white mothers of biracial children conceive of their unique parenting role. Another consequence of the deficit lenses is that mixed-race children experience varying levels of acceptance and rejection from all of the racial or ethnic groups that comprise their backgrounds (Chang, 2016; Herman, 2004; Snyder, 2012). It is thus important for parents of mixed-race children to challenge these problematic frames. Chang (2016) noted that children are watching and noticing disparities, directly experiencing racism, and listening to what people around them—from family members to strangers—say about race. For example, Chang recounted her participants’ stories about strangers stopping their children on the street to inquire about their racial makeup, whether because they recognized shared features (as in the case of an Asian older man who was excited to confirm his hunch about the Asians of some
biracial Asian/white children), or because they were surprised to discover a child’s mixed parentage. As Chang put it, “The effect of this type of racial commenting is profound. It sends blatant messages to our mixed race children about what others will or will not allow them to be: ‘one of us’ or ‘different than us’” (p. 79). Other scholars have noted the significant role phenotype plays in the identity construction of mixed-race children, particularly with respect to how the world outside interprets the various phenotypic representations of mixed-race people (Chang, 2016; Csizmadia et al., 2012; Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Rockquemore et al., 2006).

These various concerns about, vexations with, and biases toward mixed-race people and families are expressions of monoracism or, to use Phagen-Smith’s (2003) terminology, biracialism. According to Johnston and Nadal (2010) in their article about the microaggressions faced by mixed-race persons, monoracism is “a social system of psychological inequality where individuals who do not fit monoracial categories may be oppressed on systemic and inter-personal levels because of underlying assumptions and beliefs in singular, discrete racial categories” (Johnston & Nadal, 2010, p. 125), and it can be perpetrated by people of any race (Chang, 2016; Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Snyder, 2012; Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017). Similarly, Phagen-Smith (2003) used the term biracialism to define “sets of discrimination or racial insults that are unique to the biracial experience. For example... telling someone you are Jewish and being asked what the conversion process was like when in fact you were born to a Jewish mother, or a monoracial person of color thinking that you must think you are better/prettier/smarter because you are part White” (Phagen-Smith, 2003, pp. 63–64). Variations on monoracism or biracialism can also be perpetrated against parents of mixed-race children who, for example, are being mistuned by strangers for a nanny, babysitter, or nonrelative in general (Murchison-Edwards, 2003).

Lived Experience

Media representations of whites and people of color also represent an external source of socialization that deeply impact (all) children’s understandings of race. As Doucet and Adair (2013) wrote, “Even when talk about race and color is absent, children notice that some groups of people seem to be more important or less important than others; that lighter skin and European features are considered more beautiful than dark and African features; and that White people are presented more frequently and often more favorably than darker-skinned people on television, in movies ... indeed, all around them (Tobin 2000; Tenerio 2004; Segura-Mora 2008; Dulin-Keita et al. 2011)” (p. 89). Conscious of these issues, Marcella and her husband Dave have worked hard to curate the media content to which their daughters are exposed, as she explains:

One challenge for us involves hair, and is very specific to images and ideas of “beautiful” hair. Despite our best attempts to provide counter messages, Aaliyah (7) and Ava (4) experienced various aspects of influence which I equate to pervasive princess culture and even
Alaskan and white (1.4 million) (Jones & Bullock, 2013). Furthermore, 1.5 million Census takers in 2010 were counted as “multiple-minority,” or identified as mixed race not including white (Jones & Bullock, 2013, p. 9). Some researchers include mixed-race individuals from all backgrounds in their samples, or even focus specifically on mixed-race folks who are not black-white, but such studies tend to examine the lived experiences of those individuals through qualitative explorations (Caballero et al., 2008; Collins, 2000; Jackson, Welven, & Aguilera, 2013; Miville, Constantine, Baysden, & So-Lloyd, 2005; Renn, 2003; Roberts-Clarke, Roberts, & Morokoff, 2004; Robinson-Wood, 2010; Rollins & Hunter, 2013; Tomishima, 2003), or to capture a demographic understanding of mixed-race populations through quantitative analyses (Binning et al., 2009; Brusma, 2005; Campbell & Eggerling-Boeck, 2006; Gulliksson & Morning, 2011; Herman, 2004; Hitlin et al., 2006; Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, & Peck, 2007).

A notable exception to these trends in the literature is Chang’s (2016) Raising Mixed Race: Multiracial Asian Children in a Post Race World, a book based on Chang’s qualitative interviews with 68 Asian¹ (monoracial and mixed) parents raising 75 mixed-race children. Chang introduces the topic as one with deep personal relevance: her father is Taiwanese while her mother is white with French Canadian, Slovakian, and German roots; her husband is also mixed with a Japanese mother and a white father of Welsh and British descent; and they are raising their son as a mixed-race child. Chang pointed out that mixed Asians are not relieved from the paradoxical burden of being once a perpetual foreigner and a model minority, though this varies by “how Asian” these mixed-race individuals look. She also identified three systemic barriers to mixed Asian children’s development of a positive racial identity: (1) compounded invisibility as a result of their membership in three demographic groups that tend to be invisible—Asians, multiracial people, and children; (2) racial isolation, or the loneliness that can come from not having family members or peers who can relate to their unique racial identification; and (3) parent indoctrination, defined as “the degree to which parents are indoctrinated into the white racial frame” (p. 101). Consistent with other research addressing racial socialization among Asians (Rollins & Hunter, 2013), Chang found that the majority of her participants did not talk to their children about race and that their own parents had never discussed race with them. Whether these parents were Asian, mixed Asian-white, or white, there was a minimization of the relevance of being Asian among participants that Chang attributed to their acceptance of the racial hierarchy in which Asians have been made honorary whites. She advised parents of mixed Asian children to be concerned, aware, and intentional regarding their children’s racial identity development and experiences as a mixed-race person.

¹Although not explicitly defined, it can be surmised that Chang’s definition of Asian is broad, encompassing all people from the large geographic region known as Asia.

Lived Experience

Blogger and writer Thien-Kim Lam, who is a Vietnamese-American woman married to an African-American man, shared her experiences raising two mixed children in an op-ed on NBCNews.com (Lam, 2017, March 14): … I’ve had strangers stop mid-stride, turn around, and tell me how beautiful my children are.

“Mixed babies are the best!” they exclaim, clapping their hands in glee.

“Black and Asian babies are the best mix out there,” others whisper conspiratorially to me.

I’m not even surprised anymore by the strangers who command me to produce more children because my husband and I make such beautiful babies. Apparently, I’m a biracial baby factory tasked to brighten their day with my children.

I smile, nod, and continue on my way. It takes energy to discuss racial assumptions, and I have to pick my battles. I’ve even lied about our family’s background because I’m tired of fighting with strangers.

I adore that mixed race children are celebrated. There are Facebook pages that proudly celebrate interracial families by sharing photos of mixed race children in every combination imaginable. Interracial and monoracial families alike gush over the children’s golden brown skin, luscious curls, and toothy grins.

The multiracial children are put on pedestals for their beauty and even for how mixing races will save the United States from all its ills. (Spoiler alert: it won’t.)

Listen up, people: you can’t have it both ways. You can’t romanticize about the beautiful mix of multiracial babies, turn around and assume that I’m the nanny. My children aren’t memes to make you feel better about the state of race in our country.

And don’t be offended when someone rolls you out on your hypocrisy. You want to be enlightened about interracial families? Stop assuming that we’re the nanny.

This powerful testimony expresses so many layers of the complicated feelings parents of mixed-race children feel, and it is an important voice to add to the conversation on mixed-race parenting that so heavily privileges black-white relationships. It also touches on many of the themes we have discussed already in this chapter.

Gaps in Our Knowledge: Recommendations for Future Research

As noted early on, the academic literature on parenting mixed-race children is limited. More empirical research using multiple research methods is needed to grow our scholarly understandings of people parenting mixed-race children, to broaden our conceptual and theoretical lenses, and to corroborate or challenge anecdotal evidence so that educators, healthcare providers, mental health practitioners, and policymakers can gain knowledge on how best to support the mixed-race children and families they serve. Each of the five focus areas we identified for the current chapter has at least the beginnings of an empirical base of evidence (some certainly more than others), but other dimensions of mixed-race parenting are sorely in need of exploration, including, but not limited to, parents of color raising mixed-race
mixedness, though this did not necessarily lead to conflict. When conflicts did arise, the researchers found that most parents chose not to attribute those differences to culture, race, etc., though they may indeed have reflected different values, such as the Jewish father who wanted his sons to be bar mitzvahed though his wife was hesitant around the religious meaning of the ritual. As a resolution, the mother chose to think of the bar mitzvah as a celebration of their sons’ humanity. As Caballero et al. put it, “Reframing cultural difference as difference that stems from the self and choice—such as humanistic, political or personality viewpoints—may offer the mothers and fathers concerned the possibility of resolution of difficulties” (p. 38). Byrd and Garwick (2006) also addressed conflicts within mixed (black man-white woman) couples. In this study, problems arose when the white partner did not believe or accept the black partner’s interpretation of the larger society as racist, which naturally led to different and conflicting ideas about how to teach children about race and racism. More studies that explore mixed couples’ child-rearing dynamics would broaden as well as deepen current understandings of mixed-race family life.

**Raising Mixed-Race Children While ...**

As noted previously, research on parenting mixed-race children would benefit from intersectional analyses that account for the complexity of people’s identities and experiences. For example, aside from Caballero et al.’s (2008) study including a lesbian couple in the interview portion of their study, we were unable to find studies of queer parents raising mixed-race children. Another area that seems to have received limited attention in the literature is the experiences of mixed-race people parenting their own children. Bratter (2007) studied how mixed-race people racially identify their own children, but explorations of parenting processes are also necessary. In Chang’s (2016) study of parents raising mixed Asian children, some of the parents in the sample were themselves mixed, as was also the case in Caballero et al.’s (2008) study of mixed-race parenting, but in both cases being mixed while raising mixed children was not an explicit focus of the research. Song and Gutierrez’s (2016) in-depth qualitative interview study of how 62 mixed-race people in Britain approach raising their mixed-race children is the first of its kind. These researchers identified four primary approaches to parenting from the interviews: (1) “Raising as British,” reported by 8 participants; (2) “Mostly British with ethnic symbolisms,” reported by 9; (3) “Emphasis on minority heritage,” reported by 8; and (4) “Cosmopolitanism,” reported by 34 (p. 1135). Song and Gutierrez (2016) used the term cosmopolitanism to “refer to the ways in which these parents spoke of ideals around the appreciation of ethnic and cultural diversity is contemporary British society, in which many different types of people, and hybrid cultural formations, are regarded with mutual respect” (p. 1141). It would be interesting to know how these findings might vary in the United States and other countries with different histories of race relations.
As mentioned previously, social class has been included as a variable in some studies involving parents of mixed-race children. Typically, these are quantitative studies focused on how parents racially identify their mixed-race children (Brunnsma, 2005; Qian, 2004; Roth, 2005), and there seems to be an overall consensus in the literature that higher socioeconomic status leads to more choices and greater flexibility in the identity options available to mixed-race people (Byrd & Garwick, 2004; Herman, 2004; Mahlani, 2002). By contrast, Stone and Dolbin-MacNab (2017) found that “the White mothers in this study, specifically the ones most active in educating their children and involved in activism, was that they were from predominantly lower SES backgrounds while raising their children. In fact, it was three mothers in particular, from lower SES, who reported active involvement in the social movement of 1990s for the US Census to include multiple race options for multiracial Americans. This was partially the result of their creation of the [Multi Ethnic Group]. It was also predominantly the mothers from lower SES who created the multiracial organization for their children or strongly encouraged their family’s involvement with multiracial networks” (p. 106). This finding corroborates Byrd and Garwick’s (2004) point in their literature review of family identity formation among black-white couples raising mixed-race children that there is still much to learn about the perspectives of nonurban, and working-class, and poor parents of mixed-race children. We would add that such studies should address these populations through strength—rather than deficit-based lenses, as much early research on mixed-race families have focused on clinical populations, many in extreme poverty, leading to the problematic stereotypes surrounding mixed-race people we have discussed throughout the chapter.

Another interesting intersection to explore would be that of white women and men who come into mixed-race relationships already having anti-racist attitudes and engaging in anti-racist actions, and/or having complex understandings of racial dynamics, and/or who grew up in integrated neighborhoods (see Twine, 2004). For example, the white mothers of adult biracial children interviewed for the study by Stone and Dolbin-MacNab (2017) all felt it important to hold space in their homes for addressing race and racism, their children’s identities, and their children’s healthy psychosocial development as mixed-race persons. The extant research seems to focus on white women who were clueless about racial dynamics until they either got with a partner of color or had children of color (see, e.g., Byrd & Garwick, 2006; O’Donoghue, 2004). For example, Byrd and Garwick (2006) stated that the black husbands of the white women in their study “had educated them about Black culture and fostered their knowledge of this ethnicity. Without their husband’s presence, the women may have found it difficult to impart this sense of ethnic identity to their children” (p. 75). But this clearly does not represent the experiences of all white women in mixed-race relationships. Writer and psychotherapist Rhea St. Julien, whose husband is Haitian and identifies as black, believes that as the white mother of a biracial black-white child, correcting other white people’s misconceptions around race is part of her role. In this excerpt from her article, “That Hair!” St. Julien revealed some of her critically self-reflective ideas, as well as her frustrations with white people’s limited understandings around race:

The problem I have with questions about my daughter’s appearance and our relationship is that they don’t go far enough. Why doesn’t anyone ever ask me, “Do you worry that as a white woman, a group that has historically oppressed black women, that you are going to fuck up the raising of this young black girl?” Yes, yes I do. I worry that I’m not investigating my own internalized racism enough, that the time I spent researching the best binky clip would have been better used re-reading bell hooks, that my laziness to engage with anti-racist action any further than in my writing is setting the wrong tone for my daughter.

Where is the person bold enough to ask not “What product do you use in your daughter’s hair?” but “Do you think your daughter will hate you when she goes through her racial identity awakening?” Because I would like to talk about that much more than the merits of shea butter versus No Poo. I would be worried if my daughter didn’t go through a period of being very angry at all white people. It would mean she was doing a bypass on how messed up things are with race relations in this nation. It would mean she had a less full picture of her own heritage, and how far we have come.

While white persons’ lack of engagement with their whiteness and their denial about the impacts of racism have been well documented (Britton, 2013; Rauktis et al., 2016), surfacing counternarratives could be an important contribution to research as well, and important to advancing the idea that white parents are also capable of engaging in critical race parenting (DePouw & Matias, 2016). For example, in a study of white parents raising children of African descent, Twine (2004) shared the story of Justine, a white Australian and Dutch woman who had grown up in Ghana, dated only black men, and worked in an African-Caribbean youth community center. Justine had enrolled her teenage daughter in a Saturday School where she could learn about black culture and was concerned that in spite of this her daughter didn’t identify herself as black. Justine explained,

And I’m quite upset because I’ve always said to her, “Look, you’re black.” She goes, “Well, I’m not black because if I say I’m black I’m disrespecting you.” And I thought, “You have a good point there.” But what I said to her was “Okay, put it this way. Society sees you as black. And it’s best that you know that because at the end of the day if it came to one or the other it would be black people that would accept you.” The white people don’t see you as “mixed with white”. ‘At the end of the day, it’s the black people who will look after you. If push comes to shove, it’s the black people. I’m not going to tell you any different. I’d rather you be safe, than be in a position where you’re not comfortable (Twine, 2004, p. 891).

Twine has also made many empirical and conceptual contributions to understanding white parents of mixed children, including coining the term “racism-cognizant” (Twine, 2004, p. 881) to describe white parents of mixed-race children who understand racism to be a serious problem that they needed to prepare their children to address and resist, and developing the concept of racial literacy, "an analytical orientation and a set of practices that reflects shifts in perceptions of race, racism, and whiteness" (Twine, 2010, p. 92). Twine (2010) has shown that white parents of mixed-race children are capable of developing racial literacy, which is absolutely essential. Raising race-conscious children is a nonnegotiable for white parents raising children of color. And it is a deep, ongoing, life-altering commitment (Tatum, 2017).
Practice Implications: Guiding Principles for Parents

We end this chapter with ten guiding principles that reflect the practice implications of the research we have presented and discussed here. Given the chapter's focus on parenting, we articulate these as principles for parents, though following Matias (2016), our use of “parents” is broadly construed with parenting defined as “a pedagogical way to engage teaching and learning about race. Therefore, one need not be a biological, legal or foster parent to understand the dynamics between adult and child in the process of teaching and learning about race” (Matias, 2016, p. 4). Critical race parenting of mixed-race children demands knowledge of and, where relevant, commitment to at least the following:

1. **Confronting racism in your sphere of influence** (your family, home, community, etc.) should be a salient part of your identity. Your child is watching to see if what you say and what you do are in alignment. (That is, how diverse is your circle of friends? How well do you interact with family members of different racial backgrounds? How often do you talk about race with people in your sphere?)

2. **Representation matters, and you need to be aware that your consumption patterns have great influence over your children.** This includes books, TV shows, films, and what you value (i.e., which characters do you think are smart, beautiful, or competent). Normalizing the conversation about representation allows children to name race and to express identification in ways that are empowering for them, without fear of disappointing adults. As noted in the introduction, explicit representation of mixed-race people is growing in outlets ranging from children’s books to television. Resources such as the EmbraceRace website provide numerous recommendations, advice, and ideas for accessing such materials.

3. **Become a social engineer so that your child engages with people who reflect their identities.** This means playdates, cocurricular choices, and decisions about teachers need to be carefully vetted. It also means that it is your job to do that background work, so your child doesn’t have to. This is the case for all parents, but can be especially tricky when parenting across racial lines because it may not come naturally and may even involve becoming invested in communities or playgroups to which you would not normally be drawn.

4. **Get comfortable with the uncomfortable.** It is inevitable to feel vulnerable when crossing boundaries and engaging in activities that can be read as cultural or racial transgression. We acknowledge that even attempting to practice even the first three principles we have outlined can awaken such feelings of vulnerability! Buying a copy of Latina magazine when you are a black woman, spending significant time at a hair salon that is in the service of black women when you are Asian, or being the only “white” person in a particular social setting is par for the course. It is likely your child is often the “only one” in majority white environments or the only mixed-race one in a majority person of color environment, and these experiences are not socially neutral. It is okay for you to be frequently uneasy in order to make life easier for your children. It is a good reminder of the cultural and institutional ways in which racism impacts all aspects of our society.

5. **Racism isn’t (just) personal.** Mixed-race children likely live in a vulnerable space most of the time and trust that their love for and loyalty to their parents are real, but they know—consciously or unconsciously—love and loyalty are not enough to combat racism and oppression. Reinforcing dominant culture by making dominant culture “normal” and everything else other because that “isn’t how you were raised” or you believe that you are actually color-blind is the anthesis to raising healthy, race-conscious children and will likely impede your ability to truly be the teacher, supporter, and parent that you want to be.

6. **Get on the same page.** If you are in relationship with your child’s other parent, you should be in regular dialogue regarding language and messaging as it relates to conversations about race. This means explicit conversations about how your child self-identifies, and how you want to talk about everything from Ferguson and Japanese internment camps, to Colin Kaepernick and cultural appropriation.

7. **Intersectionality is not intended to create hierarchies of oppression.** Making intersectional connections to show solidarity for other diverse families can create parallel pathways for liberation. But be careful not to use those differences to reinforce intolerance (i.e., homophobia, religious intolerance, socioeconomic discrimination).

8. **Most parents don’t have enough historical context, but it is essential.** The history of people of color in the United States is not add-on information—it is American history, and it is the job of parents to learn it, synthesize it, and then teach it to their children. Don’t rely on traditional school curriculum to do that for you. Visiting places like the African-American Smithsonian Museum is a really powerful way to do this together, but can also be painful and confusing for mixed kids, who can feel torn between identities or parents as they try to make meaning of the atrocities committed as a result of white supremacy represented throughout American history.

9. **Special accolades are not part of the agreement.** It may be possible for white people to help raise empowered people of color, but this does not mean white parents who do so should expect to get special acknowledgement or reward for their wokeness: it’s your job as a parent of a child of color. This might seem obvious, but because of the damage that white supremacy has done, there is sometimes an expectation that white people who attempt to engage in anti-racist work (even in their own families) should be treated as exceptions and deserve (or expect) special acknowledgement.

10. **Be mindful of (coded) language.** Children are paying attention to the adjectives used to describe them or people who look like them. They are sponges in the most literal sense—they take in the rhetoric, images, and ideas circulating in the wider world, and without a critical lens these can be damaging. Calling a child’s hair “wild” or using animal nicknames, like monkey, for example, can reinforce dominant culture ideas of standards or beauty or behavior.
Beverly Tatum (2017) wrote in the revised and updated version of her classic book *Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race* that raising children who are developing critical consciousness is actually a gift, not a burden. In fact, as Tatum put it, we are all “better able to resist the negative impact of oppressive message when we see them coming than when they are invisible to us” (p. 127). Tatum also wrote, “We have the responsibility, and the resources available, to educate ourselves if necessary so that we will not repeat the cycle of oppression with our children” (p. 129). We believe this to be the paramount opportunity, and perhaps challenge, for mixed-race families.

References


Parenting Mixed-Race Children


