

Trans-Racial Foster Care and Adoption: Issues and Realities

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Trans-racial adoption (TRA), the adoption of children of one race by parents of another, has grown rapidly since the middle of the 20th century, but this adoption option remains controversial [1]. In the state system through which children move from foster care to adoption, there are more white parents who want to adopt than there are white children waiting for homes, and children of color are less likely than white children to be placed in a permanent home. Legislative efforts to amend these discrepancies by promoting TRA have not significantly improved placement statistics. This report describes the positions of advocates on both sides of the TRA debate and explores methods for increasing the number of permanent placements of children into loving stable homes.

DEMOGRAPHIC AND PROCESS PERSPECTIVES ON FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION

Who are the children waiting for homes and families?

Massachusetts court data for 2008 indicate that 2,272 children were adopted in the state, with approximately one-third (712) of these adoptions occurring through the public agency system [2]. In FY 2011, the number of public agency adoptions in the state was 724 [3].

In 2011, more than 7,000 children under the age of 18 were in the adoption placement system in Massachusetts; 5,700 were in foster care and the rest in other arrangements, including group homes [4]. Adoption was a goal for 32% (2,368) of these children. The median ages for these waiting children indicated that most would be long past the baby/infant stage: 11.1 for whites, 12.7 for blacks, 11.7 for Hispanic/Latino, and 4.5 for Native Americans [5].

In comparison to their white counterparts within foster care, black children spend more continuous time in placements than non-Hispanic whites (1.3 years compared to 1.1 years) [5]. Children of color not only have longer stays in the system, but the larger groups are also disproportionately represented in the adoption placement system.

The recent data in Massachusetts shows that non-Hispanic white children are underrepresented in comparison to their presence in the population by 22%, but black children are overrepresented by 10% and Hispanic/Latino children by 9% (see Table 1). That means an imbalance in the potential matching of adoptive parents with children of the same racial background.

	Children in Placement System	%	2010 MA Child Population	%
Non-Hispanic White	4,167	46%	1,128,048	68%
Black	1,549	17%	97,504	7%
Hispanic/Latino	2,372	26%	157,507	17%
Asian	185	2%	60,003	4%
Multiracial	420	5%		

Table 1: Number of Children in Placement: FY 2012

Source: Massachusetts Department of Children and Families; U.S. Census Bureau

What are the requirements for approval as a foster/adoptive parent?

The Multiethnic Placement Act

Adoption agencies have historically given preference to same-race adoption. In 1994, in an effort to combat the increasing number of foster children, Congress enacted the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA). MEPA’s purpose is two-fold:

1. Prohibit the delay or denial of a child’s foster or adoptive placement solely on the basis of race, color, or national origin; and
2. Require that state agencies make diligent efforts to recruit foster and adoptive parents who represent the racial and ethnic backgrounds of children in foster care (HR 4181).

In 1996, MEPA was amended by the Removal of Barriers to Interethnic Adoption Provisions (IEP), which deleted the word “solely” from MEPA’s prohibition against delaying or denying an adoptive placement on the basis of race. Thus, the IEP policy prohibits agencies that receive federal funding from considering race in decisions on foster or adoptive placements (HR 3348).

Massachusetts Regulations and Procedures

The Department of Children and Families is responsible for deciding the eligibility of potential parents as outlined in their procedures in Title 102. Potential parents go through a rigorous process of training and assessment to determine eligibility. Detailed information is gathered concerning the physical space in the home, familial relationships and history, as well as emotional, physical and physiological preparedness. The following requirements represent a brief overview.

Eligibility Requirements

1. The individual’s home meets the physical standards as set forth in regulation and is free of any animal that would pose a danger to a foster child.
2. The individual’s schedule would not require that a foster child of preschool age spend an excess of 50 hours per week in child care or that a foster child in the first grade or beyond spend more than 25 hours in child care each week.
3. The individual has a stable source of income sufficient to support his/her current household members and a stable housing history.
4. The individual possesses the basic ability to read and write in English or in his/her primary language.
5. The individual has a working telephone in his/her home for both incoming and outgoing calls.
6. The individual is at least age 18, a U.S. citizen, or has been granted legal permanent resident status (MA DSS, 2003).

RACIAL MATCHING: VIEWPOINTS ON WHO SHOULD ADOPT CHILDREN OF COLOR

The Racial Matching Position

One position on TRA holds that children should be placed in homes of like racial and cultural backgrounds. The basic argument is that such placement enhances the development of positive racial identity and coping skills to deal with racism in society.

The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) has been central in this position. They argue that white parents are ill-equipped to teach children of color — especially black children — how to navigate discrimination, create coping strategies for racism, and promote a healthy racial identity.

The NABSW notes that that it is a common belief that black families are less interested in foster care and adoption. However, agency policies, absence of minority staff members, lack of training, and failure to effectively recruit all provide barriers for African-Americans who want to adopt. In reality, when these barriers are removed, black families adopt at higher rates than whites. It is notable that 70% of African-Americans who adopted through private African-American agencies were unsuccessful in trying to adopt through public agencies [6].

The NABSW [7] advocates for African-American families who wish to adopt to have fair and equitable treatment, rights, and access. Their policy recommendations are to:

1. repeal MEPA and IEPA;
2. mandate culturally competent services in staffing requirements, including the revision of procedural and policy manuals; and
3. mandate that county and local governments develop community boards to monitor child welfare agencies and outcomes.

The Transracial Adoption Position

Increasing numbers of whites have been interested in adopting children of color, both internationally and domestically. This increase is thought to be a response to the need for children of color to be placed in stable home environments, along with a greater value for diversity in U.S. society. In addition to factors such as the availability of children, Jacobson, Nielsen, and Hardeman [1] note, “increased acceptance of transracial adoption and interracial marriage and the decline of blatant prejudice are also likely factors associated with the increase in transracial adoption” (p. 84).

Yet, children of TRA may struggle to develop positive racial identities and cultural affiliations. They may need to resolve the dissonance between the cultural and racial affiliations of their upbringings and their physical appearances. TRA children are able to gain healthy racial and cultural affiliations, but they may take more time to do so than children of same race families [8]. The reclaiming of one’s birth culture — or reculturation — may also be an integral part of forming a healthy cultural identity [9].

Parents can support this process by making their home reflective of their new multiracial family identity, by incorporating traditions from the child’s birth culture into family traditions and “infusing” race into child-rearing practices [10]. It is also critically important for white parents to examine what they may lack in racial awareness, to be vigilant in their awareness of racial issues and incidents affecting their children, and to reach out to both black adults and to other TRA families [11].

American demographics are shifting, as are assumptions about what a family should look like. More resources are available for white parents of children of color. Support groups, online communities and educational materials assist parents in creating multicultural households that embrace the birth cultures of both parents and children. The state of Connecticut has specific policies that address “cultural competence.” One such program trains, financially supports, and monitors care of ethnic skin and hair [12]. Doing so creates mechanisms for supporting the exploration and expression of racial identity.

ADOPTION AND CHANGING U.S. SOCIETY: A MASSACHUSETTS PERSPECTIVE

Growth of Multiracial Society: Diversity and Adoption in Massachusetts

Massachusetts needs to support both TRA families and African-American and other families of color seeking to adopt. Those skeptical and those supportive of TRA agree that streamlining permanent and stable adoption placements are imperative [7, 13, 14]. The following suggestions do not seek to side with either camp, but rather are formulated to strengthen the current system:

1. Enforce the MEPA/IEPA requirement for diligence in recruiting families who represent the racial and ethnic backgrounds of children in foster care and provide sufficient resources, including funding, to support such recruitment [15].
2. Support white parents who adopt transracially in addressing their TRA children's needs through cultural competence programs that provide both pre- and post-adoption support services.
3. Create mechanisms for assessing the experiences of TRA adoptees as well as same-race adoptions.

The U.S. population is increasingly multi-racial and multi-ethnic, and this trend will continue in the coming years. More and more people claim mixed-race heritage, with the result moving in the direction of less stark boundaries among races. It is important to carefully examine the adoption placement system to discern ways in which unjust barriers have been created for prospective adoptive parents, and to remove these wherever possible.

It is equally important to give more comprehensive attention to the information that parents who adopt transracially must know and face in order to parent their children of color in ways that help their identity development. They must also be conscious of how race impacts daily life. The priority should always be the children and their movement into stable, loving home environments.

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