

BICULTURAL FAMILIES MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF RAISING CHILDREN WITH TWO CULTURES

By Sandra Whitehead

While there is no magic formula for helping bicultural children through the challenges of Mixed matches defining who they are, says Joel Crohn, author of *Mixed Matches: How to Create Successful Interracial, Interethnic and Interfaith Relationships*, there are some basic principles of success:

- Be willing to keep working at it. Make working out your differences with your partner about the cultural and religious identity of your family an ongoing process. Don Rosenberg, a psychologist who has worked as a marriage and family therapist in a community with many interfaith and intercultural families for almost 30 years, recommends that parents who have conflicting opinions about the religious training of their children should talk often in order to anticipate issues that are likely to arise – religious ceremonies, holidays, religious education, values, in-law relations and even burials. “By anticipating, you allow yourself time to explore the alternatives,” he says.
- Make communication with your children a priority. Listen to your children and try to understand their experiences.
- Don’t take rejection personally. See your children’s ambivalence about their identity as a normal developmental stage. (See “Stages of Cultural Identity.”)
- Look for new ways to expose children to your family’s cultures. One way to promote self-esteem in a bicultural child is through education about and involvement in both cultures, Romano says. “The secret appears to lie in the parents’ ability to encourage open discussion of the children’s mixed heritage, as well as in the opportunity given the children to develop positive relationships with both cultural or racial groups.”
- Help your child deal with prejudice. Provide your children with positive experiences that reflect who they are. Parents should avoid making negative comments about certain cultural characteristics. “This is far less likely to happen,” Romano notes, “if the parents themselves respect and honestly promote each other’s culture.”
- Recognize that self-definition is ultimately up to your child. Though parents have an ideal in their minds when it comes to how their family will balance two cultures, at some point parents have to recognize that their children will choose their own paths. This could mean a choice to identify primarily with the culture of one parent, a decision to create their own identity based on something separate from either parent’s background, or an attempt to integrate aspects of both cultures.

As our children grow, we have to love them for who they are and respect who they become, says Crohn. “No matter how carefully we orchestrate our children’s experiences, we can never control or even predict how they will identify as they approach adulthood. Just as we have broken with some of the traditions and ways of our parents and ancestors, so too will our children change with the new world they are helping to create.”