

April Dinwoodie: Welcome to the NTDC Right Time Podcast, parenting in racially, and culturally diverse families. I'm your host, April Dinwoodie. This podcast works in conjunction with the classroom-based training, providing an introduction to the material that will be covered in the classroom. On parenting in racially and culturally diverse families. The podcast will also be a resource for parents to go back to as children in their home, transition through different developmental stages.

April Dinwoodie: In this episode, we welcome Beth Hall, co-founder of PACT, An Adoption Alliance, which is a multicultural organization dedicated to addressing essential issues affecting adopted children of color PACT offers, lifelong support and placement services for birth and adoptive families with adoptive kids of color. Beth is also a national speaker and author. Welcome to the podcast, Beth.

Beth Hall: Thank you.

April Dinwoodie: So Beth, we're going to start right at the beginning, what should parents who may foster or adopt children of different race or culture be considering?

Beth Hall: So we've done some research into this to try to look at what are the pieces that really lead to successful parenting in this way in these diverse families? And we think that there's four are key areas that we've seen over the years are really important for parents to self assess and think about as they approach this. The first has to do with personality. What you want to consider is are you the kind of person who is comfortable with complexity or do you shy away from it? Are you that sort of person that can juggle a lot of things? How do you feel about being public and visible? All of these things are part of being in diverse families, racially, and often culturally diverse families. And therefore, they are going to have an impact.

Beth Hall: If you have to stretch a long way, it's going to be harder for you, if you don't have to stretch as much, it's going to be easier. If you're the kind of person, for instance, I am a parent like this, and one of my challenge areas is asking for help. It's hard for me to ask for help, but it's absolutely necessary because, in this case, more than some other kinds of parenting, it truly takes a village to raise kids. The next thing we look at is attitude. What kind of attitudes do you have about race, about culture, about adoption?

Beth Hall: And thinking these things through becomes very, very important because all of us have implicit bias, we have understandings of things based on where we've grown up, how we've grown up, what our own racial and cultural background is. We need to examine those things and really dig into them to make sure that we're bringing as much knowledge and an attitude that is not going to decide things before we discover their true, both about our children and the culture or race that our child comes from. So those are important things.

Beth Hall: We want to look at lifestyle. Often, people focus a lot on lifestyle and it is critically important. It's really important to think about where do I live? Who do I know? Who do I love? Who do I worship with? Where's my child going to school. These sorts of things make a huge difference. If you live in a racially or culturally non-diverse area where children that share your child's racial or cultural experience don't live, it is going to be very, very hard for them to develop fluency both within your family, but also within their own cultural, ethnic and racial group. And both of these things are critical to their long term wellbeing. So you really want to look at that.

Beth Hall: And then lastly, we want to think about knowledge. What do you know about your child's racial group or cultural group? It is possible and some ways perhaps easiest to overcome lack of knowledge, but it's quite critical. And it's important that we find out not just about history, but also about what's going on today. It's important to understand, is this a post racial world? Can we approach it from a colorblind point of view or should we be thinking about things in other ways? And there's a lot of information that will help us make good decisions in this regard. So those are the four areas we want folks to look at, personality, attitude, lifestyle, and knowledge.

April Dinwoodie: Brilliant. Beth, that is so helpful. And the four areas and the questions that you're bringing up are really important, and not easy to answer or navigate important. So now what supports are needed for children who are adopted or fostered across race so that the children can identify in healthy ways?

Beth Hall: Well, it's really important, first of all, to understand that these things matter, race matters, culture matters, ethnicity matters, identity matters in all its versions and forms. So to be effective parents and to truly support children, we have to understand both who they are within our family and entitle them to all that holds, but also who they're going to be in the world. And what we don't know from firsthand experience, we have to help them gain fluency in so that they can be out there and make the choices they want to make that make sense for them in every context they're in, if that makes sense. So you can think about all kinds of things.

Beth Hall: It begins from the very youngest age when we want to offer affirmations to children. So, for instance, I'm white, I have an African/American son. It was very important to affirm to him that his beautiful dark skin is something he is entitled to be proud of, that he has a proud legacy of resilience as an African/American from the very youngest ages. We want to be very explicit with that, and it continues in developmentally appropriate ways throughout the years, if that makes sense.

Beth Hall: I often think that perhaps the most important thing for parents to think about when they are considering what they need to do for success for their children is really give them permission, and by that, I mean explicit permission, which means we learn how to talk about race, culture, and ethnicity, which often we

don't do very well here in America. So we learn how to talk about those things and give them permission to explore their identity to the fullest extent. We don't make it a loyalty test.

Beth Hall: In order to be part of my family, you don't have to let go of this piece of yourself, in fact, we urge you and welcome you to embrace it. That probably is the most important thing a parent can do. Now, how they do that is a daily thing and depends on the age of the child where you live, what the circumstances are, but that's the concept, that's the goal that we all need to pursue.

April Dinwoodie: Again, Beth, really important pieces of information here. And one thing I want to talk about is the danger of the colorblind approach, can you help us there?

Beth Hall: Absolutely. And this is something that sometimes is tempting for us because there's particularly perhaps apps for those of us that are white, but in fact, all of us can fall into this race and racialized feelings and expressions often are complex and we can therefore be fearful about them, concerned about young children getting involved too early, how it might impact them so on and so forth. But the reality is we aren't a colorblind society, we aren't a color blind world. And if we try to pretend that things that exist and matter don't exist or don't matter, we are not going to be able to effectively parent, we have to be able to hold complexity.

Beth Hall: It is also complicated to be a person of color, to be quote-unquote different in any way. And by different, we usually mean different than white because we are a white-dominant culture. Therefore, we need to really make sure in order for our children of color or children who have a different race or ethnicity or culture than we do that they are really being that piece of them, which may experience and is likely to experience some oppression out in the world is really held up by us, and the only way we can do that is to acknowledge it.

Beth Hall: If we try to pretend these things don't matter, then we're very likely to fall into promoting the status quo. And it only takes a few minutes on the internet to search out race facts and discover that people of color are still facing many biases in the world that are not dependent on socioeconomics. They're not dependent on which family they are, they are simply based on the color of their skin, their cultural heritage, racial heritage. This is wrong, but it still exists, and we can't change that status quo unless we pay attention to it, and that means we cannot take a color-blind approach.

April Dinwoodie: Makes so much sense to me, Beth. So thank you for that and for really driving that point at home, it's so important. Now let's talk about the different layers that exist when parents who are fostering or adopting are of a different race or culture than a child in their home?

Beth Hall: Well, there's lots of different layers, our children and our families are being asked about this experience. But if that's the case and it's visible to strangers

walking down the street, who are likely to say something like, is that your child, or is that your mom? Or where is your mom? That can't be your real mom. These kinds of things can really stir the pot of that experience for children. So we have to learn how to respond to strangers at first like a new teacher might be someone we want to help them understand our child's circumstance and our family circumstance and other strangers, it's kind of none of their business. So we have to learn how to manage that, don't we?

Beth Hall: And these things pull up feelings, both for kids and adults that it becomes very important that the adults learn how to manage. And in order to learn how to manage that, we have to act like family. We have to acknowledge differences where they exist, but also give children permission to not share all of their personal story with every stranger who might be interested. These questions that we get asked as families, this is going to happen. Sometimes when we begin the process, we imagine that it won't but I promise you it will, which means you have to make a plan. You have to think about how you're going to support your child? How you're going to act as a family when these sorts of things occur.

April Dinwoodie: Absolutely. And I know this all too well because this will happen. I remember countless times of having people invade our privacy as a family when I was with my white family, some innocence, some probing, some downright inappropriate, but it always made me feel different and odd and sometimes actually scared. So, Beth, what can families do?

Beth Hall: So as families, these kinds of families really have to find a way to make sure that they as a family and their children as well are having experiences that are shared by others. And sometimes that's going to mean for me as a parent, I remember I have parented in this way that sometimes I need to be the one who's in the minority, who's not having the same experience as my child in order for them to be around people that they share a certain piece of their identity and experience with. So we can't just live the way maybe we used to live because we felt comfortable in certain environments and spaces if our children can't also be comfortable there. We need to change, we need to expand our experiences if we haven't done so before adopting to make sure that our children are having experiences where they are in the majority, where they feel safe, where they can explore certain aspects of their identity that we may not share with them.

April Dinwoodie: This all makes perfect sense. And I want to talk a little bit about cultural differences now, which are important to acknowledge, but can sometimes be a little less obvious. What are some ways that children who are being parented in a home that is different from their culture, what are some ways that they're impacted?

Beth Hall: Well, culture is such a deeply embedded thing for each of us, and how do we learn culture? Culture is not something we learn in movies or books, it is

something we learn human to human. If you think about who you are and what matters to you, culturally, whether it's your value system or your traditions or whatever it might be, you learned that from other people. So, of course, that means our children need to too. So even children who are growing up racially, they might share the same race as the parent that has adopted them if they don't share their cultural experience that needs to be acknowledged.

Beth Hall: And let's not forget, there's also some cultural discomfort between certain groups. So, for instance, my own daughter is Guatemala. She grew here in California, where I live, where the largest population of Latinx people in our area was Mexican. Now we could've disconnected her from that and said, well, you don't culturally fit with them because she's not the same ethnicity they are, she is Guatemala. But she is part of the Latinx community and it was very in important to help her find ways to connect. And how does those connection happen? Well, for instance, language can be a way that connection happens through culture. Not everyone, of course, who's Latinx speaks Spanish, but many do.

Beth Hall: And for kids who already are going to have some challenges around connection and feeling different, the more tools we can give them, the more we can create opportunities for them to feel good about who they are and while understanding the differences between different ethnic and cultural groups, nevertheless, also being entitled to embrace the wider connections that they're entitled to by birth is critically important.

April Dinwoodie: So with all of that, right, how can parents or fostering or adapting learn how to talk more comfortably about culture?

Beth Hall: Yes, this isn't something we do very easily in America and sometimes when we do we can get confused. So, for instance, I'm white as a white person growing up, I think a lot of the world taught me that if I even so much as mentioned race, perhaps I was being a racist. I didn't really understand that talking about something and being straightforward and honest about it, I didn't have a lot of models for that doesn't mean that I am engaging in racist activity or viewpoints. And the same is true, of course, for culture and ethnicity. So we need to practice and very often that's going to take a very conscious commitment to doing so because we not learn to do so.

Beth Hall: So, for instance, in the case of someone like myself who may be white and is trying to learn how to talk about race, let's say, this is something where we don't necessarily have a great deal of modeling out in the world, at least not really healthy modeling. So I'm going to have to practice. And I usually say to parents that I suggest that at least daily, and let me say that again, at least daily, which I know tends to sound like a lot to people, we should be practicing, talking about race, culture, ethnicity, and identity.

Beth Hall: And the reason for that is if we don't, our children's antenna are going to grow quickly because they're living an experience that we may not be living, and that is going to hone their awareness of these differences at a much more rapid rate than those of us who tend to not necessarily be experiencing a lot of oppression or bias towards us or biased at least in particular in the way that our child is because they're a different race or ethnicity than we are. And as a result, their antenna are going to pass us at fairly young ages.

Beth Hall: It's hard to parent when your child actually knows more about an experience than you do. So we want to work very hard to be as aware and to train ourselves to see and recognize these things as much as we can, and that is really all about practice. So if I'm asked that question when I'm asked that question as you're asking it, my answer is always just practice, practice, practice, practice. If you're practicing, you're also risking making mistakes. You will make mistakes, you will realize that you said something you wish you hadn't had, which means you'll have to practice saying you're sorry. Doesn't this sound a lot like what we do in parenting, where we ask our children to own mistakes they make move forward in them and recognize it doesn't make you as a human being? It means you made a mistake, you get back up and you start up again. It's a great way to role model for our kids and it's super important that we do this kind of thing.

April Dinwoodie: So practice is so important. Now how will a child's comfort with their culture or race affect contact with their birth families?

Beth Hall: Well, it can have a profound effect if we think about the fact that, of course their birth family is going to include the cultures and ethnic backgrounds that they have and we don't these differences, right? That make us into this kind of diverse family. What we know is that there are different ways of interacting depending on your cultural background and experience. And, of course, within cultures, there's no one way to be anything, but there are some things that are more true in this culture than another for in instance.

Beth Hall: So the more our children can learn those more rays, those rules, if you will, they have the opportunity to be more adept at what is sometimes called code switching, which means the ability to talk to people from different backgrounds, whether it's in a different language or simply a different effect or way of approaching human interaction and recognizing those things. And that will be advantageous in interacting with all people who share their race and culture, which obviously is going to include their birth family.

Beth Hall: So it becomes very important that we can acknowledge both similarities among our cultures or ethnicities and our families and differences and recognize those so that we can help our children learn how to navigate them. We can learn how to navigate them and our children's birth family members can learn how to navigate them because that's all part of the experience. So we want to think about those things and be as explicit and as conscious as we can about what those things are in order to be supportive of the possibility of these ongoing

relationships, which we know from research are healthy to allow our children to at least explore and make their own decisions about how they want to relate to them, we don't want to deny them that.

April Dinwoodie: So, Beth, before we close, can you give us an example of a family that did the work to help integrate culture and differences into their family on behalf of their child?

Beth Hall: Well, I think for most the families that I've seen that have been most successful in this, it has usually begun with them having some honest self inventory where they look at themselves, none of us is perfection, and there's certainly nothing more humbling than becoming a parent as far as I can tell. So we really learn, and it pushes us to new realities, new experiences, and new truths for ourselves. So it begins with self inventory, those families that are really successful are honest about where their challenge areas are and really work on them. They put their children's needs at the center of their life goals, and that makes a huge difference. So what does that look like? Families that I've seen succeed, as I mentioned early on have to do with those families that really give their permission to their children to explore their own identity without them.

April Dinwoodie: Well, I think this is such a great way to close the podcast and giving these examples. And we just appreciate you for sharing your knowledge, your experiences, Beth, on this critical topic. So thank you so much for being with us.

Beth Hall: Thank you, April. And it's a great conversation could go on forever, right? A lifetime.

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