

Multicultural Families
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“I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character”
Martin Luther King, Jr.

There are many biracial and bicultural families in the United States. They face many problems that traditional families do not face. Our society is biased in favor of marriages between couples of similar backgrounds. Previous generations largely felt it was better to marry someone of the same race, religion or nationality. Modern marriages have become less traditional.

American service members marrying European or Asian spouses largely represented the early bicultural marriages. Interracial marriages are now more common than in the previous decades. It is estimated that there are over 700,000 interracial couples in the United States. Estimates of interracial and multicultural children in the United States range from hundreds of thousands to five million. Statistics on children are difficult to obtain because no official U.S. Census category exists for children of mixed parentage. Official documents such as birth certificates do not even have categories for mixed heritage. This indicates that our society is not dealing with the reality of interracial/intercultural marriages effectively.

Families with different races or nationalities face unique problems. They are dealing with divergent languages, customs, religions and cultures. Various sayings and gestures may mean different things in different cultures. This may lead to misunderstandings and miscommunications. Furthermore, couples that do not have a common background, history, education, and values may not understand their partner's belief system.

There may be conflict as to how the children will be reared and which culture they will follow. Some families choose to largely follow the culture of one spouse. Others develop a blend of customs and traditions from each of the spouse's culture of origin. The response of extended family members may cause problems for the couple. The parents of each spouse may be upset that all of the traditions of their culture are not being passed down to the next generations. This can lead to major conflicts among extended families and cause resulting marital tension.

In addition to these difficulties within the family, biracial/bicultural couples also face problems outside of the family, within their community. Although our society is making progress in accepting these marriages, we have a long way to go before prejudice no longer rears its ugly head.

The children who are products of these marriages must deal with discrimination and narrow-mindedness from our society. Jason is 11 years old and his parents are in the Army. His mother is white and his father is black. He says, “Sometimes I feel like people stare at me & my parents when we go out to dinner. Other times they whisper to each other while they look our way. When I started at a new school last year some of the kids teased me because I don't look like them”.

One of the reasons for prejudice is the psychological need to predict the behavior of others. When we are able to label or categorize someone we begin to associate feelings and behaviors to them that allow us to predict how they might act. This makes us feel safer because we know what to expect. Predictability leads to security, whereas unpredictability may lead to feelings of uncertainty or fear. When we label someone in our mind as “black”, “white”, “Hispanic”, “Jewish”, “a policeman”, “a Colonel”, or an “ex-convict”, for example, we begin to feel that we know how he or she will act. Therefore when someone does not fit into a neat category we are sometimes uncomfortable with the resulting unpredictability. For example, how do we categorize a child whose mother is white and whose father is black. Is the child white, black, both or neither? What about a child whose father is the product of a Hispanic/Native American union and whose mother is the product of a Japanese/Jewish union? As you can see the question of categorizing can become quite confusing. Unfortunately this attempt to categorize others ignores the indisputable fact that everyone is an individual who acts independent of imposed stereotypes.

Another important issue for children of multicultural families is identity. The question of “who am I?” becomes more complicated due to the diverse backgrounds of the parents. Part of our identity often implies belonging to a subgroup (e.g. Catholic, Japanese). When a child is a product of an interracial/intercultural marriage he is not solely one race, nationality or religion. Therefore the issue of identity becomes more complex.

One solution to these problems is to embrace the family’s diversity. Enrich each other’s lives by sharing your unique culture, music, and customs. Show the children that there are valuable qualities in every race and culture. Educate the children to understand that prejudice is bred from ignorance. Correct the negative stereotypes and myths they are exposed to. Many positive outcomes can result. Children who are a product of mixed nationalities may become bilingual. Children of mixed racial marriages will become less prejudice. The friends of these children may become less prejudice too.

According to one researcher, multicultural young people who have learned to cope in a racist society often have high self-esteem and a strong sense of personal identity. Their positive development can often be attributed to their parents’ view of the world and the way they handle their cultural differences. Parents who are comfortable with their own cultural heritage can help their children to understand, appreciate and embrace both cultures as they are growing up. By helping children to develop healthy positive self-esteem they are able to withstand the prejudice they will sometimes have to face in the community.

Today’s society is more accepting of interracial/intercultural marriages than previous generations. However a great deal of misunderstanding and prejudice remains. Until more progress occurs, we must take comfort in knowing that today’s interracial/intercultural families represent living proof that we can create unity despite diversity. These families represent that we are all one race- the human race.