



Alaafia Kids Tidbits

Give Them Roots and Give Them Wings



**Newsletter by
Alaafia Kids Company**

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My daughter, Amira, is almost 4½ years old. She no longer looks at pictures of white little girls, points to them and says "Amira." (Her 2½-year-old brother, Latif, still does this.) She'll also look at basketball players and say, "Look! There are white men and black men." Her awareness of color, and *her* color, is growing all the time. Working off of her cues of readiness, it's now time in our family to seriously begin an open dialog about race that I know will never end.

My husband, Malik, and I have two very simple goals in mind. I think they are the same goals that all parents have. We want to give our children roots and we want to give them wings.

First, let's state our goals. Then we'll talk about *how* we do this. We want our

children to know that they belong to two different cultures: an African culture and a white American culture. Their roots lie in these two cultures.

We want our children to know that they have two parents who love them very much. We want them to know that they have our unconditional support to succeed in life. We want to give them wings to soar strong and high in all areas of life and living.



Like this little girl, Amira is often found with her nose in a book.

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How to Handle Racism When You're Three Years Old

I agree with many leading thinkers on the issue of multiethnicity that the concept of "race" is really an artificial construct in a biological sense. Yet socially, "race" is still perceived as if it really exists beyond our imaginations. So, we run into it all the time, for good and for bad.

How we *deal* with it really makes all the difference in the world, because, quite frankly, our children are watching us.

One major objective I have in doing this newsletter is to offer insights and ideas to parents of mixed race children about how to help their children

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Give Them Roots and Give Them Wings

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These two goals are very much intertwined. With deep, healthy roots, our children will be able to fly on strong, healthy wings. So, Malik and I are working on achieving these goals simultaneously.

Putting down the roots and setting up the wings

We accomplish this in ways that make our children know they are African *and* (white) American. But we don't overdo it. For example, if we see a family like ours, we will say, "Look! A family just like ours!" And leave it like that.

At the same time that we point out our children's biraciality, we also live sometimes in African style and sometimes in white American style. For example, we often wear



African clothes, eat African foods, and speak an African language. We also spend time doing things with white Americans such as play dates with my white friends' children. Regularity brings normalcy.

We do make an effort to put our children into diverse settings with all kinds of people, mixed like themselves. For this reason, we frequent a library and a playground a little farther from our home than those in our own neighborhood.

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How to Handle Racism When You're Three Years Old

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deal with life in a largely monoracial paradigm. Let's start with the littlest ones first.

I know that it's hard imagine that very young children would even know that racism toward them as mixed race individuals even exists. They probably don't know the word, but they may feel it, for example,

being snubbed on the playground. I believe that it is our responsibility as parents to prepare our children for this reality, which is likely to occur sooner or later, and the impact it will have on their lives, maybe forever.

You can help your children by eliminating racial prejudices or biases that you may have as a monora-

cial parent (assuming you are one). These may be so subtle that you wouldn't even think of them as racial prejudices or biases. They come along with the cultural bag-

"It is our responsibility as parents to prepare our children for the reality of racism in our society."

gage we carry around with us. An example is hearing a voice on the phone and immediately classifying it as belonging to a person of a certain race. Or assuming that the workers at a certain job belong to a certain race. Be conscious of this automatic process and stop yourself when you do it. Having these prejudices and biases does filter down to

children, because they are listening for social cues from you. Give them the right ones.

One way to begin prepping your children to be aware of their mixed race identity is to use age appropriate books or places that illus-



This is a site we all hope to see: children of different colors celebrating together for racial unity.

trate the history of both (or all) of their cultural histories. Sometimes that history is a painful one; the African slave trade comes to mind. I am not advocating showing pictures of lynchings to three year

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Give Them Roots and Give Them Wings

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To learn, you have to feel confident in yourself and your abilities. We work on creating positive self-concepts in our children by praising their physical features as well as their intellectual ones. We surround them with images of biracial children in books and as dolls so they perceive their biraciality as normal. We interact with other mixed race families. We never hesitate to tell them how much they are loved just as they are.

Part of giving them wings is to tell them their history, just as we

do when working on their "roots." It's sort of like putting them on the shoulders of giants so they can soar even higher. Roots and wings really are very intertwined!

But I really want to emphasize



Make every effort to socialize with all kinds of people.

that we don't overdo any point we're trying to make because we don't want our children to become obsessive about their biraciality. We respond to their questions honestly, directly, and simply, but we don't search out ways to make our point.

It's to our advantage that our world is becoming more mixed race. But we know that our dialog on race will continue forever. We're just trying to lay the foundation now for a healthy self-outlook and positive ideas about everybody else, no matter what color they are.

How to Handle Racism When You're Three Years Old

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olds. But I am advocating taking young children to an African slave museum and letting them experience it firsthand. Be open to their questions and answer them honestly and directly. Use as few words as possible. Don't exaggerate the truth, but don't hide it, either.

Then follow up with a book or Internet search. Maybe they won't be able to understand everything, but make it real to them by giving them examples of violence they know (for example being ignored by other children because of physical appearance is "violent" in my estimation) and

then draw comparisons. Doing this over and over again at appropriate times will help.

These are a few ideas to help (contd. on p. 6)

"Answer their questions... Don't exaggerate the truth, but don't hide it, either."

Alaafia Kids Spotlight on... Tiger Woods

Almost everyone knows the name. Almost everyone knows that he is already an idol in the golf world and will go down in the annals of golf history as one of the best players of all time. What everyone may not know is that Tiger Woods is an Alaafia Kid.

Tiger's parents are Earl Woods, an African American, retired lieu-

tenant colonel in the U.S. Army, and Kultida, a native of Thailand. You know that Tiger is multiculturally aware simply by going to his official website, www.TigerWoods.com You can read about all of Tiger's golfing accomplishments and



The Tiger Woods Foundation sponsors "In the City" golf clinics for children and a National Junior Golf Team.

awards at the site in either the English language or in Japanese. Then click over to the Tiger Woods Foundation page (or go to

Alaafia Kids Spotlight on... Tiger Woods

www.TigerWoodsfoundation.org)
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and learn more about Tiger as a person. He started his Foundation as a way to help disadvantaged children of all backgrounds across the country. For example, his organization conducts "In the City" golf clinics and runs a national junior golf team. The foundation also operates a Learning Center to help children succeed in school *and* change their world for the better.

The Tiger Woods Foundation also gives many grants to non-profit organizations across the United

States that are helping disadvantaged kids on the grass-roots level.

The Foundation does this several times per year. Tiger's Foundation also has an annual benefit concert to support its charitable efforts. This year, Stevie Wonder will join him on May 21, 2005 in Las Vegas.

This is a great site to read all about the wonderful things that Tiger is

doing for disadvantaged children.



On May 21, Stevie Wonder will join Tiger for the Tiger Woods Foundation Annual Fundraising Concert.

At the site, you will see many Alaafia Kids benefiting from the Tiger Woods Foundation. Join me in saluting this Alaafia Kid, who serves as a superb role model for all children, especially Alaafia Kids!

NOTE: We will feature an Alaafia Kid in every issue of

Alaafia Kids Tidbits, some famous

Anansi Answers

NOTE: *Anansi Answers* is a regular column in Alaafia Kids Tidbits Newsletter. It is named after Anansi the Spider, a character in many African stories. Anansi is a very wise old spider! She will answer your questions about being multiracial. Please write us with your question at Jeanne@AlaafiaKids.com

Dear Anansi,

My 3-year-old was asked by another child on the playground why she had frizzy hair. She didn't know what to say and came to me very upset. What can I do as a parent?

Analese in Sacramento, CA

Anansi Answers:

This is a common situation at this

age because children naturally are very curious about differences. They usually mean no harm by it.

It is very important to allay fears and boost a

"Encourage your child to see herself as a combination of two (or more) very special backgrounds."

developing self-concept. You as a parent have a very critical role to play. Encourage your child to see herself as a combination of two (or more) very special backgrounds.

Do not participate in making your child feel different by talking about your family to others as if you need to explain or justify something. You can help your child see herself as a

good person by reading age-appropriate books that celebrate the uniqueness of multiracial families and by providing dolls that look like her. Seeing images of herself at this age helps create a positive self-concept for life. Look for other multiracial families with small children and start



Make trips to the playground enjoyable for all by taking along some multiethnic friends!

a playgroup. These things will enable your child to feel no different from anyone else. Praise all your child's features! Good luck!

Anansi

Nurturing...

Little Readers and Writers

NOTE: In every issue of *Alaafia Kids Tidbits*, we will have a major article about literacy. We will feature different theoretical aspects of learning to read and write gleaned from the latest research and show how they apply in daily interactions with your children. Our major objective is to give you some practical tips to bolster the academic successes of your children in terms of literacy. As always, if you have some other ideas, or a topic that you'd like us to discuss, please let us know! We will feature it at some later time in this newsletter. In this issue, we will discuss some basic literacy terms that we will use throughout this series of articles. Then we will discuss ways to put them into practice with babies and toddlers. In the next issue, we will focus on applying these to learning in three- and four-year olds.

The Sounds of Language: Spoken Language

Have you ever noticed how babies smile and gurgle when you talk to them? They are doing much more than just responding to you, their loving caretaker. They are learning a lot about how language works, noting its rhythms and intonations. They are also learning a lot of the nature of conversation, and, in fact, are participating in the conversations by their smiles and gurgles! At this early time, babies hear words all strung together, but they can recognize certain "strings" and prefer certain ones over others. This is why babies will smile more when they hear certain "strings" rather than others.

Hearing a spoken language(s) at this very tender age is considered to be critical in learning how to read and write. However, listening to the radio or TV is not the same; those sounds become white noise to babies. Seeing an expressive face while hearing language addressed directly to them is the key. Research shows this to be true. You as a parent can put your children on a fast-track to literacy by setting the stage with your infant. Talk and sing to your baby as much as possible. Soon you will hear the baby's sounds become more like real words. He or she will also pause and listen for an answer after "speaking" at appropriate times during the "conversation."

The Sights of Language: Print Awareness

The next step on the road to literacy (which may begin in conjunction with the previous step) is to surround your baby and toddler with print to encourage them to become "print aware." In this way, children learn that there is a direct connection between the printed letters that they see and the spoken words that they hear.

Further support this connection by pointing to billboards and traffic signs and reading them aloud to your young children. Show by example, too! Read all kinds of different media, including books, magazines, and newspapers in front of your children. Then will soon ask for the same because they want to "read," too! They will naturally learn how to hold a book and turn the pages, and how to follow along the sentences. These may seem obvious to you, but remember that these are all new and exciting discoveries to a young child.

The next, natural step is to read aloud to them on a regular basis. Make it a part of your daily routine. **Research shows that reading aloud to your children is the most important thing you can do as a parent to encourage literacy and a love of reading.** Read slowly and with expression. Stop to ask a question or make a comment from time to time. Ask your children for their opinion. Interact with your children and with the book! Read favorite books again and again. Soon children will be able to recite it with you. Make books come alive and you will have lifelong, eager readers.

Phonological and Phonemic Awareness: Letters to words to sentences

Soon, children will be able to distinguish certain sounds out of the "strings" that they know in spoken language. They will realize that the sounds belong to certain letters. This is the beginning of their phonemic awareness. The next step in this process is to relate words into groups according to their sounds. For example, a child will hear you read "ball" and say "That sounds like 'boy!'" From this point, a child will soon recognize that words are composed of syllables and that there are distinguishable words in sentences. Simultaneously, the child's speech will follow the same pattern: letter sounds to

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to words to phrases to sentences. All of these accomplishments refer to the child's phonological awareness.

To aid the natural progression of their developing phonemic and phonological awareness, you may play letter and word games. For example, children love to listen to the alliteration in tongue twisters. In fact, Alaafia Kids Company's ***Reusable Alphabet Art Flip Charts*** is based on this fun aspect of language. It is also based on the search and find game that children love: looking for hidden objects (i.e., letters) in an interesting scene. [Click here](#) to find out how to purchase our ***Reusable Alphabet Art Flip Charts***.

Rhymes are also very useful. Contemporary Mother Goose Nursery Rhymes (without the violence rampant in the older versions) are fun. Soon your children will begin to recite them and sing them! You can also foster phonological and phonemic awareness in your children by singing songs that play with the sounds of letters and words. The Canadian children's singer, Raffi, has some excellent songs like this that my children adore. There is one that manipulates the vowel sounds in words, creating nonsense words that my children just love!

Alphabetic Knowledge:

Singing the Alphabet Song from birth on will expose your children to the rhythm of the language. In the beginning, your children are reciting it without understanding that the sounds belong to letters that hear in speech, see in books and write on paper. Constant exposure to printed letters allows children to become familiar with the shapes of letters. When children point to letters, identify them. Repeat the names again and again. Knowing the names and shapes of letters is known as alphabetic knowledge.

Soon children will ask for a crayon, pen, or pencil in order to "write." At this point, learning how to read and write becomes fully intertwined. Encourage writing by providing lots of paper of different sizes and several different writing instruments. Blank paper is preferable because it permits children the opportunity to write naturally in free form and not focus on staying in the lines or tracing dotted or pre-printed letters perfectly. Soon you will be receiving "letters" from your tod-

dlers! Taking time to read them in front of your children shows that the letter is important and legitimate, further encouragement for more of the same writing, just more improved. Refrain from calling their writing "just scribbling" and tossing it in the recycling box. Tape it up high to indicate its importance. Make your children feel good about their abilities!

Conclusion:

This article provides some basic explanations of key terms you may hear in the context of early literacy. We have provided you with some concrete and practical ways to encourage literacy in your little ones. Here is a brief synopsis:

With babies:

- Sing and talk to your baby as much as possible
- Encourage talking by smiling at your baby, pausing in between sounds, repeating sounds
- Play touching games with questions and answers ("Where are baby's hands?")
- Fill in words and sentences for your baby as he or she points to objects or expresses desires

With young toddlers:

- Read, read, and read with your children *with enthusiasm!*
- Encourage discussion about the books while reading
- Provide books in easy-to-reach places and encourage your children to explore them on their own

Stay tuned for the next newsletter. We will focus our attention on three- and four-year-olds and literacy.

Jeanne Yacoubou, founder of Alaafia Kids Company, holds three Master's degrees, including one in education. She is a certified teacher with over ten years experience. Currently, she is homeschooling her young children.

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you get started on your open dialog about race and racism with your children. Getting started from a correct framework will help in the long run.

Book Nook

Note: In this column, we will review a book that features a mixed race family or child in a positive light. We begin by critiquing *black is brown is tan* by Arnold Adoff.

black is brown is tan is a forerunner in children's literature. First published in 1973, it portrays a family of four: African American mom, Caucasian dad, and two mixed race children (a boy and a girl). It's the first book that celebrates unique families like this one.

What I like most about this book is that the artwork really captures biracial features and skin tones. Too often, I see books that either portray mixed race children as too dark, too light, too Caucasian, or just not quite right. This book succeeds where other books fail.

This is a great book to have around your home because it truly celebrates normalcy in a family that non-mixed race people may find odd or even scary. Television and movies are just beginning to portray mixed race families and people, and until this happens with regularity, being mixed race will still be perceived as strange, even abnormal, in the general population. Hold on to books that give the portrayal that we want to give our children. Read them often with your children. Point out how the family in the book looks just like yours.

Another great aspect of this book is that it reads like a poem. Sing along! Soon enough, you will remember it by heart like we do. Here's one of our favorite lines (as it appears):

black is brown is tan
is girl is boy
is nose is
face
is all the colors of the race

Available through Alaafia Kids on our [Multicultural Books](#) page.

Website Review:

Spotlight on...Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA)

www.amea.org

NOTE: In this column we will review a website of interest to mixed race children and their families. If you know of one suitable for this column, please let us know!

Every multiethnic person or parent of a multiethnic child should visit this website. It is packed with all kinds of important and interesting information on all types of issues pertinent to multiethnic individuals.

AMEA was founded in 1988. Its efforts are devoted to advocacy and education for and about the multiethnic, multiracial, and transracial adoption community. It can help you form an affiliate group in your area.

AMEA, a non-profit organization, was instrumental in the federal government's decision to revise its standards for collecting racial and ethnic data by allowing persons of multiple racial heritages to check "one or more races" on the 2000 Census. This organization has representation in Washington in regard to issues relevant to the multiethnic community.

The organization also offers an online newsletter and a listserv for networking opportunities. The website is easily navigable and very informative. What's especially impressive is the long list of books and websites of interest to its members and visitors.