



# Alaafia Kids Tidbits

## Mixing and Matching: Developing Mixed Race Identity as a 5- to 8-Year Old

*In a previous issue, we looked at how to develop a healthy self-concept in very young mixed race or transracially adopted children, ages 2 to 4. At this tender age, toddlers and preschoolers are just developing a sense of self. We, as parents, can reinforce our children's self-concept every time questions or situations about race come up in several ways. For example, we can have books featuring people who resemble our children and our families in them and multi-skin-toned dolls around the home. We can compliment our children's physical features. We can also befriend other mixed race families and spend time with them. The most important thing we can do, however, is to show unconditional love to our children every chance we get. Let us turn our attention here to slightly older children, ages 5 to 8, and approach the issues of race and racial identity from their point of view.*

### Introduction

When children turn five, a time when higher cognitive and advanced verbal skills blossom, they become more acutely aware of race  
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### Letter from



Hello Everyone!

As founder of *Alaafia Kids Company*, I am starting this new column in the *Alaafia Kids Tidbits* newsletter called *Letter from Jeanne*. This is my opportunity to tell you the latest news from *Alaafia Kids Company*, comment on current events of interest or importance to the mixed race  
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### Alaafia Kids Company

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### Special points of interest:

- ☺ Racial Identity in 5-8 year olds
- ☺ Alaafia Kids Company in the News
- ☺ Halle Berry
- ☺ [www.swirl.org](http://www.swirl.org)
- ☺ Mixed race advice column
- ☺ 40 Ways to Raise a Non-racist Child



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differences and similarities in families. As they develop friendships with other children and enter school or a homeschooling community, their social world enlarges more than their families. More questions about race, and *their* race, in particular, arise. How should we, as parents, react? More importantly, what should we say and do?

### Children's Group Categorization

First, let's consider where our children are in their cognitive and emotional development. Beginning at age three and four, children categorized everything. It's a basic human characteristic. When looking at people, for example, children automatically want to know if they're "boys" or "girls," and "black" or "white," or something else.

At five, the impulse to categorize everything becomes much stronger and more sophisticated. Cognitive confusion begins when five-year-olds start trying to categorize *groups*, beginning with their own: their family. At this time, parents may begin to get questions about why mom and dad, or mom and me, don't *match* like they do in some of their friends' or classmates' families.

### Parents' Reaction to "Group" Questions

A good way for parents of biological children to respond to these questions is to point out how the children are beautiful combinations, or "rainbows" of their parents. Parents can point out the subtle nuances of similarities between themselves and their children when their children ask about it. For exam-

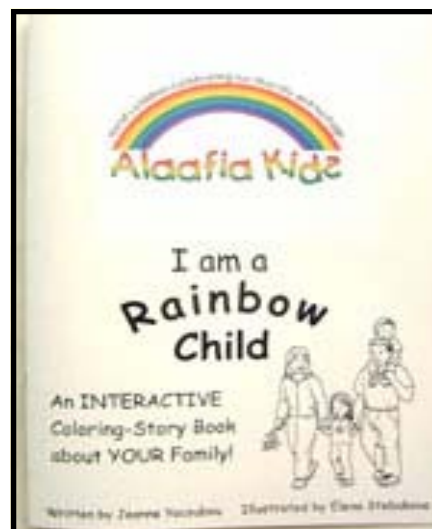
ple, the frizzy hair of an African American-Caucasian child may not be as course as the parent's and may have the lighter highlights of the other parent. Parents can stress the point that their children truly resemble them as *blends* of the parents not just as children "with mom's nose" or "dad's eyes." *Alaafia Kids Company* produces a coloring-story book, *I Am a Rainbow Child*, that celebrates the diversity in each mixed race child.

For biological and transracially adopted families, parents can respond to their children's questions about their group identity by introducing a notion that may be new to the children because it appears counter to the children's basic *assumption* about families: all members of a family have to look alike. Point out every chance you get that families are families because of the unconditional love and acceptance members have for each other. Love is what makes family members "match," not skin color or physical features.

### Children's "Group" Markers

While trying to make sense of their groupings, five- to eight-year olds become very good at drawing associations between a group and its characteristics. For instance,

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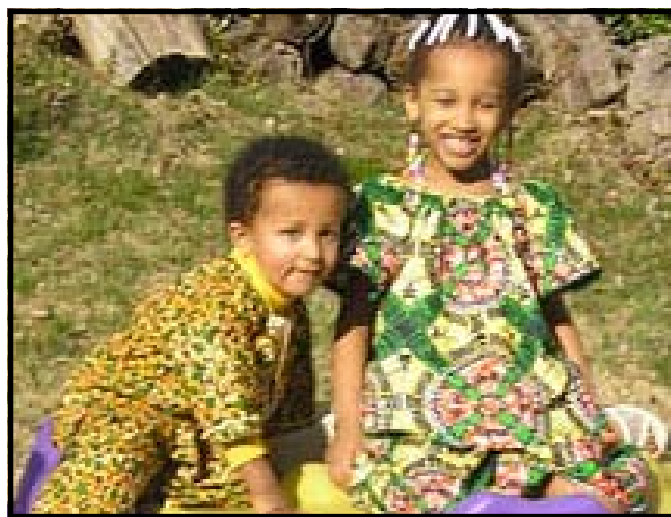
they will begin to associate a certain skin color with language, food, music, religion, etc. Similarly, they express a keen desire to learn about other groups (i.e., cultures) and those groups' characteristics.

#### Parents' Response to "Group" Markers

Because of the natural curiosity children at this age have about group characteristics such as language, food, music, religion, this is the ideal time for parents to expose their children to aspects of their culture and to emphasize things already introduced at earlier ages. For instance, if a second language is spoken at home, speak more of it at home now and with more people of that "group," all the while including your children in the exchanges. This drives the point home to your children that they are part of a larger group and these characteristics begin to make up the children's group identity.

Being able to speak a second language also has an added use. It provides the family with a "secret code" to use when interrogated by strangers (or, even family members), about the family's racial makeup. Family members can use their second language to firmly establish their unity in the face of possible "attacks."

Parents can further assist their mixed race or transracially adopted children to feel part of their "group" at this time by immersing themselves in other aspects of their cultural heritage. For example, prepare and eat foods from that culture on a regular basis. Listen to the culture's music. If prac-



ticating that culture's religion, form a social group of people in that community to interact with on a regular basis. *Alaafia Kids Company* sells handmade African clothes for children to help foster cultural identity.

Engaging in all of these activities with your children is very important in the development of their *group identity*. That's why it is so critical to share cultural experiences with other people: members of that culture and others. Your children naturally want to *share* who they are. It is a way to reinforce their identity. Provide them with opportunities to do so such as a cultural get-together with friends or a role in a multicultural presentation at their school or homeschool community. A strong group identity is part of one's self-identity. Making the experiences positive ones will boost your children's self-esteem.

A final experience that some parents may be able to provide their biological or transracially adopted children is to visit or live in the country of origin when their children are 5 to 8 years old. Getting familiar firsthand with one's heritage at the time when the children are very receptive to it

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will support your efforts to develop your children's group identity. Knowing one's extended family living there will also make your children's group identity more real to them. They will develop a sense of belongingness that is invaluable in the development of a healthy self-identity.

Likewise, seize the opportunity to multiculturally educate your children at a time when they are very receptive to it! There are many opportunities to do so almost everywhere. Befriending families from other cultures is a great way to do this. Communities frequently have ethnic festivals that are great to go to. Don't forget to check out museums, theaters, and movies, too.

### **Making Them Feel Part of a Mixed Group**

All that I've said in the previous part applies to *all* children. All parents wish to impart a well-developed cultural heritage to their children. Mixed race children have more than one cultural heritage. So, their group identity truly is multi-



faceted. Mixed race and transracially adopted children are developing co-existing group identities. How can we, as parents, facilitate this process?

Although it's true that the development of group identities occur over a life time, children between the ages of five and eight are most receptive to their development because it is a new process to them. However, both parents can participate in the process by taking an active role in activities and experiences relating to both (or all) cultures. The participation of both parents in all activities and experiences will prevent children from feeling that they have to choose between mom's or dad's group identity. It will also allow children to get a clearer understanding of the notion that *love* binds families and *not* physical characteristics or cultural markers.

### **Creating a Mixed Group Identity**

Children ages 5 to 8 are cognitively able to think of themselves as belonging to two or more cultures simultaneously. The next step in logic soon brings them to the realization that they also have a *mixed* identity. Emotionally, some children need assistance in coming to accept this fact. A mixed culture does not have a well-developed series of cultural markers like an African or African American culture has, so children may wonder how they can "fit in" to this mixed culture. They may also wonder how they really fit in either mom's or dad's culture since they really are not *totally* from one or the other.

This is where parental support comes in. Parents are called upon to answer their children's questions when they arise honestly and directly. They need to repeat their undying and unconditional love for their children. They need to make them feel comfortable "in their own skin." This may be difficult when asked in public

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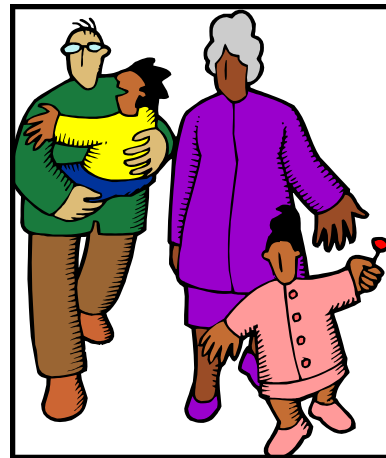
about who they are. Children hear these questions and remarks from total strangers and wonder about their meaning and significance.

So, I believe that parents shouldn't hide the fact that being mixed race is somewhat different in the eyes of a society not yet ready to think of a mixed race culture as a "culture" like an African or African American culture. I am not suggesting that parents refer to "everyone else" as racist, but just make their children aware of the fact that some people are unfamiliar with mixed race individuals are asking out of curiosity and, in some cases, ignorance. Our job is not to educate everyone, but at the same time we do need to explain to our children what's going on.

It is important for families to create a mixed group identity in their children. The interesting thing about this is that there is no "one" mixed race culture! This also makes it difficult. The common thread in all mixed race individuals is just that: they are mixed. Exactly how they are so mixed varies from person to person. So the "mixed race culture" we develop for our children *is largely constructed as they are living it*. Hard to explain to a five-year-old, yes. Impossible, no. Parents facilitate this process by befriending other mixed race families and spending lots of time together, creating a tightly knit social support group for the children. It may help to live in an area where mixed race peo-

ple, or, at least, people from different cultures live together. Then, it becomes normal that people look very different from one another. It is easier to blend in.

On a family level, it is important, of course, that parents show support of their children. They do this best when they have a strong sense of who *they* are and what they're about. It's also important that their marriage be strong. Children readily perceive when there's tension between mom and dad and the tension only creates instability in the children. But when the home is a secure haven for all involved, the mixed race children begin to feel so good about themselves as people, pure and simple, that any future discrimination they may face loses importance because they know that they have a secure home to go to for support. Even more, that



secure home life may instill in them that it is normal that different people can co-exist peacefully, whether it is in or outside of the home.

On a similar note, having a sibling who resembles you is helpful in forming the mixed race identity in a child. For the older child, there is security in knowing that there is someone else in the world who looks just like he or she does. The sibling begins his or her

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conception of self with the idea that "different" is "normal" so the development of a mixed race identity "should" be easier for the younger child. Every child is "mixed" in a unique way, so we cannot really be sure. But creating that mixed race cultural identity is made easier when there is more than one mixed race individual in the home microculture.

### Conclusion

Turning five is a big step for children. They have lost their "babyhood" and think and feel in sophisticated ways as they attempt to make sense of who they are, the world around them, and how they fit in. Their cognitive and emotional growth at this age is marked by wanting to discover, share, and fit into a group. They also want to fit that identity into their overall self-identity.

Parents of mixed race or transracially adopted children have the obligation to assist their children develop fully into members of more than one culture. It happens best when both parents actively participate in both cultures in many ways:

- Sharing heritages (languages, clothes, food, music, religion, etc.)
- Visiting family living in the home country(ies)
- Associating with people from those cultures

Parents can assist in the development of their children's mixed race identity in many ways:

- Knowing who they are (in a cultural sense) and being proud of it
- Living in a secure, tension-free marriage

- Creating a secure haven of acceptance at home
  - Having more than one mixed race child
- This is a tall order for parents of mixed race children. It's not impossible. Support groups and other resources exist. We hope that you will think of *Alaafia Kids Company* when you're looking for support and resources for raising your mixed race or transracially adopted children. \*

Letter from



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community, and re-connect with you, our readers, every two months.

**In the News:** Alaafia Kids Company will be featured in the Sun papers' (Baltimore, MD) special section called *Unisun!* This quarterly insert is written for the African American community and will be distributed statewide in selected areas.

Everyone at home was thrilled when the reporter came to interview us, followed by a three-hour photo shoot. We were happy to talk about our family and our beginnings as a company serving the mixed race community. We hope that this press coverage will take Alaafia Kids Company to the next level! We look forward to more press coverage in the future!

**School District Outreach:** *Alaafia Kids Company* is beginning to get calls from school districts about carrying our coloring-story  
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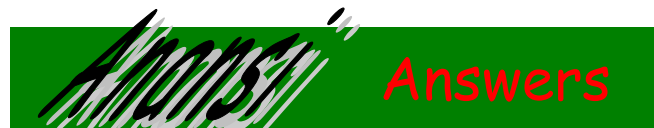
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books, *Wanna Play?* and *I Am A Rainbow Child*, and puzzles. We are really thrilled about this, too! We believe that our educational products can broaden multicultural education for all people. (See this issue for some multicultural lesson plan ideas that span preK-12.) Jeanne is working on activity guides complete with National education standards to go with the coloring-story books.

**Parents Can Help:** All *Alaafia Kids* parents can help get the word out about our coloring-story books by mentioning it to the principal of your child's school or daycare center. We believe they will enhance the anti-bias education your child receives. Parents can send us the name and address of their child's school, the name of the principal, school telephone number, and their child's name, and we will send out an informational packet.

**New Product:** When you make the call to or visit your school's principal, please mention that Alaafia Kids Company will be introducing its third coloring-story book in September. *What's a Heritage?* is a story of a six year old African American boy on a quest to understand what "Heritage" means. The book is filled with vibrant African village scenes and rhyming text that is great for beginning readers. An activity guide will be available, too.

Until Next Time,



Dear Anansi,

I'm a white mom married to an African American man. We have two children, ages 3 and 6. Our older daughter has made friends with an African American girl from her class. I would like to get to know her family better and socialize with them. But, as a white woman, I don't feel comfortable reaching out over racial and cultural lines.

What should I do?

Ann B., Milwaukee, WI

Dear Ann,

Don't feel bad. It's hard to form and maintain interracial relationships in today's society that is still rooted in racism in very subtle but still very powerful ways. Your intuition is an excellent one: You wish to model great behavior for your children's sakes, showing them that it is "normal" for people of different colors to be friends. So model it! Remember that your hesitancy is rooted in the institutional racism that we all know is wrong. Forge that friendship! You may begin on "neutral" ground such as school functions. Remember that it takes many conversations and meetings to form a friendship. Then after repeated "neutral" outings, invite your daughter's friend and her mom over to your home. Take it one step at a time. The knowledge that you are helping your daughter become socially integrated and allowing her to see how her mom models social integration is reason enough for you to form a friendship with someone from another race.

Good luck!



# Spotlight on an Alaafia Kid...Halle Berry

Who's one of today's hottest actresses who is also one of the most beautiful, appearing on *People* magazine's *Most Beautiful People List* nine times, the greatest number of times anyone has appeared on that list? We'll give you some hints: She starred in the *X-Men* series, *The Flintstones*, and *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*.

None other than...Halle Berry!

Halle was born in 1966 in Cleveland, Ohio. She was named after the Halle Building in Cleveland, once a department store but now an office building. Her African American father, Jerome, and her white, British mom, Judith, were divorced when Halle was just 4 years old. Halle was raised by her mom.

Despite her stunning beauty, Halle had a difficult time growing up. "I was black growing up in an all-white neighborhood, so I felt like I just didn't fit in. Like I wasn't as good as everybody else, or as smart, or whatever," she says.

Despite feeling less than whole while growing up due to her color and her mixed race, Halle was popular in high school. She was a member of the honor society, editor of the school newspaper, and class president. She was also crowned prom queen.

While still in high school, Halle won the Miss Teen All-American pageant at age 17. The following year, she was named Miss Ohio. Halle went on to become first runner-up in the Miss USA contest and the first African American to be in the Miss World competition. Soon after, Halle

became a model and eventually landed a role in a weekly TV series in 1989, *Living Dolls*. Two years later she made her big screen debut in *Jungle Fever*. The rest is history.

Halle has won many prestigious awards for her movie roles, including the Oscar for Best Actress. She is the first African American woman to do so. Now Halle Berry is the highest paid African American actress in Hollywood.

However, Halle has received some mixed reviews, leading to her winning the Razzie Worst Actress Award. She is only one of three actresses to have won both the Academy Award for Best Actress and the Razzie Award for Worst Actress. Halle actually appeared in person to receive that award, quoting her mother: When I was a kid, my mother told me that if you could not be a good loser, then there's no way you could be a good winner. And I hope to God I never see these people again."

Halle considers herself black. She says, "Blackness is a state of mind and I identify with the black community. Mainly, because I realized, early on, when I walk into a room, people see a black woman, they don't see a white woman. So out of that reason alone, I identify more with the black community." Halle says this even though her mom is white. "[When I look at myself,] I don't see a white woman. I see a black woman, even though my mother is white. Knowing that has made my life easier, I think."

Halle is also introspective about her success: "What is my real purpose here? I've  
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looked at what I do. I make believe and make movies. I entertain people and get paid for it. Sometimes it seems like such a shallow existence. How insignificant in the scheme of life." Still, Halle recognizes how her color has influenced the movie business. During her Oscar acceptance speech, Halle said: "This moment is so much bigger than me, This moment is for Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, Diahann Carroll... It's for the women that stand beside me, Jada Pinkett Smith, Angela Bassett, Vivica A. Fox... and it's for every nameless, faceless woman of color that now has a chance, because the door tonight has been opened."

Currently, Halle is branching out by producing a movie. Her latest project is a film on the piano prodigy Philipa Schuyler. Halle has cast the talented rhythm and blues star Alicia Keys as the lead.

All *Alaafia Kids* can look to Halle Berry for inspiration. Halle was able to surmount a poor self-concept brought about by her mixed race and color, to become one of the most popular and talented people in her high school, her state, and her profession. Now she recognizes her value as setting a precedent for all mixed race individuals and "people of color" to enter the doors that she has opened. I hope *Alaafia Kids* take her up on the invitation!

## Surfing the Multicultural Web...

[www.swirl.org](http://www.swirl.org)

If you're looking for a website that contains current articles dealing with issues facing mixed race individuals, personal testimonials of "Swirlies," events in New York, Boston, and the Bay Area, and a whole lot more, [www.swirl.org](http://www.swirl.org) is the place to go. Swirl is a grassroots non-profit organization that is devoted to "...develop[ing] a national consciousness around mixed heritage issues to empower members to organize and take action towards progressive social change." Swirl's founder is Jen Chau, a young *Alaafia Kid*, who co-founded a mixed race group at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. After college, she returned to New York and started Swirl, a national non-profit group.

Swirl is active in promoting mixed race issues related to the 2010 Census and you can read their latest article at their site. The site also contains a categorized list of web links of interest to the mixed race community. There are some that I haven't seen anywhere else, so check it out for the latest products and services designed especially for people of mixed heritage. Swirl's website is easy to navigate and well organized. *Alaafia Kids* highly recommends a visit!



## Alaafia Kids Company

Alaafia Kids Company  
P.O. Box 9425  
Baltimore, MD 21228  
Phone: 888-313-7174  
Fax: 888-313-7174  
Email: info@AlaafiaKids.com

World's Children Celebrating Our  
Diversity and Heritage



**Alaafia Kids Company** is a web-based business founded in 2004 by Jeanne Yacoubou, freelance writer, former educator, and now homeschooling mom to three children. Jeanne is married to Malik Yacoubou from Benin, West Africa.

**Alaafia Kids Company** specializes in multicultural products for children. We sell items that mixed race and transracially adopted children will love including handmade multicultural dolls, handmade African clothes for children and our own line of educational products with multicultural themes including Reusable Alphabet Art Flip Charts, coloring-story books, and puzzles. We also carry multicultural books, music, and arts and crafts supplies. The web address is [www.AlaafiaKids.com](http://www.AlaafiaKids.com)

## Book Nook

*40 Ways to Raise a Nonracist Child* by Barbara Mathias & Mary Ann French © 1996

The title of this book is enough to raise eyebrows. The photo of five very different-looking children on the front bespeaks its accessibility to parents of *all* kinds of children. *40 Ways to Raise a Nonracist Child* is a book that every parent concerned about raising a child to be not only tolerant of others who are different from them in some way, but also at ease with them, and even actively on the look out to befriend them, should own and read over and over again.

*40 Ways to Raise a Nonracist Child* captures your attention easily...and holds it. From the brief but weighty introductions by the two authors, one a white woman, and one, a black woman, the reader discovers right away that this book is intended to speak openly and frankly about the racism as it affects young people in their lives *today*. The chapter titles are enough to make you read further: *Tell the Truth about Slavery, Avoid Cultural Tourism, Don't Use Racism as a Crutch, Beware of Your Nonverbal Messages*, for starters.

*Alaafia Kids Company* highly recommends this book for its sheer number of practical tips and ideas about how to deal with, address, and end racism of all sorts in both the small and the big ways. The book's format is very accessible: There's a great first chapter just for parents followed by five chapters focusing on issues that are age appropriate. There is a short bibliography that lists other eye-opening books with antibias themes, some of them classics.

You can find *40 Ways to Raise a Nonracist Child* on the *Alaafia Kids Company* [Multicultural Books Page](#).