

Bicultural Families: Meeting the Challenges of Raising Children with Two Cultures

When Aziz and I got married 18 years ago, we told each other we'd give our children both our cultures: Syrian and American. Our goal is to have them feel like natives in both countries to be able to speak Arabic and English; to feel comfortable kissing cheeks when greeting their Syrian relatives and hugging their American ones; to enjoy hamburgers and falafels; and to appreciate Beethoven, The Beatles and Um Khartoum, the most famous singer of the Arabic-speaking world.

We want them to have the security their Syrian cousins feel of being part of a big clan in which all joys and sorrows are shared. At the same time, we hope they learn the lessons passed down from the American frontier: that they are free to pursue their individual dreams and have personal responsibility for what they make of themselves.

Trying to give them both cultures is challenging and a little risky, but the rewards are great. In the worst case, they'll be outsiders wherever they are feeling alienated and misunderstood. Or they may embrace one culture and reject the other. On the other hand, if we succeed, they'll be at home in both cultures. They'll have a unique, valuable perspective.

Bicultural children have an ability to see and be able to deal with the complexity of intergroup relations that is literally in their bones, hearts and minds, says Joel Crohn, author of *Mixed Matches: How to Create Successful Interracial, Interethnic and Interfaith Relationships*. The struggles they go through in clarifying their identity help them become better people, he says. They become complex and interesting men and women with broad views on the human situation, according to Crohn, a psychologist who specializes in helping families and organizations deal with cross-cultural issues.

A Dramatic Trend

The number of American families in which the parents are of different races or ethnic groups has nearly doubled since 1980, and it continues to rise. In 2001, about 5 percent of all married couples were in mixed marriages, compared to 3 percent in 1980.

According to Robert Suro, a contributor to *Family in Transition*, an authoritative collection of work examining changes in the contemporary American family:

- More than 35 percent of Hispanics with four-year degrees marry out of their ethnic group. That rate jumps to one in three for Hispanics in the top income bracket.
- A fifth of all married Asian women have chosen a spouse of a different race or ethnicity, while 30 percent of all married Asians between the ages of 15 and 24 have found a spouse of a different ethnic group.
- Rates of out-of-group marriage rates remain low for African-Americans roughly a third of the rates for Hispanics and Asians. However, the rate among young African-Americans is far higher than average, with about 11 percent of the 15- to 24-year-olds creating relationships outside the group, compared to just 5 percent of African-Americans overall.

Statistics aren't available for many other kinds of bicultural families.

The figures quoted above do not even begin to measure all of the various cultural groups that intermarry, creating children who are bicultural but not necessarily biracial or bilingual. A child whose parents are of different faiths, for example, is bicultural, and so is a child whose parents are from Norway and Ireland or from Mexico and Puerto Rico.

Many Questions and Challenges

There may be more families dealing with bicultural challenges than there were 20 years ago, but individual families often feel like they have more questions than answers:

- How should we raise our children?
- Should we speak two languages at home or one?
- Teach them both religions?
- Celebrate the holidays of both cultures?
- Are we prepared for our children to look like the other side of the family or neither?
- Should we give them names acceptable to both cultures or names typical of one or the other? If so, which one?

What kind of education do we want them to have? How will we teach them the things they won't learn in school?

At a more fundamental level, how should we teach them to behave and what methods should we use?

At my house, we found that we have different expectations of behavior and different ways to discipline based on the cultures in which we were raised. Aziz grew up in a culture in which children clean the house, buy the groceries, prepare dinner, take care of younger siblings and contribute to the family income. They kiss their father's hand when he returns from work. They don't openly question parental authority. When they disobey, they are shamed by their parents, siblings and neighborhood children.

In contrast, my mother like many American moms cooked dinner and served us, cleaned the house, did our laundry, drove us to appointments and asked for our input about family plans. To punish us, she sent us to our rooms or removed privileges.

Should our family adopt one approach or the other or a mixture of both? How will our choices affect our children?

There are no definitive answers, Crohn says. Approaches that work well for some families spell disaster for others. But, he says, There is one consistently bad solution: avoiding the difficult issues and living with chronic resentment. What is really important is doing the work to discover which path will work for you.

Handling Differences

Some bicultural families embrace one culture or the other. Others try to give their children the best of both. In deciding how to raise bicultural children, experts agree that *how* you decide is more important than *what* you decide.

Raising children in a bicultural family is much like raising children in any other family in that the family dynamic begins with the marriage. Raising children is a test of how well a couple has learned to handle their many differences, says Dugan Romano, author of *Intercultural Marriage: Promises & Pitfalls*. With children, all the issues surface and must be confronted. Differences don't matter, she says. How they are managed does.

Parents must make decisions about what traditions the family will follow, what foods will be served, how children will dress, where they will live, what language they will speak the list is endless. But Romano identifies 10 characteristics of successful bicultural marriages. To keep these families on solid footing, she says that parents have to foster:

- a commitment to the relationship
- an ability to communicate
- a sensitivity to each other's needs
- a respect for each other's culture
- flexibility
- a solid, positive self-image
- love as the main marital motive
- common goals
- a spirit of adventure, and
- a sense of humor.

Parents' attitudes greatly affect the children's, Romano says. When parents respect and honestly promote each other's cultural background, children will hold both in esteem.

It's always a struggle of acceptance and tolerance, says Alan Sumwalt, a marital and family therapist who specializes in counseling interfaith couples. Couples have an opportunity to become enriched by their differences. The bottom line is the degree of openness and sharing. Anything people do with each other that is limiting leads to resistance. Openness and sharing leads to closeness and growth, he says.

One key step parents can take to show their children they value each other's culture is to learn their spouse's language, says Romano. One parent's willingness to study the language of the other validates that other language for the children, encouraging them to become bilingual. Knowing the language of a culture gives access to that culture; not knowing it excludes those who don't understand.

See the complete contents of *Bicultural Families*:

Part 1: [Meeting the Challenges of Raising Children With Two Cultures](#)

Part 2: [Helping Kids Embrace Both Cultures](#)

Part 3: [Stages of Cultural Identity](#)

Part 4: [How Bicultural Families Make It Work](#)

Part 5: [Resources for Bicultural Families](#)

Sandra Whitehead is an award-winning writer and a lecturer at Marquette University. She lives with her husband and three children.

From United Parenting Publications, November 2002