

Mixed blessings

Parents who adopt children of other races find it takes patience and understanding to gain their acceptance, writes Andrea Li

When the Social Welfare Department gave Janice Henderson permission to adopt two Hong Kong born sisters 18 months after she first submitted her papers as a single parent, it was a long held dream come true. But soon after the six- and nine-year-olds moved in, the Canadian, who has lived in the city for more than two decades, began noticing something odd. The girls seemed to become aloof every time they were out in public together.

"My older daughter was refusing to acknowledge me in public and her younger sister just followed," Henderson recalls. "They wouldn't sit with me on the bus, never held my hand or invited me to attend any school events."

Then the school one day called to ask why Henderson hadn't returned a form sent out for a parent event. She hadn't seen the form because her daughters hadn't passed it on.

"I realised it was because the girls were awkward about questions from the local Chinese as they would have to admit they were adopted," she says.

All trans-racial families have to deal with public curiosity. "Perfect strangers on the train will do a double take on seeing the kids and myself, or come up and ask if my wife is Chinese," says Dennis Abline, who has adopted two daughters aged six and four and a year-old son with his American wife. All the children were born in Hong Kong.

Megan McGinn, an American adoption consultant, advises parents to practise with their children how to answer the most commonly asked questions from strangers and classmates. "It's a fact of life that people will ask questions," McGinn says. "It makes sense to prepare so kids aren't thrown off guard."

Lesley Lewis, a psychologist who specialises in "third culture kids" - those who have spent a good part of their formative years outside their parents' culture - says: "You have to think about whether you are ready to become a trans-racial family and how you plan to incorporate it into your family."

Inter-country adoption has become a subject of study, legislation and international norm-making. Moreover, thanks to celebrities such as Angelina Jolie and Madonna, who have adopted children from abroad, the issue has made headlines.

In Hong Kong, adoption applications have risen 9 per cent over the past four years to 128 as of March 2008, according to statistics from the Social Welfare Department. It says the number of children available for adoption has fallen to 89 from 131 in the same period. This may translate into longer waiting times for would-be parents.

Those who have adopted across races say Hong Kong provides an ideal environment for it.

"Western families who have adopted a Chinese child are in a fantastic position in Hong Kong," says McGinn. "It is much easier for the child because they are already assimilated into their own culture."

For Henderson and her two daughters, this means eating Asian food at home and shopping at the wet market. And all of Abline's children go to a Chinese-speaking kindergarten.

Psychologist Lewis, who adopted her 21-year old son from Taiwan when he was an infant, says the family embraced Chinese holidays, observed customs and habits and revelled in the cuisine. "It's important for the entire family to be part of the process," she says.

But ensuring an adopted child remains conversant in the ethnic culture is more than just about language, food or festivals. Most important is that this awareness can build up the child's confidence. "Keeping the child tied to their own culture, and acknowledging and discussing their ethnicity and background with pride allows the kid to grow up feeling good about themselves," says McGinn. "It's all about self-esteem."

Keeping up cultural ties will naturally lead to discussion of the child's adoption. Experts say that should be done as early as possible. "Being a trans-racial family is quite healthy because there is no inclination to hide or be secretive about the adoption. It forces you to do the right thing and pushes you to be more open and honest because the ethnic differences are so visible," says David Youtz, who heads Mother's Choice, an NGO which helps with adoption and crisis pregnancies. He has four adopted daughters from China.

Abline and his wife, who have retained each of their child's scrapbooks, photos and diary entries, began talking to them about their adoption from the start. "Even if they are too young to intellectually grasp the concept right now, they will at least grow up with the terminology of adoption," he says.

Adoptive father of one, Steve Mills, who was adopted in Britain in the 1960s, is an advocate of open adoption.

Mills says he grew up with a void in his life because he had so little information about his birth parents that in his 20s he went on a five-year search to find them.

"Growing up not knowing anything about my background felt like a puzzle I couldn't solve, which is why I'd be in favour of finding out more about my child's birth family, so both my son and I can have a better understanding about where he has come from," says Mills, a teacher.

McGinn says integration of a child from an orphanage can be a challenge. "The issue is not so much about assimilating into a western family as it is about learning to operate as part of a family, particularly if the child has come from an orphanage, where there are completely different eating and living habits and relationship dynamics," she says.

For older kids the transition can be tougher still. "All this could potentially cause enormous culture shock. But the trauma can be overcome with good parenting, love and much time given for the child to process the transition," says Mary Child, of the Adoptive Families of Hong Kong, an NGO that supports families in the adoption process.

Henderson agrees, recalling that in the early days her daughters were overwhelmed by minor things she took for granted - the use of a bathtub or the beauty of a sunset (they'd previously lived in a flat overlooking a neighbour's window).

Despite growing awareness and understanding of adoption, couples lack support. "Adoptive mums go through much of what birth mothers go through but the infrastructure to support them is not as readily available compared to pregnant women who are linked into the system already. As a result, many adoptive parents end up feeling like outsiders," says Sarah Pane, who recently adopted a seven-month-old Chinese girl.

Pane, with a background in child care, says parents can often be their own harshest critics. "Adoptive parents psyche themselves up for so long that they don't want to do anything wrong, but the fact is all parents do things wrong at the beginning."

Moreover, they might face challenges all at once. "Your challenges come at the same time rather than incrementally because you are not dealing with a newborn," she says.

To facilitate bonding, it is crucial for adoptive parents to be around in the initial months, to make up for the missed attachment process of pregnancy and feeding. "Parents should make more eye contact with the child, hold the baby close, feed, bathe and engage them as much as possible," says McGinn. Symptoms of attachment difficulty include lack of eye contact after a few months, rigidity and physical stiffness or the child pushing one away.

Mills, who knows both sides of the issue well, says couples need to first understand their own expectations of adoption and whether they are prepared for the ups and downs. "Parenting issues may be generic to a point, but for adoptive kids there is likely to be more potential for issues such as identity, culture, birth parents, among other things, to arise, which could complicate matters," he says.

Potential parents need to be emotionally sound and fully committed. "You have to be open to the possibility of anything - good or bad - and decide whether you have the emotional and physical capability to commit to this for life," says Henderson.

The embarrassment her daughters faced over her race has dissipated but it took months of patience, conversations and meetings with other trans-racial families. "Adoption is a two-way street," Henderson says.

"It isn't just about them [the children] making you happy. It's about all of us. I love them as my own and can't imagine life without them."