

Biracial Identity Part 2: Tips for Working With Biracial Families

Cortlyn Brown, BA

Hypodescent is a way of categorizing multiracial individuals such that they are defined by their minority racial heritage, no matter how small a percentage of their genetic makeup is associated with that racial group. By that definition, anyone with even 1% of black heritage is deemed black, which prior to the abolishment of slavery meant enslavement, stripping of one's identity, and, in the era of Jim Crow laws, de facto loss of the right to vote and restriction from many public facilities. Hypodescent no longer dominates how we view multiracial identity, which has allowed biracial/multiracial individuals to have more identity options available. With so many options available, it is inevitable that many biracial individuals will struggle with identity development. This is particularly true for those whose external appearance is more monoracial, like me. Although technically biracial (half black, half white), I have green eyes, blond hair, and fair skin. Although many biracial children will not have identity development issues, we all have to handle issues ranging from minor stares to more serious issues such as being called and treated as an imposter. This is particularly relevant for child psychiatrists, as we are now in the era of the biracial baby boom, and multi-cultural children are the fastest-growing youth group in the country (an increase by 50% since 2010).¹

One of my first memories as a child is actually having several elderly black women come to my house uninvited (I should preface this story by noting that my dad was very prominent in the Pittsburgh civil rights movement, so the fact that he fell in love with, married, and had a child with a white woman was very taboo to some). They proceeded to check behind my ears to look for my "true" skin color. Although I was very young, I remember wondering if something was wrong with the skin color on the rest of my body (again, very fair) that they had to look elsewhere for a "better" color. Below I

present tools to use when working with biracial families such as mine.

- Help the parents create an acceptable name for their child's ethnicity so that the child does not feel he or she has to choose sides. This label should be shared with the child's school so that there is consistency. It is often the case that, depending on who is talking, a child's identity is called several different things. For example, at home a child may be biracial but at school, multiracial. One friend may call the child mixed while another may use the term "blended," or even "mulatto." This can confuse the child and hinder his or her formation of one identity. You can also encourage the parents to establish "monoracial" labels. Therefore, if at a certain point in development the child identifies as monoracial or is more "connected" to one race, the child already feels like he or she has an appropriate label that both the child and the parents will understand. This provides the child with the tools to establish the complex identity.
- Encourage the parents to create a cultural narrative and share these stories with their children. Both parents should tell of their heritage and history so that the child may feel connected to both. This can also be through play therapy such as making picture books with old family photographs or family trees. Alternatively, the child can draw the family as well as cultural items (such as African drums). An alternative game is making a collage or papier-mâché creations with copies of old family photographs. The parents can also work with their children to create a play about their history and act it out with them, perhaps even performing or including their friends so that their friends can understand their heritage. Including the child's friends also breaks the ice for any future

conversation the child may want to have with friends about his or her identity. The child knows that the friend has some baseline understanding, making the conversation, particularly its initiation, much easier.

- Encourage the parents to discuss pressures they felt from society throughout their lives and the coping strategies that they used. They can also role-play a potential situation with their child so the parents can observe their child's coping strategies in a live environment and determine strengths/weaknesses with this strategy.
- Show the family how identity formation occurs and push the family to encourage their children to openly discuss and acknowledge their heritage. You can then explain to the family that they can develop and establish themselves as an "interracial unit" so that the child, while isolated in being biracial, is part of a group and included in the interracial unit.
- Clinicians should assess clients' social support networks (from childhood to present) to gain a better understanding of the types of reference groups to which their clients may be oriented.
- Ensure as a counselor that you are aware of your own personal bias.
- It has been said that most biracial individuals identify on a personal level as biracial but have a monoracial community as a reference group. It is believed that this is because of the limited access to a multiracial community. As a clinician you can stress the importance that the parents expose the child to other biracial individuals.
- Introduce parents to children's books about biracial identity such as:
 - *Mixed Like Me* by Gina Golliday-Cabell
 - *Mixed Blessing: A Children's Book About a Multi-Racial Family* by Marsha Gosman and Kyra Kendall
 - *Mixed Me: A Tale of a Girl Who Is Both Black and White* by Tiffany Catledge
 - *Black, White, Just Right!* by Marquerite Davol
 - *Dirty Sally* by Myrtice Edwards
- There are also books for adolescents such as:
 - *What Are You?: Voices of Mixed-Race Young People* by Pearl Fuyo Gaskin
 - *Mixed: An Anthology of Short Fiction on the Multiracial Experience* by Chandra Prasad
 - *Mixed: Multiracial College Students Tell Their Life Stories* by Andrew Garrod
 - And my favorite, *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* by James McBride
- For older adolescents, there are several options for more academic books that examine the history of mixed-race representation, such as:
 - *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* by Michele Elam
- There are also movies and children's TV shows for children where the main characters are biracial, such as:
 - *Big Hero 6*
 - *Sid the Science KID*
 - *Super Why*, which highlights an interracial couple
 - *Little White Lie* by Lacey Schwartz
 - *The Wizards of Waverly Place*
 - *Sister, Sister* (particularly the episode where the sisters learn that they are biracial)
- Alternatively, there are children's shows where the actors are biracial, such as:
 - *Shake It Up* (Zendaya Coleman is black/white)
 - *Victorious* (Victoria Justice is white/Puerto Rican)
- There are also books written for parents on how to raise a biracial child, such as:
 - *Raising Biracial Children* by Kerry Rockquemore and Tracey A. Laszloffy
 - *I'm Chocolate, You're Vanilla: Raising Healthy Black and Biracial Children in a Race Conscious World* by Marquerite Wright
 - *Does Anybody Else Look Like Me?: A Parent's Guide to Raising Multiracial Children* by Donna Jackson Nakazawa

While there is no one “correct” identity and no one “correct” way to raise a biracial child, I will end this article with the Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage by Maria P.P. Root.

Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage

I have the right...

Not to justify my existence in this world.

Not to keep the races separate within me.

Not to justify my ethnic legitimacy.

Not to be responsible for people’s discomfort with my physical or ethnic ambiguity.

I have the right...

To identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify.

To identify myself differently than how my parents identify me.

To identify myself differently than my brothers and sisters.

To identify myself differently in different situations.

I have the right...

To create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial or multiethnic.

To change my identity over my lifetime—and more than once.

To have loyalties and identification with more than one group of people.

To freely choose whom I befriend and love.

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Take Home Summary

We are living in an era of a biracial baby boom. Forty-two percent of the 6.8 million people who self-identified as biracial in the 2000 census were under the age of 18. Thanks to genetics, not all multiracial individuals’ racial identities align with how society sees them. As someone who is blond and has fair skin but is biracial and identifies as black, I am in a unique position to talk about biracial identity development. In this article I discuss biracial identity models in the US and, at the same time, examine how I felt I was perceived and treated by society, often influenced by these models.

About the Author

Cortlyn Brown, BA, is currently a fourth-year medical student at the Yale School of Medicine. She was born in Pittsburgh, PA and graduated with honors in biology from the University of Chicago. Throughout medical school Ms. Brown has been very active in student groups and currently serves as the national vice president for the Student National Medical Association (SNMA), the nation’s oldest and largest student-run group focused on the needs of minority medical school students. In this role she helps oversee the execution of an executive agenda centered on mental health. Given her monoracial external appearance but biracial identity, she is particularly interested in the effects of biracial identity development on mental health and has published several articles and given talks on the topic.

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Reference

1. Lombardo PA. Medicine, eugenics, and the Supreme Court: From coercive sterilization to reproductive freedom. *J Contemp Health Law Policy*. 1996;13:1-25.