

# Our Thoughts for Teachers

## JAMES ADOPTED FROM COLOMBIA AT 1 YEAR OLD

James: In relation to the suggestions I would give to a teacher in the instance where they do have an intercountry adoptee in their classroom, I think the first and biggest one would be to do your homework. Do a little bit of research in regards to adoption, particularly around, you know, the traumas that some adoptees have and how these manifest. And because that's really important to how you engage. Because you may see them acting out and you may just assume that's because they're naughty, but it can often be deeper than that. It can be a sign of frustration, of loneliness, of wanting to fit in and getting the approval of your peers.

## JONAS ADOPTED FROM HAITI AT 6 YEARS OLD

Jonas: So I just wasn't able to cope. I wasn't able to keep up when teachers were writing on the blackboard. I was a bit of a brat because I couldn't learn, so I'd act out.

James: I was always perceived as a very naughty, disruptive child, and I had a few learning difficulties. So I'd always be pulled out of class, I'd always be spoken to. And that compounded my problems that I had already because I already didn't fit in, being black.

## MICHELLE ADOPTED FROM SOUTH KOREA AT 4 MONTHS OLD

Michelle: There were times where it was really malicious at school. There's times where people tried to push me downstairs, like three flights of concrete stairs. I got rocks thrown at me. People that would just start fights with you because you were Asian or people that would just scream things out at you, like, "Oh, no wonder your parents didn't want you."

## CHAMILA ADOPTED FROM SRI LANKA AT 4 YEARS OLD

Chamila: School for me, I was the only little dark-skinned girl, so I was treated with a lot of prejudice. I used to get called names all the time, and I could never understand why I was being picked on for being different. I used to get kids asking, you know, "Why are your parents white, when you're black?" And trying to explain to them, well, you know, I'm adopted.

Michelle: Yeah, I think I was the only Asian throughout my entire school. One of five Asians for about 18 years of my school life. And that's really lonely because you know you're a target. So you don't become friends. And it really does leave you alone in the world.

## MESERET ADOPTED FROM ETHIOPIA AT 14 YEARS OLD

Meseret: My name at school was too long and people couldn't pronounce it properly. So I remember getting a reward at a school assembly and my teacher called me Marshie. And I was like looking around and going, "Who is that?" And it turns out to be me. So yeah, it was quite irritating. And actually it really demeaned the meaning of my name, because my name means foundation. And it was so important. It was like you're the oldest, you're paving the way, but it's just like, it didn't matter?

Michelle: Obviously, kids are really cruel and some of them do it just to fit in, others do it because that's just the way they are. But I think one of the biggest problems is that teachers just see it as kids being kids.

Chamila: If a child is being bullied, it needs to be addressed as a whole in regards to not just educating the teacher, but also educating the kids within the class.

Michelle: Yeah, it made me drop out of school at year 10. And you also don't know what's going on in that child's life in those ages. And for me, that was, you know, for me, seven to year 10, I was experiencing my eating disorder, going through psychology, my suicide attempts.

Chamila: There were aspects of my previous life being adopted that I was still coming to terms with. And if teachers aren't educated on that, they don't really understand how to help that child. So I believe that every adoptive child should be having some kind of somebody to help transition, help the parents and the teachers. So, okay, they've come from this country. This is their culture, this is their heritage.

Meseret: But certainly I remember sitting in NAPLAN, the first week of my arriving, actually the first semester, like within weeks sitting to do NAPLAN, and I could barely read a sentence. So it was quite an interesting experience for me. Going okay, well, I was in year eight when I was in Ethiopia, now I'm at year nine. Logically, I should be able to do this, but this is a whole new, different language. I think from the school's perspective, looking back, I wish that they, you know, not really put me straight to a mainstream class and really designed a program that was suitable for me to speed me up, to catch up, rather than, you know, work it out.

Jonas: My teacher, Mr. H, he was the first, he was one of the first adults, period, that gave me the time of day in wanting to get to know who I am, where I'm from, how I'm feeling, and above all, what I'm interested in. And it just meant the world to me because I was being abused at home, and I was having real learning difficulties at school. And he picked up on that. But he always tried to reach out and help me and connect with me. He centered projects, one particular project, of building a mud brick hut in the school grounds, and he put me in charge of it. And once again, it just built me up that somebody cared enough to do something like that.

Chamila: I didn't have that safe person that I could speak to, so I think what needs to happen is an adopted child needs to know that they've got someone that when they're feeling threatened, that they can actually go and speak to. And that did not happen when I was growing up, I was not given a safety mechanism or a network of support.

Michelle: It would have been nice at some stage in my life, growing up to have seen one teacher or even a teacher's aid, or when a student teacher comes through that was of color instead of a continual march of just white.

Meseret: My school didn't have very much understanding of cultural, anything about culture.

Jonas: If you can be open to that there may be something going on for these particular students that are trying to integrate and find their way, it can make a world of difference. The smallest gestures can make the world of difference.

James: You know, a teacher might say to everyone, "All right, everyone bring in a picture of your grandparents." Or, "Bring in a diagram of your family tree." Or, "We're gonna do some coloring in, so everyone gets the skin color pencil." And then if you see everyone else with pictures of people that vaguely look like them, it does hurt a little bit and people will ask, "why is your grandpa white?" And that as a kid, you can't really articulate and form a response. It just hurts. Things that seem innocuous, but just these little baby steps that teachers can have by being a little bit more informed and being a little bit more educated on the subject can make a really big difference to the outcomes that we see for adoptees in education.

(Music)

## **KEY MESSAGES**

### **UNDERSTAND ADOPTION TRAUMA AND HOW IT MANIFESTS**

### **ADOPTees HAVE ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES THAT IMPACT THEIR ABILITY TO PARTICIPATE**

### **NOTICE AND RESPOND TO RACISM AND BULLYING OFFER A SAFE SPACE**

**UNDERSTAND THE CULTURAL, RACIAL, LANGUAGE BARRIERS AN ADOPTEE CAN FACE  
DEVELOP A TRANSITION AND SUPPORT PLAN**

**PEOPLE OF COLOUR ARE IMPORTANT RACIAL MIRRORS FOR ADOPTEES OF COLOUR**

**MODIFY CLASS ACTIVITIES AND LANGUAGE TO BE SENSITIVE TO AN ADOPTEE'S EXPERIENCE**

**THANK YOU TO ADOPTEES:**

**CHAMILA, JAMES, JONAS, MESERET & MICHELLE**

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