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Interracial and international families are becoming a lot more common in today's world. In preparing for this article I decided to interview some of my friends who were mixed couples and realized that about 40% of couples I knew were actually mixed couples. Many had married a partner of a different race within Malaysia, while others had married people from other countries and had become truly international families. On top of that, I also observed that many couples who were of the same race also came from very diverse backgrounds; for example Chinese from English speaking backgrounds versus those from Chinese speaking backgrounds.

Mixed marriages present some wonderful opportunities to bring together different cultures and provide opportunities for children to understand and appreciate their different cultural heritages. At the same time, mixed families also pose some unique challenges and this article attempts to share some ideas for how these challenges can be overcome.

Respect and Celebrate Differences: The Underlying Spirit of Mixed Families

To make a mixed family work, the starting point needs to be a willingness on the part of both partners to respect and appreciate the culture of their partner. There needs to be an acceptance and a celebration of the partner's culture and heritage.

While both partners will need to make some adjustments and some changes to their lifestyle in order to make the marriage work (this is true for all couples including couples from the same race and culture), both parties also need to accept that the marriage cannot and should not "erase" or "extinguish" the cultural identity of the other person.

Irene, a Chinese who married Kevin, a Indian, shares her experience, "When I started going out with Kevin, I realized that we came from very different cultural backgrounds, and even our family practices were so different. So from the start, I told myself that if I really loved him and wanted to make this relationship work, I need to learn to really enjoy his cultural practices; I started reading things about Southern Indian culture, I made it a point to spend time with his family, and thankfully he did the same with mine."

Irene's approach is exactly what mixed couples need to build a strong and lasting marriage.

Hashim, a Malay, who married a British woman adds, "I cannot expect my wife to abandon her own cultural practices and values just because she married me. In fact I married her because I love who she is, which includes all her cultural heritage and her family style and practices; that's what makes us special; it's a marriage of two cultures, not two cultures becoming one."

Rather than seeing a mixed marriage as a clash of two different cultures, it should be seen as combination of two different cultures which will provide the children with a richer cultural experience.

Getting children to celebrate their mixed heritage

It's absolutely crucial that children in mixed families learn to appreciate and celebrate their mixed cultural heritage. It's not true that children must be asked to choose between the heritage of their mother or father. It's not a competition, or a zero sum game. They can enjoy the best of both worlds.

Theresa, a Chinese, who married an Australian, shares, "We made it clear to our children early on that they should immerse themselves in both Chinese and Australian cultures. So for example, we made them all learn Mandarin as well as English from early on. They grew up watching both Asian movies as well as Western shows. I made them read both Asian and Western books. Our parenting style was yin and yang, east meets west."

It's a good practice to get the children to spend time with both sides of the family. Rabin, an Indian whose wife is Chinese, shares, "Our children spend alternate weekends in each of our parents homes, which are all conveniently located in the same city. We felt it was important to send the message to our children that both cultures are important, both our families should be given equal priority."

Teach the Children to Take Pride in their Unique Identity

Growing up as a mixed child may not always be easy. Children can sometimes be cruel even at a young age to others who are not like them. Some school environments are still racially segregated and a mixed child may find it hard at first to fit in.

Parents should raise their mixed child with a strong sense of pride for who they are.

Chen Fong, who has a Chinese father and an Indian mother shares his experience growing up. "It wasn't easy in school; I was different from everyone else who had their own racial group. But my parents kept telling me that I was special and I had the advantage of speaking both Chinese and tamil, plus malay and English, so I could mix with any group I wanted. They said I should not mind when other kids teased me; because those weren't my true friends anyway; my true friends would accept me the way I am, and they were right."

Marissa, whose father was himself a Malay-Chinese mix, and whose mother was Indian, says "I felt weird at the start, but after a while realized that because I was mixed, no one knew whether I was Chinese, Indian or Malay, so I was the one girl at school who transcended race and I got along with everyone! In fact most of my friends envied me because I came from such a diverse environment; my teachers also said I embodied the Malaysian spirit."

In Conclusion

Mixed families create a wonderful opportunity for their children to celebrate cultural diversity. Thinking about my peers and friends who come from mixed families, they have grown up to be enlightened, independent individuals who take pride in their unique mixed identity, and who strike me as being well equipped to work and live in this increasingly diverse and globalized country.

This article on education and parenting ideas have been published in the Parenthood magazine between 2008 - 2010