

Parenting ‘mixed’ children: difference and belonging in mixed race and faith families

Findings
Informing change

June 2008

To date, little research has focused on how couples parenting across ethnic categories and mixed religious backgrounds understand difference and instil a sense of belonging in their children. To explore this topic, this study analysed census data and interviewed 35 couples from different backgrounds.

The research

By researchers from London South Bank University and the Family and Parenting Institute.

Key points

- Mixed-parent couples in Britain were often in sustained relationships, and a high proportion were middle class.
- The couples interviewed used three typical approaches to instil a sense of belonging in their children; particular approaches were not associated with particular racial or faith combinations:
 - *Individual*: children’s sense of belonging was not seen as rooted in their mixed background.
 - *Mix*: children’s mixed background was understood as a factual part of their identity; all aspects were emphasised.
 - *Single*: one aspect of children’s mixed background was stressed.
- Couples whose approach differed in giving their children a sense of belonging were not necessarily in conflict. For some, divergent approaches were complementary. Others saw difficulties between them as humanistic, political or personality choices.
- Parents identified supportive or constraining resources and relationships in creating a sense of belonging, including neighbourhoods, schools, travel, languages, grandparents and children themselves. What some regarded as supportive, others saw as drawbacks.
- Mixed-parent couples can be more concerned with other issues, such as children’s safety and health, unity over discipline and financial security.
- The researchers conclude that it is important that family support, health, education and social services do not make assumptions about mixed families. Families who seem to share a form of mixing can differ from each other. ‘Mixedness’ may be insignificant for some, compared to other issues. Mixed families would benefit from policies and practice that further tackle prejudice based on race and faith.

Background

Advances in using census data now make it possible to identify households where couples are parenting across ethnic categories. Despite parenting across racial, ethnic and religious boundaries being increasingly common, it is portrayed as though fraught with difficulties. The notion of 'culture clash' is frequently used to explain its problematic nature, with assertions that children are subject to identity confusion.

Limited attention has been paid to mixed-family parenting in Britain. This exploratory research analysed census data and looked at how 35 couples from different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds sought to give their children a sense of belonging and identity. The term 'mixed' is used to encompass a range of racial, ethnic and faith differences.

Mixed families' circumstances

Data from the 2001 Census shows that over half of 'Mixed' ethnicity children under 16 had married or cohabiting parents. Most children in mixed-couple households were living with both biological parents (87 per cent).

Mixed-couple families also had a middle-class dimension. Over a third were professional/middle managers (35 per cent), and nearly a further third worked in other non-manual occupations (30 per cent). A high proportion were well qualified: over a third held first degrees or equivalent (36 per cent) and professional qualifications (34 per cent). They tended to own their houses (75 per cent); most owned a car (88 per cent).

Approaches to difference and belonging

The parents interviewed had diverse ways of understanding difference and creating a sense of belonging for their children. Three typical approaches could be identified: individual, mix and single. However, particular approaches were not usually associated with particular racial, ethnic or faith combinations.

Individual approach

Parents did not see their children's identity and sense of belonging as necessarily rooted in their racial, ethnic or faith backgrounds. They encouraged their children to think beyond such categories, or to explore other facets of their identities:

I think the fundamental thing for them is that they are ... happy with whom they feel they are and able to articulate that and be a bit cosmopolitan. (White British/white Other and Christian/Jewish mix father with an Indian Sikh partner)

I think there are so many mixed couples now and mixed race children ... I actually think that the colour thing is less an issue than people's personalities, their set up. (White British mother with a black British partner)

Mix approach

Parents understood their children's background as a rooted, factual part of their identity. This was only evident in relation to race and ethnicity, with no evidence of mixing religions:

We talked about ... the fact that I am English and come from an English background and Lisa comes from a Chinese background, and we just said that means you have got a bit of both in you and you can learn from other cultures. (White British father with a Chinese partner)

We taught our daughter at an early age to not get caught up in colour or race. If you ask her what she is, she'll say she's a 'mixie'. (Black Trinidadian father with a white British/Irish/Pakistani mix partner)

Single approach

Parents stressed one aspect of their children's background and promoted a sense of belonging through it:

I told one of my sons, "you are mixed white and Pakistani," I said, "you know your religion is Islam, you are a Muslim". I said to him, "whatever, doesn't matter what that boy says, doesn't matter what colour your skin is, at the end of the day anybody could be a Muslim". (White British mother, converted to Islam, with a Pakistani Muslim partner)

For my daughter to be able to identify herself as African is the first and foremost ... For her to know that she belongs somewhere, which is maybe Ghana where I'm originally from. (Black Ghanaian father with a black British Jamaican partner)

Negotiating divergent approaches

Where parents did not share the same approach to difference and belonging, this did not necessarily mean there was conflict between them. For some couples, divergent approaches complemented each other. Others moved away from understanding difficulties between them as rooted in cultural difference towards seeing them as stemming from humanistic, political or personality choices. Rather than deeply rooted religious, ethnic or faith cultural differences, these chosen viewpoints seemed more amenable to negotiation and accommodation.

Case study 1: Complementary approaches

Nancy and Andrew are a white South African Jewish and white British atheist couple married for over 20 years. They have two children. Nancy has a firm single approach to difference and belonging. While not bothered about passing on her South African ethnicity, she is bringing up her children as practising Jews because she sees this as an intrinsic part of her and her children's identity. Andrew espouses a clear individual approach. He believes it is very important that his children have a sense of themselves as individuals rather than being part of any particular group. Despite their divergent approaches, Andrew sees the Jewish values Nancy is instilling in their children as coinciding with his atheist and social beliefs about being open and tolerant in a diverse society, and as providing the children with a sense of identity.

Case study 2: Reframing approaches

Ling and Howard are a Chinese and white British couple who have been married for 10 years and have a son. Ling emphasises the single, Chinese aspect of their son's upbringing in her approach to his behaviour and skills. In contrast, Howard takes a strong individual approach, regarding ethnic identification as limiting and unimportant. Their divergent understandings have proved a source of some conflict. Nonetheless, they are managing to negotiate a shift. Ling is trying to pose their problems over bringing up their son as less to do with culture and more to do with personality issues that can be addressed through relationship counselling. Howard tries to understand Ling's focus on Chinese heritage as a means of providing their son with important, interesting knowledge and resources.

Resources and relationships

Parents identified everyday resources and relationships that supported or constrained them in their attempts to create a sense of belonging for their children. What some regarded as supportive others might, however, see as more of a drawback.

Neighbourhoods and schools

Bringing up their children in a diverse neighbourhood was often important to parents. So was sending them to a school reflecting this diversity:

They had a fantastic multicultural evening at school ... where all the parents brought food from their countries. We went Jewish and took some bagels and smoked salmon in, and my

daughters both wore Ghanaian sort of smocks. It was fantastic being at a school that was like that. (White British mother from a secular Jewish/atheist background, with a black British Ghanaian Christian partner)

Some did not feel that diversity was essential:

I think because it's a middle-class kind of liberal enough area overall, then you feel comfortable and there isn't really issues, and there isn't the kind of, "oh, look at them" sort of thing. It's not a multicultural area by any means but I think it's an area where people are more accepted. (British Pakistani and Muslim father with a white British Christian partner)

Resources and organisations

Parents referred to a range of resources and organisations that helped them to give their children a sense of belonging. Their significance and implications varied according to the approach to difference and belonging that parents pursued. Religious institutions were important to parents taking a single approach in terms of their children's faith upbringing, but of little relevance to parents taking a mix or individual approach.

Parents who focused on the specific mix of their children's background or took a single approach stressing a racial identity other than being British often regarded visits 'back home' as important. Learning their own or their partner's mother tongue was also seen as significant for their children's sense of identity. Parents taking an individual approach often saw travel and learning other languages as part of broadening their children's horizons.

Grandparents

Grandparents could be a help and a hindrance. In helping, not only could they provide practical support such as childcare (if living locally), but they could also give their grandchildren a sense of cultural heritage:

Ling's mum is a very devout ... Taoist or whatever, and she's always practised ... Buddhist Taoist meditation type things ... I think our son finds some of his grandmother's religious stuff quite attractive. Overall, he does like and respect her so I wouldn't be surprised if he ended up becoming a devout Buddhist of some sort. (White British father with a Chinese partner)

On the hindrance side, parents could perceive grandparents passing on their views about cultural heritage as interference, undermining their own efforts:

We went down for lunch and my husband said, "Oh, our son is having his hair cane-rowed". And

his mother went, “No, he’s not”. It’s her opinion that only girls have that done. And probably 40 years ago only girls did have it done, but now anyone has it done. And I went, “Excuse me, he’s my son and he will have anything he likes done to his hair, it’s not up to you to say”. And it did erupt into a huge argument. (White Irish Catholic mother with a black British Jamaican Protestant partner)

Children’s appearance and preferences

Parents’ approaches could be negotiated around their children’s physical appearance:

One of my daughters is quite brown and she will sometimes look at herself and say, “Why am I so brown and my sister is really white and you’re really white? I’m like daddy”. I think she feels that she is Moroccan-British and the other one doesn’t really think about it. (White British mother from a Christian background with a Moroccan Muslim partner)

Children’s preferences could also play a major role in shaping parents’ approaches:

At first we just quite happily celebrated Hanukkah and then Christmas, and Passover and then Easter, and that worked really well. But then our son went on to develop a very very strong sense of himself as a Jewish child. (White British Jewish mother with a white British Christian partner)

Other issues

Parents could be more concerned about issues other than understanding difference and belonging in bringing up their children. Recurring worries concerned children’s safety and health, parental unity over discipline and financial security:

Well I think my worries are just the same as any parent. Drugs, crime, getting in with the wrong crowd and all them things. (White Irish Catholic mother with a black British Jamaican Protestant partner)

We do kind of make sure we set boundaries for the children and maintain it. It’s not like, “oh yes, oh well,” you know, we have got to actually do as we say and stand by what the other person says. (Chinese mother with a white British husband)

Conclusion

How parents viewed difference and approached giving their children a sense of belonging cut across the idea that there is one ‘best’ way that parents in mixed relationships can understand their children’s identity. It is important that family support, health, education and social services do not make stereotypical assumptions about mixed families.

Equally, there are no universal messages about the sorts of support that parents will find useful. Practitioners need to be wary of implementing initiatives on the grounds of ‘mixedness’. The implications can differ across families who seem to share a form of mixing, and for whom mixedness may be insignificant compared to other issues.

The most difficult issue for parents in bringing up mixed children can be others’ response to their mixedness. Mixed families, as with minority ethnic families generally, would benefit from policies and practices that focus on further tackling negative assumptions, discrimination and prejudice based on race, ethnicity and faith.

About the project

Researchers from London South Bank University and the Family and Parenting Institute studied parents in mixed families. They analysed data from the 2001 Census (in collaboration with the University of Brighton), and carried out open-ended individual interviews with mothers and fathers from 35 couples. All the families contained at least one ‘mixed’ child aged between seven and twelve. The majority of couples involved multiple mixing: racial or ethnic difference overlapped with a religious one. They lived in a range of locations across England and Wales; two-thirds were middle class.

For more information

The full report, **Parenting ‘mixed’ children: Negotiating difference and belonging in mixed race, ethnicity and faith families** by Chamion Caballero, Rosalind Edwards and Shuby Puthussery, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF’s research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

Read more Findings at www.jrf.org.uk

Other formats available.

Tel: 01904 615905 email: info@jrf.org.uk