

Parenting... Your Way!

# Mamas & Papas

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FRESH  
NEW LOOK

**MERGING RACE  
AND FAITH  
THROUGH  
MARRIAGE**

**ECZEMA  
THE ITCH  
THAT RASHES**

**MOMMY,  
WHAT  
COLOUR  
AM I?**

**CHILD-ON-CHILD  
VIOLENCE  
WHO'S  
TO BLAME?**

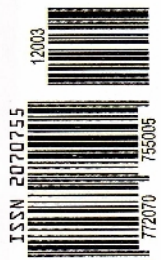
- BLACK
- WHITE
- COLOURED
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# X MARKS THE BOX... OR DOES IT?

## WHAT IF YOUR CHILD DOES NOT FIT INTO THE BOX?

*One in four marriages in South Africa today has a multiracial foundation, a trend that celebrates our country's diversity and how far we have come in the past twenty years. So why then do so many official forms still only afford parents four racial options?*

by LOREN STOW

### THE RACIAL QUESTION

It is widely accepted, and internationally celebrated, that South Africa is the "rainbow nation", made up of a wide variety of ethnic, cultural and religious groups, and yet you can't go very far without having to fill out a form that asks you to classify yourself (or your child) as one of only four very limited boxes.

The "Black, White, Coloured, and Indian" boxes were originally created by the previous apartheid government in order to segregate communities and people from each other and, although we are approaching twenty years of democracy, these boxes are still widely used on official forms today.

Glen Snyman, founder and coordinator of People Against Race Classification (PARC at [www.parc.co.za](http://www.parc.co.za)) believes that racial classification is not only an antiquated notion, but one that continues to stereotype all South Africans. "Race is not identity, and the notion of it is based on faulty ideology," he argues, adding that it only serves to hold the citizens of South Africa back from truly accepting

another person for who they are and not for the amount of pigment in their skin.

He continues, "Our message to all parents, and not just parents of multiracial children who don't fit neatly into one of the four boxes, is that you don't have to label yourself or your child. We are defined by character and heart."

### EVERYONE IS DIFFERENT

Each parent is unique; for some it is simple to tick a box even if their child is from a mixed racial background. Johannesburg-based Charlene and Makabongwe Njikelana are both 31 years old and are from Indian and Xhosa backgrounds respectively.



They have been married for six years and have two children, Abigail Unathi (3) and a newborn, Okuhle Keila (7 weeks).

Charlene explains how she ticked the box for “Black” when both her children were born because in her mind they are from their father’s lineage. It was not a difficult decision for this couple.

Yet, when it comes to everyday life Charlene explains how they don’t see colour, “My husband is my husband, not a black man or white man or Indian man; just my husband. Our children are the same, we love them as our children and don’t see colour.”

*“One in four marriages in South Africa today has a multiracial foundation”*

### ARE RACE AND IDENTITY LINKED?

“No,” says Glen simply. He goes on to explain that identity is made up of personal identity (personal likes, dislikes, beliefs), registered identity (what is put on an official form) and a cultural identity (language, customs and faith).

“A person is made up of all these things, and to narrow down a person to a racial identity is to ignore what makes that person, and every other person, unique and special.”


Glen, who would be labelled “Coloured” if he was forced to tick a box, knows all too well what it means to be raised as a multiracial child. He explains, “As parents of a multiracial child, it is important to remember that your child is a result of a loving relationship and you don’t owe anyone an explanation.”

He does, however, in his experience recommend a united front when it comes to family customs, faith, language and moral values.

### TO TICK OR NOT TO TICK THE BOX?

It is difficult to give one right answer. For some people, the idea of identifying with a race or culture is nonsensical, especially in the face of a new blossoming life, just arrived in the world, full of possibility and potential for growth.

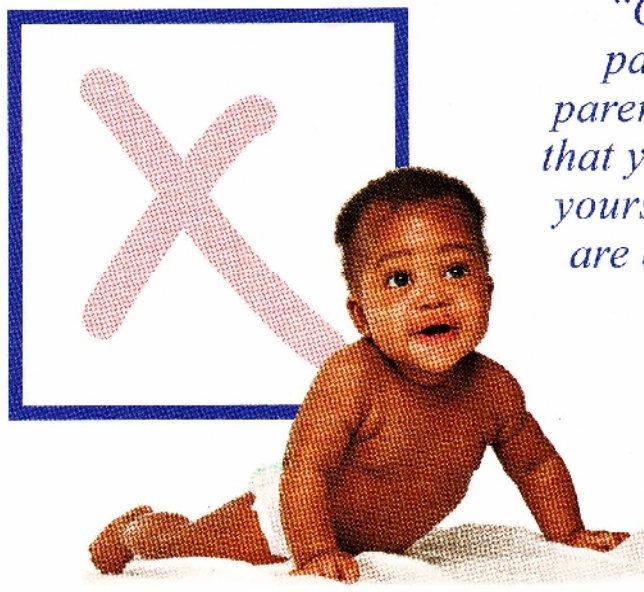
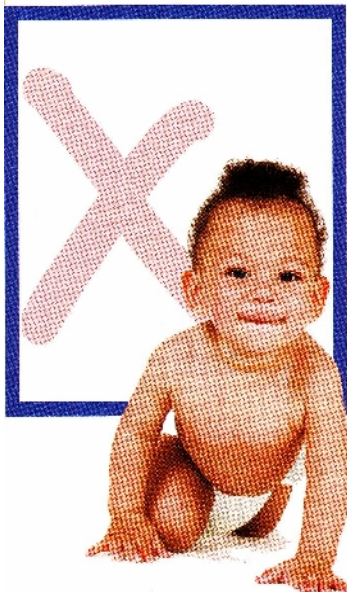
For others, identification feels appropriate or even secure. It speaks of history and lineage, no matter how limited. For Charlene and her husband it was a choice, made easily. For others, such as Glen, it is counterintuitive.

What is for sure though is that we are all unique – even if that uniqueness manifests in the individual choice to tick a box or not. 

#### Point to ponder

If the world’s population was only 100 and not the 7 billion it is today, [www.100people.org](http://www.100people.org) maps out the diversity it would have:

- 50 would be female
- 50 would be male
- 26 would be children
- 66 would be adults (of which 8 would be older than 65)
- There would be 60 Asians, 15 Africans, 14 people from the West and 11 Europeans.
- There would be 33 Christians, 22 Muslims, 14 Hindus, 7 Buddhists, 12 would practise other religions and another 12 would not be aligned to any religion at all.
- 12 would be speaking Chinese, 5 Spanish, 5 English, 3 Arabic, 3 Hindi, 3 Bengali, 3 Portuguese, 2 Russian, 2 Japanese and 62 would speak other languages.



*“Our message to all parents, and not just parents of multiracial... is that you don’t have to label yourself or your child. We are defined by character and heart.”*

# *PARENTING* THE MULTIRACIAL *WAY*



*There is not much literature dealing with the unique social and parenting challenges that multiracial families face. However, with one in four marriages today in South Africa being a multi-racial mix, there certainly should be more discussion around this topic in an effort to dispel misconception and ignorant prejudice.*

*by LOREN STOW*

**m**ost people who are part of multiracial relationships and families will admit that they often get unwarranted attention when they're out in public, which suggests that society still regards this as an uncommon occurrence. This could stem from South Africa's unique segregated history. It could also be because you can't fill out an official form today without the good chance of being asked to tick one of only four boxes, the four distinct races that the previous government tried to compartmentalise all South Africans into – White, Black, Coloured or Indian.

In her research for her dissertation in play therapy entitled 'Exploring perspectives of parents on challenges of parenting children born from interracial relationships: a Gestalt field perspective' (June 2010), UNISA-based Jacqueline Lloyd suggests that after "decades of racial reasoning, the idea that South African society comprises four distinct races has become a habit of thought and experience, a facet of popular common sense still widely in evidence".

Because of this tendency, and the resulting stereotyping that occurs, children born of two parents from different races [and those who are adopted by a different race] are thought to be "betwixt and between", straddling rather than belonging to one or the other race.

However, scientific analysis of DNA confirms that features such as hair, skin colour and facial features form less than one percent of our genetic make-up. And so, racial differences are mostly social constructs based on very little biological reasoning.

The solution lies in a delicate dance between recognising differences as well as acknowledging similarities in an environment of honest and open communication. For multiracial families, the questions of difference are based on what is happening out in the world as well as why there are differences within the family units. For example, "Why is Johnny's skin pink and mine brown, Mom?" as well as "Why I do I have different hair to you, Mom?"

Parents who are raising children born of a multiracial

relationship or who have been adopted have just a little extra challenge – and this is not something to be swept under the carpet and ignored.



### CHALLENGES FACING MULTIRACIAL PARENTS

Jacqueline's research focused on children from multiracial relationships, and found that they often face peer judgement and that their parents, often ill-equipped to deal with this non-acceptance, avoid the issue altogether which damages the child's sense of self. Despite the increase in multiracial marriages and adoptions, it is still often looked upon as uncommon, often resulting in a kind of social distance between interracial couples and other social groups.

She pin-points six specific challenges:

#### 1. Acceptance by families

Extended families give children a crucial sense of belonging and identity. For many multi-racial families, this is not an issue. However, for some it could be their first and closest form of discrimination.

#### 2. Varying approaches to differences

Research shows that it could be beneficial to see differences in approaches to parenting as less culturally-based and more simply choice-based. This way, both parents can find common approaches to parenting challenges.

#### 3. Feelings of parental inadequacy

While most mothers feel some kind of guilt when it comes to raising their children, mothers of multiracial children tend to take on the responsibility not only of caregiver and guide, but also that of passing on faith instruction, whether it is their own or not. This increases the pressure on them to succeed, as well as their sense of failure.

#### 4. Parenting based on gender differences

There are often challenges based on gender-specific rites of passage in various cultures, such as the African tradition of male initiation, Jewish male circumcision and bah/bat mitzvahs and other such uniquely traditional practices that may place a strain

on the family if both parents are not in agreement.

### 5. Neighbourhood acceptance

It is important for parents who have chosen to raise their families under a single common faith to live in an environment where they have access to this support base.

### 6. Religious pressures

Families who have no access to the desired religious support base tend to struggle to find traditional or appropriate religious experiences for their children.

### 7. Coping mechanisms

Parents of multiracial families often develop unique coping mechanisms in order to protect their children and their choices from unnecessary and painful judgement. They may choose to ignore public reactions or go to the other extreme by making a special effort to make a good impression. They sometimes choose to distance themselves physically from other parents, for example, by sitting at the opposite end of the podium on sports day; they might even restrict themselves to only going to places where they have experienced little or no negative attention. They often define themselves as “just like everyone else” in order to get a sense of being typical.

Whatever their choices, it is strongly suggested that these parents find support in structures where other families similar to theirs come together to share their experiences and their successes.

## A STORY OF A CROSS-RACIAL ADOPTION

Families who have chosen to adopt children from different racial backgrounds experience similar parenting challenges to those who give birth to multi-racial children. This is a mother’s candid story, honest and sometimes painful, but at the same time hopeful and wonderfully resilient.

Nine years ago Elna Bezuidenhout\*, a 55-year-old single mother and research manager at Stellenbosch University, adopted a 4-week-old baby girl from a Zulu biological background. Today, Elna runs a support group for mixed-racial families which has grown from eight members to almost one hundred strong in the last four years.

“I was in a long-term relationship with a black man who passed away five years ago,” Elna explains, “which makes me a little different from other white parents in my group who had not experienced a cross-racial intimate relationship, and the public’s reaction to it, before adopting.”

Elna describes the challenges that she and her daughter experience in such an honest way that it feels as if you know her personally. “My daughter on a whole has a good self-image at this point [nine years old]. This doesn’t mean that she

doesn’t have many questions, and sometimes seems somewhat insecure when faced with challenges due to her adoptive or ethnic status.”

Elna has worked incredibly hard to answer her daughter’s questions with respectful and heartfelt honesty – whether they are about skin colour, hair type or wanting to be famous – no questions are deemed “silly” and all answers are carefully thought out.



### THE QUESTION OF COLOUR

“One recurring issue is that she sees herself as brown and not black, especially since she has coloured friends who have a skin tone similar to hers, yet they are not expected to speak Xhosa as she often is,” Elna says. Her daughter’s inquisitive questions started at a much earlier age than Elna expected, with her first mentioning at around three years of age that “Mommy is pink and I am brown”. A year later she told her mom that she wanted to look like her, and that she wasn’t pretty because she was brown.

Elna responded with love. “When it happened I was saddened. I immediately reminded her of a friend of hers whose Xhosa mother is exceptionally beautiful. I asked her whether she thought this lady was beautiful, and she responded ‘yes’.” Then I mentioned all the coloured and black girls in our lives, one by one, and asked whether she thought they were pretty. Finally she said, ‘Then I am pretty too’.”

Another year passed and Elna was asked another tricky question. “She asked me that if I thought she was pretty, then didn’t I want to be brown too? I realised I had to address this question the best way possible, to relate how I felt about myself.” Elna explained to her daughter that she was happy with and accepted the way that God had made her. She would be a different person if she was a different colour, not unlike the fact that their black and white cat would be a different cat if she was yellow. Elna believes that approaching colour as if it didn’t matter would be patronising. “It would also negate her very being.”

Colour crops up from time and time and most recently her daughter stated that she wanted to be white because all the pop singers are white and she wants to be famous. “We then did a search on the Internet of all the successful black artists, and she was very proud of this.” In Elna’s experience with her own daughter and those children in her support group, contrary to popular belief, children are actually very conscious of colour. When it comes to facing the stares of the public, Elna’s response is usually “they may be looking at us for a variety of reasons; firstly because we look different and people are naturally curious, but also because she’s very pretty and people like to look at beautiful people.” Elna asks her daughter

to choose which reason she'd most like to think of why people may be staring at that particular time.



### THE QUESTION OF ORIGIN

Because her daughter is adopted, Elna has taken seriously all questions of origin. "Since her baby years, my daughter has been within earshot of questions like 'Why is your baby black and you are white?' and now from her friends it's 'Why is your mommy white and you're brown?'"

Elna's answer – which incidentally she writes out and gives to her daughter's new teacher each year so that they also respond correctly to questions from classmates – was that she was born from the womb of a beautiful Zulu woman, and therefore she has brown skin. They both add that she was given to Elna as the greatest present she have ever received and that Elna is now her "forever mommy". Elna has encouraged her daughter to understand that children are not being nasty, they are just being curious.

Ever vigilant, Elna has even corrected teachers at her daughter's school. Her Grade One teacher explained to the children that Zulu people lived in huts and that the men wore animal skins. The following day, Elna went to the teacher and asked her to tell the children that Zulu people can also become teachers and doctors, and play sports – and they can speak English and Afrikaans, which is Elna and her daughter's home language.

The following year she quizzed a teacher who had a board with pictures of "role models" on her classroom wall. The picture of Nelson Mandela bore the inscription "first black president". Elna waited for the teacher and asked her how she intended to explain this statement to six-year-olds, especially when her child was only black child in the class, the significance of being the first black president without referring to white-on-black discrimination.

The teacher admitted that she had never thought about this. When Elna returned the next morning, she saw that the teacher had replaced the inscription with "President Mandela is a role model because he is kind to all people!"



### FAMILY AND FRIENDS

As is the case with a number of multiracial families, Elna experienced initial opposition from certain members of her family. "This didn't last longer than a few weeks, after they had met this tiny little baby girl, full of

smiles and unconditional love."

Elna even discovered that the elderly traditional white Afrikaans members of her late mother's retirement home were very positive about her daughter, claiming that she was her grandmother's angel. "My mother passed away very recently and my daughter is very saddened by losing someone she was so close to."

When arriving at a birthday party of a new friend made at a new church congregation, Elna and her daughter did not know what to expect when they rang the doorbell. "When we got there and saw that she was the only brown child, she told me immediately that she wanted to go home."

Elna was prepared to turn around and leave when the birthday girl ran up to her daughter, smiling, and took her hand and lead her inside. "I didn't know whether to stay or leave, as planned, to return for her two hours later. I left, and my stomach stayed in knots until I fetched her." Elna returned to find a daughter full of smiles and laughter, begging to stay longer. "A while later, I asked her how she felt being the only brown child at the party and she answered that it was not a problem because she felt that everyone liked her. I left it at that."

*"They both add that she was given to Elna as the greatest present she have ever received and that Elna is now her 'forever mommy'".*



### KEEP TALKING

Elna encourages her daughter to talk to her about whatever bothers her, especially in bed at night. "I could never be 100% sure that she does tell me everything that bothers her, or whether something is brewing deep down inside her. I do try my level best not to react to small things, because I want her to trust me now, especially as she grows older." And when she's stumped, Elna has black friends whom she can talk with openly to get a different cultural perspective. "I also get a lot of strength from interacting with other parents who adopted cross-racially."

Even the simplest statements could be misunderstood by her daughter, and so Elna is constantly on guard for statements and questions that tell her that her daughter needs to understand more and learn more about herself and society as a whole.

"A wonderful study on family resilience was recently done at Stellenbosch University, and it found that the strongest characteristics that allow some families to handle challenges and others not is communication, emotional expression and collaborative problem solving – all of which I try to apply as much as possible in my family." 