

The New York Times

Motherlode

Adventures in Parenting

AUGUST 11, 2010, 11:00 AM

When Mom Is Mistaken for the Nanny

By *LISA BELKIN*

In a column in [The Dallas Morning News](#) this past weekend, the writer Debra Monroe describes her 14 years as the white mother of an African-American daughter, who she adopted and raised on her own.

It's an adaptation from her new book, [On the Outskirts of Normal: Forging a Family Against the Grain](#), which explores, among other themes, the expectations and assumptions we bring to what a family "looks like."

She got the message from her first calls to adoption agencies:

Most staff members were white. They asked cautiously if I'd be open to transracial adoption. During my first call, I said yes, and the receptionist thought I'd misunderstood her: "Do you know what transracial is?" Her tone gave me pause. "I think so," I said, parsing syllables, "adoption across the races." She said, "Black! The child will be black!" Black was a whole other category of transracial, I realized.

And she got the message, more bluntly, from her own family. When Monroe's mother first saw baby Marie, her granddaughter, she said, "I knew she'd be black, but not this black." Monroe answers, "Mom, there's a blank in the baby book called Grandma's First Words."

Nicole Blades, who writes the blog [MsMaryMack.com](#), is getting distinct messages from outsiders, too. A media consultant now living in New Jersey, she is black, her husband is white, and, in a guest blog today, she describes how often she's mistaken for the nanny. Like Monroe years ago, Blades is looking for words, ones that will set the record straight, strip bare well-meaning but hurtful assumptions, and reclaim her child as her own.

A QUESTIONABLE QUESTION

By Nicole Blades

I should have seen it coming.

I don't know why I told myself it wouldn't — or couldn't — happen in Montclair, N.J. Maybe it's the number of times I was told, after sharing that we were considering moving

to the town: "Montclair? Oh, it's so diverse!"

Maybe it was the office manager at our prospective new pediatrician's asking, "Is this a traditional family or two mommies?"

Maybe it was simply my wishing that it didn't happen in Montclair after dealing with it far too many times walking through our old hometown of Cobble Hill, Brooklyn — also known for its diversity.

The "it" is actually a question; one that has been posed by all kinds of people, but elicits the same response from me. I fume. I simmer. I plot. I shake my head and try to move on so the irritation doesn't have a chance to fester.

It's a question that drives me close to the edge of chucking propriety out the window and letting the four-letter words fly.

The question, four words: "Is that your baby?"

I'm black and my husband is white. Our 18-month-old son is a clear representation of this "merger." The assumption that I'm the nanny is galling. After it happened one too many times in Brooklyn, I made an angry promise to myself that the next person to ask this rude question would get a brusque setting-straight. I even walked around secretly daring someone to ask.

Then two weeks after moving to Montclair, on a trip to get a library card, it happened. It was the kind, older, black woman working at the information desk. She had dreadlocks, like me, and a smooth voice. We had an easy chat about the muggy weather and the pleasures of working in air-conditioning. My son was in his stroller chatting away (I like to say he's reading aloud) about the trucks in his book.

The velvet-voiced woman behind the desk asked to see who was "talking so much" down below. I pulled the stroller back so she and my son could see each other. She told me that he was a darling. Then it came: "Is that your baby?"

My mind started cycling through all the things to say, the things I said I would say. But I couldn't pull the surliness to the surface. The words I had planned and filed away under "Next Time" were a bunched-up mess lodged behind my nerve. I smiled, although awkwardly, and just nodded. I'm sure my eyebrows were crinkled and my shoulders shoved up into my ears, but my ice-cold defiance basically melted away.

I've read essays and first-person articles in magazines, newspapers and on blogs written by mothers of color who have had to face the humiliation ...

... on the playground: "Are you working part-time for this family? Because we're looking for a new nanny and you're so loving with her."

... at the school's front gate: "You're one of the most prompt babysitter's I've met. That must be such a relief to her mom."

... at the market: "Please tell his mom that this little cutie is so well-behaved."

And all of it in front of the children. No wonder the "I Ain't the Nanny" T-shirts are becoming so popular.

And so it's clear that, no matter which diverse neighborhood my family lives in, I'm going have to meet this question — this unintentional insult — head-on. My question then becomes, do I do it with salt or with sugar?

Approaching this issue from the offensive is never really the answer. It's a sure path to more acrimony, where no one learns anything. I recently met a digital-media smarty-pants who said, "It's not worth getting out of bed in the morning if you can't be part of a teachable moment." These wise words stuck with me.

So I'm going the sugar route. This doesn't mean, however, being ingratiating or disingenuous. It's about helping someone else better understand where I'm coming from in order to point that person in the right direction.

With my tactic decided after this latest incident, I needed to summon the language to properly explain why this question is so troubling. And to do that I had to put some thought into it, so that I might have some weight behind it.

It came down to this: I carried this baby boy in my womb for 40 weeks. I took care of him by taking care of me — avoiding certain food, drinks and activities, while adding other kinds of foods, drinks and activities to my life. I dreamed of him and for him as he snuggled up to my bladder, my stomach, the bottom of my lungs. I cared for him before he even had these tiny fingers that now tickle my neck. I loved him with everything that I could ever muster before he took his first breath. He is my son. And so, to be asked if my son is my son simply because the color of his skin is shades lighter than mine, hurts. It hurts my feelings and, in some ways, it hurts my spirit.

I know that the question isn't coming from a malicious place. Maybe these folks are just trying to figure out the nature of my son's curly hair. Who knows? But I plan to find out. The next time the question is floated my way, instead of seething, I plan on seeking out some answers by making a few queries of my own. The first being, "I'm curious, why did you ask me that?"