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The Talk: After Ferguson, a Shaded Conversation About Race

By [DANA CANEDY](#) DEC. 13, 2014

Photo



Credit Max Neumann

LIKE so many African-American parents, I had rehearsed “the talk,” that nausea-inducing discussion I needed to have with my son about how to conduct himself in the presence of the police. I was prepared for his questions, except for one.

“Can I just pretend I’m white?”

Jordan was born to African-American parents, but recessive genes being what they are, he has very fair skin and pale blue eyes. I am caramel brown, and since his birth eight years ago people have mistaken me for his nanny.

When I asked why he would want to “pass” for white, I struggled with how to respond to his answer.

“Because it’s safer,” Jordan replied. “They won’t hurt me.”

That recent gray day, not long after grand juries failed to indict the police officers who killed unarmed black men in Ferguson, Mo., and Staten Island, I had steadied myself to lay out the rules: Always address police officers as “sir” or “ma’am.” Do not make any sudden moves, even to reach for identification. Do not raise your voice, resist or run.

But now I was taken aback.

Jordan’s father and I [never had a chance](#) to discuss when we would give him the talk, or what we would say. Our baby was just 6 months old when his dad, a decorated Army soldier, was killed in combat in Iraq. So the timing and the context of the talk were left to me.

I had tried hard to delay it, and make sure he wouldn’t know the names Michael Brown or Eric Garner or Tamir Rice.

In the days leading up to the conversation, I asked an African-American male colleague if he thought it was too soon. When did he tell his own boys?

“Before they were no longer seen as cute,” he said, making me wince.

I hadn’t fully processed that someday my son would be seen as suspect instead of sweet. So I told him, and then Jordan asked if it was rare for the police to hurt black people. I said that, just like his father when he wore his military uniform, most police officers are dedicated to protecting us. But, no, I added, it is unfortunately not uncommon.

“Then I don’t want to be black anymore,” Jordan declared.

He asked if I was crying. I dabbed at my eyes and searched my mind for what to say.

“Son, your father was an incredible African-American man,” I told him. “And you are an amazing boy who is going to grow into just such a man. Please be proud of that.”

“Yes,” he responded emphatically, “but can’t I just pretend to be white?”

The message that Jordan's appearance affords him the option to check "other" on the race card comes at him constantly. After his second-grade class created self-portraits last year, I noticed that his was the only one not hanging on the classroom wall. His teacher explained that his portrait was "a work in progress." The brown crayon he had used to color in his face was several shades too dark, she thought, and so she wanted him to "lighten it up" to more accurately reflect his complexion.

Photo



The author with her son and his father. Credit Courtesy of Dana Canedy

It is not just the overt signals that have convinced Jordan that he can choose to blend in to a white world. It is also that we live a life of relative affluence. I am a journalist and author whose inner circle includes prominent black writers, television anchors and doctors. We live in a high-rise in Manhattan with a doorman and round-the-clock security. Jordan attends an elite private school and an exclusive summer camp.

A white friend calls him "the boy who lives in the sky" because of the vast city view from the nine-foot windows in his bedroom. "He lives in a bubble and is always with responsible adults," she said recently, trying to assure me that our status makes him safer than many black boys.

That is true, mostly. And if my parenting pays off, I will be able to minimize his contact with the police. He will be law-abiding. He will respect authority. He'll understand the perception of black boys wearing hoodies or sagging pants. But will it be enough?

Just last month a video went viral that showed a black man in Pontiac, Mich., being questioned by a sheriff's deputy because someone reported feeling nervous after seeing

him walking in the cold with his hands in his pockets. So as much as I want to believe that our upper-middle-class status will protect my son from many of society's social ills, it could not provide him the white privilege he seeks.

Nor would "passing" protect Jordan entirely, for the internal damage from living that lie would surely be as painful as any blow from a police baton. To deny his blackness would be to deny me. It would be to deny our enslaved ancestors who were strong enough to endure that voyage. It would mean rejecting the reflection he sees every time he looks in a mirror.

For at least a little while longer, Jordan is too young to understand any of this. He does not know the racial indignity of having jobs and promotions denied or delayed, does not know the humiliation of being stopped and frisked. He has never heard the mantra "I can't breathe."

I know that our talk was just the start of a conversation that will go deeper as he moves into his teen years in a post-Obama America. My fervent hope is that, by then, I will have found a way to help him embrace the privilege of being black.

Dana Canedy is a senior editor at The New York Times and the author of the memoir "A Journal for Jordan: A Story of Love and Honor."