

Acting 'White'

June 2007 -- What should parents of color do when their children express concerns about 'acting white'? Columnist Dana Williams shares her story.

Dana Williams

I've always referred to my precocious 10-year-old son as a real character, with his wise-beyond-his-years vocabulary, mature sense of humor and timing as dead-on as any comedian I've seen. And it seems I'm not the only one who has taken notice.

For the second time in less than a year, he recently aced an audition for a role in an upcoming play at a renowned theatre festival in our area. This time, he will portray a young boy by the name of June Bug, a nickname I sometimes call him at home, ironically.

The play is a serious drama that takes place in a small Texas town just after the assassination of President Kennedy. The community finds itself wrestling not only with grief following President Kennedy's death, but with its own painful history of bigotry and tense race relations. June Bug sees the world through the eyes of an extremely inquisitive 9-year-old, and finds much of what is taking place around him rather perplexing.

I knew as soon as I saw the script that the material would bring about some interesting conversations with my son. The most interesting conversation, however, was one that I would never have predicted.

Reviewing the lines with my son, he seemed to have a difficult time bringing June Bug's dialect to life, a mix of "broken" English along with a heavy southern accent. My son read the lines with as much feeling as he could muster, but his precise enunciation of words that weren't intended to be read as such sounded pretty unconvincing.

"You're reading the words too correctly," I told him. He wrinkled his nose and looked at me with an expression that is becoming increasingly familiar the older he gets -- I like to call it the "mom doesn't know anything" face.

I demonstrated a few of the lines, trying to help him make the dialect sound more authentic. My example seemed to help, and he read several more lines that sounded far more believable than anything I'd just recited.

"See, you got it," I exclaimed. "I bet that's exactly the way June Bug is supposed to sound!"

He nodded and read a few more lines before putting the paper down on the coffee table.

"Mom," he said, with his voice rising up high at the end of the word as though it were a question. "Do you think I act white?"

I knew all too well what this meant, but I asked the question anyway.

"What does 'acting white' mean?" I probed.

"Well, you know, when you talk really proper, always using the right grammar and stuff," he said.

Shackled by labels

His answer gave me a sinking feeling. I couldn't help but think of many, many years ago when I was about his age and was frequently ridiculed by my classmates for "acting white" and "talking too proper." I felt sad and disappointed to hear from my son that so many years later, this way of thinking still is making its way into the minds of young kids.

I asked him where he had heard the idea that speaking well meant you were "acting white," and as I suspected, he told me other kids had teased him about it before.

Though certainly not a new phenomenon, this notion of "acting white" and the impact the label has on African American youngsters has been debated by everyone from Barack Obama to Bill Cosby in recent years.

In too many instances, young black children are teased by peers for "talking too proper," for following too many rules

and in some cases, for studying too hard. Too many black youth -- especially boys -- continue to be shackled by the notion that those who strive for high academic achievement and speak and carry themselves in a manner that is considered too "mainstream" are somehow less "cool" and less black.

There are a myriad of influences contributing to this way of thinking, but perhaps the most powerful is that of popular culture. I know that in so many ways, whether or not peers ridicule my son and tell him how he should and should not speak or act, the videos, music and other forms of media he is regularly exposed to send an even louder message. These influences, often steeped in stereotypes, too often set the standard for what it means to be young, black and "cool" in our society.

All parents must work to combat these influences. And as parents of color, we must work even harder to counter such influences with real-life examples of the importance of education in our past and our present. We must make sure all our children know that every leader who has ever truly uplifted his or her community or changed the world did so by speaking and carrying themselves in a manner that commanded respect -- something no one race or creed claims the sole rights to.

That day, my son and I took a break from reading June Bug's lines, and I shared with him how I, too, was teased as a young person for "acting too white" or not being "black enough." And I told him something along the lines of what I remember my mother telling me: "You don't have to act who you are -- you can only be who you are, and that will always be enough."

Of course I also added a few wise words of my own: "Acting is for the theatre, June Bug." (OK, maybe not so wise).

As expected, my son wrinkled his nose at me once again, gave me "the look," and picked up his script.

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