



## Sibling Bonds and Separations

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Sibling relationships are potentially the longest relationship we will ever have. Mental health professionals have recently placed more recognition on their significance, and some even believe that they are more influential than the relationships with our parents, spouses, or children! Certainly, the ties between siblings can weather distance, aging, and disagreements, and provide great support throughout our lives.

Children in foster care and those in adoptive families have some unique challenges when it comes to siblings. Although adoptive families know from experience that sibling bonds DO form regardless of biological connection, our children may actually have biological siblings or half-siblings from whom they were separated. Sometimes they know about these siblings, and sometimes they only wonder if they might exist. As parents, we need to respect how our children might feel about the siblings they cannot be with, and find ways to open communication about their thoughts and feelings about siblings.

### **Out of sight, NOT out of mind!**

Siblings separated through foster care or adoption may not have contact with some of their brothers or sisters. However, if they do, those can be wonderful bonds that are lifesavers for them, or, they can be difficult and sad. Frequently, siblings do not get any choice in the matter. Yet, professionals know how the loss of this bond through separation can have potentially serious emotional lifelong consequences. Consequently, in recent years, more effort has been made by professionals to keep siblings together when they must enter foster care or are available for adoption, both domestically and internationally.

Unfortunately, the sad reality remains that it is difficult to find families willing to accept a sibling group. In the child welfare system, with the recent push to move children out of foster care into permanent adoptive homes, siblings may be separated to increase the chances for adoption. Kendra van Ausdal, former social worker for C.A.S.E., has worked with children and families in foster care and pre-adoptive homes. In both her clinical work and her prior employment as a social worker for a local department of social service, Kendra worked with many children separated by foster care and adoption. Some of the sibling groups she has been involved with span the ages from young children to adolescents. In several of her cases, only the younger children were adopted, while the adolescents remained in foster homes. She describes the intense sadness and resentment felt by teens when they were not permitted to see their younger siblings anymore.

Kendra notes that in one situation, the adoptive parents initially agreed to continued contact with the teen siblings, but then decided that contact was “inappropriate” because of problems with the adolescent siblings’ behavior. Separated at young ages, often times the younger siblings have no memories of their adolescent siblings. Kendra fears that some adoptive parents may not *even* talk to their children about siblings. Sometimes, they are not even aware that siblings exist.

Kendra describes another situation in which three children were separated from their brother because of his serious emotional and behavioral problems. The seven-year-old boy is in residential care, while the others (one brother, two sisters) are in a pre-adoptive therapeutic home. Kendra notes that at the time of placement, the sisters resented their brother because they felt that he had “cost them several adoptive placements” which meant multiple moves. They also were afraid of him. However, the older brother had mixed feelings---he missed his brother and wanted to see him. During the years of neglect by the children’s birth mother, this boy had played a parent-like role with his siblings. Thus, he felt responsible for his younger brother and felt tremendous guilt at his failure to keep the siblings together. Kendra recalls that he said, “I’ll make certain that he doesn’t bother the others, just bring him back.”

According to the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (NAIC), research that has been conducted with regard to the separation of siblings because of behavior problems or abuse has found that such explanations send terrible messages to children and *reduce* their sense of trust in adults. *(Continued)*



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Therapy in these instances is considered to possibly be a better intervention, but it is not always easy to arrange and fund.

Children may also be separated when the birth parents have not relinquished all the children or the court has not removed all the children from a family. Helping children cope with feelings about having siblings who have remained with the birth family can be quite challenging. Contact between siblings will, of course, depend on whether there is contact between the birth parent and the placed child. In general, Kendra notes that despite the awareness of the importance of the sibling connections, social workers, foster parents and adoptive parents with so much to juggle, often make visitation between siblings a low priority.

Her experiences still point to the reality that sibling relationships are “the least understood in terms of their significance.” In one instance where this was not the case, a sensitive, caring judge in Washington, D.C. ordered that social workers arrange for monthly visits to take place between a sibling group of ten children who were living in five different homes.

In international adoption, prior to placement, siblings may already be separated and living in different orphanages for any number of reasons, including age. Sometimes adoptive parents who are planning to adopt only one child at a time (especially those who want a very young child), may only learn about an older sibling when in the country. For any number of reasons, the parents may not be prepared to adopt the older sibling(s), who may have medical or emotional difficulties they do not feel equipped to handle.

As in domestic adoption, children may also be separated from siblings who have remained either living with the birth parents or other birth family relatives. And, of course, different families may adopt siblings. When adoptive parents know that siblings are living with other adoptive parents, they usually want to connect with each other. Unfortunately, many times parents only know that the sibling was adopted by another family, with no other information available to them.

### **What do we say and do?**

Adoptive parents often struggle with the question of when to tell their children that they have siblings, whether or not the parents know of their whereabouts. They worry that such knowledge will cause their children much emotional distress. They fear that their children will want contact with their siblings, and this may either not be possible or desired. Parents naturally want to protect their children from emotional harm as much as possible. Especially when the adoption story includes the fact that a sibling, born before or after the adoptee, is still living with birth parents or birth relative, that child may be more vulnerable to a common feeling experienced by school-age adopted children in which they think that something about themselves caused them to be placed for adoption.

Because there are so many factors to consider, when parents have questions about the disclosure of information about anything they consider to be difficult, it may be wise for parents to consult with a professional. Generally, however, most experts feel that children do best with ageappropriate, honest answers to questions about siblings, which they often will ask by the time they reach pre-adolescence. If they don't ask, most experts believe this information should be shared by the time they are ready to leave home. Adoption expert Holly van Gulden (Real Parents, Real Children, 1994) feels that it is best for children to learn about sensitive information *before* adolescence, which can be a tumultuous time for all kids, adopted or not. Tanya, 10, adopted from Romania at three years old, knows she has an older sister and one older brother. Her mother notes that she thinks about them a lot, and wants badly to try to find them someday. Letting her share her fantasies about them and validating her feelings helps Tanya to learn how to cope with the pain of separation.

Some parents have the option of contact, and wonder how that relationship should develop. Alyson, 15, adopted as an infant, was told that she had an older biological brother living with her birth grandparents. At age 12 when she was struggling with feelings related to adoption, her mother suggested she write to her biological brother. After a year of letters and phone calls, they were able to meet each other. Alyson says this relationship changed her life in so many wonderful ways. She delights in being able to say that she has

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two brothers – her younger one who was also adopted by her parents, and now her older one. Her older brother and grandparents flew from California to attend her Bat Mitzvah two years ago. She couldn't be more proud of the family pictures taken at that time.

What about the children who have no information about siblings? It is painful for parents to say and for children to hear, "I don't know." Most parents will try everything possible to get as much information as possible for their children. But sometimes the reality is just that it isn't possible. Because of China's one child policy and no available information, many children may speculate, and rightfully so, about the possibility that they were the "second born" and have an older brother or sister. Children in domestic or international adoption may also wonder if their parents went on to have other children.

Susan LaVigna, an adult adoptee in her late 30's, was raised as an only child. As a child, she had been told that her birth parents were killed in a car accident, so she never fantasized about siblings. To her great shock, at the age of 30, she was found by a sister who is her full sibling. She also learned that her birth mother was alive and that she had two half brothers. In time, she connected with all of them, and today tells her tale with much joy. Her new relationships also include her sister's family ("they are now MY family.") Best of all, "I have a *sister!*!" she exclaims. The word rolls off her tongue with a youthful sense of delight and enthusiasm.

### **Honor the Connections**

Just as adoptive parents honor the connections to birth parents, it is important that all who touch the lives of children in foster care and adoption give serious consideration to sibling relationships. Whether the goal is to maintain a strong sibling connection, heal sibling relationships, or foster new connections, these ties should not be broken.

