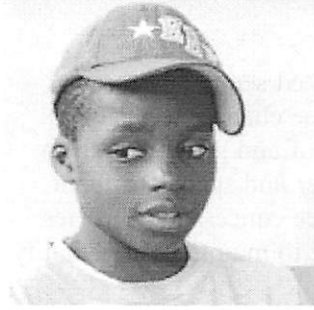


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Adoption & Sibling Relationships: What Children Have Taught Me

From the Spring 2008 Adoptalk

By Jane Brown

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A veteran foster and adoptive parent, social worker, and adoption educator, Jane Brown currently travels around the U.S., Canada, and Australia facilitating Adoption Playshops for adoptive families. Playshops are designed to help children (adopted and non-adopted) normalize, understand, and express their feelings about growing up in an adoptive family. Jane also finds time to write adoption-related articles for magazines and newsletters.

When I ask children in my Adoption Playshop sessions what they like best and least about their family, their answers reflect the importance of sibling relationships—real, imagined, yearned for, or lived-at-a-distance. They speak of siblings with affection, sadness, anger, longing, resentment, envy, gratitude, guilt, or bitterness.

No matter what they share, it is clear that sibling relationships fundamentally affect the children's sense of self, their self-assurance or insecurity, and other crucial aspects of their life's journey. As parents and caring professionals, we must carefully consider and address sibling issues that enhance and complicate the lives of children in adoptive families.

Sibling Issues in Adoptive Families

Parents and siblings may assign polarized roles among children in a family, so that different children are known as the good, bad, smart, athletic, introverted, or outgoing one in the family. These designated roles may influence how parents regard and treat each child, how children see themselves, and how siblings interact.

When older children join a new family, they bring along predetermined self-concepts and beliefs that shape their expectations of new parents and siblings. When a sibling group is adopted and must mesh with a pre-existing sibling group, these imposed characteristics, beliefs, and ways of interacting will influence how the children relate to one another and whether they get along or clash.

Adopted children with un- or under-treated mental health issues, or other issues from their past, can have troubling behavior that severely erodes the family's quality of life. Other children in the family who become targets of the troubled sibling may need professional help to cope with and find ways to support and help a brother or sister who steals or destroys their belongings, has violent outbursts, publicly embarrasses them, or claims an unequal portion of parental time and attention.

Non-adopted siblings in my groups are initially guarded, but express

themselves with more intensity once they realize others are empathetically listening to *them*—an uncommon happening for many. They and their adopted siblings speak of the frequent need to defend the authenticity of their sibling relatedness in public venues like school. Yet, even as they do so, some still harbor questions about whether blood is thicker than water—questions that parents should anticipate and address.

Siblings who are separated in care and placed or adopted separately often reveal how important birth connections are. They value chances to visit and talk with birth siblings, and proudly show off photos of and gifts from them. At the same time, while separated siblings may wonder and speculate about why they couldn't be placed together, they rarely voice concerns or theories for fear of upsetting their parents or losing the chance to maintain birth family ties.

Siblings who are adopted together usually talk about how great it is to have one another. They may be the only recorders of specific chapters in their history. Some who have comforted, protected, or depended upon one another during times of crisis, however, may find it harder to integrate into a new family. One sibling pair, for example, cared for their dying parents in Ethiopia and survived together until being found and taken to an orphanage. The special bond they developed kept them from feeling as close to new siblings, and from being able to trust and rely on their adoptive parents.

Addressing Sibling Issues

Without skilled and sensitive prompting, most youngsters rarely reveal to themselves or others (including parents) what they truly think, feel, and believe about adoption-related matters. Sibling issues and concerns may be similarly kept under wraps. In the interest of children who are members of the same family, parents can offer meaningful sibling support.

Below are some suggestions:

- **Create and use a family journal.** I encourage parents to construct a journal that the family works on once a week. Everyone takes part by responding to a question or quote or a fill-in-the-blank statement that will spark an open dialogue about family dynamics, establish a foundation for problem-solving, or allow everyone a chance to be heard. Discussions about sibling relationships and concerns should be included regularly.
- **Seek therapeutic help for serious sibling and family conflicts.** When one especially troubled child traumatizes other children in the family, professional intervention may be needed. In these situations, it is crucial that sibling conflicts be addressed in psychotherapy sessions. If therapy can uncover the thinking and emotions driving the conflict, solutions are easier to identify and healing can begin. Over time, if the troubled youth is helped to better manage her emotions and behavior, a lasting sibling connection can develop.
- **Make certain each child gets individual attention and affection.** Non-adopted or less outwardly troubled adoptees may feel resentful and marginalized when a sibling monopolizes parental attention. For children who were not adopted or do not have the “right” cultural heritage, adoption and cultural events may intensify feelings of being undervalued and relegated to the periphery. Parents, adoption professionals, and adoptive family organizations should focus on meeting these youngsters' needs too—actions that promote healthier sibling relationships.
- **Model and promote open communication.** Many children become

less communicative as they get older, and those adopted from foster care may find it hard to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. To nurture more honest, open communication, parents must practice active listening and tune in to the emotional content of children's words and actions. Structured family meetings should demonstrate and encourage respectful information sharing and problem solving. Written notes, e-mail, and text messaging can help youth who would rather type than talk.

- **Provide chances for your children to interact with similarly situated peers.** Children with whom I have worked in group sessions are immensely relieved to learn that other youngsters' experiences are similar to their own, and that they are "normal." By observing and interacting with other children in adoptive families, children pick up knowledge that can help them to better navigate life as an adopted person. Within the safety of like-minded and experienced peer groups, children can also develop strategies for resisting racism, adoptism, xenophobia, and other types of intolerance.

Addressing Issues in Multicultural Families

Some white children in transracial adoptive families speak of being the "vanilla kids" in whom no one seems interested (thankfully, on one hand, and hurtfully on the other). They worry that peers and adults are too interested in their siblings' pre-adoption history, and feel sympathy over their siblings' exposure to negative, intrusive comments and questions from strangers or acquaintances.

Most children express resentment when parents promote their internationally adopted siblings' heritage, but ignore other children's ancestries. Others demonstrate an avid interest in their siblings' cultural heritage, but only because they secretly fear they will lose their parents' approval if they don't. Only as adults reworking their sibling relationships—if they do—might they realize that their adopted siblings disliked and resented this imbalance as much as they did.

Transracially adopted youth are also very affected by white siblings' attitudes toward race and willingness to fight racism. Ideally, every white family member should become "transracialized," a term coined by Dr. John Raible, Assistant Professor of Diversity and Curriculum Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Transracialization occurs when, through immersion in a multicultural lifestyle, white people get comfortable with diverse populations, recognize racism, and support and defend family members of color.

If your family has members who were transracially adopted:

- **Encourage everyone in your family to participate in adoption education events and multiracial and multicultural adoptive family organizations.** Children seem to benefit more when they participate in multiracial and multicultural groups whose participants were adopted domestically and internationally and have different life stories. Under the Kid Code of "I'll tell if you tell," children are more likely to divulge information about themselves and their experiences when their curiosity is piqued by peers whose life path is or has been markedly different.

Group members are often surprised to learn that, while race matters, children in same-race families and those placed transracially have shared thoughts, questions, feelings, beliefs, and fantasies about adoption. They are curious about and empathetic with non-adopted siblings who share their challenges and vulnerabilities. In turn, non-adopted children learn a great

deal about adoptees' challenges—knowledge that helps them feel closer to and better support their siblings.

Parents also benefit from learning that they too have much in common with other adoptive families, and can connect with families to acquire the skills and strategies they need to raise their children. Adoptive family networks can yield new family connections and youth kinships with members of other families that are enriching for everyone involved.

- **Facilitate transracially adopted children's connection with members of their birth race and culture.** Provided they have access to and are encouraged to build same-race social relationships, transracially adopted children benefit from closeness to members of their same-race peer groups. Through these friendships, children of color can debunk stereotypes, socialize without fear of being ambushed by racism, and hone their individual and collective strengths. It is imperative that adoptive parents consider how to foster these connections early and often.
- **Make your family culturally competent.** Everyone in a multicultural family fares better when white members truly understand how people of color experience life. White children who ally with their siblings to resist racism can also pave the way for closer lifelong relationships. Because discrimination can be hard on the whole family, parents must coach all their children about the realities of racism, and help them to develop coping strategies that can be reinforced within adoption-related support groups.

When we think about sisters and brothers, the image of close birth family kinship often comes to mind. Siblings who are related by law but not birth, though, can also develop close and enduring connections. By nurturing and working to meet each child's needs, promoting honest communication, and giving children opportunities to interact with other adoptees, non-adopted siblings, and cultural resources, parents can do much to cement enduring sibling bonds within their adoptive families.

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