



FAST FACTS: Sibling Relationships - Maintaining Connection When Sibling Separation Occurs

Children with foster care and adoption in their history generally have had no choice in almost anything in their young lives. They often have had many people/things/experiences taken from them abruptly and without their consent, such as their connection to their biological parents, continuing to attend their current school district upon placement into foster care, or having their favorite blanket taken from them when taken out of a biological parent's home by Child Protective Services. The losses they experience at times include not being to continue living with biological siblings, if there was a sibling separation upon entering foster care or being adopted. It is common to minimize these losses, but sibling relationships are among the most important in our lives and the connections runs deep. Siblings are often the only constant in the lives of children who come from 'hard places.' For example, the oldest sibling may have been put in charge of parenting their younger siblings in a neglectful situation and may see their identity solely in being a caregiver of others. While we may disagree about whether this is age-appropriate for them to feel, it is their reality and should be handled delicately.

For these reasons, it is recommended siblings are placed together in foster care or an adoptive home, when possible. If this is not possible, foster/adoptive families are encouraged to consider allowing some form of ongoing contact between the siblings, such as visits with the siblings and their adoptive/foster parents in a neutral and highly supervised setting. Activities that keep the children active, but allow conversation and play, are encouraged. Some activities that may work well for these times of connection might include bowling, mini golf, or meeting at a park. Below are some simple, yet important, ways to support your child if a sibling separation occurs:

- Validate the thoughts and feelings of children if they verbalize missing siblings. Expressions of validation might include, "Wow, it sounds like you feel..." or "I can see why you would feel that way". It is not agreement as much as it is displaying that you understand how they feel.
- Create an open atmosphere in your home for dialogue surrounding the child's experience of adoption/foster care, so that you can be the 'buffer' for their stress and support them in their thoughts/experiences/grief. We cannot leave them in it on their own.
- Encourage contact with the siblings in some form, whether it be in-person, sending letters and pictures annually, video calls or creating a separate (and supervised) Facebook account solely for the purpose of contact between the siblings.
- Recognize that while we as parents may have reservations about sibling contact, we have not lived their experience. Children with adoption in their history often have many questions and misunderstandings about their adoption story. It is helpful to provide them with factual, age-appropriate information about their story. Sibling contact can help fill in the gaps at times. It allows the adopted child the ability to have some connection to their past, which is most often yearned for, regardless of how much trauma and hardship they have endured.
- Safety may at times be an issue in deciding on the type/frequency of sibling contact, so make these decisions thoughtfully and if possible, with the child's therapist (if involved).



After Adoption: Developing Attachment Between Biological and Adopted Siblings of the Family

Adoption brings together families physically and geographically, but much work needs to be done to bring adoptive families together emotionally, creating a bond that can withstand time and circumstances. Many families welcome new members to their family through adoption and have existing biological children in their homes; the biological children often range in emotions toward the adoption, with some displaying excitement and others ambivalence or anger. Adoptive families frequently experience a 'honeymoon period,' in which the first few weeks or months after the adoptive placement go well for everyone involved, and then slowly but surely, problems tend to arise. This is a very human experience and happens in almost all relationships.

Below are tips/guidelines to meet the emotional needs of each of the biological/adopted siblings in the home, as well as build attachment and connection:

- Validate the experiences of both your biological and adopted children. Expressions of validation might include, "Wow, it sounds like you feel..." or "I can see why you would feel that way." It is not agreement as much as it is displaying that you understand how they feel.
- Spend time individually with each child to build connection and allow them to verbalize thoughts and feelings about your newly formed family. Biological children may need extra 1:1 time shortly after the adoption, as they are navigating a totally new normal. Biological children are at times taken off-guard with the extent of the changes, which may include the home now being louder and messier than usual. They may also have strong feelings when different or new parental responses to challenging behavior occur in regard to the adopted siblings.
- Assist children who are old enough to express feelings in an age-appropriate way, such as through coloring, painting, or journaling.
- Create some new family traditions together (whether it be bedtime routines or holiday traditions), which symbolize the family, embarking on a new life together. This can help the adopted child feel as though they are part of this family, not just stepping into the world/life of someone else.
- One fun family project is to create a paper or cardboard shield (like warriors used) with the last name of the family written largely on it. Each family member identifies several traits they appreciate about the family, such as a favorite family activity or attribute. This can be hung up and is a reminder of the unity and cohesion of the new family unit.

In closing, family cohesion after adoption often takes time and adjusting of expectations. As parents, our expectations of having 'the perfect family' or having instantaneous attachment between family members may need to be altered. There may always be reminders of the differing histories or personalities. We will likely need to give grace to one another to be the person we were designed to be. We can chose on a regular basis to celebrate the small, simple successes and connections that we see.

Resources

Helpful books: *The Connected Child* by Karyn Purvis and *Beyond Consequences* by Heather Forbes.

www.mnadopt.org HELP link, for assistance in finding resources including adoption-competent therapists

www.nacac.org Connections link for assistance in finding support groups in Minnesota, both live and virtual

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