

Adopting Siblings: Issues to Consider

Outline

1. Siblings are available for adoption in all types of adoption (foster care, international, and domestic, although rarer in private infant domestic adoption.) In fact, in foster care adoption and in some countries in international adoption, the greatest need is for adoptive families for sibling groups.
2. Why is it important to keep siblings together when placed for foster care or adoption?
 - a. For many of us, our relationships with our siblings are the longest in our lives- longer than our parents and spouses.
 - b. Being placed with a sibling means the child can maintain a connection with biological family members- which we know is important for children as they develop their sense of identity.
 - c. Shared racial or cultural background- in a transracial adoption, you have another person in the family who looks like you.
 - d. Siblings share a history and have survived together- the bond and connection can be strong. If a child could not be placed with a sibling, the loss of that sibling relationship would add to the long list of losses for the child.
3. Advantages to adopting siblings.
 - a. Fulfilling a need; sibling groups are harder to place- not every family is equipped to care for siblings
 - b. Importance of keeping siblings together.
 - c. Sometimes, a shorter wait- because there are many sibling groups available and not everyone is willing or able to parent multiple children at once
 - d. Children have each other to aid in the adjustment.
 - e. Instant Family- can be an advantage and a disadvantage (adjusting to a rapid increase in family size and the strain it can place on the family)
4. Special issues to consider:
 - a. Forming an attachment with both children separately.
 - b. Children maintain their primary attachment to each other rather than to the parent(s)- they already have established trust with their sibling, and parents have been less trustworthy in their experience.
 - c. Parents can feel more connected to one child over the other
 - i. There is nothing wrong with that- it's natural for relationships to develop differently
 - ii. The important thing is to make an effort and be intentional about developing a bond with the other child

- d. The child connects to one parent over the other.
 - e. Siblings may grieve or adjust differently – individuals all grieve differently and at their own pace; one sibling may feel excited to be in your home, and the other may be resentful because they feel a strong connection to biological family members.
5. Integrating siblings with children already in the family:
- a. Involve children already in the family early in the process of bringing additional children into the family; they might not have decision-making “power” but should know the ultimate plan for the family and have an age-appropriate understanding of the process.
 - b. Get your support network in place before you adopt because you’re going to need time.
 - c. Suggested books for helping siblings understand adoption.
 - d. Be aware of the language you use when referring to the children. Don’t say “my child” when referring to a child who was already in the family.
 - e. Allow children in the family to help teach new children about the family; being the “expert” on family life, family routines, and traditions will give them a sense of importance and control.
 - f. Children already in the family might help new children feel safer. It may be easier for the children to bond with their siblings than with their parents at home.
 - g. It is important to ensure individual time with children already in the family and maintain consistent activities or time with friends so their routines are not disrupted completely.
 - h. Consider having extended family or close friends schedule individual time with children already in the family - to help them feel special and to give you individual time with the new children joining the family.
 - i. Recognize that adopting additional children into the family will be hard for children already in the family in some ways- they will get less attention, they will have moments of jealousy, and their lives will change in real ways. But they will also develop strengths and character as a result- learning to compromise, becoming more flexible, putting others’ needs over their own, and additional love and relationships for your child. And they get a sibling with the lifelong connection.
 - j. Build connections between all the children. Plan activities that help the whole family bond.
6. Parentified child
- a. What do we mean?
 - b. Is it a problem? **not bonding with the parent

- c. Tips for handling a parentified child.
- 7. Overcoming unhealthy dynamics from their past
 - a. One child was the favorite in their previous family or families.
 - b. Negative sibling interactions-Sibling rivalry
- 8. When is it not a good idea to keep siblings together?
 - a. When one sibling's needs threaten the safety of the other sibling (i.e., the child is physically aggressive or acts out sexually with a sibling).
 - b. When one sibling has a high level of need (high medical needs, unsafe behaviors) and finding a family to meet those high levels of needs prevents all siblings from finding a family.
 - c. Really difficult decision to determine which is more important- a forever family or keeping siblings together. This is why being open to adopting a sibling group is fulfilling such an important need.
- 9. Consider your motivation carefully- be honest with yourself and your partner about your desire to adopt a sibling group.
 - a. Be careful about adopting a sibling group because you feel a connection with or a desire for one child.... for example, the two year old sibling if you are adopting in order to parent the a newborn sibling or consider the implication on the teenager if your true desire is to parent the five-year-old sibling.

Tips for parents adopting or fostering a sibling group:

- 1. Educate yourself before opening your home to a sibling group- it always helps to have realistic expectations... listening to this interview is a great sign!
- 2. Consider your motivation carefully- be honest with yourself and your partner about your desire to adopt a sibling group.
 - a. Be careful about adopting a sibling group because you feel a connection with or a desire for one child.... for example, the two-year-old sibling if you are adopting to parent a newborn sibling or consider the implication on the teenager if
- 3. Be patient with yourselves and with the children- it's a big adjustment for everyone.
- 4. Get help to free up your time so that you can pay attention to all the children and the new family unit. Develop your support system ahead of time.
- 5. Take care of yourself. Spending time on things that are important to you is not selfish!
- 6. If married, ensure your marriage/partnership remains strong- it is the foundation of your family's health.
 - a. As much as is possible, be on the same page when deciding to consider a sibling group.

- b. Even in the busy-ness of parenting multiple children, set aside time for you and your partner to have quality time together.
 - c. If parenting puts a strain on your relationship, seek couples counseling to help - setting aside the time that counseling requires is beneficial all by itself.
- 7. If single, maintain your friendships. You need to have a life outside of your children.
- 8. Find individual time with each child in the family (individual “dates”, story time at night, who goes to the grocery store, helping to prepare dinner, etc.)
- 9. Pay attention to each child’s interests and personalities and create opportunities for those to grow. Don’t treat the sibling group as a unit.
- 10. Seek out professional support for the family when needed--seeking help is a strength (not a sign of failure)- you do not have to do it alone- especially if it proves more challenging than you were prepared for.