



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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## **Sibling Issue in Adoption**

**by Mary Martin Mason**

For several years my son's birth mother, my husband and I grappled with the best time to tell Josh that he has a half-brother. Josh's birth father has chosen not to participate in our arrangement of open adoption, and Josh's half brother is his son by a previous marriage. The chances of Josh and his brother accidentally meeting one another are remote. Still, we believe it is his right to know that he has a brother.

Last year, as a song about brothers was playing on the car radio, I told Josh about his half-brother. Josh, who was 6 at the time, laughed uproariously, exclaiming, "I have a half-brother! Is he an astronaut? Where's the other half? Is it on the moon?" Our discussion was lightened by a child's perception of the odd terms which adults assign to relationships. Even for adults, categorizing adoptive relationships can be cumbersome. I still have trouble explaining my brother, the birth son of my adoptive parents. "He wasn't adopted. I was," is how I usually begin. Invariably some person, brow furrowed, asks, "Oh, he's your step-brother?" or, "He was their real child, but you were ... their..." and then they never finish the sentence.

Even more complicated is defining the relationship between my birth brothers and myself. Since I grew up in an open adoption, long before they became commonplace, I had ongoing contact with my two biological brothers and birth father. Today, the casual question, "Do you have brothers and sisters?" makes me pause before deciding how much of the adoption maze to unravel.

Adoption creates sibling pairs who invariably must decide what they mean to one another, work on their individual adoption issues, and sometimes be triggered by each other's issues.

Deciding what each means to the other is a lifelong task among siblings. Even in non-adoptive families, this task exists. Siblings can be friends or enemies, confidants or tale-tellers, strangers or intimates. Often the relationship slips in and out of many modes until the siblings reach adulthood and their relationship solidifies.

When siblings look very dissimilar (which is often the case in adoption), they must affirm to outsiders that they are indeed siblings. Arguments can be fueled by their points of differences. Perhaps one is adopted and another not; one came from Colombia while the other from Chicago; or one is biracial and the other not. These days, the sibling participating

in an open adoption might be the object of jealousy of a sibling without access to birth parents. Sibling rivalry is alive and well in all families, perhaps even more so in adoptive families because one child's adoption issues can trigger another's.

Despite differences, many siblings through adoption become best friends. I know two brothers, one from Korea and the other the child born into the family. Just 6 months apart in age, these two bonded immediately and today, as adults, never let a week go by without getting together.

When siblings differ, it's easy to make adoption the dumping ground. Sometimes a particular family member lacks a good fit within the family. Even non-adoptive families may have a member who doesn't stylistically fit in: the night owl living with day people, the athlete among couch-potatoes, the sister who does not resemble sisters who look like clones of one another.

In adoptive families where one member seems to stick out, accepting that variable empowers everyone. Pointing out biological families where one or more members don't mesh perfectly can move the issue away from adoption. Families can seek creative ways to explore the wonder of diversity within their family.

When differences between siblings revolve around adoption, parents can reinforce their belief that loving a child is not dependent upon them either being adopted or being born to them; that membership within the family is not stronger for one child than another; that it is normal to compare oneself to whomever sleeps in the next room or perhaps in the top twin bed. Candid discussions can give voice to fears and anxious feelings among siblings.

More problematic these days are adoptive families in which one child has contact with their birth family and another does not. To watch a sibling interacting with his or her birth family can trigger a sense of abandonment in the child who does not know the birth family. Four year-old Molly was thrilled with her new baby brother. She especially liked his birth mother but began to question why her birth mother didn't come to see her. Molly's parents took the initiative to contact her birth mother and open up her adoption. Frequently, the open adoption of a second child precipitates full disclosure in the adoption of the oldest child. Not all families have the luxury or even the possibility of opening up a confidential adoption. One family, faced with the same situation as Molly's family, had

requested contact with their oldest child's birth mother, but it was denied by the state in which the child had been born. The family has a summer vacation planned to the child's home state to visit her foster parents. Anticipating the trip has eased the oldest child's animosity towards her younger sister.

Sometimes a birth mother can be enlisted to include the child who feels left out. She can bring a gift for that child or include him or her in special ways. If the disparity between an open and confidential adoption gets to be a serious problem, the family might decide to seek a therapist who understands adoption and family systems.

In families with both adoptive and birth children, it may not be possible to completely erase the myth of blood being thicker than water. In my case, I felt that my brother, since he was my adoptive parents' offspring, held stronger family membership than I. This was not a matter of different treatment, but rather was based upon my personal adoption issues which were not addressed.

Far more traumatic for me was feeling unwanted, particularly from the ages of 9 to 12. "What's wrong with me that he kept my brothers, but not me?" was the question about my birth father which stuck in my throat. Those were the pre-Oprah days, when it was important to appear "normal," so many years passed before I got my answers.

Be aware that if birth parents have other children in their home, the normal feelings of loss that accompany adoption can be compounded for the adopted child. Particularly in middle childhood, the child may blame himself for a birth parent's decision of adoption and may resent any siblings living with the birth parent. In such cases, adoptive parents need to trust their expertise. Better than any book or advice from an "expert," parents know their child from the day-in and day-out experience of living together. Using their instincts, they can elicit discussions about feelings the child may have.

Today, birth families and adoptive families are making adoption arrangements which may include ongoing contact. The possibility exists for children to see and hear firsthand from their birth parents why the adoption took place as well as why birth parents are now able to raise children. A marvelous benefit of openness is that a child can speak directly to birth parents about the decision of relinquishment, about the life circumstances that surrounded that decision, about how wrenching that decision was to make. Today new adoption practices and a more open culture give children permission to ask hard questions.

Keep in mind that an integral part of life's journey is to explore "Who am I?" For the adopted person, siblings become a part of that process. I was an adult before I could understand the circumstances facing my birth father after my birth mother's death which led him to choose adoption for me and not for my brothers. Speaking to him and to my adoptive parents and to my brothers has helped, as has accumulating some mileage through living.

My three brothers and I have vastly different types of relationships today. As we are separated by many miles, my phone bill is enormous as is the cost of visiting one another. With my biological brothers, I am careful not to interfere when they have conflicts with one another. They have a history together which, for the most part, did not include me. We connect more like friends than as siblings. Even though we knew one another as children, we lost the time together that most siblings have. That has colored and altered our connection.

Although the possibility exists for a close relationship between siblings who share at least one birth parent but are not raised together, the reality is that it may not be as close as for those within the adoptive family. Interacting over time allows humans to attach to one another and form an affectionate bond. Siblings growing up in the same house have a backlog of experiences and knowledge of one another that even the most open of adoptions will probably not provide. But then again, anything is possible within the realm of human arrangements.

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