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# Sibling Attachment

By Patricia Irwin Johnston

Research shows that for those who have brothers or sisters, sibling relationships — whether healthy or unhealthy, loving or antagonistic — are the longest-lasting and most constant intimate relationships formed by human beings, lasting longer than most friendships, through the deaths of parents and beyond marriages, extending a shared history and deeply-rooted shared experience from early childhood into old age. Many of us who have planned families to include more than one child made this decision partially because we hoped our children would gain from the richness and support of sibling relationships.

And yet within adoption, little has been written about sibling issues. Nearly all of traditional adoption education centers on parents' needs: the needs of adoptive parents to feel "entitled" to their children; the needs of birth parents to feel confident in this most difficult and ambivalently-supported decision. And because adoption so often grows out of adults' anguish and deeply-felt losses experienced, it is easy for the needs of those adults and their emotional perceptions to continue to take center stage. Does this preoccupation with the adults contribute to the losses felt by children in adoption? It must!

## Brother/sister Definitions — Child View, Adult View:

Fact: Kids think differently than do adults. Those of you who have read the work of Swiss psychiatrist Jean Piaget are already familiar with his theories of the changes in children's cognitive abilities over time. Many of you are no doubt familiar with the related adoption-specific research of Dr. David Brodzinsky. Others have also read the related work of Dr. Anne Bernstein (author of *Flight of the Stork: What Children Think and When about Sex and Family Building*, Perspectives Press). If you haven't read these things, you simply must. They should be required reading for all of us—both parents and professionals.

In examining sibling relationships, this research tells us that adults' expectations for their children's sibling relationships reflect many years of personal experience and education, adding to their expectations layers of genetic as well as emotional meaning. But the research also indicates that for young children, family relationships are purely social in nature.

While it is true that we can never have too many people who love us, no matter how adults label other children in their

lives — using legal, social, genetic or other ties to create terminology — for young children, the definitions are simpler: brothers and sisters are those children with whom one grows up and shares parents. Young children think in concrete terms. So even in a family that includes adoption, whether open or confidential, whether there are siblings being raised in other families, and however much the adults try to explain, in the young child's mind, it's simple: brothers and sisters are those with whom a child lives. Brother is the guy who NEVER shares his stuff. Sister is the person who NEVER cleans toothpaste out the sink and ALWAYS blames me for it. Sister is the person who ALWAYS agrees that Mom and Dad are too strict. Brother is the one who ALWAYS remembers that one time when....

That birth brother seen never or infrequently, that half sister who lives downstate with the weekend-visiting parent-in-common and stepparent or with birth mother will NOT be experienced by young children as siblings in the same way as are those children with whom he lives his daily life — whether he is related to these same-house children by birth, by law, by love or only by social situation. Good friends? Maybe. Linkages akin to those of close cousins? Perhaps. But not siblings.

Why should this be surprising? Even in the most open adoptions, feelings about birth mother and birth father are not the same as feelings about Mommy and Daddy and do not encompass the societal expectations for feelings about and relationships with mothers and fathers.

It is mostly the limitations of language which create confusion. A brown young child asked about his white housemate — "Is that your brother?" — has no idea why this concept strikes outsiders as odd; after all, this person may be the only brother he has ever known. An older child introduced for the first time to the six-year-old as "your brother" will not "feel like" brother.

As children mature, they will become better able to make sense of connections that are not just social and will be more interested in the distinctions. We know, for example, that during adolescence, many adopted people begin to feel intensely interested in the concept of genetic connection and what it might mean for them. Genetic relatives might be able to provide some explanation for how one looks or why one possesses or lacks skills for certain physical or intellectual

or artistic endeavors and might offer some insight into how tall or how shapely one might be as an adult. As adopted people approach adolescence, they are likely to be ready to be interested in, to understand and to appreciate additional complexities about the existence of, or relationship with, their genetic siblings.

### **Do sibling relationships differ in adoption-expanded families?**

Whether siblings are related by birth or by adoption, a variety of issues colors relationships, including general family culture and closeness, the sex of the children, their relative ages, their position in the family, the size of the family, similarity or disparity of interests and talents, individual children's personality styles, and each person's sense of "psychological fit" within the family system.

### **Does adoption change this? Yes. No. Maybe.**

Even families formed entirely by birth frequently may include one or more family members who feel "different" from the others. Certainly, since the children and parents in adoption-expanded families have differing genetic backgrounds, they cannot expect to be as prone to be "alike" physically, intellectually, or emotionally as are people who have a genetic connection. So adoption-expanded families may be more "at risk" for poor matches than are birth-connected sibs and parents.

But parents can do much to work on these issues. Here is a list of ideas to consider.

1. Every child deserves to be wanted, loved, and valued for who he is rather than as a stopgap or replacement for a child one dreams of parenting. It is my belief that parents who thoughtfully embrace and consistently practice this principle — treating each child as a unique individual with unique needs — will make decisions for themselves and their children that are truly child-centered.

For example, avoid artificial twinning. Many adoptive parents deliberately pursue two adoptions at once. These decisions are nearly always parent-centered. After struggling so long to become parents, they think it will be great to have two at a time and to get the difficult family-formation period over with. Often parents are not truthful with birth parents or intermediaries about such efforts. Result? Family relationships based on half-truths or outright lies that WILL catch up with you. Two genetically-dissimilar kids who will nearly always be parented as a pair who are set up to be compared by peers and teachers and coaches, and on whom the spotlight of being different and being adopted will be obvious on an almost daily basis throughout their lives.

2. Treat each child as the individual he or she is. For example, life is not fair, so don't base parenting decisions on making all things equal. Just as no two adoptions are alike, and no two sets of birth parents and their circumstances are alike, no two children are alike and so can't be expected to feel the same way about adoption issues in their lives. Some kids wonder, some don't. Some kids enjoy extended family relationships in open adoptions and some don't. Some adopted people who grew up in confidential adoptions search and some don't. What children need more than "fairness" is to know that, as their parent, you are "on their side," ready to help them meet their needs— whatever they may be.
3. Do all that you can to nurture a sense of shared family culture. Carefully cultivating and highlighting religious and holiday traditions, the family's shared mealtime and bedtime rituals, favorite foods and family recipes, books and songs and games and repeated visits to favorite places all contribute to each child's sense of "us" as a family unit.
4. Watch for and support the ways in which children, separated by age or of opposite sexes, discover things they enjoy in common — perhaps even more so when you discover that those things shared by your children are not things you yourself enjoy, thus contributing to their sense of conspiratorial generation vs. generation intimacy.
5. Be realistic in your expectations about sibling relationships. Did you always get along with your brother? Did you willingly share friends with your close-in-age sister? It is not uncommon for siblings to be close as very young children, become more distant from or unpleasantly competitive with one another as they grow, and then rediscover one another as adults.

A common store of family based and sibling inclusive family experiences enhances the sense of family that each of us takes into adulthood. When we are gone, it is this we will leave our children: memories and values that root them against the storms of life, and siblings — brothers and sisters — who share these roots.

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