

The Real Daughter

by Colleen Houlihan

"You're my mommy, only mine!" exclaims my fierce ten-year-old daughter, Brigiy, as she possessively clutches my arm and hugs me.

We are strolling through a mall with her older sister, Dara, who is adopted. Brigiy wishes she were the older sister; she wants to be first in my life. She says, "If you hadn't gotten Dara, then I'd be the oldest child!" I explain that she might never have been born at all. I might have gotten pregnant sooner if we hadn't pursued adoption, and then there would not have been a "Brigiy." I tell her I would be very sad not to have "my Brigiy."

There has been much written about adopted children coping in a family with siblings who are birth children of the parents. What about a birth child who arrives after a sibling has been adopted into the family? Will that child feel closer to his/her parents? What happens to the dynamic of sibling rivalry? Does the adopted child feel less a part of the family if there is a birth child now? Will such children worry that their parents may not love them as much anymore?

After several years of infertility treatment, my husband Jim and I pursued adoption. We planned a county agency adoption. The preparation process began in 1977 and took about a year; we finally finished all the paperwork and settled down to wait for the phone call that would tell us a baby was waiting. A few weeks after Christmas 1978, my mother called, saying a friend of my sister in law was pregnant and thinking about placing the baby for adoption; were we interested? Yes!

Our daughter's birth mother lived with us for about two months before Dara was born. Obviously, we had an open adoption which we had not planned, but this was an opportunity to have a baby and we were willing to do just about anything.

Over the years, our relationship with our child's birth family has become very open. We are all extended family in reality, and that idea has been our guiding premise all along. Adoption did not replace our child's family; it simply extended our definition of family. We have always told our daughter the truth about her family relationships and everyone in her life is identified accurately. Dara is not the least confused by this; she can comprehend grandparents and siblings - why not birth

parents? They are just more relatives to visit. We visit Dara's birth mom, Tricia, about every two years. She is married now and has two young sons - Dara's half brothers. We also visit Tricia's dad, who is married for the second time. His wife has two sons from a previous marriage, and together they recently adopted a little girl from Ecuador.

As you can see, the family has extended even further! But this poses a dilemma for our birth child, Brigiy. How does she fit into this constellation of Dara's birth family? Well, she doesn't, really. She is not their blood relative. Her family was somewhat nonplused when Tricia made it clear that she expected them to consider Dara a member of their family, at least to the extent of including her in the cousin's Christmas gift exchange and inviting her to the summer family reunion camp-out. But to include Brigiy also seemed too much to ask. So Brigiy feels left out.

When Dara receives a birthday gift from her birth grandpa, Brigiy notices, and tearfully says to me, "I guess they don't love me." I try to explain that they just don't feel as related to her as they do to Dara. But she only sees that she is excluded. She feels that Dara, as the adopted child, gets extra relatives, extra presents, extra events and invitations. Sometimes I try to explain that yes, this is true, but that Dara is not getting to live every day with her birth family as Brigiy does. I'm not sure this argument counts for much right now. Maybe that's why Brigiy sometimes taunts Dara with "I'm the real child and you're not!"

In a closed adoption, a birth child could taunt an adopted sibling with "I'm the real child" just to be cruel. The adopted child would perhaps feel "unreal," not knowing any birth relatives. I have heard adopted people speak of feeling they were "hatched" or "dropped off a spaceship" because they did not know to whom they were born.

Dara's response to her sister's words is "I'm as real as you are." But she has accused me of liking Brigiy better! I do admit to having a lot in common with Brigiy - we are both stubborn, opinionated and love to read. But I point out that like me, Dara is generous, kind, socially congenial and a good listener. I explain that people often feel affiliated because of their similarities, but that she is my first daughter and I love her.

I hope our children realize that we dearly love both of them for who they are and not because of who they are "really" related to. Each of them is unique and special and they both belong to our family. As the Velveteen Rabbit learned in the story of that name, what makes you real is being loved.

Colleen Houlihan is a book reviewer, writer, and daycare provider in Berkeley, California. She has two daughters, Dara, 13, who entered the family by adoption and Brigiy, 10, who entered the family by birth.