

A Sibling Thanksgiving: One Mom's Tradition

By Arleta James, PCC

Carol, the adoptive mom to nine adopted children—eight via the child welfare system and one via a disrupted international adoption, was sad and aggravated by the chronic bickering that occurred between her children ranging in ages from 9 to 16 (several children were the same age at the time of their adoptions). Daily, she was followed around by her children as they shouted over iPods, computer time, clothing, snacks, chores and on and on. “She won’t take out the trash!” “He won’t get his clothes out of the dryer!” “He has my iPod!” “She’s wearing my sweater!” “I wanted those cookies!” “It’s my turn on the Internet!” “It’s his turn to walk the dog!” “Make him give me the remote!”



Carol had grown up with two brothers and three sisters. While certainly there was sibling rivalry, she also had an array of fond memories with her siblings. Today, they are among her best friends. In creating her own large family, she had hopes that she was providing her children a foundation for those same wonderful childhood experiences, as well as for companionship in adulthood. Lately, nice interactions between her children were few and short-lived.

Carol determined to make it a priority to begin to turn this situation around. The nearness of Thanksgiving gave her an idea. She went to the store and purchased nine baskets, some pens and note paper. Each child was given a basket, a supply of paper and pens. Their instructions were brief and clear. “Write a letter to each of your brothers and sisters. Tell them why you are thankful they are in the family and a few ways you will treat them better over the next year. Place your basket of completed letters in the living room the night before Thanksgiving. If you need any help, let me know.”

At first the children’s moans were overwhelming. Carol held firm. Soon, rough drafts were presented for review. Carol would offer suggestions for improvements and also point out what was great about the letters. With only a few prompts, the letters were completed as requested. On Thanksgiving Eve, nine baskets were all in a row in the living room. The children were curious as to what would happen next. Carol had their attention.

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption: Helping Children Navigate Relationships when New Kids Join the Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>)

Sure enough, early on Thanksgiving morning, a disagreement broke out between two of Carol's daughters over who would finish the vacuuming before the guests arrived. Carol calmly stated, "Please go and get the letters you wrote to each other." She gathered all of her other children. Once all were present, she instructed the two squabbling daughters to read their letters out loud. Carol repeated this process throughout the day and over the next few days until all of the letters had been read.

Certainly, her point became clear to all of her children—there were many reasons to appreciate each brother and sister in the family. Fights among the children would now be resolved with some kind words, and they would be reminded to use their own ideas—listed in their letters— as to how they could be nicer to each other to settle as many of their arguments as possible. For months after this Thanksgiving, the emotional climate in this home was far more peaceful. In the event it escalated, Carol simply pulled out the letters and the family members were gathered for a review.

Happy Thanksgiving!

As the next year's Thanksgiving approached, Carol's children asked if they had to write another set of letter. Carol said, "Of course!" Out came the baskets, pens and paper—a Thanksgiving tradition was created!

I'd like to thank Carol for letting me share her tradition with you!