

Sibling Rivalry in Adoptive Families – Part 3

Well, we're at Part 3, our last portion of our topic Sibling Rivalry in Adoptive Families. The links to Part 1 and Part 2 are listed at the end of this blog in case you're just joining us.

Today, we offer more solutions for improving sibling relationships especially in the area of sibling aggression.

Parental Response is Critical

The way in which parents respond to sibling conflicts and aggressive actions is an important factor in the look of further conflicts and their outcome—neither punitive actions nor a total “hands off” approach is effective. Jean and Matt parent four children, two by birth and two by adoption. Jean said,

“Talk about sibling rivalry! My kids fight a lot! And, I do mean fight—push, shove, punch, etc. My adopted son’s first reaction is to hit. I used to feel like I was a referee. Then, I decided to take a different approach. I sat the fighting children at the table with some cookies and milk, when the fight was over a larger issue, and made them come up with solutions. I sat with them or listened while I cleaned the kitchen. I made suggestions as I felt necessary. I have a lot less fighting now and a lot more free time.”

Jean felt like a referee until she altered the manner in which she handled her siblings' rivalry. Her approach is actually between the two polar opposites noted above. The cookies and milk disarmed the children. Once calm, they were more open to resolving their dispute. Often, one of the kids needed to cool off in his room before he would come to the table. Jean also decided which disagreements warranted her help and which didn't. She didn't involve herself if the matter was minor. Jean's method would work in any family, but it is an essential tool when one of the children has mental health issues. Children who have experienced trauma have difficulty coming up with solutions. They may need a parent nearby to interject ideas. They will need some help to resolve conflicts. She also had “no favorites” and “no comparisons” policies.

Don't Add Fuel to the Fire

When sibling conflict escalates into frequent violent interactions, or the physical or mental abuse of a weaker sibling is caused by a stronger sibling, this can be harmful. There are also cases in which one child repeatedly exposes the other sibling's vulnerabilities in an intentional effort to humiliate that child. In such instances where there is a clear imbalance of power, the parent will need to step in. Joseph Sparrow, author of [Understanding Sibling Rivalry](#) says,

“When it is necessary for a parent to intervene, it will be important to keep from giving the older or stronger child more to be angry about, more fuel for her fights. Talk with that child about herself, not the other child: “When you get out of control like this, I’ll have to help you.” And to the victim: “You are going to need to learn to protect yourself. You may have to learn to get away from her for now. But you’re going to learn ways to protect yourself.”

However, the more important point to understand is that when there is an aggressive child in the family, she becomes the focus. She receives the bulk of the consequences and the majority of the attention—anger—while the victim receives sympathy. Actually, the victim is engaging in just as poor of a pattern of behavior as the aggressor, and so the victim needs to change as well.

Further, the parent described above is responding calmly. Keep in mind that aggressive sibling interactions are a good way to illicit parental anger—a negative emotional climate occurs. Parents who react with anger will intensify the sibling rivalry. Brothers and sisters who chronically engage in angry interactions with their mentally ill sibling perpetuate the violence. Much negative sibling behavior will decrease when anger is reduced.

The “Safe Spot”

Overall, evacuating the area of conflict is often a good interim solution. Many children, even toddlers, can learn to go to a “safe spot” if an adult or older sibling is not available to remove them from the destructive sibling’s path of fury. The safe spot is complete with a safe spot bag that contains snacks and a few new inexpensive toys.

Reverse Respite

A variation of the safe spot is a reverse respite.

Annette and her husband, Wayne, parent five children, two by birth and three through adoption. The family is very involved in their church. Annette identified two families in the church that she trusts and whom she feels mirror much of her and Wayne’s thoughts on raising children.

In times of crisis, her birth children go to spend time with these families. This leaves her and Wayne free to deal with their troubled adopted children. The typically-developing kids get a nice break. The adopted children with problems get the extra attention they need in their times of adoption-related crises.

Annette has named this reverse respite. It sends a nice message. “In our family, everyone takes breaks, not just the adoptees.”

In conclusion, Jill and Mitchell, parents to two children with many special needs, and a typically-developing infant daughter offer this advice about protecting infants from an aggressive brother and sister,

“Adopting our infant daughter, Jessica, with two traumatized children already in residence has been a bit challenging. I take special precautions to keep her safe. We just can’t trust Ivan and Tina to ever be alone with the baby, or the dog for that matter. When I shower, the baby comes with me. I put her in the stroller and push her into the bathroom where I know she’ll be safe. Her crib is in our room, and I never leave her out of my sight. I have a child-proof door knob cover on the outside of our door as a double precaution. If she’s napping they cannot get in, and I do keep an eye on them at all times. They’ve always needed constant monitoring, even before the baby. I’ve never left them unsupervised so this is really nothing new. Now that the baby is older she wants to play with them and they do seem to like her. I still keep a very close watch; there’s no way I’m taking any chances.

“Tina really loves the baby. I think Jessica’s presence has helped her to develop more nurturing feelings. Watching me with the baby has caused Tina to think about when she was a baby. She’s been able to talk about it and ask questions with an ease that she didn’t have before. She also loves helping out. She’ll get me diapers, pick up things when Jessica throws them off the high chair, and she’s also very playful with her. If Jessica’s crying she talks to her and tries to comfort her. I think it’s helped her to understand that moms love their babies and take care of them. She’s expressed that she is sad that her Russian mom didn’t do those things for her. I think she’s finally starting to realize that she’s my baby, just like Jessica is and I’m always going

to love her and take care of her too. I think she's more affectionate toward me now and is beginning to attach."

Overall, the best solution regarding abusive sibling interactions is to end the violence or emotional torment and the victim mentality. Parents are encouraged to seek professional assistance when these types of interactions persist. The [Association for Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children \(ATTACH\)](#) offers a list of trauma-informed and adoption-competent mental health professionals.