

Sibling Rivalry in Adoptive Families – Part 1

The topic of sibling rivalry is one many parents can relate to. Because of its breadth, we'll give it coverage as a three-part series—yes!—three full posts replete with information and solutions! Without further ado, here we go!

Sibling conflict is unavoidable. Certainly, the positive side is that it can be a valuable experience. It teaches negotiating, compromising and listening to another's point of view. Sibling disagreements better prepare children for relationships outside of the family—with peers, co-workers, college roommates, boyfriends and girlfriends, and so on.

However, mix typical siblings with adoptees with a history of [complex trauma](#) (i.e., abuse, abandonment and neglect, etc.) and the sibling rivalry can be fierce! Really fierce! Some of this ferocious contention does share elements in common with families with all appropriately-developing kids such as, “Mom, she’s using my makeup again.” “Dad, make him come inside. I want to play basketball with my friends.” Some sibling opposition may be short term during the immediate post-placement adjustment period. For example, the addition of a new child may have meant a change in birth order. So, transitioning to a new position within the family constellation will likely generate some unpleasant or uncomfortable situations until children reconfigure their place in the family.

Yet, when sibling rivalry just continues and continues, then it is time to more fully examine what is really perpetuating the daily quarrels. Grief-related thoughts and feelings often lurk just beneath the latest argument over the television, Wii, last Oreo, or who will be riding in the front seat of the car!

For example, below are some thoughts typical kids and adoptees have about each other:

Typically-Developing Siblings: Thoughts Contributing to Sibling Rivalry

“I want to unadopt him.”
“He is so hard to play with.”
“I wanted to teach her things.”
“I’m the one that wanted a brother or sister.”
“You’re adopted and I’m not.”
“You look different. You’re not even from America.”
“If I’m not good will I have to move?”
“I hate being told that I have to set the example.”
“I am tired of babysitting. I used to spend more time with friends.”
“Why wasn’t I enough for Mom and Dad?”

Adopted Children: Thoughts Contributing to Sibling Rivalry

“Can you really want me as a brother or sister?”
“I wish my brothers and sisters would play with me the way they play with each other.”
“My brothers and sisters are so lucky to live together. I want to live with my birth siblings.”
“I look different from everybody in my family.”
“They are having friends over again.”
“They are going out with their friends again.”
“They act so “perfect.”

“Mom and Dad love them more because they were born to them.”

“My brothers and sisters get more, and get to do more, than I do.”

These thoughts lead to grief. Grief means feelings—anger, rage, resentment, frustration, jealousy, sadness, sorrow, depression, woe, fearful, hopeless, scared, guilt, shame and so on.

Below are some examples of the feelings that go with the thoughts listed above:

- “You’re adopted and I’m not.” Anger motivates a typical sibling to shout this at her adopted brother. The anger could be rooted in the changes that have occurred in the family. Or the resident child may be angry that her adopted brother was in her room for the hundredth time! The negative behavior is a reminder that, “I had more privacy before you came.” The feelings of being robbed are compounded by the loss of the family as it was.
- “Can you really want me as a brother or sister?” Just as the adoptee wonders how his adoptive parents can want him when his own birth parents didn’t, he perceives he is unlovable to his new brothers and sisters. He is grieving the loss of his birth parents and has feelings of fear, sorrow about being accepted by his brothers and sisters in his adoptive family.
- “They are so lucky to live together.” The adoptee’s grief for the birth siblings living elsewhere is triggered by observing brothers and sisters in the adoptive family.
- “I asked for a brother or sister.” It is my fault that Mom and Dad aren’t as happy as they used to be.
- “You look different. You’re not even from America.” I look at you and “see” that our family is different. I long for the old family. I am tired of people looking at us when we are out in public. I hate it when people ask me, “Is that your sister?”

Can you identify the hidden issues in the other thoughts and comments listed above in this blog? Can you identify any thoughts specific to your typically-developing children? What losses are at the bottom of their thoughts? What feelings result from these losses?

Siblings with unresolved grief collide. Day-to-day situations trigger feelings about the losses experienced due to integrating the adoptee into the family system. *The rivalry is intensified because the grief underneath is unleashed—along with the feelings for the latest transgression!*