

Sibling Rivalry in Adoptive Families – Part 2

Welcome to Part 2 of our look at sibling rivalry. Today and next Tuesday we'll focus on solutions! All parents want a peaceful home in which giggles and laughter dominates. Reducing contentious sibling relationships contributes to fulfilling this desire.

So, let's get going with ways to navigate enhanced camaraderie among the children in your home!

Tips for Facilitating Grief

A main point of this blog has been to put forth the idea that grief intensifies the conflicts between brothers and sisters. So, it makes sense that one way to reduce the intensity and frequency of the arguments between siblings is to facilitate the grief-related feelings. Three main tips are offered for resolving your children's grief:

Expect and Acknowledge Strong Feelings

Here is a sentiment expressed by Craig, a typically-developing brother, currently age 15, in a family expanded by the adoption of older children,

"My parents adopted my cousins, Sam and Kyle, when they were 9 and 11. They are now 14 and 16. At first, I was excited—I would have two more brothers! I already had two so now there would be five of us. Sometimes it's fun. Boy, other times the fights are huge!

"Sam just lies and steals!". Mom and Dad go around and ask everybody in the house about the latest missing item. Why do they ask us? We didn't have this problem before he moved in. I want to say, "Why are you asking me where your ring is? Really, anything we can't find, he stole! He is a liar and a thief! I'm not!"

Likely, there are those whose first response would be to help this young man understand his brother Sam's behavior. Or, he might be told that calling his brother a "liar and a thief" isn't a nice way to talk to his brother. Instead, we need to say to Craig, "Wow, you are really, really angry. Tell me more about this."

So, a first step in grieving is to realize that the adopted child and the resident children may have strong feelings. These feelings need to be acknowledged in order to be resolved.

A Time to Grieve

American society is a rather grief-confining society. That is, there is a prevailing perception that grieving should be a rather short process. But grieving is individual. How long an adult or child grieves is dependent upon the person, his support system and the type of loss. Overall, there is no definite timeline for grief. Additionally, grief is developmental. Issues need to be reviewed at various stages of childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

The grief process can't occur at all if it isn't given time, and today, time is hard to come by. The busy pace of life most families keep inhibits the flow of feelings. The family keeps attending the next baseball game, school concert, karate class, birthday party, and so on. Coping with grief is put off for another day. However, parents are encouraged to set aside their own time to grieve, and time to make it possible for children to express their feelings.

Talk About It

Talking is a primary way to facilitate grief. Often, children are leery of expressing feelings. Typical kids view their parents as stressed out by the care of the adoptee. So, they don't want to "bother" their parents with their problems. Further, the children residing in the family at the time of the adoption received the impression they were to have a positive attitude toward their new brother or sister. Social workers and parents often comment, "Isn't it going to be great to have a new sister!" Or, "Be patient. He hasn't had it as good as you!" The adoptee harbors feelings for many reasons—fear of how big the feelings feel, fear no one really cares or will understand, a true inability to express emotions, fear that feelings will lead to a true connection with another human, etc.

I recommend the *ripple effect*. The parent puts forth an idea of what the problem might be. Initially, the child may deny the information or simply not want to talk about it. But, a ripple has been created. Enough ripples usually lead to a wave—of grief. Eventually, kids will respond to the safety net the parent has offered. There will be an outpouring of sadness, anger, fear, jealousy and so on.

If you would 7 more ways to facilitate feelings, look at Chapter 10, Brothers and Sisters in Adoption: Helping Children Navigate Relationships when New Kids Join the Family.

Reduce Stress

Stress increases sibling rivalry. Monitor the amount of stress each child is experiencing in all areas of his life—school, sports and other extra curricula activities, friendships, and so on. Slow down the pace of life, for a period of time, if need be.

Mirror, Mirror

The way parents resolve their own conflicts sets a strong example for kids. So, how do you resolve conflict? Is it the way in which you want your children to resolve conflict?

Put Old Memories in Context

Sibling rivalry conjures up parents' own memories of their relationships with their siblings. Parents need to gain awareness of how past experiences contribute to their reactions to their children's individual actions as well as to sibling interactions. When parents are aware of how much old memories can influence their reactions to their children, they may find they are better able to choose their response. Ask yourself:

Did I always get along with my brother or sister?

Did I willingly share friends with my close-in-age sister?

Did I willingly babysit my younger brother?

Did I feel resentful or angry when my sibling "got away" with a behavior for which I was certain that I would have received consequences?

How are my sibling relationships at the present time?

What was my role in the family?

Do/did I have expectations about what roles my typically-developing child will/would assume once I become an adoptive parent?

Do/did I have expectations as to what role my child by adoption will/would assume once he or she enters my family?

Create Fun

Families that don't have enjoyable times will have more conflict. One adoptive mom recently stated, "On a really bad day when we're all on each other's nerves, I order pizza and pick out a movie. A good mood arrives along with the pizza!" As for movies, [Yours, Mine and Ours](#) is a particular favorite and great for enhancing sibling connections as well!

Eliminate Battles

Eliminate battles when possible. Shannon, a single mom provides an example:

Shannon adopted Peggy when she was 8 years old. Peggy is now 11. A few months ago, Shannon received a foster care placement, Justin and Joey, six and seven years old. Peggy was instantly jealous of any time or attention Shannon provided the young boys. Arrival home from school was particularly challenging. Shannon would put out cookies and milk for the boys. Peggy usually got her own snack and a drink. However, complaints of, "Why do you get them their snack?" and "I want what they're having," prompted Shannon to put out three plates of cookies and three glasses of milk. This fight was resolved.

Humor

Humor may also diffuse the situation. In therapy, complaints of, "My brother got a new truck" or "My sister just got new clothes" are responded to with, "Okay, the next time Mom gets a new bra she'll get one for everyone." Immediately, the child replies, "I don't need a bra!" "The mortgage needs to be paid. Go get your piggy bank." Again the child replies, "I don't want to spend my money on that." They precisely draw the correct conclusions—everyone in the family gets what they need and sometimes they get what Mom and Dad feel like buying.