

The Adoptee Leaves the Family: Helping the Brothers and Sisters Who Remain in the Home (Part One)

Today's topic is a painful issue. It is an unfortunate fact of adoption that some adoptees/prospective adoptees will leave their family. However, we must address this topic in order to transition all the children in these situations. This two-part blog focuses on the children who remain in the family. Losing a sibling is a time of confusion, anger, sadness and frustration for these brothers and sisters. Just as we want to transition the child leaving the family—in the most sensitive manner possible—we also want to help the children remaining in the family adjust to the best of our and their ability. Thus, the purpose of this blog is to offer some ideas about how to best help the brothers and sisters when a sibling leaves the family.

Just as the decision to adopt a child, and that child's arrival and presence, impacted each member of the adoptive family, so will the adoptee's leaving affect parents, brothers and sisters, and the adoptee. An adoptee leaving the family is referred to as an adoption *dissolution* (if the parents' terminate their legal rights to the child), a *displacement* (if the child remains in an alternate living arrangement outside of the family) and a *disruption* if the prospective adoptee leaves the family prior to the legalization of the adoption.

Consider this: the adoptee must deal with being abandoned again. The pain of another rejection stings and re-opens the old wounds of previous losses of birth family and possibly other care givers. He must move on to another family, or he must return to a foster home or a placement in a facility. He gets very little time to mourn before he is expected to form new relationships, go to school and participate in extracurricular activities.

Parents must grieve a child. There are now four places at the dinner table instead of five. A birthday passes with no celebration. A bedroom is empty. Months later, a toy found in the back of a closet is a reminder of the child who once called the parents "Mom and Dad." Anger, sorrow, frustration, guilt, despair, confusion and many other emotions plague these families, often for years after the adoption ends.

The typical children must also cope with this tragedy:

Bobbie and Amber, currently ages 11 and 14 respectively, were the brother and sister to 9-year-old Sam. Sam arrived at age 5 after spending five years in an Eastern European orphanage. He very recently left the family to join a new adoptive family (dissolution).

Amber writes, "I wanted a girl and expected it to be more like it was with my biological brother. I wanted her to admire me like Bobbie did for a while and help her grow when she became a teenager like I am now. I learned he was a brother when my parents emailed a picture from their hotel abroad.

"Instead, we lost our typical routine and normal lifestyle. We had a decrease in fun activities and definitely lost time with our parents.

"We had no preparation. We knew some of the children available had a handicap (medical or physical) but we didn't know anything about the problems Sam had. He painted my bedspread, took food in his closet which grew mold, tried to have sex with my brother, made sexual comments to friends and cousins—which made it difficult to have friends over—stole change, and broke whatever was important to me.

“I am feeling mad, sad, frustrated, confused and guilty. I also wonder if I will ever see him [Sam] again?”

Bobbie says, *“I also expected another sister—the perfect little sister who would look up to me.*

“No, no, no—I got no preparation. I have a list of losses—friends, family, stuff, privacy, time with parents, feeling safe, peace, fun, and on and on.

“I tried to cope by talking to people I trust and when I really needed a break I tuned the world out with music whether it was playing it, listening to it, or writing lyrics. I also wrote in a journal in a poem format because poems help me express my feelings.

“I have a lot of feelings! I feared saying much as I thought he [Sam] would harm me if he knew I was talking about him. I am most disappointed about the fact that I couldn’t help my brother to become better than he is or help him learn. I reached out to him over and over. He didn’t respond.”

As the above story makes clear, there are many issues for the children who will remain in the family after the adoptee leaves the family—dashed expectations, shock, a sense of failure, anger, sadness, concern, working to cope, disappointment, confusion about the negative behaviors experienced, questions about why no preparation was provided, a desire to see the sibling again, a wanting to know where the sibling is going and so on! Below we offer some ideas about helping brothers and sisters cope with the loss of the sibling. Our suggestions cover the most pertinent matters related to these children remaining in the home.

Where Is My Sibling Going?

This first question requires that someone explain to the children remaining in the family where the adopted sibling will be living.

When the Sibling Is Going to Residential Treatment

Residential treatment, a group home, a specialized boarding school, a specialized adoption-competent ranch—these are living arrangements unfamiliar to most typically-developing children.

Clear and honest explanations about where a sibling is going to be living need to be offered. If some type of residential treatment is the option, information about the facility can be printed from the Internet and shared with the birth and/or previously adopted children. Parents can share their view on what the treatment center has to offer and why they feel it may be helpful for the sibling to live there. Once the troubled adoptee is settled, it is likely that a tour can be arranged. Older children often benefit from meeting the staff. Adolescents can sit in on treatment team meetings or an occasional therapy session.

When the Adopted Sibling Is Moving to a New Family

If the move is to be permanent, parents should expect immediate queries from siblings such as, “Who is this new family?” “How do we know they are safe?”

Regarding, "Who is this new family?" consider that the two families could meet. This openness quells many fears the children remaining in the family have about their sibling's new family. Certainly, this will be helpful to the child who is moving. In the long-run, this adoptee will need to process the loss of his once adoptive family. The more information that is available, the better the adoptee can process this painful experience.

Many children will want to know if they will be able to visit their former brother or sister, or at least know how he or she is doing especially, if biologically related. Ongoing contact between siblings is always an issue to be decided on a case by case basis. Overall, most children benefit from staying in contact with their siblings. However there are cases in which this contact creates additional stress or raises safety issues. For example, the sibling may be living in residential treatment, the brother or sister may still not be adopted or the sibling may be incarcerated. These types of living arrangements cause grief because the implication is, "My sibling isn't doing well." or "My sibling doesn't have a family." There are also instances in which the sibling was sexually or physically abusive to his or her brothers and sisters. In these cases, we need to weigh the benefits of contact versus the emotional strain and determine what is best.

It is important to point out that contact with former brothers and sisters can occur along a continuum. Many children are satisfied knowing where their siblings live and how they are doing. This information can be obtained through the parents and passed on to the children. Others want letters, email, current photos and phone calls. Still others want in-person visits. Again, we need to weigh all the facts and decide upon a type (s) of contact that best meet the needs of all the children involved.