

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

Welcome to Part Two of our post regarding helping children—who remain in the home—adjust when an adopted sibling/prospective brother or sister leaves the family via dissolution, disruption or displacement. Part One described these terms and Part One contained our first suggestions to help these brothers and sisters cope with the loss of their sibling.

This post will offer some more suggestions for this most painful of situations.

Responding to Questions from Others

Just as parents will be asked a myriad of questions when a dissolution, displacement or disruption occurs, so will the brothers and sisters remaining in the home. These inquiries will come from many places—school, Sunday school, the next door neighbor, the bus driver, the lady at the convenience store, and so on. All will realize that they haven't recently seen the adopted sibling.

Parents will need to decide how to tell friends and relatives about their decision to move the adoptee/prospective adoptee out of the family. The birth and/or previously adopted children will also need some help responding to the queries posed by kids and adults. They will need a "cover story."

Start the process of developing a cover story by first sorting out who is already aware of the decision and who isn't. Then, list those persons that are regularly seen—this becomes a list of people who will notice and require an explanation. It is helpful to think about how many people may ask questions and in what situations. Parents and kids are better able to respond when they are prepared for what may be coming when they arrive at church, their favorite restaurant, school, a sporting event, the community pool and so on.

The actual explanation can be compiled by sifting through what is "private" and what could be shared. For example, one family opted to dissolve the adoption of their son, who had sexually abused their daughter. The family chose that the sexual abuse was private. Instead of relating the details of this abuse, they put the dissolution in terms of safety. The parents "cover story" is as follows,

"Sadly, Vic had behaviors that were not safe for Diana. After much advice from professionals, it was uncertain that his problems could not be alleviated. As such, we felt it necessary to ensure Diana's safety. It was a profoundly difficult decision. However, we are at peace with the decision. We have no hard feelings toward Vic. His past was just too great for him to overcome. We will always miss him, and we continue to pray for him. He is living with another family at this time."

Their daughter, Diana, was offered the choice of simply saying, "I would prefer you ask my Mom and Dad. It's too hard for me to talk about." This deferring to the parents is always an option for the children. Or, she could offer something similar to her parents. Below is what Diana felt comfortable saying, and which maintains Vic's confidentiality as well as Diana's privacy,

“My brother had a lot of serious problems. So, he went to live with another family who can take care of him. I miss him a lot, but this is safer for our family.”

It must be kept in mind that brothers and sisters’ responses—cover stories— will most likely be met with shock or with silence. Few of their peers will be able to relate to losing a sibling in this manner. In such instances, parents and professionals should consider connecting these brothers and sisters to other children whose families have experienced a displacement, disruption or dissolution. In Diana’s case she continued on in therapy, and she was introduced to another youngster who had experienced a sister leaving the home. The two find each other comforting.

Would Mom and Dad Give Me Away?: Resolving Fears and Dealing with Trauma Bonds

Nearly all children ages 3 to 5 years old have fears about being abandoned, getting lost, or no longer being loved by their parents. Loss of a sibling makes these fears seem all too possible for children born to the family. Appropriately-developing adopted children, already all too familiar with abandonment, are now watching their parents move a son or daughter out of the family. These children all wonder, “Would Mom and Dad give me away?” “What would I have to do to be forced to leave the family?”

Parents may notice that these healthy kids regress or exhibit more fears after an adopted sibling moves. They may also engage in negative behaviors with increased frequency. Sometimes they begin repeating the exact behaviors of the child who is gone. This may especially occur if the siblings are related by birth.

At times, the birth sibling bond is stronger than the parent and child connection. Adopted birth siblings, then, will strive to be reunited. The rationale may be any of the following:

- *Loyalty*: “She is my birth sister. I belong with her.”
- *A desire to contribute to the healing process*: “I have to help her. She is my ‘real’ sister.”
- *Fear*: “We have never been separated. I am scared to be without her.”
- The two (or more) siblings are connected by a *trauma bond*. The victim child is linked to the exploitive dynamics of the abusive child.

Thus, the adopted birth sibling remaining in the family will begin to spiral out of control. Irrationally, this child believes that his unconstructive actions will cause him to go live with his traumatized birth brother or sister. The behavior of the adopted child who appeared healthy now plummets. His trauma has been triggered by the separation from his birth brother or sister.

It is important that parents be alert to any changes in their typical children. More so, it is critical that parents assure them of their place in the family—repeatedly! Adults must be clear in their explanations: “Vic left the family because he isn’t safe.” “Joan left the family because she kept hurting people.” “You are staying in the family because you are safe. You don’t hurt people. In a family, everyone needs to be safe.” [Seek professional help if necessary.](#) *This may be needed immediately in the case of separations involving birth siblings.*

Facilitating Grief

When it comes to the emotions of the typical children, “mirror, mirror on the wall” is a good saying to keep in mind. Children who are developing in a healthy manner will reflect—mirror—their parents. Their feelings will follow suit with Mom and Dad.

However, adults attempt to smooth over children’s grief. Grown-ups want to believe “children are too young to understand what happened,” “children will get over loss quickly,” we need to “shield children from loss and grief,” or “It would hurt her too much to talk about it.” These thoughts need to be discredited as they do children a great disservice. Children who are not provided opportunities to grieve are at risk for:

- Decreased social, emotional and cognitive developmental growth
- Regression to earlier stages of development for an extended period of time
- Inability to concentrate—impaired academic progress
- Physical difficulties—fatigue, stomach aches, appetite changes, headaches, tightness in chest, shortness of breath, low energy, difficulty sleeping, etc.
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Withdrawal from friends or extra curricular activities.

Helping children grieve requires offering sons and daughters,

- The opportunity to express their feelings.
- Empathy for their feelings, “Yes, it is so sad that your brother left the family.” “Yes, I was angry too that he hurt people in the family.”
- The truth. Provide children the facts in language they can understand.
- Assurance about their place in the family.

There is more information about helping children grieve, and talking to children honestly in our previous blogs [Let’s Make a Deal: Bargaining as an Expression of Grief](#), [Sharing Information with the Typically-Developing Children Preschool to Adolescents](#), [Typical Children: Afloat on a Sea of Grief](#)

Conclusions

No one wants a child to leave a family. Yet, adoption practice, parental qualities and a child’s age and history of trauma blend to create a living situation that may be unsafe or abusive. In these instances, services and empathy must be extended to the family. When they have taken all steps possible to avoid a disruption, displacement or dissolution, observers and supporters must applaud their outstanding efforts to heal their troubled adoptee. We must not consider the adoption a failure if the family remains connected and involved with the child. In other instances, where the family simply finds the child intolerable because of poor fit or unrealistic expectations, professionals involved must find ways to remind these parents of their commitment, offer intensive services and support, but ultimately keep in mind what is best for the child. Simultaneously, those same professionals must work to improve social work practice in order to prevent these tragic adoptions.

In all cases, we must ensure that our special brothers and sisters are cared for. The loss of a sibling is confusing and painful. It is a loss that occurred through no fault of theirs. When families who displace, disrupt or dissolve adoptions are abandoned, so are typical children. A system that says it serves children should mean all children.