

Psychological "Fit": A Place Where Parents, Brothers, Sisters and the Adoptee Must Come Together

Psychological fit relates to the interplay between parental experiences, expectations, desires and wishes, and the child's capabilities and performance (Trout, 1986). Let's exemplify this concept and then discuss it further. Then, we'll also expand on the concept to include the typical brothers and sisters.

Peggy and Cameron had four children by birth. These children ranged in ages from 7 to 14. Two were boys and two were girls. Peggy and Cameron felt very blessed. Their children were all healthy, excelled academically, and had terrific musical and artistic talents. Evenings were spent singing and playing the piano, flute, trombone and cello. Great pleasure also resulted from painting and trips to art museums. The family was fortunate financially.

They decided to share their blessings by adopting an orphan. Eight-year-old Owen joined the family from Columbia. Owen struggled academically. He preferred baseball, soccer and swimming to reading and math. He also had no interest in singing, art or playing an instrument. His lack of "fit" affected everyone in the family. The [cultural difference](#) between Owen and his family further affected the "fit." Owen's presence in the family led to many questions and overt stares from neighbors, family friends, classmates and strangers.

Peggy stated, "We simply cannot relate to him. He is not like us at all. We certainly expected that he would choose to do well in school. We thought that he would accept our interests as his own. We have attended his sporting events and have disliked every moment spent as spectators. We didn't realize that others would so acknowledge his 'color.' Everywhere we go, we feel people looking."

Peggy and Cameron ultimately made the decision to [dissolve their adoption](#) of Owen. A new family was located for Owen. This family enthusiastically enjoys watching Owen score home runs and goals. Owen, scarred from the abandonment by his birthmother and his years in the orphanage, has been further hurt by the loss of his first American parents and his four siblings. He has little capacity to believe that his second adoptive family will "keep" him.

Peggy, Cameron and their children were not able to mesh with Owen. Peggy and Cameron were raised in families that placed great value on education and self-enhancement. They offered these values to their birth children who readily accepted and executed them. Owen's school performance defied their experiences and expectations. They were disillusioned by a child to whom academic success seemed to have no meaning. Peggy, Cameron and their children were always looked at as a wonderful family. The children received many accolades for their accomplishments. In turn, Peggy and Cameron were given compliments for their excellent parenting abilities. Now, they received confused looks, and embarrassing and rude questions because Owen was of a different culture. They did not like being in the spotlight in this manner. Their wishes for him to join the family's creative endeavors were thwarted by his preference for athletics. Ultimately, they felt that trying to blend Owen into their family was comparable to putting a round peg into a square hole—Owen would never "fit."

Now let's turn our attention to Donna,

Donna is the youngest of three female adolescent birth children. Several years ago, her family adopted Maggie. Maggie is now 9 years old. She has presented various challenges. She is

clumsy. It seems that every time she enters a room she breaks something. She has little knowledge of personal boundaries. She enters Donna's bedroom without knocking. If she sees something she likes, she takes it. She constantly interrupts conversations. She is "busy"—she walks or runs around the house constantly. Sitting still is difficult for Maggie.

Donna expected a sister who would enjoy dressing up, painting her nails and having her hair fixed. These were all things she enjoyed with her sisters. Maggie would have none of this. Maggie preferred toy trains and cars. She liked toys she could move around and that made noise. Donna and her sisters were quite compliant children. They wanted to please their parents. Maggie, on the other hand, wanted to do things her way. Donna could not comprehend this type of disobedience. Daily conflict erupted due to Maggie's insolence. Donna wrote the following:

"I found it increasingly hard as the years went on to bond with Maggie. I felt most of my family's arguments and problems were her fault. Everything she did I felt was bothering me and I couldn't stand being around her. I resented her a lot for the problems that began to arise in my family especially the constant arguments. I developed anxiety because of all of the conflict. It became really hard for me to be nice to her and even to think about getting close to her. I felt all she did was to keep trying to push away from my family and have my family push away farther from each other. I was mean to her. I yelled at her for not doing anything. I hated to be in the same room with her. I blamed everything on her.

"I have had to work hard to overcome my feelings of resentment towards her. I no longer get irritated by her as much or as quick. I am always trying to be nice to her even though I know I slip and will be mean—she can still get on my nerves. I know that I do handle the problem a lot better now and I don't have near as many problems with her as I used to. I try to do fun things with her that I know she will like and that will be fun for her. When I look back at how mean I used to be to her, I feel terrible about it. I never want to act that way towards her again. It made me sad to think how much I could have been hurting her feelings and her views about herself. It also made me angry at myself that I could treat her that way and think it was okay. I realize that the problems in my family are no way near her fault. I now know she isn't the whole reason my family gets into arguments. I know I was being irrational about it. I would say I have mostly overcome the problem. I am able to handle being around her and playing with her without getting frustrated, angry or annoyed by her. I was able to become closer to her and know she was going to be my sister forever if I liked it or not. I would have to make it work without hurting her or myself."

Donna's poignant account helps us understand the personal struggle that she underwent in order to attain a level of "fit" with her sister. Maggie did not live up to Donna's experience of a sister nor her expectations of a sibling. Maggie entered the family with her own unique interests, abilities, temperament, strengths, weaknesses, values, attributes, etc. Initially, Donna focused on all of the things Maggie didn't have. Ultimately, Donna realized that there were some areas the two could share. She went about connecting—"fitting"—with Maggie in those areas. At present, Donna and Maggie can sometimes be found laughing together!

Many adoptive families will have to follow Donna's lead. Experiences, expectations, desires and wishes will have to be tailored to "fit" with the unique characteristics of the adoptee. This will be a process for each member of the adoptive family—parents, the children already in the family and the child about to move into the family.