

Where are the Support Groups for Typically-Developing Children?

By Arleta James, PCC



Lena was adopted as an infant. In her late adolescence, her parents adopted a sibling group of two sisters ages 1 ½ and 5. The older of these two siblings continues to struggle due to the trauma she experienced pre-adoption. The younger sibling exhibits social and emotional delays, and she also receives treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Lena relays the following about her friends' comments.

“Out in public, sometimes they act fine. Sometimes they’ll be disruptive. But, it’s not a major scale disruption like at home where they’ll throw a complete tantrum. I would be talking to my friends and they would ask, “How are your sisters doing?” I would try to explain the behaviors but they never caught on. They would say, “They can’t be that bad. They’re only children.” I would be like, “No, these are worse problems than what normal children cause.” My friends thought I should look at things differently and that I was exaggerating. They thought I was the one who needed to change my views and to understand that these are children and this is what children do.”

Lena’s friends view Lena as the problem. Their statements imply that Lena needs to change her perceptions of younger siblings.

Lena recalls a therapy session,

“We had a therapy session where my extended family—aunts, uncles, grandma, grandpa—came. We talked about how our family couldn’t handle it all the time and that we needed help from them. They were like, ‘Yeah, you guys need help. We’ll call and take the kids out to lunch.’

“But then a couple of my family members said, ‘Why don’t you just give the kids back? You shouldn’t even have them because they’re horrible for your family. We don’t want you to live with this.’ It made me feel like,

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

'I'm adopted. Do you want to give me back?' I think that every child should have a chance to be with a family. It hurt—'just give them back.' There was no thought of them at all.

The conclusion of this experience was that my extended family never does anything. They don't call unless we call them. Nothing ever gets done. They don't want to come to holidays. Basically, when they call all they talk about is, 'Are you going to give the kids back?'

Lena and her parents were devastated by the outcome of this meeting. They simply could not believe that their own family would assume they would just give their children away. The subsequent lack of action demonstrated by their relatives was shocking yet, one experienced by many adoptive families.

Parents are frequently able to find a group for support—online or in-person. Groups for adoptees are fewer than groups for parents. Support groups for the typically-developing children are even scarcer yet. However, as Lena's story makes clear, the resident children lose their support system post-adoption. They can benefit from networking with other youths. For typically-developing children support groups provide,

- the opportunity to be with others in similar situations and with similar concerns
- a means to gain information about the issues of their adopted siblings
- an avenue to enhance skills in the areas of problem-solving, communication, expressing feelings and handling sibling rivalry
- a place to obtain answers to adoption-related questions asked by curious strangers or classmates
- a location to explore the facets of life in a transcultural adoptive family
- a way to make friends to call in difficult times in adoptive family life

Below are some ideas about launching groups for these appropriately developing children. They are modeled after parent groups. Most require little start up monies and time:

- Professional and parent group leaders may want to consider recruiting interns from local colleges and graduate programs in schools of social work, education, counseling, psychology or pastoral care. Interns in programs like these need to complete hours of community service in order to satisfy degree requirements. Inviting students into support groups is a great way to expose future professionals to the issues of adoptive families. Interns can plan and carry out activities, and safely oversee a group of children. Most resident children would benefit greatly from an evening of learning problem-solving skills, knowing how to approach a busy parent with sensitive questions, learning to navigate peer relationships, improving self-concept or identity development, working on anger management, dealing with anxiety and depression, and so on. If they need some prepared workbooks or games, economical tools are available through [ChildsWork-ChildsPlay](#).
- Kids Like to Read! Just as adults participate in book clubs, kids would love the chance to read along with other kids—start with [Emma's Yucky Brother](#) or [Don't Pop Your Cork on Mondays!: The Children's Anti-Stress Book](#).
- Ask the dads to organize a softball game, a bowling night or a trip to the zoo. Afterwards, make time for pizza and some networking. A social event conducted every two or three months involves our fathers and helps reduce his and his children's isolation.

- A group with more experienced leaders could host a time time-limited, six-part or eight-part, group focused on the issues brothers and sisters must navigate post-adoption to form a relationship with the new arrival. Private insurance policies offer reimbursement for group meetings.
- There is also the option of creating an online group—listserv, chat, etc.—for these children. Monitoring needs to be ensured. If you aren't technologically competent, there is likely a typical teen to help with this project. Most adolescents speak "computer" quite well!



Family members shouldn't have to navigate the adoption journey alone. Support groups provide travel companions and a whole lot more! They are quite an oasis! Parents and professionals can remove the obstacles blocking greater participation for each member of the adoptive family. Brothers and sisters need more opportunities—supports—as they make their way through family relationships.