

# "Yes" There are Positives for the Typical Kids!

By Arleta James, PCC

It is always great to get positive news! For adoptive families, it can be a ray of sunshine amidst a sometimes dark and dreary situation. It is especially nice for parents to know that, "yes", your sons and daughters, developing "normally", can and do come out of a difficult family situation with some great qualities!



From very practical sentiments like, "We got a bigger house" or "I didn't have anyone to play with and now I do" to more principled thoughts, brothers and sisters express many positives of sharing their "home" with an adoptee with a traumatic past.

Overall, six main positives emerge from living within a family raising a combination of children with and without mental health issues. These six positive factors are identified below. Mixed in are the reports of actual brothers and sisters. These birth and/or previously adopted siblings range in age now from 15 to 25. They were between the ages of 7 and 16 at the time their families adopted. Their families adopted children ages 10 months old to 13 years old. The adoptees have now been a part of the family for between six and twelve years. All of the adoptees received various therapies for their difficulties.

## *Compassion*

Our typical children develop a compassion for those less fortunate from having lived with a sibling with mental health issues. They are able to realize that adversity strikes many—young and old alike. They listen and strive to see beyond the outside of a person. They acknowledge that there are individuals who require help. Compassion leads to the development of tolerance, insight and empathy.

*"As a whole, I believe that our family has had to make numerous sacrifices since my sister's adoption, but we have gained from it. Spending time as a family is more difficult now, and the household is definitely less peaceful. However, I find it much easier to relate to children with differences and the families of those children. Before, when I saw a badly behaved child, it was easy to attribute that to bad parenting. Now I realize that other factors may be involved. Even with a loss of family time, I feel that we have become closer as a family because taking care of my sister brings us together."*

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## **Appreciation**

There is an understanding of the fact that they are well-off to have been born to (or adopted by) and raised by healthy, loving parents (Smith, Greenberg & Mailick, 2007.) On one level, the typical children tend to appreciate fun times and quiet moments. On a different level, they acknowledge that they are fortunate to have escaped the often horrendous long-term effects of neglect, abuse and abandonment.

*"I think a positive experience for me is that this has made me become a stronger person. I look at my brother and see what a horrible past he had with his foster mom (very neglectful). I look at my past and think 'Wow' I was really lucky to have a foster mom as good as I did. She treated me good and gave me food and all that. My brother grew up in a whole different situation."*

## **Maturity**

A maturity develops as a result of the knowledge that life can be unfair, things might not get better, and bad things do not always happen to others (Meyer & Vadasy, 1994). This maturity produces children who are well-adjusted and more responsible than most same-age peers.

*"I think it's been a positive experience just in the fact that it opened my eyes to other issues that are out there. Like in school, my French teacher would always talk about students who would trash the desks—write on them and stuff— and that it was the parents' fault. The parents didn't care about their children. Bringing in disruptive children, who we have tried to help as much as possible, let me see that, "No, that's not always the case." There are parents who actually try to help and do whatever they can. This child, in her own mind, doesn't want to follow it and chooses not to do what the parents want. So, it opened my eyes to the fact that it's not always the parents that are causing the problem. It may be the child herself."*

## **Aware of Consequences**

In setting their own life courses, brothers and sisters of children with mental health problems may have a heightened awareness of the consequences of various actions. For example, regarding drinking and pregnancy, they know firsthand how drinking while pregnant can condemn a child to brain damage and a lifetime of challenges (Olesen, 2004)

## **Making the Best of a Difficult Situation**

*"We found a way to occupy our time with making the best out of the situation. You learn how to work with what you got. This is good."*

In essence, we all have to learn to "work with what you got." This process helps to develop problem-solving skills. The resident children become quite creative in making life with a sibling with mental health issues work to their advantage. It is not uncommon that they negotiate with their parents ways to earn money for comforts like a television, an iPod or CD's. These supplies allow a comfortable escape during major family storms. They learn to be heard when absolutely necessary—demonstrating improved communication skills. Certainly, enhanced problem-solving, communication and negotiating skills will serve them well throughout their lives.

### *Vocational Opportunities*

Brothers and sisters whose siblings have mental health issues frequently gravitate toward the helping professions (Meyer & Vadasy, 1994). These young adults are more certain of their own futures and about personal and vocational goals than comparable young adults without similar experiences. Several families that I have worked with are currently the proud parents of psychologists, social workers, special education teachers, counselors and psychiatrists!

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