

Sibling Issues in Adoption



SIBLING TYPES

Biological siblings adopted together
Biological siblings adopted separately
Adoption after having biological child(ren)
Adoption followed by biological child
Adoptee separated from biological siblings

Sibling issues matter because it is part of the adoptee's experience of loss, grief, fear of rejection, internalized shame and identity.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

SIBLING ISSUES TIED TO ADOPTION ARE A COMPLICATED LAYER OF EMOTIONS ADDED TO TYPICAL EXPERIENCES, LIKE SIBLING RIVALRY AND BIRTH ORDER.



BIRTH ORDER IN ADOPTION

Children may not transition well in adoption situations if their birth order is changed by the placement, particularly if the children are old enough to have established patterns of habits or behaviors related to their position in the family. Birth order is one of many considerations adoptive parents must consider when growing their family through adoption.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO DISCUSS BIRTH ORDER CONSIDERATIONS WITH YOUR CASEWORKER OR AN ADOPTION-COMPETENT THERAPIST PRIOR TO PLACEMENT.

SEPARATION FROM BIRTH SIBLINGS

When birth parents place one child while choosing to parent other children, the adoptee may be left with a significant sense of rejection. This can drive children to grow up worrying that if they had been "good enough" their birth parents would have chosen to parent them, too. It is critical to have a truthful explanation for why their birth parents were unable to parent any child at the time the adoptee was conceived or born. The child may crave regular reassurance that they are loved.



PREPARING CHILDREN FOR A SIBLING

Whether biological or adopted, adding siblings to a household is a big change! Children need preparation for the transition to gaining a sibling, particularly if adoption is part of the equation.

If your adoption story involves infertility, adoption and a successful pregnancy, your family may benefit from the assistance of an adoption-competent therapist to navigate this complex experience. Adoptees in this situation can internalize feelings of being their family's "Plan B" who is less desired than the child who was conceived after a long infertility journey. This is also true of adoption following secondary infertility.

It's also important to prepare biological children for how the adoptee may have different needs in a family. Attachment and trauma-informed parenting may look different than the traditional parenting methods used with a biological child. All siblings types being raised in adoptive homes can benefit from working with an adoption-competent therapist.

Tips to helping children transition to siblings when adoption is part of the family story

- Give truthful information about the plans and what to expect.
- Purchase children's books about gaining a sibling to facilitate discussions about your family's plans to grow.
- Allow your existing child(ren) to be part of the plans, such as letting them pick out clothes or décor items for the new sibling.
- Allow emotional space for the child's feelings about the change your family is making and validate their fears or concerns.
- Be sure to take special parent-child time with your kids, even after the new sibling joins the family. They need to know they're still important to you.
- Prioritize adoption-competent therapy throughout the transition.

BIOLOGICAL SIBLINGS ADOPTED TOGETHER

Often, the most ideal situation for adoptees is to be placed in the same adoptive home as their biological siblings. This may come from adoption at the same time (ex: foster-adoption) or from a subsequent adoption if the birth parent(s) became pregnant again. These adoptees may display typical sibling rivalry and birth order issues. The experience of the seven core issues of adoption will be unique to each adoptee based on age, personality, and other factors.

Occasionally, it isn't possible to keep siblings together in adoption. This may occur when there are too many children for one family to adopt or if one sibling has such significant needs that it poses a risk to other children in the home. Some siblings are separated when an adoptive family isn't available to adopt subsequent children. In these situations, adoptees may benefit from regular, ongoing contact with their birth siblings.

BIOLOGICAL SIBLINGS ADOPTED SEPARATELY



ADOPTION AFTER HAVING BIOLOGICAL CHILD(REN)

Some families adopt after having one or more biological children. The reasons for this are many, including secondary infertility, birth trauma, or desire to provide a loving home to a child. It is important to consider how an adoptee will experience growing up in a home as an "outsider" surrounded by others who share many genetic traits. They may feel as though they don't "fit" in their family, struggle with identity issues, and fear rejection. Biological children may feel resentful of the adoptee who may be treated differently due to attachment and trauma needs.



While adoption doesn't "cure" infertility, there are instances where adoptive families became pregnant at some point after adopting. When that happens, the adoptee will need preparation for a new sibling and the typical adjustments a new baby will require. They'll also need regular reassurance that their adoption wasn't a family's "Plan B" and that the biological baby isn't what the adoptive parents were actually hoping for all along. Parents will need to be careful with messaging so the adoptee feels they are just as loved and wanted as the conceived child.

ADOPTION FOLLOWED BY BIOLOGICAL KIDS

ADOPTEE SEPARATED FROM BIOLOGICAL SIBLINGS

Often, birth parents place one child for adoption, but are able to parent subsequent children after they've matured or their situation has changed. Or they have existing kids and later place an unexpected child for adoption because they don't have the resources to add another baby. For the adoptee who is placed in these situations, the loss and rejection issues are often significantly magnified and they may struggle to understand why parents chose to parent their other children while seemingly rejecting just one. They may benefit from regular reassurance, ongoing contact with birth family, and counseling.

REGARDLESS OF THE SIBLING SITUATION, ALL ADOPTEES BENEFIT FROM ADOPTION-COMPETENT THERAPY TO ADDRESS NEEDS.