

# *How Siblings Fare in Difficult Adoptions*

by Mavis Olesen, Ph.D.

When parents knowingly or unknowingly adopt a child with extremely serious special needs, children (birth or adopted) who already live in the home may be relegated to the background as the new adoptee's behaviors and problems escalate. As time goes on, children whose very challenging siblings push them to the family's margins may experience physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual consequences - both negative and positive. Fortunately, for these and other adoptive families, there are ways to protect siblings and find peace amidst the chaos.

## **Challenges**

Although most adoptive parents are able to successfully integrate new family members into the mix of children already in the home, in some adoptive families, a deeply troubled adoptee can play a much greater role in shaping her siblings' experiences and feelings. Family dynamics change when a new child arrives, and parents who assume a sometimes overwhelming responsibility for one child can be in danger of neglecting other children.

The neglect may not be very apparent. What may happen, simply, is a blunting of attention to the siblings' emotional and spiritual needs due to sheer exhaustion from focusing so much emotional energy on the very troubled child.

This attention imbalance and emotional distance may inspire in the adoptee's siblings actions and feelings such as:

**Self-sacrificing behavior.** Some siblings, even children as young as three, may try to be extra good and help the parents with the adoptee. Such children can become masters at hiding their needs, and their parents are frequently too exhausted to notice their pain. Grateful for these well-behaved children, parents may make the compounding mistake of reinforcing, through praise, the unhealthy self-sacrificing behavior.

**o Anger and resentment.** As siblings' emotional needs go unmet, resentment and anger can build up inside. If expressed openly, resentment can be addressed. When stored instead of resolved, resentment may manifest itself in adolescence or adulthood. Siblings may, for instance, harbor an underlying sense that they are not worthy, their mistakes are unforgivable, and they do not deserve respect and care. Others may feel driven to succeed. Still others may direct their anger toward their parents or reject religion.

In some cases, a troubled youth may physically or emotionally abuse his siblings. Due to an adoptee's neurological or mental disorders or past history, siblings may be in danger from physical, emotional, and sexual violence. If the abusive child threatens more violence if the siblings disclose information about his behavior, it can wreak further damage.

Some siblings are able to openly deal with abuse. If they do not receive help, however, abused siblings can develop a victim mentality, and become vulnerable to poor choices in vocation, relationships and other aspects of life.

Siblings may also resent having been subjected to ridicule from neighbors, classmates, and others due to the troubled adoptee's behavior. Siblings may feel both a sense of shame when the adoptee turns to crime, develops a serious drug problem, lands in jail, or

commits suicide, as well as guilt over not being there for the brother or sister, being afraid of him or her, or being unable to forgive past injuries.

### Benefits

Sometimes, through the hard lessons of living with a very troubled brother or sister, siblings are able to transform negative childhood experiences into positives. As adults, their lives may be more full and meaningful. They know true pain and adversity firsthand, and siblings say this experience can be enriching.

For example, siblings may be more able to empathize with people who have disabilities or are facing other hardships. They may have learned to listen and see beyond the external shell to the hidden burdens that disabled people bear. They may approach a street person with compassion, because their own brother or sister was there once. They can often handle courts, jails, and mental health facilities without fear and with great respect for people struggling to become whole.

They are also less likely to judge or objectify prostitutes, pimps, drug addicts, and homeless people. They know that brain damage has wide and varied results that may not change over time, that some problems cannot be fixed, and that no amount of punishment will stop some individuals from self-destructing.

In setting their own life course, siblings may have a heightened awareness of the consequences of various actions - such as drinking and pregnancy. They know firsthand how drinking while pregnant can condemn a woman's child to brain damage and a lifetime of challenges. Many choose helping professions because they have grown to understand that all life is a gift, and some people need extra support and care. And, while fully aware that life and families are not perfect, siblings can be more grateful for important things in life.

Ultimately, by living with a troubled sister or brother, siblings may evolve into strong, caring, and satisfied adults. The parents in Living in Limbo genuinely respect and admire their children for where they are on their life journey and how they have learned to be caring people.

### Looking out for siblings

Although families profiled in Living in Limbo appreciate their children's achievements, they also realize that life could have been better for the whole family. Below are suggestions about how families can address some of the challenges involved in raising troubled children with siblings, while preserving the benefits of the experience.

**Education.** Learn as much as you can about your child, what to expect, what you can do. The more you know, the better you can prepare. Thirty years ago, parents did not know that some teens with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder or FASD (due to their lack of inhibition and inability to foresee consequences) may, if not prevented from doing so, express their sexual needs by molesting siblings. If parents know the risks, they can avoid trouble by carefully educating and supervising their children.

**Sharing.** To protect your child and those who may interact with her, share necessary information with family and other community members. Teachers, law enforcement officers, and others will then be able to deal with the child's behavior more appropriately (and understand the challenges that the child's siblings face every day).

**Support.** No one who has not lived with your child can fully understand your family's life.

**Seek family therapy, and find adoption support groups or groups for families who share your family's issues or background. Some support groups offer special sessions for kids where adoptees and their siblings can talk about issues that affect them. Siblings should also be encouraged to find support from other trusted adults (teachers, coaches, neighbors, grandparents, counselors) whom they can talk to and spend time with.**

**Self-sufficiency. Though you may gather information, and even advice, about your children from those you trust (including other parents, doctors, counselors), your family must make final decisions concerning any significant course of action. Do not wholly rely on decisions made by those who do not have to live with the consequences.**

**Self-care. Unless parents and children learn to actively care for themselves on a very basic level, they will not be very effective at caring for the troubled child or his siblings. As the doctor says, eat well, exercise, and get plenty of rest. Self-sacrificing siblings who witness parents' self-care behaviors can also learn to take better care of themselves.**

**Balance. Somehow find balance among the mental, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of life for the whole family. It may be that you will have to develop much more structure in each day's activities. You might, for instance, establish set times for physical exercise, prayer, interaction with each child, etc. By enforcing the schedule, life for all of your children will be more predictable and feel safer.**

**Respite. Everyone in the family needs a chance to recharge, refresh their minds and spirits, and have breaks from the stress of living with a troubled child. Siblings should be allowed to visit friends, participate in school activities that bring them joy, and have some time alone with parents. Parents should help each other to find time to relax, sleep, and seek other healthy outlets.**

**Relationship maintenance. Like all parenting couples, couples who share the stress of parenting challenging children need opportunities to keep their relationship strong. If you can find a good respite provider, establish a regular schedule of outings with just your partner. If you can't easily leave the house, think of ways to periodically do something special together after the kids are in bed. Well-tuned, connected parenting partners are much better at supporting each other and helping to offset one parent's time-consuming care for the neediest child with attention to other family members. By sharing or trading off the balancing role, parents can help keep events in perspective for themselves, the troubled child, and other children.**

**Communication. Keep the lines of communication open with your parenting partner and with the rest of the family. Plan time for regular (daily or weekly) family chats where everyone has a turn to voice concerns. Listen for signs of stress from siblings who are trying to be good and watch for symptoms of resentment or anger. Keep a family journal of the negatives and positives, problem-solve, and follow-up. Celebrate anything positive that emerges during or after the chat.**

**Mediation. If communication breaks down, you may want to enlist the help of an outside mediator (a wise and respected aunt or uncle, church leader, or trained professional) who can be a neutral observer and help each family member to express his problems or needs and work toward solutions.**

**Expectations. For some children affected by FASD, severe neglect or abuse, or other neurological disorders, common parental expectations (that their kids will stay out of trouble, graduate from high school and college, start a career, get married, and have children - in that order) can be unrealistic and even counter-productive. Without selling your child short, be honest about her capabilities and limitations, and adjust expectations accordingly.**

**Accentuating the positive. Even troubled children have accomplishments and can bring joy to a family. Remember to celebrate each child's gifts, talents and successes, large and small.**

### **Conclusion**

**It is easy to think of things we should have done once we have the chance to reflect with our children, as adults, about the family's adoption journey. Back when we did not understand the depth of our adopted children's pain and need, as well as the pain their siblings endured, we - like most parents - made our share of mistakes. We have discovered, however, that it is possible to find peace, even in the limbo of our children's struggles. Our hope now is that other families who adopt children with disabilities such as FASD, attachment disorders, or post-traumatic stress disorder will be better-prepared and supported as they face the challenges of living and growing together.**

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