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The Sibling Bond: Its Importance in Foster Care and Adoptive Placement

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The Powerful Sibling Bond

Loss has become all too familiar to 35-year-old Amy. First, it was the loss of her childhood. At nine, because her parents were not capable of caring for her and her younger sister, she became the care giver to six-year-old Anne. Two years later, she lost her parents and her home. She and Anne were moved by the authorities into foster care after it became clear that their parents could not provide a safe and nurturing environment for them. It was an especially difficult move for Amy, who had to relinquish her "parental" role to her new foster mother.

But the most wrenching loss of all came when Amy was 12. Her social worker believed it would be in her best interest to live in a home with girls her own age. For the first time in her life, she and her sister were separated.

It was devastating for both of them. Amy's self-esteem plummeted because so much of it revolved around her ability to take care of her

younger sibling. Anne, too, was destroyed by the move for she no longer had the only constant in her life. Her sister, in addition to being her best friend, had also been her consistent source of advice and approval.

Anne was later adopted by her foster parents and moved with them to another State. The sisters lost touch with each other. They also lost their ability to trust and to form lasting relationships when they became adults.

At 35, Amy says, "I will never forget the day I had to leave my sister. We were both crying, and I felt like the world was a terrible and hostile place. As the months went by, I could feel myself close up. The more I thought about what had happened to me, the more angry and bitter I became. If the social worker who was supposed to be concerned for me had the power to take away my sister, I could never trust anyone again."

Today, Amy and Anne are in contact with each other. They see each other from time to time, but they do not have the close relationship that they might have had they not been separated. Amy lives alone, insists she will never marry, and prefers living a solitary existence where no one can hurt her. Anne has been divorced twice and says that intimate relationships are impossible for her to manage. When someone gets too close, she unconsciously sabotages the relationship.

The story of Amy and Anne demonstrates the powerful bond that exists between siblings and what can happen when it is broken. Today, mental health experts are beginning to recognize the significance and power of the sibling relationship. It is, they say, longer lasting and more influential than any other, including those with parents, spouse, or children. When it is severed, the fallout can last a lifetime.

"In the past it was assumed that parent-child relationships sowed the seeds of adult behavior, but there is a growing awareness that the interplay between siblings also exerts a powerful life-long force," says Elisabeth Rosenthal in an article published in The New York Times. "So, people who spent years on the couch dissecting their relationship with their parents may be chagrined to learn they have more work ahead of them. Some psychologists say they must now probe their relationships with their brothers and sisters."

Dr. Jerry F. Westermeyer of the Department of Psychiatry at Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago says, "The sibling relationship has been a neglected topic in social science, especially in adulthood," noting that virtually no research had been done on the topic until the 1980's. "But people are starting to look hard at it now," he says. "It's an important topic and it strikes a chord."

Despite this new burst of knowledge, statistics indicate that more and more brothers and sisters may have to experience the same heartbreak

felt by Amy and Anne. Sixty-five to 85 percent of children entering the foster care system have at least one sibling; about 30 percent have four or more. It is often difficult to find families willing to take all of them, and current estimates indicate that 75 percent of sibling groups end up living apart after they enter foster care. For most of them, it means losing the only significant relationship they have known.

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How Strong Is the Bond?

The bond between brothers and sisters is unique—it is the longest lasting relationship most people have, longer than the parent/child or husband/wife relationship. While the bonds may wax and wane, a person's lifetime quest for personal identity is undeniably interwoven with his or her siblings.

In early childhood, siblings are constant companions and playmates. Through games and conversations with each other, they learn to interact with the larger community. During adolescence, once-close siblings may temporarily weaken their ties as they exert their individuality and independence. In adulthood, when they have families of their own, the needs of their families usually take precedence over the relationship with each other, but the sibling ties often emerge stronger during this period. Siblings generally want to share their adult struggles and triumphs with each other.

The cycle of the sibling bond comes full circle when the siblings reach old age, after their parents and spouse may be gone and their children are raising children of their own. The bond between them often intensifies as they once again become each other's companions, sometimes living together for the remainder of their lives.

This bond exists in children raised in well-adjusted families, but it is even stronger for brothers and sisters from dysfunctional families. They learn very early to depend on and cooperate with each other to cope with their common problems.

Separating siblings in foster care or through adoption adds to their emotional burden. They have already had to cope with the separation and loss of their parents. If they are then separated from their siblings, they must experience the grieving process all over again. For many children, this separation will be even more traumatic because, if they have experienced abuse and/or neglect at the hand of their parents, they will often have stronger ties to each other than to their mother or father.

Sometimes, it is only through their siblings that children have been able to gain any positive self-esteem. When they see good qualities in a brother or sister, they are less likely to see themselves as "a bad kid from a bad

family." Siblings are often able to reveal to each other parts of themselves that they are reluctant to share with anyone else, thus strengthening the bond between them.

These early ties remain even when siblings are separated in foster care or through adoption. In her book, *Adopting the Older Child*, Claudia Jewett writes, "Children separated from brothers and sisters may never resolve their feelings of loss, even if there are new brothers and sisters whom they grow to love. There may be more drive in adopted adults to track down their remembered biological siblings than there is to locate their birth parents, so great a hole does the loss of a sibling leave in one's personal history." Many adopted adults desperately want to meet a person who they think might look like them. Seeing similarities between themselves and their biological siblings helps to answer elusive questions they may have about their heritage.

Studies have shown that even babies experience depression when they are separated from their brothers and sisters. In one such study, it was found that a 19-month-old girl was better able to cope with the separation from her parents than from her siblings. The children in this family were placed in different foster homes, resulting in the baby's loss of speech, refusal to eat, withdrawal, and an inability to accept affection. This pattern persisted even after she was reunited with her parents. It was not until her brothers and sisters rejoined the family that this little girl resumed her former behavior.

The media continues to report stories about brothers and sisters who have been separated through adoption and as adults begin a tireless search for each other. One such story involved Eleanor, 39, who searched for her older brother, Jim, 41, who had been separated from her when they were young children. These two children had been extremely close. It was Eleanor's older brother who, when they were first adopted, showed their new parents how to get his sister to eat her vegetables and brush her teeth. It was her big brother who had made the transition into their new family easier for Eleanor. But when Jim showed signs of emotional problems, the adoptive parents returned him to the adoption agency. It was believed to be in everyone's best interest.

Now, 36 years later, the only information Eleanor has found out about her brother is that he had been in a shelter for the homeless. It was believed he had also been in and out of mental institutions. Unfortunately, the decision to separate the children proved damaging to both of them. Jim's emotional problems worsened, following him through his life, and his sister was traumatized by the loss of her brother.

Today, a greater number of former foster children are searching for their siblings than are searching for their biological parents. They are suing child welfare agencies in order to get them to release information—and they are winning. States and courts have begun to recognize the importance of the

sibling relationship—not only biological siblings, but also "psychological" siblings.

"It's a sad commentary that such an action is needed," states Kay Donley Zeigler, a trainer on sibling relationships in adoption at the National Resource Center on Special Needs Adoption in Southfield, Michigan, "but it may be that this type of action on the part of former foster children will force social workers to think twice before separating siblings."

Recently, a couple from New Jersey was able to receive an adoption subsidy for adopting a sibling group even though none of the three children was related biologically. These three "sisters" developed their relationship while they were placed in the same foster home—a home they shared for three years.

In similar cases, judges in New York and Massachusetts have ruled that agencies must accept responsibility for the failure of sibling groups to remain together. The Massachusetts decision added that brothers and sisters should be raised together, even half-brothers and sisters, "unless there are compelling reasons for separating them."

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Why Are Siblings Separated?

Although it is generally accepted that separating siblings should be the exception, many brothers and sisters are living apart. Unfortunately, there are no laws or set rules—the decision to split the family is usually left to the discretion of the child's social worker.

Today with more children entering the child welfare system, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find families willing to accept a sibling group. Hemmed in by budget and time constraints, overburdened caseworkers often feel that they have no other option than to separate the children. They believe that separately the children will stand a better chance of finding a permanent family since there are more families looking to adopt just one child at a time.

Often these sibling groups have come from troubled backgrounds, having suffered abuse and neglect by their biological parents. Their combined problems may seem too severe and numerous for one set of parents. It is thought that placed separately, the children will each receive the undivided attention of their new parents, and this will help each develop to his or her highest potential.

Social workers may also decide to separate siblings if one of them is being victimized by the other, as in the example of Jimmy and Diane. Jimmy, 11, and Diane, 9, were a close-knit brother and sister who were placed

together with a family in New Mexico. Before the adoption was finalized, Jimmy was found to be abusing his little sister. The soon-to-be adoptive parents frantically contacted the social worker, saying, "We can't tolerate this kind of behavior. We want Jimmy out of our home!"

The social worker immediately acted on the case and removed Jimmy from the home. It was later discovered that Jimmy had been abusing his sister in an earlier placement as well. It was believed that by separating Jimmy from his sister he would "straighten himself out." Only time will tell whether the best interests of the children truly have been served.

Separating siblings may also appear beneficial if the children are so unhappy about being removed from their biological or foster family that the social worker feels they will band together to sabotage their adoption.

Other siblings are separated because of their inability to get along with each other. Sibling rivalry has been a concern of families since Cain slew Abel in the Garden of Eden. Few brothers and sisters are driven to such extremes; yet, sibling rivalry and jealousy remain major causes for separation in foster care and adoption.

As seen in the earlier example of Amy and Anne, separation is also common when one child has difficulty giving up his or her role as "care giver" to the other children. His or her role confusion may result in removal from the home so that the other children can bond with their new family without conflict or interference. Removing the care giver may also appear to be in his best interest, as he can learn to become a child again without the constant reminder of past responsibilities.

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Research Findings

Although these reasons for separating siblings may have merit, numerous studies invalidate them. They indicate that separating siblings often delivers inappropriate messages and results in greater problems for children in the long run. Research on siblings reveals the following five points:

1. When children are separated because of sibling rivalry, it teaches them that the way to deal with conflict is to walk away from it, not to work it out. Siblings who remain together learn how to resolve their differences and develop stronger relationships.
2. The responsibility felt by an older child for a younger sibling is not necessarily a negative. It can be used constructively by adoptive parents to help both children develop appropriate roles with each other. The caregiving child can be helped to become a child again and the younger child can learn that adults can be trusted.
3. Even a needy child does not necessarily benefit from being the only child in

a family. According to Margaret Ward's study, "Sibling Ties in Foster Care and Adoption Planning," an only child may receive a lot of attention, but the child may also then become for the parents the embodiment of all their hopes and aspirations. The child may be expected to change troublesome behavior sooner than he or she is able.

4. When a sibling is removed from a home because of behavior problems, remaining children get the message that the same thing can happen to them. It reduces their sense of trust in adults.
5. Removing a sibling from a foster or adoptive home because he has abused his brother or sister does not guarantee that the abuse will not continue in another environment. Therapy may be a more appropriate intervention.

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Struggling With the Issues of Sibling Relationships

Despite the growing recognition that it is healthier for brothers and sisters to remain together, social workers charged with the responsibility of placing sibling groups still struggle with the difficult reality of finding families willing to accept several children at one time. It is easier to find a family for one child than for a sibling group of six. It is also less costly to search for a family in the immediate area than to stretch across State lines or travel cross-country, which is often required when looking for a family willing to adopt a sibling group. It is also more comfortable for some social workers to place a child with a traditional two-parent family, although single parents and those with alternative lifestyles may be more receptive to adopting a sibling group.

Social workers who are dedicated to keeping siblings together and who are willing to be flexible about prospective adopters can be successful in finding families for them. For example, large families are often willing to adopt a sibling group of three or four, but these families make some workers uneasy. They worry that the parents may be overburdened and will not be able to give each child enough attention. They wonder whether the household will be too chaotic and at what point the family will be strained beyond its capacity to give quality care.

However, research shows that living in a large family has many benefits. "Large families teach everybody how to work together," explains Lois Cowen, mother of 15, 10 of whom are adopted. "The older children help the younger children. The children also learn to share. You never hear 'This is mine...you can't have it.' I recently bought the children one play toolbox and one set of play dishes. Each child got a tool and a dish—and was happy."

Parents in large families are less likely to overreact to minor problems—most of which they have experienced in the past. Large families also tend to have more structure with set guidelines and consequences that are known to everyone. For many children who experienced abuse and

neglect, this will be a welcome change from the chaos they faced in their earlier lives.

Children in large families learn to cooperate and share things with people of different personalities and temperaments, helping them to be more flexible about future changes in their world and preparing them for interaction with the wider community.

An agency's determination to keep siblings together must be reflected in its foster and adoptive family recruitment messages. When recruitment highlights sibling groups in a positive manner, families willing to adopt them respond.

The National Adoption Center, for instance, a Philadelphia-based organization that promotes adoption opportunities for children with special needs, feels strongly about placing siblings together. When it conducts publicity campaigns, brothers and sisters are shown together and every effort is made not to separate them. The Center has found that the general public shares its sentiments and believes fervently in preserving the rights of brothers and sisters to grow up together.

Carolyn Johnson, the Center's Executive Director, explains, "Most people are distressed when they hear there is a chance siblings will have to be separated. It is against the natural order of things—and their visceral reaction is that brothers and sisters should stay together. Even a family considering the adoption of only one child will almost always want to adopt his siblings once they are made aware of their existence."

Paddy Noyes, who for 23 years has written a column in the Philadelphia Inquirer featuring children waiting to be adopted, says, "Sometimes a worker will tell me that a sibling group won't have a chance of being adopted if we put them all in the paper. But I say, 'Let's start with the positive and feature them all.' The results have been that people will adopt the whole group."

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Decisionmaking in Sibling Placement

For adoption workers struggling with a decision about whether to separate a sibling from one or more others in a foster care or adoptive placement, Kay Donley Zeigler makes these five suggestions:

1. Examine the importance of siblings not only at present but for the child throughout his or her life. Although the child may not be close with a brother or sister now, consider future implications if they are separated.
2. The child's feelings should be considered. Although it is a major decision and not one the child can or should make alone, his or her wishes should be part of the decisionmaking process.

3. The decision about separation should be made by several informed persons, including current and former caretakers, therapists, counselors, teachers, physicians or any others who have played an important role in the children's lives. Explore with them the history and meaning of the sibling relationships.
4. Document all of the reasons for and against separating the children. Making a list will force an examination of the pros and cons. Provide clear documentation of the circumstances leading up to the decision in the event a decision to separate is ever legally challenged.
5. If siblings must be separated, plans for future get-togethers should be initiated immediately. Legally, adoptive parents can override any decision to maintain contact with siblings. They may have problems logistically with the contacts (i.e. they may move out of State, or it may be inconvenient to keep in touch), or they simply may not recognize the importance of maintaining the bond. Social workers should help educate the parents about the value of the relationship. Experience shows that the bond between a child and new parents is strengthened when they confront the issues of sibling relationships together. The child can then see his parent as someone who is sensitive to his or her needs.

"These relationships are sometimes the only semblance of normalcy these children have," says Ms. Donley Zeigler. "When you take away someone's siblings, it's kind of like you're stripping him of everything that he has that makes him feel okay about himself."

"If the idea of the child welfare system is to protect and help children," says Carolyn Johnson, "everyone involved should be careful to carry out that mission and always keep in mind what the best interest of the child truly is."

This article was written by Gloria Hochman, Ellen Feathers-Acuna, and Anna Huston of the National Adoption Center for the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse in 1992.

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