Preparing Birth/Previously Adopted Children for the New Adoptive Child

One of the biggest decisions a family makes is choosing to add to their family through adoption. For the adoptive parents it is a time of both anxiousness and anticipation, and children already in the home by birth or previous adoptions are also feeling the same emotional roller coaster as they wait for that new sibling or siblings to join the family. Therapist Heidi Wiste reminds us that “. . . a lot of us tend to focus on the newly adopted child. The child [or children] already in the family will experience just as much change with the least amount of preparation because they’re not in classes.”

According to social workers Ellen Steele Mullin and LeAnn Johnson, parents need to be aware that birth and previously adopted children play a big role in the “making or breaking” of the new adoptive placement. While the addition of a new sibling has the potential to create long-lasting sibling relationships, it also has the potential to disrupt established relationships in the family unit. Birth and previously adopted children may feel jealous of the attention on the newest family member. They may also be struggling with what Wiste calls “the letdown when reality replaces fantasy.” This could be especially true if the family adopted a special needs child who requires a lot of attention and interventions.

Most parents consider the effect the adoption will have on birth or previously adopted children, say Mullins and Johnson, but many are unaware at just how much the adoption will impact the kids. Previous children in the home may not understand the tremendous amount of time it may take for new children to transition to a new family. They may also not understand the amount of intervention involvement required if the new adoptive siblings have special needs. If the children in the home were adopted, the new adoptions may bring up feelings for them, especially if there is a difference in the amount of information or relationships each has with birth family.

Parents also need to be aware of the potential differences in their child’s background. Negative behaviors between the birth or previously adopted child or children and their new adopted sibling(s) can greatly impact the success of the adoptive placement. Studies have shown that disruptions are more likely to happen when the parents perceive the children already in the home are at risk.

Talking to the birth/previously adopted children about their expectations will help guide parents as they begin to explore adoption. Some questions to ask children in the home:

- What does adoption mean?
- What do you know about the adoption process?
- Why is our family adopting?
- What do you think will be different after the adoption?
- What might be the same?
- What will be hard to talk about?
- Who can you talk to when it’s hard?
- What can’t you handle?
- What will happen if you hate it?

In addition, it is likely that the new adopted child will come with connections to previous birth siblings, birth parents or other important people in their lives such as birth relatives or kid and foster parents. The
majority of children adopted from foster care have siblings; and 75% of youth in foster care have been separated from birth siblings while in care.

Part of preparing birth and previously adopted children for the addition of another sibling by adoption includes discussing the new child’s connection and past relationships with birth siblings. For example, if the newly adopted child was placed in the role of caretaker to younger siblings in his or her birth family, becoming the youngest child in the new home may be a difficult adjustment when the youth’s past role was that of the “parentified” child. The newly adopted child might have feelings of split loyalty between new siblings and birth siblings.

The newly adopted child may have experienced negative relationships with birth siblings as well, so parents must consider how that will affect the new sibling relationship(s). Parents and professionals alike need to be mindful of the potential negative behaviors that might show up between the new adopted child and the siblings already in the home.

Discussions about how the family will expand, not just by the addition of the newly adopted child, but also his or her connections to birth siblings and other important people are important, especially if the child has an open adoption or contact with the birth family.

Wiste offers these suggestions for parents and professionals to help prepare children for new siblings:

- Ask the child to describe his/her fantasies about the new sibling(s)
- Give the child a chance to voice their thoughts separate from the parents
- Pay attention when the child’s views do not match the parents
- Be aware that parents and adults may need to adjust a child’s fantasy about the sibling(s) about to be adopted, particularly if the child expects a “picture perfect” experience
- Note that children without other siblings seem to have more difficulty with the transition
- Practice “future thinking” to help children project themselves into situations where they will be able to keep their identity apart from their new siblings(s)
- Be aware that kids equate parental love with the amount of attention given to a child in the family – even if it is negative attention
- Provide ways to grow the sibling relationship
- Remind children of why they were excited to get a new sister or brother and seek commonalities that might help them renew that initial excitement.

Adopted children experience many losses, but parents and professionals alike need to recognize that birth or previously adopted children experience losses too – the loss of privacy, loss of attention, loss of one-on-one time with their parent(s) and maybe even the loss of their birth order.

The sibling relationship is one of the most enduring relationships a person can have in their lifetime – longer than the parent/child relationship or a marriage/spouse relationship. Studies show that having sibling bonds help kids with their sense of well-being and attachment as adults. Helping your children prepare for the new adoptive sibling(s) can go a long way in facilitating these life-long sibling bonds.

For more information on preparing birth/adoptive children for new adoptive siblings: