

# *School and Adoption—Answering Adoption-Related Questions: Brothers and Sisters Need Responses!*

*By Arleta James, PCC*



As school gets in motion across the country, many adoptive parents wonder about the potential for adoption-related issues to arise in the classroom and on the playground. Of particular concern is how the adoptee should respond when questioned about his or her adoptive status. Questions like, “Why don’t you look like your mom or dad?” “What happened to your ‘real’ mother?” “Where are you from?” “Why were you adopted?” — and many more will crop up! Adopted children need to be prepared with answers.

Yet, so do their siblings! Brothers and sisters receive the same types of queries, “Where is your sister from?” “Why doesn’t your brother look like the rest of your family?” “Why was your sister adopted?” “Where are your brother’s ‘real’ mom and dad?” “How come your sister had to be adopted?” “Why did your family adopt?” “What is adoption?” “Is Sally your ‘real’ sister?”

In cases in which the adoptee with a history of trauma displays negative behavior in the school setting, brothers and sisters also receive additional questions,

*Abigail entered the family at age 9. She and her typically-developing sibling, John, attended the same school. One day, Abigail was found eating food off of girls’ lavatory floor. A preceding student had apparently dropped it. The news of this behavior passed through the school quickly. At recess, numerous fellow classmates asked John, “What is wrong with your sister?”*

*Randy’s family adopted Sean when he was 6 years old. Randy and Sean attended the same school. Randy was four years older than Sean. Each day, Sean struggled with emotional regulation. The school’s response was to have Randy come to Sean’s class to assist in calming him down. This interrupted Randy’s education as well as it caused his class-mates to wonder what was going on. “Where was Randy going every day?”*

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*“What is the problem with his brother?” It wasn’t long before questions were posed to Randy about his brother’s behavior.*

These are but two of the many examples that could be presented! Troubled adoptees often steal from fellow classmates or rummage through the other students’ lunches for extra snacks. In one case I worked, a young adoptee exposed himself —frequently—on the kickball field. Comments flew all over in this situation. His sister heard, “Your brother is a pervert” over and over again!

Parents need to help all their children respond to the wide array of questions that may be posed. Below are some ideas for Moms and Dads to utilize.

### *Helping Brothers and Sisters Respond to Behavioral Related Questions*

School should be a time of learning, making friends and having a ton of fun! Yet, for some brothers and sisters in adoption, there may be trying times if their adopted sibling acts poorly during the school day. Parents express many valid concerns about the impact of these negative behaviors on their typical children.

Overall, parents want to encourage communication. Moms and Dads want to know what types of questions and comments are being put forth. This isn’t for the purpose of “tattling.” This is to help the son or daughter field the queries or remarks. This is to prevent a build-up of resentment. We also want to process the embarrassment as well! Of course, it is embarrassing that your sister is eating off the bathroom floor, or that your brother displays his penis in front of peers! Pent up feelings spill out in the home via hurtful shouts, “I wish we didn’t adopt you!” “I wish you would go back to China!”

Rather, parents want to make statements containing feelings once informed of situations. “I get mad and embarrassed by your brother’s \_\_\_\_\_ (insert behavior) as well. It is so difficult at times. Let’s sit down and talk about how this makes you feel.”

Parents will often need to be proactive in opening the lines of communication. Brothers and sisters frequently harbor their thoughts and feelings pertaining to their adopted sibling. They believe a positive attitude is to be expected—“He didn’t have life as good as I have.” However, even when parents are happy to assist, some siblings will keep their questions and concerns to themselves. These resident children feel their parent is too stressed or saddened by the new arrivals needs. So, they keep quiet in order to try to be helpful to their parents.

Once communication is flowing and feelings are validated, Moms and Dads want to offer some guidelines for responding to the questions peers pose. Children often feel that they need to answer questions. They need permission to say, “I would rather not talk about that.” “Please ask my mom to explain that.” Such answers can be followed with a change of subject. “Did you win your soccer game yesterday?” “How do you think you did on the Social Studies test? I thought it was hard!” This allows for a natural and smooth transition away from the more troubling matter.

Consider role-playing the potential responses. This will ensure children have heard and understand their possible solutions, and practice lends to confidence in the delivery phase!

At times, parents need to intervene and resolve such situations. Parents will help discern what is acceptable for the child to handle and what matters require parental intervention.

So, the coping skill of most importance for children to learn is to rely on parents!

Parents may want to check out, [Adoption Awareness: Handling Awkward Adoption Questions and Comments](#), by Christine Mitchell. This 18-page booklet covers basic questions that adopted children and adoptive parents must field throughout their academic years, as well as queries resulting from transcultural adoption status. She also addresses remarks that arise out of sibling rivalry. Christine gives parents guidance about how to start a dialogue with sons or daughters, and how to help your child decide what to share and what to keep private.

This point of privacy is crucial. It is quite common that brothers and sisters—related by birth to the adoptee or not—are privy to personal facts about the adoptee’s pre-adoptive history. Thus, each child with knowledge needs to know what information is private and should stay in the family. (Certainly, many family matters besides adoption are private. Often, children are familiar with this concept.) This is not because there should be embarrassment about what happened to the adoptee that experienced trauma, and this is not because there is something “wrong” with or “bad” about the adoptee because of his or her pre-adoptive experiences. It is because the adoptee’s history is a private family matter—this may be especially true when relationships in the school setting can be affected.

We need to help all of the children in the family develop a “cover story” to ensure that privacy is protected. Parents and children can put together a story that covers the need to provide some information without revealing facts that could prove to hurt the adoptee.

In conclusion, being prepared gives kids the confidence necessary to navigate the world while away from their parents. If you haven’t tackled this area of questions and comments, go ahead and get started today!