

An In-Depth Conversation with Younger Typical Kids: "I Don't Have to Fix Her" and More...

By Arleta James, PCC

I recently had the privilege of meeting with three bright, fun, caring typical children. Mark, Catherine and Linda, ages 10, 8 and 6 respectively. These youngsters are struggling with the day-to-day barrage of behaviors exploding from their 12-year-old adopted sister, Vikki.



Vikki joined the family when she was [18-months-old](#). Initially, she exhibited a “strong will.” Yet, this did not seem concerning at the time. However, as she has aged into a “tween” the once more manageable arguing, lying, devouring of anything sweet, disrespect, etc. have now erupted! Daily loud rampages over chores are commonplace! Vikki thinks nothing of getting in Mom’s face and yelling! Candy disappears from cupboards and her siblings’ secret hiding places. She shoves the younger children out of her way going up the stairs, to grab the remote control first, or to make her school lunch—whatever her need, the littler kids get pushed aside! They are feeling very bullied in their own home!

Vikki is in therapy now. Progress is slow. She is overwhelmed with grief for the loss of her birth family, and she is plagued with a survivor’s guilt—she has difficulty living a “nice” life when other children still “have to live in orphanages.” She has many posttraumatic stress symptoms, residue from her period of institutionalization. As change is going to occur slowly, Mom and Dad recognized the need for coping skills for Mark, Catherine and Linda.

The family meeting started with a LOT of venting! “She is so loud! She hurts my ears!” “She takes all my candy no matter where I try to hide it—even if I try to put it ‘way in the very back of my closet!” “She should

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just do the dishes when Mom tells her!” “We can’t watch any shows we want ‘cause’ she won’t let us!” “We couldn’t go out to eat last week because she was having a fit!”



Then, 6-year-old Linda burst into tears! “I keep trying to ‘fix’ her.” “I tell her what is right all the time!” “If I could just fix her, we could be a happy family!” Heart wrenching to say the least! Immediately, Catherine, age 8, stated, “I am afraid one day she is going to hurt Mom!” “She shouts at Mom and pokes her with her finger!” “When Mom walks away, she grabs her shoulder!” Then, Mark, the family’s 10-year-old asked, “What is wrong with her?” “Is she ever going to be better?” “Is our family always going to be like this?” The concern for Mom and the state of the entire family was profound!

Further discussion revealed that during Vikki’s rants, Catherine attempted to hover in the area of the argument. She wanted to be on hand to “protect” Mom in the event Vikki tried to “hit” her. Mark retreated to his room—alone! Little Linda ran to the basement family room where she reported crying because “Vikki wasn’t fixed!” In essence, Vikki’s behavior was bogging the whole family down. Everyone went on pause until the fit ended.

I present this conversation as it makes clear that the typical kids often think deeply about the climate of the home—even at very young ages. It behooves us to take breaks—to make time to talk with them. We need to quell their fears, empower them, educate them, help them cope and make sure their attachment to parents and each other remain strong!

In this family’s case, Catherine was assured that Mom thought it was so kind of her to want to be protective. Yet, Mom could handle Vikki. Mom was the parent. Catherine could be a kid! If Mom ever felt the need for help, she would call on Dad or their very good neighbor, Mr. Stewart. Linda was relieved of her self-assigned job of “fixing” Vikki. She was then given the kid appropriate task of coming up with a “code word.” This word or phrase could be anything she wanted—“broccoli” and “cheddar cheese” were her first two picks. She would get to say the code word whenever Vikki started to “lose it.” This would be the prompt for all three kids to go— together—to the family room. Mark and Catherine were asked to stock a “fit bag.” This would include all kinds of supplies—board games, video games, cards, markers, paper—anything they wanted that would be fun for them! It also included the key to the lock box that was loaded with snacks!

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They would ride out Vikki's storm by creating a fun time for themselves. They would unite, rather than separate. They would go on with the business of being kids! Mom would call out another of Linda's code words when the "coast was clear"—Vikki was back on an even keel. At this time, all the kids—including Vikki—would re-connect with Mom, and Dad, if he had arrived home from work. Mom or Dad would pick a number between 1 and 100. The child closest to Mom or Dad's selected number would pick the television show or Wii game, provided homework was complete.



Psycho-education was initiated as well. This will take a few appointments to complete. Booklets from [Channing-Bete](#), children's books like, [Borya and the Burps](#) will offer visual aids for Mark, Catherine and Linda's learning as to how the lack of having a parent for the first 18-months has profoundly affected their oldest sister. They will come to view her as more than a bundle of disruptive behavior. They will be encouraged to extend empathy—just as Vikki is learning in her therapy. Information is an essential part of everyone's adjustment post-adoption.



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The kids' education will start with the [attachment cycle of needs](#) (pictured above.) The cycle demonstrates that when these resident kids were babies, Mom and Dad met their needs. They cried and Mom or Dad brought them a bottle, changed their diaper, or just gave them attention. As a result, they learned the world was safe and that Mom and Dad could be trusted to provide love, meet their needs, give guidance, etc.

Then Mark, Catherine and Linda will define "needs." They will make a list of needs. They will use this knowledge of needs to compare and contrast their life to Vikki's life. For example, Vikki cried and the orphanage care givers were too busy with other babies to come and feed her right away, or to pick her up and hold her." Vikki didn't learn to trust that adults could care for her. The purpose of her therapy is to help her understand that Mom and Dad can be trusted. If she "listens to Mom and Dad the very first time" and accepts their love, her life will be better. This will take time!

(If a domestic adoption, the scenario may be: "When your brother or sister cried, his or her birthmother was not home. She left him or her alone while she went out with boyfriends or to buy drugs. So, your new brother or sister will have different ways of thinking and acting than you do because his or her needs were not met. It may take some time before your brother or sister understands this and can fully join the family.")

The "cycle of needs" is a great way to initiate the process of giving the brothers and sisters a rationale for "why" their adopted sibling thinks and acts so differently from them.

Mom and Dad were also encouraged to "start a habit" of dates with each of their children. Alone time with parents is another key factor in coping long-term with a sibling with mental health issues.

Several days after this first meeting, Mom left a voice mail stating that Linda had just come to her and offered a "big" hug. She said, "I love you so much Mom, and I'm so glad it isn't my job to 'fix' Vikki anymore!"

Certainly, we'll have to tweak and expand on our "family plan." But, at this time, this family has clarification about the concerns of their resident children. New coping skills are being implemented. Strong, close attachments are well under way!