

This is Not the Brother or Sister I expected!: The Need to Prepare the Typical Children

By Arleta James, PCC

A Mom called stating, “Our 20 month old daughter arrived from Russia six weeks ago. If I could turn the clock back I would. She is having long temper tantrums complete with screaming, biting, throwing things and hitting. These fits are happening, on and off, all day. My five-year-old birth son is beside himself. He is so disappointed that she isn’t a ‘nice’ sister! I am wondering what my husband and I have done—we had a great son and a great life—why weren’t we satisfied? What should we do?”



Calls such as these are received frequently where I work—[Attachment and Bonding Center of Ohio](#). Adoptees, of all ages, arrive in families in which both the parents and the children already residing in the family have many expectations. Unmet expectations, post-placement, cause an array of confusion and feelings for brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers. Ensuring preparation for each member of the adoptive family is one means to help offset crises in adoptive families.

While parent preparation is conducted regularly, this caller lacked knowledge that a child may arrive with behavioral problems. In turn, her son was also ill-prepared. He expected a fun little playmate—a sibling with whom he could have fun and, as the older brother, he was anticipating teaching her all kinds of things. This young boy’s expectations are common among appropriately developing siblings, especially if there is already an existing sibling relationship in the household at the time an adoptee joins the family.

1

Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

Such typical siblings are often only presented the positive aspects of gaining a sibling. Professionals and parents make statements such as, “What are you most looking forward to?” “Won’t it be great to help a child who needs a home?” “I bet you are excited to have another brother and sister around to ride your bike with!” In reality, the adoptee that has experienced [complex trauma](#) (i.e., abandonment, abuse, neglect, institutionalization), prior to the adoption, may not be able to fulfill the dreams of parents, brothers or sisters. As such, the adoptee’s negative behaviors and developmental delays, and the response of family members to the adoptee, prevent family members from forming connections post-adoption.

The typical children need knowledge—pre-adoption—to offset disappointment, anger, frustration, isolation, loneliness and sorrow. Specifically, they need information in six main areas:

- Overview of Adoption:
 - Where is my brother or sister coming from?
 - How did he or she get there?
 - Who will help us throughout the adoption process?
- Coping skills
 - What are coping skills?
 - How do siblings cope with questions about their adopted brother or sister?
 - How do they cope with all those negative behaviors?
 - Keeping brothers and sisters safe
- Expressing feelings
 - It’s okay to talk with Mom and Dad
 - Negative and positive feelings are expected
- Transcultural adoption issues
 - Why is everyone looking at our family?
 - How do brothers and sisters answer questions from friends, neighbors, family members and strangers?
 - How do siblings cope with prejudice and discrimination?
- Networking with other brothers and sisters
 - Creating a support system for brothers and sisters
 - Positive aspects
 - Yes, there are positives!
 - Maturity, advanced problem-solving skills, compassion, career goals, awareness of consequences, and an understanding of what it means to be a family emerge throughout the adoption experience.

Regarding brothers and sisters in adoption, we must keep in mind that how professionals and parents handle the dissemination of information about a sibling’s special needs will greatly influence the adjustment of the children already in the family (Meyer & Vadasy, 1994). This, in turn, affects the adoptee’s emotional well-being, and parent’s state of mind. When we prepare brothers and sisters, we ensure adoptions that take into account the best interest of each member of the adoptive family.