

fostering perspectives

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Honoring and maintaining sibling connections

My brothers live far away. Each has his own career and family. Due to distance we don't see each other very often, but not a day goes by that I do not think about them. I feel a deep connection to them that goes beyond words. My siblings are part of who I am.



If you have brothers or sisters, I think you will know what I mean. The influence of siblings on our lives is hard to exaggerate.

Historically, the child welfare system has not always done a great job acknowledging and protecting sibling relationships. Fortunately, that's changing. In North Carolina and across the nation child welfare policy and practice increasingly emphasize preserving and maintaining sibling relationships of children in foster care whenever possible (Shlonsky, et al., 2005).

Yet for many children, foster care still means being separated from their brothers and sisters. National studies suggest that up to 75% of children in foster care are separated from at least one of their siblings (Casey Family Programs, 2003; CASCW, 2000).

This issue of *Fostering Perspectives* is about honoring and maintaining sibling connections. We lead off by bringing you the voices of children in care responding to the question, "Why are your siblings important to you?" Elsewhere in this issue you'll hear from many others, including:

- A birth parent whose sister stepped in to care for her children until they could return home.
- A man who found his sisters many years after they were separated by foster care.
- Adoptive parents who thought their family was complete until they learned their daughter had a brother who needed them.

I hope that as you read this issue you will think about what you can do—as a foster parent, kinship parent, adoptive parent, or child welfare professional—to honor and preserve sibling connections for the children in your lives. —John McMahon, Editor

Additional essays from kids in care can be found on pages 2, 8, and in the online version of this issue at <www.fosteringperspectives.org>



Joseph, age 7

My sister always tells me that she loves me. Jayden is the best sister in the world to me. She shares her toys and her pony with me because I don't like my pony.

My sister is only three years old, but she has a big heart with me in it. Jayden is braver than me—she is not scared of the dark like me. When I was left alone in a big house all I had was my sister to keep me company till someone returned. I love her, even if sometimes I want peace and quiet.

I would be lost without her.

Joseph's letter won first prize, for which he was awarded \$100.

My sister is only three years old, but she has a big heart with me in it. . . . I would be lost without her.



Arlene, age 16

[When they] moved us and placed us all in different homes I felt as if God was punishing me for something. It broke my heart. . . . I had sleepless nights wondering: Is my sister OK? Has she been fed? Have they left the light on for her? I got on my knees and asked, "Why me, God?"

I could not see myself without siblings. I wouldn't give them up for anything, not even if Bill Clinton, George Bush, or Barack Obama came to my door and asked for them. Though it would be nice to meet them, they can't have my siblings. My family is my world. . . .

I am an only foster child in my home. It feels as if I am drowning . . . because my sister is not with me.

What is important about siblings? Everything. . . . Yes, they can be annoying, but aren't we all? My grandma always said before she died, "This would be a boring world without siblings because you would have no one to talk to, fuss with, or be nice to. So take advantage of what you have." She was right. . . .

Having sisters and brothers is the most important part of life, right after moms. Enjoy every minute of them because when they are gone it feels like an eternity till you get to see them again.

Arlene won second prize, for which she was awarded \$50.

I wouldn't give up my siblings for anything, not even if Bill Clinton, George Bush, or Barack Obama came to my door and asked for them.



Cierra, age 17

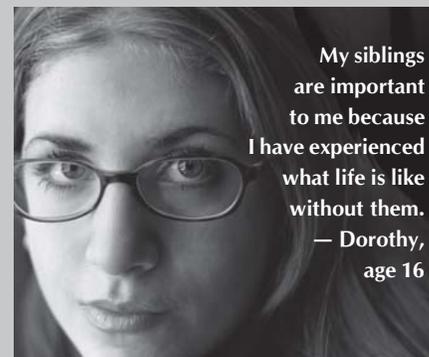
My siblings meant everything to me, but over the course of the last two years, our relationship has slowly deteriorated. There were five of us altogether, but now I appear as an only child. . . .

The group home that we went to forever changed our relationship. Nothing has been the same. I see them and it feels like I don't even know them at all. I raised my little sister from infancy and I see her now and she's almost a stranger to me. Everything—or at least most of it—is out of my control. Our visits are limited. At one point, I couldn't even talk to any of them at all. There would be times when we would have meetings, but no one would talk because it became so awkward since we were so far apart. Someday I would like to know if my siblings have overcome the past, but I don't think I'm quite ready for that yet. I think it's time for me to step out of the "mother" role and become the sister I was meant to be.

My relationship with my siblings isn't the greatest. We were a close knit family. Now I'm out in the cold. I have faith that one day this will get better.

Cierra received \$25 for having her letter published in Fostering Perspectives.

My relationship with my siblings isn't the greatest. We were a close knit family. Now I'm out in the cold.



My siblings are important to me because I have experienced what life is like without them.
— Dorothy, age 16

Jamie, age 11

When I help my brothers it makes me a better person.

My brothers and I came to live with my aunt and uncle about three years ago. My brothers are Josh, who is five years old, and Johnny, who is a two-year-old terror. They are my best friends and playmates. We live on a farm. We do lots of fun things together. . . . My brothers bring joy not only to me but to the family. I think when I help my brothers it makes me a better person. When I am around

them I teach them to do the right thing. We share good and bad memories of the past. Without them our family would not be the same. They make me very happy. I love them very much. *Jamie received \$15 for having this work published in Fostering Perspectives.*

Cyrano, age 12

My sister is important to me because she has been there and took care of me. Then one day she had to go somewhere else without me for a long time. We stayed separated until I went into foster care, too. After several years passed she had a baby boy and I became an uncle. During this time she turned 18, the visits stopped, and I began to feel all alone. Being away from my sister and not knowing how she's doing makes me feel worried and sad. If I had one wish I would reverse everything so my sister would stay with me forever. If my sister was reading this essay I would want her to know that I want her back and please never leave me again.

Cyrano received \$15 for having his letter published in Fostering Perspectives.

Being away from my sister and not knowing how she's doing makes me feel worried and sad.

David, age 14

Let me tell you why I am so close to my brother: my brother and I have been through everything together. When my mother passed away, we were there for each other. We never left each other's side. You cannot ask for a better brother than this. If I ever need somebody to talk to, I can always count on him to listen and give me the best advice he has to give. If he needs somebody to talk to I am always there. . . . My brother and I have our share of arguments, but we still stick together through the good and the bad times. I love my brother and he loves me. He is the best a person can ask for. I would not give him up for all the money in the world.

David received \$15 for having his work published in Fostering Perspectives.

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Mission. *Fostering Perspectives* exists to promote the professional development of North Carolina's child welfare professionals and foster, kinship, and adoptive parents and to provide a forum where the people involved in the child welfare system in our state can exchange ideas about foster care and adoption.

Disclaimer. The opinions and beliefs expressed herein are not necessarily those of the NC Division of Social Services or the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Social Work.

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What you can do to strengthen sibling connections

A great deal depends on our ability to maintain and strengthen sibling connections for children in the child welfare system.

Placing Siblings Together Makes a Difference

Usually, the best way to maintain sibling connections in foster care is to place brothers and sisters with the same family. Research indicates that when they are placed together with at least one of their siblings, children experience an enhanced sense of safety (Shlonsky, et al., 2005) and fewer emotional and behavioral problems (Smith, 1998). They may also experience better outcomes. For instance, studies have linked joint placement of siblings to increased placement stability (Hegar, 2005) and to positive permanent outcomes—specifically, greater likelihood of reunification (Webster et al., 2005), adoption, and guardianship (Leathers, 2005).

Separating Siblings Can Have Consequences

For most children, being separated from their siblings means losing one of the most significant relationship they have known. This can have a variety of negative consequences:

- Brothers and sisters separated from each other in foster care can experience trauma, anger, and an extreme sense of loss. Separating siblings may make it difficult for them to begin the healing process, form attachments, and develop a healthy self-image (McNamara, 1990).
- Studies have shown that even babies experience depression when separated from their brothers and sisters. In one study, a 19-month-old girl was better able to cope with separation from her parents than from her siblings. When the children in this family were placed in different foster homes the baby stopped talking, refused to eat, withdrew, and rejected affection. This persisted even after she was reunited with her parents. It was not until her brothers and sisters rejoined the family that the child resumed her former behavior (Meyendorf, cited in Hegar, 1988).
- Sometimes it is only through their siblings that children have been able to gain any positive 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 (NRCFCPP, 2004).
- Children separated from their siblings in care may be at greater risk of placement disruption and less likely to exit to adoption or subsidized guardianship (Leathers, 2005).

Keeping Siblings Together

The primary responsibility for keeping siblings together when they enter out-of-home care lies with child welfare professionals and the courts. However, kinship, foster, and adoptive parents (i.e., resource families) can make a big difference by doing the following:

- **Express an interest in sibling groups.** Sometimes siblings are separated for no other reason than that the agency involved cannot find a single family to care for them all (Shlonsky, et al., 2005). Resource families can help by clearly communicating to their agencies their interest in caring for sibling groups.
- **Be open to changes.** Children are more likely to be separated from their siblings if the children enter care at different times (Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005; Washington, 2007). Make it clear to your agency that you understand how important it is to keep brothers and sisters together, and that you would consider opening your home to the siblings of children already in your care, should the need arise.

Maintaining Connections

Even when siblings are not in the same placement, resource families can maintain and strengthen sibling connections using the following strategies, most of which come from the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning's *Sibling Practice Curriculum* (2004):

- Family-to-family visits and joint meals.
- Playgroup meetings during foster parent support groups or training.
- Have the children join the same sports association (e.g., play soccer together).
- Allow children to use the phone, email, Skype, or Instant Messenger to chat briefly on a daily basis.
- If your child's sibling is being cared for by another resource family in the same community, explore the possibility of babysitting for one another or using the same babysitter, child care, or respite provider. It is the social aspect of spending time together in an unstructured way that is valuable to building and maintaining sibling relationships.
- If you are an adoptive parent, consider allowing ongoing contact with your child's siblings even after the adoption is finalized.
- Children in foster care may live in homes with other children (foster, adopted, or birth) to whom they are not related, but with whom they develop ties. Ask the children in your home who is important to them and, in collaboration with the child's custodial agency, help the child maintain connections with these children as well.
- Look for opportunities to bring separated siblings together in settings such as reunion camps specifically geared to helping children connect with their brothers and sisters.



Ways Agencies Can Support Sibling Placements

- Siblings should have the same worker, if possible.
- Place children in homes as geographically near to each other as possible.
- When a family is recruited to foster sibling groups, don't fill up the home with individual children just because the beds are there. Some programs provide a stipend for families without placements, as an incentive to remain with the agency and keep beds open until a sibling group needs placement.
- Siblings can be placed in stages, so that the foster home is not overwhelmed and each child can integrate into the family.
- Provide extra supports to help the family deal with logistics—transportation, assistance with tasks such as school registration, day care, etc.
- Make supportive services such as training and respite care available and accessible.
- Encourage/start support groups in which resource families can share and learn from one another. Families who have adopted sibling groups have the capacity to act as mentors, support networks, and recruiters.
- Make sure resource families, especially kinship caregivers, are receiving all the financial support to which they are entitled.
- Ask community members and businesses to help support resource families by donating or providing at a lower cost items such as vans, bunk beds, etc.
- If siblings must be placed separately, agencies can maintain the sibling relationship through joint therapy sessions, shared vacations, shared respite care, and by placing siblings in the same neighborhood or school district.

Sources: CASCW, 2000; McFadden, 1983; NRCFCPP, 2004;

Her love kept me going by Youshell Williams

My Sister Helped Us All When My Kids Went into Care

When New York City's Children's Services (ACS) came into my life, I was going through a very bad time. I had just gotten out of an abusive marriage, my kids were having trouble in school and I was depressed.

I usually turned to my sister for guidance. My big sister, Gina Williams-White, is a gift from God. I am so blessed to be related to such an angel. My sister goes out of her way to show how much she loves my children and me.

A Mother to Me

Gina and I have been close ever since we were kids. When I was only 14, we had to watch our mom die of cancer.

Once my mom left this earth, I went to live at my aunt's house and I gave up on life. Life was hell and I wanted no part of it.

Gina was like a mother to me during those years. My aunt didn't care what I was going through. She got rid of her problem by sending me away to live with my demon father in Detroit. My sister came through as usual by sending me care packages. Her love kept me going.

When I was 18, my sister sent for me to come back to New York. Even though she had just graduated from college and could barely make ends meet, she gave me another chance.

At age 19, I married a man twice my age though my sister begged me not to. My sister stuck by me all through my brief, horrible marriage. She glued me back together, talked to me, loved me, and helped me through my heartbreak and pain.

'What Was I Thinking?'

But when I gave up my job and started getting depressed once again, I was ashamed. I did not know how to talk to her. What could I say? How could I let her know that I needed even more help? She'd already done so much.

Finally, instead of telling my sister what I needed in a direct way, I called the ACS worker who

kept showing up on my doorstep and asked her to take my two children to my sister in Staten Island. Instead, she put them in a foster home in the Bronx.

Looking back, I think, "Why didn't I just call my sister first?" I was just so ashamed of feeling weak.

'It Ain't Over!'

When my sister found out what that worker did to me, she was furious. She rushed over and we cried and planned together. We went to court the next month and my sister got custody of my children. The judge asked the worker, "Why did you put the children in foster care when there was family willing to take them?" Of course, she had nothing to say.

My children blossomed while living with my sister, her husband, and their son. My sister also tried to include me in everything. My visits started off very unsatisfyingly at the agency office, but soon my sister and I were taking the kids to movies and out to eat together.

My Children Prospered...

As happy as I was with the way my sister cared for my children, we also had disagreements. Sometimes I felt upset and frustrated that I could not make the decisions I was used to making for my children. At times, I felt like my sister believed she knew more about my kids than I did. I felt embarrassed and angry when I felt like my sister also believed I was an incapable parent.

For instance, I had told my sister that my son got sick every two months with a sore throat. She didn't believe me until she had to take him to the doctor every two months and saw for herself.

It definitely was not easy for either of us to handle these stressful situations but our love brought us through all the difficulties and misunderstandings. We worked together to make sure things went right for our children.



...I Felt Lost

My children lived with my sister for three years. For a while, I felt like I would never get them back. I was doing what I was supposed to do but the case seemed to drag on. I felt depressed and lost. I half believed my kids were better off with my sister.

One time I briefly turned to booze to try to drown my sorrows. My sister and her husband did not tolerate that kind of nonsense.

"You better get yourself together quick, girl. These children need you!" my sister said.

"They don't seem to need me. It looks like you got everything covered!" I said in a sarcastic tone of voice.

My sister gave me such a look that I immediately felt ashamed of myself. I knew better.

Where Are My Angels?

Finally an agency worker told me what to do to get my children back and my children were returned to me nine years ago. I waited so long to get my angels back but the transition was far from easy.

After three years, my children were too used to living with my sister and her husband. Once they came home, they acted like little monsters.

For months, my kids couldn't wait to escape from me on the weekends and go back to Aunt Gina, where they felt more comfortable. I couldn't blame them, but that didn't stop my tears of frustration and pain.

'Keep Going'

My sister was a big support. She told me, "I know it's not easy but

they love you. Don't give up, girl."

"You don't have to worry about me ever giving up again. The price is too high. I love my babies," I told her. "But they are not the same, Gina. All they talk about is you—Aunt Gina this, and Aunt Gina that. Aunt Gina, Gina, Gina! Ahhhh! What the hell did you do to my children? Just kidding, but I don't think they remember that I love them too!"

"When they were here with me, they always said they missed you and couldn't wait to go home," Gina reassured me. "They just need a lot of attention. Keep going, Youshell."

I realized that they were afraid I would lose them again and that they resented that I'd lost them to foster care in the first place. With help from family therapy, my children calmed down over time and were happy to be home once again.

Looking to Give Back

Now my sister and I are still close and so are our children, especially my older daughter, who truly adores her Aunt Genie. I think she calls her that because she thinks my sister is magical. She makes so many of our dreams come true.

I hope one day to show my sister in a huge way how much I appreciate the sacrifices she has made for me and all the love, care, and joy she has given my children and me. I show my sister a lot of love and buy her small things—gold jewelry, purses—but there's no way I can repay her for all she's done.

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A place for Michael by Basil Qaqish

We Thought Our Family Was Complete Until We Learned Our Daughter's Brother Needed Us

"I am sorry," the doctor said. "You can't get pregnant on your own. You'll need an *in vitro* procedure."

This happened quite a few years back. *In vitro* procedures have less than a 30% chance of success and a high price tag. Too high for us at the time.

You see, I had married a beautiful western girl and immigrated to the west. My academic degrees from back home did not amount to much, or so I felt. So, I decided to have a fresh start for my academic studies by getting an undergraduate degree from a western university, then pursue graduate studies.

The fact Diane, my wife, could not get pregnant did not bother me much. But it was a different story to Diane. Accepting this was very hard for her.

We Look at Adoption

Years went by. I finished my education and our life became more stable. I had a secure job with a reasonable income. Even though we were not getting any younger, my wife still longed to have children.

So we looked at adoption. Many couples go to faraway countries like Russia and China to adopt a child. But we had heard there were children in North Carolina who needed a family.

We went to the department of social services (DSS) to learn about fostering and adoption. We found that to get licensed as foster/adoptive parents, a couple has to do many things. There are classes to go to. There are medical exams. The fire marshal has to come to your home to make sure it is safe. Police reports have to be obtained to make sure you are not a danger to children.

It takes real commitment to become a foster/adoptive parent.

My wife and I went to special classes and met all the requirements necessary to be licensed as foster/adoptive parents. It took us about eight months to get there, but finally we got licensed.

Our Family Grows

Not long afterwards, DSS called and asked Diane to go to the local hospital. There, a social worker brought her a two-day old child, Kayla, to take home and care for until the judicial system could decide on the matter. Diane was thrilled.

It's been almost four years since that day. Kayla now carries my family name for her last name. We adopted her when she was about 16 months old.

Later, DSS placed Sierra with us. She was a lively two-year old, but with no structured way of life. She had been in a home where

all they ate was junk food. She did not have any schedules of eating or sleeping. We had to work to create some structure in her life.

After she was placed with us, Sierra was given a battery of tests and was found to be behind other children her age in seven out of eight developmental areas. After that we took her for therapy and tried to design activities to help her. We also ended up adopting that lovely child.

Sierra started school this year. When we took her to register her in school, they had to test her on a battery of tests geared toward understanding her cognitive and social skills and development. Well—and this brings tears to my eyes—Sierra scored *above average* on most of the tests: cognitive and social and emotional!

Children are resilient. All they need is some structure and love and they will thrive.

A Full House

After adopting Sierra and Kayla, my wife and I felt our family was complete. We had two lovely children. Our lives were full and busy with family and friends.

Plus, we had a two-bedroom house. I literally had to watch my steps to avoid stepping on the girls' toys. The house was cramped. We couldn't even have a visitor stay overnight. So we decided to let our foster home license expire.

We Change Our Plans

Then one day, the DSS foster care and adoption supervisor visited with my wife. Out of the blue, she asked Diane if she wanted another baby boy!

We really did not plan on another child. But my wife asked the supervisor about the child. As it turned out, he was a half brother to one of the girls we adopted.

When she learned that, the decision was made in my wife's mind. We couldn't say no to a child who is a brother to our little girl.

So, when I came home from work that day, I had a new surprise waiting for me. I just did not know how we could make it in such a little house!

Blessings

One of the blessings of a bad housing market is that one can buy a much larger home for less. This is what we did recently. We moved to a new house where all of our children have their own rooms—all with walk-in closets, believe it or not! We have a home that accommodates all of us nicely.



From left to right: Sierra, Diane, Basil, and Kayla

We are blessed. Michael, the new little baby, was also two days old when he came to us. He is almost one year old now. He is a charming and very observant child.

I am glad my wife agreed we would care for Michael. There is always a place in our lives for another soul to love.

A native of Jordan, Basil Qaqish lives with his family in Winston-Salem, NC.

Tips for Reducing Sibling Rivalry

- Treat each child as an individual. Help children understand that they are treated differently by you and have different privileges and responsibilities because they are different individuals.
- Respect each child's space, toys, and time when he wants to be alone, away from his siblings.
- Avoid labeling or comparing one child to the other.
- When a new child comes into the family, prepare the other children.
- Play detective. Watch and note when siblings are not getting along (before dinner, in the car, etc.) and plan separate quiet activities for those times.
- Watch how you treat each child to see if you are contributing to the rivalry. Don't play favorites.
- Have realistic expectations of how they should get along, cooperate, share, and like each other.
- Positively reinforce them when they are getting along or when they solve their own conflicts.
- Make each child feel special and important. Try to spend one-on-one time with each child every day.
- Take time out for yourself to re-energize. Remember, sibling rivalry is a normal and expected part of family life.

By Elizabeth Pantley, author of Kid Cooperation and Perfect Parenting

Source: US Children's Bureau, 2006



NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association

Visit the Association's Web Site at <www.ncfapa.org>

From the Association's President

by Stacey Darbee



The NC Foster and Adoptive Parent Association is a voice for foster, adoptive, and kinship parents in North Carolina. Our mission is to promote quality foster and adoptive services through collaborative advocacy, education, resources, reunification, and networking. We partner and advocate with others in the field of child welfare. There are over 12,000 potential members of this association. We need your support to make sure your voice is heard. Join today!

Meet the 2009-2010 Board of Directors

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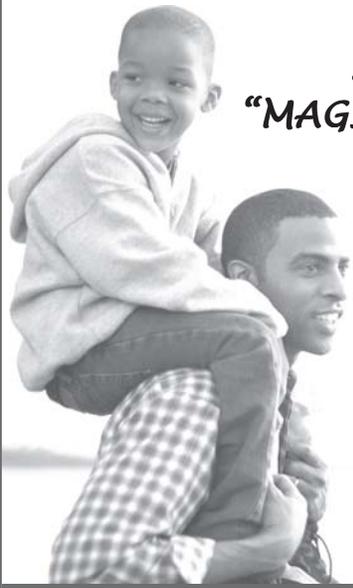
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Welcome new members and sincere thanks to former members Gregg Childers and Crystal Merritt for their dedication and hard work in prior years! If you'd like to look into becoming a member of the NCFAPA board please go to <www.ncfapa.org> to apply.

Special Award Presented at 2009 Conference

A special award was presented to Ms. Donna Foster for outstanding service to foster and adoptive families in our state. NC Foster Parent of the Year award went to Jessie and Arthur Kelley of Moore County. The award for Adoptive Parent of the Year went to Claire Duclos, also of Moore County. Congratulations to all!



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Legislative News

NCFAPA continues to make the general assembly aware that foster and adoptive families are paying attention to what is happening in Raleigh and to advocate on your behalf. When the first draft of the state budget reduction was published this summer, it proposed to eliminate the new foster care board rate increase we fought so hard to obtain. Members e-mailed, called, and showed up in Raleigh. NCFAPA also supported the Covenant with NC Children's legislative agenda and had great support from other agencies as well. We were at press conferences and sitting in sessions along with other child and family advocacy groups. We walked the halls of the legislative buildings and spoke to anyone who would listen. Ultimately, the new foster care board rate increase was saved!

Join the Association!

Membership is open to anyone interested in strengthening foster and adoptive services in North Carolina. Send this form, with payment (DO NOT send cash), to: NCFAPA, 2609 ATLANTIC AVE., SUITE 105, RALEIGH, NC 27604. Make checks payable to the NC FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT ASSOCIATION.

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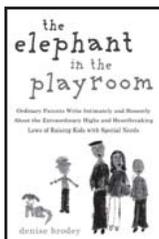


Books on the nightstand

Book reviews by Becky Burmester

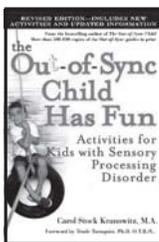
I love books. There is danger when I am in a book store and have my credit card! Regular readers of this column know that often the books I write about are ones that helped our family. My top pick for this month is *The Elephant in the Playroom* by Denise Brodey.

Right now we are struggling through the process of getting an official diagnosis for our nine-year-old son. What we know for sure is that he is somewhere on the continuum of the autism spectrum. We also now know that we did nothing (nor did his birth mother) to cause this condition and that our son will have a lot of hard work ahead of him as he learns social skills that to most of us are just automatic. He quite literally cannot read the message in my "If you do not stop that this instant. . ." look. Nor does he recognize the importance of "how" something is said.



The Elephant in the Playroom is a collection of essays written by parents and siblings of children with special needs. The book includes sections on self-care, schools, medication, "Going Public," "Seeing the Forest Through the Trees," "A View from Within the Whirlwind," and others.

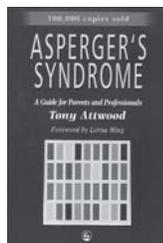
Editor Denise Brodey, herself a parent of a child with special needs, introduces each section. There follow several essays by parents of children with differing special needs relating to the topic. Each essay is headed by a brief description of the child. For example, one essay states that the author is the mother of a 17-year-old diagnosed with autism at age 4. All of the authors write from the heart. The book is almost like getting hugged and being told it will be OK. Not easy, but OK.



I have also been rereading *The Out-of-Sync Child* and *The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun*, both by Carol Kranowitz. These books deal extensively with Sensory Processing Disorder and Sensory Integration Dysfunction. The author is the preschool teacher every child should have. *The Out-of-Sync Child* is a comprehensive description of all things related to the how, why, and what of sensory processing. However, it is not a textbook, but very readable. If your child has difficulties with certain things, you could easily pick through the book reading only the sections of inter-

est to you. *The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun* is packed with safe play activities that help address sensory integration issues.

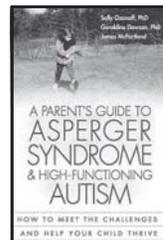
Many children with autism must deal with sensory integration issues. Carol Kranowitz is a calm, reassuring voice for the parent struggling with a child who won't or can't do many things that kids his or her age do. Kranowitz can't make the problems go away, but she does suggest things parents can do to make things better, and offers clear advice about when to seek professional help.



Readers will feel empowered by the ideas she presents for helping their children.

Currently I am reading *Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals* by Tony Attwood. Our son's therapist recommended this book highly.

Attwood writes about this condition in such a way that the reader begins to glimpse what life is like for persons with Asperger's.



The therapist also recommended *A Parent's Guide to Asperger Syndrome & High-Functioning Autism: How to Meet the Challenges and Help Your Child Thrive* by Ozonoff, Dawson, and McPartland (2002). I confess I haven't started the book

yet, but as I scan the contents and leaf through the pages, this book looks like it will help us understand treatments for Asperger's and help us learn to live and thrive with this challenging condition.

What books are on your nightstand? I love to hear your recommendations. Contact me at becky.burmester@mindspring.com or 919/870-9968.

Quick Reference for Parents

Autism Spectrum Disorders

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2009), autism spectrum disorders (ASD) cause "severe and pervasive impairment in thinking, feeling, language, and the ability to relate to others. These disorders are usually first diagnosed in early childhood and range from a severe form, called autistic disorder, through pervasive development disorder not otherwise specified, and to Asperger's Syndrome." These disorders are characterized by varying degrees of impairment in communication skills, social interactions, and restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior (APA, 2000).

How common is autism?
Two new government studies indicate about 1 in 100 children have autism disorders—higher than a previous U.S. estimate of 1 in 150. Greater awareness, broader definitions and spotting autism in younger children may explain some of the increase, federal health officials said (AP, 2009). Children diagnosed and treated at an early age can show significant improvement. However, only 50% of children with autism are diagnosed before kindergarten.

When and how does autism become apparent?
Children with ASD do not follow typical patterns of child development. In some, hints of future problems may be apparent from birth. In most cases, problems in communication and social skills become more noticeable as the child lags behind other children the same age. Between 12 and 36 months old, differences in the way children react to people and other unusual behaviors become apparent. Some parents report the change as being sudden, and that their children start to reject people, act strangely, and lose language and social skills they had previously acquired. In other cases, the child's developmental progress levels off and differences with other children the same age become more noticeable (NIMH, 2009).

What behaviors do children with autism exhibit?
According to Kyle's Tree House, an association of Autism Spectrum Support groups, symptoms can include exclusivity or a lack of significant age-appropriate relationships with others, repetitious and self-stimulating behaviors, lack of eye contact, and low attention span. Developmental delays associated with autism can be manifested in a variety of behaviors, including:

- Behavior injurious to oneself or others
- Needs in the area of self-help skills such as dressing and toilet training
- Language difficulties
- Academic challenges

What can I do if I suspect my child has autism?

- Contact your pediatrician for a consultation and referral to a certified mental health clinician who has expertise in the diagnosis and treatment of autism spectrum disorders.
- Call the school to find out about services available in your district. Talk to the counselors, social workers, and teachers who may be working with the child.
- Join a support organization for autism and become involved with other families facing the same challenges.
- Educate yourself and your family about this disorder.
- Explore all funding sources; the treatment of autism can be expensive.

Adapted from the Adoption Resources of Wisconsin/Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center of Wisconsin, 2008
< www.wifostercareandadoption.org/library/409/AutismSpectrumDisorders.pdf >

Kids' Page

Words and Pictures by and for Children in Foster Care

Vol. 14, No. 1 • Nov. 2009

Writing contest *continued from page 2*

D'Anna, age 11

My sister Lorisa is important because she can play with me when I am bored. Although she is only 7 years old, she's still does a lot for me. When I'm down or sad she tries to cheer me up.

I also have two more brothers in another foster family. I get to see them on Fridays. But they're still important to me, even though I cannot see them every day. I am thankful I can see them once a week.

My 9-year-old brother, Erick, is like my counselor. When we both failed the EOG (End of Grade tests), he was there to say to me, "It's going to be OK—I failed, too." We both share our tears. When the DSS worker left my house and took us to our destination, all the way there we cried.

My 4-year-old brother, Ryon, is a sweet little boy when he wants to be. He is my everything. He lives with my brother Erick. They're all important to me—I love them with all my heart. Sometimes I might not like what they do or I might lose my temper and words will come out I don't mean to say. But I don't mean it. I cannot live without my brothers and sister on my side.

D'Anna received \$15 for having her letter published.

Brittany, age 14

My older brother and I are in two separate foster homes. Foster care isn't all that bad. The hardest thing about being in foster care (even though we are a family) is being away from "MY" family. Through my 14 years of life, [I have lived] with my grandmother for ten, wilderness camp for a year, and now in a foster home. Through it all I don't get to be with them. I love and miss them terribly. No matter what they'll always be my brothers and sisters. Maybe someday God can bring us together and we can be a family again.

Brittany received \$15 for having her letter published.

Drawing by Benjamin, age 8

Benjamin writes:

"I have one foster brother and two adopted brothers. Also Zach, which was born. They are important because they help do jobs and when I'm in trouble they're there to help me. I love my brothers."

Benjamin received \$15 for having his work published.



I also have two more brothers in another foster family . . . I am thankful I can see them once a week.

Marti, age 16

My siblings mean the world to me because we were there for each other through all the ups and downs that we experienced with our birth mom. They are the only ones who understand me. I was the mom most of the time because I am the oldest and they would always tell me what was on their mind. I miss growing up with them. I wish on a star every night to see them again soon. It never comes true.



I wish on a star every night to see them. It never comes true.

There are four of us. We haven't been a major part of each other's lives for eight years now. They have a different dad than I do and he don't see how much I care about them. Honestly, I don't think he cares. The most important thing is that they are happy and have what they need. My brothers and sister mean everything to me and I would do anything in my power for them. I want them to know that I love them with all my heart. I will see them again one day soon—I promise. *Marti received \$15 for having her letter published.*

Kenneth, age 15

The only biological family I really know is my brothers. They mean the world to me. I think about them every day even though I have not seen them in three years. When I was eight they separated us from each other. DSS said I was taking too much of a father role and they just wanted me to be a normal kid. So I was moved. I was so sad, but later on I understood what they were saying.

I pray one day we will reunite.

I am going to start with my brother under me. Austin is 12. He is in grade 7. My youngest brother is 9. He is in grade 4. A lot of people say we look just alike. They are adopted by the same family in another county. I pray that one day we will reunite.

Kenneth received \$15 for having his letter published.

Kelvin, age 15

I am not going to be in foster care my whole life, but I will stay connected to my brother and sisters until the end of time.



Kelvin received \$15 for having his letter published.

Resources and training opportunities for families caring for children with special needs

by Karen Leclair, FSN-CI, Family Support Specialist

Many foster, adoptive, and kinship families care for children with such special needs as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, developmental delay, autism, or behavioral difficulties. While caring for a child with special needs involves unique challenges, it can also bring extraordinary joys. North Carolina has a wealth of organizations serving families with children who have special needs. Knowing where to look for these organizations, resources, and training opportunities to enhance your knowledge and skills will help you address some of your concerns and get the support you need.

The Family Support Network is a wonder-

ful resource for families caring for a child with special needs. The Family Support Network, part of the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities at UNC-Chapel Hill (FSN-CI), promotes and provides support for families with children who have special needs. FSN-CI maintains the Central Directory of Resources. By calling (800) 852-0042 or visiting <http://www.fsnnc.org>, you can speak with a Resource Specialist about your child's special needs, and you can also receive printed information on disabilities, chronic conditions, and related issues.

The Family Support Network is a great resource for families caring for a child with special needs.

FSN-CI is a part of the Family Support Network of North Carolina, which is made up of affiliated family support programs. Each Family Support Network affiliate provides support to local families with children who have special needs. Their activities include information and referral, Parent-to-Parent matches, sibling workshops, support groups, and training workshops for families and service providers. Programs can be reached directly in the local community, or through the Central Directory of Resources at the numbers and addresses above.

Sample Resources Related to Special Needs

Below are just a few of the resources in North Carolina you can use to learn more about specific special needs and training opportunities for families caring for children with special needs.

- **The Arc of North Carolina** is committed to securing for all people with intellectual and developmental disabilities the opportunity to choose and realize their goals of where and how they learn, live, work, and play. Arc has 40 local chapters in the state that provide varying levels of advocacy, education, referral, services and support to families and professionals. Web: www.arcnc.org; Tel.: (800) 662-8706.
— Sample trainings: Special Education; Guardianship, and other issues relating to the lives of persons with developmental disabilities.
- **The Autism Society of North Carolina (ASNC)** provides support and promotes opportunities which enhance the lives of individuals within the autism spectrum and their families. ASNC parent advocates offer expertise in a variety of areas including information and referral, mental health services, IEP issues, transition planning, crisis services, parent leadership training, and workshops. Web: www.autismsociety-nc.org; Tel: (800) 442-2762.
— Sample trainings: What is Autism?; The Autism Spectrum IEP; Staying Safe in the Community
- **ECAC** is a statewide Parent Training and Information Center for families of children with disabilities. They provide a variety of free services to families including a toll free Parent Info Line, information packets, website, workshops for parents and professionals, lending library, information packets, and newsletter. All parent educators who answer the Parent Info Line or conduct workshops are themselves parents of children with disabilities. Their website and parent educators are especially helpful around issues of educational advocacy. Web: www.ecac-parentcenter.org; Tel.: (800) 962-6817.
— Sample trainings: Becoming Your Child's Best Advocate; Positive Behavior Support; Informed, Effective Parents
- **NAMI NC** provides support, education, and advocacy for the families and friends of people with serious mental illness, and for persons with serious mental illness. NAMI focuses specifically upon those mental illnesses that are brain disorders. These are serious illnesses that can affect a person's ability to think, feel, and relate to other people and the environment. Serious mental illnesses include schizophrenia, major depression, bipolar disorder (manic depression), obsessive compulsive disorder, panic disorder, and other brain disorders. For children, the list of serious emotional disturbances includes the above illnesses, plus attention deficit disorder, autism, and pervasive developmental disorder. Web: www.naminc.org; (800) 451-9682.
— Sample training: NAMI Basics, for parents or direct caregivers of children who showed symptoms of a mental illness before the age of 13 (no matter what age they are now)

Realistic Expectations Key to Positive Outcomes in Special Needs Adoptions

A 2003 study of families who adopted children with special needs found parental expectations had a significant impact on parents' satisfaction with the adoption, the quality of the parent-child relationship, and the perceived overall impact of the adoption on the family. These findings underscore the need to adequately prepare families adopting children with special needs and provide post-adoption services that are accessible, affordable, and available to families throughout a child's lifetime.

94% of the NC children adopted from foster care in 2006 had special needs.
(USDHHS, 2008)

"Characteristics and Challenges of Families Who Adopt Children with Special Needs: An Empirical Study" is based on a survey conducted by researchers Thom Reilly and Laurie Platz of 249 adoptive families (including 373 children) in Nevada. All participating families were receiving adoption subsidies or had an adoption subsidy agreement in place as of January 2000. Other findings included:

- Close to one-third of the families (32%) reported their children's behavior problems or disabilities as profound or severe. The longer children had been in the adoptive home, the more likely parents were to report behavior problems.
- Fifty-eight percent of families reported not receiving enough information about their child prior to the adoption. More than one-third (37%) of adoptive parents reported their child's problems were more serious than the agency originally reported.
- While relatives reported having significantly more information than nonrelatives about their children prior to adoption, no significant differences emerged between foster/adoptive parents and new adoptive parents.
- Adoptive families reported significant barriers in obtaining post-adoption services. Parents of children ages 14 and older reported more difficulty obtaining post adoption services than parents of younger children.

Children's behavior problems had the greatest influence on parental satisfaction. (Fewer behavior problems were associated with higher satisfaction with parenting.) Parents' expectations had the second greatest influence on parental satisfaction. More realistic expectations were associated with higher satisfaction with parenting and more positive impact on families, marriages, and parents' relationships with their children.

While the authors acknowledge the need for additional studies to validate these findings, they cite the following implications for adoption agencies:

- Agencies may want to increase recruitment efforts targeting families in the larger community to adopt children with special needs since, surprisingly, no significant differences emerged between foster/adoptive parents and new adoptive parents.
- Agencies need to ensure expectations of both foster/adoptive parents and new adoptive parents are thoroughly assessed. Agencies must provide special training on the developmental needs of children who are medically fragile or substance-exposed.
- This study reinforces findings from other studies that many problems of children with special needs manifest themselves years after placement. Post adoption services for these families are critical throughout a child's life. Agencies must develop a wide range of post adoption services and promote and advertise these services.

Adapted from the CB Express, 2004.

Ambiguous loss can haunt foster and adopted children

From Adoptalk (Winter 2009), published by the North American Council on Adoptable Children, 970 Raymond Avenue, Suite 106, St. Paul, MN 55114; 651-644-3036; www.nacac.org.

Ambiguous loss—a feeling of grief or distress combined with confusion about the lost person or relationship—is a normal aspect of adoption. Parents who adopt children with special needs may feel ambiguous loss related to what the child could have been had he not been exposed to toxic chemicals in utero, or abused and neglected after birth. Birth parents experience loss when a child is removed from their home.

For children placed in foster care, this type of loss tends to happen over and over again, and is incredibly hard to process. To help children better manage these repeated traumas, foster and adoptive parents, as well as child welfare workers, must be sensitive to the role ambiguous loss plays in foster and adopted children's behavior.

Ambiguous Loss and Child Welfare

Ambiguous loss occurs in two situations: when a person is physically present but psychologically unavailable, or when a person is physically absent but psychologically present. The latter type is most common in foster care and adoption.

Children who enter foster care lose contact with their birth parents, physical surroundings, and sometimes their siblings, and enter an extremely tenuous situation. Will the child be reunited with the birth parent and siblings? Will the parent fight to get the child back? Will the child remain with the same foster family? What if the child can never go home?!

A child placed with a family of a different race loses something else. As editors Sheena McCrae and Jane MacLeod point out in *Adoption Parenting: Creating a Toolbox, Building Connections*, transracial families cannot hide. The anonymity of being in a regular family vanishes when the “conspicuous family” goes on any public outing.

School can be another source of unsettling grief. When a child moves among several schools, both social and educational continuity is broken. The child loses chances to develop lasting friendships and keep up with peers academically.

The symptoms of ambiguous loss often mirror those of post-traumatic stress disorder. A child will commonly experience:

- Difficulty with changes and transitions, even seemingly minor ones
- Trouble making decisions
- The feeling of being overwhelmed when asked to make a choice
- Problems coping with routine childhood or adolescent losses

- Depression and anxiety
- Guilt

Children whose adoptive parents rarely discuss the absent birth parents or birth siblings feel the loss more keenly. In a study of young adult adoptees published in a 2005 issue of the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, sociocultural researchers Kimberly Powell and Tamara Affi correlate heightened ambiguous loss symptoms with children and youth who lack information about their birth parents and have lived with a family who failed to honor the adoptees' connection with their family or culture of origin.

In *Ambiguous Loss: Coming to Terms with Unresolved Grief*, author Pauline Boss suggests, “the greater the ambiguity surrounding one's loss, the more difficult it is to master and the greater one's depression, anxiety, and family conflict.” This holds true for the following reasons:

It is hard to resolve grief when one does not know if the loss is temporary or permanent. Children in foster care, and even some in adoptive families, often feel great ambivalence about accepting a new family when there is even the slightest chance the birth family may still reclaim them.

Uncertainty about losses prevents children from easily reorganizing roles and relationships in their family. Children who served as their younger siblings' caregiver in the birth family, for instance, can find it exceedingly hard to relinquish that role in a new family. In fact, separation from the birth family may make a child even more determined to fulfill the task of caring for her siblings.

Clear, symbolic rituals do not mark foster care and adoption losses. Society recognizes death through funeral ceremonies, but there is no equivalent for losses caused by separation from the birth family. Knowing that a parent or birth siblings are still somewhere out there can be confusing and anxiety-inducing for foster and adopted children. Will they run into members of their birth family by accident? Will their parents or siblings contact them someday?

The lost relationship is not socially acknowledged or is hidden from others. For adoptive families and their relatives and friends, an adoption is cause for celebration. Children who are adopted, however, may feel confused or guilty about expressing happiness over being legally disconnected from their birth family. Extended family members and members of the community may not fully appreciate that adoption is directly tied to losing one's birth family.



Ambiguous loss—a feeling of grief or distress combined with confusion about the lost person or relationship—is a normal aspect of adoption and foster care.

Others negatively perceive the circumstances that led to the loss. When children are removed from families in which they are neglected or abused and placed with foster or adoptive families, many believe that the children are being rescued. Children, however, even when parents mistreat them, often feel a fierce loyalty to their birth families. After all, life with the birth family may be all they know. It is familiar. Social workers and foster/adoptive parents who believe children should be grateful for being placed in better functioning families need to understand how very differently children in foster care may view their situation.

How to Help Children Deal with Loss

When children—like those in or adopted from foster care—experience multiple losses, the psychological damage may extend well into adulthood. Ambiguous loss can erode trust, and adults who cannot trust typically struggle with relationships—sometimes avoiding closeness to forestall loss, sometimes clinging to a bad relationship due to deep-seated abandonment issues. The sooner children can address issues raised by ambiguous loss, the more likely it is they will learn better ways to deal with the fallout. Below are some suggestions that can benefit children troubled by loss:

Help your child identify what he has lost. In addition to losing birth parents, he may have lost extended family members and old friends, his home and neighborhood, contact with people who share his heritage or looks, his family surname, or even his home country and native language. **Give voice to the ambiguity.** Acknowledge and validate your child if she expresses feelings of loss. Show that you understand and sympathize.

continued on page 11

“Come Home to SaySo”

by Nancy Carter, SaySo Executive Director



Many new and exciting additions have occurred with SaySo in recent months that make it even easier to help youths connect with other youths facing similar transitions. “Come Home to SaySo” is our campaign to reach young people, especially alumni, who are transitioning to the adult world. Many SaySo youths say they feel supported and “at home” at SaySo events, when they call the SaySo office, and just spending time on our website. A recent “Come Home to SaySo” poster contest awarded Titianna \$75 for first prize. Her poster will be printed and distributed to child serving agencies throughout North Carolina to help promote the support and information SaySo offers to young people up to age 24.

In addition to our new campaign, we have added Ms. Lauren Zingraff to our staff as Program Coordinator. Lauren comes to SaySo full of energy and enthusiasm to help young people meet their potential. Her background in communications and social work provide a perfect fit for her role to help build the SaySo organization and increase the range of community partners that have an interest in assisting youths. At this summer’s orientation session, the Board of

Directors outlined three goals that Lauren will help them achieve: (1) increase income through the Food Lion Shares program, (2) increase marketability and visibility, and (3) increase service and outreach to youths across North Carolina.

You can help SaySo reach these goals by supporting several programs:

- Visit www.saysoinc.org, search “Food Lion,” and enter your MVP # or call Lauren at 800-820-0001 and give it to her directly.
- Contact SaySo if you have an event and need a youth speaker or SaySo exhibit. We do our best to honor all requests.
- Visit our website often. Anyone can access it! We are constantly updating the site, adding new information about LINKS, events, and other services, plus we have added a new page for each local chapter. As of this date, we have 16 local chapters! We are currently seeking information from all the local chapters to add information to their respective pages.
- Encourage youths to join our Facebook page. We are a closed group on Facebook—the only SaySo INC group that will come up on a “search.” Our

Board of Directors is pictured on the page. We require all members of this Facebook group to secure all privacy settings to protect the young person’s location. Lauren can help them set their privacy settings if they call her (800-820-0001). We also inform youths that by only allowing friends to view their profile, they are also protecting their information/photos and discussions from potential employers and school admissions personnel.

We really are working hard to help North Carolina’s young people support and educate each other. Encourage your young people to join SaySo and attend our events whenever possible. They will receive a membership card and six newsletters per year with updates on services and information. The events are fun but the impact is great. As one young person said after many years of multiple placements, “I had to come back. SaySo was in my blood.”

We are here to stay. So whenever youths are ready, they can “Come Home to SaySo.”

Ambiguous loss

continued from page 10

Redefine the parameters of what constitutes a family.

Boss writes, “Acting as if the membership list of an adoptive family is etched in stone may in the end be more stressful than explicitly recognizing that the family has some ambiguous boundaries.”

Give your child permission to grieve the loss of his birth family without guilt. Suggest times and places where your child is welcome to express his grief, and ways in which he can grieve. Talking, journaling, drawing, or venting feelings through intense exercise are just a few options.

Create a “loss box.” Debbie Riley, a therapist and author who works with adopted teens, guides clients as they decorate a box into which they can put items that represent things they have lost. By creating the box, youth participate in a ritual that acknowledges their loss, and construct a controlled vehicle for revisiting losses in the future.

Include birth parents and other birth family members in pictorial representations of the adoptive family tree. One option would be to depict an orchard where trees grow side by side. The birth family,

Model normal, healthy responses: let your children learn how you express sadness and anger about loss.

former foster families, or other significant people in the child’s life can be other trees in the same family orchard.

Be conscious of how certain events—birthdays, holidays, adoption day, etc.—may trigger intense feelings of loss. Add or

alter family rituals to respect the child’s feelings. On birthdays, for instance, you could add an extra candle to the cake in memory of the birth family. Or you might make a point of saying something like, “I bet your birth mom and dad are thinking about you today.”

Keep your expectations reasonable. A child’s need to grieve over ambiguous losses will not be fully cured, fixed, or resolved in any predetermined time frame, if ever. Let your child know that feelings related to these losses will come and go at different times in her life, and provide a safe person to whom she can express those feelings.

Model normal, healthy responses to loss. If you or your parenting partner suffers a loss, share your feelings openly. Let your children see you mourn, so they can learn how you express sadness and anger about loss. For boys, seeing a grown man cry can be especially instructive.

Losses may loom especially large when children approach adolescence. Missing pieces of their history make the task of developing a confident self-identity much more complicated. Some will feel that they are destined to make the same mistakes as their birth parents, so foster and adoptive parents must be especially careful to avoid unflattering comparisons between the teen and a birth parent, and stress that a large part of an individual’s identity is a matter of personal choice, not some preordained fate.

Parents must also recognize that, by parenting a child who has experienced staggering losses, they will realize losses in their lives too. Support from other parents who are struggling with similar issues is key. Conversations with other foster/adoptive parents may bring to light a new way to approach issues linked to ambiguous loss, or just help you to feel less alone. Loss is an inevitable part of adoption; acknowledging the role of ambiguous loss in children’s perceptions and actions is the first step in the long journey of healing.

Adapted from two articles by Jae Ran Kim (“Understanding Ambiguous Loss” and “Adoption and Loss”) in MN ASAP Family Voices, a publication of Minnesota Adoption Support and Preservation. MN ASAP is a collaboration of the Minnesota Adoption Resource Network and NACAC.



Maintaining connections with siblings

by Lauren Zingraff, SaySo Program Coordinator

There is no question how important it is for foster children to be able to maintain their sibling relationships. For many children in substitute care, one of the most traumatic experiences occurs when they are separated from their brothers and sisters.

The 2009-2010 SaySo Board of Directors has two biological sisters as representatives. They are only one year apart in age and their birthdays are only two days apart. The oldest sister is 16 years old and currently resides by her choice in a group home. The younger sister, Shanita, is 15 years old and was recently adopted. We thought it would be informative to see how two

siblings on two different “permanency” paths maintain their connections. For these two sisters, being involved in SaySo together is one way to remain connected to each other. Their story also shows how imperative it is to listen and take into account young people’s feelings about permanency.

While these two sisters may not share a home anymore, they continue to share a loving and healthy bond as siblings. Below is Shanita’s very personal perspective in her own words on the importance of maintaining sibling connections.

Torn and Ripped Apart, Sewn and Glued Together

by Shanita, age 15

My story starts when me, my two sisters, and my brother were taken away from our uncle’s home. Our uncle’s abusive home. We lived in constant fear of being beaten for anything that upset him. We never knew if there was going to be food in the fridge when we came home from school. Would he be there to open the door, or will we have to wait in the cold, again, for a few hours? In his house “Stupid A**,” “Idiot,” and “Ugly Thing” were often our nicknames.

Split Up

So we were glad when we left our uncle’s home, if somewhat frightened. But I never thought that I would be separated from my siblings. We were split up into two groups. My little sister and little brother were dropped off first. I didn’t trust who they were staying with. . . . As we drove away, it hit me: I would never watch Power Rangers with my brother or play dolls with my sister again.

What Happened Next

Me and my big sister were dropped off not too far from my other siblings. We had visits, but they were more like meetings because our uncle had to be there.

Me and my big sister argued a lot. We weren’t as close as I was to my other siblings. We were polar opposites. But during the four years we lived together, I think I began to love her more.

My little sister and brother moved a lot, unlike me and my older sister. They both went back to our uncle. That’s when me

and my sister worried the most. Most of the time when we had visits he would refuse to bring them.

My little sister didn’t stay there. She ended up in a group home for her behavior. It was always hard to contact her and when I did see her she would hug me until it hurt.

My brother came to live with me and my big sister because our uncle had beaten him in a drunken rage. I wanted to kill my uncle when I saw my brother’s face. He stayed with us for a while. Yes, we argued, but that’s what siblings do.

Adoption: I Say Yes, My Sister Says No

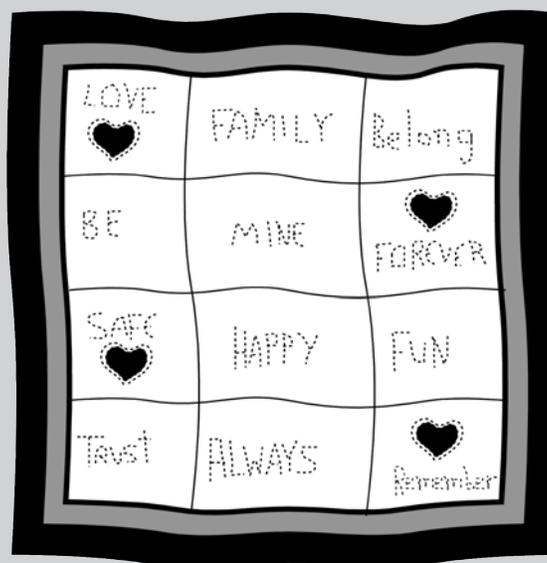
By this time my foster parents had brought up the idea of adoption. I said yes to adoption, my sister said no. She was still waiting for our mom to get straight and come get us like she promised, but it didn’t seem [to me] like she was coming along.

We all have different views on adoption. . . . I did what I thought was best for me.

Our Relationships Now

Our brother left after about a year. I call him every blue moon to see how he is doing.

My little sister got out of the group home and into a foster home not too far away from us. Our visits are better now that our uncle is completely out of the picture. One time we had an overnight visit, my sisters and I.



“Even though we are spread apart we are closer than ever. I love them all dearly.”

My big sister doesn’t stay with me anymore, and now lives in a group home. She visits me almost every other weekend.

I was angry at everyone when [my big sister] left. Now I’ve forgiven everyone, but I will never forget that day when my heart crumpled in front of me.

The bonds between me and my siblings have been torn and ripped apart by cruel and unknowing hands, but slowly they were sewn and glued back together stronger than ever because of our experiences. Even though we are spread apart we are closer than ever. . . . I love them all dearly.

Separated as kids, finally reunited

by Clemmie Tony Brazil

Tony Brazil is a true hero to his three sisters. No, he didn't save their lives. But Tony did put their lives and his back together again, against all odds.

In 1993, 25-year-old Tony, and his sisters Doris (26), Christine (23), and Gloria (24) had been separated from each other for 12 years. It was a painful period in their lives, not knowing if the others needed help, or were even alive. But this Rocky Mount family held out hope through the power of God, and love, that one day they would find each other again.

Despite having both a mother and father when they were young, Tony says family wasn't what you'd expect. Neither parent was around much, leaving the four young siblings, plus their baby brother Michael, at home alone many times. This almost cost them their lives, when at the age of 5 Tony set fire to the house one night in 1973. No one was hurt, but not being able to tell the police where their parents were got all five shipped out to foster homes.

For years, the siblings moved from one foster home to another, going back and forth to Social Services. But at least they could be together. Foster parents usually wanted babies, so Tony had the most difficult time being placed. But even that experience couldn't prepare him for what happened 12 years ago. On a Monday morning, all five went to court. Their mother was up on the stand. Tony remembers the judge asked her, "Do you want your children?" She said, "No."

With their mother's rejection, the siblings cried, knowing they'd be separated from each other forever. Christine and Gloria were lucky enough to be raised in the same home in Sanford, but the rest would be scattered to different towns, in different counties. Over the years, all of the siblings' last names were changed when they were adopted, with the exception of Tony, who came up hard in foster homes. Letters they would write to each other had to be given to Social Services, who would deliver them, but wouldn't allow a return address. Frustrated, as the siblings grew older they stopped writing, but never stopped dreaming of finding one another.

It was 1987 before Tony and Doris found each other again. She was a senior in high school, and pregnant. They always talked about Christine, Gloria, and Michael, wondering where they could be and if they would want to be found.

Seven years later tragedy struck: Doris' husband, the father of her two children, died of complications from diabetes. She was now a mother alone and she needed Tony more than ever. Doris and Tony got closer then, because he promised to take care of her and



Siblings reunited after years of separation. From left to right: Gloria, Tony, Doris, and Christine

the children. But what prompted Tony to find his sisters was to make Doris happy. Because when a life is taken, something is gained back.

Then one day in 1993, after getting home from his overnight job, Tony couldn't sleep. He heard a voice telling him to get up and find Christine and Gloria. He left Raleigh and spent an hour and a half riding around Sanford, asking people if they knew his sisters. Finally, he found Gloria's home. When she drove up with her boyfriend, Tony was waiting, still not sure if she'd want to see him again after all these years. At first, Gloria refused to believe it was Tony. But when he reminded her of the nickname she used to call him—"Pumpkin"—she broke down in tears and hugged him. This was her brother.

Soon, Gloria called Christine at work to share the joy. Later, even more tears of happiness were shed when they all went to see Doris in Rocky Mount. That time, Tony cried

for 30 minutes. "Never thought it would happen," Doris recalls.

Michael hasn't been located yet, but Tony believes they'll see him in time. There is another sister Nikki Nicole Henderson, daughter of their father by another woman, who will not share in the joy. She was killed in a car accident at age 22.

As for their mother, even though she's since seen them all together again, Tony says she refuses to acknowledge what has happened, the pain that they've suffered, and her responsibility for it.

But Tony, Christine, Doris, and Gloria are family together once again. It's what Gloria says she's always dreamed of, and now makes her feel complete. That's why she wrote a poem to her brother Tony. "Tony, you are my hero, not because you found us, but because you never gave up."

C. Tony Brazil lives in Raleigh. His e-mail address is tbrazil@nc.rr.com

Debunking Common Myths about Sibling Placement

MYTH: The "parentified child" should be separated from younger siblings to give him/her a chance to be a child.

Separating such a child from younger siblings is detrimental to the younger ones, who now must face placement in an unfamiliar home without the older sibling who could be a source of comfort and support. It is also a negative experience for the older child, who feels responsible for the care of siblings and may suffer great anxiety about their fate. Placing such a group with a resource family that understands the sibling dynamics can allay the fears of all the children and allow them to gradually develop a more "normal" relationship.

MYTH: Brothers and sisters should be separated to prevent sibling rivalry.

Sibling rivalry is a fact of life in all families. It's even possible that such squabbles are a way children learn to deal with other forms of conflict. Separating siblings to prevent sibling rivalry increases the trauma of removal and denies children the opportunity to learn to iron out their differences in a safe, supportive environment.

MYTH: A child with special needs should be placed separately from siblings in order to receive more focused attention.

Children with special needs also have the same needs all children have—to be loved, to belong, to feel safe. Families are what satisfy these needs, and brothers and sisters are part of families. In addition, placing a child with special needs alone makes him or her the sole focus of the resource parent's attention, distorting the child's sense of place in the family and possibly overwhelming the child. Living in a family as just one member of a sibling group—as the child did in the family of origin—allows the child to maintain normal relationships with brothers and sisters and with the new adults in the family. A better solution is to recruit, prepare, and support resource families who can effectively care for both children with special needs and their siblings.

Adapted from Casey Family Programs, 2003

A reader asks ...

Do you have advice for a family considering adopting an older sibling group?

We are interested in adopting a sibling group of children ranging from age 4 to 15, but we're hesitant about adopting older children. What are some things we should consider before moving forward?

Congratulations on your decision to adopt! While every adoption is unique, adopting older children and sibling groups can present specific challenges and joys to your family. Here are some suggestions for families thinking about adopting older children and sibling groups:

1. Understand the value and power of sibling bonds. Prior to their entry into foster care, many older children take on a parenting role for their younger siblings. Most children experience significantly less stress when placed with their siblings. Allowing visits and phone calls between adopted children and their birth families, when safe and appropriate, is also a way to relieve children's anxiety.

2. Be prepared for challenges. Don't be surprised if, after a "honeymoon" stage, children's behaviors rapidly deteriorate for a while. Children who have been maltreated by adults often have difficulty learning to trust new adults. While it's easy to think that simply loving a child is enough to take away their previous pain, it is not unusual for foster children to try to reject an adoptive family so that the family does not have the chance to reject them. Give all children, but particularly teens, the time they need to adjust.

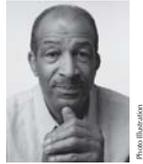
3. Assess your commitment. Most seasoned adoption workers have experienced a time in which families have adopted sibling groups and later have tried to "return" the oldest child. This is difficult and painful for everyone. To help prevent this, consider beforehand whether there is anything a child could do that you couldn't handle. Discuss these concerns with your family and the professionals involved in your adoption. Educate yourself on attachment, rejection, and other issues around adoption. Be honest with yourself about the impact that potential behaviors will have on your family, particularly on children already in your home.

4. Talk to, educate, and prepare your existing children. They deserve to know in advance what they might see and how your parenting may change after the adoption. Let them know that things like discipline may look different for a while—for example, you may be more lenient with children new to your home than with children who have been there longer and understand your rules. Although parenting and discipline may not be equal in the beginning, assure them that it will be fair.

5. Be aware of the benefits available to families who adopt from foster care. Being

in a sibling group and/or adopting an older child may qualify as a "special need" and may include eligibility for an adoption subsidy and medical assistance until the child's 18th birthday. Children adopted from North Carolina foster care on or after their 12th birthday are eligible to receive a scholarship to attend any state college, university, or community college in North Carolina. This can include the full cost of attendance. For more information, go to <www.ncreach.org>. Children adopted on or after their 16th birthday are also eligible for a Federal Education Voucher of up to \$5,000 a year to any public institution of higher learning throughout the country.

6. Be open to the blessings adoption can bring. Don't be surprised when you realize that it is possible to love adopted children as much as you love the other children in your home. Although older children can have difficulty reciprocating the love they receive, know that you have provided an older child and their siblings with a permanent "anchor" in your community, somewhere they can return to in times of need and times of celebration and, best of all, someone to share it with—you!

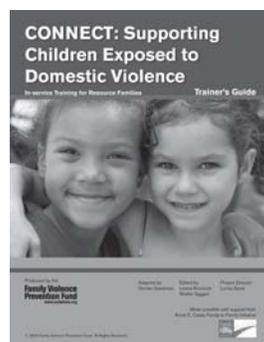


Response by Robyn Weiser, NC Kids Adoption and Foster Care Network. If you have a question about foster care or adoption in North Carolina, send it to us using the Fostering Perspectives contact information found on page 2.

Resources for supporting children exposed to domestic violence

The Family Violence Prevention Fund recently released *Connect: Supporting Children Exposed to Domestic Violence*, a trainer's guide and set of materials designed to help resource families (foster parents and kinship care givers) and others promote resilience among children who have been exposed to violence. The toolkit includes a curriculum, PowerPoints, mini magazines, and optional training videos and Public Service Announcements (PSAs).

The materials are available to download at <http://endabuse.org/content/features/detail/1314/>. Free copies of the CD can be ordered by e-mailing childrensteam@endabuse.org



Supporting Children Exposed to Domestic Violence

Send the right messages about violence being a choice, and that the violence is not the child's fault. Say things like:

- *The violence in your home was not your fault, no matter what anyone said.*
- *It's not safe to try to stop the violence, even though you might really want to.*
- *It's not your fault that you aren't living with your mom and dad. You didn't do anything wrong.*
- *It isn't your job to protect your mom. Your job is to keep yourself safe, and to help keep your brothers/sisters safe.*
- *I don't think your father is a bad person, but his violence is not okay. However you feel about him is okay — it's normal.*
- *If you're angry at your mom, that's okay too.*
- *It's important to talk about how you're feeling. (Help them think of two or three people they could talk to).*

Reprinted from: Family Violence Prevention Fund. (2009). *Connect: Supporting children exposed to domestic violence*. Accessed Oct. 1, 2009 from <<http://endabuse.org>>



Help us find families for these children

For more information on these children or adoption in general, call the NC Kids Adoption and Foster Care Network at 1-877-NCKIDS-1 <www.adoptnckids.org>



Travis

Travis (age 12) and Timothy (age 14)

These brothers are close and would like to be adopted together. They have never been separated. They thrive on adult attention, affection, and praise.

Timothy loves to be near adults. He likes to be helpful and beams when praised for his good work. He has a great sense of humor and loves to laugh. Some of his favorite activities include fishing, playing basketball, and watching NASCAR. He also enjoys going out to eat, watching movies, being read to, and caring for others. (NC# 105000864)

Travis likes to spend time playing video games and working on his computer. He enjoys baseball, basketball, and anything to do with NASCAR. Like his brother, he also enjoys going out to eat and watching movies. He likes going to the park. (NC# 105000865)

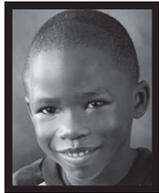


Timothy

Sandra (age 12) and Pa'Cola (age 17)

Sandra is a happy, sweet, and friendly girl with a beautiful smile. She has a pleasant personality and a fun sense of humor. Sandra is curious and inquisitive and loves to talk. She enjoys jumping rope, playing basketball, and board games. Sandra is quite an animal lover and says her favorites are dolphins, cheetahs, and monkeys. She also loves to dance, sing, read, and watch TV. Sandra loves to draw and would greatly benefit from some formal classes (NC# 01922801).

Pa'Cola is a sweet and polite girl with a terrific sense of humor. She is dramatic, funny, and has great leadership qualities. Pa'Cola is a very social girl with lots of friends. She likes listening to music and performing, whether it's dancing, acting, or singing. She wants to be a professional actor and hopes to be able to attend a School of the Arts. Pa'Cola is athletic and enjoys a variety of sports, from volleyball to roller skating. (NC# 01922802)



Sequan

Sequan (age 7) and Jasmin (age 8)

Sequan is a kind, loving, and compassionate little boy with a million dollar smile. He loves to show how much he cares by talking and hugging. Sequan expresses himself very well and has a special way with words. He enjoys playing with trains and video games and absolutely loves homemade spaghetti. Sequan enjoys playing soccer, basketball, and football and dreams of becoming a professional football player. (NC# 01262830)

Jasmin is an affectionate and very confident little girl. She has a wonderfully positive outlook and excellent coping skills. Jasmin enjoys swimming, riding her bike, taking ballet lessons, and reading. She also likes to be artistic and "make designs." Jasmin plans to become a ballerina or a model when she grows up. (NC# 01262815)



Jasmin

Devin (age 6) and Dustin (age 7)

Devin enjoys sports, particularly volleyball. His favorite football team is "me and Dustin." Devin's foster parents say he is a lot of fun to be around. He has a good sense of humor, is very inquisitive, and is resilient.

Dustin enjoys riding bikes in the park, listening to rock and roll music, and playing board games. His foster mom describes Dustin as "an old soul" who is fun to talk with and loves to be neat.

Devin and Dustin need a loving, caring, and active adoptive family who will set clear limits and advocate on the children's behalf. Families with experience as therapeutic foster care parents are encouraged to respond. Additionally, Dustin and Devin need a family open to maintaining contact with their two younger sisters. (# SNC1055479)



Devon (age 15)

It has been said about Devon that he "has a good head on his shoulders and can do anything when he applies himself." Friendly, caring, and athletic, Devon takes pride in taking care of his physical appearance. He makes friends easily, has good manners, and is respectful of adults. He has good behavior at school and at home.

Devon plays football and runs track at school, enjoys working with computers, and likes going to movies, hanging out at the mall with friends, and listening to music, particularly R&B and rap. He enjoys attending church. (NC# 1056000914)



Shanice

Shanice (age 16)

Very friendly and polite, Shanice is happiest doing things she loves, like shopping and listening to music. She also enjoys reading, writing, and organizing photographs into notebooks. She is an especially talented artist and could succeed in an art or fashion-inspired career. Shanice is very conscientious about her appearance and takes special care with her personal things. Shanice loves going to the salon to have her hair brushed and fixed. She plans to become a cosmetologist. Shanice would love to have a family of her own, but is worried that nobody will give her a chance because of her age. (NC# 105431735)



Darryl

Darryl (age 12)

Darryl is a handsome and quiet boy who likes to be helpful to others. He enjoys helping out in the kitchen, working in the yard, or just running small errands. Darryl gets along best with children who are his age or older. He is a talented artist and can focus on a drawing project for hours. Darryl recently started playing football and enjoys it very much. He plans to be either a football player or a truck driver when he grows up. (NC# 026-3068)



Delton (age 8)

Delton is looking for his "forever family." He is a loving, caring, and respectful child who strives to be liked by peers and adults, although sometimes his behaviors get him in trouble. Like most boys his age, Delton enjoys watching TV, playing video games, and playing outdoors with other children. He also enjoys riding his bike and playing basketball. He loves cartoons and his current career goal is to do voices in cartoons. (NC # 000000845)

Writing Contest

If you are under 18 and are or have been in foster care, please send us a letter or short essay in response to the following:

Why are fathers important?

DEADLINE: FEBRUARY 8, 2010

E-mail submissions to jdcmahoe@email.unc.edu or mail them to: Fostering Perspectives, NC Division of Social Services, 1459 Sand Hill Rd., No. 6 (DSS), Candler, NC 28715. Include your name, age, address, social security number (used to process awards only, confidentiality will be protected) and phone number. In addition to receiving the awards specified above, winners will have their work published in the next issue. Runners-up may also have their work published, for which they will also receive a cash award.

We're Also Seeking Artwork and Other Writing Submissions

Submissions can be on any theme. The submission requirements described above apply. If sent via U.S. Mail, artwork should be sent flat (unfolded) on white, unlined paper.



FIRST PRIZE: \$100

SECOND PRIZE: \$50

THIRD PRIZE: \$25

Get in-service training credit for reading this newsletter!

Enjoy reading *Fostering Perspectives* and earn credit toward your relicensure. Just write down the answers to the questions below and present them to your social worker. If your answers are satisfactory, you'll receive 30 minutes of credit toward your training requirement. Questions about this method of gaining in-service credit? Contact the NC Division of Social Services at 919/334-1176.

In-Service Quiz, FP v14#1

1. Describe three common myths about sibling placement and why they are not true.
2. Name three ways that being separated from their siblings can affect children in foster care.
3. Name three messages or lessons you take away from reading the essays from children on pages 1, 2, 8, and 12.
4. Describe in detail what Youshell Williams' sister did to help Youshell get her children back.
5. What are four things parents can do to help reduce sibling rivalry?
6. When and where will the next NC Foster and Adoptive Association conference be held? What steps can you take so that you can attend this event?
7. What behaviors are associated with autism spectrum disorders?
8. Who is eligible to participate in the NC Reach Program? What are the benefits of this innovative program?
9. How can the Family Support Network help children with special needs and their families?
10. Name four things parents can do to help children cope with ambiguous loss.

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fostering perspectives

Jordan Institute for Families
UNC School of Social Work
Campus Box #3550
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3550

Have You Heard about NC Reach?

Our state's NC Reach program provides college funding and support services to young people adopted from North Carolina DSS foster care after the age of 12 and those who age out of the system at 18. Benefits include:



- **Funding.** NC Reach provides last dollar funding after all federal, state, and private dollars have been applied, to ensure that students can meet the cost of attendance at community colleges or four-year public schools.
- **Mentoring.** Be matched with a volunteer online mentor based on your professional, academic, and personal interests and goals.
- **Workshops.** You must attend at least one workshop every semester. Topics relate to school, work, and home life.
- **Academic Support.** Participants are coached by NC Reach staff; if they fall below a 2.0 GPA they are enrolled in a program for intensive academic support.
- **Internships.** NC Reach coaches students on finding and successfully applying for internships in their communities and across North Carolina.

Eligibility Requirements

- Applicants must have aged out of North Carolina's DSS foster care system at age 18 or have been adopted from the system after the age of 12.
- Applicants must be considered residents of North Carolina for tuition purposes.
- Applicants must attend a North Carolina state university or community college. For a list of eligible schools, visit www.northcarolina.edu.
- Participants must maintain a 2.0 GPA on a four-point scale and be making "satisfactory progress" towards a degree.

For further information or to enroll, visit www.ncreach.org.