

## Sibling Conflict in Adoptive Families

No two people perceive the world the same, and when individuals live in the same house, conflict is unavoidable. Sibling conflict is the kind of conflict that most people are familiar with—who gets what room or toy, who gets more attention or privileges.

The conflict between siblings in an adoptive family can be more complex than those of a birth family, because the family connections were built differently. Sometimes the best way to deal with sibling conflict is to know potential reasons why it occurs, how to avoid it and what to do when it occurs.

### Potential Reasons Sibling Conflict Occurs

There are many triggers that can cause sibling conflict, but some of the most common reasons are: a child's need for attention, grief, and birth order.



### Need for Attention

When families are built through adoption, the need for attention can be a bit different. Birth children may feel that they are receiving less of your attention. On the other hand, it could be that the child who was recently adopted needs more time and attention and the conflict between siblings could be a signal to you of just that. Specifically, children who have spent time in foster care may be confused about why they were taken from everyone and everything

that was familiar to them, and will likely need extra attention. Even with pre-placement visits, your child will need some time with everyone before he or she begins to feel like part of the family.

**Grief** is also a common cause for conflict in a family—and grief sometimes masks itself as anger, sadness, frustration, and resentment. Many adoptees struggle with the loss of their birth and foster families, which is sometimes called “ambiguous loss.”

Pauline Boss, who has a website called [ambiguousloss.com](http://ambiguousloss.com),

describes it by saying, “With ambiguous loss, there is no closure; the challenge is how to learn to live with the ambiguity.”

It's a mix of grief and confusion and can be very difficult for children to understand. They know their birth family is physically

absent, but they are psychologically present. This is common for any adopted child, even a child adopted at birth.

Some of the situations that may occur between siblings dealing with grief include:

- A birth child being angry at her sister for being in her room again. This may be a clue that she is grieving for the privacy she had before you adopted her sister.
- Adoptees may feel as though they may be unwanted as brothers and sisters. Some adoptees feel as though their birth

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parents didn't want them, and this sometimes correlates to feeling unlovable to their siblings as well. They likely know their adoptive parents want them, but they're not always so sure about their siblings.

- Adoptees may be grieving their birth siblings who live elsewhere, whether they remember them or not. Sometimes this is triggered by interaction with the brothers and sisters in their adoptive family.

Grief as a cause for sibling conflict can be present in all families, but is more common in families with adoptees, due to the children's feelings of loss of their birth family (and/or foster family).



### Birth Order

According to adoption professional Arleta James, who wrote *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption: Helping Children Navigate Relationships When New Kids Join the Family*, birth order is another cause of sibling conflict that's found in adoptive families. It's often very difficult for children to move from their familiar place in the family to an unfamiliar new role.

A child who is used to being the oldest may struggle with now being the middle child and what that means as far as the responsibilities and accompanying privileges in the family.

Children who are familiar with the middle child role and then move into an older middle child role may also struggle with how their role will change: Will they now have to help more with babysitting or picking up extra or new chores? Or maybe their semi-responsible middle child role gets "demoted" when an older middle child enters the mix. And just like families who don't adopt, if you adopt a child who is now the youngest, the

previous youngest child may struggle with not being the youngest child and may resent sharing the attention.

### How to Avoid Sibling Conflict in Your Family

The first step in avoiding sibling conflict is to identify what triggers the conflicts between the children. If you can identify the losses each child is experiencing, you are likely to get a better handle on the triggers to conflict, since they are often related.

As parents, it's our role to help them find other ways to deal with their grief. A few examples of ways to help children gain their self esteem and work through past losses include:

***Give children their own safe place.*** We all need our own place to be able to escape to within the house to process through our feelings and a place to keep special things such as a life book, photographs, or a special gift from their birth family. This is especially important if your children have shared bedrooms and may not feel as though they have a place of their own.

***Enhance positive interactions with all of your children by planning family activities.*** Look for activities or games where everyone "wins" if they work together. You may also want to work on a puzzle as a family or grow a garden, something that everyone can work on together and accomplish as a family.

***Encourage each of your children child to develop his or her own interests.*** This will help because your children won't be compared to their siblings. It will also help in building your children's self esteem by honoring their individual choices and talents.

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**Allow one-on-one time for each of your children.** Try to have a guideline that during each child's one-on-one time, he or she can talk to you privately about any issue. Feeling as though they are understood may help them feel a little better and reassure their importance within the family. One-on-one time also offers your child the opportunity to bond with you, which every relationship needs.

These are a few suggestions of ways to decrease the amount of sibling conflict in your family. Although these tips may help in avoiding conflict between your children, there will always be some conflict. The goal is to decrease the amount of conflicts that arise.

### **What to Do When a Conflict Occurs**

One of the best things you can do in conflicts between your children is to try and remain calm while you separate the children. Once your children have been separated, talk to each one individually and listen as each tells you his or her side of the story. Allow them to express how they felt in the situation and validate their feelings. When talking to your child about a sibling conflict.

**Acknowledge Feelings.** Instead of dismissing negative feelings about a sibling, acknowledge the feelings. When your child is mad at one of his siblings for breaking a toy, he might say he hates his brother. You might respond by saying, *"It looks like you're feeling mad and I don't blame you. Your favorite toy is broken and you didn't do it. I'd be mad too."*

### **Split Your Time Between Children.**

When your children are arguing over whose turn it is to spend time with you, it may be easy to say, *"I will spend 15 minutes with you after I spend 15 minutes with your sister."* Instead try saying, *"I know I've been spending a lot of time with your sister lately, but this project is very important to*

*her. As soon as I'm finished, I want to spend time on something that's important to you."*

**Give your children in fantasy what they don't have in reality.** Your daughter might say, *"I heard him laughing about me with his friends."* Instead of responding, *"Oh honey, that's just how brothers are,"* try saying, *"I bet that hurt your feelings, and you wish he'd show some loyalty to his sister."*

**Help children channel their hostile feelings into symbolic or creative outlets.** If you walk into the room and your children are fighting over a toy, instead of saying, *"Are you trying to break his arm?! Do you need to go to the naughty chair?!"*, try saying, *"No hurting your brother! You can show me how you feel with your doll."*

**Stop hurtful behavior and show how angry feelings can be discharged safely.** Refrain from attacking the attacker. For example the one child knocks over another child's tower of blocks and you walk in on them trying to hit their sibling. Try saying, *"No hitting! Tell your brother how angry you are with your words, not hands!"*

These are only a few examples of ways to acknowledge your child's emotions. The more your children feel as though their feelings are validated, the more likely conflict will decrease.

Sibling conflict is not something that occurs only within adoptive families, although it can happen more often and for different reasons than in birth families.

But there's also an upside to sibling conflict: It's normal, healthy and it's one of the best ways children learn how to negotiate, compromise and have respect for others. At the Wisconsin Family Connections Center, we hope we can help you discover why your children are having conflicts and

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how to effectively respond. Please call us at 800-762-8063 or at [info@wifamilyconnectionscenter.org](mailto:info@wifamilyconnectionscenter.org).

*This tip sheet is intended to give tips and information about conflict that does not pose a safety threat. If you are experiencing situations of aggression which pose safety concerns in your home we advise you seek professional help.*



## Resources

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption*, by Arleta James
- *My Brother, My Sister: Sibling Relations in Adoption and Foster Care*, by Regina Kupecky
- *Emma's Yucky Brother*, by Jean Little
- *Welcoming a New Brother or Sister through Adoption*, by Arleta James
- *Real For Sure Sister*, by Ann Angel
- Partners Newsletter: [Siblings](#)

Tip Sheet

- [Sustaining and Strengthening the Sibling Bond](#)

Additional Resources

- [Adoptive Families](#)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)