

Parenting Siblings Connected Through Trauma

Sibling relationships are among the most significant bonds an individual can experience throughout their lifetime. The bond between siblings can positively impact children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. For example, brothers and sisters can learn the important life skill of sharing—not only their personal space but also their toys, friendships, and thoughts and feelings. Sibling bonds can also result in caring and supportive connections during good times and more challenging times.

As with all types of relationships, the sibling relationship is not always harmonious. This can be especially true for siblings who have experienced or been exposed to traumatic events and, therefore, have a trauma history. Siblings who share a trauma history can sometimes form a trauma bond.

A sibling trauma bond is an emotionally complex interpersonal relationship and can be very challenging to break. Trauma can impact a child's physiology, emotions, ability to think, learn, concentrate, impulse control, self-image, and relationships with others, including their siblings. These complex emotional bonds can lead siblings to act out their feelings rather than talk about them.

"For our sons, this bond was created during a crucial part of their emotional development. In infancy and early childhood, they lived with neglect and chaos. The unrest bound them together. Even after joining a family with healthy relationships, when they were together, they tried to re-create the chaos and unrest because it was what they always did when they were together. Recreating it felt familiar and gave them comfort." - Adoptive parent of siblings with a trauma bond

Because each child and every sibling's relationship is different, the way the children in your home react, respond, or behave may vary. Below are a few examples of how you may see a trauma bond play out in your home.

- Recreating a chaotic environment
- Excessive protectiveness of the other sibling(s)
- Intense competition or rivalry
- Significant emotional responses to a sibling's pain or being upset

Furthermore, multiple factors can impact how your children interact with one another, such as lack of sleep, a difficult day at school, or too much caffeine. Meeting your children where they are emotionally can be beneficial for them and for your family. Doing so means validating their feelings and helping them work through their complex emotions.

Trauma triggers

Just like individuals can be triggered, siblings can be, too. A trigger is a stimulus, such as a specific

sound or smell, that can create a memory of past traumatic experiences. For siblings with trauma histories, there may also be a trigger—or multiple triggers—which can have immediate, sometimes intense impacts on their interactions with one another. Some triggers are easy to identify and anticipate, but others are subtle and often catch the individual off guard. Examples of triggers may include:

- Holidays, birthdays, or anniversaries
- Times of transition
- Arguments between parents or caregivers or raised voices
- Changes to the child's routine

Parenting tips and techniques

Trauma is an experience of losing control and a violation of expectations. Children expect that parents will care for them, not physically or emotionally hurt them. Creating a safe space for your children will foster a respectful, trusting relationship among your family members.

Establishing a trusting relationship with children who have trauma histories will take time, unconditional love, patience, and perseverance. Trust is something earned. Often, for children who have experienced past traumas, trust has been broken countless times. For children with sibling trauma bonds, the quest to heal their relationship with one another, as well as with others, may be challenging.

It may take some time to determine which interventions yield positive results. The following are some additional tips and resources that you and your family may want to learn more about:

- Safety and security are essential first steps for families to establish as soon as possible. Create a safe space for each sibling to be alone when they need to disconnect for a while.
- Sometimes, siblings with trauma bonds who spend too much time together can end up having intense conflicts or heated disagreements. When siblings have a temporary break from each other, by spending time alone or with friends, they may appreciate each other more when they reconnect.
- Sibling trauma bonds are more emotionally charged than typical sibling conflicts or rivalries. As a result, being open to therapeutic support from a trauma-informed and adoption-competent therapist can be a resource for you and your family to consider. Therapists can provide individual, sibling, or family therapeutic support services to begin and continue the healing journey. (The Wisconsin Family Connections Center can help locate a therapist if you need assistance.)
- Building connections with other adoptive parents who have been through similar experiences can be insightful and mutually beneficial. Our resource team can help you find information about upcoming support groups or training opportunities.

As parents of children who have trauma histories, there will most likely be times of emotional struggle and resistance. The children will need time and support to work through their feelings, memories, and past experiences and exposures to trauma. But know that there is hope, resources, and support available for you. We encourage you to contact us at the Wisconsin Family Connections Center for ongoing support, understanding, and resources.

Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption*, by Arleta James
- *The Body Keeps the Score—Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, by Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D.
- *Siblings in Adoption and Foster Care: Traumatic Separations and Honored Connections*, by Deborah N. Silverstein
- *My Brother, My Sister: Sibling Relations in Adoption and Foster Care*, by Regina Kupecky
- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: [The Importance of Sibling Relationships](#)
- Partners Newsletter: [Facilitating Strong, Healthy Sibling Bonds](#)

Tip Sheets

- [Sustaining & Strengthening the Sibling Bond](#)
- [Fostering a Child Whose Sibling\(s\) Live Elsewhere](#)

Learn in [the Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Sibling Relationships](#)
- [An Introduction to Trauma's Influence on the Brain, Body, and Behavior](#)
- [Taking Time to Help and Heal: Child Development Through a New Lens](#)
- [Creating Felt Safety](#)
- [Creating Belonging](#)

Additional Resources

- [Belong Wisconsin](#)
- [Trauma Bonds in Foster and Adoptive Children](#)