

Sibling Conflict in Adoptive Families

No two people perceive the world the same, and conflict is unavoidable when individuals live in the same house. 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 that of a birth family because the family connections are built differently. Sometimes, the best way to deal with sibling conflict is to understand the potential reasons it occurs, how to avoid it, and what to do when it happens.

Potential Reasons Sibling Conflict Occurs

Many triggers 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 familiar to them and will likely need extra attention. Even with preplacement visits, your child will need time with everyone before they feel like part of the family.

Grief is also a common cause of 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 (ambiguousloss.com) says, "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 is 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 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 challenging for children to move from their familiar place in the family to an unfamiliar new role.

A child used to being the oldest may struggle with now being the middle child and what that means regarding the family's responsibilities and accompanying privileges.

Children 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 identifying what triggers the children's conflicts. If you can identify the losses each child is experiencing, you are likely to get a better handle on the triggers of 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 within the house to escape to, to process our feelings, and to keep special things, such as a life book, photographs, or a special gift from our birth family. This is especially important if your children share bedrooms and may not feel 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 everyone can work on together and accomplish.

Encourage each of your children to develop their interests. This will help because your children won't be

compared to their siblings. Honoring their choices and talents will also help build your children's self-esteem.

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

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

What to Do When a Conflict Occurs

One of the best things you can do during conflicts between your children is to try to remain calm while you separate them. Once your children have been separated, talk to each one individually and listen as they tell you their side of the story. Allow them to express how they felt in the situation and validate their feelings.

- *Acknowledge Feelings.* Instead of dismissing negative feelings about a sibling, acknowledge the feelings. When your child is mad at one of their siblings for breaking a toy, they might say they hate their brother. You might say, "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, 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 their feelings are validated, the more likely it is that 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 and 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 to help you discover why your children are having conflicts and how to respond effectively. Please call us at 800-762-8063 or 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 aggression that poses safety concerns in your home, we advise you to seek professional help.

Resources

From the [Resource 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](#)

Learn in [the Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Supporting Sibling Relationships: Honoring Their Past, Present, and Future](#)

Additional Resources

- [Adoptive Families](#)