

# The "TEAM FAMILY" Approach

## *Helping Siblings Build Family Attachment*



By Jean MacLeod

Adopting a baby, toddler or child is a joyous event. Older siblings are usually excited to be involved, and anxious to meet, greet and play with their new sister or brother. What happens when post-institutional reality counters their vision of a dream sib, with a toddler who needs vast amounts of parental time and special attention?

What happens is disappointment and resentment, unless big brothers and sisters are prepared to help the new sibling become "one of the family". Older siblings can be incredibly understanding of an adoptee's issues if they are given information in advance, are encouraged to ask questions, and are helped to role-play potential interactions.

Children who are adopted from an institution may have no concept of family, of what parents are supposed to do, or what exactly siblings are for. Children adopted from a foster home may enter a new family while grieving their foster family terribly, and rejecting everyone else in sight. Helping older siblings view your family (and themselves) *from the position of the transplanted adoptee* will give them a base for patience and compassion when dealing with their new sister or brother.

If your older children were also adopted, watching a parent teach the new child to love and trust may create a better understanding of their own babyhood. Be prepared to talk about what all babies need and why adoption happens. Listen to what *isn't* being said when your older child asks you questions, and be sure to address underlying feelings.

Teaching your older children that helping the new baby or toddler to fall in love with *you* is your parent-job, and that they can promote this happening with helper-jobs of their own, is one way to pull them into the new child's bonding process.

Doing attachment work and activities with a newly adopted child can be emotionally draining if you are also worried about slighting the needs of your older children. Enlist your kids, and have them work *for* you rather than against you!

- If your baby or toddler has a breakdown or needs intense time with mom or dad, have a strategy in place with your older kids so they can help you handle it. Example of a pre-arranged plan of action: older children leave the room, dim the lights, turn music on low, bring a bottle, answer the phone if it rings, and have a special treat while they give you uninterrupted time to help your new child.
- If your BIG KID has a breakdown (a sudden, genuine need for attention), have a seat on the floor, put the baby down next to you, and pull the big kid in for a hug. BOTH can end up on your lap together!
- Create structured time for fun, loving activities with each child, but also plan on being flexible for triaging needs. Schedule times out of the house with each older sib where it is one-on-one, just like the time the new sibling gets. Tell them often what an amazing job they are doing as a big sister or brother, and how much you appreciate their hard work and help.
- Ask Grandparents and extended family to spend some extra time with the older kids if the new child needs lots of your attention. Grandparents benefit from the same information and preparation about adding a sib that you gave your sons and daughters. They likely don't know about the extra issues you are dealing with if it's their first "adoption", too. If your parents or in-laws are pro's with adoption-grandparenting, let them know exactly how they can help when the baby arrives, and express your appreciation for their understanding!
- Older kids can be a conduit to you, and reinforce your emotional work with the new child. It is very easy (especially when a parent is tired!) to allow a baby or toddler to attach sideways to a sibling before he or she is fully, securely attached to a parent. It is great to see siblings interact, *but if the new child is at all avoidant towards you then you initially need to be the only one "filling her up with love"*. Give an older sibling the task of reporting to you when the new sib needs attention. If a toddler falls down and gets hurt, instead of your older child picking the toddler up and comforting him or her, your oldest can say "Let me get mom or dad for you-- they can help!" and then *you* step in to be the one to meet the toddler's emotional/physical/ safety needs. This also works for diaper changes or potty, dressing, and wanting to be picked up--for all of the basic, caring parental duties. Explain that this process is not going to take forever and eventually your older child can lavish all the nurturing attention she or he desires on the new sister or brother. This makes it a tough job for the parent... older siblings make for a nice respite from the demands of a baby or toddler, but wait until your new child wants *you* over anyone, before letting her depend on anyone else.

Take care of yourself while you are filling the needs of a busy, growing household. You can't fill anyone else up if you are on empty! If the stress of juggling the needs of your new adoptee and the change in your family dynamics is wearing you down, call a family meeting and involve everyone in finding solutions:

- Everyone gets a turn to express their feelings, to bring up needs, and to ask the family for creative problem-solving. Sometimes just respectfully listening to a family member express their difficulties is helpful. A shift in the family structure, no matter how positive, can still be stressful.
- Delegate or re-assign chores. If your older kids are teenagers, then they can help pick up the slack and rotate laundry and dinner. *Change expectations by talking about the changes in advance, and noticing your children's efforts.*
- Get outside help for anything you can afford to have done, so you can concentrate on your kids without total burnout. *If this is impossible, give yourself permission to let anything not of primary importance, to slide.* Look upon facilitating the new addition to the family, and the family transition to multiple children, as a full-time job with a temporary "intense" career assignment!

The Team Family approach can work very well; it is extraordinary what big sisters and brothers can do to help once they are informed about the issues, understand what you are trying to accomplish, and are given an action blueprint. Expect some bumps while siblings work out their new roles. The end goal is a happy, cohesive family, which contributions from *all* family members have helped to build.

~ excerpted from the new EMK Press book, "Adoption-Parenting: Creating a Toolbox, Building Connections" [www.emkpress.com](http://www.emkpress.com)