

Preparing Your Child for a Sibling

Adopting a second child? Here's how to get your first child used to the idea.

by Jane Dalton

TAGS: [Blended Families](#), [Deciding to Adopt](#), [Talking with Kids About Adoption](#)



“Mommy, can you take care of me always?” asked my five-year-old daughter, Colleen.

“Of course,” I replied easing the impatiens into the garden.

“But what if you can’t?” she persisted. “Who would take care of me? Would I need a new mommy?”

“Well,” I stammered, realizing this wasn’t idle chitchat, “there’s Daddy and Nana to help if I don’t feel well or have to go someplace. And you know I always come home to you.”

Then, in the astonishing way children have of switching gears, she shouted, “Look, Mom, a butterfly!” and darted across the lawn to follow it.

My knees sank slowly into the soil. This was a conversation I hadn’t expected when we shared the news that our daughter was going to be a big sister [via adoption](#). We explained that, because the baby’s birth parents could not care for him, we would be his forever family.

While my husband and I read everything we could find on adoption and enjoyed Colleen’s excitement about becoming a big sister, we neglected to consider concerns she might have. It was startling to discover her fears that mirrored our own when we first considered adoption.

What had eased my fears? How can a parent make adoption understandable? The suggestions that follow are gleaned from adoption professionals, parents of both biological and adopted children, and my own experiences.

***Be honest.** According to Joan Regan, a social worker with Holt International Children's Services, children can sense when something is changing, and they may be anxious about the unknown. Should parents tell their children early in the process, before the home study, or after everything is approved? It depends largely on your child's age and on the kind of adoption you are pursuing. Some adoptions may take a year or more to complete, while others may take only months.

According to Regan, "Some families do not introduce the topic of adoption prior to the home study interview, fearing they may not 'pass.' In reality this hardly ever happens. Children can be told that the social worker is coming, not in the role of inspector or judge, but to help the family decide if adoption is the right choice for them."

Regan suggests approaching the subject by "gradually talking in very general terms about the possibility of another child joining the family. Parents may then define time frames in terms that children can understand, such as 'after your next birthday' or 'after summer vacation' to anticipate the arrival of the new sibling."

Susan Watson, Director of Birth Parent Services for [Spence-Chapin N.Y.C.](#), has worked with older siblings and their families for years. She encourages parents to avoid the desire to ask a child if he or she would like a sibling. "A child shouldn't have the sense that he has the power to make this enormous family decision. Parental authority in this area should be recognized from the start."

***Include your child.** Debbie and Paul Miller included their older son, Sean, in as many aspects of their domestic adoption process as possible. "We brought Sean to the home study and when we got fingerprinted. He even went with us to meet a birth couple."

Terri and Mike Guth, who recently adopted their six-year-old son, Joseph, from Ukraine, included their son, John, in the adoption process from the beginning. "We had made the decision to adopt but were debating whether we wanted a boy or a girl. We asked John. He thought about it for a while and then told us that he wanted a brother."

Asking Colleen to be our official announcer worked for us. She delighted in telling people our good news. Involving her this way strengthened our sense of proceeding through the process of adopting a second child — as a family.

"When an arrival date seems likely," says Watson, "children can be involved with preparation like buying bottles, formula, and diapers, and setting up the nursery. Older children can discuss the differences in building a family through adoption or by birth."

***Reassure:** Once a child is introduced to the idea of adoption, fears may surface about whether adoption is permanent. A child may fear, as my daughter did, being placed for adoption if her parent becomes ill. Regan asserts, "Explaining that birth parents are unable to parent at all, due to age, chronic poverty, or cultural stigmas, may help eliminate fears of abandonment if illness or temporary economic reversals hit your family." Nancy Borders, a psychotherapist specializing in adoption, recommends explaining that adoption is a plan that biological parents make for their child, not a haphazard decision.

A child's fears may surface as questions, disruptive behavior, or negative comments like, "Mommy will love the new baby more than me." Borders says that one of the best ways to reassure your child is to "constantly reaffirm her place in your family." My husband and I enlisted our daughter's help in imagining what it would be like to be a family of four. How would we arrange the chairs around the dinner table? Who would sit behind Mommy in the car? This reassured Colleen that her brother would be sharing her space, not taking her place.

Children may also fear that their sibling could someday be taken away. Borders suggests reassuring your child that "when you adopt, you become that child's family forever." Parents, Borders asserts, should impress upon their children that "siblings, like husbands and wives, develop relationships not because of blood but because they are raised together."

***Encourage discussion:** Adoption discussions with your child will help you learn what's on his mind and allow you to correct any misconceptions about adoption. Watson advises, "Include children – but don't overwhelm them with complex information. Procedural, legal, and emotional issues in adoption are tough for adults to understand. Most children are not developmentally ready to take these on."

***Prepare for questions:** Reading books about adoption, role playing responses to intrusive questions, and using positive adoption language helped us prepare our daughter for questions from family and friends. It also helped, after adoption, when we responded with authority to questions others asked in our daughter's presence.

- "Is he yours, too?" "Sure is."
- "I can tell she belongs to you, but who's this little guy?" "He's mine too."

When remarks like these come up, we talk about them when we get home. Sometimes Colleen and I fall into giggles about what we could but won't say in response to rude questions.

Watson advises providing children with basic adoption facts and then allowing them to decide how to answer questions. They will model their answers on what their parents say. She adds, "Children should not be given private information that parents want kept within the immediate family. They shouldn't have to feel that they are keeping secrets. We want siblings to feel proud to tell their family's adoption story without having to censor themselves."

***Network:** We were fortunate to find a local support group that includes families formed by birth and adoption. Terri Guth and her family belong to a chapter of [Families of Russian and Ukrainian Adoptions](#). Borders says, "Children who have a network of adopted friends do better. I think it's very important for the adopted child and the biological child to see that their family is as normal as any other family."

Networking is especially important for families who are adopting transracially. "International celebrations can be fun," says Watson, "but they are no different than any other family activity. They may be a big hit with some family members and not for others. Your biological child may enjoy Korean Culture Day while your Korean child does not. Parents should set the tone for what they think are important 'all family' events."

***Discuss the adjustment:** A new sibling, no matter how he or she comes into the family, is a big adjustment. Add to that the possibility that parents may have to spend extra time with a child who has developmental delays, and the sense of being displaced can be overwhelming.

“Making special time for your older child is especially important,” Watson says, “even though it can be difficult with all of the demands and activity surrounding a new child.”

***Empathy is the key:** Sometimes it’s really hard to share Dad with a new baby, isn’t it? Babies can be a lot of hard work, can’t they? You seem really angry today. What’s up? Such questions, explains Watson, demonstrate your recognition that it’s not always easy to be a big brother or sister.

Children may behave negatively during the adjustment period. This is normal, says Watson, “excessive clinging, needing a great deal of attention, regression to an earlier stage of development, misbehaving in unusual ways, or even trying to harm the newcomer.” If you are having a difficult time coping, or if your child does not seem to be adjusting well to the arrival of his or her sibling, contact your pediatrician or social worker for help.

***Watch and enjoy:** Because so many dreams are invested in adoption, you hope that your child will be instantly delighted with his new sibling. Borders cautions, though, that “if you try to force it, you’re only going to cause anger, hurt feelings, and tension. You have to let the kids develop their own relationship.” The Guths worried about the language barrier between their two sons. To their great relief, says Terri, “even though they did not speak one another’s language, the boys could communicate. They spent time together and got to know each other’s likes and dislikes. Now they’re buddies.”

Remember, you know your child best. What works for another child may not work for yours. Rely on your knowledge as a good parent — your child’s parent — to guide him through the process of adopting a sibling.

Questions Your Child May Ask.

Respond with Honesty

Why don't you just grow another baby, Mommy?

“Some moms can give birth to many babies. I was able to give birth to only one — and that’s you! But I want to be a mom again, so I decided to adopt my second baby.”

Why don't you just have another baby, like my friend's mom?

“Daddy and I always wanted to have a child we gave birth to and a child who came to us from another part of the world. We’ve decided that now’s the right time to adopt.”

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