

Spotlight: Preparing for the Annual Back to School Tradition

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6 Principles for Caring for Every Child through Adoption & Fostering

By Nicole Wilke

The addition of a new member will definitely impact and probably upset the balance of any family, requiring work and time to achieve a “new normal.” Changes are a natural part of life and provide opportunity for learning and growth for all involved — children and adults alike. Rightly, there is a great deal of conversation around the demands on vulnerable children and their caregivers through this journey. However, the unique challenges for children already living in the home is often overlooked. Although any parent would hope that bringing a sibling into their child’s life will be a blessing, this transition also has a substantial impact on the routines and relationships a child has come to expect. If not handled carefully, adding to the family through adoption or foster care can leave children already living in the home feeling unanchored, detached, overlooked, unimportant or even traumatized.

How can we improve the odds the experience will be overall positive? Of course, every family’s experience — and furthermore, every

child’s experience — during this time of transition will be distinct. However, keeping a few key guiding principles will help children and families to better withstand the unique challenges of this transition.

1. Create Open Communication. Talking regularly with your kids about changes — both as a group and individually — is the best way to assess their well-being. Even 10 minutes at a time can offer significant insight into how they are handling the transition process. Give them space to privately express their frustrations with the process or with the new sibling — it is normal and acceptable. Listen without judgment and help them seek solutions.

2. Involve at Developmentally Appropriate Levels. Bringing a new child into the family can trigger multiple emotions, from excitement to fear to confusion. How children are prepared has the ability to be one of the most important predictors of how a child will experience this transition. Give your child a voice. As much as possible, and in develop-

mentally appropriate ways, involve your child in the process. Talk about why your family is making this choice, how things might change, what will stay the same, and offer your child the opportunity to ask questions. Engage them in any way that can help them feel partnership in the process, like choosing bedding for their new sibling’s room or making a welcome card. With older children, it might be helpful for them to talk with a social worker or even sit in on some training sessions, if interested.

3. Acknowledge Your Child. A family is a team, and receiving a new member requires teamwork. You cannot fully integrate a child into your family without the help of your other children. Both to them and in front of others, acknowledge your child’s role in making this transition. Affirm to them that they still play an important, irreplaceable part in the family, and that they are valued and needed. A new sibling will mean new patterns: check in before you change seats at the dinner table, and before deciding who does what chore or who stays in which room. Validate your child’s importance

as a person and as a critical part of the transition process, and respond to their input.

4. Plan for Challenges in Advance. One of the biggest concerns I hear from potential adoptive parents is in regard to the personal safety of their children. As much as we don't want to think about it, all children who are eligible for adoption or fostering have a challenging history. At minimum, they have experienced the enormous loss of biological parents as their caregivers. Beyond that, many have experienced abuse, neglect and other trauma. They may lack the skills to process their experiences in a healthy way, which can lead to acting out. The other children in the home are often deeply impacted by this behavior. The most loving thing you can do for everyone involved is to be proactive about how your family will handle these issues. Even before a child arrives, develop a relationship with a clinical professional who can help you navigate behavioral challenges. One place to find adoption-competent clinicians is at <http://adoptionssupport.org/memberships/adoption-competent-professionals/>. Don't be afraid to set stricter boundaries — such as

children not going in each others' rooms unsupervised or not staying home alone — than those that might be found in a typical home.

Create an open dialogue about personal safety with all of your children, checking in with them regularly and letting them know they can tell you anything. However, although being vigilant is critical, don't go hunting for something that might not be there.

5. Return to Equilibrium. There is a vital need for families willing to care for vulnerable children, and it is understandable that parents may want to help by opening their home to more kids. However, bringing a child into your family is a huge change that will impact most facets of your life in some way. Everyone is learning his or her role, and patterns that worked previously may need to be adjusted. One of the most detrimental practices I have seen in my clinical work is that of families adding child after child, without allowing sufficient time to return to routine and stability. This can result in needs being neglected, broken relationships, increased behavioral problems, jealousy, bitterness or even disruption. It is critical

that any future adoptions and fostering be delayed unless and until all children currently in the home are safe, healthy and stable in order to avoid unnecessary hardship. Allowing sufficient time for a family to solidify is a gift parents can give to all of their children.

6. Prepare to Be Amazed. Your children may be your biggest asset when welcoming a new member of your family. Sibling relationships may be less complicated than parent relationships for your newest child, making them the ideal place to begin weaving a child into the fabric of your family.

Nicole Wilke serves as research fellow for the Christian Alliance for Orphans. Prior to this role, she worked with foster and adoptive families as a clinical therapist. Most of her many siblings were gained through adoption and foster care, and she is passionate about helping families walk their children through the rich, beautiful and challenging process of bringing a new sibling into the family via adoption or foster care. She, her husband and their two daughters call Minnesota home.

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