

# While You Wait



ADVOCACY TOOLS FOR PROSPECTIVE FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS

DECEMBER 2004



## *Keeping Kids Together: Fostering and Adopting Siblings*

One of the most important life-long bonds is the relationship between siblings. Too often in the past, children placed in foster and adoptive care were separated from their siblings. Today, social workers actively seek families who are willing to foster and adopt siblings, and there are many families who are inviting small and large sibling groups to join their families.

The following pages feature families who have adopted siblings and have learned from their experiences. While you wait for a referral or placement, examine your needs and goals and decide if welcoming siblings into your home is something you can do. You may be the one who can make the dream come true for sisters and brothers who want to stay together.

### *Guided by Passion*

Michele Hutton's and Rick Stimpel's passion is keeping siblings together. Michele says, "As far as I'm concerned, the unnecessary loss of a sibling bond is tragic. Maybe sometime in their life, children will be able to understand why they were separated from their birth parents, but they won't understand why they were separated from a brother or sister just because there wasn't room somewhere for them. Separation from siblings has a long-term psychological effect on a child."

For different reasons, Michele and Rick were both separated from siblings as children. Michele adds, "Once a sibling relationship is broken—even if there is no legal reason why the kids can't see each other or be together—it's very difficult to maintain that relationship. Even into adulthood, my relationship with my brother, who lived with my dad after our parents divorced, has never been the same. And we were very close before that."



Pictured from left to right. Back row: Michele and Rick. Middle row: Devon, 19; Vanessa, 16; Tiffany, 14; and Andrea, 18. Front row: Ashley, 13; Barrett, 10; Jamila, 10; Mariyah Deanna, 7; Jerel, 10; Marneze, 7; and Mariah Sharee, 12. (Children not pictured are Jake, 26; Mahrya, 24; Orion, 23; and Brandon, 21.

Michele and Rick had five birth children from previous marriages when they decided to adopt. In 1998 they adopted four toddler siblings, 14-month-old and 3-year-old twins. Their adoption was going so well, they decided to adopt four sisters, ranging in age from 8 to 12 years old. Then, in December 2000, they welcomed six- and eight-year-old brothers into the family.

"Our children respect for us for adopting them," says Michele. "In

the adoption community, they often say 'Don't expect any thanks from your adopted children.' Well, we get thanks and respect. Our kids know we have a passion to keep siblings together. When one of our daughters was 12 years old she said, 'Mom thank you for adopting us because I am so happy I can be with my sister. I wasn't with her before you adopted us. Thank you for giving my sister back to me.'"

## Taking a Leap of Faith

Although Mary Hankel and her husband, Todd, were committed to adopting siblings, they never intended to adopt seven children all at once. When they heard about seven brothers and sisters who were waiting to be adopted together, they were hooked.

“Of course at first I thought, ‘Seven! We can’t take seven!’” says Mary. “But deep down we felt like they were ours from the very beginning. The more we found out about them, the more it felt right to us. After meeting [the children], it confirmed in our minds—they were our kids.”

The Hankels have three birth children, Mandy, 19; Sarah, 16; and Betsy, 11. Mary says they all felt like something had been missing from their family until they adopted the seven siblings. “Now we feel we are complete,” she adds.

Mary admits that adopting siblings can be more work, especially seven. Certainly the workload is magnified, but Mary says the joys are magnified too. The older girls enjoy their new role of helping the younger kids get ready for school, taking turns reading to them and listening to them read, helping them with their piano lessons, and more.

Ashley and Brittany, the oldest of the seven siblings, spent most of their early years parenting their neglected younger siblings. Though the parenting role is still engrained in them, they are learning to relax and allow others to care for them, and they adore their new attentive older sisters.

Mary says, “The younger children have a sparkle in



Pictured from left to right. Back row: Mary, Todd, and Brittany, 8. Middle row: Ashley, 9; Megan, 3; Joshua, 5; Betsy, 11; and Alysa, 6. Front row: Mandy, 19; Jenna, 4; Sarah, 16; and Heather, 4.

their eyes, and play, smile, and laugh again. Their love of life brings joy to the whole family. Witnessing them coming back to life is rewarding. They are like different people now.”

“My husband and I have grown with our patience, compassion, and empathy, but so have Mandy, Sarah, and Betsy,” adds Mary. “They know the world doesn’t revolve around them. They know some people can’t take for granted some things they can, such as our love for them, that we will feed them, and that we will be there for them.”

Good support is a must. Mary admits to having moments of panic several months into their placement. Deena McMahon, a therapist who has worked with the children since they were placed in foster care, provided help that was invaluable.

“Deena taught us what *normal* is in our situation. I would advise anyone who is adopting any older child or sibling group to find a good therapist who understands adoption and attachment issues,” adds Mary.

Mary and Todd have had a lot of help from their community,

church, schools, family, and friends. People brought food and clothes and offered child care. “In the beginning, when it was all such a big change, people used to come and watch the sibling group so we could get away with our biological girls and have a break,” offers Mary.

“This helps birth children get accustomed to their new life without growing resentful or angry. It is good for them know they will have some time alone with mom and dad and time to make the adjustment,” she says.

Mary’s advice to prospective parents is to:

- ♥ advocate for a smooth transition by getting to know the children and working closely with the social worker and foster parents before placement
- ♥ be prepared to run a tight ship if you are going to have a large family
- ♥ take time to plan and get your house ready before the children arrive
- ♥ get a commercial-sized washer and dryer(!)

Mary’s final words to anyone who is considering fostering or adopting siblings: “Take a leap of faith and do it, because you can really make a difference.”



# Fostering or Adopting Siblings Helps Children Adapt to a New Life



Common themes surfaced during interviews with families who have fostered or adopted siblings. Although each family's experiences are unique, many families shared similar insights.

♥ One advantage of fostering or adopting siblings is that you know the children are capable of forming an attachment because they are already attached to their siblings. Maybe not all of the siblings are attached to each other, but most of them will be and they can support the one that isn't. If a child has reactive attachment disorder (RAD) and can't attach to anyone, fostering or adopting that child with siblings will most likely be a more successful experience because the child will still have birth siblings around to help form a structure for him and help him get through life.

♥ Fostering or adopting more than one sibling group allows the second group of kids to benefit from the attachments formed by the first group. The second sibling group can see that the first group of siblings have formed attachments, and that they trust, love, and depend on their foster or adoptive parents. The second group may first attach to the children from the first sibling group, and then when they decide it is safe for them, they will trust mom and dad and bond too.

♥ Sibling groups often function at a higher level than people might expect because they are in a large family. Large families *have* to cooperate or they can't do anything. Most kids want to be just like every other kid and do normal things like eat in a restaurant or go to the movies. Large families can't do those things unless everyone cooperates. Many large families believe they get better behavior out of their kids than a lot of smaller families do.



♥ Most children from foster care have special needs and many have behavior issues that will take time for them to manage. Generally kids don't usually have a good perspective on their own behavior, but they often have a more accurate assessment of their siblings' behaviors. For example, a child who has tantrums usually can't see her own tantrums, but she can witness her siblings' and ask, *Oh, my gosh that looks really bad! Do I look like that?* The parents can answer, *Yes you do. You look exactly like that when you tantrum.* Witnessing her own behavior through her siblings, helps a child more quickly gain the motivation to change her own undesirable behaviors.

♥ Siblings also recognize each other's bad choices and are more likely to monitor each other than to monitor themselves. They will caution each other and say, *Don't do that or you're going to lose your privileges.* They may not be able to say it to themselves, but they can say it to their siblings. The sibling can take the time to think, *Do I really want to lose my privileges?*

♥ Siblings also report on each other when they are having trouble outside the family, such as at school. Again, the child himself might not be able to tell his parents about the problem, but his siblings can. Michele Hutton says that even when one of her children is in trouble and doesn't care about the consequences, one of the other siblings does care. She says she has never had a case where nobody cares. There has always been someone who cares enough to seek adult help.

♥ Some children's special needs are significant enough that if they didn't have siblings, they might not have a best friend. Their siblings are their best friends. Think about how hard school or life would be if they didn't have each other.

# *Fostering and Adopting Sibling Groups Equals a Large Family*



Claudia Fletcher, an adoptive parent who founded Large Adoptive Families Together (LAFTER), believes that having a large family enhances a family's ability to help children work through bonding and attachment issues, form friendships, and deal with multiple special needs. The list below has been adapted from LAFTER's web site and was printed with Claudia's permission. To learn more about LAFTER or to find out how your family can get support, go to [www.LAFTER.org](http://www.LAFTER.org).

## *Large Foster and Adoptive Families—*

- ♥ **are active and busy and there is always something going on.** Some children lack the creativity necessary to plan their day and they benefit from the busy-ness of a large family.
- ♥ **provide instant companionship to children who sometimes lack the organizational and social skills to develop friendships.** There are built in friends who are always there for them in a large family.
- ♥ **provide relief for children with attachment issues who are trying to bond with their foster or adoptive parents.** Children in large foster and adoptive families are at various stages of bonding. Children can choose to model bonding behavior at the level they are comfortable and can grow over time. Children can form attachments to each other, which is less threatening than with a parent. They can learn to develop a trusting bond with their foster and adoptive parents with the help of their siblings.
- ♥ **help children learn self-acceptance because the child is part of a family where there are other children like them.** Each child has issues and some they share in common. In a large family, children learn they are not so weird. They see that many of their siblings take pills in the morning, have an IEP, and go to therapy. This is *normal* in their family.
- ♥ **must have structure and consistency to survive.** This is exactly the kind of environment that most children from the foster care system need to function well.
- ♥ **are more likely to have realistic expectations for their various children.** Parenting several children with emotional issues, multiple diagnoses, and learning differences makes it almost impossible to have high, unrealistic expectations.
- ♥ **have an easier time of teaching cooperation, life skills, and responsibility.** Children must work together to assist parents in running the



The Fletcher family from left to right. Back row: Kyle, Mike, John, and Rand. Middle row: Claudia, Bart, Sadie, and Salinda. Front row: Dominyk, Tony, Ricardo, and Jimmy.

household because it is impossible for parents to do this alone without help.

- ♥ **are headed by parents who have made raising children their life's passion and purpose.** There are few outside activities that don't involve children. These parents don't add children to their lives, they make children the center of their lives.

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We encourage you to reproduce and distribute this newsletter.

Janet Jerve, Writer/Editor  
Michelle Johnson, Project Manager  
North American Council on Adoptable Children  
970 Raymond Avenue, Suite 106  
St. Paul, MN 55114  
651-644-3036  
[info@nacac.org](mailto:info@nacac.org) • [www.nacac.org](http://www.nacac.org)