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## Matching Assistance Newsletter Blending Families

October 2012

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I come from a pretty diverse family. I am the oldest of six, with an adopted sister, two step-sisters, a step-brother, and a half sister. We range in age from 23 years old to 3 years old, and we all couldn't be more different. It all started when I was three, and my parents brought home my sister from Texas. The first words out of my mouth were, "When is she going back to Texas?" I was not thrilled with the idea of sharing my parents with someone else. That lasted all of a day, however, and I became absolutely obsessed with her. I insisted on helping change her, feed her, and I always had to be the one holding her if I was in the room. We've definitely had obstacles to overcome in our relationship, especially since we are exact opposites in every way. She is of Native American/Mexican descent, while I am of Western-European descent. She is head-strong, independent, and out-going, while I tend to be a little more reserved and stubborn. She is an incredibly talented artist, while I can't even draw a proper stick figure. Even through all our differences (and believe me, there are a lot more!), we still became very close and love each other so much. We still have our days when we disagree, but at the end of the day she is still my sister. The next big family adjustment came when I was thirteen, and I met my step-siblings for the first time. That adjustment left me figuring out where my place in the family was. Trying to bond and connect with my new siblings was scary, especially since I was in their home, and not in my own territory or comfort zone. There were some ups and downs as we adjusted to each others habits, mannerisms and personalities, but we've all grown pretty close. My third, and biggest adjustment, came three years ago, when my half-sister was born. It was really weird having a sister that was 20 years younger than me. I also harbored a little bit of jealousy and fear, as I grappled with the fact that she was blood-related to my father, versus all of my other siblings and I who have no biological ties to him. I have always been close to my dad- I'm his first born, and will always be his little girl, so I was afraid of being replaced. Even at the age of 20, I was coming to terms with the fact that I was not my father's biological child, and what that meant, if anything. That fear subsided quickly though, because there are still things that my dad and I can do that he doesn't do with anyone else. We go to local pubs and have some beers, go on long runs, participate in road races, and give each other "adult" advice (me on how to handle teenage girls, and him on how to handle grown-up things like adding renter's insurance), to name a few. He carves out the time to spend with me, and all of his kids- adopted, step, and biological. And that means a lot. That can be the hardest thing for a parent to do; finding the time to spend with all of your kids and attend to their different needs. When you already have children of your own and you adopt, there is the worry that your children won't get along. There is the concern that your adopted child will not adjust. You might try and over-compensate to make your new child feel welcome, which will leave your other children feeling hurt. You need to find the right balance in all that. Take some time to spend individually with your kids, and also as whole group. Keep one-on-one traditions alive too, so there is still a sense of the old normalcy present. Talk to your kids too before you adopt, and make sure that they are on board with it and that you answer their questions. Assure them that you will still love them, and will still spend time with them. Tell them that this new child will become your brother or sister, and even though they might not be biologically related or look like them,

they will still be their forever sibling. Discuss the changes that will be taking place when you adopt your child, especially if you are adopting a younger child, but stress that your love for them will never change.

My family is a mixture of different ethnicities, personalities, interests, and ages. We have days where we don't get along at all, and days where we are the best of friends. Coming from someone who is part of a blended family, the best advice I can give you is treat all your kids the same, while attending to their individual needs. Carve out time to spend some one-on-one time with each of them, but make sure they all feel included in family activities. Keep things fair when disciplining, while adjusting for age. Blending families definitely takes some time and patience, so don't give yourself a deadline for when everyone is going to bond with each other. Take it one day at a time.

### Blending and Bonding

Although many of us instantly fell in love with the children we adopted, others admit it took some time before they felt bonded. "For six months, I felt like I was baby-sitting someone else's child," says Lasick. Having been in an orphanage since birth, Jasmine was excessively friendly and didn't know how to form attachments. "She'd go up to strangers and jump in their laps."

Some kids actively push away their new family. When the Woehrls brought 21/2-year-old Seth home, he spent hours roaming from their bed to his. During the day, he would kick and bite whoever was near. The couple visited a therapist, who helped the Woehrls see that "Seth had come to us as a hurt child who was grieving," says Robin. The couple learned that they had to be patient. "The therapist told us, 'Attachment is a process, not an event,'" says Robin. "She said, 'Write that down and read it to yourself a hundred times a day.'" Seth is more loving now, and the family is no longer in therapy.

As for the siblings, it's normal for them to resent a new arrival in the family-but the adoption process can stir up more anxiety than usual. According to a 1999 study by the City University of New York's Lehman College, it can be especially upsetting because it shakes kids' beliefs that the parental bond is unbreakable. My daughter, Emily, was thrilled when we told her she'd be a big sister, but after we explained about birthmothers and adoption, her first question was: "I'm going to be with my family forever, right?"

Emily also bombarded us with questions after we brought Annie home: If her parents gave her up because they were poor, couldn't we send them money? Was Annie sad that she wasn't with her "first" mother? I always answered truthfully, but I wondered, when my daughters argued, would adoption ever be used as a weapon?

Experts say kids in blended families will make below-the-belt remarks to their siblings, as most kids do. The key is how parents handle it. Beth Hall, codirector of Pact, a Richmond, California-based nonprofit serving adoptive children of color, has a vivid memory of the time her sister, who was adopted, broke the head off her favorite doll. "You're not my real sister anyway!" a livid Hall had screamed. Her mother swiftly punished her. "That was a good thing because it sent us the message, 'Family is absolute.'" But Hall believes her parents also needed to discuss their secret fears and feelings as a family.

Article by: Pamela Kruger Source: *Adoptive Families* Magazine <http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=804>

*Adoptive Families* magazine readers share their experiences.

#### **"Callie was totally involved."**

While preparing to adopt, we made our 6-year-old, Callie, a partner in the process. She helped pick the paint for her brother's room, and we bought her a special bear to give him. When Callie outgrew her car seat, we put it away for her brother. Toys that she no longer wanted were also saved. I knew that she had grasped the concept when I told her that her dress was too small and she said she would save it for her brother.

-Denise Harris Hoppenhauer

#### **"Tina traveled with us."**

We adopted Christina Xinwei from China in 1999, and returned

there four years later to adopt a second child, Leanne Pengjing. We took Tina with us and used the trip as a way to explain her own adoption to her. She saw the procedures involved, and the kind of orphanage she had lived in as a baby. Having Tina also made the transition easier for Leanne. I'll never forget when Tina put her hands on Leanne's shoulders and said, "It's all right. You're with us now."  
-Joanne Mattern

**"Our daughter shared the ups and downs."**

My oldest daughter was adopted at birth in a private domestic placement. When we pursued another domestic adoption, she was part of the process, choosing photos for our biographical brochure and dictating a little bio of her own. She also spent two emotional weeks with us in the hospital with the baby. There she got a first-hand education about the social issues surrounding a birthmother's decision, which led to some good conversations about her own birthmother's decision, eight years earlier.  
-Kate Findlen

**"We did it when the time was right."**

I wanted to adopt a child when my daughters were 10 and 14 years old, but my oldest said she'd prefer that I wait until she felt better able to "share" me. As a single parent, I wanted and needed their support. A few years later, the time was right for all of us, and I adopted a newborn boy and a 2-year-old girl. My older girls were a great help, and it was wonderful to share the experience with them.  
-Donna Dresser

**"We just kept talking about it."**

Communication was the key for us. We knew for a long time that the twins were coming, and we had an opportunity to talk to our children-then ages 6 and 8-about the changes to come. After the babies arrived, we took time to "date" each older child, giving them alone time with Mom or Dad-a meal, a movie, or simply a walk around the neighborhood. We wanted them to recognize that they were still an important part of the family, despite the demands of the newborns.  
-Nancy Cozadd

Source: *Adoptive Families* magazine  
<http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=804>

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