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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Preparing Children for an Adopted Sibling

We recently responded to a question from a family who have two children, and will be adopting a child in the near future. We know that each family has its own particular features, but hope that our response to this family will also have some relevance for other families.

Q. We are about to adopt a child from Russia. Our new daughter will be 15 months old when we receive her. What are your suggestions about how we can best prepare our children for their new sister. We have a 7-year-old son, Brian, who is our biological child, and an almost 4-year-old daughter, Nina, who we adopted when she was twenty months old, also from Russia.

A. You are raising a thoughtful question. In some ways, Nina and Brian are about to experience challenges common to all children when a new sibling enters the family. In other ways, their situations will be individualized, having to do with their age; life histories, including whether they are adopted or your biological child; and their unique selves.

Challenges for every child: Your children will probably be excited about the prospect of a new sister, sharing in your excitement and anticipating a new playmate. Nina may look forward to no longer being the youngest, and Brian may feel very grown-up, measuring the distance between his schoolboy self and his new toddler sister. There will be expected challenges as Nina and Brian respond to the changes in family routines and physical and emotional availability of their mom and dad.

Most children wonder why they were not enough for their parents and feel

inevitable jealousies. It may help to remember that Nina's and Brian's jealousies are ultimately complaints about their mom and dad because, to them, you bear the responsibility of their dissatisfactions that result from the new arrival. The good news is that you also will get some credit, more so as time goes on.

Special issues related to adoption: Your children also face certain issues specific to adoption and the details of this particular adoption. Generally, parents-to-be travel to the foreign country to get their new child. You may be overseas for a week or longer. In likelihood, you will travel without your children for practical reasons. Therefore, your children's introduction to their new sister will have been preceded by a lengthy separation from you.

Generally, we would expect that a 7- and 4-year-old could manage such a separation if it is done carefully. Ideally they would stay at home with familiar routines, be cared for by someone with whom they have established a trusting relationship, and have some contact with you by phone. However, not all children successfully manage a long separation, and some are more vulnerable to that stress than others.

Nina probably endured trying experiences before you adopted her, and she may be particularly vulnerable to lengthy separations. You will certainly be busy when you return, providing Nina and Brian with the extra care and attention they need in response to your absence and the adjustment to a new family member while simultaneously coping with the needs of your new daughter.

Many children adopted in the second year of life experience anxiety and confusion at the time of adoption and find it difficult to turn to their new parents for comfort. Your new daughter may have a particularly challenging adjustment of her own. If adopted children endured difficult situations, they communicate a level of distress and painful emotion that other children can read intuitively and be upset by. It may help to explain to Nina and Brian that their new sister needs time to learn that she now has a mother and daddy who love her and can make her feel better.

Nina may remember her own difficult times in an orphanage, and she may regress in one way or another. Brian also may react to his memories of

Nina's entry into the family when he was a younger and needier child. If such reactions develop, you can identify these memories while comforting your children and explain that these memories don't have to be upsetting now.

There is another issue to keep in mind regarding your children's responses to adoption. Although it will not be a new idea, since Nina is adopted too, they will be reminded that children do not always stay with their biological parents. You can provide some explanation about why parents may not be able to keep them. Nina will be reminded of a very complex part of her life that she will be working out for many years, and Brian will be confronted, once again, with complexities of life that are beyond his understanding but a part of his life.

You should assume that both Nina and Brian will think about why children stay with parents, and why they don't. Listen for questions and concerns and convey your interest in discussing this matter at any time. Try to give factual answers, without either sugarcoating the situation or presenting more information than they can handle.

Keep in mind that Nina has already changed caregivers from her biological parents to the orphanage and the orphanage to you. This will be a time when she needs to be reassured that you will remain her parents, and she will be at home until she is grown. Even Brian may need the same reassurance; he sees that both his siblings have been placed with a new family. Why not him?

Although there are often unexpected developments with biological children, the path with adoptive children is more often filled with surprises and unexpected challenges for all. Be prepared to unclutter your life in the months following the adoption so that you have the flexibility to respond to the needs of all three of your children.