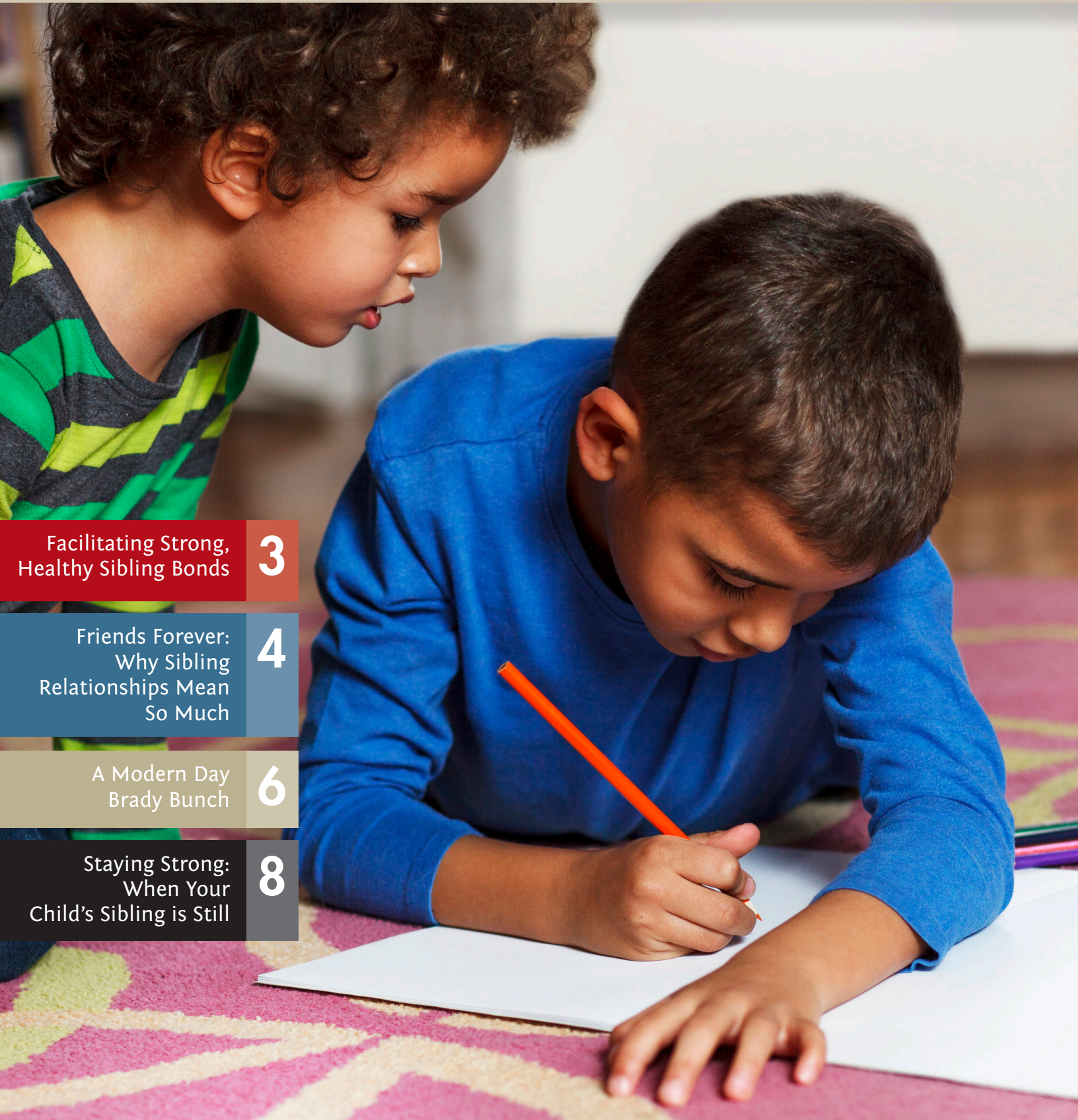


PARTNERS

THE NEWSLETTER FOR WISCONSIN'S ADOPTIVE & FOSTER FAMILIES



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FROM THE CORNER OFFICE

Happy 2017!

After reviewing the articles for this issue of *Partners*, I found this quote on Pinterest that, to me, wonderfully summed up and described the challenges faced by many children and youth touched by foster care or adoption:

“Siblings are supposed to be there for you from cradle to grave. Relationships with them are most prolific and enduring. Estrangement from siblings is a powerful ache.”

As you will see in the following pages, this issue focuses on sibling connections in the world of adoption and foster care; the thoughts, feelings, and associated meanings about siblings take on forms only those familiar can understand. Adoptive and foster families dare to tell the world that connection is important and that family is not simply defined. You all have taken the risk to change the world one connection at a time and to embrace vulnerability. While you work through your own personal challenges of helping your children build strong relationships and stay connected, I hope you take a moment to embrace what is working, allow your kids to find their own journey, and help them understand the disappointments that may occur.

As always, we hope the articles contained in this issue of *Partners* provide you with information and thoughts for further research and discussion. Please always remember we are only an email or phone call away. If we can't locate you what you need, we will work to connect you with those that can help.

Helping your kids stay connected to siblings in whatever way is possible and safe is the greatest extension of love you give.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Oriana'.

Oriana

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FACILITATING STRONG, HEALTHY SIBLING BONDS

“It’s okay. He’s my brother.”

If you’re one of the millions watching the new TV family drama “This Is Us,” you may recognize this line as the turning point, 36 years in the making, between adoptive brothers Kevin and Randall. If you’re one of the six people not riveted by the show, here’s a quick summary:

A young white couple has triplets, but one of the babies is stillborn. Determined to take home three babies, the couple adopts an African American safe haven baby who was brought to the same hospital on the same day. The show explores the relationships between the now grown siblings. Brothers by adoption, Kevin and Randall have a contentious relationship at best.

As adoptive parents, we can unknowingly bring a lot of assumptions and expectations to the table concerning sibling bonds. Perhaps one of the biggest of those assumptions is that our children will bond organically by virtue of being part of the same family. Or perhaps you’re on the other end of the spectrum and worry that your children may never have the strong sibling bond that your biological children may have.

Where ever you fall on the spectrum, there are things we can do as parents to facilitate healthy bonding. It’s important to note a couple of things at the onset:

- 1) Many of the pointers given here are much the same as those you would use with any siblings, related or not.
- 2) As parents, we may be assuming things are a “given” because it seems natural to us. Be aware that “the givens” may need articulating for our children.
- 3) Blood ties don’t necessarily assure bonding between siblings, just as there are factors that may impact bonding between children who have come to you both by birth and adoption.

Here are some actions you can take to encourage bonding in your home:

- 1) Take advantage of opportunities to reinforce what it means to be family. For example, make sure that it is an expectation within your family that everyone has one another’s backs. This means speaking up when someone picks on your little brother at school.
- 2) Be aware of the language used within your family. Reinforce that the family uses terms like “brother” or “sister,” not “adopted brother.”
- 3) Provide family activity opportunities where children can build on shared experiences.



- 4) Spend time with each child individually. Make each child feel special during that alone time to minimize opportunities for comparison or resentment.
- 5) Allow your children one-on-one bonding opportunities with one another as well. Sometimes, some of the best bonding is a result of problem-solving without the interference of a parent.
- 6) Create new traditions, specific to your family, that give family members a unique bond.
- 7) It can be easy to overlook “existing” children while helping a new child to adjust, which can build resentment. Ask children to speak up if they feel they are needing more of your time.
- 8) Expect bickering/fighting/arguing between siblings.
- 9) Have “family rules” that apply fairly to everyone.
- 10) Don’t be afraid to seek out support from adoption professionals when needed.
- 11) Be patient.

Relationship building can be a complex process under any circumstances. Ultimately, doing all you can to make sure everyone’s needs are being met will help avoid the building of resentments that can inhibit sibling bonding. Creating an inclusive family culture and shared family experiences can go a long way to forge sibling bonds.



Friends Forever: Why Sibling Relationships Mean So Much

"Sibling relationships - and 80 percent of Americans have at least one - outlast marriages, survive the death of parents, resurface after quarrels that would sink any friendship. They flourish in a thousand incarnations of closeness and distance, warmth, loyalty, and distrust." - Erica E. Goode

Sibling: one of two or more individuals having one common parent. This definition, or a close variation of it, is probably what would spring to mind were someone to ask you how to define a sibling. But the true definition of a sibling is much broader and encompassing. Sibling relationships can be created through marriage, adoption, foster care, and even those relationships that we, as individuals, choose for ourselves.

Children involved with the child welfare system may live (or might have lived) with various, diverse families. As a result, they may have formed close relationships with other children or youth with whom they are not biologically related, but about whom they think of as a brother or sister. The term “*fictive kin*” addresses those connections and could include:

- Full or half-siblings (including any children who may have been relinquished or removed at birth)
- Step-siblings
- Other close relatives or non-relatives living in the same family home
- Children or youth in foster care who are in the same family
- Peers in a group home setting who form a close and long-term relationship
- Children of the partner or former partner of the child’s birth parent

Respecting who your child views as their brother or sister (regardless of a blood/familial connection) is important for your child’s wellbeing and emotional growth. Siblings are important members of our support networks; they are one of the few people who are involved with a child from the beginning, and they help one another along the journey from childhood to adulthood.

Along that journey, there will be ups and downs. Your kids may get along great for days on end or they might bicker constantly. Sometimes they are best friends, sometimes they are enemies. As a parent, there are some things that you can do to help all of your children become – and stay – friends throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. How? Here are some tips and ideas:

- **Emotion coaching.** Teach your children how to identify, monitor, think about, and react to their own emotions. Help them learn how to de-escalate feelings of frustration or irritation. Siblings are going to push one another’s buttons; by helping your children through emotion coaching, those reactions will be just a little less intense. Side benefit: you’re helping your kids become better communicators, too!
- **Treat all of your children fairly.** To steal (and slightly modify) a line from the musical *Hamilton*, “[your children] have their eyes on you.” They aren’t watching, necessarily, for you to be exactly the same with each of them, but they are certainly watching to be sure you are being fair. What does that mean? Show all of your children similar amounts of affection, praise, and discipline. Science shows that, when siblings think that they are all being treated fairly by their shared parents, their relationships with one another are more positive, too.
- **Provide lots of opportunity for positive playing.** What kinds of activities do all of the children enjoy? Perhaps it’s puzzles or scavenger hunts in the house. Maybe it’s a particular sport or board game. There will always be times when kids argue or fight while playing together; the key is for the good and positive experiences to outnumber the negative ones.
- **More coaching.** It can be hard to watch your children during a conflict and resist the urge to step in and break things up. But, by acting as referee, your children aren’t learning how to work through the disagreement on their own. If your children are younger, and don’t quite have the skills needed to work things out on their own, it’s absolutely okay to be the coach, giving prompts and helping to facilitate. But, if your children are older, try to stay out of the conflict and let them work it out between one another.

A child’s relationship with his or her sibling(s) is one of the longest-lasting relationships he or she will have in life. Our role as parents and caregivers comes in trying to model happy and healthy relationships and encouraging our children to be – and stay – close with one another.

A Modern Day Brady Bunch

After getting married in 2014, Brad and Nick Schlaikowski knew their next step was creating a family. They looked into adoption and, after that first Google search for adoption in Wisconsin, they registered for an informational meeting in Milwaukee. They filled out their application that same night and mailed it the next day. Once they were licensed, it was only a few months before their daughter, Ivy, walked through their front door and into their lives.

During the licensing process, Brad and Nick had talked about being open to a child's biological family, and helping whatever children came into their lives maintain the healthy relationships they already had. They could not have known that their little girl would have connections that would grow their family far beyond just one child.

Before Ivy entered foster care, she lived with two older sisters. Those sisters were removed from the home and placed with their aunt and her wife a few months before Ivy was removed. When Ivy was removed, the aunties knew in their hearts that they could not take Ivy and give all of the girls what they needed. When Ivy was placed with Brad and Nick, the new dads shared their phone number with Ivy's aunties right away.

A few short weeks later, Brad and Nick planned an outing with Ivy, her "sissies," and aunts. They all planned to meet in the community room at Chuck E Cheese. While the adults were cautious in their conversations, it was clear to see the bond the girls had. "The second they get together, they light the room," said Brad. "The older girls basically raised Ivy when they were all still together. They are very motherly to her." Ivy's sisters were only five and six when they were removed from the home, and Ivy was 16 months old, but during that time, her sisters had cared for her in the absence of a stable parent.

That first meeting quickly turned into regular outings and, after a while, welcoming Ivy's sisters, aunts, and other family into their home. Both families attend all of the girls' birthday parties and see each other monthly. Brad said, "They aren't Ivy's family anymore, they are my family, our family. The girls call us Uncle Brad and Uncle Nick. We are a modern day Brady Bunch."

"With the three girls, there is a deep-rooted connection," Nick said. "And you don't get to know that until you can see them together. We are so glad we foster the relationship between the three of them. Everything that they have been through has strengthened their relationship, and they can go a period of time, and it doesn't matter. When you see that, it's different than close siblings. My brother and I were inseparable, but not like this. Almost like they carry a secret. They see the world in their own way."

Brad and Nick continue to be grateful for the family connection as Ivy gets older. They have the benefit of biological family members who will be able to answer questions that come up as she grows.

"I can't imagine saying, 'you can't be with your sisters,'" said Brad. "That would mean that I knowingly broke this magical bond that they have and that's not my decision to make. This bond was in place before I came into the picture. That's not for us to take away."



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“It’s not about us, but what is best for the girls and Ivy. There’s no reason for Ivy to not see them,” Nick said. “Everything about this particular situation was very healthy for all the people involved; it was a no brainer for us to continue to build the relationship that was already there.”

Ivy and her sisters also have two older siblings who are living with different family members, as well as a new baby sister, who was born in November. Brad, Nick, and the aunties are waiting to learn where this child will be placed and hope that the family she is placed with will be open to sharing their family and this new sibling with them. The girls’ oldest brother recently reached out to connect with them again, as well. The sibling connections for Ivy and her family just keep growing.

RESOURCES

Tip Sheets

<http://postadoptccyf.org/Resources/Tip-Sheets>

- Fostering a Child Whose Sibling(s) Live Elsewhere
- Maintain a Child’s Culture by Supporting the Sibling Connection
- What Grief Looks Like for Children & Youth in Foster Care

Additional Information

- When Siblings are Separated by Adoption: What Adoptive Parents Need to Know
- How Does Adoption Affect Siblings Who Get Separated?
- Separated at Adoption: Addressing the Challenges of Maintaining Sibling-of-Origin Bonds in Post-adoption Families – by Rebecca L. Scharf, UNLV School of Law (See section IV. The Psychology of Sibling Relationships)
- Siblings Together, UK
- Keeping in Touch publication by Siblings Together, UK
- Camp To Belong Wisconsin
- Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption
- What You Can Do to Strengthen Sibling Connections
- Celebrating Sibling Connections
- Wake the World Wisconsin
- Siblings: How to Help Them be Friends Forever

Library

- *Siblings in Adoption and Foster Care: Traumatic Separations and Honored Connections* by Deborah N. Silverstein
- *My Brother, My Sister: Sibling Relations in Adoption and Foster Care* by Regina Kupecky
- *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption*, by Arleta M. James



STAYING STRONG: WHEN YOUR CHILD'S SIBLING IS STILL WAITING FOR PERMANENCE

Estimates from national child welfare sources show that two-thirds of the children in foster care have siblings. In the best scenarios, those children can be and are adopted together. And yet there are times when, for a variety of reasons, that doesn't happen. Perhaps reunification efforts are being made for a sibling. Or maybe the sibling was born after the others were adopted. Maybe the sibling is receiving services in a treatment center or that sibling could be older and isn't open to being adopted. There are many more complex reasons why biological siblings may, despite best efforts, not always be placed with the same family, and a sibling may still be in foster care.

If you have adopted a child or children who have siblings still in care, there are many opportunities for keeping a healthy connection between the kids. With proactive efforts, you can do something very important for your child and these special people in their lives.

- Talk with your child about his or her sibling(s). How does your child feel about their sibling? Do they regularly miss them or maybe even worry about them? Are they upset about being separated? Do they get to see one another and do activities together? Don't be shy about these conversations with your child. You might feel like you don't have the right answers to their potentially sensitive questions, but that's okay. You're on this journey together and it's most important that your child not feel alone and afraid. Just knowing that you're there to help them process, as things unfold, is what they need.
- Brainstorm some ways that you might help keep the sibling connection strong. That might include initiating contact with the sibling's foster parent, or helping your child to make phone calls, draw pictures, or write letters to send to their brother or sister.

Continued on next page

- Get your child involved. Talk about the kind of activities that your child would want to do with their sibling when they get the chance. How often would they like to see their sibling and how close is that matching with the reality of visits?
- Is there anything you could do or provide to help the sibling? You may not have a lot of extra resources but, when you can, you might think to add an extra toy or necessity to the shopping cart if you know your child's sibling is in need. It might make him or her feel special to receive an unexpected gift. If you can, take the sibling under your wing; it may mean a lot to them so that they can participate in special activities with your child, or have the things they need or hope for during their childhood.

Your child is one of the strongest supports to his or her sibling in care. Whether their relationship is good or strained right now, they have a history of common experiences or common relationships. The understanding that comes with that is something that can bring them great strength someday, if it has not already. Furthermore, it can be reassuring to a child in a stressful situation to feel the consistency of their relationship with their sibling. Children and youth go through many unexpected changes while in foster care, and by doing what you can to keep this key relationship in place, you may hold the key to consistency and stability.



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Family of websites:
coalitionforccyf.org
wiadopt.org
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