



Parenting Siblings Connected through Trauma

Sibling relationships are among the most significant bonds that an individual can experience over the course of their lifetime. The bond between siblings can have positive impacts on children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. For example, brothers and sisters can learn the important life skill of sharing—not only their personal space, but also their toys, friendships, and thoughts and feelings with one another. Sibling bonds also can result in caring and supportive connections during good times, as well as more challenging times.

As with all types of relationships, the sibling relationship is not always harmonious. This can be especially true for siblings who have experienced or been exposed to traumatic events, and therefore have a trauma history. Siblings who share a trauma history can sometimes form a trauma bond.

A sibling trauma bond is an emotionally complex interpersonal relationship and can be very challenging to break. Trauma can have an impact on a child's physiology, emotions, ability to think, learn, and concentrate, impulse control, self-image, and relationships with others, including their relationships with their siblings. These

complex emotional bonds can lead siblings to resort to acting out their feelings, rather than talking about their feelings.

“For our sons, this bond was created during a crucial part of their emotional development. In infancy and early childhood, they lived with neglect and chaos. The unrest bound them together. Even after joining a family with healthy relationships, when they were together, they tried to re-create the chaos and unrest

because it was what they always did when they were together.

Recreating it felt familiar and gave them comfort.”

~Adoptive parent of siblings with a trauma bond



Because each child and every sibling relationship is

different, the way the children in your home react, respond, or behave may vary. Below are a few examples of how you may see a trauma bond play out in your home.

- Recreating a chaotic environment
- Excessive protectiveness of the other sibling(s)
- Intense competition or rivalry
- Significant emotional responses to a sibling's pain or being upset

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Furthermore, there are multiple factors that can have an impact on how your children interact with one another, such as lack of sleep, a difficult day at school, or too much caffeine. Meeting your children at the level where they are emotionally can be beneficial for them, as well as your family. Doing so means validating their feelings and helping them to work through the complexities of their emotions.

Trauma triggers

Just like individuals can be triggered, so can siblings. A trigger is a stimulus, such as a specific sound or certain smells, which can create a memory of past traumatic experiences. For siblings with trauma histories, there may also be a trigger—or multiple triggers—which can also have immediate and sometimes intense impacts on their interactions with one another. Some triggers are easy to identify and anticipate, but others are subtle and inconspicuous, often surprising the individual or catching him or her off guard. Examples of triggers may include:

- Holidays, birthdays, or anniversaries
- Times of transition
- Arguments between parents or caregivers or raised voices
- Changes to the child's routine

Parenting tips and techniques

Trauma is an experience of losing control and a violation of expectations. Children expect that parents will take care of them, not physically hurt or emotionally harm them. Creating a safe space for your children will empower a respectful and trusting relationship among all members of your family.

Establishing a trusting relationship with children who have trauma histories will take

Long-term trauma can interfere with healthy development and affect a child's:

- Ability to trust others
- Sense of personal safety
- Ability to manage emotions
- Ability to navigate and adjust to life's changes
- Physical and emotional responses to stress

From "Caring for Children Who Have Experienced Trauma: A Workshop for Resource Parents." National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2010

time, unconditional love, patience, and perseverance. Trust is something earned. Often, for children who have experienced past traumas, trust has been broken countless times. For children with sibling trauma bonds, the quest to heal their relationship with one another, as well as with others, may be challenging.

It may take some time to discover which interventions have a positive result. Following are some additional tips and resources that you and your family may want to learn more about:

- Safety and security are important first steps for families to establish as soon as possible. Create a safe space for each sibling where they can be alone when they feel the need to disconnect for a while.
- Sometimes siblings with trauma bonds who spend too much time together can end up having intense conflicts or heated disagreements. When siblings have a temporary break from each other, by spending time alone or with friends, they may appreciate each other more when they reconnect.

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- Sibling trauma bonds are more emotionally charged than typical sibling conflicts or rivalries. As a result, being open to therapeutic support from a trauma informed and adoption competent therapist can be a resource for you and your family to consider. Therapists can provide individual, sibling, or family therapeutic support services to begin and continue the journey of healing. (The Coalition can help you locate a therapist if you need assistance.)
- Building connections with other adoptive parents who have been through similar experiences can be insightful and mutually beneficial. Your local Post Adoption Resource Center (PARC) can help you find information about upcoming support groups or training opportunities. You can also contact us at the Coalition and take part in our Journey Partners program to be paired with another parent who can work with you on an individual basis.

As parents of children who have trauma histories, there will most likely be times of emotional struggle and resistance. The children will need time and support to work through their feelings, memories, and past experiences and exposures to trauma. But know that there is hope and there are resources and supports available for you. We encourage you to connect with your local Post Adoption Resource Center as well as with us at the Coalition for ongoing support, understanding, and resources.

Resources

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption*, by Arleta James
- *The Body Keeps the Score—Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, by Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D.
- *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
- Fostering Across Wisconsin: [The Importance of Sibling Connections](#)
- Partners Newsletter: [Facilitating Strong, Healthy Sibling Bonds](#)
- Tip Sheet: [Sustaining and Strengthening the Sibling Bond](#)

Additional Web Resources

- [Camp To Belong](#)
- [Trauma Bonds in Foster and Adoptive Children](#)
- [The Impact of Trauma on Sibling Relationships](#)
- [Ten Myths of Sibling Adoptions](#)



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