

Bringing Birth Siblings Into Our Children's Stories—and Lives

The vast majority of our children have birth siblings, yet parents may wonder how to approach the topic. Adoptive parents, birth parents, and adoptees share how they talk about biological siblings, and build brother-sister bonds.

by Barbara Here!

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I'll admit—the [birth sibling conversation](#) was an afterthought for me. It felt complicated enough to cover the basics from “You grew in your birth mom’s belly” to “and that’s how we became a family.” Yet, this depiction was far from complete. There was another subplot to my daughter’s adoption story—a narrative of siblings who were growing up elsewhere without their sister.

I’m hardly alone in needing to start this conversation. A previous *Adoptive Families* survey found that [71 percent of adopted children have known birth siblings](#), and parents couldn’t rule out the possibility for another 14 percent. And yet, many of us are underprepared to do so. While the pre-adoptive training most of us receive emphasizes the need to talk about adoption and birth mothers, weaving in the birth father is often treated as a second layer, and thus we get very little advice, if any, on [talking about birth siblings](#). When I considered introducing the topic, the responsibility felt enormous. I wanted to give my daughter her truth, yet also wanted to protect her from the loss and pain of that truth. I found myself holding off as I tried to get the wording *just right*.

When my daughter turned two and my husband and I began planning our first birth family visit, however, I knew couldn’t hold off any longer. I took a deep breath—and what came out of my mouth was not my well-

rehearsed, far-too-complicated sibling storyline, but simply, “You have a big brother, a big sister, and a baby brother.” Relief followed just as quickly.

Cut to five years and five visits later: conversations about my daughter’s birth siblings and adoption have ramped up considerably. So, how would a parent involve birth siblings from the start? And what do you do when you don’t have contact or visits with birth siblings, or have only a bare minimum of information to discuss? We spoke with adoptive parents, birth parents, and adoptees with a range of birth sibling contact. Read on to learn their thoughts.

Talking About Birth Siblings

> Include siblings in your child’s story from the beginning

When Jackie adopted her oldest son, she met his older birth sister at the hospital. “I worried about how to explain her, why she wasn’t here with us. I was nervous that he would experience survivor’s guilt,” says the mother of three children adopted as infants. She is grateful to her social worker, who advised bypassing any need for a “big revelation” by talking about the birth sister from the start.

“I started when he was a newborn, and what I say has changed over time,” says Jackie. “I make it as natural as possible. We have lots of nieces and nephews who are having babies, so that’s an easy way to bring up birth siblings.” She shares a typical conversation with her son when he was three or four:



“You have a sister who lives with another family.”

“I have a sister?”

“Yes.”

“What’s her name?” (She would answer.)

“Can I see pictures?” (They would look at pictures together.)

When Jackie’s son was six, she learned that his [birth mom was going to have another baby](#) whom she was going to parent—and about another group of older siblings who were placed with other families.

“In that instance, I felt like a bomb dropped,” shares Jackie. “I feel that birth sibling contact is especially important for my son. My younger two kids, who are birth half-siblings, have that built in; my son doesn’t have anyone he looks like in our immediate family. By having a birth-sibling connection, hopefully he’ll have less of that ‘how do I fit into the world?’”

Jackie is hoping to open up contact between the siblings. As she waits, she has shared what she knows with all her children. “They know that my son has birth siblings, that we don’t know them yet, but they are out there.”

> Consider your language carefully, and keep it positive

When Amber placed twin boys in an open adoption two years ago, she knew she would have to explain it carefully to the children she was parenting. Although her son, who is now four, has never really questioned the adoption—“Perhaps he’s still too young to voice questions, or maybe it’s because this is what he’s always known”—her daughter, who is now seven, was very upset. Amber sought out counseling for her daughter and herself.

“I highly recommend therapy, even if it’s just a place to get the feelings out,” she says. One thing that stuck with her is when her therapist said, “We don’t say, ‘give up.’ We say, ‘they live with somebody else.’” Amber also found that voicing some of the reasons why she placed the boys—she didn’t have the extra help and financial support to provide for all of her children—helped them both.

Above all, Amber credits openness with helping all the children, as well as all the parents. “If we had a closed adoption, no one would be doing as well as they are, especially my daughter. Who knows what kind of feelings she would be having?”

> Ask the birth family for help in explaining

Alana, who adopted Amber’s twins, wanted to know how she should talk about Amber’s side of the adoption. “I didn’t want to make assumptions representing her experience to the boys,” she says. The moms had a discussion, and Alana asked Amber to write down her reasons for choosing adoption. “I felt this would help us better answer questions the boys might have as they grow,” says Alana.

She believes the contact between the siblings, and the parents, has made their lives richer. “Our boys have siblings with a different mommy and daddy,” shares Alana. “That’s the way our family works. And it is working. All the togetherness, talking openly with all of the kids, the conversations with Amber—it’s only made everything better. The more people who love the kids, the better.”

> Expect a range of feelings

Children may have different feelings about birth family members, including siblings. Brandy, the mother of three biological half-sisters adopted from foster care, knows this well. Her daughters, ages 20, 15, and 12, have four [birth siblings who live with three different families](#).

Despite Brandy’s efforts, the children haven’t been able to maintain close relationships. The girls’ last visit with their oldest sibling was 10 years ago, and she only learned of the two younger siblings last year.

Her oldest daughter is very protective of her birth siblings, especially the oldest one, since they lived together. “She’s angry that she’s being kept from him,” Brandy explains. “She’ll say, ‘This is my brother. I took care of him when he was a baby and now [foster mom] won’t let me see him.’” When Brandy shared the news about the younger siblings, her oldest daughter said pointedly, “They can live with me. If my birth mom has more kids, I’ll take them.” Brandy’s middle child was unfazed and said, “I don’t know them, Mom, they’re strangers to me,” while her youngest daughter expressed frustration at not being able to see them.

> Be open to questions and candid conversation

Adoptees aren’t the only ones who might long to know more about their birth siblings. Debbie, a birth mom who is parenting two sons, 16 and 12, can attest to that. “My oldest was four when he began asking about ‘the little girl in the picture,’” says Debbie.

That little girl was her daughter, Meaghan, her sons’ birth half-sibling, whom she placed for adoption at birth. Debbie recalls telling her son that this was his sister, and that she’d had her when she was very young and couldn’t raise her. As her boys got older, she added more detail. “I also talked about the other side to adoption—that I couldn’t raise a baby, but there was a family that wanted a baby and could.” Debbie’s sons never expressed fears that they too could possibly “go live somewhere else,” and she hopes that her candid, ongoing conversations eased any of their apprehensions.

The openness continues, says Debbie, who shares that her youngest son recently asked whether his dad was Meaghan’s birth father. “I had to stop in my tracks,” she says. “Meaghan’s birth father was my high school

boyfriend. Not a great conversation to have with your 11-year old, yet it was important to fill in this part of the story for him. I want my kids to know that Mom's not perfect and that Meaghan's birth dad and I made a bad choice."

> Keep the conversation alive (but don't push)

Allison adopted her son from foster care at 10 months. The boy, who's nearly nine years old now, has a brother and sister who live with their biological father, and a sister who lives with another adoptive family. Despite Allison's efforts, her son does not have contact with any of his siblings. He knows they exist, but doesn't talk about them much. "It's funny, my daughter [not biologically related to her son] asks a lot of questions and seems more interested in her brother's story than he is," says the mom of four.

Without contact, Allison doesn't want to push her son into talking about his siblings, yet she also wants to keep the conversation alive. She confesses that it's a fine line to draw.

> Recognize that curiosity and sadness probably won't abate

Caleb, a young adult who was adopted from foster care with two younger siblings at age eight, recalls asking about his four older brothers for as long as he can remember. "I knew about them, but only got to meet my oldest brother," he shares. "I just want to know what they are like and how they've been."

Caleb's mother, Ilene, spent years searching on Facebook, and finally found her children's birth aunt and cousin—within walking distance from their home. "Over the years, we've had more contact with my birth family and learned a lot more about my brothers," says Caleb. "I have wondered at times how it would be if we had all been raised together, as actual brothers."

He feels the loss of his older brothers profoundly and has strong words for anyone not committed to keeping up contact with birth siblings. "It's wrong to deprive a child of his birth family. It should be his choice to cut his bio family out of his life, not anyone else's."

Ilene agrees. "These kids are not just ours," she says. "They belong to their siblings, their biological parents, grandparents.... All I can do at this point is keep the information updated and available to Caleb."

When Contact Isn't Possible

> Keep the door open, even if you don't hear back

Allison continues to reach out to the adoptive parents of her son's birth siblings once a year. "I'm a busy mom raising four children. Time is an issue, so I'm not able to write every month, plus I don't want to overwhelm them. I feel a Christmas card is a good way to express interest about the kids."

Along with the card, Allison includes a picture of her son and a letter. She writes about what he enjoys doing and asks questions about the siblings—what do they like to do? What's their favorite subject? So far, however, she has yet to receive a response.

Whether or not she hears from the families, Allison is committed to helping her son reach out directly when his siblings turn 18, to see if they want to talk or meet.

> Follow siblings from afar through social media and court records

Brandy follows open court records to find out what's going on with her daughter's birth siblings. That's how, six months ago, she discovered the two youngest siblings.

Brandy asked DHS to reach out to the adoptive parents, and was frustrated when she was told they weren't interested in contact. "I just want to tell them, 'There is no threat to your family to let the kids see each other. My kids want to know their siblings are all safe.' I want their siblings to know they are loved."

The mom of three remains diligent in gathering information from the Internet and social media, and always tells her children the truth, even if that truth adds to their pain. "Some parents are inclined to think, 'the adoption is over, close the door and move forward. If you don't talk about the past, your child won't get hurt again.' But giving your child that birth sibling connection is giving her healing. And the more honest you are, the better your relationship will be."

Allison also takes to social media to uncover birth sibling information and pictures for her son. "I want to be able to say to my son that I did everything in my power to give him parts of his identity; to be able to show him photos and say, 'this is who you look like.'"

> Connect with another birth relative

If a child was removed from his birth parents' care, but birth siblings remain with them, it may not be safe to make contact when the children are young. However, as Ilene points out, that doesn't eliminate a child's need to know where they came from.

"It is our job as parents to find a way to fill that need," she says. "Find a family member who is not a danger. Do background checks. Kids need to know that at least we tried. But to cut off all contact with birth family to 'protect' your child is a lie."

Visits and Ongoing Contact

> Plan visits, as you would with other family members

Amber recalls her discussions about openness with her twins' adoptive parents. "I told them that I wanted lots of visits and contact to make sure my kids, then five and two, would be OK." Alana and her husband were receptive to Amber's wishes.

"When my husband and I first talked about adoption and openness, we obviously didn't know what to expect," says Alana. "We knew the child would know he was adopted. We knew we wanted our child's birth mom and family involved. Then we met Amber and her children, and learned that she wanted a great deal of openness." The parents got to know each other better while the twins spent time in the NICU after birth. "That's when our level of openness took off," explains Alana.

Amber describes [the kids' current relationship](#) as "like any sibling relationship." The families live about two hours from each other. They try to get together every month or two, plus spend birthdays and holidays together. "Alana and her husband accept me and my children as part of their family," says Amber. "Spending a week together or having sleepovers are common. My kids love my twins' adoptive parents."

Both families also [keep family photos around the house](#), and taking birth/adoptive family portraits has become a Mother's Day tradition.

> Talk about birth siblings with other people, too

“Another thing we do to increase the normalcy in our kids’ lives is to talk about the fact they have siblings to *other* people, especially when the boys are around,” says Alana. “We try very hard to not make any of it some ‘dirty little secret,’ with the hope that our kids and other people will see our family dynamic as just another diverse way to have a family these days.”

Alana works in special education, and notes that she has photos of all the children hanging in her office at school. “Students are always asking about the kids. It’s cool to address acceptance of all differences across the spectrum.”

> Let the children determine their roles

Debbie’s birth daughter, Meaghan, 28, always knew she was adopted and always knew about Debbie, yet learned about her two birth siblings only when she was a teenager. Debbie had asked Meaghan’s parents to give Meaghan a letter when she turned 16. That was the beginning of their family reunion.

“My boys were two and six when they first met their 18-year-old birth sister,” recalls Debbie. “As Meaghan came to spend time with us, I noticed the sibling shift. Meaghan, who is a younger sibling in her adoptive family, is the oldest in her birth family, and, over the years, I could see big-sister mode kick in.”

The three children get along very well. “They kind of ‘get’ each other,” says Debbie. “My oldest son enjoys her, and the younger one has always had Meaghan in his life and loves having her around.”

“Sometimes I sit back when we’re all together and think about what it would have been like if they had had the opportunity to see each other from the start,” says Debbie. Because they didn’t, she prizes their time together. “When Meaghan is here, a lot of my attention falls to her. I’m very focused on making memories with her. I encourage families to find some way to keep that line of communication open.”

> Project the relationship into adulthood

Despite their openness, Amber worries that her twins may one day come to resent her for placing them. However, she has no such fear for her children. “I definitely feel the kids will remain close,” she says. “I see that my daughter and son are thriving because they know their brothers are OK. I imagine that kids who don’t know about their sibs would grieve.”

Gabriel, who [grew up with a very open adoption](#), would agree. “If I didn’t know my birth mom and siblings, I feel I would be missing something from my life,” says the 25-year-old. He was eight when his biological brother, Julian, was born, and 17 when Ophelia was born. Due to their age difference, Gabriel feels that Ophelia thinks of him as “her big brother’s big brother.”

Despite their age gaps and growing up in different households, Gabriel feels a [strong connection to his birth siblings](#). “It’s really cool to see the traits that I have, that they have,” he says. “In a normal brother/sister relationship, this would probably be an everyday occurrence, whereas here, it’s more special.”

“Growing up, our open adoption was never about ‘required visiting time.’ We’d get together for holidays and birthdays, have sleepovers; we just saw each other a lot, and I think that’s good.” He also emphasizes that meeting in person is “way better than anything you could achieve online. Being there in the flesh is meaningful, and fun.”

As graduate and college students, he and Julian are now getting their first taste of connecting without their parents. They “talk,” mostly online, every week or so. “I like him,” says Gabriel. “Julian’s going to the same

undergrad school I went to. I give him advice.”

For Gabriel, the relationship with his birth siblings is like any other meaningful relationship. “We’ve known each other our entire lives. I don’t feel there’s a place the relationship needs to move forward to. Any major event in my life—Julian and Ophelia will be a part of it.”

Gabriel’s advice for adoptive parents considering opening up contact with birth siblings? Do it. “At some point, you want the kids to be able to talk to each other on their own. To be able to say, ‘OK, I’ve exchanged the emails, now it’s up to you.’”

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