

Separating Siblings For Adoption

Viewpoint from someone who went through it

(as submitted by Stuart Fraser)

I know nothing about adoption so I will leave comment about adoption to those who do know.

I do know about the care system, both historically and pretty much right up to the present day. After 16 years in care, I spent all of my adult life as a social worker working in a number of roles with children and young people in care, so that covers over 60 years involved in some way or other with the care system.

I also know about being separated from my siblings and the impact that has had upon our lives.

As a child, I grew up in care between about 1952 and 1968. I was placed in a number of foster homes and children's homes. Other than the last three placements, most are just vague unhappy memories.

For most of my time in care, I had an older brother placed with me. He is five years older than me, and joined the army as soon as he was old enough, leaving me to face my last five years in care alone. This was the first time I had ever been totally separated from my birth family.

Having said that, separation from my family has been a constant throughout my life. Although I spent most of my childhood living with this one brother, I am in fact one of six siblings. I am the youngest, and have four brothers and a sister.

My family had many of the problems so well known to social workers, and may be described as "chronically dysfunctional".

My two oldest brothers were taken into care before I was born. They were placed in a residential school, and I was never to live with them or really get to know them at all.

My sister, the oldest of the siblings, was taken into care on her own. Once again, she would not return to live with the family and although I knew her in later life, after a lifetime apart there was not any emotional bond between us.

Another older brother (18 months older than me) was removed from my mother as a small baby and placed with foster carers who cared for him until he was 18 years old. He told me when we met for the first time that he had no further contact or information about his birth family given to him. He was informally adopted, and his name was changed. He was always aware that he was fostered and received routine monitoring visits from the local authority.

Whereas I knew this brother's first name, that was all I ever knew about him until he traced me when we were both in our 40's. Paradoxically, we are very close now.

I went through most of my care career living with the remaining older brother. We were taken into care together because our mum was homeless and considered to be living an unhealthy itinerant lifestyle.

We were considered to be neglected, and were made subject to a care order. (That always makes me smile, because I never recall being hit or shouted at by my mother, whereas I got very used to being hit and shouted at in care.)

As a small boy, I had curly brown hair and blue eyes. My brother is black, or “half caste” as they liked to call him in those days. Whereas I suspect I could have been fostered or even adopted, back in the racist 1950’s few people wanted to foster or adopt a black child.

To his eternal credit, the children’s officer (they weren’t called social workers then,) refused to split us up. There was very little chance of any foster carer taking us both, so we spent many years placed in a long term children’s home. It was a very unpleasant, unhappy and at times traumatic experience, but I found having my older brother with me a real source of support.

On bad days I would fantasise about being part of a loving family and receiving hugs and smiles from people who cared, but there were no families for us. If a family had been found for me without my brother, even then I would have chosen to stay with him in the children’s home every time. He was part of who I was, who I am, and we had a history and a heritage (albeit perhaps not a very pleasant one).

After six years in the children’s home, an elderly couple were found who would take us both.

They were much older than most foster carers, but they were prepared to take us both, so they were approved. A year or so after the transfer, my brother joined the army, and for the first time in my life I actually felt alone.

There were no steps taken by anyone to maintain any contact between my older siblings and me. I knew where my mother was (some of the time) and would occasionally see her, so knew from her about my brothers and sister.

As we grew into adulthood, I saw more of my older siblings but they were virtual strangers and we had little in common. I knew nothing of my extended family and nothing about my family history. I had no emotional or practical support or encouragement from my siblings as I made the transition from care to adulthood and as adults we very rarely saw each other or communicated. Leaving care and making the transition into adulthood was hard.

When I was in my mid 40’s, the ‘missing’ brother traced us. He had obtained his file and learned of his siblings and gone to a great deal of trouble to trace us. He had also traced our extended family and learned of our family history. When we finally met, learning all this from him filled a huge hole in my knowledge and understanding, and I was able to make contact with cousins and other relatives all over the world. I was able to learn about my grandparents, uncles and aunts, family history and how and why my family had disintegrated.

To his disappointment, my “new” brother never found the emotional link to all his siblings he was seeking and was left disillusioned, but he and I have enjoyed a very positive relationship since we met over 20 years ago now.

Could it have been different? Yes, I think it could. The family could have been placed together, or closer together, or care could have been taken to ensure we stayed in touch and had positive contact as we grew up. I suspect that with support we could have grown to support and encourage each other, and successful outcomes may have been achieved more quickly and easily than they were.

We could have been kept informed of each other’s progress and shared our talents and skills with each other. (For all our faults, we have proved to be an enterprising family, and each of us became “successful” care leavers in our own way. How much easier that might have been!) Who knows – we might even have become fond of each other.

For me, being separated from my siblings and having no contact or information about them or my family was a negative and painful experience. It did not surprise me to find that research reinforces my experience and appears to suggest that it can have long term damaging effects to split siblings for more than a short term for fostering or adoption

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/siblingissues/siblingissues.pdf>

<http://www.thelizlibrary.org/site-index/site-index-frame.html#soulhttp://www.thelizlibrary.org/liz/siblings.html>

<http://www.adoptuskids.org/assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/ten-myths-and-realities-of-sibling-adoptions.pdf>

I am told that the new adoption procedures allow for the adoption process to be rushed through more quickly. Social workers and foster parents I speak to tell me that large families of siblings are now being separated as some are put up for adoption and others are fostered, even though there may be no history of abuse between the siblings.

I hear this and I reflect on the damage this separation caused in my own family. I wonder how it can be happening given it seems to fly in the face of the research findings that such long term separations may be damaging to the children involved.

I understand that many caring people might regard placing young deprived or neglected children up for adoption as a positive move, even if it means splitting siblings. “It at least gives the kid a chance of a good life” has been said to me when I have questioned it. My question is “Does it?”

That was not my experience and is not what research appears to suggest.

I am not against adoption for children who need and will benefit from it. I am against splitting siblings for the sole purpose of adoption when there are perfectly good alternatives available that can still “give the kid a chance of a good life” without adding to their future problems or taking away their history, positive family links or heritage – kinship care and long term foster care are both proven alternatives.

I have sought links to any research that supports splitting siblings for adoption – none has been made available. Why then are social workers continuing to separate siblings in this way?

I would like a national debate to involve all those involved and affected by this strategy, and a research review to ascertain exactly what the most recent research tells us before continuing with what is a life changing experience for the children and young people involved. Mistakes made now may affect children for many years to come.

It is not good enough simply to believe it may be in the child’s best interests. The social workers who split my family probably thought the same. The social workers who split families and transported children to Australia and Canada thought the same too.

I ask that those people who make policy, who make decisions, and who teach, represent and advise social workers challenge the practice of splitting innocent siblings solely for the purpose of long term adoption until they are very clear about the impact this practice may have on those children. Their future happiness and wellbeing may depend upon it.

Note by TaKen UK: This is also available in our Blog section at www.takenuk.com