

My Brother, My Sister: Sibling Relations in Adoption and Foster Care

By

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Case 1

Michael and Veronica came into care when they were four and five due to issues of abuse and neglect. They have different birth fathers but always lived with the birth mother. They went to a temporary emergency foster home where they stayed for three weeks. They were then placed in the foster home of the Jones family where they have resided for four years.

Michael is intelligent and healthy with a diagnosis of attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity (ADHD). He does well academically but he often has behavior problems in school with authority. He has difficulty attending to the teacher. Medication has helped but he is a handful after 4PM at the foster home when the medication wears off. The psychiatrist does not want to increase the dosage as Michael needs to grow and the effective medication inhibits his appetite.

Veronica is a sweet girl. She loves school but is not as bright as her brother testing with an average IQ. She is rather compliant and docile. She had night terrors at first but has settled in the family and really loves the parents and their oldest biological daughter who is 28.

After many extensions, false leads on kinship placements, appeals and other delays, permanent custody has been granted and the agency worker is making a permanency plan.

The Jones family is older with a foster mother who is 65 and the foster dad who is 67. They would like to keep Veronica with a plan that their daughter would take custody if they were unable to continue to parent her due to their age. They do not feel they can continue to parent Michael, as his energy level is too much for them. They cannot imagine being effective parents for him as an adolescent.

They say they will continue to visit Michael if his family wants to have an open adoption. Veronica is afraid to leave the family and wants to be adopted by them. Michael refuses to consider a family without his sister.

What is the best plan for these children?

Who should make the decision?

Will the agency legalize the adoption of Veronica with the Jones family and move Michael or look for a family for the two of them?

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Case 2

David and George are twins. They were removed from a very abusive, drug house when they were five. The neighbors didn't even know they were in the home as they rarely went outside. Because of major speech and developmental delays the boys were split and put into separate foster homes. Their medical and social histories were confused as the worker couldn't tell them apart and had the histories mixed in the files.

After about eight months, the boys were reunited in a specialized foster home, the Smiths. They received a great deal of stimulation there with speech therapy, occupational therapy, as well as psychological help. The Smiths have three biological children 5, 7, 9 as well as three adopted children 10, 13, and 14. The boys seem to fit in well and have lived there a year.

While the twins were living at the Smith home, the worker learned that the biological father had another child, a daughter, in the system. As the boys use their birth mother's last name, the connection was never made prior to this.

Her name is Anna and she is a year older than the twins. She came into foster care as an infant because her birth mother was serving a 25-year sentence in prison. Their birth father was unable to parent her due to drug, alcohol and psychological issues. She has always lived with the Anderson foster family who now wants to adopt her.

The agency took a long time to get custody of Anna and make a decision because several biological aunts petitioned to adopt her. One lived out of state and it took almost 18 months for the other state to do a family assessment and rule against her as a resource. The other aunt was approved

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but was diagnosed with terminal cancer so withdrew her petition to adopt. The Andersons are not open to sibling visits after adoption. Anna's development is right on target and they see no reason to expose her to the antics of the twins, as she doesn't even know they exist. She is a bright, healthy child who is in the second grade. She is looking forward to being adopted by the Andersons, the only family she has ever known. They have been waiting so long that they cannot imagine, once again, that her future with them is being questioned.

The Smiths will adopt the twins and will accept Anna because she is a sibling. They, however, are finished with fostering and adoption after this as their house is full.

What is the best plan for these children?

Who should make the decision?

Will the agency legalize the adoption of the twins and Anna where they are or move Anna to secure her sibling ties?

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Case 3

There are five children in the sibling group. Jerome is 13 and on medications for seizures. He has an average IQ but does poorly in school.

Monica is 12 and has always parented the siblings. She has many learning disabilities and is in a learning support classroom. She even stole food for them while living in the abusive and neglectful birth home. The children came into care because she called 911 when the children were left alone for several days. Her sister, Allison, now 3, was an infant then and would have died of dehydration if Monica hadn't called. The other two boys (Donald and James) are 10 & 8 and are both diagnosed with ADHD and take medication for this. They are extremely bright, and when helped individually, do quite well in school. There is a known sexual abuse history in the past for Jerome, Monica and James. It is unknown for Donald and Allison.

Monica, as one would expect from a parenting child, bosses the others around. Jerome likes his siblings but does not try to parent them.

Jerome and Monica live in one home with Donald, James and Allison in another. The two foster mothers are friends and the children see each other at least weekly. The families swap respite hours also so the children often spend weekends together. These foster homes do not adopt so have not asked to provide permanency for the children.

The children have settled in their homes quite nicely. They are used to busy households with a country atmosphere. The highlight of the summer is the county fair.

Donald, James and Allison are full siblings. Jerome and Monica are half siblings with all the children sharing the same birth mother and different fathers.

Early recruitment has been somewhat successful. Thirteen families have sent their home studies in for Donald, James and Allison. One of the families knows all the children, as the prospective adoptive father is a teacher at the elementary school they all attended. Another family knows the children from church. All these families say they are open to visiting but not to parenting Jerome and Monica. One family, an inexperienced childless couple, has expressed an interest in parenting all five. Workers doubt they can handle the issues of this complex group.

What is the best plan for these children?

Who should make the decision?

How long should the agency wait to see if a family could be found for all five of them?

What recruitment plan could be developed for a sibling group of five?