

The Psychological Consequences of Separating Siblings in Foster Care

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The psychological stigma associated with being labeled an “orphan,” “foster child,” “ward of the court” or “at-risk youth” can play havoc with one’s self-esteem. The terms used to describe our lowly social status say that we are less than other kids: less fortunate, less worthy, less good, less capable, less important, less lovable ... less almost everything.

Many of us are so distressed by what happened at home or in the system that we develop behavioral disorders, emotional problems or other mental health issues that compromise our ability to overcome the past and adjust to the future. Still others of us feel ashamed of our youth and spend a lifetime hiding from the past – or struggling to forget it.

At best, the experience of being separated from family and placed in the care of strangers leaves a bloody scab on the psyche that may never quite heal.

Take, for example, the psychological consequences associated with placing siblings in separate settings. On page 95 of *Growing Up in the Care of Strangers*, alumna Dr. Debraha Watson writes:

“Keeping siblings together must be a priority. It is paramount that foster children retain some sense of familial identity. It is difficult enough for us to deal with removal from our parents or other adult family members, but by also separating us from our brothers and sisters, we now are stripped of all sense of family – cut adrift, alone, and unconnected to anything or anyone.”

Indeed, those alumni who lost touch with brothers and sisters in foster care know this fact intuitively. Being left all alone, bereft of parents ... and now siblings ... is often too much emotional pain to bear. That is why foster kids deprived of sibling connections are prone to spurn relationships, act out and endure mental health issues in the care of strangers. Furthermore, their relationships with siblings will likely suffer long after leaving foster care.

On page 115 of her revealing 2011 memoir, *If Not for Dreams: memoir of a foster child*, Dr. Debraha Watson describes her lost connection with her younger sister and brother:

“Graduation day finally arrived. For the first time in our lives Lois, Sandy and I were together. It was both a happy and uncomfortable time. Sandy had never met Lois, and I had not seen Sandy in years. At fourteen, he stood on the edge of manhood. I remembered him as a whiny little boy that I always had to take care of. Our conversation was awkward. It was as if we

were all strangers who sensed a connection and were trying to reach out to each other. Unfortunately, time and separation were the barriers. We were no longer what we remembered of each other.”

We certainly realize factors such as the number of siblings, their ages and special needs complicate, and sometimes preclude, placing brothers and sisters under the same roof. However, we also realize siblings that do not live in the same home should be encouraged to maintain their relationship through phone calls, texts, e-mails, cards, letters and especially regular visits.

In a personal communication with us, Dr. Watson encapsulated the essence of why every effort should be made to preserve sibling relationships this way:

“Sustained contact between siblings helps foster kids to maintain the emotional stability and family ties that will benefit them during placement and long after they exit the child welfare system. Often, we older siblings experience feelings of guilt and loss. I still deal with survivors’ guilt as I have lived beyond my brother. I survive believing that one day we will see each other again and claim our lives anew.”

Read the article [online](#).