

The Effects of Adoptive Family Composition on Outcomes for Children

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The following report summarizes research focused on the effects and outcomes of

- adopting two children at once;
- artificial twinning: raising genetically unrelated children born less than eight months apart as siblings by the same adoptive parent(s)(Johnston, 1).
- sibling adoption; and
- families comprised of both adopted and birth children.

Outcomes of these types of family composition will be discussed including adoption disruption. This paper defines adoption disruption as “prelegalization relinquishments in which the child is placed with an adoptive family but re-enters the child welfare system before the legalization of the adoption (Barth & Berry, 21). It is important to note that after an extensive review of the literature very little academic research was found that addressed artificial twinning. The majority of the information available on artificial twinning was written by adoption practitioners and clinicians. It is also important to note that there are limitations to the studies quoted and to any generalizations that might be made. Readers are encouraged to read the original source documents.

Adopting Two Children at Once

Ames:

Elinor Ames, in her study entitled *The Development of Romanian Children Adopted into Canada: Final Report* found that families that had chosen to adopt two Romanian children at the same time rather than one child reported a larger number of serious problems. Whereas only one of the 16 orphanage children with no serious problems had a sibling adopted from Romania, 8 of the 14 orphanage children with 3 or 4 serious problems had a sister or brother who was adopted from Romania at the same time (Ames, 100-101). These serious problems included:

- having an IQ of 85 or lower;
- having an atypical insecure attachment pattern (attachment behaviours that are uncommon in the home-reared population);
- severe behaviour problems;

- continued presence of stereotyped behaviour. In this study stereotyped behaviour is defined as repeating the same behaviour over and over (Ames, 47 & 97-98).

The report states that several of the parents adopted more than one child in order to keep Romanian biological siblings from being separated, or to build an “instant family” or simply to help more children.

Bird, Petersen and Miller:

A study by Bird and others examined factors associated with distress among support-seeking adoptive parents. Fifty-three percent of adoptive families had two adopted children at home and 11% reported having three adopted children (Bird et al, 216). The researchers’ findings indicated that parents reporting higher levels of emotional distress tended to experience significantly greater adoptive strains, have more adopted children, adopted older children, as well as perceived less family support for their decision to adopt (Bird et al, 217). The number of adopted children in the family contributed significantly to explaining parental distress. However, another study found rates of disruption were lower when there were other adoptive children in the home (Rosenthal, 110). It is important to recognize that these studies did not provide information regarding the interval of time between adoptions.

Research indicates that adoptions are at greater risk of disrupting if parents do not know how to respond to behavioural problems, are threatened by them or feel defeated by them (Partridge et al, 60). This is supported by research findings that indicate behavioural difficulties exhibited by adoptees were the single most powerful correlate of parental stress (Judge, 245). Adopting two or more children at once may exacerbate the challenges adoptive parents face. Adopting additional children means parents take on a stress and coping model, where the accumulation of parenting responsibilities may be experienced as pileup that ultimately contributes to greater distress (Bird et al, 218). Although this study does not remark on whether the parents adopted more than one child at once, it does demonstrate potential parental responses to having more than one adopted child as part of the family. This research indicates that parental distress would be intensified by adopting more than one child at once.

Artificial Twinning

Pavao:

Joyce Maguire Pavao, a family therapist specializing in adoption, believes that it is nearly impossible to meet the needs of both artificially twinned children and that adolescence may be a particularly difficult time for artificially twinned adoptees. Two adopted children are more demanding than one, the amount of time, energy and resources that parents have often do not easily meet this increased demand (Ames, 101).

Johnston:

According to Patricia Johnston some of the concerns surrounding artificial twinning include:

- artificially twinned children are often different ages and therefore at different developmental stages and have different developmental needs. Meeting these needs can be challenging for parents;
- Being of differing genetic backgrounds and not quite the same age will give these children an unusual status, placing them in the social position of being compared and questioned by teachers and peers throughout their childhoods, despite the likelihood that they are unlikely to be socially, psychologically and sometimes even racially similar;
- Using children as insurance against “failure” to conceive or delays in the adoption process.

Johnston believes that these downsides of artificial twinning cannot be made up for by the benefit of having a close-in-age playmate (Johnston, 22).

The literature notes that the act of artificial twinning usually reflects the parents’ desire to regain control over their family planning and in “getting” a child, far more than it reflects an understanding of the needs of their children or the challenges of parenting and family life (Johnston, 20). Avoiding artificial twinning and promoting the need for a psychological pregnancy are the main reasons that many agencies require that couples end fertility treatments before beginning preparations for adoption (ibid).

Johnston refers to Michael Trout, a child therapist and an expert on attachment issues, who believes that healthy preparation for parenting in adoption cannot happen when adopters’ don’t give themselves the opportunity to experience a psychological pregnancy (Johnston, 22). This psychological pregnancy also benefits the adoptee by providing the child with the opportunity to be the center of the parents’ universe for at least the amount of time nature would take to bring a pregnancy to a live birth (ibid).

Johnston also refers to Dr. Brodzinsky, a Rutgers researcher and clinical professional, who cautions against artificial twinning, but also states that when parents of “back-to-back” children are well supported, most families appear to function quite well (Johnston, 22).

Sibling Adoptions

Barth and Berry:

Barth and Berry found that families who adopted two siblings and had no birth children in the home had surprisingly successful outcomes. Most sibling

placements in the study were for younger children (Barth & Berry, 94). This study also found that placing siblings into homes with no other children will go more smoothly than sibling placements into homes with other children (Barth & Berry, 64). This may be in part attributed to what previous research referred to as the “Cinderella Syndrome,” where children believe they are severely maltreated in contrast to their non-adopted siblings (see Goodwin et al). However, this contradicts findings from another 1988 study which found that families with more birth children in an adoptive household experienced less incidents of disruption (Rosenthal et al, 110).

Groze:

Groze’s longitudinal study reports on the affects of sibling adoption in regards to social problems, attention problems, aggressive behaviour and parent/child relations. This study is included in this report as other research has found an association between increased risk of disruption and emotional/behavioural difficulties in the adoptive children (see Rosenthal (1988) and Sack and Dale (1982).

Groze’s study examined the responses of 71 families who participated in the study from the spring of 1990 until the summer of 1993. Seventy-one children were studied and in the case of families where there were more than one adoptive child, one child was randomly selected as the focus of the study (Groze, 17). Eighty percent of the homes had other children in the home, and included mostly adopted and biological children with several homes having a few foster children or step children (Groze, 26). Children were an average of 5 years old at the time of placement and had been in their adoptive homes for approximately 5.5 years.

Social problems:

Scores were highest for the children separated from their siblings and least for siblings placed together (Groze, 59). Behaviours in the social problem scale included:

- the child acting too young for his or her age;
- clinging to adults;
- not getting along with other children;
- getting teased a lot;
- not being liked by other children;
- preferring to play with younger children (ibid).

Attention problems:

- Attention problems were least for the girls for the group of siblings placed with all their siblings and greatest for the children separated from their siblings during year 1 (Groze, 59).
- Over time, girls placed with all their siblings scored higher for attention problems and by year 4 scored higher than the group of girls placed with some of their siblings.

- Scores for girls separated from siblings decreased slightly but remained higher over the four year period than for the siblings placed together. In addition, scores remained above the clinical norms during the 4 year period for girls separated from their siblings and remained below the clinical norms for female children placed with siblings (Groze, 60).
- There was a tendency for boys to exhibit greater attention problems than their female counterparts with the exception of siblings placed apart. Female siblings placed apart scored higher than their male counterparts for attention problems.
- For boys, attention problems were least for the group of siblings placed with all their siblings and greatest for boys placed with some siblings during year 1.
- Over time, the scores for boys placed with all their siblings increased. Scores for the boys separated from siblings and placed with some siblings remained approximately the same over the 4 year period (Groze, 59).
- For boys, most scores remained above the clinical norms during the 4 year period for siblings placed together but below the clinical norms for the children separated from siblings.

Aggressive behaviour findings:

- During year 1, aggressive behaviour scores were least for siblings placed with all siblings, however over time these scores increased.
- Scores for the children separated from siblings remained above the clinical norms over the 4 year period while scores for the children placed with siblings fluctuated above and below the scores for the clinical group.
- Aggressive behaviour scores were greatest for girls separated from their siblings and remained higher than for siblings placed together over the 4 years of the study (Groze, 59).
- No significant findings existed for boys in relation to aggressive behaviour scores.

It should be noted that “attention problems” and “aggressive behaviour” was not defined in this study so it is uncertain as to what these behaviours included.

Groze states that for some behaviours it is not clear whether the behaviour is a cause or consequence of sibling group status. For example, it is not clear whether female children are more likely to be placed separately from their siblings if they exhibit social problems, attention problems or aggressive behaviour (Groze, 66). However, it is clear that these problems remain higher for the siblings separated than for the siblings placed together.

Parent/child Relations:

- In assessing parent/child communication, initially scores were the same for children placed apart from their siblings and children placed together (Groze, 66). Over time, relations remained about the same for children who were placed apart and get worse for siblings placed together (ibid).

- When asked how the parent got along with the child, initially scores were the same for children placed apart from their siblings and children placed together. Over time, relations slightly improved for children who were placed apart and got worse for siblings placed together (Groze, 66).
- The item that asked whether the parent feels respected by the child found that parents reported higher scores for siblings placed apart and lower scores for siblings placed together. This difference between the groups remained consistent over the 4 year period.

Results suggest that both trust and how close the parent feels to the child have the same pattern as getting along with the child, communication with the child and trust of the child (Groze, 66). Anxious attachment is greater in children placed apart and decreases slightly over the four years, whereas for siblings placed together it is lower and increases slightly over the four years. Even with the increase, anxious attachment remains greater for siblings who are separated. Avoidant attachment is greater for siblings placed together and decreases slightly during the fourth year whereas for siblings who are separated it is slightly higher over time.

Groze's study does not explicitly define anxious and avoidant attachment. Other literature has described anxious attachment behaviours as always trying to be who others want them to be. Children exhibiting anxious attachment behaviours tend to be extremely anxious about how they should behave and easily mold themselves to meet the expectations of others (Institute for Attachment and Child Development (www.instituteforattachment.org) Avoidant attachment behaviours include tending to avoid close contact with others. Children exhibiting avoidant attachment behaviours do not make friends easily and do not maintain those friendships they do have, thus isolating themselves from their peers (ibid).

Groze notes that the differences in parent/child relationships provide partial evidence of the importance of the sibling bond. The sibling group develops a strong subsystem that affects the quality of parent/child relations. Children separated from their siblings are easier to influence because the parent is trying to build a relationship with only one child. Trying to build a relationship with more than one child is difficult. Therefore, Groze concludes that sibling status influences some aspects of parent/child relations. The study also states that both adopting a sibling group and adopting children separated from siblings had unique stressors for families. Many children demonstrated significant behaviour difficulties and these difficulties were more pronounced for children with a preadoptive history of physical and/or sexual abuse (Groze, 121). A qualitative study by Chisholm suggests that adoptive families with adoptive siblings enjoy greater success if training is received, if families are active in support groups that are perceived as being helpful and if adoptive families have a large support network of family and friends (Chisholm, 188).

Overall Findings:

Groze notes that there do not appear to be strong differences between the siblings placed together and the siblings separated on most variables studies with this sample (Groze, 77). Groze argues that once a decision has been made to separate siblings, outcomes for the children for whom this decision is made can be positive. While results suggest limited differences, the research indicates the importance of emphasizing in policy and practice the continuance of sibling ties. Some issues that siblings have about being separated will not appear upon standardized measures, such as the longing that children have for the misplaced sibling. Both theory and research suggest a need for a careful examination of this issue of sibling placement in policy and practice.

Groze states that the norm should be that siblings are kept together, and only when there is compelling evidence of when interventions into sibling relations fail should consideration be given to separation. However, if it is determined that the siblings are to be separated, families and practitioners need to explore how to maintain sibling ties, although the children will be in separate locations. In addition, effort must be given to assisting the siblings with loss and grief issues as they separate from each other. It is helpful for siblings to have an opportunity to meet the other's parents and know when their next contact will be and how it will occur. It is incumbent upon the adults to take the initiative to plan and facilitate ongoing contact.

Families were asked how often they thought of ending the adoptive placement. Over the four year period, while the majority remained very positive, there was some shift to less positive perceptions of these outcomes. However, over 90% of families had not thought of ending the adoptive placement and would themselves adopt again (Groze, 41).

It is important to note that the Groze study focuses only on domestic biological sibling adoptions and that 82% of adoptees studied were Caucasian. Therefore caution needs to be exercised when applying Groze's findings to intercountry adoptees. The Groze study also does not address which family characteristics are most conducive to the successful placing of siblings, such as education, support of extended family, age and socioeconomic status.

Families Comprised of Adopted and Birth Children

Simon and Alstein:

Simon and Alstein conducted a study on family relations where more than half the families adopted more than one transracial child. The researchers found that birth children in the adoptive family reported being unchanged by the adoption.

Vroegh:

A study on transracial adoptions by Vroegh found that 60% of the adopted children got along well with all of their siblings (Barth & Brooks, 32). The remaining reported that they got along well with some of their siblings and not well with others. The primary reasons reported for not getting along with siblings involved age and sex differences and personality conflicts (ibid). None of the transracially adopted children mentioned conflict with biological children or race as a reason for not getting along with their siblings. It is important to note that this study did not provide information regarding the timeframe of when the adoptions occurred. It is not clear as to whether the families who adopted more than one child did so at the same time or what the time interval was between adoptions. This study provides insight into some of the effects of adopting multiple children on family dynamics.

Boer, Versluis-den Bieman and Verhulst:

A 1994 study conducted by Boer, Versluis-den Bieman and Verhulst compared ten year outcomes for 399 children placed with one or more siblings to 1749 children placed alone. Part of their analysis focused on children adopted into families with other children called step-siblings by the authors. The researchers found a relationship between the number of problem behaviours and the number of step-siblings. This correlation was not found among children adopted with their biological siblings into families with children (Barth & Brooks, 34). The authors suggest that the presence of biological siblings may serve a protective function for children (ibid).

Barth and Brooks:

Barth and Brooks suggest that adding adoptive children to larger groups of birth children will result in poor outcomes. The decision to spend additional time and resources on their adopted children may be much easier when it does not directly compromise the quality of care for their biological children. Families who elect to adopt many children may not experience this competition for resources in the same manner (Barth & Brooks, 53).

The 1994 California Long-Range Adoption study found that family structure was significantly associated with a parent satisfaction indicator four years post adoption (Barth & Brooks, 33). Comparing satisfaction levels among the 556 families in the sample who had one or more adopted children and no birth children to the 452 “blended” families in which birth children were present, significantly fewer respondents in blended families reported being “very satisfied” with their adoption experience. These findings have implications for adoptive families with biological children considering multiple adoptions.

Suggestions for Families and Adoption Practitioners

Groze:

Groze suggests using life books and life maps to assist both siblings and adoptive parents in preparing for the adoption as well as a tool to be used throughout the child's life (Groze, 128). The life book is a scrapbook that contains photos as well as other mementos, drawings and memories that form the child's life experiences. It is used to help children connect and integrate their past to the present and assist in planning for the future. The life map is a picture the child draws that represents his or her life. A curving road is drawn on a poster board and at the top of the page where the road begins is the child's birth. At the bottom of the page where the road ends is the current living situation of the child. Working with a therapist, the child then diagrams the different places and events of his or her life (Groze, 127-128). One study found that life books were not used in 40% of disruption cases studied (Partridge et al, 37).

These tools can be used to help siblings understand each other's perceptions and experiences about their history, together and apart, including their history with the birth family. Groze states that understanding their experiences and the experiences of their siblings can be beneficial in promoting stability in the adoption and beginning to work together on the unique issues the children bring to the adoptive family system.

Life books and maps can be used as a tool for adoptive families who have artificially twinned or families which consist of multiple adoptees, as a way of maintaining the adoptees separate identities and acknowledging and celebrating differences among siblings. Life books and life maps can be updated periodically and provide an opportunity for discussion. This type of acknowledgment may assist the adoptees in identity formation and may help ameliorate some of the negative outcomes of being "twinned", thus reducing familial stress and/or disruption.

Ames:

Ames recommends that parents should be cautioned that the time and energy necessary to rear an orphanage child make it unwise to adopt more than one child at a time, or to bring the child into a family that already has several young children. A pre-adoption program should help both parents decide if they have the resources to raise an orphanage child (Ames, 116). The Ames report speaks to the need for parents to be educated and better prepared to address behavioural difficulties. This type of preparation can assist parents in making an informed decision regarding family composition. If families are not provided with counselling and education they may not foresee the challenges surrounding artificial twinning.

Judge:

Judge recommends that adoption practitioners refer families who are adopting more than one child at once to a variety of services, including developmental assessments (Judge, 247).

It is important that adoption practitioners promote the importance of a psychological pregnancy to allow for emotional and practical preparation. Adoption practitioners also need to educate prospective adoptive parents about the stressors related to adoption and artificial twinning and explain the reasoning behind any requirements the parent(s) may be subject to. This type of education should also reduce the temptation some prospective parents' may have to work with multiple adoption agencies or facilitators without informing each of the other's involvement.

Bird et al:

As the research indicates that families experiencing multiple stressors are more at risk of disruption, adoption practitioners should also promote perceptions of stressors as challenges rather than threats (Bird et al, 219). This may help strengthen parental resilience.

Irwin Johnston:

The following suggestions are applicable to families raising genetically unrelated children born less than eight months apart as siblings by the same adoptive parent(s). From "Artificial Twinning: An Instant Family at What Price?" by Patricia Irwin Johnston published in *Adoptive Families* magazine:

- If the adoptees are of the same race, the assumption that they are fraternal twins will be even greater than it will be if they are of opposite sexes or racially/ethnically different. However, adoptees of differing races may draw even more questions from the curious, causing awkwardness. It is important for families to be aware and prepared for these instances.
- People are fascinated by multiple births and may expect the family to want to do "twin things" both because they think twinning is neat and easier on parents. Parents will need to go to extra lengths to refuse to allow themselves or anyone else in the children's lives to treat the children as twins. Parents should not dress them alike, give them individual toys and acknowledge birthdays separately. No matter how close they are in age, the children should be treated not as a twinned pair but as children born at least a year apart.
- Being artificially twinned is likely to be harder on same-sex siblings than on opposite sex pairs. If children are the same sex, parents will have to work even harder not to twin them.
- Parents should become acutely tuned in to their children's age-related developmental differences, particularly during their first two years of life when change and growth is rapid, and be individually responsive to these differences. As the children grow older, parents need to be especially

- observant of and supportive about their children's individual interests and talents while at the same time fostering their sibling interactions.
- As the children grow, parents should support their friendship but discourage what could be their inclination to become "twin entwined" as exclusive friends who are frightened of separation from one another.
 - The common fascination with multiples also means that parents will need to be particularly aware when the children are babies of the need to establish family privacy boundaries concerning who really "needs" detailed information about the unusual beginnings of the family. As the children become older, parents need to help them to develop their own scripts about how to respond to the curious.
 - Parents should give serious consideration to planning from pre-school forward to separate the children in school by more than just different rooms and teachers for the same grade. There are two ways to do this: parents may decide to hold one back from the beginning or if the cognitive and development of both children makes it in their individual best interests to start school at the same time, parents may consider sending them to separate schools.

Limitations of this report

As there is very little academic research on adopting more than one child at once, sibling adoption and artificial twinning, the findings of this report are limited. The research that is available is also dated and speaks to the need for further research in this area. Research that focuses on sibling or multiple placements is warranted as the literature suggests that sibling relations exert considerable influence on individual development and attachment behaviour in each other. The research also suggests that sibling relationships assist children in developing a private identity and a public identity (Groze, 53). Therefore, whether the focus is on biological siblings or children raised as siblings, research in this area can yield valuable information for adoptive families and adoption practitioners. Very little of the research explicitly examined family composition of families adopting internationally. Future studies may wish to explore differences in family composition between domestic and international adoptees.

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