

YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

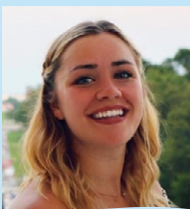
The Path Away from — and Back to — My Siblings: Discovering the Power of Family Identity and Sibling Relationships

by Aleks Talsky

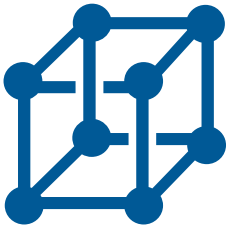
Have you ever considered the role your siblings play throughout your life? No relationship in your lifetime will compare to the bond you form with a brother or sister. As you grow and define who you are and what you believe in, your sibling is one of the few people to support you in your journey from adolescence to adulthood — the one person who understands where you came from and where you are going. Your sibling is the first person to show you how to kick a soccer ball, and someone you can trust to keep secrets from Mom and Dad. A sibling is a big brother or sister who protects you from bullies at school and teaches you how to stay out of trouble. A sibling is a shoulder to cry on after your first breakup. A sibling is your biggest enemy and your best friend — someone you can argue with for hours but still rely on if you need help. Sibling bonds are friendships that last a lifetime. Imagine losing that friendship at a young age not because of anything you did, but because you enter foster care. When your life is turned upside down you not only lose your toys, belongings, home, school, and friends, but you also lose one of the most crucial relationships in your life.

I am sharing my story to emphasize the importance of maintaining sibling relationships for all children who enter the foster care system. I spent a total of eleven years in the Milwaukee County foster care system. Child Protective Services took me out of the home of my parents, who suffered from drug addiction, when I was only eight years old. When I was placed in my first foster home, a tumultuous period followed where I became isolated from my nine siblings and suffered significant instability. I was later placed with my grandmother. Living with my grandmother provided me with some

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Alexandrea (Aleks) Talsky, is a national child welfare advocate passionate about achieving reform through the legal system. She currently works as legal professional at Michael Best. Outside of work, Aleks serves on the National Youth Advisory Board for the National Association of Counsel for Children, secretary of SUN Scholars, and as a Constituent Consultant with the Family Voices United Knowledge Management Team. Aleks is driven to strengthen her knowledge in child welfare so she can efficiently and effectively use her lived expertise to inform and redefine how we serve children and families.

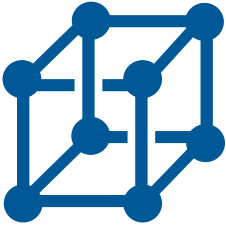


balance and security, but placement with family comes with a different set of unexpected problems.

The way my siblings and I maintained relationships with one another varied significantly from home to home based on our placements. I was fortunate enough to maintain a relationship with many of my siblings because my grandma fostered and supported all my sibling relationships without bias. On the other hand, unfortunately, many of my siblings, who were either adopted or placed with family, were not provided with the same flexibility and support. For example, many of my siblings' parents prevented them from having a relationship with my oldest sister because of her "risky" behavior. When my sister ran away from foster homes, her actions were viewed as "risky", rather than understood for what they truly were: a call for help. My sister's efforts to reunite our family and provide support for each of her siblings were viewed as a threat to our safety. There was so much focus on my sister's negative behavior, and never any consideration for her positive behavior. Not one person took the time to acknowledge the behavior that defined who she truly was: her dedication and hard work ethic inside the classroom and at work.

Preventing my siblings from having a relationship was unfair to both my siblings and older sister. The so-called "risky" behavior of my oldest sister was a normal part of growing up for all teenagers. Even if she did have what some may call "risky" behavior, it could be attributed to trauma she experienced and her unstable placement history. She was placed in group homes and lacked a sense of belonging, parental figures, and support in general. Before we were taken away, my sister was the mom of the house, the only one taking care of me and all my siblings. Our relationship with her was an important part of her identity and life. It was not fair to take that relationship away from her. She was only a child and did not deserve to be punished for things that were outside of her control. My sister strived to develop a relationship with her siblings despite the challenges that were created by adults who were supposed to support her.

The lack of effort by our placements to maintain relationships with our siblings has significant impacts on each of our lives. Many of my siblings, including myself, are at an age where we can decide what relationships to maintain and who our family is. Reconnecting with and strengthening my relationships with family has always been an important part of finding my identity and sense of belonging. However, this power comes with a different set of unexpected challenges. Family events can often be stressful as we struggle with how to treat one another. It is difficult to have healthy relationships because we did not have the opportunity to learn how to do this when we were younger. As a result, I am forced to set boundaries and distance myself from my



siblings so I can focus on caring for myself. I suffer from individual and shared pain of guilt as I pursue my own life because many of my siblings are unable to do the same. I've endured firsthand the barriers that young people in and aging out of foster care face.

As the child welfare system modernizes to meet the needs of children and families, we must ensure siblings' relationships are supported and fostered. Sibling relationships are an essential part of a young person's identity and connection to their family. Foster care is a traumatic experience, and a sibling is one of the few people who understands what you have been through and what you are dealing with. All children have a right to a relationship with their siblings and should not be prevented from having one because they are in foster care. I urge attorneys to foster and support siblings' relationships by following the recommendations below:

1. Advocating to place sibling groups in the same home;
2. Ensuring foster or adoptive parents and guardians are supporting children and young people to maintain relationships with siblings, if sibling groups cannot be placed in same home;
3. Removing the bias of what "risky behavior" is by:
 - a. Normalizing teenage behavior;
 - b. Understanding that if even if the behavior is risky, there are probably reasons for that, and those reasons need to be addressed instead of putting more potential negative impacts in place; and
 - c. Never restricting sibling visitation as a consequence; and
4. Removing the bias that siblings aren't good for each other.

As you embark on the next milestone in your life, whether it is starting a new job, going back to school, getting married, buying a home, or starting a family, think about who you need to be there as you make life-changing choices and define your goals, values, and personal beliefs. As I embark on these next steps in my life, I will make choices that are defined by who I am and where I came from. I am confident my siblings will play an important role in supporting me in these life decision as they are some of a few people who truly understand what I have been through and what I want in life. ■