



# UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

MAY 2012

**Emanuel & Willie, ages 13 and 14 are waiting...**

Photo by: Linda Boyd



# UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

QUARTERLY DCFS NEWSLETTER



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If you are interested in more information on any of the children featured in this publication, please contact The Adoption Exchange at 801-265-0444.

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Kathy Searle, Editor  
Lindsay Kaeding, Design Director

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# **I can not give away that which is not mine to give.**

**I can not provide peace, tranquility and calm to a wounded child, if I am not at peace and calm.**

**I can not provide safety to a child, if I do not feel safe inside.**

**I must remember my child's eyes, before they were far away eyes, before they looked right through me, before they were vacant.**

**I must remember that my child has seen what no child should have ever seen; that my child has heard what no child should have ever heard; that my child has felt what no child has ever felt.**

**I must remember that the lens through which my child sees life, love, family and relationship is not the same lens through which I see life, love, family and relationship.**

**My child comes from a land of hurt, shame, abuse and neglect. My land is foreign to her.**

**My child comes from a home of anger. My home is foreign to her.**

**My child comes from a life of fear. My love is foreign to her.**

**We simply can not expect our children to move into our worlds when we can not spare a few moments to join them in theirs.**

**We simply can not expect our children to trust us, because we say so. Many before us have said many things.**

**We simply can not expect our children to obey us, because we are right. They have been wronged too many times prior to our right.**

**If we are to become the conduit to healing such pain in wounded children, we must first heal ourselves. We simply can not give away that which is not ours to begin with.**

**Peace,**

*Juli Alvarado*

**Foster Mom**

**[www.coaching-forlife.com](http://www.coaching-forlife.com)**





# SIBLING RIVALRY

An article by: Kids Health

## About Sibling Rivalry

While many kids are lucky enough to become the best of friends with their siblings, it's common for brothers and sisters to fight. (It's also common for them to swing back and forth between adoring and detesting one other!)

Often, sibling rivalry starts even before the second child is born, and continues as the kids grow and compete for everything from toys to attention. As kids reach different stages of development, their evolving needs can significantly affect how they relate to one another.

It can be frustrating and upsetting to watch — and hear — your kids fight with one another. A household that's full of conflict is stressful for everyone. Yet often it's hard to know how to stop the fighting, and or even whether you should get involved at all. But you can take steps to promote peace in your household and help your kids get along.

## Why Kids Fight

Many different things can cause siblings to fight. Most brothers and sisters experience some degree of jealousy or competition, and this can flare into squabbles and bickering. But other factors also might influence how often kids fight and how severe the fighting gets. These include:

- Evolving needs. It's natural for kids' changing needs, anxieties, and identities to affect how they relate to one another. For example, toddlers are naturally protective of their toys and belongings, and are learning to assert their will, which they'll do at every turn. So if a baby brother or sister picks up the toddler's toy, the older child may react aggressively. School-age kids often have a strong concept of fairness and equality, so might not understand why siblings of other ages are treated differently or feel like one child gets preferential treatment. Teenagers, on the other hand, are developing a sense of individuality and independence, and might resent helping with household responsibilities, taking care of younger siblings, or even having to spend time together. All of these differences can influence the way kids fight with one another.

- Individual temperaments. Your kids' individual temperaments — including mood, disposition, and adaptability — and their unique personalities play a large role in how well they get along. For example, if one child is laid back and another is easily rattled, they may often get into it. Similarly, a child who is especially clingy and drawn to parents for comfort and love might be resented by siblings who see this and want the same amount of attention.

- Special needs/sick kids. Sometimes, a child's special needs due to illness or learning/emotional issues may require more parental time. Other kids may pick up on this disparity and act out to get attention or out of fear of what's happening to the other child.

- Role models. The way that parents resolve problems and disagreements sets a strong example for kids. So if you and your spouse work through conflicts in a way that's respectful, productive, and not aggressive, you increase the chances that your children will adopt those tactics when they run into problems with one another. If your kids see you routinely shout, slam doors, and loudly argue when you have problems, they're likely to pick up those bad habits themselves.

## What to Do When the Fighting Starts

While it may be common for brothers and sisters to fight, it's certainly not pleasant for anyone in the house. And a family can only tolerate a certain amount of conflict. So what should you do when the fighting starts?

Whenever possible, don't get involved. Step in only if there's a danger of physical harm. If you always intervene, you risk creating other problems. The kids may start expecting your help and wait for you to come to the rescue rather than learning to work out the problems on their own. There's also the risk that you — inadvertently — make it appear to one child that another is always being "protected," which could foster even more resentment. By the same token, rescued kids may feel that they can get away with more because they're always being "saved" by a parent.

If you're concerned by the language used or name-calling, it's appropriate to "coach" kids through what they're feeling by using appropriate words. This is different from intervening or stepping in and separating the kids.

Even then, encourage them to resolve the crisis themselves. If you do step in, try to resolve problems with your kids, not for them.

When getting involved, here are some steps to consider:

- Separate kids until they're calm. Sometimes it's best just to give them space for a little while and not immediately rehash the conflict. Otherwise, the fight can escalate again. If you want to make this a learning experience, wait until the emotions have died down.

- Don't put too much focus on figuring out which child is to blame. It takes two to fight — anyone who is involved is partly responsible.



- Next, try to set up a "win-win" situation so that each child gains something. When they both want the same toy, perhaps there's a game they could play together instead.

Remember, as kids cope with disputes, they also learn important skills that will serve them for life — like how to value another person's perspective, how to compromise and negotiate, and how to control aggressive impulses.

## Helping Kids Get Along

Simple things you can do every day to prevent fighting include:

- Set ground rules for acceptable behavior. Tell the kids that there's no cursing, no name-calling, no yelling, no door slamming. Solicit their input on the rules — as well as the consequences when they break them. This teaches kids that they're responsible for their own actions, regardless of the situation or how provoked they felt, and discourages any attempts to negotiate regarding who was "right" or "wrong."

- Don't let kids make you think that everything always has to be "fair" and "equal" — sometimes one kid needs more than the other.

- Be proactive in giving your kids one-on-one attention directed to their interests and needs. For example, if one likes to go outdoors, take a walk or go to the park. If another child likes to sit and read, make time for that too.

- Make sure kids have their own space and time to do their own thing — to play with toys by themselves, to play with friends without a sibling tagging along, or to enjoy activities without having to share 50-50.

- Show and tell your kids that, for you, love is not something that comes with limits.

- Let them know that they are safe, important, and loved, and that their needs will be met.

- Have fun together as a family. Whether you're watching a movie, throwing a ball, or playing a board game, you're establishing a peaceful way for your kids to spend time together and relate to each other. This can help ease tensions between them and also keeps you involved. Since parental attention is something many kids fight over, fun family activities can help reduce conflict.

- If your children frequently squabble over the same things (such as video games or dubs on the TV remote), post a schedule showing which child "owns" that item at what times during the week. (But if they keep fighting

about it, take the "prize" away altogether.)

- If fights between your school-age kids are frequent, hold weekly family meetings in which you repeat the rules about fighting and review past successes in reducing conflicts. Consider establishing a program where the kids earn points toward a fun family-oriented activity when they work together to stop battling.

- Recognize when kids just need time apart from each other and the family dynamics. Try arranging separate play dates or activities for each kid occasionally. And when one child is on a play date, you can spend one-on-one time with another.

Keep in mind that sometimes kids fight to get a parent's attention. In that case, consider taking a time-out of your own. When you leave, the incentive for fighting is gone. Also, when your own fuse is getting short, consider handing the reins over to the other parent, whose patience may be greater at that moment.

## Getting Professional Help

In a small percentage of families, the conflict between brothers and sisters is so severe that it disrupts daily functioning, or particularly affects kids emotionally or psychologically. In those cases, it's wise to get help from a mental health professional. Seek help for sibling conflict if it:

- is so severe that it's leading to marital problems
- creates a real danger of physical harm to any family member
- is damaging to the self-esteem or psychological well-being of any family member
- may be related to other significant concerns, such as depression

If you have questions about your kids' fighting, talk with your doctor, who can help you determine whether your family might benefit from professional help and refer you to local mental health resources.

Reviewed by: Jennifer Shroff Pendley, PhD  
Date reviewed: December 2009

\*This information was provided by KidsHealth®, one of the largest resources online for medically reviewed health information written for parents, kids, and teens. For more articles like this, visit KidsHealth.org or TeensHealth.org. © 1995- 2012 . The Nemours Foundation/KidsHealth®. All rights reserved.

# A PLACE TO CALL HOME



Nick, who once went by the name of Kevin because he felt like the little boy on Home Alone, finalized in court on December 2nd with his adoptive mom, Leona. Nick came into care at only 9 months old and has spent his whole childhood in foster homes and residential treatment facilities. Fifteen-year-old Nick has gotten used to change. "I've never had a home that I could call home," he said.



Last year he was placed in a home he knew would be different. "He just fits in, He's totally like our family," says Leona. "He acts just like my children, so he belongs here with us."

"It's different because I can care about her and she'll care about me," Nick said.

*"It made me cry on the stand when they asked me if I would take care of him like one of my own natural children. I told them, "Of course I will, every day," Leona recalled.*



# 100

## Fun Things to do with your Children this Summer

By Katie Pertiet at [designerdigitals.com](http://designerdigitals.com)

1. Library-check out books that have IDEAS - how to make paper airplanes, science experiments, craft projects, etc.
2. Library-STORY TIME - something about a different setting breaks up the routine for the kids, gives them something to look forward to.
3. Local Park - go early, pack a lunch, bring a drawing tablet, enjoy the outside before its too hot.
4. Take a field trip.
5. Visit a fire department.
6. Play in the water.
7. Build a fort.
8. Take a nature walk.
9. Take an "Alphabet tour"... - drive to town/city - begin with the letter a (Apple street) b (building) c (colosseum) d(dairy queen) etc...
10. Check out kids free days at your museums.
11. Make homemade ice cream Make popcicles, smoothies, ice cream sundaes.
12. Go on a scavenger hunt
13. Host a neighborhood carnival.
14. Go to an outdoor concert (most towns/cities have a website where you can see what/when and which ones are free.)
15. Check your movie theatre for free summer movies (usually morning showings)
16. Go to the beach.
17. Check out your local hardware store - they offer free kids club building projects.
18. Cook with your kids but let them plan it, be apart of the shopping, table setting - make dessert!)
19. Host a cooking party - invite some friends - have each mom bring a few ingredients and spend the day making cookies, treats, etc.
20. Teach the kids frisbee golf.



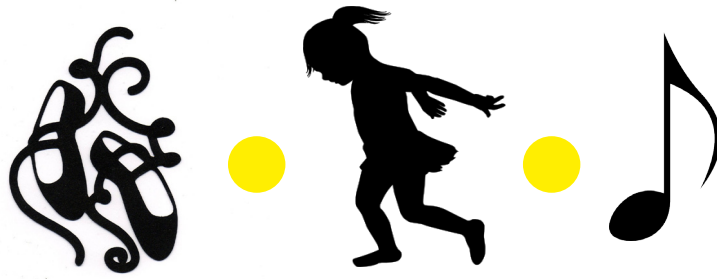
21. Go fly a kite (why not make them first).
22. Do a sewing project together. Make a picnic or story time blanket, apron, or summer dress.
23. Make sock puppets - put on a puppet shows.
24. Go outside for reading time.
25. Make and blow bubbles.
26. Hide all the army men, mini animals, etc. in the sand pit - have a excavation. (even read a book about archeologists before hand).
27. Play dress up.
28. Have a tea party.
29. Make an obstacle course out of your back yard and have races.
30. Play jacks.
31. Go fishing.
32. Go on a bike ride.
33. Camp in your back yard.
34. Melt and create with crayons.
35. Visit a local state park.
36. Go bowling (a lot of the alleys offer students 2 free games over the summer).
37. Plant a garden using seeds from your vegetables/fruits.
38. Tour local historic sites.
39. Make a star gazing map.
40. Teach the kids to knit.
41. Check with a local farm - offer to help feed the animals.
42. Set up a lemonade stand.
43. Set up hotwheels races in the driveway.
44. Have a LEGO building contest
45. Make a doll.
46. Hunt for animal tracks. (get a book from the library to help identify them).
47. Have a dress up party (doesnt have to be halloween to wear those costumes).
48. Learn bird calls.
49. Use magazines to make mosaics.
50. Check your craft stores for make and take craft projects (Michaels, Hobby Lobby, etc.).
51. Tour a factory.
52. Make musical instruments and become a 'home band' sensation!
53. Make tye die shirts. (play some groovy tunes, too)
54. Take a picnic to dad/mom/grandma/ etc... give them a nice break from their work day.
55. Make a tent in the living room.
56. Go to an Arboretum.
57. Make a bird feeder with pine cones & peanut butter (and bird seed of course).
58. Paint with fruit and veggies (and anything else you will let them paint with - think q-tips, old toothbrush, sponges, leaves.... etc.)
59. Play charades.
60. Have a "BORED" game day - pull out all those dusty games and let each child pick a game
61. Walk your neighbors dog.
62. Blow up Diet coke with mentos.

63. Make sillouettes.
64. Check out local VBS offerings - a lot of time you can volunteer while your kids attend.
65. Learn/Go Orienteering.
66. Make a compass. (ties in to 65)
67. Gather friends and have a "clean" the park day - celebrate your good deed with a picnic and play time.
68. Sculpt with homeade SALT CLAY.
69. Collect Seashells.
70. Play "I Spy" as you walk around your neighborhood.
71. Go to a farmers market.
72. Check with a local pizzeria to see if you can come in for a tour
73. Check your newspaper for local summer festivals.
74. Make school related activities fun -
75. Learn (play) street games.
76. Make Taffy.
77. Make a checker board and your own checkers. then play for a bit...
78. Make your own board games.
79. Make a Milk Carton Boat - and head to a pond.
80. Have a Christmas in July party and ask all the guests to bring donations for your local food pantry.
81. Participate in a free activity at Bass Pro Shop.
82. Have a major league team in your area - call about free kids tickets this summer.
83. Take a trip to tour your state capitol, local courthouse, etc.
84. Gather, paint, make pet rocks.
85. Plan a theme week (keep checking back here for more details about our themes this summer).
86. Volunteer at a local charity/Habitat for Humanity.
87. Have a pajama day, enjoy movies and popcorn (great for a rainy day).
88. Color.
89. Make a Windchime.
90. Write your own poems.
91. Do a toy swap (pack up those forgotten toys and swap with a friend - kids love new "to them" toys as much as they love :NEW: toys.
92. "Play" school.
93. Make paper dolls for boys, for girls, or for the more advanced.
94. Travel around the world. Have English scones for breakfast, Chinese Stir Fry for lunch, Italian for dinner.
95. Have a switcher-oo day, you send your kids to someone elses house and their kids come to yours.
96. Play tennis, soccer, kickball, football, etc.
97. Make slime.
98. Make glowing fireflies. we get our glowsticks at Target's \$1.00 bins and they come with 10, so its practically free.
99. Make a sandcastle.
100. Enjoy an art lesson.

**Most importantly remember the simplicity of childhood is found in the quality of the time spent together - enjoy each moment, create an environment of joy and excitement, learning and fun and I am certain this summer will be one we all remember for a very long time.**

For more ideas, visit Utah's Adoption Connection Lending Library at [www.adoptex.org](http://www.adoptex.org). Check out, "365 Smart After School Activities" by Sheila Ellison and Judith Gray or "Hopscotch, Hangmand , Hot Potato, and Ha Ha Ha: A Rulebook of Children's Games" By Jack Maguire.





# Connecting with our Children

## *They need to move and make noise*

*By: Jane Peranteau, Project Director StepUp! Diligent Recruitment, The Adoption Exchange.*

**In order to feel safe, we only need someone to see us, be present to us, for fifteen minutes a day; this can best be done through play, including music and dance.**

**Play time, down on the floor, fifteen hours a week, lessens the consequences of stress and the manifestation of hyperactivity and attention deficit.**

**Over 85 percent of all learners are kinesthetic learners-they need to move to learn and grow**

These are some of the research findings of Carla Hannaford, PhD, an internationally recognized neuroscientist and award winning educator for more than thirty years. Her focus has been on kids of all ages who have difficulty learning, difficulty connecting to others, and difficulty feeling comfortable in their own skin. In her latest book, *Playing in the Unified Field: Becoming and Raising Conscious, Creative Human Beings*, she describes how children and families who live with the effects of emotional and behavioral disorders can benefit from physical and emotional alignment that movement, especially if its connected with music, singing, and dance, can bring.

Her point is that the ability to learn, change and grow doesn't happen without physical movement-of the body, the face, the mouth, the hands, the feet. Movement grows the brain, keeps us healthy, and keeps us connected socially. She sees play as the most beneficial form of movement, the form that puts the brain in its optimal mode for learning. She includes regular, noisy rough and tumble play done outside and inside on the floor, and play accompanied by music, song and dance as essential for brain development to occur.

Hannaford believes play is a natural activity for humans, but the chronic stress that can be a part of adoptive families' lives becomes an obstacle to play. Stress causes the brain to shut down by 75 to 80 percent, and learning cannot occur in this state. Her position is that regular, noisy play is a necessary response to stress.

Music ties deeply into her research. Music activates the brain and body in a way nothing else does. People, adults and children, do better with music. There is much research that shows the benefits of music for traumatized and troubled children, including listening to music, singing and playing instruments. Her research with children shows how music calms, focuses, and brings them into the moment, better able to connect with those around them.

Dancing produces great benefits as well. In a large study of 70-90 year olds, dancing, in those who danced a few times a week, decreased the likelihood of Alzheimer's by 79 percent, illustrating the continuing benefit of movement. It activates portions of the brain in children that allow them to productively release pent up emotion. She argues that we do too much quieting of children, at exactly the point in their lives when they need to make noise and move to thrive.

The more movement, the more brain development, because movement is what activates our learning potential. Brain development occurs until we die, Hannaford says, and movement remains essential, crating our best environment for learning, growth, and connection to each other.

# Hope's Boy: A Memoir

By Andrew Bridge

Publication Date: 2008

**Reviewed by: Kathy Searle,  
Utah Director of Programs, The Adoption Exchange**

Have you ever wondered what is going on in a child's mind that is in foster care or who has spent time there? Many times in my life when things are happening in our family I look at one of my children and there is a look in their eyes that seems to have a story but when I ask her about it they say "oh, it's nothing". A Child Called It was the first book that I read about childhood abuse after adopting children who also had been abused. It helped me to see things from a different perspective. I was raised in a home with loving parents and thus I see the world from that view. It can be difficult as both parents and professionals to see the world from the perspective of a child who views the world and adults as being unsafe.

Hope's Boy gives you a view into foster care from the perspective of a young boy. Even though Andy, was only with his mother for a short time and, in my opinion something unpleasant things happened while he was with her. He never stopped longing for her and the unconditional love she offered. He talks about a foster brother Jason who joined the family and wanted so much to belong. He worked hard to win the approval and acceptance of the mother and father. Andy thought this was so foolish, "You're not their son, it won't last". Andy was right, before long Jason was gone.

As parents and professionals we often see behavior that we can't make sense of. Andy describes an incident where he cut his foot on a rock on purpose. "With the correct pressure and speed, several rocks were sharp enough to cut the bottom of a wet slippery foot...but then I lifted my foot and pressed it against a chosen red stone. In the seconds that it lasted, the heavy slicing was wonderfully selfish. The moment tolerated nothing by itself in my head. Everything stopped for it, allowing only a tender, rushing calm. The wound would give me dominion over a world that had taken everything else"

Hope's Boy gives us a great look at what the system looks like from the perspective of a child, caseworkers doing their best but not really ever measuring up. A system that is tired and worn with caring people trying to do their best given a nearly impossible job. As I read I wondered what are we doing today in practice that will seem so wrong in 20 years. We are always changing the way we do things trying to get it right, but the paid love of parents and professionals rarely measures up the love of even the most abusive parent. Child welfare is given the task of safety for children but in the process loses many children to the rage that occurs when it is only replaced with hollow promises and a neverending stream of foster placements. We all acknowledge that parenting is hard under the best of circumstances but it is nearly impossible to get it right when, for the most part, everyone involved is paid to care and they come and go as regularly as dirty clothes thrown in a black trash bag for the next move.

Hope's Boy is a book about overcoming the odds and becoming a success. It's the love of a mother that was never forgotten even when the mother forgot herself.

Hope's Boy is one of the many books in **Utah's Adoption Connection library**. There is something for everyone. Children's books, books for professionals and even CD's and video's. To me knowledge is power and for me I need all the power I can get to keep at the task of raising children who often refuse to be raised. The lending library has come to my rescue when I was ready to give up hope and gave me tools to use to get through another day. Parenting is hard no matter who the children are but for us who choose to raise other people's children on any given day it can be like trying to climb Mount Everest in your swimming suit. Give the lending library a try you'll be glad you did.



**\*Utah's Adoption Connection Lending Library can be found at [www.adoptex.org](http://www.adoptex.org)**





## May 19th, 2012 • Jordan River Parkway

**Distance:** Family Walk/Run 5K  
**Start Time:** Registration & check in begins at 7:30  
 8:30 Race Start  
**Entry Fee:** \$20.00 Individual      \$50.00 Family of 3 or more  
*T-Shirts are free to all participants registered before May 15, 2011*  
**Sign Up:** MAIL: The Adoption Exchange  
 975 E Woodoak Lane, Suite 220, Murray, UT 84117  
 ONLINE: [www.adoptex.org](http://www.adoptex.org)  
 DAY OF: Germania Park  
 5243 Murray Parkway Avenue  
 Race will be timed.  
 Prizes will be given to 1st and 2nd place men's & women's runners

For More Information, Call 265-0444  
 or visit us online at [www.adoptex.org](http://www.adoptex.org)

### Race Course

Race will begin at Germania Park (5243 Murray Parkway Ave.) and will follow the Jordan River Parkway north.

### Water

Water will be provided following the race.

### Online Registration

You can register online at [www.adoptex.org](http://www.adoptex.org) by clicking on the Utah tab at the top of the page. Payment accepted by credit card.

### Release and Waiver (Please Read)

I know that running is a potentially hazardous activity. I should not enter and run unless I am medically able and properly trained. I also know that although police protection might be provided, there could be traffic on the course route; therefore, I assume the risk of running in traffic. I also assume any other risks associated with running in this event including, but not limited to, falls, contact with other participants, and the effects of weather and conditions of the road. I understand I am solely responsible for my own safety while traveling to and from or participating in this event.

Knowing these facts and in consideration of your acceptance of my entry, I hereby for myself, my heirs, executors, administrators, or anyone else who might sue on my behalf covenant not to sue, and waive, release, and discharge the sponsors or contributors to this event, any race officials, volunteers, the city and police agencies, their representatives, successors, or assignees from any and all claims of liability for death, personal injury, or property damage of any kind or nature whatsoever arising out of, or in the course of my participation.

This release form and waiver extends to all claims of every kind or nature whatsoever, foreseen and unforeseen, known and unknown. The undersigned further grants full permission to use any photographs, videotapes, motion pictures, recordings or any other record of the event for any purpose. Minors will be accepted with a parent's signature. The undersigned acknowledges that he/she has read the foregoing release and waiver, understands it and executes this waiver and release of his/her own free will, with full knowledge and understanding of the effects of it.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 City \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_  
 Home Phone \_\_\_\_\_ T- Shirt Size \_\_\_\_\_  
 Email \_\_\_\_\_

*If Registering as a Family:*

Family Team Name \_\_\_\_\_

Name	Age	Male/Female	Shirt Size

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO: THE ADOPTION EXCHANGE  
 REGISTER ONLINE AT [WWW.ADOPTEX.ORG](http://WWW.ADOPTEX.ORG)



# From Fear to Advocacy: My Journey from Foster Care to Helping Others

from Summer 2011 Adoptalk  
by Steven K. Walker

Steven was adopted from foster care at ten. Below he tells of the events that transformed him from an abused child to a national adoption advocate. Follow Steven on Facebook at the official page of Steven K. Walker, Adoption Advocate.

“He’ll never amount to anything.”

Would those words destroy or motivate you? For me, the words simply seemed true; I should be a failure. Statistics would predict that I’m in prison, but that wasn’t my destiny, was it? Who can know for certain if I will amount to anything, and why would they say that?

My story started in August 1987 when Alice, a mentally challenged alcoholic, gave birth to an undersized baby boy (me) in Niagara Falls, New York. There was no father listed on my birth certificate; it could have been any of the men she brought home from the bar most nights.

From the hospital, my mother brought me to a filthy four-room apartment that had only one outside window. There was no crib or baby formula, so Alice fed me whatever she ate. I often slept on a makeshift bed on the kitchen floor while strange men came over to abuse and take advantage of my poor drunk mother.

In November 1988, Alice gave birth to another boy, David. He and I shared everything and it was great because David gave me the attention my mother gave to strangers. Soon, however, life turned into a nightmare.

Alice kept bringing home men and some of them abused David and me physically, sexually, and emotionally. I tried to protect David by hiding us under the kitchen table, me covering him, and a blanket over us both.

If we refused to get out from under the table, the men would swear, rip me off of David, and beat him. When I tried to defend David and fight back, they beat me even more severely. Though I don’t remember specific men, all the abuse is like a vivid Van Gogh painting in my memory that can’t be forgotten or erased. Inevitably it defines, in part, who I am.

Memories ate at me and made me second-guess everything. Was the abuse my fault? What about my mother—why didn’t she defend me against abuse that left me with a dent in the back of my head and hand tremors? Alice never abused us, but she did not keep us out of harm’s way. Later, I came to realize that it wasn’t her fault, and believe now that she tried the hardest she could to keep David and me safe.

Through all the abuse, I cared for David as best I could. I always made sure he was fed before I was. I made certain he had a coat to keep



him warm during the cold winters. Soon I became malnourished.

David and I moved into foster care when I was four years old. With our things in black trash bags, we were shoved into the back of county cars, and said goodbye to our mother. It was confusing. I felt like a prisoner, but prisoners know where they're going and we didn't. What if we obeyed instead of fighting and hiding?

David and I ended up at a farm, with a mother and father who seemed nice. It was a hardworking Christian family who prayed with us before bed and got us up early to work in the barn. David and I did as they asked.

One morning, the foster mom assigned us to milk the goats. We didn't understand why this needed to be done and were struggling to comply. The foster mom tried to make it fun by squirting us with milk from the goat's udder. Unfortunately, the raw milk hit me in the eye. Six years and several surgeries later, I became legally blind in that eye.

With my belongings in another trash bag, I went to the next foster home. My third foster home was supposed to be therapeutic. The mother had a Ph.D. in psychology and was a special education teacher. She claimed she knew how to care for David and me, but also told us that she really wanted a baby girl, not boys.

Just when I started to get close to the father, they pulled the rug out from under me. They claimed that I was a bad influence on David and sent me away. David stayed behind.

From this home I moved to a Pennsylvania group home. At age six, I was the youngest kid there. We had to complete chores to earn rewards but no one taught me how so I often had to do chores over when I messed up the first time. The head of the facility told me I should never have been placed in the group setting.

Imagine my mindset. I was separated from my brother, lied to, and kept in the dark about my future. When I asked where I was going, the response was often, "Do you like ice cream?" People were saying they loved me, but then giving up on me in less than six months.

Next, I moved in with an older couple in Buffalo, New York. They made it clear they didn't intend to adopt me; they were only fostering to get money for the husband's heart surgery. I was eight, but was treated worse than the couple's five-year-old granddaughter because I was "not blood." This saying irks me. When humans get cut, don't we all bleed the same color?

On weekends, I visited potential adoptive families—too many to count. They all gave up on me, even the three families who signed the adoption papers. My feelings of hurt and distrust grew.

Just before my ninth birthday, I moved in with a family in North Tonawanda, New York. I knew them a little from having been in respite care with them a few times, including a time when David was there because his family went to Florida. Before I moved in, the family sent me a letter with pictures of the family, house, and school. The letter ended with a question: Did I want to adopt them as parents?

I was hesitant to fall in love, but this family reached out to me. They wore patches to see what it is like to be blind in one eye. They put ice on their hands to simulate tremors. Still, I could not give in. I hit, kicked, spit, bit, and swore. I told the mother that I didn't have to follow her rules because she was not my real mother.

Her response was always, "I love you no matter what." She got to know me and saw my broken heart. She learned that I loved sports and invested in hockey goalie equipment so I could take shots at her whenever I was angry. Afterward, she would rock me in her arms, give me a freezer pop, and tell me she loved me.

The mother was always open and honest with me. She and the father tried to answer my questions as best they could without lying. Around the time of Halloween, after I turned ten, they told me that they would only answer my questions if I called them Mom and Dad.

On New Year's Eve, Mom and Dad took me to Niagara Falls to see the ball drop. At the time, they said, "How great it is to be celebrating both our anniversary and our son." The words caught me. I chose to be adopted. I got to pick a court date and even change my name. To honor my dad, I took Kevin as my middle name.

On Tuesday, April 1, 1997, I went into the Niagara County Court House as a foster child and came out as Steven Kevin Walker, son of Kevin and Jody Walker. It was a relief, though I still wish I could have been adopted with my brother.

Since my adoption, my family has grown to include another boy and six girls. I graduated from high school at the top of my class, was Student Council president, captain of the football team, and a three-sport athlete. At community college, I was in more than 20 clubs, served as an officer in the student government, and earned my associates degree.

Today I am an adoption advocate. I share my story in the U.S. and Canada, have been published widely, and have appeared on television and in videos. A man in Florida who heard my story donated more than 400,000 suitcases for youth in care so they can move with some dignity instead of having their things stuffed in garbage bags. In 2001, I helped write legislation to keep siblings together in foster care in New York State. In 2006, I got to share my story with then-Senator Hillary Clinton and leave copies of my speech with all 100 senators (including Barack Obama).

The message I hope to convey is: Don't give up on us. You never know who we can become. Accept each of us as your child; I am simply your son, not your adopted son, or foster son. All of the adoptive families who stick with the children they adopted from foster care are my heroes! Walk in our shoes and you will understand; our love is deep and the best place we have ever lived is the place with the family who keeps us forever.



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