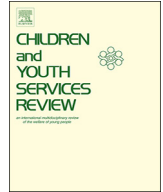




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## “People said we were nuts ... I understand what they were saying now”: An exploration of the transition to parenthood in sibling group adoption

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## ABSTRACT

Despite U.S. federal laws that require placing siblings together in foster care whenever possible, a majority of children are still separated from at least one of their siblings when in foster care or when adopted, due to various barriers including difficulty finding adoptive parents that match the needs of sibling groups. Few studies have focused on the experiences of parents who adopt sibling groups, resulting in little understanding of (a) their motivations for doing so, and (b) the challenges and strengths that accompany sibling group adoption. The current exploratory longitudinal qualitative study aims to address this gap. Twelve parents in six same-sex couples who adopted a sibling group from foster care were interviewed before, immediately after, and two years after they adopted. Findings indicate that sibling group adoption introduces several obstacles during the transition to parenthood including difficulty responding to children's varied needs during the transition and difficulty developing a close bond with each child. Further, parents described challenges integrating their own expectations with the family practices of the sibling group. Parents also indicated ways that adopting siblings together deepened their understanding of their children's behaviors and provided opportunities to establish family norms even when one child was struggling to adapt to the transition. After several years, parents reported reorganizing their family roles to meet the needs of their children. They also identified areas of perceived competence (e.g., behavior management) and areas where challenges persisted (e.g., navigating birth family contact). Implications for policy and practice around supporting sibling group adoptions are discussed.

### 1. Introduction

There are over 100,000 adoptable children in foster care in the United States at any given time (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019), of which an estimated two-thirds have at least one other sibling in care (Hegar, 2005). Still, only an estimated 23% are listed for adoption as members of a sibling group on the national database AdoptUSKids<sup>1</sup> (McRoy & Ayers-Lopez, 2014). The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which was signed into law in 2008, mandates that agencies prioritize placing sibling groups together whenever possible. Many obstacles to achieving this goal exist, and it is widely believed that sibling groups are harder to place than singletons<sup>2</sup> (Silverstein & Smith, 2009; Waid, 2014). Understanding the true availability of potential sibling group adopters is complex. A recent study found that as many as 84% of prospective parents in the AdoptUSKids national registry indicated that they would

be willing to adopt two or more children together—but only 9% of those families indicated that the minimum number of children they would accept was two or more (McRoy & Ayers-Lopez, 2014). Although the options parents could choose on AdoptUSKids (e.g., minimum and maximum number of children to see in a photolisting) did not ask about sibling groups directly, the search criteria they identified were used to filter photolistings of children who are only listed together when they are siblings, such that an interest in two or more children indicates an interest in finding and potentially being matched with siblings. This suggests that many families are open to considering a sibling group placement but may not be looking for those types of placements exclusively. Unknown is how and why openness to a sibling group may or may not translate into adopting a sibling group.

At the same time that practitioners are actively working to recruit families willing and able to adopt sibling groups, there is limited research on U.S. families that have adopted sibling groups, with existing

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E-mail addresses: [rfrost@clarku.edu](mailto:rfrost@clarku.edu) (R.L. Frost), [agoldberg@clarku.edu](mailto:agoldberg@clarku.edu) (A.E. Goldberg).<sup>1</sup> AdoptUSKids is a national online database for photolisting children who are available for adoption from foster care.<sup>2</sup> The term “singleton” is used to describe children who join a family alone, or as a single child, to differentiate them from children placed in sibling groups. This term is borrowed from research about biological children enter families as single births or multiple births (see Olivennes, Golombok, Ramogida, Rust & Team, 2005).

work focusing mainly on what promotes stability versus disruption in these adoptive placements (Erich & Leung, 2002; Hegar, 2005). Further, existing research on sibling group adoption has focused almost entirely on heterosexual couples even though same-sex couples are at least four times more likely to adopt as compared to heterosexual couples (Gates, 2013). Absent but of crucial importance in the area of sibling group adoption is work describing the experiences of diverse families built through sibling group adoption, including (a) parents' motivations to pursue this type of adoption, (b) the challenges and joys that families experience during the initial transition, and (c) how families adjust over time. Despite a large literature on the transition to parenthood among biological parent families (Cowan & Cowan, 2000) and a limited literature on this transition among adoptive parent families (Goldberg, 2010), there is no work that describes the transition to parenthood for families adopting sibling groups specifically. Such work can provide insight into the experiences of adoptive parents who ultimately adopt siblings, including their challenges and resources.

The current exploratory study aims to address this gap. In this longitudinal qualitative study, 12 parents in six same-sex couples who adopted a sibling group from foster care were interviewed before and after they transitioned from partners to parents. Of interest were their motivations to adopt a sibling group, transitions to sibling group parenthood, and experiences parenting a sibling group. Next, we describe several distinct but related strands of literature—namely, the work on the transition to parenthood for first-time, multiple-child, and adoptive parents, and the work on sibling groups in foster care—all of which inform the current study.

### 1.1. Transition to parenthood

The transition to parenthood is an important life transition that is well studied in heterosexual, biological families (Cowan & Cowan, 2000) and has been found to represent a significant time of change in the couple's relationship as they take on new roles, responsibilities, and challenges (Roy et al., 2014). Couples face new life stressors, increases in household demands, and changes in the way that they relate to each other as partners (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). The smaller literature on this transition for same-sex couples has documented similar findings regarding increased parenting demands and shifts in intimate relationships. However, differences have also emerged, such that same-sex couples who are new parents divide paid and unpaid labor more equally than their heterosexual counterparts (Farr & Tornello, 2016). Notably, the research on the transition to parenthood tends to focus on parents of a single child. Little work has examined biological parents' experiences becoming parents to multiple children, either via a multiple birth or addition of a second child. No known research has explored the transition to parenthood involving multiple children for same-sex couples.

When heterosexual biological parents welcome a second child into their families, this transition to second-time parenthood is characterized by changes in coparenting practices as parenting demands increase (Kuo et al., 2017; Szabó, Dubas, & Van Aken, 2012). In their review of research on family changes during the transition to second parenthood, Volling (2012) theorizes that it is common for parents of multiple children to have different relationships with each child, whereby parents often "split up" parenting tasks such that each partner has a closer relationship with different children (most commonly, the mother is closer to the newborn, while the father takes more responsibility for the older child). Yet limited work has studied this pattern directly and the gendered nature of this pattern indicates that it may be different for same-sex couples.

Even less is known about the experiences of heterosexual biological parents who enter parenthood with a multiple birth (e.g., twins, triplets), leading them to transition directly from non-parents to parents of multiple children. Research on biological parents of twins has found that they exhibit greater parental stress (Olivennes et al., 2005) and

lower perceptions of parental competence (Boivin et al., 2005) compared to parents of singletons. Taken together, this work suggests that parenting multiple children may present unique challenges.

The small body of research that has examined the transition to parenthood for heterosexual and same-sex adoptive parents indicates that this transition is uniquely characterized by a variety of factors, including that the timing of placements is often sudden and unpredictable, and the process of transitioning to parenthood can be marked by instability and uncertainty, particularly when adopting older children (Goldberg, 2010; Weir, 2003). Adoptive parents are also faced with many decisions that are not present in the transition to biological parenthood, including selecting an adoption route (private domestic, public domestic, international) and a set of adoption professionals to work with, and determining what child characteristics (e.g., race, age) they are willing to consider (Goldberg, 2010; Vandivere et al., 2009). In addition, adoptive parents must complete a number of pre- and post-adoption tasks, which include passing home inspections, completing training, and teaching friends and family about adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Goldberg, 2010). In the case of transracial adoptions, parents may also need to learn about race and racism and ways to socialize their children around these topics (Goldberg et al., 2016).

Importantly, same-sex couples are active in U.S. foster care adoption (they represent 6% of couples registered for AdoptUSKids; McRoy & Ayers-Lopez, 2014) and as foster parents (they are six times more likely to foster than heterosexual couples; Gates, 2013). Although the experiences of the transition to adoptive parenthood tends to be similar for heterosexual and same-sex adoptive parents, some differences have also been found. For instance, same-sex prospective adopters sometimes face heterosexist discrimination in their pursuit of adoption, such that they are seen as less preferable or deserving parents than heterosexual parents (Goldberg et al., 2019). Internalization of heterosexist stigma may in turn affect parenting confidence—although perhaps more so for men than women. Female prospective adopters (heterosexual and lesbian) have been found to report more confidence in their parenting skills prior to adopting, as compared with male prospective adopters (heterosexual and gay); however, lesbian adoptive mothers showed less growth in their confidence over time and gay men showed the most growth, highlighting the importance of on-the-ground experience in enhancing parenting confidence (Goldberg & Smith, 2009).

Parents who adopt from foster care specifically face additional challenges and considerations. Children adopted from foster care commonly have a history of abuse or neglect and often face related challenges, including trauma-shaped behavior and socialization, difficulty trusting and attaching to caretakers, developmental and educational delays related to neglect, and mental health challenges (Howard et al., 2004; Vandivere, et al., 2009). Among children adopted from care, predictors of greater and longer-term difficulties include being adopted at an older age, having had more placements in foster care before adoption, having disabilities, and being exposed to more severe abuse and neglect (Dellor & Freisthler, 2018; Goldberg et al., 2012; Meakings & Selwyn, 2016).

### 1.2. Adopting a sibling group from foster care

In addition to the factors that can make foster care adoptions challenging, adopting a sibling group often introduces its own challenges (e.g., increased parenting load, multiple needs). Still, almost no research has looked directly at the experiences of parents who adopt sibling groups from the U.S. foster care system, and the little that does exist looked at these experiences quantitatively as part of a larger study of "special needs adoptions." This work found that parents who adopt sibling groups report lower levels of subjective family functioning (e.g., greater stress, lower cohesion) than parents who adopt singletons (Leung et al., 2005).

More research has been focused on parents who adopt siblings from

the U.K. foster care system—which is unsurprising, as the United Kingdom has been focused on the importance of considering sibling relationships in foster care placements much longer than the United States (Hegar, 2005). Findings from a large scale study of 37 parents (36 heterosexual couples and one female same-sex couple) of large sibling groups (Saunders & Selwyn, 2011) as well as a panel study of current and prospective adopters (Butcher et al., 2018) suggested that the experience of parenting siblings is both anticipated and experienced to be harder than adopting a single child; at the same time, placements were generally stable. Challenges included managing different behaviors, increased workload, and managing sibling interactions and conflicts (Butcher et al., 2018), as well as insufficient post-placement support from agencies—although parents also felt that their placements were good fits for their family (Saunders & Selwyn, 2011). These studies have informed United Kingdom guidelines for preparing for and making sibling placements in the United Kingdom (Beckett, 2018). Still, little is known about the ways that families that adopt siblings function as a system—particularly in the American context or in the context of same-sex parents.

Amidst limited data on the experiences of parents who adopt sibling groups, more work has examined the outcomes of these placements in terms of placement stability and child wellbeing (Hegar, 2005; Leathers, 2005; McCormick, 2010; Waid, 2014). Findings indicate that intact sibling placements tend to be as or more stable (i.e., less likely to disrupt) than non-sibling placements, although contributors to stability are not well understood (Waid, 2014). Research suggests a more complicated picture of the impact of sibling placement on child wellbeing, with some studies suggesting that, compared to children separated from their siblings, children placed as sibling groups show similar or better psychological adjustment (Hegar, 2005; Leathers, 2005; Waid, 2014) while other studies indicate that child well-being can be negatively impacted in cases where children are placed with siblings with whom they do not get along (Selwyn, 2019; Waid, 2014). Problematic relationships between siblings may include violence and conflict which can lead to at least one child leaving the home, thereby impacting the entire family (Selwyn, 2019). Thus, it seems that in at least some contexts, keeping siblings together may serve to enhance child (and family) outcomes, but in some contexts, sibling placements may present notable challenges. Importantly, however, there is evidence that siblings would like to stay together in most circumstances (Butcher et al., 2018; Herrick & Piccus, 2005). Current and former foster youth prefer to be placed with their siblings, and if they cannot, often desire frequent visits with and information about them (Herrick & Piccus, 2005). Furthermore, sibling research more broadly highlights the profound implications and importance of sibling relationships across the life course, whereby siblings represent key sources of support during times of significant family stress (Brody, 2004; Gass et al., 2007; Noller, 2005).

Even amidst this mixed picture of sibling placement and gaps in current knowledge, both the United States and the United Kingdom have committed to keeping siblings together whenever possible and to considering these important relationships when decisions are made (Beckett, 2018; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; Saunders & Selwyn, 2011). Thus, while sibling group adoption is a valued goal with the potential to benefit siblings in the long-term, parents may find aspects of these placements challenging and there is still much more to know about their experiences and needs with regard to sibling placement in general.

### 1.3. Theoretical perspective

Our analysis was guided by family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 2003; Erdem & Safi, 2018), which focuses on the family as a system, such that members impact and are impacted by other members at multiple levels (e.g., as individuals, as subgroups, across relationships) and the system develops (and adjusts and changes) to balance the needs of each individual and the needs of the family. This framework suggests

that, at the point of adoption, a sibling group will function according to a family system that was developed in different circumstances and may or may not work to meet the goals of their adoptive family. At the same time, adoptive parents will possess their own orientation to family relationships, learned from their own families of origin and developed via their own interactions in their couple relationships. This framework led us to attend to how adoptive parents made decisions about adopting a sibling group, and how those decisions were shaped by each family member and their interactions. This framework also focused our attention on how parents thought about the ways that they and the sibling groups each interacted as their own family subsystems prior to placement and during the transition to being a family. We further attended to how those separate family subsystems functioned together and clashed as they moved toward establishing a new family system. As recent research (Erdem & Safi, 2018) has highlighted the ways that cultural and socioeconomic differences impact the practices of a family system, we particularly attended to the ways that children's and parent's differing backgrounds informed how they "did" family and learned to "do" family together.

## 2. Research questions

Why do parents want/choose to adopt a sibling group from foster care? That is, how do they explain their motivations or reasons for doing so?

What unique issues characterize the transition to parenthood for parents who adopt a sibling group from foster care? What do parents experience as uniquely difficult or positive?

How do parents approach parenting a sibling group adopted from foster care? How are parenting practices adjusted to meet the needs of a sibling group?

How do parents and sibling groups adopted from foster care adjust to being a family unit over time? What factors do parents understand to be helpful or harmful in the adjustment process?

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Description of the sample

Data from 12 individuals in six couples were analyzed at three time points: before they adopted (T1), three months after they adopted (T2), and two years after they adopted (T3). This sample was taken from a larger longitudinal study that focused on the transition to adoptive parenthood for 95 heterosexual, 67 lesbian and 54 gay couples in the United States across multiple adoption types (for details, see Goldberg, Downing, & Sauck, 2007). The following inclusion criteria were used to select the current sample from the larger sample: (1) families adopted two or more related children at the same time, (2) families adopted from foster care, and (3) parents were transitioning to parenthood for the first time. These criteria ensured that all families included in our analysis transitioned from being partners to a family with multiple children who were related to each other. Further, these criteria ensured that all families were reporting on experiences specific to foster care sibling group adoption, not just multiple child adoption. The focus on foster care adoption excluded two families who adopted twins in private domestic adoptions and four families who adopted sibling groups through international adoption.

While the larger study includes gay, lesbian and heterosexual adoptive parents, the participants who matched these inclusion criteria were largely lesbian couples ( $n = 5$ ), with one gay male couple. In an effort to gain insight into why our final study sample was entirely same-sex couples, and mostly female same-sex couples, we conducted descriptive statistics of the larger sample. Reflecting our study sample, lesbians who adopted via foster care were overrepresented in the larger sample. Indeed, lesbians were more likely than other groups to have adopted their children via this route,  $\chi^2(8, n = 216) = 38.159$ ,

$p < .001$ , with 17.9% ( $n = 17$ ) of heterosexual participants, 20.8% ( $n = 11$ ) of gay male participants, and 37.3% ( $n = 25$ ) of lesbian participants having adopted via foster care. This may be impacted by income differences because foster care adoption is the least expensive adoption choice (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016) and same-sex adoptive couples in the United States have lower median annual household incomes than different-sex couples (Gates, 2013), with female same-sex couples reporting lower average incomes than male same-sex couples (Williams Institute, 2019). However, our sample does not appear to be low-income. Also, other research has found that lesbian couples are more likely to adopt from foster care and to adopt children with special needs, perhaps in part due to gender socialization (e.g., women should help others; see Goldberg et al., 2012). Among those pursuing foster-care adoption ( $n = 53$ ), similar numbers of each group stated that they would be willing to consider siblings:  $\chi^2(4, n = 50) = 4.381, p > .05$ , hetero: 88.2%,  $n = 15$ , lesbian: 72.0%,  $n = 18$ , gay: 62.5%,  $n = 5$ .

All parents were White. Parents reported an average annual family income of \$104,083.33 ( $Mdn = \$108,000, SD = \$70,000$ ). In terms of education, two (16.7%) had some college, six (50%) had a bachelor's degree, and four (33.3%) had a master's degree. Half of couples ( $n = 3$ ) were placed with a sibling group of two children, and half ( $n = 3$ ) were placed with a group of three children, totaling 15 children overall. Children's average age at placement was 42 months ( $Mdn = 36, SD = 30.93$ ; range: six months to 10 years). Children had an average of 2.27 foster care placements pre-adoption ( $Mdn = 2, SD = 1.53$ ), with 40% experiencing abuse ( $n = 6$ ) and all experiencing neglect ( $n = 15$ ) before entering care. Children were largely (53.3%,  $n = 8$ ) two or more races; two were described as Latino, three as African American, and two as White. In 86.67% ( $n = 13$ ) of the adoptions, the parents were a different race or ethnicity than their children. All of the children and parents spoke English as one of their primary languages. The number of children, ages, and genders within the sibling groups varied. See Table 1 for characteristics of these families, along with pseudonyms for each participant.

### 3.2. Recruitment and procedure

Recruitment for the larger study was done through over 30 adoption agencies in the United States, including agencies that handled private adoptions and those that handled public (child welfare) adoptions. Social workers who performed home studies for prospective adoptive couples also disseminated study information to clients. Multiple recruitment strategies were employed to increase representation of same-sex couples in our sample, including recruiting in specific geographical regions and via LGBTQ organizations (see Goldberg, Downing, & Sauck, 2007).

At each time point (T1, T2, T3), each partner was interviewed separately, by phone, using a semi-structured interview format that lasted 1–2 h. Interviews were transcribed and de-identified, and pseudonyms were assigned. Interviews for all participants were available at the first two time points, and interviews for all but one couple (6) were available at the third time point. Overall, 34 interviews from 12 participants across a period of almost three years ( $M = 2.95, SD = 0.82$ ) per

participant were analyzed for this study.

#### 3.2.1. Open-ended interview questions

In the pre-placement interview (T1), relevant questions attended to preferences for certain child characteristics, such as: 1. Do you have preferences for child age, gender, race, disability? Why or why not? 2. Would you be willing to accept a sibling group? Why or why not? In the interview shortly after placement (T2), questions attended to experiences of parenting, expectations, and supports, including: 1. How is parenting going? 2. Tell me about the process of adopting. 3. Tell me about your children. 4. Is this what you expected? In two year post-placement interview (T3), questions about parenting expanded to address attachment and the impact of parenting on parents' relationship quality: 1. How is parenting going? 2. How has your attachment to your children (and their attachment to you) changed or progressed over time? 3. How is your relationship with your child different from your partner's relationship with your child? In this semi-structured interview format, more general questions were often followed up tailored probes to address topics relevant to topics like sibling group adoption. Parents' responses to additional relevant questions were also examined for themes related to the adoption of a sibling group.

#### 3.3. Data analysis

Interviews from both partners were analyzed separately, using reflexive thematic analysis and a semantic approach to identify commonalities among adoptive parents navigating this transition (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019). This involved looking for patterns in the data with regard to the factors that influenced parents' decisions to adopt a sibling group and their descriptions of the specific experiences of their parenthood transition, with a focus on the ways that each member of the growing family influenced and changed these processes. Our analysis was informed by research findings on general patterns across the transition to parenthood and adoptive parenthood, as well as sensitizing concepts drawn from family systems theory, including the notion that both family systems and subsystems adapt and change over the course of key family transitions. The first author coded all transcripts; the second author read select interview transcripts and provided input throughout the coding process. This sharing of the coding process allowed for a reflexive processing around our development of codes and understandings of content in the data. Since our primary interest was on the initial transition to parenthood, we initially conducted a close reading of all transcripts from T1 and T2, paying particular attention to concepts from relevant literatures (i.e., the transition to sibling group parenthood, the transition to adoptive parenthood). Our initial codes were broad and general, delineating various motivations to adopt a sibling group (e.g., altruism, beliefs about the importance of sibling relationships) and responses to the initial experience of sibling group parenthood (e.g., overwhelmed by parenting demands, bonding challenges). As we more closely examined the interviews, these initial themes were refined, expanded, and collapsed until the scheme was clear and defined (Charmaz, 2006). Using this coding scheme, all transcripts were reread multiple times and the data was organized into this framework. Our final scheme emphasized the ways that families

**Table 1**  
Adoption characteristics, by family type.

ID	Pseudonyms	Family Type	Wait time (mths)	# kids	Ages @ adoption (yrs)	Genders	Transracial	Expected sibs?	Other Sibs elsewhere	Abuse	Neglect	# previous placements
1	Pat & Sue	Lesbian	12	3	1, 2, 4	F, M, F	Yes	Yes, 2–3	No	Yes	Yes	2
2	Jackie & Alex	Lesbian	12	2	2, 4	M, F	Yes	Yes, 2	No	No	Yes	1, 6
3	Erin & Robin	Lesbian	36	3	4, 7, 10	M, F, M	Yes	Split	Yes	Uncertain	Yes	> 4
4	Sam & Melissa	Lesbian	5	2	4, 6	M, F	Yes	Yes, 2	Yes	Yes	Yes	2
5	Ann & Fay	Lesbian	36	3	1, 2, 3	M, M, M	Yes	Yes, 2	Yes	Yes	Yes	1
6	Joe & Fred	Gay	2	2	6mths, 18mths	M, M	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	1



were developing and interacting as a system, including their experiences building relationships with each child, supporting multiple children in adjusting to a new family, and developing a functioning family system.

We were also interested in longer-term adjustment to adopting multiple children at the same time. Thus, after we had formulated an in-depth understanding of the initial transition to parenthood, we expanded our lens to include a careful reading of the transcripts from T3. We continued to code both within and across families, noting, for example, where individual families' experiences shifted from T2 to T3 (e.g., parental relationship health), but also common themes across families (e.g., adjusting the balance of work and home responsibilities; settling of initial behavioral problems and optimistic planning for longer-term challenges).

Throughout coding, we attended to and drew on concepts from family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 2003) which posits that the choices and experiences of any member or subsystem affect all of the members of the family system. This framework is a useful way to explore how the addition of multiple new family members changes the roles of each member of the system, while the siblings themselves constituted their own family system before placement.

## 4. Findings

The process of considering, preparing for, and then adopting a sibling group is complex. Themes in parent interviews centered on four different stages of this process. First, parents discussed their pathways to sibling group placement, including why they were interested in a sibling group. Next, parents reported challenges they faced during their initial adjustment to parenting a sibling group, including balancing children's differential adjustment processes. Then, parents discussed their functioning as a family and the process of establishing a family system. Finally, two years post-placement, parents reported on their longer-term adaptation to being a family, and the challenges that persisted.

### 4.1. Path to sibling group placement

At T1, five of six couples indicated that they preferred a sibling pair or group to being placed with a single child (Families 1–5). Some (2, 4, 5) showed a strong commitment to adopting siblings, indicating that a sibling group was their strongest priority (e.g., over race, gender, or age) and/or describing a process of specifically searching through photolistings<sup>3</sup> for sibling sets. Others (1, 3) expressed an interest in siblings while still indicating that they would be open to a single child in some circumstances. The remaining family (the one gay couple, 6) indicated that they would like to adopt more children eventually but preferred to start with a single child. This couple was approached to adopt a sibling group instead and eventually accepted that placement.

#### 4.1.1. Reasons for wanting to adopt a sibling group

The five families who expressed a particular interest in adopting a sibling group gave reasons based on the perceived benefits to themselves, the children, and the child welfare system. Pat (1), who hoped to have two children eventually, explained that adopting a pair of siblings would make the adoption process more efficient: "We just felt you know, 'two for the price of one,' why not?" Parents also explained that they believed their future children would benefit from being placed with their siblings because siblings would provide a source of support or comfort (2, 5). And, parents indicated that they were motivated to adopt siblings because they heard that siblings were harder to place,

and more sibling group adopters were needed (2, 4, 5). In this way, parents identified a desire to help the child welfare system—and the youth in the system—by meeting the greatest need they could.

#### 4.1.2. Potential singleton placements

Strikingly, of the five families with a preference for a sibling set, all but one (1—Pat and Sue) described being offered potential placements of single children by their social workers, which they sometimes declined and sometimes pursued. Jackie and Alex (2) explained their process of advocating for a sibling placement:

We had gotten calls about a couple other kids that needed immediate placement, a three-year-old girl ...and a nine-year-old girl. But we were really sort of holding out for a sibling pair because we were told that sibling pairs were harder to place and keep together. And because we were willing to take two we wanted to really hold out for that.

Importantly, they explained that they were interested in a specific set of siblings at that point, which helped them to "hold out": "We were already sort of in process with inquiring about these two. So, it was hard to say no [to] a phone call about a kid that needs a home today."

The challenge of 'turning down' a potential single placement to wait for siblings was evident, even among the prospective parents who had expressed a strong preference for siblings. They identified this as challenging because they worried about waiting longer for a placement or because they felt guilty about declining to help the offered child. Families 3 (Erin, Robin) and 4 (Sam, Melissa) were both being considered for a single infant placement at one point, although in both cases, the placement did not end up happening. Less than a week after Sam had described asking their social worker to "concentrate on getting us a sibling pair," the family was offered a potential placement of an infant. Melissa described how she adjusted her thought process,

We had our mind totally set on this four or five, six-year-old, because everyone says "You can't get a baby, don't even think about it." We were like "That's alright, we're totally cool with that." So, we've been preparing all this time for this four or five, six-year-old, and then we get this call from our social worker and she says, "Would you think about a baby?" We were like "Uhhh, yeah, I mean of course we would." Who wouldn't?

Melissa's question highlights the risks associated with professionals offering or suggesting placements that are theoretically 'easier' than the type of placements in which the family has expressed interest. Melissa and her partner were interested in siblings *and* older children—both demographics that are considered 'harder to place,' but were offered a very young infant. They both went on to describe the excitement they felt at this other potential option, and how they considered reprioritizing their parenting choices. In this way, it may be that families who hold a strong interest in sibling group adoption are not used for a group placement because some other placement is offered first.

In fact, Ann and Fay (5), a couple who expressed a strong commitment to sibling group adoption in part because of their own positive experiences growing up with siblings, were placed with a young infant for an extended period of time and intended to adopt that child. While that placement did not end in an adoption, the couple had to wait nearly another year before they were placed with a sibling group, highlighting the risks that couples take when they decide to turn down a potential placement. Importantly, this mirrors the reports of some U.K. sibling group adopters who shared that some adoption professionals were unsupportive of, or actively dissuaded them from considering sibling group adoption (Saunders & Selwyn, 2011).

### 4.2. Post-placement: Initial adjustment

#### 4.2.1. Overwhelmed and possibly outnumbered

Once placed with their children, all six families reported that the

<sup>3</sup> Photolistings are publicly available, searchable, profiles of waiting children that are posted on the internet by child welfare agencies with the goal of recruiting and matching prospective parents.

initial transition to parenting a sibling group was challenging, with many describing the experience as “overwhelming.” Sue (1), explained, “So, for the first couple of weeks we were completely, just 100% overwhelmed. We were like holy crap, what do we do? It [is] laughable now, but...at the moment...it wasn't funny.” In explaining this initial sense of being overwhelmed, parents cited children's behavior and varied needs, and parents' own lack of preparation. Melissa (4), who adopted a school-aged sibling pair, explained, “The first couple of weeks were really hard. I won't lie. [The children] were physically, emotionally ... They were both really tough because they fed off of one another.” Likewise, Jackie (2), a mother of two, said, “When they first came, I guess they were like whirling dervishes, really.”

Sue (1), a mother of three, described her ideas about what she would do differently in retrospect to manage this overwhelming time:

The first weekend we had the kids, we called five or six people to see if somebody could come over and help us, because we needed help. And we couldn't find anybody...We hadn't set anything up ahead of time, which was our bad, because we should have put the call out saying we need help, instead of being all, “Ohh we'll be fine, we'll be fine!”

In this quote, it is clear that Sue recognizes that preplanning some help from their social supports might have helped them adjust to parenting three children. Notably, these reports of difficulties were focused around a lack of preparation, which parents described as their own mistake—yet this is an issue that could, and should, also be addressed by social workers (Beckett, 2018).

#### 4.2.2. Parental “culture shock.”

Several parents (1, 2, 3, 4) also described a type of family “culture shock” or “family immersion” as new parents abruptly transitioned into families of four or five people. Most parents did not describe this “culture shock” experience as particularly negative, but detailed the transition as one that simply required intense adjustment. One mother, Erin (3), found the experience living with so many people particularly hard to adjust to, having been an only child herself and preferring quiet. She said, “It's like I am trapped in an enormous crowd of people and I cannot get away from them.” Alex (2) explained,

It's not like there was this huge epiphany of like, “I'm here, I've arrived at this bliss of parenthood.” It's more like, “oh my god when am I going to do the laundry?” It was sort of...a culture shock at first. Now we've sort of settled into our routine and it is...natural.

Sue (1) also explained her process of adjustment, highlighting how the responsibility for multiple children hit her all at once:

We have three kids—they are who I am responsible for, I'm not responsible for just me. Doors shut when this happened, I literally, inside of myself felt doors start shutting as far as things I thought I might do some day. I just felt like, “Click, click, click...”

While some type of adjustment to parenthood is normative for all new parents (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Kuo et al., 2017), what seemed unique in this context was the lack of a ‘warm-up’ period, which is more likely in the context of parenting an infant or even just one child of any age. That is, people who transition to single-child parenthood have more time and space to discover ways that they need to change their behavior or environment as their children develop, or as they add additional children to their families. Indeed, parents shared their struggle to accomplish daily tasks with a group of children, having never done them with any children at all. For example, they described the overwhelming experience of taking several children to the grocery store, noting that children would climb out of the cart and wander off as parents tried to find items. Alex (2) summarized this by saying, “It took twice as long as it should have!”

### 4.3. Individual difference, individual needs

After the initial adjustment to parenting a group of children, parents turned their attentions to addressing the needs of each individual within the group.

#### 4.3.1. Matched/mismatched histories

Although siblings having a shared history is often considered a benefit to sibling group adoption, some families (1, 2, 3) also identified ways that their children had different histories or experiences within their birth family and in care. Often related to age (e.g., older children stayed longer in an abusive or neglectful home and/or had more placements), these different experiences seemed to be reflected in individual children's opinions about their birth family and their ability to adapt to the adoptive home. Indeed, moms Jackie and Alex (2) both described the ways that their two children understood adoption differently based on their placement histories. Alex said, “Lily had a hard time I think because she's moved so many times. Lily is 4 ½ years old and we were her sixth move. And for Jake, he was always with his foster mom.” Interestingly, Jackie explained how these differences manifested in the siblings' abilities to comfort each other during the transition to being adopted:

There was a solid week where Jake cried, “I want [foster mom]. I'm not living here.” And other times Jake would say to Lily, “We go back to [foster mom]'s house? You want to go to [foster mom]'s?” And Lily would say, “No.” Lily understood that she clearly wasn't staying there forever.

This couple went on to explain that their older daughter seemed to be grappling with why she was moved so often, and was afraid of being moved again, while their younger son was still navigating an initial separation. Thus, while siblings can sometimes be sources of support for each other in navigating shared challenges, there are also differences in their lived experiences that may present points of disconnection or even conflict.

In fact, in one family, Erin and Robin (3), the oldest child had experienced such severe educational neglect before they were taken into foster care that he was unable to read, while his younger siblings started school after they were in foster homes and were doing well. Erin described how this led to conflict in their home:

He missed a lot of school and of course it is very shameful for him that his seven-year-old sister is a far better reader than he is. So, he always makes fun of her because she likes to sit at the kitchen table and read her books out loud and he makes fun of her because you know, he's feeling that.

Taken together, it seems that adoptive families face specific challenges related to supporting children in their transition to adoption and may struggle to meet siblings' diverse needs.

#### 4.3.2. One struggles, others thrive

Related to children's different pre-adoption experiences, most couples (1, 2, 4, 5, 6) indicated that they had one child who was struggling to adjust to the adoption or displaying more problematic behavior while their other child(ren) were doing well. Often, the child having the most difficulty was the oldest child of the group, which is not surprising given findings that older age at adoption is related to greater difficulty adjusting post-placement and more emotional and behavioral challenges (Hussey et al., 2012; Nadeem et al., 2017; Sharma et al., 1996). Further, it is likely that the oldest sibling experienced longer periods of traumatic events before entering foster care, and, possibly, more separate or group home placements. Older youth may also have served as caregivers for younger siblings, thus protecting them from some experiences of abuse or neglect in the home. Sam (4) described the differences between her younger son and older daughter:

Connor is definitely more winning, he is less cagey, he is just more open, I think that's partly at Ruby's expense, because I think she did protect [him], within care and in the home when things were going phooey. I think she's a little aged beyond her time... She's harder—I don't want this to sound wrong—she's harder to love, she's more defensive—but that doesn't mean that I don't, I do love her. I think she fights it more and he doesn't...we just have to give it more time, but there is no question that she will flower.

In addition to noting the challenges of having one child with more initial difficulties than the others, Sam also expresses a common sentiment among these families—an optimistic focus on growth (e.g., “she's taking longer to bloom”). This suggests that the more stable or ‘easier’ child(ren) in a family may help their parents to establish a normative and healthy family system that allows them to be open and patient while supporting their struggling children.

#### 4.3.3. Uneven bonding

Three couples (1, 2, 6) described ways that the differences between their children impacted the ways that they bonded with each child, sometimes leading one parent to “specialize” in the care of some children over others, and other times leaving both parents feeling more connected to some children than others. This somewhat echoes [Volling's \(2012\)](#) descriptions of the transition to second time parenthood for heterosexual biological parents. Interestingly, this was sometimes attributed to the differences in children's histories or levels of need, and other times to differences in personality match or other characteristics. Fred (6), a father of two, described differences in bonding related to his children's developmental stages: “The fact that Luke is so independent already whereas the baby is like—you can hold him forever. That physical connection isn't there as much with Luke and that is kind of hard.” Interestingly, Fred's partner, Joe, reported the opposite experience: “I have bonded with the older kid much more quickly than I did with Chris, who is a baby. Luke requires more attention but Chris when we first got him wouldn't sit up or babble or do anything...”

Sue (1), a mother of three, described the difficulty of managing different children's needs and schedules, which led to some children receiving less attention as well as to uneven bonding:

I probably spend the least amount of time with Derrick, I spend more time with the baby, and I spend more time with Sarah [the oldest] because I put the baby down and I feed her at night, and Sarah I take her to school. So, I'll spend more time with Derrick once he starts school. Down time with him? Not so much. I can't seem to create it.

While it is not uncommon for parents to have different relationships with their children, families who adopted sibling groups are unique from other multiple-children families because their children arrive at different ages and with different levels of need. Thus, unlike parents who have raised children sequentially and had time with each as a baby before another arrived, these parents were in the unique position of having just met their children and having no preexisting relationships to build on. This finding differs from research on twins ([Boivin et al., 2005](#); [Olivennes et al., 2005](#)), which shows that twin parents are often tired from caring for the needs of several children but do not report feeling like they are neglecting the needs of a particular child.

#### 4.4. Functioning as a family

In addition to considering the individual needs and contributions of each child, families also emphasized the ways that they worked towards becoming a cohesive family unit.

##### 4.4.1. Establishing a family system

Three parents discussed their experiences of transitioning to

parenthood in terms of how they worked to establish rules and habits in order to create a functioning family system. For example, Robin (3) explained how she managed one sibling's jealous reaction when another sibling received a needed pair of new shoes:

He needs to understand that it is about need, and she needed a pair of boots. They need to understand that one will get a present and the others will not. It doesn't mean that every time one gets something that all three need to get something.

In this example, Robin demonstrates a conscious decision to establish and reinforce rules in order to teach the children about familial expectations. At the same time, she shows an understanding that each child learns from the feedback that they receive, as well as from observing the feedback that others receive ([Bandura, 1969](#)). In this way, parents emphasize how their actions with any one member of their family system influence the other parts of the family system as well. In a humorous example of this, Sam (4) recounted a time early on when she was trying to teach her daughter not to curse:

She would be coloring and the crayon would break and she would say “Oh shit.” ... And I said, “Oh, you know what honey...you can't say that. You have to say ‘Oh my.’” In fact the first two weeks, both of them, although we had the conversation with one of them, I never heard so many ‘oh my's!

##### 4.4.2. Confronting established roles and norms

While new parents of sibling groups are working to establish family rules, they are often interacting with the sibling group's own established family norms and learned roles.

**4.4.2.1. Roles.** Some parents described ways that their new adoptive family expectations disrupted the roles that their children had been used to enacting within their birth or foster families (2, 3, 4). Erin (3) explained the ways that changing her oldest child's role as ‘caregiver’ led to more challenging behavior,

I learned at a certain point that we had taken Tom's role of caretaker away and so he was really trying everything. He would manipulate Nora and Billy and get them worked up to the point where I would be yelling, “that's it!” You know, screaming and yelling and giving consequences all over the place and then Nora and Billy would start crying and Tom would swoop in and be, “oh it's okay, you know she's mean...”

In this way, the oldest child in the family was affected by a change of roles and his response to that change was impacting the rest of the family. Similarly, Sam (4) explained how she and her wife worked with their children to understand what their roles were in this new family,

That's what we tell him, you have to—Connor has to take care of Connor and Ruby has to take care of Ruby and Mommy and Mama take care of both of you. You're in charge of—as they say, their own self, they're in charge of their self.

**4.4.2.2. Norms.** Parents also described encountering differing understandings of what was normative or appropriate, based on children's experiences with their birth and foster families. These things included personal preferences like maintaining personal space, the levels of noise or activity that were considered acceptable in the home, and boundaries and closeness with family and non-family adults (3, 4). Erin (3) shared: “They slept in the same bed with their parents, they never had their own rooms, so they have no concept of boundaries.”

In turn, Erin described an ongoing awareness that they experienced closeness differently than she did:

I am realizing more and more that I make an assumption that...

“doesn’t it make you uncomfortable to do this?” I tried to do the, ‘I’ll do to you what you do to me’ thing. Like Tom likes to get right up in my face, and sometimes he will scream in my face and he thinks he is being funny. I’ll be like, “Well, how do you like it?” And I finally realized it doesn’t bother him! It doesn’t!

This example demonstrates how norms in a family are not universal and how a clash between a parent and child’s norms may lead to misunderstandings or strife. While it is likely that many adoptive parents of older children must work to help children understand different family practices, parents who adopt siblings are faced with added challenges because their children are with members of their families (siblings) who may reinforce particular behaviors.

#### 4.5. Long-term adjustment: two years post-placement

After the initial adjustment to parenting multiple children, families settled into their own patterns of how they “did” family.

##### 4.5.1. Finding our roles and adjusting responsibilities

Significantly, all of the parents who participated at T3 described making a major life change to accommodate the demands and challenges of parenting their children. Namely, in each couple, one parent had decreased their work schedule (1, 2) or quit working (3, 4, 5). Couples made this decision at different points in their adoption journey, but always described as a response to the needs of the children. Sam (2), a mother of two, said,

We decided when we adopted the kids that I would leave work and be a full time mom. There were transition issues ... They needed me, we needed me around 100% of the time. I don’t know how families do it who adopt and go back to work.

In a different instance, Erin (3), a mother of three, attempted to continue working, but found that the children needed her at home, “I stayed with [working] the first year probably and it just became too difficult to try to get anything else done.”

This major change meant a corresponding shift in work-family roles, such as taking on the role of stay-at-home parent, the meaning of which then had to be negotiated. Ann (5) described realizing that being a good parent “means keeping everybody calm, and giving them what they individually need. Which means that all three of my kids need to be in a structured program.” For Ann, too, this new role meant identifying what was not part of her role. Namely, being a stay-at-home mom “doesn’t mean that they have to be with me all the time.”

##### 4.5.2. Maintaining and adjusting our romantic relationship

In addition to what they each were bringing to the family system as individuals, parents also attended to how their relationships with each other as a couple was impacted by the experiences of parenting (3, 5). By T3, one couple with three children, Ann and Fay (5), had separated after trying a variety of strategies to bring more support into their family system. They clearly identified the impact of the children on their relationship. Ann (5) explained, “The kids have a lot of needs—more than anticipated. We both sometimes feel overwhelmed and trapped. It makes supporting each other harder.”

Other couples reported thriving in their new roles as parents (1, 2, 4). Still, some of those couples described changes in their relationship. Sue (1) described how the exhaustion of parenting three children all day made her unavailable for intimacy in the evenings, “I lay my head on the pillow and it’s all I can do to keep my eyes open for two seconds.”

##### 4.5.3. Siblings influence each other and the family unit

While parents often felt at T3 that they had things “figured out,” one area that they were still navigating was the complex ways that siblings impacted each other and shaped decisions around parenting. A

particular challenge in this area was related to navigating birth parent relationships.

Nearly all of the families (1, 3, 4, 5) described ways that their children’s experiences of open adoption varied and their opinions about and experiences with their birth family continued to impact them—and in turn the entire family—after having been adopted. Robin (3), a mother of three children, recognized that their youngest child did not understand why they were removed from their birth family. She described using the experiences of the older children to help him develop a narrative about his early life,

I know that now that Billy is six, ... the only real memories he has of his parents are the ones where DSS was supervising him... fun, playing all the time, nothing wrong at all... .... Then we asked the other kids to share what was real and Tom, the oldest, once he and I and Billy sat down and Billy asked his brother questions ... and Tom did finally say that it is much better here than it was at home.

Maintaining contact with their children’s birth family was sometimes difficult, because siblings were differentially impacted by and had different feelings about their birth family. Said Sam (4):

I’d love to stay in touch [with birth father] so that if we wanted to open the door more, we could. But we don’t know what happened either, really. So there’s always that sense that—he doesn’t have as good of a relationship with Connor as he does with Ruby... .... It might be good for her, but it’s not good for him, so you can’t split the difference.

Trying to find some “middle ground,” in an effort to do what was best for all children, often meant compromise. Parents tried to meet their children’s varied needs while also seeking a solution (e.g., in terms of level and type of contact) that would work for the entire family system.

##### 4.5.4. Challenges persist, but there is progress

Through these challenges, adjustments and family growths, a consistent theme emerged of parents being surprised by the continued challenges of raising a sibling group and the (sometimes slow) progress they were making. Some mentioned being generally surprised by the children’s difficult behaviors (3, 5), while others described this challenging behavior and slow progress as being related to the enduring impact of the children’s early experiences (2, 4). Alex (2) said, “The surprises are that the trauma and the history that they experienced before us just isn’t going to go away anytime soon.” Sam (4) gave this example of the differences when comparing her children to her sister’s same-aged children:

They still need a lot of direction. They’re not typical birth kids who grow up with that sense of direction, so we have to monitor—like their cousins, their mom can tell them, “I want you to go downstairs, get your cereal bowls, get your cereal, pour your milk, eat your cereal, and when you’re done, come back upstairs.” And she takes a shower. That would never happen here... .... And I am a little surprised. I thought that by year two they would be a little bit further along in the learning curve in terms of expectations.

Still, in nearly all instances, parent’s reports of challenging behavior were accompanied by a statement qualifying that things were in fact getting better or improving over time. As Erin (3) explained, “... some of the behavior that they came here with was just tearing my hair out... That really, really bad stuff, the really obvious stuff was pretty much gone in about six months.”

However, not all families described hope or significant improvement. Fay (5) reported feeling consistently overwhelmed by her children’s behavior, with no change in sight, and, in turn, constantly wondering about whether their parenting strategies and foci were “on point”: “They are chaotic. I don’t know, is it we’re doing this, and we shouldn’t be doing that? Or focusing on this and it’s not the right thing



and it's something we should be letting go?"

## 5. Discussion

This is the first study to explore the transition to parenthood for parents adopting sibling groups in the United States. Amidst the policy demand to keep siblings together in adoptive placements (Waid, 2014) and research on the benefits of maintaining sibling relationships (Hegar, 2005), it is essential that parents and adoption professionals understand the successes and challenges of families who adopt siblings. Such knowledge will enable parents to more confidently choose and be better prepared for this type of placement and will aid adoption professionals in making and supporting appropriate sibling placements.

Our first research question centered on parents' motivations to adopt a sibling group. We found that parents believed sibling group adoption was good for their families, for children in care and the child welfare system. This mirrors prior findings showing that altruism is a major motivation for choosing to adopt via foster care as opposed to pursuing private adoption (Downing et al., 2009) and suggests that foster-to-adopt parents may be likely to be moved to adopt a sibling group if that is understood to be an altruistic choice. Importantly, this may be particularly true for female same-sex couples, who have been found to report child (and not self) oriented reasons for adoption decision-making, such as wanting to give a child a permanent home, who might otherwise not have one (Goldberg et al., 2012).

We found that parents interested in adopting a sibling group were often offered a singleton placement first. This is compelling in that there is a demonstrated need for sibling group adoptions, yet a seeming underutilization of available prospective adopters. This is a small sample, composed of same-sex couples who sometimes face discrimination or doubt about their parenting abilities (Goldberg et al., 2019), and conclusions should be made with caution. Still, this pattern is concerning and has been similarly described by at least some heterosexual couples in the United Kingdom (Beckett, 2018). Considering the contradictory findings that siblings are difficult to place (Waid, 2014) and that a majority of prospective adoptive couples would consider a sibling adoption (McRoy & Ayers-Lopez, 2014), this finding raises questions about who holds the responsibility to 'hold out' for a sibling group placement—prospective parents or case workers? This further raises questions about how case workers make the decision to prioritize sibling group placements or offer other types of placements. Groza et al. (2003) found that case workers may not prioritize sibling group placements due to personal beliefs, special needs of the children, or a need to utilize the (few) available homes for the (many) waiting children rather than leaving homes open for ideal matches. The placement challenges in this study may point to some disincentive related to these particular couples or point to a broader pattern of underutilization of prospective adopters open to adopting a sibling group from foster care. Further research is needed to examine the severity and pervasiveness of this gap between interest and matching, the causes of such a gap, and ways that potential sibling group adopters are or are not matched to waiting sibling groups.

Our second research question concerned the unique aspects of the transition to adoptive parenthood for parents adopting sibling groups. We found that parents transitioning to multiple- parenthood reported a startling and overwhelming initial adjustment, as they learned to manage the needs of their suddenly larger family. One practical way to address this difficulty might be to provide parents who adopt sibling groups additional supports during the initial transition like early and frequent access to respite care services or connections to other sibling group adopters who may provide social support. Couples who are preparing to adopt siblings should also be encouraged to ask friends or family to provide some initial support during the transition and be supported in making a plan for dividing labor during the transition. Indeed, some similar supports have been recommended for U.K. sibling group adopters (Beckett, 2018) and a specialized post-placement

training has been piloted (Butcher et al., 2018).

In addition to being initially unprepared for the needs of multiple children, sibling group parents reported that they struggled with uneven bonding with their children, in part due to children's varying needs. This is striking, in that same-sex couples tend to divide parenting labor more equally than heterosexual couples (Farr & Tornello, 2016), yet the participants in this study still reported "splitting the kids up" and struggling to engage with all children in a balanced way. Future research should explore how this is experienced in heterosexual couples who may divide responsibilities differently and thus experience parenting separations differently. If this pattern persists across parenting types, programs for supporting sibling group adoptions could consider how parents can work to develop a relationship with each child and perhaps provide supports in the home for each child to have uninterrupted time with each parent.

In addition to different experience of bonding, parents often reported that each child in the sibling group was adapting to the adoption differently, with one child having markedly less difficulty than the others. Notably, parents seemed to use their experiences with the children who were having more success in order to bolster their parenting confidence. In this way, having children with different adjustment experiences allowed parents to be more patient with struggling children while still maintaining positive attitudes about their parenting abilities. This is notable, because some research has indicated that lesbian women (the majority of our sample) report slower growth in parental confidence than some other types of parents (Goldberg & Smith, 2009). This is also different from research on parents of twins in important ways. Boivin et al. (2005) found that parents of twins felt less effective as parents than parents of singletons, and that parents of twins with difficult temperaments reported feeling even less confident in their parenting abilities. Yet in our research, parents seem to be expressing confidence in their abilities to improve their current parenting situation. Perhaps they are more likely to "give themselves a break" in terms of their own perceived inadequacies and steep learning curve than parents of twins. It may also be that having siblings where one is more difficult than the other(s) facilitates parents' ability to learn and grow from both children and to lower their standards for "success" amidst recognition of their children's difficult histories. Future work should focus on the ways that sibling group adopters evaluate their competence and ways that adopting a group impacts these evaluations—with attention to ways that sibling group adoption may bolster adoptive parents' confidence.

Our third research question asked how parents approached parenting a sibling group and how they addressed their needs. We found that early on parents worked to establish a family system and rules that everyone could follow, carefully considering how their responses would be understood by the group. Because parents of sibling groups are adopting children who are likely older and who have learned patterns of interacting with each other already, parents seemed keenly aware of the need to remain 'one step ahead' of their children in establishing family rules. In this way, parents demonstrate their understandings of families operating as systems and their specific attention to how their choices impact all members of the family (Cox & Paley, 2003).

At the same time, it was clear that parents were confronted with the norms, roles and expectations that children had learned in their birth families or foster families. Recognizing that the siblings' behavior was shaped by their early experiences (Silverstein & Smith, 2009), parents engaged in a variety of parenting practices to establish their own family system with both their and their children's experiences and expectations. While some families emphasized helping children to learn why previous patterns of family interaction were inappropriate (e.g., "we don't use that language in this family"), other parents looked for ways of integrating what was normative for their children into their own expectations of family (e.g., "I realized this doesn't bother the children like it bothers me"). This finding adds to discussions of how children's birth family experiences shape their understandings of family practices

and behaviors (Guishard-Pine et al., 2007; Silverstein & Smith, 2009) by illuminating specific ways that children's expectations and practices differ, and the creative ways that parents address these differences. It seems that children being placed together with their siblings served to center adoptive parents' understanding of children's behavior around early experiences and family norms. Specifically, parents often described how the siblings demonstrated similar (if perplexing) behaviors, which indicated that they had been learned in their families of origin and were not likely to be attributable to individual differences or developmental problems.

This struggle to combine sometimes disparate family systems processes aligns with Pinderhughes's (1996) description of the *accommodation* phase of older-child adoptions, a time when "the family system begins to adjust as [each] individual explores and tests the fit of new and old roles and as relationships undergo redefinition and creation (p. 119)." In the current study, an additional level of complication is added as sibling groups are renegotiating their roles within the sibling group and adoptive family, at the same time that parents are negotiating roles within the siblings' partially intact family structure. Little research is available to help families identify constructive practices in this process. Future work should focus on the successful family integration of sibling groups across different types of parental practices (and different types of families) regarding family system establishment and recognition of existing sibling group practices.

Further, as these were largely transracial adoptions, it may be the case that some of these differences in family norms and expectations may be related to cultural differences—although this was not addressed explicitly by the parents. While research on adopting a second child has found that transracially adoptive parents prioritize adopting a second child of the same race as the first because they believe it would be beneficial to share the same race as family members (Frost & Goldberg, 2020), sibling group parents in the current study did not address race or culture in terms of parenting a sibling group. Future research should explore how differences in "doing" family among transracial sibling group adoptive families are understood in terms of race and culture.

Our fourth research question asked how parents and sibling groups adjust to being a family unit over time. We found that in all of our families, at least one parent had made a major employment change, with most families having a stay-at-home parent several years post adoption. While it is somewhat common for a parent to leave the workforce after having children (approximately 33% of mothers; Hotchkiss et al., 2008), the frequency of this is notable even in our small sample. Particularly notable is that parents described their decision to leave the workforce as often being unplanned and necessitated by the needs of their family. Our findings add support to the Beckett's (2018) suggestion that workers should explore "what the prospective parents' work day and weekend day look like now [and] how this might change if brothers and sisters were placed" (p. 94). Such attention is important, as a decrease in work hours may introduce financial challenges and can require additional supports or subsidies from placement agencies. Unanticipated career changes should also be considered inasmuch as shifts in partner responsibilities and roles within the family are likely to have significant impacts on the entire family system (Cox & Paley, 2003).

Additionally, we found that parents reported surprise about the persistent impact of trauma on their children, even as children's behaviors improved, but also voiced notable optimism for the future. Thus, even as parents can identify ongoing and unanticipated challenges of sibling group parenthood, they are motivated by a persistent optimism that may serve as a protective factor in stressful times. Interestingly, Saunders and Selwyn (2011) also identified notable optimism in parents of sibling groups. An optimistic outlook may be particularly important for parents adopting siblings and could be an aspect of resilience that agencies might assess in determining appropriate or promising placements for siblings.

### 5.1. Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, this exploratory study focuses on a small, non-representative sample of sibling group adopters. The sample is not representative because it lacks diversity in parental demographic characteristics including their sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. They also have a higher than average education level and family income. Additionally, the sample is not representative in that the children are younger ( $M = 3.5$  years,  $Mdn = 3$  years) than the average children adopted from foster care ( $M = 6.1$  years,  $Mdn = 4.9$  years; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). This limits our ability to understand how parents from different familial, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds might approach sibling group adoptions. Future work is needed to explore the experiences of more diverse samples to allow for understanding the broad experiences of sibling group adopters. Second, because the reports are collected only from adoptive parents, limited information is available about the children's histories which limits our ability to fully understand family dynamics. This single perspective also limits our understanding of the perspective of the children and their experiences of adapting. Future research would be bolstered by details from case workers around decision making and data from the siblings themselves about their experiences. Third, this study only includes parents who eventually adopted a sibling group. Future research should explore prospective parents who expressed interest in sibling groups but were placed with singletons, in order to better understand decision making.

### 6. Conclusions

Despite these limitations, this study provides useful insights with practical implications for policy and parenting as well as future directions for research. This is particularly true because many of our findings follow or build on the findings of studies of predominantly heterosexual sibling group adopters in the United Kingdom, which supports the transferability of our findings. Sibling group adoption is an important goal in the United States, and many prospective adopters express some interest in these types of placements. More research is needed to explore the pathways as well as barriers to adopting a sibling group in the United States, specifically focusing on parents' initial plans for sibling group adoption and eventual placements. Additionally, research on the long-term adjustment of sibling group adoptive families is needed for a larger and more diverse set of parents. Understanding the unique experiences of parents who adopt sibling groups, and their perceptions of challenges and strengths, is important for expanding our ability to support and expand these types of adoptions.

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### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Reihonna L. Frost:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft. **Abbie E. Goldberg:** Methodology, Resources, Writing - review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

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