

Siblings Unite at Camp to Belong

As 29 vanilla-frosted birthday cakes, their candles blazing, are paraded into the dining room, high over the heads of volunteer waiters, nearly 90 children burst into a rendition of "Happy Birthday," smiling in amazement at their siblings. For many of them, this is the first time celebrating a birthday with their siblings.

The event is one of the most memorable at Camp to Belong, a nonprofit volunteer organization that reunites siblings for one week at a camp in Gypsum, Colorado. " 'Birthday night' was incredibly powerful," says Martha Virgin, a social worker for Casey Family Services, who recently escorted four sisters to the camp.

All too often, the significance of the bond between siblings is underestimated. Unlike any other relationship, siblings share the same heritage and biology. Yet when placed in the foster care system, 75 percent of siblings end up in separate foster homes.

"Loss of siblings is a real bereavement (issue) for many children in the child welfare system," says Caroline Burry, assistant professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. "Research with adult adoptees has found that they are searching for siblings...at least as often as they are searching for their birth parents."

While placing siblings in the same foster home is preferred, a shortage of available homes often leads to separation. To help these foster siblings maintain a connection, Lynn Price launched Camp to Belong. "We have reunions for separated siblings to encourage bonding and belonging," says Price, who was separated from her sister when placed in foster care at age 8. "Just as important, we strive to educate the public about the plight of foster children who are separated from siblings."

Launched in 1995, Camp to Belong continues to be replicated in sites throughout the country. Two other sites serving more than 900 siblings have opened in the past few years. Additional sites are under development, and a camp in Maine is scheduled to open in the summer of 2004.

Maine foster siblings reunite

Camp to Belong Maine will be located in Waterford, Maine, at Camp Wigwam. For one week in August, 60-100 children between ages 8 and 18 from Maine's foster care system who have been separated from their siblings will have a chance to live together and engage in a variety of team-building activities.

“The purpose of the camp is to reunite brothers and sisters placed in separate foster homes for fun, emotional empowerment and sibling connection,” says Virgin. Camp to Belong Maine is a collaborative effort among a number of child welfare organizations including Casey Family Services’ Maine Division, the Muskie School of Public Service, Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine, Maine Department of Human Services, and Families and Children Together.

The first group of foster siblings from Casey Family Services recently experienced Camp to Belong in Colorado. Virgin, who chaperoned four sisters from Maine, says it was both a memorable and educational experience. She hopes to bring what she learned back to Camp to Belong Maine.

The sisters, Beth, Jane, Maria and Sharon, range between 9 and 14 years old. “The best thing about the trip is that I got to reunite with my sisters. It was neat sharing a cabin with my sisters and eating meals together,” says Beth.

“A different type of relationship develops when you spend your days and nights living under the same roof,” Virgin points out. “When you’re separated from your sibling, a strong bond is broken. Attending a camp like this helps in mending that disconnection. So they don’t feel so alone.”

Making this connection is no easy feat. The trip, she says, can be frightening for some kids. “They’ll be spending time with someone who they don’t really know and that’s a scary thing. But after a few days I could feel the kids’ walls drop and see them really connect. It was very powerful and very healing,” says Virgin.

While spending time with one another helps develop a connection, the camp’s activities also provide an avenue for promoting close bonds. Some activities, including wall climbing, horseback riding, rope courses and kayaking, help to build self-esteem, confidence and trust.

The siblings also learn to function as a team. Virgin joined the four sisters on a whitewater rafting adventure one afternoon. To successfully steer the raft, Virgin says, everyone had to count together and work as a team. In another instance, three of the girls jumped off a cliff into a river. “The girls kept encouraging one another to do it, so that helped in bringing them closer together.”

Meanwhile, older campers who may be transitioning out of foster care can attend a Life Seminar where they learn about career and education opportunities. Siblings struggling to reconnect can attend the Sibling Enhancement Program.

“Coming to the camp is a very empowering experience for these kids; they all share similar experiences.” Near the end of the trip, relationships were

“normalizing,” says Virgin, adding with a chuckle, “there were pillow fights, laughing, wrestling, even arguing. It was not all about handholding.”

Then again, successful sibling bonding never is.