

Name:

If you ANNOTATE, complete the following several times throughout the text:

- Summarize main ideas and label them MI, then underline their supporting details.
- Circle words you do not know or key words (the most important words for this article's topic) and use context clues to define them
- Connect it to the unit we are studying using evidence from the text

AoW8: "Siblings Raising Siblings"

By Heather Won Tesoriero Sunday, May 06, 2001

At some point along the way, almost every child fantasizes about what life would be like without parents. It would be oodles of fun, with unlimited television, ice cream every night for dinner and none of those pesky rules imposed by the adult world. And, of course, there would be no homeowner's insurance, car payments or utility bills either. Except that's not the way it works.

Dave Eggers, in his best-selling *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (Vintage, 2001) recounts with candor and humor how he raised Toph, a brother 13 years his junior, following the death of their parents within 32 days of each other. "I have to get a resume together," Eggers wrote, "and we have to find a new place to live when the subplot ends, and how will Toph get to school if I get an early job...Should I lighten my hair? Does that whitening toothpaste really work? Toph needs health insurance. I need health insurance."

There are in America today about 2 million Tophs--children currently in kinship care--according to a recent study by the Urban Institute titled "Children Cared for by Relatives: Who Are They and How Are They Faring?" The number has been rising significantly over the past 20 years, and in 1996 the U.S. Census Bureau began tracking domestic situations that differ from the traditional two-parent household. Siblings raising siblings account for approximately 140,000 of those cases. Sondra Jackson, the Interim Receiver of the Child and Family Services Agency in Washington, explains, "In the 1980s, we lost about 50,000 foster-care homes nationwide. So we began to look at relatives as potential caretakers." The idealized version of a sibling-run household was promoted by the 1990s television drama *Party of Five*, which chronicled the Salinger family after their parents died in a car accident. But real-life siblings who have weathered



tragic loss and then learned to improvise their way through parent-teacher conferences and dentist appointments will tell you it is not the romanticized stuff of television.

Janice Pang of Belmont, Calif., was a 23-year-old journalism graduate student on the verge of starting an internship when her parents' bitter divorce resulted in her taking sole guardianship of her sister Lisa, 11. Unprepared, Janice had to reorganize her life quickly. She pursued a job rather than an internship and moved into Stanford University family housing with her boyfriend Scott, who was willing to share parenting responsibilities. Dr. Laurie Kramer, a University of Illinois siblings expert, says that for the older sibling, such an upheaval can be restricting. "The ages from 18 to 25 are really a time of life when you're exploring," says Kramer. "If the older siblings are taking care of the younger ones, they've lost that opportunity to be free." But, Janice insists, "I didn't want my sister in foster care. I was grateful that I was old enough to take care of her."

Today Lisa, 19, a college sophomore, talks frequently with her sister and returns to Janice's home during vacations. Though both are now adults, they communicate more like mother and daughter than sisters. "Because we're so far apart in age, we don't have the kind of sister relationship most people have," says Lisa. "She'll probably always be a caretaker figure. I'm just starting to get into the friend thing."

In a perfect world, parents would draw up wills with careful guidelines for their kids, removing some of the critical decision making at a time of shock and grief. Alas, that's seldom the case. Realtor Bernard Strong, 47, of Atlanta, was already devastated at the age of 20 by his mother's tragic death in a car accident. No sooner had he returned to college than he learned his father had suffered a severe heart attack; his father died in his sleep 18 months later. "When that happened," Bernard admits, "I was about to check it in."

Bernard's youngest brother, Wayne, 12, was sent to live with him. With no wills to direct them, Bernard and his two older siblings distributed their parents' belongings on an as-needed basis. As Wayne became a teenager, the relationship between the Strong brothers began to shift to that of peers, a change that brought some strife between them. "He became harder to parent," says Bernard. "I think one of the conflicts was asking him to do as I say, not as I do."

Leading by example can be a tall order for the older sibling, who is often just steps ahead of the younger ones. At 19, with both parents deceased, Kathy Borkowski, now living in Madison, Wis., took charge of her three younger siblings, ages 9 to 14. John, the youngest, was on dinner duty one night, when there was no milk for the mashed potatoes. He quickly solved the problem by melting a cup of vanilla ice cream. "I figured they were both dairy and the right color!" he explains.

Just winging it doesn't always work out so easily. Kathy, now 47, married her high school sweetheart at the time and quit her job to be a full-time parent. She set out to re-create as closely as possible the dynamics and setting that their parents would have provided. "Clean, shiny floors and fresh bread when the kids got home from school," says Kathy. When she later found out she was pregnant, she had a long talk with her husband. "I don't think I can do it," she announced. "I don't think I can go through another 18 years of being responsible for someone." She did have a child, but only one.