

Are they really brothers?

When we adopted our first son, I fielded strangers' questions about adoption all the time.

I assumed that after we adopted our second son, the questions would continue, but I was wrong. When we are out in public, I am so busy keeping my children safe and from damaging their surroundings, that if anyone is throwing questions my way, I don't notice. I'm too busy catching items cascading off of store shelves while a sweet little voice sings out, "Sorry, Mama!"

But one question occasionally penetrates the maternal haze.

"Are they really brothers?"

It's asked with curiosity and usually with a smile. And it always takes me aback.

"Just look at them," I want to say, as our boys argue about who gets to load the groceries on the belt at the cash register or as they race across the playground, yelling happily to each other.

"Are they really brothers?"

I usually say, "They are now."

That's my attempt to end the conversation—so people will understand that our sons may have different origins, but they are our sons and part of our family—and, this part is also implied, we don't discuss their origins with strangers.

But I don't like that my answer feels qualified. If someone asked, "Is John your husband?" I would never say, "He is now." I would simply say, "Yes."

And so sometimes I just say, "Of course they are." But invariably that brings a follow-up question, "No, I mean, are they *really* brothers?" Even then, sometimes when I say, "Yes," the questioner says, "No, but are they really brothers? You know what I mean."

Yes, I do know what you mean. And, if you're paying attention, you probably know what I mean, too. I'm saying that what makes our boys brothers is something much deeper than a mere genetic link.

"Are they really brothers?"

They yell, "I'm not inviting you to my birthday party!" and a minute later say, "Will you play Ninjago with me?"

"Are they really brothers?"

They giggle together as they're falling asleep—and a lot of the times when they're awake, too.

"Are they really brothers?"

They need to know where the other one is all the time—and to make sure he's not enjoying some special treat.

"Are they really brothers?"

They insist on sharing a bedroom—and have hard-and-fast rules about staying on your own bed.

"Are they really brothers?"

They understand each other's interests and wishes and hopes—and even words—better than I do.

"Are they really brothers?"

They have different genes and different beginnings, but they have something deep and lasting in common—the same parents, the same family, and a friendship for the rest of their lives.

In other words, they're brothers.

Yes, for real.

And, yes, forever.