



Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption

One of the most critical contributions that child welfare professionals can provide for children who enter care is to preserve their connections with their brothers and sisters. Children who come into foster care or are adopted often are separated from existing or future siblings. Approximately 70 percent of children in foster care in the United States have another sibling also in care (Shlonsky, Elkins, Bellamy, & Ashare, 2005). For a variety of reasons, many of these sibling groups are not placed together.

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This bulletin will explore research, intervention strategies, and resources to assist professionals in preserving connections among siblings.

Defining a Sibling Relationship

The identification of siblings can be a challenging issue, especially in cases in which children have lived in more than one family. Children's definitions of their siblings often differ from those of caseworkers or official legislative definitions.

Informal Definitions

Children are less formal than adults in their view of who is a brother or sister. In particular, children involved with the child welfare system may experience a number of different families and may develop ties with other children with whom they may or may not have a biological relationship. In child welfare, the term "fictive kin" has been introduced to recognize types of relationships in a child's life where there is no legal or biological tie, but a strong, enduring bond exists (Casey Family Programs, 2002).

There are many types of relationships that might be defined as sibling relationships:

- Full or half-siblings, including any children who were relinquished or removed at birth
- Step-siblings
- Other close relatives or nonrelatives living in the same kinship home
- Foster children in the same family

- Orphanage mates or group-home mates with a close, enduring relationship
- Children of the partner or former partner of the child's parent

While laws and policies may have restrictive definitions of siblings that typically require a biological parent in common, child- and family-centered practice would respect cultural values and recognize close, nonbiological relationships as a source of support to the child. In these cases, the child may be one of the best sources of information regarding who is considered a sibling.

Legislative Definitions

States vary in their definitions of sibling relationships as well as in the policies regarding sibling placement. In past practice, judicial enforcement of States' statutory protections for siblings in child welfare has applied only to siblings who have established personal relationships prior to their entry into State custody (Shlonsky, et al., 2005). For instance, in a number of States, legislation requires that any sibling relationships be taken into consideration when determining the best interests of the child for the purposes of court custody decisions. In a few States, there are statutes and regulations that mandate what efforts caseworkers must make in terms of visits and placements to maintain ties among siblings in foster care. State-by-State information regarding postadoption contact can be found in *Child Welfare Information Gateway's Postadoption Contact Agreements Between Birth and Adoptive Families*: www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes//cooperative.cfm

California is an example of a State that has detailed legislation regarding sibling issues, defining a sibling as a child related to another person by blood, adoption, or affinity through a common legal or biological parent. California's law allows any person, including a dependent child, to petition the court to request sibling visitation, including postadoption sibling contact or placement with or near a sibling (Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Christian, 2002). The State of Washington also broadly defines "sibling" in legislation and includes language that refers to tribal law or custom for defining siblings of Indian children.

Importance of Siblings

Sibling relationships are emotionally powerful and critically important not only in childhood but over the course of a lifetime. Siblings form a child's first peer group, and children learn social skills, particularly in managing conflict, from negotiating with brothers and sisters. Sibling relationships can provide a significant source of continuity throughout a child's lifetime and are likely to be the longest relationships that most people experience.

The nature and importance of sibling relationships vary for individuals, depending on their own circumstances and developmental stage. Typically, there is rivalry in the preschool years, variability in closeness during middle childhood, depending on the level of warmth in the relationship, and less sibling closeness in adolescence when teens are focused on peers. An extensive body of research addresses issues of birth order, gender, age spacing, and other influences on sibling relationships.

Research has demonstrated that warmth in sibling relationships is associated with less loneliness, fewer behavior problems, and higher self-worth (Stocker, 1994). Marjut Kosonen (1996) studied the emotional support and help that siblings provide and found that when they needed help, children would first seek out their mothers, but then turn to older siblings for support, even before they would go to their fathers. She also found that for isolated children (as is the case for many children placed into foster care), sibling support is especially crucial. For these children, an older sibling was often their only perceived source of help.

Sibling Relationships in Abusive or Neglectful Families

In many families involved with the child welfare system, sibling relationships take on more importance because they can provide support and nurture not consistently provided by parents. For children entering care, siblings can serve as a buffer against the worst effects of harsh circumstances. While sibling relationships in particular families experiencing adverse situations do not always compensate for other deficits, research has validated that for many children, sibling relationships do promote resilience—for example, a young child's secure attachment to an older sibling can diminish the impact of adverse circumstances such as parental mental illness or loss (Werner, 1990; Sanders, 2004). Therefore, protecting these ties that offer support to children removed from their original families is especially important.

A study of children's perspectives on their important relationships among 90 children ages 8 to 12 who were or were not in foster care concluded that the foster children's smaller networks of relationships with important persons made siblings proportionally more important (Kosonen, 1999). Foster children experienced more losses of significant others, meaning sibling relationships were often one of their only sources for a continuing significant relationship. Nearly one-third of the related siblings named by foster children in this study were not known to their social workers—most were half- or step-siblings. Kosonen's study also underscores the importance of obtaining children's perspectives on their family relationships. When siblings could not all be placed together, workers often decided to keep those closest in age together, resulting in placements that did not necessarily fit the preferences of the children.

Benefits of Placing Siblings Together

For children entering care, being with siblings can enhance their sense of safety and well-being. They are not burdened with wondering where their siblings are and whether or not they are safe. Siblings in the same home can provide natural support to each other and some sense of stability and belonging. Continuity of sibling relationships assists children in maintaining a positive sense of identity and knowledge of their cultural, personal, and family histories.

Sibling placement may also affect permanency outcomes. A recent study found that placing siblings in the same foster home was associ-

ated with a significantly higher rate of family reunification (Webster, Shlonsky, Shaw, & Brookhart, 2005).

For agencies, placing siblings in the same home can streamline some processes such as visits by caseworkers. Also, caseworkers are relieved of the obligation to arrange and carry out visits among siblings if they are already living together. Communication between birth and foster families is also made more manageable when there is only one foster family involved.

Conversely, a body of research has established that separated siblings in foster care are at higher risk for a number of negative outcomes, including placement disruption; running away; and failure to exit the system to reunification, adoption, or guardianship (Leathers, 2005; Courtney et al., 2005). Girls separated from all of their siblings are at the greatest risk for poor mental health and socialization (Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005).

A foster youth advisory team described separation from siblings entering foster care as being "like an extra punishment, a separate loss, and another pain that is not needed" (YLAT, 2002). Even for very young children, separation from a sibling deprives them of developing a relationship that might be expected to offer them significant support over the course of their lives.

Barriers to Placing Siblings Together

A substantial proportion of the approximately 70 percent of children in foster care who have siblings in care are not placed with those

siblings. Two studies provide some statistics about siblings separated in foster care.

- In a study of California foster children with siblings in care, about 46 percent were placed with all their siblings who were in care, and 66 percent were placed with at least one sibling (Shlonsky, Webster, & Needell, 2003).
- In a longitudinal analysis of placement patterns of more than 168,000 foster youth with siblings in care in New York City over a 15-year period, initial placement status was a strong determinant of sibling placement over time (Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005). Forty-three percent of siblings entered care on the same day, with another 10 percent entering within 30 days. A substantial number (41 percent) entered care longer than 6 months apart, and these siblings were at the highest risk of being separated. In fact, for siblings not entering care together, two-thirds were not placed together initially; however, when siblings entered care together, 78 percent were placed all together.

Factors Associated With Placing Siblings Apart

Besides entering foster care together, a number of other demographic and situational factors are associated with the likelihood that siblings are placed in the same foster home (Hegar, 2005; Shlonsky, et al., 2003). These include:

- Size of sibling group—larger groups are more often split
- Age gap—wide age span leads to splitting
- Differences in the needs of siblings
- Type of placement—siblings placed with kin are more likely to be together
- Differences in relatives—kin may want to foster only children to whom they are related, and not include half-siblings or step-siblings who are not blood relatives
- Behavior problems—a sibling with a behavior problem is more likely to be removed, while brothers and sisters may remain in the placement
- Organizational policies and procedures
- Adequacy of placement resources and supports
- Agency rules regarding the maximum number of children who can be placed in a foster home

Beliefs Associated With Placing Siblings Apart

Beliefs and attitudes of foster parents, workers, agency personnel, and therapists also contribute to separating siblings. In a study of foster parents' and workers' views on placing siblings, over half of the foster mothers (55 percent) did not believe it was easier for a foster child to fit into the foster family if placed with siblings. As explained by one foster parent, "the siblings depend on one another too much and shut other people out" (Smith, 1996). Approximately 45 percent of foster parents believed that children placed with siblings were easier to foster because they felt more secure having their siblings with them.

In this same study, over half the caseworkers indicated that it was difficult to find foster parents willing to accept sibling groups (Smith, 1996). Most caseworkers also believed that the presence of siblings made it harder for

the foster parents to incorporate the child into the family. However, the vast majority of caseworkers personally believed in the county policy of placing children with their siblings, unless separation was in the best interests of the child.

Recommendations of therapists may be the basis of some placements. However, best practice indicates that the therapist should have experience with siblings in child welfare and that the same therapist should see all of the siblings in order to make a recommendation that is beneficial for the group. Some clinical judgments that have been used to justify separating siblings are not necessarily best practice.

Although each of the following reasons has been used in the past to separate siblings, child welfare professionals now generally agree that these are not reasons to keep siblings apart:

- There is too much conflict or rivalry between particular siblings to keep them together.
- The special needs of a single child require a separate placement.
- An older child is too involved in taking care of a younger brother or sister.
- A sibling born after older siblings have been removed from the home can be considered separately for purposes of permanency goals, because the children do not have an established relationship.

In many of these cases, therapy and services will help all the siblings, and the benefits of being together will outweigh those of being separated.

Policies and Practices for Keeping Siblings Together

Decisions regarding sibling placement may be more straightforward when siblings come into care at the same time, when their needs are similar, and when the sibling group is small. In such cases, placement together is both more feasible and likely. When there are more barriers to placement together, as listed above, caseworkers may have to make more difficult decisions regarding placement.

Connie Maschmeier (2001) developed a decision-making matrix to help agencies make decisions around the placement of siblings. The matrix takes into consideration the degree, duration, quality, and intensity of the sibling relationships; any safety risks associated with placement; possible long-term benefits; the family's ability to meet the needs of all siblings; and the children's preferences.

Standards to guide workers in placement decisions and other practice related to siblings are included in the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) Standards of Excellence for Adoption Services (2000). Standard 3.7 specifies:

Siblings should be placed together both in out-of-home care and adoption unless the serious, specific needs of one or more of the siblings justifies separation. The decision to separate siblings should be based on a carefully documented and reviewed determination that such separation is necessary.

Family-centered practice suggests that children and youth should be included in developmentally appropriate discussions and decisions about being placed with their siblings.

Thorough Assessment of Sibling Relationships

During intake, workers need to complete a thorough assessment of sibling relationships and individual children, including the experience and feelings of each child. They should talk with children individually and ask age-appropriate questions, such as:

- Which sibling does the child enjoy spending time with?
- Who will play a game with the child?
- Which sibling would the child turn to if he were afraid or hurt?
- Who would listen to a story?

If separate placements must be made for very large sibling groups, this assessment will help the worker make decisions about which sibling relationships are most essential to the well-being of specific children.

In completing assessments, it is important to recognize that sibling relationships vary greatly in both positive and negative qualities. In evaluating the quality of sibling relationships, the worker will want to look for warmth or affection between siblings, rivalry and hostility, interdependence, and relative power and status in the relationship, as well as determining how much time the siblings have spent together.

Strategies for Placing Siblings Together

Agency policy, along with the individual circumstances of each sibling group, will affect whether or not siblings are placed together. The following are policy and practice strategies designed to address the needs of sibling groups more effectively:

- Designate certain foster home resources for large sibling groups, and offer incentives to hold them open for these placements.
- Recruit families specifically to care for sibling groups through community outreach, the media, special events, faith-based organizations, photolistings, and websites.
- Educate foster, adoptive, and kin families about sibling and grief issues.
- Have contracts with private agencies to offer a specialized foster care program designed specifically for large sibling groups (examples of these include the Hull House Neighbor to Neighbor program in Chicago, Neighbor to Family in Florida, and the Jewish Child Care Association Sibling Houses program in New York).
- If efforts are being made to recruit an adoptive family for a sibling group, list them as a group with a picture of the entire sibling group.
- Have a system in place to track the location and status of all siblings.
- Seek kinship placements first, because they are generally more open to taking a sibling group, and because such placements offer the further advantage of preserving family connections.

- Conduct a thorough social work assessment of sibling groups as a whole, as well as of each individual child, including children in discussions.
 - Assign all siblings to the same caseworker, no matter when they enter care.
 - If siblings must be separated in an emergency placement, provide for a review within the first week to plan for reunification.
 - At regular case reviews, discuss sibling issues and include children or youth in these discussions.
 - Provide training for caseworkers and foster parents on the importance of preserving sibling connections.
 - Provide sufficient resources for foster families who take in large sibling groups and may need additional household items and services.
 - Ensure that information about siblings is included in each child's Lifebook.
- An infant may come into care and be placed in a foster or pre-adoptive home before workers have determined that the infant has siblings already in foster care or in adoptive homes. The foster or pre-adoptive parents of the infant may then argue against the removal of the infant from their home. To avoid this dilemma, agencies should establish whether or not any infant or child coming into care has siblings already in placement. If so, strong efforts should be made to place the infant with siblings.
 - In some cases of separated siblings, foster parents may want to adopt only the sibling placed with them. Workers are put in the unenviable position of choosing the lesser of two evils—allowing the child to be adopted without his or her siblings, or keeping the child in foster care until a family can be found who will adopt all of the siblings. To reduce the likelihood of this situation, foster parents should always be told at the time of placement that reuniting siblings is a top priority of the agency. Whatever decision is made, there should be provisions for maintaining connections with both the foster parents and siblings.
 - A similar dilemma occurs when a sibling group placement disrupts because the foster parents cannot handle one of the sibling's behavior but they want to continue parenting the others. The worker must decide whether to remove just the one child or the entire sibling group. Another alternative would be to have a temporary specialized placement for the sibling with behavior problems if the foster parents are willing to work toward reintegrating this child into their family.

When Siblings Cannot Live Together

Despite agency policy or a caseworker's best efforts, a number of situations may lead to siblings being placed separately. This initial separation can lead to permanent separation if an agency does not make ongoing, concerted efforts to place the children together. Both policy and practice should promote ongoing efforts to reunite separated siblings. Common dilemmas regarding separated siblings include the following:

When a Sibling Is Abusive

Whenever there is a concern that one sibling poses a safety risk to another, a thorough assessment needs to occur. Distinctions need to be made between sexually reactive behavior (inappropriate sexual touching or fondling between children close in age) and sexual abuse by a more powerful sibling of another. If there is significant abuse that does not respond to treatment or if the risk of re-occurrence is high, the abusing sibling may need to be moved to another placement.

Physical aggression within the normal range of sibling relationships needs to be differentiated from physical abuse or victimization of a weaker sibling. Also, the severity of the abusive behavior needs to be assessed and a determination made as to whether the safety risks are moderate and can be managed through closer supervision, therapeutic parenting, and clinical treatment to change behaviors.

Victimization of one sibling by another should not be ignored. Research indicates that the impact of sexual abuse by a sibling is just as harmful to the victim as sexual abuse by a parent or stepparent. In fact, one study found that penetration occurred more commonly in sibling incest (71 percent), than in incest between a father or stepfather and a child (35 percent) (Cyr, Wright, McDuff, & Perron, 2002). Hence, children should be protected from abuse by a sibling just as they are protected from abuse by caretakers. In some cases, it may be possible to work toward reunification after a period of treatment for the offending sibling.

Maintaining Ties Between Separated Siblings

When siblings cannot be placed together, facilitating regular contact is critical to maintaining these relationships. Regular contact may even affect permanency outcomes. Findings from the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) conducted in all States found a strong association between visiting with parents and siblings and the outcomes of reunification, guardianship, and placement with relatives (Children's Bureau, 2004).

States vary considerably in their protection of siblings' right to contact in statute or child welfare policies. Even States that have extensive statutory protections governing the treatment of siblings who come under court protection often do not offer much protection of the right of siblings to associate with each other if they are not placed together. In the end, workers and foster or adoptive parents have to understand the importance of sibling contact for the children for whom they are responsible in order to maintain their commitment to making these contacts happen.

Strategies for Preserving Sibling Ties in Separate Placements

Some promising practices from the field suggest ways to maintain ties among separated siblings.

- **Place with kinship caregivers who have an established personal relationship.** Even when siblings cannot be placed in the same home, they are more apt to keep in

close contact if they are each placed with a relative.

- **Place nearby.** Placing siblings in the same neighborhood or school district ensures that they will be able to see each other regularly. Also, keeping children in their same schools contributes to better educational outcomes.
- **Arrange for regular visits.** While there is no consensus on frequency of face-to-face contacts, a minimum of twice a month for siblings separated in foster care has been recommended by some experts in the field. At least two States (Missouri and Utah) require weekly visits (National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning, 2005). Also, visits with birth parents can be arranged to occur at a time when all the siblings can be together.
- **Arrange other forms of contact.** If the distance between siblings is great, workers need to assist foster and adoptive families in maintaining frequent contacts through letters, email, cards, and phone calls. Make sure that children have full contact information for all their siblings. For instance, providing older siblings with calling cards may facilitate sibling communication.
- **Involve families in planning.** The adults in the siblings' families should be involved with the worker in developing a plan for ongoing contact. This meeting should include working through any barriers to visits, and the plan needs to be reviewed and revised as needed, at least yearly. Sometimes there are value differences between families or other issues that cause parental discomfort with visits. Such differences need to be discussed and resolved.
- **Plan joint outings or camp experiences.** Siblings may be able to spend time together at summer or weekend camps, including camps specifically for siblings, or through short-term outings. For instance, Camp To Belong is a camp for siblings separated by foster care. Such camp experiences help siblings build and maintain their relationships.
- **Arrange for joint respite care.** Families caring for siblings may be able to provide babysitting or respite care for each other, thus giving the siblings another opportunity to spend time together.
- **Help children with emotions.** Sometimes sibling visits stir up emotional issues in children, such as the intense feelings they may experience when visiting birth parents. Children need to be helped to express and work through these feelings; this does not mean visits should not occur. Visits should provide some opportunities for joint Lifebook work with siblings. If siblings are in therapy, they should be seeing the same therapist, and it may be possible to schedule appointments either jointly or back to back. Children may also need help with feelings of guilt if they have been removed from an abusive home, but other siblings were left behind or born later.
- **Encourage sustained contact.** Sustaining sibling contact often requires a unique understanding and commitment from parents. Many adoptive parents recognize the importance of their adopted children having contact with siblings living with their birth families or other adoptive families. Some families even travel across the country or to other countries to give their children the opportunity to get to

know their siblings. Some States offset the costs of such visits through their adoption subsidy plans. The earlier these relationships can begin, the more children can use these opportunities to work through adoption identity issues that may arise, and the sooner they can develop truly meaningful relationships with siblings.

Many States have adoption registries that can help adult siblings separated by foster care or adoption re-establish contact later in life. The caseworker needs to make sure that all pertinent information on each sibling is entered in the registry at the time of each child's adoption.

Sibling Issues Within the Foster or Adoptive Family

Facilitating healthy attachments and interactions among all siblings in foster and adoptive families, including all birth, foster, and adopted children, is an essential therapeutic goal. A single family may contain birth and foster children as well as adopted children coming from different backgrounds or types of adoptions. Negative interaction patterns can result when children have different statuses in their families or special needs that require an inordinate amount of parental attention, create stress for other family members, or both.

Other dynamics lead to tensions as well; for example, one adopted child may have extensive information about his or her background, as well as ongoing contact with birth relatives, while another may have neither of these. Or an adopted child who maintains contact with

his or her siblings who are still living with the birth family has difficulty integrating into the adopted family.

Two social workers in Minnesota developed a model for supporting children already in families when older children are adopted. The model was developed after the agency experienced an adoption disruption related to other children in the family (Mullin & Johnson, 1999). This model advocates having a social worker assigned to the sibling group who meets with them at strategic points. It is essential to prepare children for both the positive and negative changes in the family that are likely after a new placement and to assist parents in developing strategies to communicate and cope with their children's needs.

Some important strategies for parents and workers in addressing the needs of all children in the family include:

- Encourage children to share their thoughts and feelings; empathize with, and do not minimize their concerns.
- Provide opportunities for fun and positive interactions between children to promote attachment.
- Promote reciprocity between children in the family; for example, if a child destroys the property of another, find a way for the child to make up for the loss, such as earning the money to replace the item.
- Find ways for parents to have meaningful one-on-one time with each child.
- Teach children skills to resolve their own disputes to the extent possible.
- Develop a support group for siblings, either informally or through an agency.

Resources for Promoting Intact Placement of Sibling Groups

States and agencies have developed special programs or resources to facilitate meeting the needs of siblings in out-of-home care. Below is a list of some of the resources that help professionals to address the needs of sibling groups. Additional resources may be found in the reference list.

- Both professionals and foster parents may be helped to appreciate the child's perspective on the importance of sibling connections and the painful impact of separation from siblings by reading the following:
 - Herrick, M. A., & Piccus, W. (2005). Sibling connections: The importance of nurturing sibling bonds in the foster care system. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27(7), 845-861. www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/01907409
 - Folman, R. D. (1998). "I was taken": How children experience removal from their parents preliminary to placement into foster care. *Adoption Quarterly*, 2(2), 7-35. http://dx.doi.org/DOI:10.1300/J145v02n02_02
- *My brother, my sister: Sibling relations in adoption and foster care*. This 6-hour training curriculum by Regina Kupecky emphasizes the importance of sibling relationships. It consists of trainer's notes, activities, PowerPoint slides and video. Order from the Attachment and Bonding Center of Ohio, 12608 State Road, Suite 1, North Royalton, OH 44133.
- The Proceedings of the National Leadership Symposium on Siblings in Out-of-Home Care (May 19-20, 2002) may be downloaded from the website of Casey Family Programs. This volume contains many resources, including an appendix on policies and laws on sibling placements (pp. 63-70) as well as a variety of materials useful in trainings. www.casey.org/Resources/Archive/Publications/SiblingSymposium.htm
- The Sibling Practice Curriculum from the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning utilizes materials developed by Casey Family Programs. www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/siblings.html
- Samples of State policies and links to many complete policies regarding sibling placement and visitation can be found in documents available from the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning. www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/siblings.html
- The Oklahoma Department of Human Services has developed a video on the importance of keeping siblings together in adoption. *The Sibling Connection: Keeping Brothers and Sisters Together Through Adoption* is available by contacting Deborah Goodman at 918.588.1735 or Deborah.Goodman@okdhs.org
- The Maine Youth Advisory Leadership Team, composed of youth in care and their guardians, caseworkers, and others,

prepared a position paper on siblings in out-of-home care that was adopted by the Bureau of Child and Family Services as its sibling policy.

www.ylat.org//leadership/policy/sibling/siblingpolicy.htm

- Minnesota has developed Program Improvement Plan (PIP) tips to help counties in their efforts to improve practice related to Child and Family Services Review issues. Two of these publications deal with siblings (placement issues and visitation). www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/county_access/documents/pub/dhs_id_028205.hcsp

- There are some unique programs around the country to facilitate foster or adopted siblings' contact with each other. A well-known program is Camp To Belong, which was developed in Colorado by sisters who had been in foster care themselves. This program has been replicated in at least five other States and in Canada. Some States have developed regular weekend camps specifically for children who are separated in foster care or adoption. www.camptobelong.org/

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