



Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption

Sibling relationships can provide positive support and improved outcomes for children involved with child welfare as well as for those in the general population (Richardson & Yates, 2014). Connections with siblings can serve as a protective factor for children who have been removed from their birth homes, but for a variety of reasons, siblings may not be placed together or may not have regular contact. Child welfare professionals can support children's well-being by attempting to preserve their connections to any brothers and sisters while in foster care or any subsequent permanent placements. This bulletin explores relevant research, strategies, and resources to assist child welfare professionals in preserving connections among siblings.

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Importance of Sibling Relationships

Having a brother or sister provides children with a peer partner with whom they can explore their environments, navigate social and cognitive challenges, and learn skills (Richardson & Yates, 2014). Sibling relationships can provide a source of continuity throughout a child's lifetime and can be the longest relationships that people experience. Unfortunately, though, many siblings may be separated upon removal and not have frequent contact while in care (Wojciak, McWey, & Helfrich, 2013). However, for some siblings in care, their separation or infrequent visiting can cause those relationships to wither, sometimes to the point of permanent estrangement. The following sections describe the benefits sibling connections have on the well-being and permanency outcomes of children involved with foster care.

Well-Being Outcomes

Experiencing maltreatment and being removed from their homes are traumatic experiences for children. They can cause children to suffer from feelings of worry and confusion as well as loss of identity, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging, which can be exasperated by separation from a sibling (Wojciak, McWey, & Waid, 2018). Preserving ties with siblings, however, can help buffer children from the negative effects of maltreatment and removal from the home (Aguiniga & Madden, 2018).

The following are examples of positive well-being outcomes that can arise from supporting sibling relationships or copacements:

- Children who have positive relationships with their siblings are less likely to exhibit internalizing behaviors (i.e., behavior problems, such as anxiety or depression, that are directed inward or "kept inside") after experiencing a traumatic event (Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007; Wojciak, McWey, & Helfrich, 2013).
- Being placed with siblings or maintaining sibling connections while in care serves as a protective factor for children's mental health (Jones, 2016; McBeath et al., 2014).
- Being placed with all their siblings may improve children's school performance (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2011).

- When siblings who are all placed together were compared with those in "splintered" placements,¹ those placed together tend to show more closeness to their foster caregivers and like living in the foster home more than those not placed with a sibling (Hegar and Rosenthal, 2011).
- Separating siblings can hinder adjustment and adaptation to the new home. This is in part due to children worrying about their siblings in other foster homes or those remaining with their birth families (Affronti, Rittner, & Semanchin Jones, 2015).

Siblings can also provide support to youth after they have emancipated or otherwise exited from foster care. Based on a small convening of youth formerly in foster care, FosterClub—which helps connect youth in foster care with tools, resources, and peer support—noted that siblings can help by providing emotional and spiritual support, guidance about college or other opportunities, assistance required due to physical and developmental disabilities, and information about health concerns or history (C. Teague, personal communication, April 22, 2019).

Permanency Outcomes

Joint sibling placements can increase the likelihood of achieving permanency and stability. Studies have found that placing siblings in the same foster home is associated with higher rates of reunification, adoption, and guardianship (Jones, 2016; Akin, 2011). Additionally, siblings placed together are more likely to exit to adoption and guardianship than if they are placed apart (Jones, 2016). Some studies find that children placed with their siblings also experience at least as much placement stability—if not more—than those who were separated from their siblings (Jones, 2016). A large study of placement disruptions in Texas found that placements of all siblings together led to a lower risk of disruptions due to incompatibility between the child and caregiver or child-initiated disruptions (e.g., the child ran away or refused to stay) compared with placements of siblings placed apart (Sattler, Font, & Gershoff, 2018).

¹ A "splintered" placement is one in which a child is placed with at least one sibling but is also not placed with at least one sibling.

Legal Framework for Protecting Sibling Connections

Even when professionals believe that maintaining sibling relationships is in children's best interests, laws and policies must be in place to support these connections, both in foster care and when permanency is achieved. At the Federal level, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections Act) was the first Federal law to address the importance of keeping siblings together. The law mandates that, to receive Federal funding, States must make reasonable efforts to maintain sibling connections. This means that States must seek to place siblings in the same home or, if the children are not placed in the same home, provide for frequent visitation or ongoing contact, unless either of these actions would be contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings.

As of January 2018, approximately 37 States, the District of Columbia, and Guam have statutes requiring child-placing agencies to make reasonable efforts to place siblings in the same home when they are in need of out-of-home care, except when there are documented reasons why a joint placement would not be in the best interests of any of the siblings. Additionally, approximately 35 States and Puerto Rico have statutes requiring that siblings who cannot be placed together be given opportunities for visits and/or other contact or communication (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).² State statutes regarding siblings may vary. For more information, refer to Information Gateway's *Placement of Children With Relatives*, which provides State-specific legislative text, at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/placement/>.

As of August 2018, only 13 States specifically have statutes providing that visits between siblings who have been separated by adoption may be included in a contact agreement (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

² Although the Fostering Connections Act requires States to have policies and procedures in place to ensure reasonable efforts are being made to place siblings together or help them maintain contact, that does not—in most cases—necessarily require the State legislature to pass a law.

Adoptive parents have the right to decide, however, who may have contact with their adopted child, and they can allow any amount of contact with birth family members, which can be arranged without any formal agreement. State-by-State information on this topic can be found in Information Gateway's *Postadoption Contact Agreements Between Birth and Adoptive Families* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/cooperative/>.

In addition to the Fostering Connections Act, other recent Federal legislation has included provisions recognizing the importance of sibling connections. The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 amended title IV-E State plan provisions to require that the parents of siblings be included as persons to be notified when a child needs placement. The Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 permits a State to allow the number of children in foster care who may be cared for in a home to exceed the numerical limitation specified in law in order to allow siblings to remain together.

Defining a Sibling Relationship

The identification of siblings can be challenging, especially when children have lived in more than one family. Additionally, children's definitions of their siblings may differ from laws and agency policies, which may have restrictive definitions of siblings that require children to have a biological parent in common. Children may have more expansive definitions of who their siblings are; they may include biological siblings, step siblings, foster siblings, or other close relatives or nonrelatives with whom they live or have lived. It is also possible they have siblings they have never met. Caseworkers should ask children about who they view as their siblings and strive to help them maintain connections even when some siblings may fall outside their jurisdiction's legal definition.

Challenges to Placing Siblings Together

Placing siblings in the same home should always be the priority. There may be situations, however, where placing siblings together is not advisable due to clinical considerations arising from the trauma the children have experienced. If there is concern about placing the siblings together, caseworkers should conduct an assessment of the sibling relationship and consult with the children's therapists and previous foster parents to determine if placing the siblings in separate homes is warranted. In the event that one of the siblings poses a risk to the other due to physical, sexual, and/or verbal abuse, the caseworker should determine if the risks can be managed if the siblings are placed in the same home. If so, the worker can put a plan in place to ensure the safety of the siblings. The entire child welfare team, including the foster parents, should be made aware of this plan.

There are sometimes logistical barriers that make it difficult to place siblings together. Although the following demographic and situational factors present challenges for agencies to placing siblings together, they should not be used by caseworkers as reasons *why* siblings should be placed apart (Wojciak, McWey, & Waid, 2018; Wojciak & Hough, 2018):

- Large sibling group size
- Differences in the needs of siblings
- Entrance into foster care at different times
- Lack of foster homes that can accommodate a sibling group

Other difficulties that could arise include caseworkers not being able to determine sibling connections or find siblings if they have different last names, live in a different jurisdiction, or are otherwise unknown to the agency. Another potential obstacle in some jurisdictions is that a termination of parental rights could also end the legal relationship between siblings, which would make the Fostering Connections Act requirement to place siblings together when possible irrelevant in those cases (White & Jernstrom, 2014).

If siblings have to be placed in different homes, it is essential that a visitation plan be put in place to ensure consistent contact between the siblings. Potential barriers to sibling visits while in foster care including long distances; high caseloads, which can prevent caseworkers from having enough time to coordinate and supervise visits; foster parent resistance; youth resistance; adoption of one or more siblings; and other resource issues (e.g., lacking funds to reimburse foster parents for mileage, visitation rooms) (Church & Moe, 2015; Joyce, 2009).

It is essential that child welfare agencies plan for these obstacles in advance. They should routinely review their policies and practices to find ways to mitigate any barriers to placing siblings together and ensuring consistent contact between siblings who are separated. Agencies may be able to adjust their resource family recruitment and retention methods, as well as their data-collection efforts, to be better situated to have a set of families willing and able to accommodate sibling groups of various sizes and needs.

Practices to Maintain Sibling Connections

Given the importance of sibling relationships and the positive outcomes they can generate, it is crucial for child welfare professionals to place siblings together or, if that is not possible, seek ways for them to remain connected while they are in foster care, postpermanency, or after they have aged out of care. Beginning at intake and continuing throughout a case, workers should determine and assess sibling relationships from the perspective of each child (as age appropriate) to help create strategies to place siblings together. The assessment should also include information from collateral sources, such as relatives, caregivers, and teachers (Waid, 2018). During this process, caseworkers should seek information about who the child considers to be a sibling—including those who are not included in your jurisdiction's legal definition of siblings and those who may not currently be living with the child. They should also ask the child about the actual and desired frequency of contact with each sibling.

The following are practices that can help caseworkers and agencies achieve both of those goals:

- Providing training for caseworkers and caregivers on the importance of preserving sibling connections—including with those siblings who have achieved permanence, aged out of care, were informally placed with relatives, or were not removed from the home—and the impact of sibling loss on children
- Having a system in place to track the location and status of all siblings, including those currently in separate placements, have achieved permanence, aged out of care, were informally placed with relatives, or were not removed from the home
- Assigning all siblings to the same caseworker, regardless of when they enter care
- Discussing sibling issues at regular intervals with all relevant individuals (e.g., children, birth families, resource families) throughout cases and incorporating sibling connections into postpermanency plans
- Including children and youth, as well as caregivers, in discussions and case planning regarding siblings

Additionally, there are programs designed to enhance the relationships of siblings in foster care, both for siblings placed together and those placed apart. For example, Supporting Siblings in Foster Care (SIBS-FC) is a 12-session program that provides sibling pairs with opportunities to learn and practice social skills, emotional regulation, problem solving, and other skills. In a randomized clinical trial, siblings participating in SIBS-FC had significant improvements in relationship quality (Kothari et al., 2017). Caseworkers should determine if similar programs are available in their communities and if children in their caseload would benefit from them.

The remainder of this section addresses strategies for placing siblings together and helping them maintain a relationship when coplacement is not possible.

Strategies That Support Placing Siblings Together

Agency practices, along with the individual circumstances of each sibling group and the availability of suitable placements, will affect whether siblings are placed together. The following are practice strategies designed to recruit and support families who can care for sibling groups (National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, 2017; Silverstein & Smith, 2009):

- Help families assess their capacity to care for a sibling group so they can be better prepared.
- Provide opportunities for foster and adoptive families who have cared for sibling groups to speak with families considering caring for sibling groups, either as a group or individually as a peer partner.
- Recruit families specifically to care for sibling groups through community outreach, the media, special events, faith-based organizations, photolistings, and websites.
- Have contracts with private agencies to offer a specialized foster care program designed specifically for sibling groups. For an example of this type of program, you can read about Neighbor to Family, which has several locations throughout the United States, at <http://neighbortofamily.org/>.
- 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.
- Ensure families who care for sibling groups receive information and access to sufficient resources (e.g., family support groups, sibling camps, individual and family therapeutic services, respite care).
- Designate certain foster home resources for large sibling groups and offer incentives to hold them open for these placements.
- If siblings must be separated in an emergency placement, review the case within the first week to plan for how they can be placed with the same family.

Sibling Placement Decision Scenarios

Despite supportive policies or a caseworker's best efforts, several 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:

- An infant may come into care and be placed in a foster home before workers have determined that the infant has siblings already in foster care or in adoptive homes. The foster parents of the infant may then argue against the removal of the infant from their home. To avoid this dilemma, agencies should establish whether any child coming into care has siblings already in placement or who have achieved permanency. 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 an untenable position—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 sibling group placement could disrupt 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. An 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.

Strategies for Preserving Ties When Siblings Are Separated

When siblings cannot be placed together, facilitating regular contact is critical to maintaining their relationships. Caregivers play a crucial gatekeeping role in regulating contact between siblings, particularly after adoption or guardianship, and it is important for caseworkers to address any caregiver concerns and promote the benefits of sibling contact. Sometimes supporting and sustaining sibling visits require clinical interventions, including both sibling therapy and clinically supervised visits, to address dysfunctional patterns that have developed in their relationships.

The following are examples of practices that can help maintain or strengthen relationships among separated siblings:

- **Place siblings 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 them nearby.** Placing siblings in the same neighborhood or school district makes it easier for them to see each other regularly.
- **Ensure regular visits occur.** Frequent visits help to preserve sibling bonds. Children's Bureau guidance on the Fostering Connections Act (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/pi1011>) designates that these visits should occur at least monthly and allows agencies to set standards for more frequent contact. Some communities may have local organizations

that can support sibling visits. For example, Project Visitation in Hawaii helps arrange monthly visits and special events for separated siblings.

- **Arrange other forms of contact.** If regular in-person meetings may not be possible or are not sufficient to meet the needs or desires of the siblings, workers should assist them in maintaining frequent contact through letters, email, social media, cards, and phone calls. Caseworkers should ensure siblings have full contact information for each other and have access to the proper technology, if needed. Although these alternative forms of communication are beneficial and can provide additional contact between in-person visits, they should not serve as a replacement for regular in-person contact, which may need to be arranged by the caseworker or caregivers.
- **Involve families in planning.** Caseworkers should partner with the adults in the siblings' families (e.g., birth, foster, adoptive, guardianship) to develop a plan for ongoing contact. This discussion should include working through any barriers to visits and how the plan will be reviewed and revised as needed.
- **Plan joint outings or camp experiences.** Siblings may be able to spend time together in a joint activity or at summer or weekend camps, including camps specifically designed for siblings in foster care (e.g., Camp to Belong [<http://camptobelong.org/>]).
- **Arrange for joint respite care.** Families caring for separated 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.** Children may experience a wide range of emotions that are caused or affected by their separation from their siblings as well as the maltreatment they experienced and their removal from home. For example, children may feel guilty if they have been removed from an abusive home while other siblings were left behind or born later. Caseworkers and other adults in the children's lives can help them express and work through these feelings. If siblings are in therapy, it may be helpful for them to see the same therapist, with appointments perhaps scheduled jointly or back to back.

Postadoption Contact

Sibling relationships should still be facilitated and encouraged in cases when they are in separate homes due to adoption or guardianship. The earlier these relationships begin, the more children can use these opportunities to work through adoption identity and other issues that may arise and the sooner they can develop truly meaningful relationships with siblings. Caseworkers should ensure prospective and current adoptive parents understand the importance of sibling contact, encourage it to be included in any postadoption contact agreements, and seek ways the agency can support this contact.

Many States have adoption registries that can help adult siblings separated by foster care or adoption reestablish contact later in life. The caseworker should ensure that all pertinent information on each sibling is entered in the registry at the time of each child's adoption.

For more information, including State statutes on postadoption contact agreements, visit Information Gateway's Open Adoption and Contact With Birth Families in Adoption web section at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adoptive/before-adoption/openness/>.

Social Media and Child Welfare

Facebook and other social media make it much easier for siblings to both find and communicate with one another, regardless of the adults' feelings or concerns. Caseworkers can work with both children and their families to explore expectations regarding social media and ensure that children know how to safely use it. For more information about the use of social media in child welfare, including tip sheets for youth in foster care and caseworkers, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/workforce/tools/socialmedia/>.

Conclusion

Maintaining and strengthening sibling bonds is a key component to child well-being and permanency outcomes. It is also central to meeting the requirements of the Fostering Connections Act. Child welfare professionals can champion these efforts by developing their knowledge about the importance of sibling connections and relevant strategies to support them as well as encouraging birth, foster, and adoptive families to take steps to promote these connections.

Additional Resources

The following Child Welfare Information Gateway web sections offer additional resources about sibling connections in foster care and adoption:

- Considering Siblings in Permanency Planning <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/planning/siblings/>
- Sibling Groups <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adoptive/who-are-the-children-waiting-for-families/sibling-groups/>

Other helpful resources for child welfare professionals include the following:

- *Working With Siblings in Foster Care: A Web-Based NCCWE Toolkit* (National Center for Child Welfare Excellence) <http://www.nccwe.org/toolkits/siblings/index.html>
- *Organizational Self Study on Parent-Child and Sibling Visits* (National Resource Center on Permanency and Family Connections) <http://centerforchildwelfare.org/kb/bpam/OrganizationalSelfStudyonVisiting2011.pdf>
- *Practice Principles for the Recruitment and Retention of Kinship, Foster, and Adoptive Families for Siblings* (National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment) http://adoptuskids.org/_assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/practice-principles-and-seven-step-process-for-sibling-recruitment.pdf
- *Ten Myths and Realities of Sibling Adoption* (National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment) https://www.adoptuskids.org/_assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/ten-myths-and-realities-of-sibling-adoptions.pdf
- "Positive Youth Development for Siblings in Foster Care" (webinar) (Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare) <https://cascw.umn.edu/portfolio-items/pyd/>
- "Siblings in Foster Care: Assessment Considerations for Child Welfare Professionals" (webinar) (Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare) <https://cascw.umn.edu/portfolio-items/siblings-in-foster-care-assessment-considerations-for-child-welfare-professionals-5-hr/>

Some States may have a sibling bill of rights that can guide your approach to sibling visitation and placement and that may be helpful to share with clients. The following are examples:

- Connecticut: <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DCF/YAB/pdf/SiblingBillOfRightsFINALpdf.pdf?la=en>
- Minnesota: https://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/county_access/documents/pub/dhs-305844.pdf
- Oregon: <https://www.oregon.gov/DHS/ABOUTDHS/Documents/CF-0262-Posters.pdf>

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