



PERMANENCY

SIBLINGS AND FOSTER CARE PLACEMENT



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WHY IT MATTERS

Siblings can be a consistent source of comfort, support, and strength, and, in many cases, are the longest-lasting relationships we will ever experience. To a child in foster care, a sibling may be the only continuity between past and present homes, and may be a dependable comfort when adults in the child's life are unreliable. Children who have experienced traumas may rely on one another for support and understanding of their shared history and thus be especially emotionally attached.^{1,2} Yet, when it comes to out-of-home placement for children, efforts focus on building and preserving relationships between children and their biological and foster parents, often to the detriment of relationships with siblings. It is estimated that at least two-thirds of children in foster care have a sibling.³ Nevertheless, more than 50% of siblings in foster care are separated.

Evidence suggests that siblings placed in the same home are more likely to experience positive well-being outcomes, such as fewer emotional and behavioral problems. Siblings can be a source of strength and hope for one another, and can be instrumental in developing resiliency.

Except in cases when one sibling is preventing another sibling from thriving, joint placement is considered best practice in child welfare. Research has repeatedly found that most youth believe being separated from their siblings is an additional burden and loss during what is

often the most difficult time of their lives.^{4,5}

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The *Foster Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008* mandates that "reasonable efforts" be made to keep siblings together, but specifics are left to the interpretation of the States.⁶ Sibling

placement policies exist in over 50% of States, and visitation statutes in even more, but these statutes vary widely in their scope and impact.⁷ Fewer States require visitation if the siblings are not placed together. Small sibling groups and those that are placed with a relative are more likely to be placed together, but it can be difficult to find placements for larger groups of siblings, particularly when resources are tight.⁸ Other risk factors for sibling separation include older age, greater differences in age, special needs of one or multiple siblings, and entering care at different times.^{9,10}

If given the opportunity, volunteers should advocate for joint placement when it is in the best interest of a sibling group; however, in circumstances when siblings must be placed separately, it is important to recognize that an advocate can be instrumental in ensuring that siblings continue to have access to one-another. Remember that the child may be your greatest resource in understanding the importance and closeness of a particular sibling bond.

ADVOCATES IN ACTION

Experts estimate that 23% to 75% of foster care children with siblings are placed separately at any given time, and that separation is more likely in traditional family foster care than in kinship care.¹¹ Separation from a sibling can be an additional loss that brings its own stress, grief, and fear during an already turbulent time in a child's life.

ACTIONS

- **Compile information about your State legislature's policy on this topic.** Know whether your State has a statutory protection for sibling relationships and whether there are requirements for visitation when siblings are not placed together. Understand the technicalities of how your State defines a sibling relationship.
- **Develop resources for foster parents of sibling groups.** When foster parents are willing to be a placement for sibling groups, it becomes imperative that every support possible be provided for that family.

- **Be aware that there are many types of siblings, and only the child knows the value of each relationship.** Children can form a deep and intimate bond and a shared history, regardless of whether they are full-, step-, half-, or non-biological siblings¹². Be sure to recognize and respect cultural and circumstantial differences in defining sibling relationships.

advocate for preserving the relationships that are most critical to the well-being of the child. Strategies include questions about which sibling a child relies on the most when that child is afraid, which sibling the child enjoys playing with the most, and which siblings spend the most time together.

In the event that siblings can't stay together in foster care even when it is in their best interest, focus on ensuring they have as much contact as possible.

- **Thoroughly assess a child's feelings towards his or her siblings when you first meet the child.** Seek to understand the child's perspective on bonds with other children in the household by asking questions about the length of time that they've lived together, and the quality of the relationship. Recognize that some siblings rely on one another for emotional support, while other sibling relationships may have a negative impact on a child's well-being.
- **Develop strategies for assessing sibling bonds when a sibling group is particularly large.** Given that large sibling groups are less likely to stay together during foster care, it is important to understand the nuances of each sibling bond and
- **Advocate for visitation and look for programs in your area that support sibling contact.** In the event that siblings can't stay together in foster care even when it is in their best interest, focus on ensuring they have as much contact as possible. Talk with the caseworker about arranging phone calls, video calls, and in-person meetings as frequently as possible. Look for sibling meet-up opportunities in your area. For example, Sibling Connections is a non-profit in Massachusetts that organizes monthly meet-up groups for siblings separated by foster care. Run predominantly by volunteers, the organization coordinates events like pumpkin patch visits or afternoons at the roller rink, so sibling groups can spend the day together.

BRIGHT SPOT

CAMP TO BELONG MULTIPLE LOCATIONS, UNITED STATES

Camp to Belong is a national non-profit with the goal of reuniting siblings separated by foster care through a week-long summer camp for siblings. Siblings spend the week together engaging in activities that encourage healthy, strong connections. The camp entails challenging and exciting outdoor activities like horseback riding and canoeing, but what is arguably more significant is the time spent sharing meals, exchanging stories, and relaxing together in a safe environment. Moreover, there is no judgement or stigma about being in foster care, as all kids in the camp are experiencing it.

There are currently camps in over 10 States (plus Australia), with new locations being added regularly. If there is not a camp in your area, check to see if a similar program exists, or start one yourself! *Camp to Belong* is continually looking for volunteers to start a camp in a new State, with the goal of eventually having at least one camp in every State.

To learn more: <http://camptobelong.org/>

SELECTED RESOURCES

Below are tools and resources for supporting siblings in foster care.

Name	Description
<p><u>Neighbor to Family Sibling Foster Care Model</u></p>	<p>The <i>Neighbor to Family Sibling Foster Care Model</i> is a unique child-centered, family-focused foster care model designed to keep sibling groups, including large sibling groups, together in stable foster care placements while working intensively on reunification or permanency plans that keep the siblings together. Neighbor To Neighbor began in 1994 serving targeted communities in Chicago where the majority of children came into foster care. The program uses a community-based, team-oriented approach, including foster caregivers and birth parents as part of the treatment team. Trained and supported foster caregivers are key to the model's success.</p> <p>Foster families, birth families, and children receive comprehensive and intensive services including individualized case management, advocacy, and clinical services on a weekly basis. The program was incorporated in 2000 with geographic presence beyond Illinois.</p> <p>The goals of the <i>Neighbor to Family Sibling Foster Care Model</i> are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Siblings referred to <i>Neighbor to Family</i> will be placed together in one foster home. • Neighbor to Family caregivers will receive 90 hours initial training and then 50+ hours annually. • Siblings will stay in their original placement until discharged from care. • Siblings will be returned home, be in an alternate permanent placement, or be in the process of being adopted in less than 12 months after placement.
<p><u>Keep Siblings Together: Past, Present, and Future</u></p>	<p>For more on the legal angle of keeping siblings together, this informational brief provides information about how research has and has not been translated to effective policies in the US. The publication describes California's progressive sibling rights policies to demonstrate the kinds of legal protections that could be advocated for around the country.</p>
<p><u>Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption</u></p>	<p><i>Child Welfare Gateway's</i> bulletin on this topic details the legal framework for joint placement of siblings, as well as ideas for maintaining relationships when siblings are placed separately.</p>

ENDNOTES

- 1 Washington, K. (2007). *Research Review: Sibling placement in foster care: a review of the evidence*, Child and Family Social Work. DOI: 10.1111/j.1365-2206.2006.00467.x
- 2 McCormick, A. (2010). *Siblings in Foster Care: An Overview of Research, Policy, and Practice*, Journal of Public Child Welfare, vol. 4. DOI: 10.1080/15548731003799662.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 NC Division of Social Services and the NC Family and Children's Resource Program (2009). *Kids' Pages: Words, Pictures, and Activities by and for Children in Foster Care*, Fostering Perspectives, vol. 14, no.1. http://fosteringperspectives.org/fpv14n1/kids_pages_v14n1.htm
- 5 Washington, K. (2007).
- 6 Gustavsson, N.S, MacEachron, A.E. (2010). *Sibling connections and reasonable efforts in public child welfare*, Families in Society, vol. 91, no. 1. DOI: 10.1606/1044-3894.3956.
- 7 McCormick, A. (2010)
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Hegar, R.L. (2005). *Sibling placement in foster care and adoption: An overview of international research*, Children and Youth Services Review. DOI: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2004.12.018
- 10 Wulczyn, F, Zimmerman, E. (2005). *Sibling placements in longitudinal perspective*, Children and Youth Services Review. DOI: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2004.12.017.
- 11 Leathers, S. J. (2005). *Separation from siblings: Associations with placement adaptation and outcomes among adolescents in long-term foster care*, Children and Youth Services Review.
- 12 Washington, K. (2007).