



**National Resource Center for
Permanency and Family Connections**
Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College



*A Service of the Children's Bureau
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INFORMATION PACKET

Sibling Placement:

The Importance of the Sibling

Relationship for

Children in Foster Care

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Sibling Placement for Children in Foster Care

Sibling relationships are essential to children, and the maintenance of sibling ties “can nurture a sense of stability and continuity in the lives of foster youth” (Herrick & Piccus, 2005, 851). Oftentimes, “children who are abused or neglected by their caregivers have especially strong ties to one another” (Washington, 2007, 426) and separating them may cause additional trauma. Moreover, the emotional support of the sibling bond can provide “a sense of safety” (Shlonsky, Bellamy, Elkins, & Ashare, 2005, 698) as children enter foster care.

In addition, “children in care are likely to form sibling-like relationships with non-related children in their placements...[such as] other foster children...[or] related children in kinship placements” (Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005, 839). Thus, many children who view themselves as siblings are not biologically related. As a result, professionals must “seek the views of children” (Hindle, 2000, 623) in making an accurate assessment of sibling relationships.

Furthermore, there are many factors that determine the placement of siblings in foster care. Some of the positive predictors of joint sibling placement are when siblings are close in age, from a smaller group, of the same sex, living in kinship care or when they enter at the same time (Shlonsky, Webster, & Needell, 2003). In contrast, the negative predictors include larger sibling groups who are not close in age, older children, those in group homes and siblings who do not enter simultaneously (Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005). In addition, there are circumstances when professionals determine that siblings should not be placed together, such as “situations where there are safety concerns such as sibling abuse or extreme trauma that is triggered by sibling contact” (Herrick & Piccus, 2005, 847).

It is essential that we recognize the importance of the sibling relationship and that “former foster children...live on as adults. [They] make their way through the world with whatever family they have left...[and] siblings may well turn out to be the most important family members in the lives of these young people (Shlonsky et al., 2003, 51).

It is not only best practice to place siblings together in foster care, but the issue has gained increased attention in child welfare legislation following enactment of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. Passed on October 7, 2008, the Act was “the first piece of federal legislation specifically addressing the problem of keeping siblings together” (McCormick, 2010, 204). The Act contains a provision on sibling placement, which is described in greater detail in the “Policies and Legislation” section of this information packet.

Facts and Statistics

- “The National Adoption Information Clearinghouse estimates that 65-85% of U.S. foster children come from siblings groups, and studies of siblings in the child welfare system suggest that 60% to 73% of U.S. foster children have siblings who also enter foster care” (Hegar, 2005, 718).
- “Siblings who entered the foster care system within 30 days of each other had almost 4 times the odds of residing together than children who entered care at different times” (Shlonsky et al., 2003, 41).
- “White sibling pairs were far less likely to be together in placement than were black, Hispanic, or mixed-race children. Twenty percent of white sibling pairs were placed together, compared to 58% African American, 62% Hispanic and 67% mixed-race pairs” (Staff & Fein, 1992, 264).
- “Studies show that larger sibling groups are more likely than smaller groups to be placed separately, not only because fewer foster homes are willing to accept large groups of children, but also because large sibling groups are less likely to enter foster care at the same time” (Washington, 2007, 431).
- “Children in sibling groups where the age span between the oldest and youngest member exceeded 4 years had about half the odds of being placed all together than children with an age span between oldest and youngest of 4 years or less” (Shlonsky et al., 2003, 42).
- “Children in group care had twice the odds of being separated, whereas children with siblings in related care were much less likely to be separated” (Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005, 761).
- “Preschoolers placed with siblings had a higher rate of psychological problems prior to placement, but despite this history, showed significantly fewer emotional and behavioral problems in placement than those separated from their siblings” (Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005, 837).

Best Practice Tips and Model Programs

- **Practice Principles for the Recruitment and Retention of Kinship, Foster, and Adoptive Families for Siblings**, developed by the National Resource Center for Recruitment and Retention of Foster and Adoptive Parents (NRCRRFAP) at AdoptUSKids, seeks to assist agencies in creating a clear plan in the recruitment and retention of families for sibling groups. This resource addresses the importance of keeping sibling together, provides ten basic principles to frame an agency's recruitment and retention practices relating to siblings, and uses a seven-step chart to demonstrate considerations at every step from targeted recruitment through placement. <http://www.adoptuskids.org/assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/practice-principles-and-seven-step-process-for-sibling-recruitment.pdf#snl>
- **Camp To Belong** is an international non-profit organization dedicated to reuniting siblings placed in separate foster homes and other out-of-home care for events of fun, emotional empowerment, and sibling connections. Founded in Las Vegas in the summer of 1995 by Lynn Price, Camp To Belong Summer Camp was created to offer siblings in foster care and other out of home care the opportunity to create lifetime memories. www.camptobelong.org
- **Camp Connect San Diego** is a partnership program between the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency and Promises2Kids, a non-profit organization offering a wide variety of resources and programs focused on fighting child abuse and neglect. Camp Connect brings together siblings separated in foster care, giving them the opportunity to reconnect and strengthen family ties. <http://promises2kids.org/camp-connect>
- **Neighbor to Family** is a foster placement program for sibling groups, in addition to serving children with special needs and older foster children who are preparing to transition to independent living. The program uses a family-centered approach to provide abused and neglected children and their parents quality foster care services. <http://www.neighbortofamily.org/index.cfm>
- **Project Visitation** was developed in 2001 to strengthen the bonds of siblings separated in foster care by coordinating visits that give siblings a chance to connect to one another. Project Visitation, created by the State of Hawaii First Circuit Family Court and the Department of Human Services, is supported by volunteers who bring siblings together for monthly visits and regular family events. <http://familyprogramshawaii.org/programs/project-visitation/>

Policies and Legislation

- ***Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (H.R. 6893/P.L. 110-351)***

This Act, passed in 2008, included a provision on sibling placement that declared states must make:

reasonable efforts [...] to place siblings removed from their home in the same foster care, kinship guardianship, or adoptive placement, unless the State documents that such a joint placement would be contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings; and in the case of siblings removed from their home who are not so jointly placed, to provide for frequent visitation or other ongoing interaction between the siblings, unless that State documents that frequent visitation or other ongoing interaction would be contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings. (Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, 2008, Title II, Section 206)

- **Individual State Policies and Legislation**

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (n.d.), some states had already begun the process of enacting policies and legislation regarding sibling placement and visitation prior to the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, including: Maryland (2005), New Hampshire (2006), Arizona (2007), Oregon (2007), Colorado (2009), and Washington (2009). Beginning in 1998, “Minnesota law required the commissioner or agency to make every effort to place siblings together for adoption” and since 1999, “has required siblings be placed together for foster care and adoption at the earliest possible time unless it is determined not to be in the best interest of a sibling or unless it is not possible after appropriate efforts by the responsible social services agency” (M. Sherlock, personal communication, May 30, 2012).

In 2011, Arkansas, Missouri, and Nebraska enacted policies and legislation relating to the mandatory sibling placement provision of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. States including Arizona, California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania had done so prior in 2010 (National Conference of State Legislatures, n.d.). During 2009, such enactments or changes to existing sibling placement policies occurred in Minnesota, with the addition of “reasonable efforts” language (M. Sherlock, personal communication, May 30, 2012), North Dakota, Oklahoma, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin (National Conference of State Legislatures, n.d.).

By enacting the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, a baseline was established by the federal government “requiring states to make reasonable efforts to keep siblings together,” but

considerable variation exists across states about how sibling connections are to be maintained (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2010, 42). For a complete detailed list of State legislative enactments during 2009-2011 relating to the provision on sibling placement, visit The National Conference of State Legislatures at: <http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/human-services/fostering-connections-act-sibling-placement.aspx>.

National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections (NRCPFC) Resources

- **NRCPFC Website**

The NRCPFC website features a variety of resources pertaining to siblings and child welfare. Visit the Fostering Connections Siblings webpage (http://www.nrcpfc.org/fostering_connections/siblings.html) and the Siblings Hot Topic webpage (http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/siblings.html).

- **NRCPFC Sibling Practice Curriculum**

The overall training objectives of this curriculum are to: enhance understanding of issues concerning siblings in out-of-home care; expand knowledge and skills in making appropriate placement decisions for sibling groups; enhance knowledge and skills in the recruitment and retention of resource families willing and able to parent sibling groups; enhance ability to present appropriate information to the court to support sibling groups; and increase knowledge of policy and legislation affecting sibling placements in participants' jurisdictions.

http://www.nrcpfc.org/is/training_curricula.html

- **Organizational Self Study on Parent-Child and Sibling Visits**

NRCPFC created this self study assessment tool to assist agencies with reviewing the core principles of parent-child and sibling visiting. The tool is designed to review overall agency readiness, assess administrative policies, and identify strengths and challenges in parent-child and sibling visiting practice. This assessment tool can aid you in shaping your technical assistance needs. (Last updated: May 2011)

<http://www.nrcpfc.org/downloads/OrganizationalSelfStudyonVisiting.doc>

- **“Siblings: Critical Life-Long Connections” Teleconference**

Listen to the audio files and download handouts from this teleconference on siblings in out-of-home care, hosted jointly by NRCPFC and the Child Welfare League of America for state foster care and adoption managers. (2006)

<http://www.nrcpfc.org/teleconferences/05-10-06.html>

- **State Strategies to Support Joint Sibling Placement**

NRCPFC surveyed States about specific strategies they have used to maximize the placement of siblings together when they enter out-of-home care. Responses provided by Alabama, Louisiana, New Jersey, New York, and North Dakota were compiled in this document. (Last updated: February 2011)

http://www.nrcpfc.org/fostering_connections/download/Strategies%20to%20Support%20Joint%20Sibling%20Placement.pdf

Additional Websites and Resources

- **Ten Myths and Realities of Sibling Adoptions**

This resource developed by the NRCRRCFAP at AdoptUsKids provides real facts and statistics, and addresses misconceptions agencies may hold towards siblings and adoption. It includes a section on the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 in regards to siblings and provides guidance to title IV-E agencies on sibling placements.

<http://www.adoptuskids.org/assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/ten-myths-and-realities-of-sibling-adoptions.pdf#snl>

- **Youth In Progress: Sibling Placement and Visitation & “A Guide for Maintaining Sibling Connections”**

Youth In Progress involves youth leaders, mentors, alumni, the Adolescent Services Resource Network (ASRN), NYS Office of Children & Family Services (OCFS) regional office liaisons, and OCFS Central Office staff, with the mission of enhancing and advancing the lives of youth in care. Their booklet, entitled *Need to Know Series: Sibling Placement and Visitation*, provides information specifically for youth in care in New York

(<http://www.youthinprogress.org/series/Sibling%20Placement%20Series%20Booklet.pdf>). While this publication

is for youth in care in New York, it serves as a sample of the type of resource that can be provided to youth. The

Youth In Progress website also offers a video exploring the first-hand experiences of youth in care with siblings,

entitled “A Guide for Maintaining Sibling Connections,” which can be found on their homepage in the side bar

under *Our Videos*. <http://www.youthinprogress.org/>

- **Youth Leadership Advisory Team Position Paper**

The Youth Leadership Advisory Team is comprised of Maine youth in state custody, their guardians, caseworkers, and other important adults in their lives. Their position paper, “Siblings in Foster Care and Adoption,” includes discussion of sibling placements and considerations for placement decisions; the purpose and decisions regarding sibling visitation, contact, and knowledge of one another; and adoption considerations.

<http://www.ylat.org/results/Position%20Paper-%20Siblings.pdf>

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