



National Resource Center for
Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning
at the Hunter College School of Social Work

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 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).

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

- **Camp to Belong**

Camp To Belong is a national 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 connection. 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, downloaded on 2/29/08).

- **Neighbor to Neighbor**

Developed in 1994, the Hull House Association program works to keep large sibling groups together in stable foster placements. They believe that brothers and sisters should have every opportunity to stay together, and families should be reunified whenever possible. Intensive services are provided to birth and foster parents in order to achieve this family reunification (www.hullhouse.org, downloaded on 3/11/08).

- **National Leadership Symposium on Siblings in Out-of-Home Care**

The symposium brought together alumni of foster care, resource families, researchers, practitioners, advocates, and policymakers to address sibling issues from a variety of perspectives. The symposium was to be a first step in a continuing effort to develop a clearer understanding of the issues, make recommendations for public policy changes and lead a public will-building campaign to improve outcomes for siblings in out-of-home care

(www.casey.org, downloaded on 3/11/08).

- **Project Visitation**

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 is supported by volunteers who bring siblings together for monthly visits and regular family events (www.ffphawaii.org, downloaded on 3/20/08).

Policies and Legislation

- ***California State Assembly Bills (AB 740 and AB 1987)***

In 2000, these bills “were passed requiring child welfare practitioners to preserve sibling relationships...and make reasonable efforts to place siblings together, reconfigure family reunification timelines when siblings are involved, and promote more frequent visitation among siblings not placed together (Shlonsky et al, 2003, 30-31).

- ***California Welfare and Institutions Code (Section 366 and 16002)***

This legislation states, “once children are removed from their home, as a group or individually, the siblings will be placed in foster care together, unless...[it] is not in the best interest of one or more siblings” (Shlonsky et al, 2005, 702).

- ***Child Welfare League of America Standards of Excellence for Adoption Services***

Standard 3.7 states, “siblings should be placed together in out-of-home care and adoption unless the serious, specific needs of one or more of the siblings justifies separation” (Child Welfare League of America, as cited in Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2006, 7).

- ***Individual State Policies***

New York: Law requires “the state to include a sibling visitation plan in the permanency petition, but the state is not required to aid in the visitation process” (Kernan, 4).

Illinois: State legislation “requires bimonthly visits among separated siblings...and sibling visitation plan[s] that detail how long visits will last, how often they will be, and where they will be” (Kernan, 4).

Websites and Resources

- **Camp To Belong**

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

- **Minnesota Child Protection and Child Welfare Supervision**

Minnesota's Child Protection and Child Welfare Supervision Website includes a description of a Program Improvement Plan (PIP) that will positively effect placement and visits with siblings in foster care. Items #12 and #13 under the PIP Tips explain the provisions in further detail.

http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/idcplg?IdcService=GET_DYNAMIC_CONVERSION&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased&Redirected=true&dDocName=id_028205

- **Neighbor to Family**

The Neighbor to Family Website includes a video about their organization that may be found under the *Keeping Siblings Together* headline. Former foster children and agency employees speak about the organization's mission and how they work to keep siblings together.

www.neighbortofamily.org

- **Youth Leadership Advisory Team**

YLAT is comprised of Maine youth in state custody, their guardians, caseworkers, and other important adults in their lives. They created a *Sibling Placement and Visitation Policy* written by youth in foster care. The policy includes the purpose for sibling placement, consideration for when siblings should not be placed together and information in regards to sibling visitation and contact for siblings who have been separated.

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

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