Sibling Issues in
Foster Care and Adoption

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Child welfare professionals can make a critical contribution to the well-being of children who enter care by preserving their connections with their brothers and sisters. Approximately two-thirds of children in foster care in the United States have a sibling also in care. For a variety of reasons, many of these siblings are not placed together initially or become separated over time (Webster, Shlonsky, Shaw, & Brookhart, 2005; Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005). Foster youth describe this experience as "an extra punishment, a separate loss, and another pain that is not needed" (YLAT, 2002).

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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 challenging, especially when children have lived in more than one family. Children's definitions of their siblings often differ from those of caseworkers or official legislative definitions. Children are less formal than adults in their view of who is a brother or sister. Research indicates that biological relatedness was not associated with young children's perceptions of closeness to siblings; being a full, half, or step-sibling did not influence their perception of closeness (Sturgess, Dunn, & Davies, 2001). Children in foster care may live with and develop ties to 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

- Adopted children in the same household, not biologically related

- Children born into the family and their foster/adopted 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

- Individuals conceived from the same sperm or egg donor

While laws and policies may have restrictive definitions of siblings that typically require a biological parent in common, child- and family-centered practice respects cultural values and recognizes 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.

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. It was not until the mid-1990s that State legislatures and courts initiated regulations regarding sibling placement and visitation, and in 2004 the Child and Family Services Reviews began to consider efforts to place siblings together. By 2005, sibling placement policies (28 States) and visitation statutes (32 States) had been established in over half the States (Patton, 2009).

State sibling statutes vary considerably in their definitions of sibling relationships, in the scope of activities they regulate, and in whether siblings have legal standing to file suit for access to each other. In 1993, California was one of the first States to pass legislation promoting sibling visitation for foster children, and several additional statutes have expanded legal protections of sibling relationships. The California Welfare and Institutions Code, Section 16002, is recognized by many as offering the strongest statutory protections for the needs of siblings in foster care and adoption among existing State statutes. It liberally defines 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 (Patton, 2009; McCormick, 2008; Christian, 2002).

Fostering Connections Act

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 is the first Federal law to address the importance of keeping siblings together. This law requires States to make reasonable efforts to maintain sibling connections in order to receive Federal funding. The provisions of section 206 provide that reasonable efforts shall be made:

(A) 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

(B) 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.

While the Federal Government through the Fostering Connections Act has taken a leadership role in mandating reasonable efforts to maintain sibling relationships, it is up to the States to vigorously support these connections. Between 2009 and 2011, 13 States passed statutes regarding sibling placement and visitation (National Conference on State Legislatures, 2012), and many others already had such statutes. There is often a gap, however, between what is considered best practice or what the law requires and what happens in day-to-day practice. Ultimately, the State courts will help define reasonable efforts by their decisions as to whether the requirement has been met in specific cases (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2010).

Legal scholars assert that there is still a need to fortify statutory protections of siblings' rights to have contact after adoption (Patton, 2009; Mandelbaum, 2011). The Fostering Connections Act sends a clear message that sibling relationships are critically important to preserve, but it is unclear as to whether the reference to "adoptive placement" in the statute refers to the postadoption period as well. Mandelbaum (2011) recognizes the placement of this phrase after the term "kinship guardianship," which clearly is a permanent arrangement and can infer that "adoptive placement" also refers to the child's life in a permanent adoptive home.

Currently, only a minority of States provide a legal foundation for postadoption contact between siblings; seven States – Arkansas, Florida, Illinois (relative adoptions only), Massachusetts, Nevada, Maryland, and South Carolina allow a court to order postadoption contact without the consent of adoptive parents, and another 16 States allow for such a court order with the consent of adoptive parents (Mandelbaum, 2011).

State-by-State information regarding postadoption contact agreements can be found in Child Welfare Information Gateway's *Postadoption Contact Agreements Between Birth and Adoptive Families* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/cooperative.cfm). These laws pertain not just to sibling contact but to contact with any birth family member.

Importance of Siblings

Sibling relationships are emotionally powerful and critically important not only in childhood but over the course of a lifetime. As children, siblings form a child's first peer group, and they typically spend more time with each other than with anyone else. Children learn social skills, particularly in sharing and 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 in 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 child welfare, sibling relationships take on more importance because they can provide the support and nurture that are 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, substance abuse, or loss (Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007; Kittmer, 2005; Sanders, 2004). Adverse circumstances can magnify both the positive and negative qualities of sibling relationships. Some studies have found that the ties between siblings become closer as a result of helping each other through adversity, such a parental divorce (Kunz, 2001).

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). 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.

Since children in foster care experience more losses of significant relationships, siblings are often their only source for continuity of important attachments. For children entering care, being with their brothers and sisters promotes a sense of safety and well-being, and being separated from them can trigger grief and anxiety (Folman, 1998; Herrick & Piccus, 2005, 2009). Therefore, it is especially important to protect these ties that offer support to children removed from their original families.

Benefits of Placing Siblings Together

For children entering care, being with their siblings can enhance their sense of safety and well-being and provide natural, mutual support. This benefit is in contrast to the traumatic consequences of separation, which may include additional loss, grief, and anxiety over their siblings' well-being. Siblings have a shared history, and maintaining their bond provides continuity of identity and belonging. The benefits of keeping brothers and sisters together are most clearly evidenced from the perspectives of youth themselves.

Children's Perspective

It is essential that professionals be able to understand children's experiences from the child's perspective in order to be able to grasp the critical importance of maintaining sibling connections whenever possible. A North Carolina publication for foster and adoptive families sponsored an essay contest for foster children to write, "Why are your siblings important to you?" Below are just a few of their entries (North Carolina Division of Social Services, 2009):

- "My sister is only three years old, but she has a big heart with me in it. Jayden is braver than me—she is not scared of the dark like me. When I was left alone in a big house all I had was my sister to keep me company till someone returned. I love her…" –Joseph, age 7

- "[When they] moved us and placed us all in different homes I felt as if God was punishing me for something. It broke my heart."   –Arlene, age 16

- "The group home that we went to forever changed our relationship. Nothing has been the same. I see them and it feels like I don't even know them at all. I raised my little sister from infancy and I see her now and she's almost a stranger to me… At one point, I couldn't even talk to any of them at all."   –Cierra, age 17

When youth in foster care unite to work toward protecting the rights of children entering out-of-home care, keeping brothers and sisters together is invariably near the top of their list; for example, a New England Youth Coalition joined with the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors in the summer of 2012 to develop a regional Siblings' Bill of Rights ("Regional and Foster Youth," 2012). Youth advocates in States across the country have sponsored similar efforts.

Studies that directly seek the perspective of foster children are relatively rare, but those that have done so consistently underscore the overwhelming importance of protecting sibling relationships (Harrison, 1999; Whiting & Lee, 2003). Folman (1998), who interviewed 90 children (ages 8-14) about their memories of their initial removal, reported that many children did not know they were being separated from siblings until they were dropped off at different houses, nor did they know how to contact each other. In describing their distress at separation, she wrote (p. 25), "All sense of family, of comfort, of familiarity and of belonging was gone and there was no one except strangers."

Not only is the support of siblings helpful in the immediate adjustment to the trauma of placement, but this contact continues to offer support to the child over the course of their time in care and into adulthood. Mary Herrick and Wendy Piccus (2005, 2009) are child welfare professionals who themselves spent considerable time in care. They poignantly described the central themes related to the value of sibling connections for children in foster care, illustrated by their own experiences.

For some siblings in care, their separation or infrequent visiting can cause their relationships to wither, sometimes to the point of permanent estrangement. Maintaining these relationships is important for the future as well as the present. Youth who age out of foster care report the value of sibling connections; for example, a Midwest study of over 600 foster alumni found that youth were most likely to identify a sibling as a family member they felt close to – 59 percent felt very close and 23 percent somewhat close to a sibling (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010). Moreover, a Texas study of adult foster alumni found that those who had greater access to their siblings and reported stronger relationships with them during childhood had higher levels of social support, self-esteem, and income, as well as stronger adult sibling relationships than those who did not (McCormick, 2009).

Research on Outcomes of Placing Sibs Together

Research on sibling placement patterns has confronted methodological challenges and developed more sophisticated research designs; however, there are differences in findings across studies. For a review of the body of research, see McCormick, 2010; Smith, 2009; and Washington, 2007. When significant differences are found between siblings placed in different patterns, they typically favor siblings placed totally or partially with each other over those placed completely separately (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009, 2011; Albert & King, 2008).

Joint sibling placements can increase the likelihood of achieving permanency. Several studies have found that placing siblings in the same foster home is associated with a significantly higher rate of family reunification (Webster, et al., 2005; Albert & King, 2008). Leathers (2005) did not find such an association with reunification but did find that children placed with the same number of siblings consistently throughout foster care had greater chances for adoption or subsidized guardianship than those placed alone. Some studies find that children placed with their siblings also experience more stability and fewer disruptions in care than those who were separated (Albert & King, 2008; Leathers, 2005; Drapeau, Simard, Beaudry, & Charbonneau, 2000; Staff & Fein, 1992).

Conversely, some studies have found that separated siblings in foster care or adoption are at higher risk for negative adjustment outcomes, including running away (Courtney, et al., 2005) and higher levels of behavior problems, evidenced in some studies but not all (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009; Smith, 1998; Boer, Versluis-den Bierman, & Verhulst, 1994). Another study found that girls separated from all of their siblings are at the greatest risk for poor mental health and socialization (Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005). Finally, a recent study based on the National Study of Child and Adolescent Well-Being did not find that separated sibs were reported to have more behavior problems but did find that teachers reported lower academic performance for separated siblings (either partially or totally) than for those placed together (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2011).

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.

Barriers to Placing Siblings Together

Past research indicates that a substantial proportion of children in foster care who had siblings in care were not placed with all of those siblings, but this proportion varied significantly across studies. Two California studies published in the past decade with large samples of 10,000 or more children indicated that somewhere between 23 and 46 percent of siblings were placed with all their siblings in their initial placements, and about two-thirds were placed with at least one sibling (Shlonsky, Webster, & Needell, 2003; Webster, et al., 2005). Also, an analysis of placements of more than 168,000 foster youth with siblings in care in New York City over a 15-year period revealed that initial placement status was a strong determinant of sibling placement over time: 78 percent of those siblings entering care together were placed all together, but those entering care longer than 6 months apart were at the highest risk of being separated (Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005). This study is one of the only ones that followed siblings to see how many placements were still intact 4 years after admission. The authors found that of those initially placed together, 79 percent were still intact 4 years later. Some of those initially separated came together; among sibling groups that were completely separated in their initial placement, 51 percent were intact at the end of 4 years (Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005).

It is possible that the percentage of sibling groups placed together initially has improved since the passage of the Fostering Connections Act. Currently there are no sibling studies sampling children placed after 2008.

Factors Associated With Placing Siblings Apart

Besides entering foster care at different times, a number of other demographic and situational factors are associated with the likelihood that siblings are placed in the same foster home (Albert & King, 2008; Hegar, 2005; Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 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 and those in group care are less likely

- Behavior problems—a sibling with a behavior problem is more likely to be removed

- 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

In many if not most cases of sibling separation, brothers and sisters are separated because the system cannot accommodate the best interests of children rather than for any child-centered reason. For example, Leathers (2005) interviewed caseworkers of adolescents in care who were separated from their siblings, asking for all the reasons and the most important reason. While 19 percent did not know the reason, the most common of all reasons given was "could not find a placement for all" (33 percent).

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 in the past are not necessarily best practice, including the following:

- 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.

Practices for Keeping Siblings Together in Placement

Decisions regarding sibling placement may be more straightforward when siblings come into care at the same time, and the sibling group is small. When the sibling group is large, enters care at very different times, or individual siblings have extraordinary needs, caseworkers face more challenges.

Initial 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. 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. They should talk with children individually and ask age-appropriate questions, such as:

- Which sibling do you enjoy spending time with?

- Which sibling enjoys spending time with you?

- Who will play a game with you?

- Which sibling do you turn to when you are afraid or hurt?

- Which sibling turns to you when he or she is afraid or hurt?

Groza, Maschmeier, Jamison, and Piccola (2003) offer an assessment tool for making decisions regarding the placement of siblings. The factors include 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.

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 practices, along with the individual circumstances of each sibling group, will affect whether or not siblings are placed together. The following are practice strategies designed to address the needs of sibling groups (Silverstein & Smith, 2009):

- 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.

- Provide training for caseworkers, foster, and adoptive parents on the importance of preserving sibling connections and the impact of sibling loss on children.

- 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 (http://www.cebc4cw.org/program/neighbor-to-neighbor/detailed), Neighbor to Family in Florida (http://neighbortofamily.org/), and the Jewish Child Care Association Sibling Boarding Home program in New York. The last program has three apartments staffed by foster parents for large sibling groups of up to seven or eight children, with an assistant cook and child care counselors for relief.

- 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 the sibling group as a whole, as well as of each individual child, and include 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 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.

- Conduct yearly interviews with adoptive parents of separated siblings to assess:

  ○ If visits between and among the siblings are continuing, how often, for how long, and of what quality

  ○ If visits have discontinued, for what reason(s) and what would it take to reestablish connections

When Siblings Cannot Live in the Same Home

Despite supportive policies 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:

- 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 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 untenable 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. 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.

When a Sibling Is Abusive

Research identifies sibling assault as one of the most common forms of victimization in families generally, and more than 50 percent of children and adolescents have acted toward a sibling with severe violence (Kiselica & Morrill-Richards, 2007; Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2009). Whenever there is a concern that one sibling poses a safety risk to another, a thorough assessment needs to occur. Physical aggression within the normal range of sibling relationships needs to be differentiated from physical abuse or victimization of a weaker sibling. 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. 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. If there is significant physical or sexual abuse that does not respond to treatment or if the risk of recurrence is high, the abusing sibling most likely needs to be moved to another placement.

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 conducted in all States found a significant association between visiting with parents and siblings and both permanency and well-being outcomes (USDHHS, 2011).

Ultimately, 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. Caregivers play a crucial gatekeeping role in regulating contact between siblings, particularly after adoption, and sometimes they limit contact with the intent of protecting themselves or the child

from what they view as negative influences or painful experiences (James, Monn, Palinkas, & Leslie, 2008). Sometimes supporting and sustaining sibling visits requires clinical interventions, including both sibling therapy and clinically supervised visits, in order to address dysfunctional patterns that have developed in their relationships. A project called "Sibling Kinnections" (Pavao, St. John, Cannole, Fischer, Maluccio, & Peining, 2007) developed a clinical visiting model to address barriers to visiting such as anxiety or behavioral problems of individual children, miscommunication among their respective foster or adoptive parents, and parental concerns about the effect of visits on specific children.

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. See *Untangling the Web: The Internet's Transformative Impact on Adoption* (Howard, 2012), which looks at both the benefits and the risks of social media for adopted persons and their families (http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/publications/2012_12_UntanglingtheWeb.pdf).

Strategies for Preserving Sibling Ties in Separate Placements

Some promising practices from the field suggest ways to maintain ties 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 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.** Frequent visits help to preserve sibling bonds. The Children's Bureau Guidance on the Fostering Connections Act (http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/resource/pi1011) allows agencies to set standards for the frequency of visits but designates that these should be at least monthly. Some State statutes specify contact twice a month, and at least three States (Alabama, Missouri, and Utah) require weekly visits, although many others do not specify frequency. 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, social media, 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 differences in rules 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 in a joint activity or at summer or weekend camps, including camps specifically for siblings or through short-term outings. 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 while 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 reestablish 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 may have difficulty integrating into the adopted family.

More than a dozen research studies have explored the experiences of birth children in foster families, but less attention has been paid to siblings in adoptive families. Birth children often report positive benefits of sharing their home with foster children but also report a range of difficulties: competing for parents' time and attention; loss of family closeness; difficulties dealing with some foster siblings' behavior problems, including having possessions stolen or fear of physical aggression; a high level of stress in the family; different expectations or discipline between birth and foster children; loss and worry when a foster sibling leaves the family; and others. Studies also show that birth children often do not communicate their feelings and concerns fully to their parents and cope independently or through isolating themselves (Thompson & McPherson, 2011; Younes & Harp, 2007; Hojer, 2007).

Two social workers in Minnesota developed a model for preparing and 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.

- Seek professional help for serious sibling conflicts.

An excellent resource has been developed for adoptive parents to address sibling issues across the adoption life cycle: *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption: Helping Children Navigate Relationships When New Kids Join the Family* (James, 2009).

Resources for Maintaining Sibling Connections

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.

- *The Sibling Practice Curriculum* from the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections (NRCPFC) offers a variety of materials and links to other websites: http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/siblings.html

- The NRCPFC also offers an information packet, *The Importance of the Sibling Relationship for Children in Foster Care* (2012): http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/information_packets/Sibling_Placement.pdf

- *Organizational Self Study on Parent-Child and Sibling Visits* (2011) is an assessment tool to assist agencies in fulfilling the core principles of sibling and parent visitation, listed under "Resources on Sibling Visitation" on the website of the NRCPFC: http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/siblings.html#rsjsp

- The National Resource Center for Recruitment and Retention of Foster and Adoptive Parents at AdoptUSKids offers *Practice Principles for the Recruitment and Retention of Kinship, Foster, and Adoptive Families for Siblings* at: http://adoptuskids.org/_assets/files/NRCRRFAP/resources/practice-principles-and-seven-step-process-for-sibling-recruitment.pdf

- The NRCPFC offers teleconference audiofiles and handouts from "Siblings: Critical Life-Long Connections" held on May 10, 2006: http://www.nrcpfc.org/teleconferences/05-10-06.html

- 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 from the following resources:

○ Herrick, M. A., & Piccus, W. (2005/2009). Sibling connections: The importance of nurturing sibling bonds in the foster care system. *Children and Youth Services Review, 27*(7), 845-861. http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/01907409 (reprinted in *Siblings in Adoption and Foster Care: Traumatic Separations and Honored Connections*)

○ Folman, R. D. (1998). "I was tooken": 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

○ Adoptions Unlimited, Inc. (2007). "Family Connections" (DVD). Chicago: Adoptions Unlimited. May be ordered or viewed online at http://www.nrcadoption.org/videos/family-connections-project/

• *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. Also you may email ReginaKu@msn.com and put "sibling" in the subject box, or call 440.230.1960, ext. 5.

• 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 918.794.7544 or Deborah.Goodman@okdhs.org

• 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 by adult sisters who had been in foster care themselves. This program now exists in at least eight States and in Australia. Some States have developed regular weekend camps specifically for children who are separated in foster care or adoption. http://www.camptobelong.org/

• Sibling Sundays is a Massachusetts program that offers regularly scheduled opportunities to be together for brothers and sisters who do not live together: http://www.siblingconnections.org/our-programs/sibling-sundays-and-saturdays/

• *Keeping Siblings Connected: A White Paper on Siblings in Foster Care and Adoptive Placements in New York State* (2007) offers recommendations for facilitating biweekly visits between siblings. http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/reports/sibling%20white%20paper%20wes.pdf

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