

## Beyond Together or Apart: Planning for, assessing and placing sibling groups

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### Learning Outcomes:

- increased knowledge of what constitutes effective early planning for brothers and sisters in care
- a better understanding of key issues that should be included in sibling assessments and who might helpfully contribute observations
- awareness of tools and techniques that can be used in practice
- knowledge /signposting to key research messages and resources

### Context

Why *Beyond Together or Apart* and what has changed?

In 2008, when an earlier edition of this guide was last published, the timescale for court proceedings was substantially longer. The Family Justice Review (2011) set out that care cases were taking on average over a year, with considerable variation between different areas. In July 2013, revised procedures, (the Public Law Outline) were introduced with the aim of completing care proceedings within 26 weeks. Since then timescales have reduced significantly but remain challenging, most especially for the children involved. Assessments of sibling relationships are now required earlier and the way in which this work is planned merits fresh focus.

In their recent research Monk and Macavarish (2018) highlighted that: *Routine decision making in the Family Courts can have a significant impact on children and young people's sibling relationships. The impact is most profound in care and adoption proceedings in public law, as they can result in siblings being separated with limited or no effective provision for contact.* (Monk, D. and Macvarish, J. (2018) Siblings, Contact and the Law: An Overlooked Relationship, Summary Report. London: Birkbeck. Available at: <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/siblings-contact-and-law-overlooked-relationship> )

Greater scrutiny of adoption plans and complexity of balancing what is right for children e.g. in the Matter of W-C (Children) [2017] EWCA 250:

*'...Guardian's view is that **sibling contact overrides the need for certainty and permanency.** It may be that in ten years' time the question will be answered differently. It is clear that even **over the last few years far more weight is given to sibling contact than it was a not very long time ago.** But it seems to me the weight of judicial thinking, as at the moment, is that **permanency and certainty outweigh the need for sibling contact**'...*

The above was described as: *'a wholly inadequate judgment in terms of its analysis of the issue as between long-term fostering and adoption for D' and that a 'central fault' in the judgment was 'characterising the case as one of 'permanency vs sibling contact' (Macfarlane LJ)*

A recent review of *Beyond Together or Apart* that was republished in the Local Government Lawyer publication noted that:

*This new guidance will be invaluable, and essential reading, for all professionals working in the children law arena. As legal practitioners it is crucial that we keep up to date with the research available to social workers. Not only do we need to understand what guidance they are working with and following, but we need to know, and recognise, when best practice is not being followed. That way, when it is not being followed, practice can be challenged, and in the best interests of the child, promoted before it is too late.*

<https://www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/child-protection/309-children-protection-features/39880-sibling-groups-and-care-proceedings>

Over the past decade our knowledge about sibling relationships and the impact of multiple adversities experienced in childhood has grown though attention and priority continues to be accorded far more readily to adult-child relationships. Many reports - over many years - have exhorted us to listen to the voices and experiences of children and young people. Nowhere is this more needed than in respect of siblings. Children and young people have much to tell us about the importance of brothers and sisters in their lives.

#### **Looked after children population, sibling group size and complexity**

Brothers and sisters have potentially the longest lasting and one of the closest relationships of their lives with each other. These relationships have enormous capacity for shared understanding, care and joy which can help to sustain children and adults through distressing times. Even when brothers and sisters have never lived together the significance of the relationship may be keenly felt during childhood with a sense of 'what might have been' stretching into adult life.

The vast majority of children who are looked after have siblings and typically they come from larger and more complex sibling groups: an average group size of just over four (Kosonen 1999; Jones and Henderson, 2017) compared with community samples of just over two children. Jones and Henderson also noted that more than two thirds of children were living apart from at least one of their familiar biological siblings and two fifths were living apart from all of their familiar biological siblings.

Sibling groups are more likely to include one or more children who share one rather than both parents, they may be of different ethnicity and are highly likely to have some additional needs. The timing of children's entry into care may differ, one or more siblings may become looked after whilst others remain at home or are placed with relatives. When brothers and sisters are placed in different settings, children may deeply grieve the loss of these.

#### **PLANNING – from the outset**

**Q Key question: *What might a truly "sibling-friendly" service look like from the perspective of children?***

#### **Early Planning**

*Local authorities should place a child with siblings where practicable and provided*

*that it is in the best interests of each child. (s.22c, Children Act 1989)*

Planning and service provision should be informed by an understanding of sibling relationships and needs. Decisions about placement together or not in foster care and beyond, as well as the ways in which contact between separated siblings is nurtured, all have huge impacts for children.

**For example:** When siblings are separated, visiting one another's foster home and having an overnight visit sometimes should be the norm unless there are clear safeguarding reasons to prevent this.

**Q Does this happen here in your LA?**

### **Proactive planning**

Think about steps that can be taken which will helpfully contribute to a balanced and child-centred assessment of children and their sibling relationships, for example I would suggest the following are especially important:

- ensuring that observations of the children during parental contact include consideration of how siblings interact with one another as well as parental behaviour towards each child. This, together with other actions, can help you identify and/or evidence patterns of behaviour such as differential treatment by parents (Discuss Beyond Together or Apart forms to use);
- ensuring that children's foster carers work constructively with you, so that their observations about and relationships with the children can effectively inform the assessment process as it evolves;
- drawing on the knowledge and experience of health and education professionals that focuses on sibling relationships (see Appendix 2 for forms and tools to use);
- undertaking an SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, (Goodman, 1997)) assessment early on with foster carers and education staff for all children aged two years and above.

### **A Charter for brothers and sisters**

**In foster care** Information and explanations for separated brothers and sisters in foster care are crucially important. A quality service from the perspective of children might helpfully include the following:

- ✓ I know why it wasn't possible to place us together.
- ✓ I know where my brothers and sisters are living.
- ✓ I know how I can contact my brothers and sisters.
- ✓ I know when I will see my brothers and sisters.
- ✓ I have photos of my brothers and sisters.
- ✓ My social worker has talked to all of us about why we are in foster care.
- ✓ I sometimes have/have had life history sessions that include my brothers and sisters.
- ✓ My foster carer knows important details about my brothers and sisters.
- ✓ I know that I can talk to my foster carer and social worker about my brothers and sisters – including any mixed up, confusing feelings that I might have.
- ✓ I know that my foster carer and social worker will help me to maintain links with my brothers and sisters.

- ✓ My social worker has written down the dates of my brothers' and sisters' birthdays and given these to me.
- ✓ I know that my foster carer knows how to contact the foster carers of my brothers and sisters.
- ✓ I know that my social worker thinks carefully about how to help me and my brothers and sisters and wants to make the best plans for all of us.
- ✓ I know that my social worker and foster carer will try to help if I have problems or fall-outs with a sibling.
- ✓ I know that my social worker works in a department that thinks relationships between brothers and sisters are really important – not just now but for when I'm older.

**And similarly, in permanent placements**

- ✓ I know the reasons why I am not living with all my brothers and sisters.
- ✓ I have information and explanations in my life story book about my brothers and sisters.
- ✓ I have met the family who care for my brothers and sisters.
- ✓ I know that my family met my brothers and sisters and have photos of us all together.
- ✓ I receive news about my brothers and sisters and how they are doing.
- ✓ I have recent photos of my brothers and sisters.
- ✓ I know when I will see my brothers and sisters (or why I cannot see them).
- ✓ I know that I can talk about and ask questions about my brothers and sisters.

Many children who become looked after and require a permanent placement to meet their needs will be young, pre-school-aged children and will have "future needs" for information and explanations to be accessible to them and their family. The importance of planning and addressing these issues requires a life-course perspective, as the decisions that are made will ripple and resonate throughout each child's journey into and throughout adulthood.

**Working well with foster carers**

Foster carers and social workers have distinct and crucial roles in helping children. The ways in which foster carers are prepared generally and specifically to meet the needs of brothers and sisters is key. Understanding, or a lack of understanding, of how sibling relationships may be affected by adversity, abuse, neglect and separation will influence how foster carers respond, for example, when faced with children who may show challenging behaviours, distress or apparent indifference. Constructive working relationships established early on between foster carers looking after separated siblings can help children directly but also, and importantly so, links with more robust and coherent assessments.

**PARTNERSHIP, ROLES AND CONTACT separated siblings**

- Those involved in caring for and working with the sibling group should meet to draw up a written plan for direct and indirect contact between the children. This should happen at the earliest opportunity and at least prior to the first review. The plan should ensure clarity about the level of contact that can be managed between the foster carers and what will be arranged by the

social workers involved.

- Children should have contact with each other outside of parental contact. In particular, they should have regular opportunities to talk and play, to share meals and help one another.
- Contact plans should address overnight contact, allowing separated siblings to go to bed and wake up in the same house on at least some occasions; for example, consideration should be given to foster carers taking it in turns to have the whole sibling group for a weekend perhaps once every two or three weeks.
- Practical and financial support should be addressed so that this is not an obstacle when planning and promoting contact between brothers and sisters.
- Foster carers' observations on the impact of contact, including visits between brothers and sisters should be routinely sought.

#### **The quality of contact – observations and links to assessment**

Contact between separated brothers and sisters is not only important for children in its own right but can also provide rich opportunities to learn more about how a child relates to each of their siblings. It is helpful to think about how behaviour and interactions during contact are recorded and ideally this should commence as soon as children become looked after.

The importance of involving foster carers and obtaining feedback from them in a structured way will help you as you collate information and evidence. Similarly, the use of consistent forms for recording contact observations. Forms should include appropriate headings so that information can not only be noted at the time but can be more easily extracted and collated subsequently.

This can help foster carers and contact supervisors to identify:

- the ways in which a parent or relative behaves towards each child in a sibling group;
- differential treatment by a parent or relative of one or more children;
- patterns of interaction between brothers and sisters.

#### **Contact supervisors**

Use a form for recording that includes dedicated questions and space to note interactions between parents and children, and brothers and sisters.

It is important to identify any issues in respect of established patterns of parents or others treating one or more of the siblings preferentially and/or showing emotional warmth to one child but not to another – see form.

Contact supervisors may need, or benefit from, additional training. This should focus on aspects that are especially important to observe and record in respect of sibling interactions and behaviour.

### **Sibling relationships – a brief overview**

Most studies have examined biological sibling pairs growing up in two-parent, white families. Little is known about sibling relationships within larger sibling groups, or the development of sibling relationships in different cultures. Our understanding of children's sibling relationships in foster care and adoptive family life is limited.

Relationships between siblings start from birth or early childhood often endure into old age, and are usually much longer than relationships with parents, their own children, or partners. How these relationships develop will depend on many things: for example, how might exposure to high levels of conflict, such as repeated episodes of domestic violence, impact on sibling relationships?

**Usual development:** during the first two years of life, children start to develop a range of social-emotional, cognitive and behavioural skills. These core skills will prove crucial in helping to promote relationships with siblings and peers as well as having wider benefits, such as allowing an easier transition to nursery and school. They include:

- sharing adult/parental attention;
- regulating emotions;
- being able to inhibit impulses;
- imitating another child's actions;
- understanding cause-and-effect relationships; and
- developing language skills.
- Interactions are emotionally charged such that relationships are typically defined by strong, uninhibited emotions of a positive, negative and sometimes ambivalent quality.

Howe and Recchia (2014) summarised four major characteristics of sibling relationships that are prominent during early childhood:

- Interactions are emotionally charged such that relationships are typically defined by strong, uninhibited emotions of a positive, negative and sometimes ambivalent quality.
- They are defined by intimacy: because young children spend large amounts of time playing together, they know each other very well – they have the power and knowledge to support, to tease and to annoy. 'This long history and intimate knowledge translates into opportunities for providing emotional and instrumental support for one another, engaging in pretend play, for conflict, and for understanding others' points of view' (p17).
- They are characterised by large individual differences in the quality of children's relationships with one another.
- The age difference between children within a sibling group often makes the issues of power and control as well as rivalry and jealousy sources of contention for children, but can also provide a context for more pro-social exchanges, such as teaching, helping and caring actions.

Children's social understanding and capacity to manage conflict are not only important within sibling relationships but also have resonance more widely in terms of peer relationships and adjustment to school.

### Adversity and sibling relationships

- Sibling relationships are influenced within the family and by parenting behaviour. The climate of the home, such as whether it feels organised; whether parents show affection; how involved fathers are; and similar factors help explain how siblings get on, better than “structural” variables such as children’s age, gender or intelligence.
- Young children spend more time interacting with their siblings than anyone else, including parents, and from a very young age children attend to the ways in which their parents treat them relative to their siblings.
- Sibling relationships provide a context for learning about “how other people tick” and how conflicts are resolved, which may be carried through into other relationships.
- Sibling relationships are often very ambivalent, rapidly switching between warmth and conflict during observed interactions. For example, high warmth may co-exist with high conflict between children. High conflict and low levels of emotional warmth are more worrying. Greater sibling warmth is associated with better individual adjustment. Sibling relationships tend to be more tolerant of conflict than those with peers. Siblings closer in age may experience conflicts more intensely and be more adversely affected.
- Better-quality parental relationships appear to “spill over” into more positive relationships between their children, suggesting that children may learn positive relationship skills from their parents, or that “happy-together” partners are better able to structure their children’s environment and respond in ways that help promote better relationships between their children.
- Hostility and conflict between parents and negativity in parent–child relationships are linked to sibling conflict (“spillover” effect). However, research has also shown that some children and young people show “compensatory” behaviours, forming closer relationships that help to protect them from adjustment problems.
- Differential treatment by a parent has been linked to greater sibling conflict. Children are particularly affected by differential affection that is harder for them to perceive as “fair” (as compared to being tasked to do more jobs in the home). Boys may be more sensitive to differential treatment than girls.
- Witnessing violence towards a sibling merits greater attention – it is not only deeply distressing but has significant impacts on brothers and sisters.
- More emotionally volatile children generally have poorer relationships with their siblings. Research found that this was also the case for children who exhibited problem behaviour and poor social competence.
- Poor sibling relationships can contribute to the development of peer aggression, bullying and rejection by peers. Home is the place where bullying often begins. If a child bullies their brother or sister, they are three times more likely to also bully other children at school. This is learned behaviour.
- Interventions designed to reduce sibling conflicts and increase pro- social behaviours are promising and can help prevent difficulties in relationships.

**NOTE: All references to research are from *Beyond Together or Apart: Planning for, assessing and placing sibling groups* Shelagh Beckett (2018) CoramBAAF**

## **Sibling relationships and assessments – overview**

It's not all your responsibility – it should be a partnership, step-by-step approach.

### **WHO?**

Think about who might helpfully contribute to the assessment. The following list provides a **typical 'core' list** of who should be involved:

- Children
- Parents and any relatives who know the children well
- Foster carers
- Contact supervisors
- Health visitors
- Education staff

Note: if you are assessing children pre-proceedings within their family, then use the above list apart from foster carers and contact supervisors as your starting point. Consider who else might be involved and in particular the contribution of extended family may be especially important.

### **WHEN?**

A **step-by-step process** that draws on what has happened in the past as well as what is happening currently, will contribute to a better understanding of the children, their experiences and sibling relationships.

Q: Do **Chronology formats** help you to identify issues in respect of sibling relationships?

Using a step-by-step approach **from the outset** will also help promote better outcomes for children both individually and as a sibling group. Initial decisions and planning – particularly whether brothers and sisters are placed together or not – will inevitably affect how relationships are subsequently viewed and assessed by practitioners. For example, there is an inherent risk that the initial placement decisions will be maintained rather than challenged and changed.

Allow time for forms to be sent and for them be progress chased/ a reminder sent.

### **HOW?**

**A range of sources, a range of people, a range of methods over a significant period of time.**

The ways in which **links and contact** are promoted between foster carers and the children for whom they are providing care is <sup>SIL</sup><sub>SEP</sub> one key component that will not only benefit children but also, and crucially so, can inform the assessment process.

There should be a strong emphasis on **multi-sourcing information and corroborating evidence** wherever possible. A collaborative approach between



families, social workers and foster carers working together is at the heart of sibling assessments as is the involvement of children themselves.

The use of **semi structured formats** to collate information and observations from all key contributors can massively help social workers.

**SDQs** completed with foster carers and education staff for children aged 2 years and above.

Note: if you are assessing children pre-proceedings within their family, then use the SDQ with parents and education staff e.g. nursery/playgroup or school.

Interrogate differences: what might explain or help to explain a big variation in scores in one or more domains? Why? For example, a parent or carer may perceive an individual child very differently from the child's teacher. A child may present differently in different settings. Two parents completing the SDQ with you in separate interviews may provide similar or very different accounts – again, what might this suggest? Do other observations support your analysis?

### **Sibling Assessments**

**It is crucial to conduct a full assessment of each child in a sibling group as well as an assessment of their relationships with one another.** Even if it seems clear that the brothers and sisters should remain together, a detailed assessment will provide essential information for a new family and will enable the agency to anticipate the extra help and support that may be necessary. Equally, if it is determined that children are to be separated or to remain apart, the reasons for this should be made clear and reports should fully explore issues in respect of contact and how relationships can be promoted. The benefits of different placement options and combinations require a careful balancing exercise and this is likely to be especially challenging in respect of sibling groups where children have intense and divergent parenting needs, where the age span is greater, and when older children may have significant, complex relationships with some birth relatives. The extent to which contact is actively considered and supported within the range of permanency options is also likely to influence what placement options are perceived as viable within each authority. Practice may vary significantly in this regard.

**Children and young people should be involved and feel involved, and those who know them well should be similarly engaged in the assessment.** Early engagement and active participation should make it easier for adults to understand the outcome, be more likely to accept reasons for decisions, and be better equipped to support children and young people to develop a coherent narrative in the years ahead. The assessment process should “feed into” explanations and information, with key elements being included in life story work and more detailed accounts provided in later life letters for children and young people.

## MAKING ROBUST SIBLING ASSESSMENTS AND MULTI-SOURCING OBSERVATIONS

### The overall approach

The approach to assessment that is recommended within the Beyond Together or Apart good practice guide is very much a partnership, step-by-step approach based on an understanding of what we have learned from research as well as the experiences of children and families.

Several dimensions are clearly important to address, for example, frameworks reviewed in the guide (see Chapter 4) generally included some recognition that the following elements were especially relevant:

- warmth and positive engagement, the level of care shown by a child towards their sibling/s;
- conflict and aggressive behaviour, including attempts to dominate, bully or undermine a sibling;
- the extent to which siblings compete and show rivalry for adult attention.

The aim of the guide is to achieve a structured, coherent approach to the assessment of siblings that builds on existing knowledge – including research – and also, crucially builds on a range of perspectives. The importance of involving professionals from other settings, notably health and education, is stressed; health visitors, for example, often have helpful observations to contribute about the development of children and their relationships with brothers and sisters. Family members, foster carers and children themselves are also at the heart of the assessment. If you follow this approach then your report should be more nuanced and robust, including examples of behaviour seen in different settings over a period of time.

### **Making Robust Assessments: Say what you see and also include what others see**

The importance of providing a clear account of your own observations, and describing behaviours and the context in which you saw them, should be at the heart of your assessment. Your own observations should be supplemented and supported by additional observations made by foster carers and others who know the children well. Where there are significant discrepancies between observations and views, it is crucial to interrogate them, that is, consider what might account for these differences.

Shemmings (2018) cited and commented on a court case where a judge had criticised a social work witness statement for being long on rhetoric and criticism but short on concrete examples of where and how the mother's parenting had been deficient. During oral evidence, when asked to provide examples, the social workers had struggled to do so. Whilst a good understanding of attachment theory and research will helpfully inform practice, Shemmings (2018) reminds social workers of the training required to become fully accredited in assessing attachments and strongly recommends that they substitute the word "relationship" instead. He also advised practitioners to:

*...take heed of Professor Sue White's tip to 'say what you see'. Of course, that may assume that we all see the same thing but if we then expose fully what assumptions we are making, including the use of theory, then we remain accountable, both to the court and to family members.*

#### **ASSESSMENT REPORT - suggested headings and issues to cover**

- Key background information– Note: using a summary chronology template that includes a focus on the sibling relationships can help when reviewing key background information
- An overview of adverse childhood experiences and supportive factors.
- Parenting of each child, to include shared and non-shared experiences.
- The views of parents and significant relatives about each child, and their sibling relationships (see Forms – Appendix 2)
- Observations of the children: from social worker, foster carers, contact supervisors, education and health professionals (see Forms – Appendix 2)
- A SDQ completed by foster carer and education staff for all children aged two and above – analysis of findings
- An overview of the individual needs of each child.
- An overview of the strengths and vulnerabilities within the sibling group relationship. It will be important to not only identify behavioural issues but also to describe how these have/have not been addressed.
- Roles and reasons why children may interact in particular ways (e.g. parenting/ caring roles), including identification of their impact and any support or intervention needed, and the outcome of any help already provided.
- The ascertainable views of each child about their sibling/s
- Consideration of realistic placement options.
- Consideration of types of contact, purpose, risks and benefits and analysis.
- Research evidence.
- Analysis, conclusions and recommendations.

### Identifying risks and thinking about how they might affect outcomes

Our enhanced understanding of the experiences of children and adoptive families, together with research on outcomes, is also key. We now know more about the impact of pre-placement experiences and should strive to fully take account of each child's emotional and behavioural needs. Particularly high levels of behavioural difficulties presented by one or more children may understandably lead us to worry about placing them all together or in a particular combination – even if there is also evidence of emotional warmth between the siblings.

When thinking about research on placement outcomes, we need to remain focused on the fact that research relates to populations of children and as such is probabilistic and not deterministic; in general terms, though, we know that some factors increase risks:

- Age is important – children who are older when they join their new family tend to have fewer good outcomes when compared with populations of younger-placed children.
- Higher levels of maltreatment are significant – children's pre-placement experiences are more significant than age at placement on its own. "Good start-late placed" older children may have better outcomes<sup>[11]</sup> than younger children who were exposed to particularly high levels of adversity and low levels of emotional warmth (Howe, 1998).
- Children who have been exposed to drugs or alcohol *in utero* are likely to be at greater risk (Neil *et al*, 2018).
- Adopted children who have experienced delays in decision-making are more likely to experience a disruption than those for whom planning is more timely (Selwyn *et al*, 2014).
- Children who spend more than 12 months in care are likely to be at risk (Neil *et al*, 2018).
- Children who have two or more foster homes before moving to their adoptive family are likely to be at risk (Neil *et al*, 2018).
- Children placed over the age of four years old are more likely to experience disruption (Selwyn *et al*, 2014).
- Aggression and violence are the most frequently described forms of challenging behaviour identified by adopters and become more difficult to manage during adolescence (Selwyn *et al*, 2014).

In a study of adoption disruptions, Selwyn *et al* (2014, p28) cited studies that had examined factors that increased the risk of child aggression, such as exposure to domestic violence, paternal behaviours, neglect under the age of two, and exposure to alcohol *in utero*. The authors highlighted that it was important to:

*Identify young children who are aggressive in foster care and intervene to address the aggression. The message from research on aggression in general population samples is that most children will not "grow out of it".*

Physical aggression that is instigated by one child towards other siblings is linked with more adoption difficulties and breakdowns (see Chapter 10 of *Beyond Together or Apart* for more details).

Selwyn also cited research on child development by Feinberg *et al* (2012) that identifies parental differential treatment as being associated with greater conflict among siblings and, for the less favoured child, poorer adjustment.

### **Adoption planning, sibling contact and support**

**Knowing what is happening, what is planned and why** Children and young people should be involved in making plans and have a developmentally appropriate understanding so far as is possible at each stage. Sensitive work and consistent explanations should be provided and be included in Life Story Work and Later Life letters. Birth family, foster carers and adopters also need information to meet their particular needs so that they are best placed to understand decisions and respond to questions that children may ask in the years ahead.

**Emotional readiness and transitions** Foster carers' and adoptive parents' readiness to work well together during introductions and beyond will have a profound impact. The emotional needs of the adults are important to think about and to address prior to introductions to the children beginning. It is vitally important that children's attachment needs are at the forefront during planning, introductions and when they move. Children should not be expected to lose significant, supportive relationships with foster carers and others when they move. The maintenance of caring relationships should be viewed as supportive of attachment-building rather than a threat that might undermine adopters or the child's capacity to settle and thrive.

**Adoptive parents of siblings** Most adopters feel positively about the decision to keep siblings together but they also tell us that they need more targeted services. They describe sibling relationships as being fairly typical with highs and lows but "constant conflict" between brothers and sisters is associated with higher rates of adoption breakdown. This conflict had usually been apparent from early on in the placement. Parents described the most troubling behaviours as: physical aggression largely instigated by one child; coercion; and sexualised behaviour between siblings. Families who already have children experience the adoption process as being focused almost exclusively on the adopted children, at the expense of other children in the family. Adopters want more support to help children get on better.

**Adopters, siblings and contact** Most adopters are supportive of contact between separated siblings and want help to make this happen and for it to be a good experience for all the children involved. Social work commitment, support and encouragement is valued by parents but often lacking.

**Support** Research, practice experience and feedback from adopters are clear in conveying the importance of post-placement support. Good support packages for families are absolutely essential if they are to parent large sibling groups. However, it is clearly not just about the number of children, but the demands presented. The links between practical support and building attachments needs to be understood. Exhausted parents will be less emotionally available to children. Money and resources invested well can help promote relationships and placement stability.

## Contact between siblings

*Statutory guidance on adoption for local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies July 2014 at 5.7 sets out that: Where siblings cannot be placed together with the same family, it is important to ensure that contact arrangements between them are given very careful attention and plans for maintaining contact are robust. Contact arrangements may need to be varied as the children's relationships and need for contact change over time. Contact arrangements with a child's relatives may take the form of indirect contact, with letters and cards and some background information about the child's progress being sent via a social worker. The practicalities of such arrangements require careful planning.*

### Research tells us that:

- About half of children placed for adoption lose contact with their brothers and sisters either on placement or soon afterwards (Jones and Henderson, 2017; Neil *et al*, 2018).
- Sibling contact arrangements and children's wishes are poorly documented (Jones and Henderson, 2017).
- There is little consideration of indirect ways of maintaining links such as through phone calls, sending postcards or similar means (Rushton *et al*, 2001).
- Adopters broadly support contact between brothers and sisters in different placements unless it poses a clear threat (Barth and Berry, 1988; Rushton *et al*, 2001).

Macaskill (2002) and other studies report clearer benefits associated with continuing contact between brothers and sisters than have been identified in respect of birth parent contact after adoption.

In a very helpful systematic review of 11 UK studies, Boyle (2017) examined the impact of birth family contact on adopted children. In nearly all cases where contact between children and birth parents was problematic, contact with siblings and grandparents was positive (2017, p28): *Sibling contact was consistently identified by adoptive parents, foster carers and children as very important. It was also thought that this attachment was a significant protective factor in the absence of secure attachments to birth parents. The wish to see more of siblings and concern for separated siblings was a salient theme for children across the board.*

In respect of children placed apart from some of their siblings, contact may have been planned but had not yet taken place. As Meakings *et al*, (2018) noted in this regard and more generally: *Whilst adoptive parents were often determined to help strengthen sibling bonds created and affected by adoption, this commitment was not always championed through social work intervention.*

Drawing on studies of contact after adoption, Neil *et al* (2015) set out a model for planning and supporting contact (see [www.uea.ac.uk/contact-after-](http://www.uea.ac.uk/contact-after-)

adoption/resources). In their model, Neil *et al* provide a helpful guide to practitioners. The principles underpinning the model are:

- that contact should be *purposeful* (how contact can benefit the child is the central question);
- that contact should be *individualised* (taking account of the particular needs of the child, and of the particular qualities of children, adoptive parents and birth relatives that can have a bearing on contact), and that contact is a *relationship-based* process that is *dynamic* across time.

#### Practice – key points

- Be clear about the importance of relationships between brothers and sisters in early discussions with potential new families. The way in which prospective adopters receive information about contact plans and the information that they receive can have a significant impact on their views.
- Be clear about the purpose of contact and communicate this well – remember that even if children squabble and fall out now, their relationship can develop in the years ahead.
- Be positive about contact between brothers and sisters: adopters broadly support contact between brothers and sisters in different placements unless it poses a clear threat.
- Involve adoptive parents in planning contact and ensure that they meet other adopters early on. Bear in mind that adopters who share similar values, attitudes and aspirations are more likely to work well together to manage contact for children in separate families.
- Address practical problems such as venue, timing and costs – ensuring that contact occurs requires positive social work planning and support.
- Consider indirect means of maintaining links between visits such as through phone calls, Skype, social media platforms, sending postcards and similar means.
- Remember that the impact and risks of not having contact also need to be part of any assessment.

Adopters need preparation that helps them think about changing needs over time. The meaning of contact and its importance to each child within a sibling group may vary at any point in time and over time. Meeting up with brothers and sisters can help children talk about past trauma that they endured, which can be helpful but also carries the potential for negative emotions to resurface for, and between, some children. As children become increasingly settled and secure in separate adoptive families, their views about how often they want to see siblings may change with some wanting less contact. Some children want to “move on from their past” but even so it is usually important to maintain links for the future and to recognise that needs and the significance of contact may ebb and flow at different developmental stages.