



Guidance for Brothers and Sisters 'Together or Apart' Assessment

This guidance has been devised as an aid when making decisions about the future living arrangements for brothers and sisters. The assessment undertaken is called a Together or Apart Assessment. The aim is to provide a toolkit to enable Social Workers to plan and complete the assessment.

Introduction

"Brothers and sisters who share a childhood and grow up together have potentially the longest lasting, and one of the closest relationships of their lives with each other. In common with all relationships, sibling relationships have enormous capacity for shared understanding and activity, can stimulate warmth, care and joy, and can help sustain children and adults through distressing times. They also have the potential to be undermining, driven by conflict and marred by other difficulties."

"Whilst these qualities are evident in most relationships, there are also differences and unique aspects of sibling interactions that are important to understand, think about and address when working with looked after children. Even when a child has never lived with his or her siblings, the significance of the relationship may be keenly felt during childhood with a sense "what might have been" stretching into adult life."

"... Practice should stem from a rights based and child centred approach wherein children's relationships with their brothers and sisters is valued and accorded priority alongside each child's individual needs ... sibling relationships always need to be carefully considered and we should be rigorous in making plans that not only recognise the current sibling relationships but also their capacity for change during their childhood and beyond," Beckett, 2018, p.1 & 7)."

Assessments for brothers and sisters often evoke an array of strong emotions for Social Workers, some finding it extremely difficult to consider separation due to a

view that the relationship between brothers and sisters is one of the longest and most fulfilling relationships we may have throughout our life.

It is often difficult for practitioners to consider separation of brothers and sisters when dealing with or seeing first-hand the impact on the child or young person of the separation from their parents. It is accepted that children who share a positive and healthy relationship should remain together. However, Argent (2008) suggests that *“Respite from siblings who share a history of abuse may be the only way to promote healing and to enable each of them to make a secure attachment to an adult.”* Children who are fostered or adopted tend to have more complex and fragmented family relationships than other children (Kosonen 1999 and Rushton et al 2001).

Whilst the presumption should be that brothers and sisters will grow up together and we should make every effort to enable this to happen, there will be occasions when carefully thought out decisions will need to be made to separate, not to reunite or unite brothers and sisters due to their assessed needs whilst making further decisions around their contact needs and arrangements.

Due to the challenges in making such complex decisions, thought was given to how practitioners must consider relationships between sisters and brothers.

The assessment needs to consider and include the legal basis within the analysis when making recommendations and decisions in the child’s best interest.

Legislation Which Guides Practice

- **The Children Act 1989 s23(7)(b)** places a duty on local authorities to accommodate a child together with his/her brother(s) and/or and sister(s)s so far as is ‘reasonably practical and consistent with his welfare.’
- **The Adoption and Children Act 2002 s1(4)** requires the court to consider “the likely effect on the child (throughout his life) of having ceased to be a member of the original family and become an adopted person” and “the relationship which the child has with relatives (...) including the likelihood of any such relationship continuing and the value to the child of its doing so.” The Act also requires the court to consider contact arrangements, and it allows the child and any relative to apply for contact (s26).
- **Adoption Regulations, 2013**, “siblings should be adopted by the same prospective adopter unless there is good reason why they should not be. Where an agency is making a placement decision on two or more children from the same family, it should be based on a comprehensive assessment of the quality of the children’s relationship, their individual needs and the likely capacity of the prospective adopter to meet the needs of all the siblings being placed together. Where it is not possible for the siblings to be placed together the agency should

consider carefully the need for the children to remain in contact with each other and the need for adoption support.”

- **Draft Adoption Statutory Guidance, 2014,**¹ “There should be a clear decision making process which enables Social Workers to decide early whether it is in the best interests of each child to be placed together or separately, and the impact on each child of that decision. The decision making process should be set out clearly with the supporting information and evidence so that all the professionals who are involved in making decisions about each child’s future can see how and why the decision was reached. It will also be important in future for the child, as an adult, to be able to see how and why a decision was reached. The decision should be based on a balanced assessment of the individual needs of each child in the group, and the likely or possible consequences of each option on each child. Agencies may wish to have a formal assessment process in place to assist with the analysis and decision making process.”
- **Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998** covers the right to private and family life and prohibits interference with this. Provided that family life is established, each member of the family including brothers and sisters has their own right to respect for family life.

Who Should Be Responsible For Completing The Assessment?

The child’s Social Worker is the lead professional who completes the assessment. Consideration must be given for a 2nd Social Worker to be co-allocated for larger families with 5 or more children to support the assessment and analysis process.

Family members, Foster Carers, school staff, health professionals and any other professional involved in a child’s life will also be asked to contribute to the assessment.

There are examples of observation tools to enable and support them to do this and these can be found in the Brothers and Sisters Assessment Toolkit.

When Should a Together or Apart Assessment Be Completed?

It is good practice to undertake a Brothers and Sisters assessment as part of the permanence parallel planning process and in the following situations:-

- **Family Assessments** – Assessing brothers and sisters should start within the Family Assessment under the Child Development domain. The quality of the attachment each brothers or sister has with their primary care giver will affect a

¹ The Draft Adoption Statutory Guidance 2014 was not passed in legislation. The quote from the draft is included to support good social work practice. The draft document can be found on the internet.

child's relationship with their brothers and sisters. The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (DoH, 2000) states, "The quality of relationships between siblings may also be of major significance to a child's welfare." A family assessment is completed within **45 working days**.

- **Pre-proceedings** – If a family is subject to pre-proceedings then **the 6 week review stage** should discuss the parent/carers progress in their parenting. If significant concerns continue with the likelihood being that care proceedings will be issued, then **a decision needs to be made whether a current 4 to 6 week Together or Apart Assessment** needs to be completed at home utilising the Brothers and Sisters assessment toolkit and template during the remainder of the pre-proceedings process. This would inform the interim care plan and placement request whether brothers and sisters are to live together or apart. It is recommended that an assessment of the relationship between brothers and sisters should be completed as part of the assessment process in decision making about the need to remove the child(ren) from the family home. Research shows children who are initially placed together are much more likely to remain together and this has implications for how initial placement decisions are made.
- **Care Proceedings** – Once a child is subject to care proceedings then in most cases a Court direction will be made to complete **a further 'Together or Apart Assessment' which is likely to take 6-8 weeks for completion, to build on the 'Together or Apart Assessment' already completed during the pre-proceedings stage**. This would inform the final care plan and the plan for permanence. **If this assessment was not completed during the pre-proceeding stage then a longer assessment period may need to be requested from the Court which could be up to 12 weeks.**
- **Changes of Placement** – A 'together or apart' assessment may be needed to review the care plan, for example if a foster carer gives notice for one brother or sister in placement, or where there are signs of significant changes in the brother and sister relationship which raises concerns. Therefore further assessments are needed to inform what support and intervention is needed. The assessment should focus on the brother and sister relationship and not the relationship the brothers and sisters have with their carer with the former leading to decisions around 'together or apart'. The timeframe for completion may be dependant on the issues emerging from the foster care home as well as the number of brothers and sisters involved and should take no longer than 12 weeks to avoid drift and delay.
- **Home Visit observations** should also include some on-going analysis around brother and sister relationships.

- **Care Planning Meetings and Child in Care Review Meetings** should consider what the Together or Apart Assessment is recommending about the brother and sister relationships, whether there should be a review of placement to reunify or separate siblings and to keep contact arrangements under review. There should be consideration whether reparative work should be undertaken to repair brother and sister relationships if this is needed. The plan for permanence should be discussed and agreed at the 2nd review meeting.

BCT's Approach to Together or Apart Assessments

The Trust's 'Brother and Sister Together or Apart Assessment Template' and Toolkit is informed by the guidance within 'Together or Apart?' by Lord and Borthwick (2008). This is further supported through the guidance and tools provided by Beckett (2018). The assessment should be supported by theory, research and be evidence based.

Timescales

The time required to complete an assessment may differ, depending upon the circumstances of the child and when the decision is required. This is based on the points in the child's journey as detailed in the section *When Should a Together or Apart Assessment be Completed?*

Consultations

The Trust offers all Social Workers the opportunity to access consultations when making decisions for complex families. This should be used by Social Workers as a supportive aid.

1. The Therapeutic Emotional Support Service (TESS)

- The TESS Service offers a reflective space for Social Workers to think about their case work which includes Brother and Sister Together or Apart Assessments.
- The approach enables reflection in respect of systemic and relationship issues and to consider the voice of the child within social work analysis. It is a collaborative process exploring the best way forward to help meet their needs.
- The TESS Consultation form on Eclipse provides a brief summary of the discussion along with any agreed outcome(s).
- Please note that while TESS may offer guidance and recommendations any actions taken remain the responsibility of the Social Worker/case-holder and their manager. Social Workers also need to make clear if they are writing a Court

statement and wish to make reference to the consultation session, if TESS staff has not met with the children or their networks. The advice given would be in an advisory capacity in order to enable space for the Social Worker to carry out a reflective discussion.

2. The Family Finding Service

- Through the Permanence Advice Service (PAS), Family Finding Social Workers offer a reflective space for practitioners to think about a range of care planning issues in Adoption and Long Term Fostering, including but not limited to the assessment of brothers and sisters.
- The PAS can support practitioners to consider the children's current individual and collective needs, project their future needs through a trauma informed lens, explore the carer capacities required to meet the likely demands and balance together or apart decisions with the wishes of the children held in mind. It is a collaborative exchange, exploring the options with curiosity and openness.
- Discussions that take place through the PAS are intended to facilitate thinking rather than instruct workers or to progress the case in any particular direction, as the Family Finder will not have been privy to detailed information and neither will they have met the children or those in their network.
- The Family Finder will offer general practice principles or note additional factors that might warrant further exploration.
- Any advice or guidance taken from the PAS session to inform care planning or recommendations must be owned by the practitioner and their Team Manager, and if there is a need to make reference in reports or assessments to the advice, it must be made clear that it was given in the context of peer support rather than case analysis for decision making.
- In complex cases, these consultations may also be supported by the Adoption Service Clinical Psychology Team.

What to Include In The Assessment

At the outset of the assessment the Brother and Sister Assessment Plan needs to be completed, this will guide the assessment process.

At the point of completing the assessment the following information needs to be included:-

- Background information including the child's lived experience and their experience of being parented.
- Direct Work and the child's wishes and feelings.
- Information about the individual needs of the child.

- Assess the quality of the attachment through observation of the child in different settings and as a brother and sister group.
- Views of parents and significant relatives need to be obtained.
- Views and observations by the Foster Carer, School Staff(s), Contact Supervisor(s) and Health Worker(s).
- The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and the Brother and Sister assessment forms need to be completed by family and professionals, and the outcome of these questionnaires will then require further analysis.
- An understanding of the brother and sister group relationship, including strengths and vulnerabilities.
- Detail of any support or intervention needed for the brother and sister group as a whole or for an individual child around promoting, repairing, developing or maintaining the brother and sister relationships.
- Analysis, conclusions and recommendations including recommendations in regards to placement and views on how placement moves could be facilitated.

Practice Guidelines from Literature and Resource Considerations:²

- Social Workers, Team Managers, Independent Reviewing Officers, and Senior Management who are involved in decision making need to acknowledge their own beliefs, assumptions, prejudices and be mindful of how this may impact on the decision making process.
- Ideally, one Social Worker or two Social Workers working as a team, to have responsibility for all brothers and sisters in a group irrespective of their different situations to maintain an overview of the brother and sister group.
- Ideally, to have one Independent Reviewing Officer for a brother and sister group to maintain an overview of care planning decisions and contact arrangements.
- Key people involved with the children should be included in the assessment and decision making process rather than through an individual decision as standard: Social Worker(s), Team Manager, Foster Carer(s) for each child if placed separately, representatives from the Adoption and / or Family Finding Service if involved with the children, other key professionals involved as appropriate (school, family centre, health and emotional wellbeing services), birth parents (if able to participate in constructive planning). (Best Practice).
- Recommendations and decisions about separating, uniting, reuniting brothers and sisters should be based on clear evidence and rationale. Currently, within

² The Section for Practice Guidelines and Care Planning Decisions has been largely reproduced from the Sibling Assessment Toolkit for Dudley (2014) with permission from Dr. Marie Kershaw, Principal Clinical Psychologist with the Birmingham Children's Trust Adoption Service who formally worked with Dudley Children Services. A wider review of literature was considered to ensure the content remains up to date and relevant and has been enhancement.

BCT the final recommendation and / or decisions is made by the Social Worker and Team Manager which needs to be evidence based.

- The Assessment Checklist and Supervision Questions within the toolkit is designed to support decision making. This is to ensure all factors and views have been discussed, and the decision reached is individual to the brother and sister group. **This is not to be filed in Court.**
- Where there are complex factors to consider then a reflective case discussion should take place with the Head of Service to reach a decision.
- Clear decision making rationale which is recorded is essential for a young person or adult who needs to make sense of their life story or trauma and how decisions were made.
- Extended family members should be considered first when children in care need a new family. This should include non-related families parenting other brothers and sisters.
- Foster or adoptive families who are parenting siblings could be viewed as 'extended family' and the principles of Regulation 24 apply.
- If placement with birth family members will involve the separation of brothers and sisters, it should not be assumed that the link with the adult is more important than the link between the children.
- There may be evidence that there is a significant attachment to the adult which would be too damaging to disrupt in order to unite or reunite brothers and sisters.
- Separation of brothers and sisters purely because of a lack of immediate placement resources should not be supported.
- There needs to be thought to what work needs to be done whilst in temporary foster care to maintain or build a relationship between brothers and sisters.
- Consideration may be need to re-locating all the children, even if this means to an out of area placement, rather than splitting them for any longer than is absolutely necessary.
- Frequent contact should be facilitated as a priority (where appropriate) to take place whilst in foster care to avoid children from drifting apart. This should include arrangements for different carers (foster carers, adopters, birth family) to share information on the brother and/or sister they are caring for the benefit of the brother and sister group. These arrangements will need to be reviewed and revised over the years.
- Plans to reunite brothers and sisters not living together will require careful preparation and will depend on their familiarity with each other, the level of contact including overnight stays. Contact plans should be reviewed leading up to a permanent home together. It will likely be appropriate to increase contact incrementally enabling shared experiences, for example meals times, the bedtime and morning routine as well as negotiating what activities to do together.
- Tailored work may be needed with birth family, extended family, children, foster carers and adopters around assessed contact needs and arrangements.

Implications for Transition Planning

- If the decision is to place children together then careful consideration needs to be given to how this is facilitated.
- Traditionally, all children would probably move together. However, this can often overwhelm new parents/carers and children. Particularly if there are difficulties, or if the children have previously been placed apart.
- Lord and Borthwick (2008), Argent (2008) and Beckett (2018) offer guidance on factors to consider when deciding how to place brothers and sisters in their permanent home.
- Children should be involved in the transition planning. They need to know what is happening and be involved in the decisions made.
- Brothers and sisters already living together may struggle with a staggered move for one or more of them and it may not be in their best interest not to be placed together.
- If the brother and sister assessment suggests a staggered move is recommended due to their competing needs, then it is important to involve them in the planning to increase the chances of a successful transition.
- Children who have never lived together or who have a very limited relationship could find it very overwhelming to move to a new home at the same time and a staggered move could be more appropriate.
- Consider carefully each child's needs and balance this against how they seek adult attention, for example in stressful or pressured situations, which will impact on how introductions with their new family are planned.
- Seek the views of current carers and the new carers/family in planning the move.

Recommendations to enable the family to adjust:

1. In most situations brothers and sisters should be placed at the same time, particular if they are already living together, (Lord and Borthwick, 2008).
2. If it is assessed as being in the children's best interest to stagger the placement with one child being introduced, start with the oldest (Fahlberg, 1994 cited in Lord and Borthwick, 2008).
3. The time interval when staggering children into their new homes will depend on their ages, their wishes and feelings and those of their new family.
4. Use longer rather than shorter periods of introductions as this can enable children to settle and adjust to their new homes whilst helping to form relationships with their new parents and carers.
5. It is good practice not to change schools for children who are in foster care, where this can be avoided. However, it is noted that in adoption cases a change of school will be necessary. If changing schools, defer the start date to avoid too many transitions taking place in a short period of time.
6. Parents/Carers to be at home through the process of integrating each child.

Factors That Should Not Automatically Determine Care Planning Decisions

1. The plan for permanence is not age dependent and should be centred on the assessed individual and collective needs of the children.
2. Younger children should not automatically be placed separately because they could secure an earlier placement or permanent home. The advantage of an earlier placement should be carefully balanced against the life-time loss of the experience of growing up with their brothers and sisters.
3. If efforts to find a family together have failed within the younger child's timescale, and they are placed on their own, then meaningful and sustainable contact arrangements are to be explored and agreed. The factors that have led to a decision to change the care plan needs to be evidenced clearly.
4. Never having lived together previously, (e.g. if taken into care at different times), does not mean the brothers and sisters should not be placed together in the future. Placements together may enable them to develop brother and sister relationships and could potentially be an important investment for the future.
5. Difference in Care Plan Status (i.e. permanent fostering / adoption and in legal status) between younger and older children. It may be possible to adopt some brothers and sisters together and to have different care plans for others, e.g. where an older child does not want to be adopted.
6. Disability should not be a pre-conceived idea that a disabled child needs a separate placement from brothers and sisters or, if brothers and sisters are to be split s/he should be the one placed on his/her own. Professionals need to be aware of their own underlying assumptions/prejudices in relation to this.
7. Emotional/Behavioural difficulties – a thorough assessment of need and the scope for improvement through focused time-limited direct work or brief therapy whilst in temporary care should be considered. The aim is to improve the brother and sister relationship and prevent the need for permanent separation. If possible this work should start with the birth family prior to the children being looked after with this being an investment for their future.
8. Experience of abuse - a thorough assessment of need and risk assessment to be completed to understand the impact on the sibling group and how this will impact on them living together. This will help to identify what support is needed.

9. A lack of limited resources. There should be attempts made to search widely for suitable placements to meet the children's needs.