



## Toolkit for Brothers and Sisters 'Together or Apart' Assessment

This toolkit has been devised as an aid to undertake a brother and sister Together or Apart Assessment. The aim is to enable the practitioner to plan and complete the assessment whilst utilising their existing assessment skills.

### Introduction

**Social Care Institute for Excellence** highlights the statutory guidance within the UK is that brothers and sisters should be placed together, unless this would not be in the best interests of one or more of the brother and sister group, or there is a good reason not to (Department for Education, 2012a). If it is deemed necessary to separate brothers and sisters, guidance in the UK suggests that the reasons why should be clearly documented and reviewed, with judgements based on an assessment of the relationships and consideration of individual circumstances, (DfE, 2012a; Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2004).<sup>1</sup>

Research tells us that where children have been removed from their parents and separated from their brothers and sisters, they frequently find the loss of their brothers and sisters harder to cope with. Brothers and sisters usually share life experiences and they can provide each other with comfort but they can also act out their trauma for each other. After children are removed from their parents, they can sometimes 'act out' their experiences in the early part of their placement which is important to bear in mind.

It is important to consider the bond and the child's presenting needs rather than make assumptions based on age.

It is vital to observe brothers and sisters and for large brother and sister groups you need to observe different pairing and / or combinations.

---

<sup>1</sup> Paragraph taken from website One Stop Social <https://www.onestopsocial.co.uk/brother-and-sister-attachment-assessment-what-you-need-to-know/> (23<sup>rd</sup> Aug 19)

## Together or Apart Assessment Timeframes and Approaches

1. Family Assessment (45 working days)
2. 'Together or Apart' Assessment during Pre-Proceedings (4-6 weeks)
3. 'Together or Apart' Assessment during Care Proceedings (6-8 weeks, or up to 12 weeks for large or complex sibling groups. Any extended timeframes should be planned for from the onset and discussed within pre-proceedings).

The assessor to refer to the scenario document related to the 3 different timeframes within the child's journey.

## Key Assessment Questions<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Individual Child Factors

#### What Is The Child's Birth Family Experience / History>

- Use existing forms and reports where available to avoid repetition.
- The assessor could use the 'Trauma / Nurture Timelines.'
- What was the nature / quality of their early experiences within their birth family?
- What was the child's role within the family?
- What was their parenting / attachment experience, (include details of parental mental health problems, learning difficulties, alcohol / substance misuse) within the birth family?
- Details of any experiences of abuse, neglect, trauma, disrupted attachment relationships and the potential impact of these experiences.

#### What are the Child's Individual Needs:

- Review the file, previous written reports, observations, interviews with carers / other professionals, 'Daily Diary of a Child in Care or at Home.'
- What are the individual child's needs and strengths? (The core areas are emotional, developmental, behavioural, physical health, social relationships with peers & adults, sense of identity, self-care skills).

---

<sup>2</sup> The Section for Key Assessment Questions has been reproduced from the Brother and sister 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. This has been combined with some aspects of BCT's Brother and sister Assessment Toolkit (2018) and a wider review of literature to ensure the content remains up to date and relevant with appropriate enhancement.

- How do they cope with transitions? Endings, Beginnings and Change?
- **Describe** the child's attachment (or relationship) style and evidence for this **through examples** around Secure, Avoidant, Ambivalent and Disorganised.
- The assessor can describe the behavioural and emotional presentation.
- **Please remember social workers are not trained and accredited in assessing attachments and therefore are not to label the child with an attachment style. Shemmings (2018) strongly recommends substituting the word 'attachment' with 'relationship' instead, " ... 'say what you see.' Of course that may assume 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."**
- If one or more of the children have attachment (or relationship) difficulties it may make the process of attaching to a future carer more complex.

### What are the child's wishes and feelings?

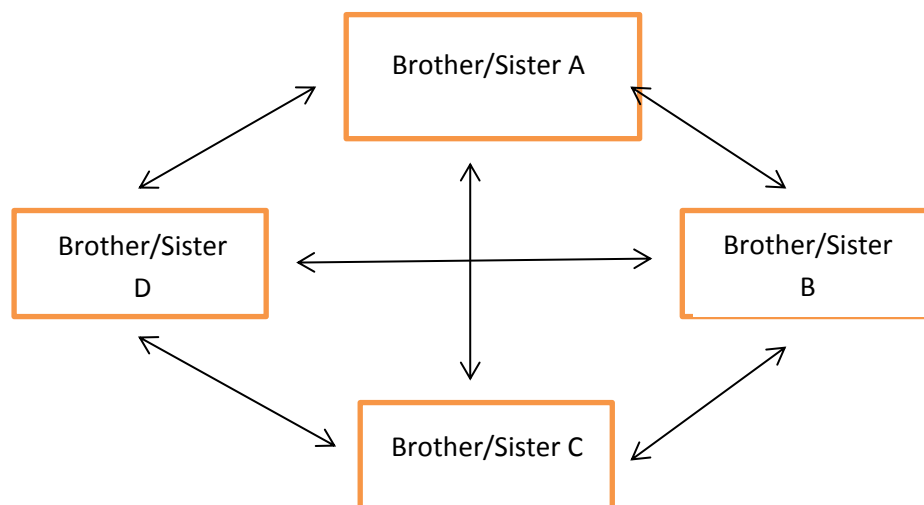
- The assessor can use observations as well as age appropriate discussions and methods to explore with the child their wishes, feelings and perceptions, for example drawings, puppets, characters to represent different brothers and sisters.
- Explore the value and meaning of the brother and sister relationship from the child's view, consider their wishes and feelings about a placement together or apart, as well as on matters relating to contact.
- They may or may not wish to engage depending on their experiences.
- Who do they refer to as their brothers and sisters?
- What are their thoughts and feelings about each brother and sister? (Who do they get on with, who do they not get on with, what is the best/worst thing about each brother and sister?)
- Who do they identify most with (who are they most like, who are they least like)
- Where would they like to live?
- Who would they like to live with or not live with?
- Who would they like to live close by, who would they like to live far away?
- Who would they like contact with and the frequency of contact?
- Support the child to understand the implications of each different legal status and how this could impact on the contact arrangements.

## 2. Brother and Sister Relationship Factors

### What is the quality / nature of the relationships between the children?

- Review the file, previous written reports, observations, interviews with carers / other professionals, *'Brother and Sister Relationship Checklist.'*

- The genogram should identify all known brothers and sisters.
- Consider all known brothers and sisters' parentage, ethnicity, age, where they are currently living, how long they have been separated and current as well as past contact with the brother and sister being assessed.
- Establish who the core group of brothers and sisters are that are being considered for a placement together or apart.
- Each child's experience of family life and brother and sister relationships will have been different depending on their position in the family, gender, ethnicity, emotional age functioning, extent to which they have shared family experience, individual capabilities, personality, resilience, perceptions of events and relationships.
- It is important to fully assess the needs of each individual child in the brother and sister group, as well as their relationships to each other, and the dynamics of the group as a whole, e.g. do 2 of the brothers and sisters get on quite well if the 3<sup>rd</sup> brother and sister is present, does one child appear to be acting out on behalf of the others?
- Consider within the assessment the quality of each child's attachment and relationship to each other brother and sister in the decision making process.



- Describe each brother and sister's relationship as accurately as possible in terms that are concrete, observable and measurable. Please give examples of behaviours.
- Positive and negative behaviours should be noted and recorded, bearing in mind all brothers and sisters exhibit some degree of these behaviours.
- In what context has the brother and sister relationship developed?
- Have these brothers and sisters had any previous contact and / or knowledge of each other? If not, what are the risks and benefits of introducing them now?
- What is the quality (over time), the type of relationship (full or half brother and sister etc.), duration and intensity of the relationship between the assessed child and their brothers and sisters? Is this age and developmentally appropriate?

- What is the role of each child within the family? (Protector, parent, mentor, rival, persecutor). For example, is there a favoured child/ren? Is there a scapegoated child? Is there a parenting child who takes responsibility for the younger ones?
- How much are the children modelling their behaviour in the other children?
- Furman and Burhmester (1985) highlight 4 key factors to be assessed in brother and sister relationships: the **degree of warmth, conflict, rivalry**, and to which degree one brother and sister **dominates or nurtures** the other.
- What is the evidence for affection, comfort, protectiveness, praise and recognition of strengths towards one another?
- What triggers the more challenging behaviours? What methods help to resolve any challenging behaviours or emotions? Is the behaviour outside of what might be reasonable to expect of brothers and sisters? Is there something in the history that might explain why? What impact is the behaviour having on the brothers and sisters?
- Panksepp (1998) found 4 main systems in the brain are activated by attachment behaviour: **Aggression, Fear, Comfort Seeking**, normal, age appropriate, collaborative **reciprocal Play**, (not traumatised play which is characterised by dominance, control, power, repetition, ritual, violence, scary themes).
- **What are the emotional, psychological and physical / sexual risks each child poses to another if placed together?** Explain this carefully and give examples. What is the context of this behaviour? Is this behaviour acting out previous trauma? What attempts have been made at interventions to address these risks, what was the outcome of this? Is TESS or FTB involved and if so what are their views.
- What are the **potential impacts of removing any one child on the others**, i.e. will that change the dynamic between the others for example if the very controlling one is removed, will another take his / her role?

### 3. Potential Adopter / Carer Factors (Parenting Intensity)

- Parenting brothers and sisters who have been harmed by early parenting experiences and whose brother and sister relationships have become highly challenging as a result can be extremely demanding.
- In making family placements it is important that the primary objective of developing a secure attachment between child and parent figure is not jeopardised by the demands of managing brother and sister relationships.

#### Has the child been able to form a healthy bond with the current caregiver?

- Information needs to be gathered regarding the history / nature / quality of the child's relationship to their current caregiver (or previous foster carers) as this

may give clues about their capacity to form relationships with future adopters / carers & future parenting demands. If there have been difficulties in developing a relationship with the current or previous carers this needs to be documented.

#### **Potential Adopter / Carer Factors to be Considered:**

- There is a need to assess the potential stressors and risks for potential adopters and / or carers in parenting brothers and sisters together. This is very important as part of the matching process.
- What level of parenting intensity would be required to manage the brothers and sisters together and how would this impact on them?
- What capacity and support would a prospective adopter and / or carer need in parenting these children together and ensure their individual needs are met both emotionally and practically? Consider brother and sister dynamics, attachment needs, impact of trauma, disabilities etc.
- Will it be difficult to meet the demands of all the children if placed together and their needs are high and will this achieve the best outcomes for them?
- Are the identified stressors / risks for adopters in parenting these children together going to significantly restrict the chances of a match? If so, is it in the child's best interests to keep the children together?

#### **4. Details of Any Work Undertaken**

- Following any assessment that indicates the potential need for a separation, consideration should be given to whether a time-limited programme of work (brief therapy / direct work with an individual child or group work with brothers and sisters as whole) may be effective in improving the brother and sister relationship and preventing the need for separation.
- The brothers and sisters could be provided with opportunities to resolve any trauma / conflict between brothers and sisters; validate that certain experiences did happen, and possibly process any unresolved thoughts and feelings?
- There needs to be a balance between the potential benefits if this work vs potential implications / risks associated with a delay in a long term placement whilst this is being undertaken.

#### **5. Summary of Decision Making**

- What are the life-long implications / benefits / risks of keeping the brothers and sisters together vs the benefits / risks of separating them?

- The permanence plan is not age dependant.
- Details of the final decision.
- How and by whom was this decision taken?
- Could more resources have prevented the children being or remaining separated? If so, what?

## 6. In the Case of Brother and Sister Separation

- Have the reason for the decision to separate been explained to the child and included in the life story book and later life letter?
- What are the reasons for separation?
- What plans need to be put into place for preparing and supporting the children with the separation?
- What arrangements have been made for future contact?

### Description of Tools or Methods Used During the Assessment

**Daily Diary of a Child in Care or at Home** - Completed by foster carers or a parent/relative dependant on the living arrangements. Break down the day into sections to obtain a picture of the child's practical routine, along with the emotional and behavioural presentation at these times, looking at whether there are patterns, triggers to difficulties etc.

**Trauma / Nurture timelines** - A map or chronology of the child's life experiences which is usually taken from case files. These allow the assessor to consider both the positive and negative experiences that the child may have had, at which stage of chronological, emotional and social development these occurred and therefore their likely impact upon the child's development.

**Social Atoms and pictures of people in the child's life** - Various circles of different sizes are used to make a picture of the relevant people in a child's life. The child is placed in the middle and the distance from them to the placement of each other person is considered. The size of the circle representing each person is also considered.

**Direct Observation and structured/unstructured play sessions** - This occurs in various settings such as home, school & contact visits with birth family members. Where there is a large brother and sister group these sessions should take place with various combinations of the children. It is useful to view the children for brief periods where their primary attachment figure is not present. This will allow you to observe whether the children take on any parenting, domineering or authoritative roles.



**Direct Work with the Child(ren)** - Each child should have individual sessions in which they can explore and reflect on their life at home, the reasons why they are in care, their relationships with brothers and sisters and family members and what they would wish for in the future. Preparing and supporting children and their families for separation and their plans for permanence is important.

The tools and approaches used to seek their thoughts, feelings, wishes and perceptions will depend on the age of the child. The assessor could consider using figures, drawings, toys, labels to represent different family members, social atoms, eco maps etc. Children with disabilities may need extra help to express themselves.

Direct work with a brother and sister group together could include drawing up a family tree and talk about the significance of different family members. Experiences and memories will likely to vary and some may wish to keep family secrets. However, group work could be useful with older brothers and sisters supporting younger brothers and sisters to understand what happened at home. This approach where appropriate needs to be sensitive and is useful as part of life story work.

**Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) for 4-17 year olds** – this is helpful when assessing the emotional and behavioural needs of individual children and should be completed by the parent / carer and educational setting. Interrogate differences: what might explain or help to explain a big variation in scores in one or more domains? Why? A child may present differently in different settings, a parent or carer may perceive an individual child very differently from the child's teacher. 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?

**Gain information across settings** - at different times of the day and from different people who know the child well. For example naturalistic observations, free play, structured activities, home, school, alone, with different combinations of brothers and sisters, all brothers and sisters together, with care givers, during supervised contact sessions, at key points in the day e.g. meal times, bedtimes, how do they handle separation / endings? Any opinions or comments should be backed up with concrete examples of behaviours. The assessor does not need to rely on the opinions/reports of independent 'experts.' Foster carers and social workers are likely to know the children and their views must be considered in the assessment.

**Brother and sister Relationship Checklist (1991)** – this tool is used to understand the way in which brothers and sisters behave towards each other. The checklist is used to assess brothers and sisters in pairs and therefore be mindful in how the information is captured to analyse larger brother and sister groups through using the tool to consider different pairings.



[Questionnaires devised by Beckett \(2018\)](#) – these tools are used to gather information, views and observations from different sources where appropriate.

**These tools should not be applied in isolation to draw conclusions on a child's parenting needs and their brother and sister relationships. Instead, they are used in combinations, alongside information gathering from foster carers, birth parents, teachers and social workers to complete a profile of the children, giving a comprehensive picture of their long term needs within a new family.**

The Appendices has links to most of the tools detailed above. Others can be explored in supervision, consultations or with social workers who are experienced in direct work.

## Appendices

Appendix	Title
1	Together or Apart' Assessment Practice Guidance for Brothers and Sisters
2	1a Assessment Plan 1b Assessment Timeframe and Approaches
3	Assessment Template
4	Assessment Summary Checklist
5	Brothers and Sisters Together or Apart Supervisory Sample Questions
6	Eco Map
7	Trauma/Nature Timeline Template by Family Futures
8	Parents' and Relatives' Views About the Children and Their Sibling Relationships - Template for Social Workers (Beckett, coramBAAF)
9	Exploring Siblings' Roles and Any Differential Treatment of Children Template, for Social Workers (Beckett, coramBAAF)
10	Daily Diary of a Child in Care or at Home
11	BAAF Carers Report or Templates by Beckett for Foster Carers) Note: Foster Carers can either complete this form or the templates by Beckett listed below in appendix 12, 13 or 14)
12	Foster Carer's Initial Overview of Each Child - One Template Per Child (Beckett, coramBAAF)
13	13a Children's Physical Aggression Towards Others (Handout for Foster Carers) 13b Identifying Difficult Patterns of Behaviour and Aggression (for Foster Carers)
14	Foster Carer's Observations of Sibling Relationships - Positive and Negative Aspects (Beckett, coramBAAF)
15	Foster Carer's Observations of Contact,(Beckett, coramBAAF)
16	Observations of Contact with Parents and Brother and Sisters by Contact Workers (Beckett, coramBAAF)
17	Observations by Education Staff - Pre-School (Beckett, coramBAAF)
18	Observations by Education Staff - School (Beckett, coramBAAF)
19	Observations by Health (Beckett, coramBAAF. Note: This form can be amended and addressed to other professionals.
20	Sibling Relationship Checklist

21	<p><a href="#">Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires</a></p> <p>Note: Please consider the following from the list:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>P4-17</b> - SDQ and impact supplement for the parents of 4-17 year olds</li> <li>• <b>T4-17</b> - SDQ and impact supplement for the teachers of 4-17 year olds</li> <li>• <b>S11-17</b> - SDQ and impact supplement for self-completion by 11-17 year olds</li> <li>• Scoring instructions for SDQs for <b>4-17 year olds</b>, completed by parents, teachers or self-report. These instructions also cover scoring SDQs for those aged <b>18+</b></li> </ul>
22	<a href="#">Attachment Styles and Parenting Profiles</a>
23	<a href="#">Family Futures: Hierarchy of Needs When Considering Brother and Sister Placements (2008)</a>
24	<a href="#">Together or Apart? Assessing Brother and sisters for Permanent Placements. London: BAAF, Lord, J., &amp; Borthwick, S. (2008)</a>
25	<a href="#">Argent, H. (2008) 10 Top Tips on Placing Siblings. London: BAAF- Notes</a>
26	<a href="#">Beckett, S: Summary Paper for training dated March 2019, for Beyond Together and Apart: Planning for, assessing and placing brother and sister groups (2018)</a>
27	<a href="#">Family Futures: Siblings Together or Apart Practice Paper (2015)</a>
28	<a href="#">Family Justice Young People's Board, Top Tips for professionals when working with brothers and sisters</a>

## Reading

Lord, J., & Borthwick, S. (2008) Together or Apart? Assessing Brother and sisters for Permanent Placements. London: BAAF

Beckett, S. (2018) Beyond Together or Apart, Planning for Assessments and Placing Brother and sister Groups

Argent, H. (2008) 10 Top Tips on Placing Brother and sisters. London: BAAF

Bond, H. (2007) Managing Contact. London: BAAF

Burnell, A., Vaughan, J., & Williams, L. (2007) Family Futures Assessment Handbook: Frameworks for assessing children who have experienced developmental trauma. London: Family Futures Consortium

Kosonen, M. (1999) 'Core and Kin Brother and sisters' in We Are Family, London: BAAF

Rushton, A., Dance C., Quinton, D. Mayes, D. (2001) Brother and sisters in Late Placements, London: BAAF

## Useful Websites

Family Futures - <https://www.familyfutures.co.uk>

PAC-UK - <http://www.pac-uk.org>

Adoption UK - <http://www.adoptionuk.org>

First4 Adoption - <http://www.first4adoption.org.uk>

CoramBAAF - <http://corambaaf.org.uk>

One Stop Social - <https://www.onestopsocial.co.uk>