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**Together and Apart assessment**

Guidance notes are provided here to help you and it should be deleted before submitting this assessment. The guidance is all in red text, so make sure any red text is deleted before you submit.

**Background**

Sibling relationships are really really important. For many people they are the longest lasting and most important relationships of their lives. Siblings are potentially the people we can turn to most reliably in our lives for help, belonging, comfort, fun and support. It is therefore crucial for our children, who are already often very vulnerable, to try and make sure we do all we can to enable their relationships with their siblings to develop positively and to be maintained.

Legislation, guidance and regulations are clear that we must place children together wherever possible and only place them apart where is a good reason to (which can be the case sometimes). If children are placed apart, we also need to make sure we work to help them develop their relationships with their siblings in other ways.

The placement decision has to be based on an assessment of the children’s relationships and needs. If the children can’t be placed together, we must consider their need for support and to see each other. We have to consider the needs of each child in the group, and the likely or possible consequences of each option on each child.

There is no clear definition in law of what a “sibling” is, so we need to think broadly about this. It will include children sharing a parent (or a step-parent), but potentially also having lived in the same household together or children who would have lived together if they had not been in care. It may be best to ask a child who they identify as their siblings.

Research in this area is not amazingly robust but in general, children who share a positive and healthy relationship should remain together. Children who are placed apart from their siblings suffer more common placement breakdowns and children placed together tend to have better outcomes – but this is complex, which is why we need to try and do a good assessment.

**Tasks to carry out before you write up**

* Read the case notes/history to help you understand their story so far. What have they experienced, what’s been the history of sibling relationships? Who have they lived with/not and when? Think about what the file/what you already know tells you about care the child needs now and you think their needs might be in the future.
* Talk to the current carers/significant past carers/parents and anyone else who knows the child well (e.g. adult siblings). Find out about the day-to-day parenting needs of the children, individually and together, and what they know about the relationship between the siblings – consider each child with every other child. Ask for a description of each child’s personality/interests/emotions/behaviour etc. What is a day in their life like? What is it like to care for these children? What is the behavioural, social, and emotional development of each child? Ask for their views on who should be placed together or apart and why they think this is right. What has the child/ren said about their siblings to them? Do they talk about missing their siblings? If so, who?
* Ask the foster carer to complete a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire if they haven’t already. You can download these from [www.sdqinfo.org/py/sdqinfo/b3.py?language=Englishqz(UK)](http://www.sdqinfo.org/py/sdqinfo/b3.py?language=Englishqz(UK)) . Look for the heading “Double-sided version with impact supplement”. The first four are the ones you will need. There are versions for children ages 2-4 and 4-17, and versions for school and parents/carers (the first 4 in the list). The scoring sheets are at the bottom of the page. If the link is broken, you can google “Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire” and download them from lots of different websites.
* Talk to school/nursery/other involved people and get the same information as far as possible. Ask the school/nursery to complete a SDQ if they haven’t already.
* Observe the children together – preferably playing a game or doing a joint task where they have to take turns, share, reciprocate etc. Observe how they interact. Think about these things: Do they take pride in each other, give praise, show understanding to each other and help each other? Do they come together as a group to complete a task, for example when playing a game? Do any of them try and parent or dominate the others? Are any of them scapegoated or seem to be on the edge of the group? How critical are they of each other and/or how negative or insulting are they to each other? How much conflict or rivalry is shown? How much warmth and affection is shown? Can they share? Do they have fun together? How does each child interact differently with the other children? If possible, and/or if it's a large group, try and see them in different groupings. Things may be very different with one child absent or present for example. You may wish to print off and take the observation tool at the end of this document.
* Try and also observe the children in a different environment (e.g. school or nursery) to see how they play, take turns, share etc. with different children who aren’t their siblings. What’s the same and what’s different? If you don’t know the children already and haven’t seen them interact already, you may need to undertake more observations. Others who know the child may be able to help you with information here.
* Draw an ecomap with each child, or do another similar activity to gain their views about the strengths of each relationship and about each of their siblings. Also ask them how their other siblings get on with each other. Do not directly ask the children who they want to live with as that’s putting a great deal of responsibility on them and you may not get their true feelings. You might, however, reconsider this with older children.

Name of social worker completing this assessment:

Date of assessment:

## **1. The assessment process**

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| Why this assessment is being completedSet out why are you doing this assessment. What has happened or may happen that means you need to consider where siblings need to be placed? Has it been ordered by court? If so, by who and when?The siblings being considered as part of this assessment/not being consideredSet out which children are being considered as part of the assessment and why. Tell us the relationships of each child – who are their parents, full siblings/half siblings etc. Include siblings you aren’t considering as part of this assessment.Work carried out before completing this assessmentSet out what you did (see the list of tasks above). For example, who did you speak to/observe/get information from? How many times have you met the children and how long have you known them for? When did you observe them/in what combination? |

## **2. Profile, history and needs of each child**

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| Put a heading with the child’s name. Set out the child’s name, age, ethnicity and any health/disability/learning or other specific issues. Summarise briefly what’s happened for this child since birth including placement moves/abuse and trauma suffered and the impact of this and what the quality of care they’ve had has been like. What are their needs now and what do you expect their needs to be in the future? Do they show any challenging behaviours or aggression? Do they have any emotional needs which are challenging to meet? Include where they live and their care status and what you were told by others about the child. How resilient do you think this child is? Overall, how challenging is it now for a carer to care for them, and how do you think this will change in the future? Look at your SDQ results. The individual answers given in each line will help you understand how the child functions, and the overall score will tell you how much more or less they are struggling in each area than another child of their age. |

## **3. Sibling relationships**

**Relationship of the children to each other**

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| Put a heading with the child’s name and consider each child one at a time. Think about everything you’ve heard, read and seen from your observations. Be clear where your information has come from as you give it.Set out how they relate to every other child in the group – both positives and negatives. Positives would include being warm, engaging well with them and showing care to and care about them. Negatives would include lots of conflict, aggressive behaviour, trying to bully/undermine/dominate another siblings or strongly competing with another child for attention. Tell us how often/where/when they see every other child and the history of seeing them/living with them. Has any child abused or exploited another child? Does any child trigger trauma in another child? If a child plays a parenting role to another child, can they let go of this? What did each child say about each other and their relationships with each other? |

**Group interactions**

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| Set out how the children interact together (see the questions above) as a group, but also as smaller sub-groups (if it’s a big sibling group). If there is no difference, just say that – be as brief as possible. What needs do they present together as a group/different sub-groups and what parenting capacity is required to meet it? How might that change in future? |

## **4. Views of others**

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| Set out here what others say about which children should be placed with who and why. Include foster carers, parents, other family and friends who know them well, relevant professionals etc. Be clear who gave their view and when. |

## **5. Analysis**

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| The realistic optionsFirst, tell us which placement options you are ruling out as they are not realistic and tell us why you think they aren’t realistic. For example:* It’s unlikely a long-term placement for 7 siblings together will be found
* If one child has abused another and this is likely to continue/start again if they are placed together and is unlikely to be prevented by therapeutic work.
* It may also be that no carer could realistically meet the needs of multiple children together as their needs are not likely to reduce even with work, or the competing needs of children may mean placing them together is not realistic.

If you are unsure about what’s practical, ask for advice (perhaps from your manager or the permanency advice service). Be careful here, as you will need to be clear that we could not change the situation by doing work with the children to rule out a placement as realistic (as in the examples above).Then set out what the realistic placement options/placement combinations are.The pros and cons of each optionList each option one at a time. For each option, tell us what the impact would be on each child of that option and how well or not you think it would work for them and why. What are the pros and cons? What work, if any, would need to be done to make this combination work or be more likely to work? The research about how to know what combinations to place children in is not as robust as we’d like it to be, but these things are important to think about:* Sibling relationships are really important, and siblings should not be placed in different homes without good reason.
* Consider which relationships seem to work best. Signs siblings could successfully be placed together include if they show each other care; if they’ve spoken positively about their siblings; and if they interact positively (see what to look for in the observation tool on the final page). Negative signs include conflict and aggressive behaviour between siblings including attempts to dominate, bully or undermine a sibling; competing and showing rivalry for adult attention; a previous pattern of sibling abuse (particularly sexual abuse) and/or exploitation; and triggering strong memories/feelings of trauma in each other.
* Think about the level of needs a group of children will present carers with both now and in future (particularly with challenging or aggressive behaviour). Also consider any additional emotional, mental health or health needs. Will carers realistically and sustainably be able to cope? Think back to what you outlined in previous sections. You cannot and should not assume that if one child is disabled or has a serious health issue, that they should be placed alone, or if that siblings are to be placed in different homes, that child should be the one placed alone. Each situation needs to be thought about in terms of the whole picture.
* Younger children should not automatically be placed separately because they could secure a permanent home more quickly. The advantage of an earlier placement should be carefully balanced against the loss of the experience of growing up with their brothers and sisters and what that means across their life.
* If siblings have never lived together previously, (e.g. if they were taken into care at different times), this 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 may be really important in the future. That said, the more harm (from abuse and neglect) a child has experienced before joining a new family, the less likely it is to work out well. Also, if a child is older when they are joining a family and if they have two or more placements before being placed in the long-term placement the placement is less likely to be successful. If a sibling has an inability to invest emotionally in a new family this could complicate and/or disrupt a new placement for their sibling(s).
* Carefully consider if we can do some focussed and time-limited direct work or brief therapy before any long-term placement to improve sibling relationships to then enable them to be placed together long-term.

This list is not exhaustive. The research around this area is not amazingly robust and each situation and child will have unique factors you need to think about. Your preferred option and planWhen you have set out the options, state which your preferred option is and why. Who is to be placed with who? Be clear why you think this is the best overall option for this group. If you are overriding the wishes of children, be clear why.Be clear what work will be done and what family time arrangements will be put in place if this option is pursued.For example, state what work you will do to help each child make sense of why they are living with other siblings or not. They need to be helped to understand in an age-appropriate way, why this is. If the child is having a later-life letter or book, this should be recorded clearly.For family time, what work is going to be done on quality of relationships? When and how often will they visit the homes each other live in (doing this at least once is really important). How often will they see each other? How will they be helped to remember/celebrate/mark each other’s birthdays and other special occasions? How will news about their siblings be shared with them and by who?Remember that even when seeing each other is difficult and upsetting, children may value seeing each other. It’s really important for siblings to see each other apart from seeing their adult relatives. At the same time, this has to be balanced against spending time with those they live with and their friends and settling into their life where they live.ReviewSet out when this recommendation should be reviewed. There should be clear timescales identified in relation to reviewing whether plans should be altered with regards to placing children apart, for example, if there is significant delay to a care plan of adoption. The reviews should also consider how the siblings see each other and where/when and how they receive news about each other/hear from each other, get photos and/or videos of each other and take part in celebrations and special events with each other. Do the children know and understand these plans and know what to expect? |

**Sibling observation sheet** Date: Venue:

Children observed:

Positive interactions – note down who did what. Look for praise, caring, cooperation, showing understanding, helping each other, affection, sharing, having fun and warmth.

Negative interactions – note down who did what. Look for aggression, conflict, competing for attention, dominating others, parenting others, criticism, insults and scapegoating.

What is it like to care for each child? What challenges/positives have you seen?

Future planning – who do you want to see with who now? What questions do you have now or areas you want to explore further? What work might you need to recommend to try and improve how the siblings interact?