

CASCW Practice Notes

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Siblings in Foster Care: Maintaining the Ties that Bind

A large number of children who must be placed in foster care are members of sibling groups--estimated between 56% and 85%. National studies disclose that up to 75% of children are separated from at least one of their siblings when placed in foster care, underlining the importance of the issue.

Most states have policies and regulations that encourage the maintenance of sibling bonds. In fact, Minnesota has model legislation and guidelines to reinforce the principle of siblings being placed together. While the lifelong value of sibling relationships is acknowledged, the practice field struggles with pragmatic placement issues.

Illustratively, concurrent planning and shorter timelines may actually hinder the placement of large sibling groups because it may take longer to find foster/adoptive homes.

Attention to the issues of sibling placement has been limited, as reflected in the meager research studies and the lack of focused attention to the barriers in maintaining a vital relationship among siblings.

This edition of "Practice Notes" identifies Minnesota's policy, provides some insights from existing studies and suggests recommendations.

We hope this contribution will encourage the maintenance of sibling bonds.

Value of Sibling Ties

Siblings hold lifelong importance for each other.

The presence of siblings may ease adjustment to loss and transition.

Siblings maintain a family connection and help provide a sense of family identity.

Siblings can support each other in crisis and are a source of comfort, which can provide stability in foster home placement.

In families where there has been parental absence, older siblings sometimes fill these roles, suggesting that in some cases, separation from brothers or sisters may produce as much or more grief and anger than the separation from parents.

The importance of sibling relationships may be increasing, due to societal factors such as smaller extended families, longer life spans and increased mobility.

Sources: Hegar, R.L. (1988). Sibling relationships and separations: Implications for child placement. *Social Service Review* 62, (3), 446-467.

Kosonen, M. (1996). Maintaining sibling relationships: Neglected dimension in child care practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 26, 809-822.

What is a sibling?

In defining "siblings," we should make sure to include those brothers and sisters with biological ties, significant bonds and love, those who have lived with each other as brother or sister, including half-siblings and step-siblings, and those with a biological bond who have never lived together. Siblings may have lived together and still have different parents.

Minnesota Strongly Encourages Siblings be Placed Together

These principles guide the Commissioner in consenting to the separation of siblings:

1. Children have an inherent right to maintain their sibling relationships and live with their siblings when possible.
2. **Minnesota Statute:** "Siblings should be placed together for foster care and adoption at the earliest possible time unless it is determined not to be in the best interests of a sibling or unless it is not possible after appropriate efforts by the responsible social services agency." (Minnesota Statute 260C.212 subd 2).
3. The county agency should explore all available resources to find a permanent placement which will allow siblings to live together.

Source: Minnesota Rules, parts 9560.0410 to 9650.0485

The Rules also allow for **adoption subsidies** for sibling groups which are considered a "special need" (Rule 9560.0081).

Minnesota Rule 9545.0040 permits extending the maximum number of children to seven in a foster family placement, if there are siblings who "need placement together as determined by the agency."

When Siblings Cannot Remain Together

Requests to separate siblings must be sent to the Commissioner for approval and must include information on the following:

Permanent adoptive or foster home placement that would allow the siblings to live together is unavailable.

Psychiatric, psychological, emotional, behavioral or other documented factors preclude the siblings' ability to live together.

Efforts have been expended to place siblings in the same foster or adoptive home.

Agency plan for continued contact among the siblings has been developed. Objections by all known parties regarding the separation are recorded.



Practice Guidelines

Siblings who are separated for the purpose of adoption or foster home placement must have the opportunity for contact with one another (unless not in the best interests of the children involved as therapeutically documented).

Minnesota Rules: Foster care agencies must keep in the child's record "all available information about the names and addresses of the child's siblings." (Rule 9545.0825)



Strategies for Maintaining Sibling Ties

Families who have adopted sibling groups have the capacity to act as mentors, support networks and recruiters.

Siblings can be placed in stages, so that the foster home is not overwhelmed and each child can integrate into the family.

Supportive services should be in place for these foster homes, such as training and respite care.

Financial resources to foster parents, through adoption subsidies, specialized foster care rate or an initial supplement to help foster parents meet the additional financial burden of caring for large sibling groups should be provided.

Agencies can maintain the sibling relationship through joint therapy sessions, shared vacations, shared respite care and placing siblings in the same neighborhood or school district.

Siblings should have the same worker, if possible (Hegar, 1988).

Source: McFadden, E.J. (1983). Placement of sibling groups, single-parent adoptions, and transracial adoption: An analysis. In Hardin, M., & Dodson, D. (eds.), *Foster Children in the Courts*. Boston, MA: Bullsworth Legal Publishing.

Best Practice and Permanency Planning

Research suggests that siblings are more likely to stay in their first placement without disruptions, if they are placed together. The same study shows that if siblings are not placed together initially, the chances of reunion in a permanent placement is greatly diminished. The implications of these findings highlight the importance of finding one placement for siblings as soon as possible when coming into care.

Source: Staff, I., & Fein, E. (1992). Together or separate: A study of siblings in foster care. *Child Welfare*, 71, (3), 257-270.

Encouraging Visitation

Minnesota Statute 260C.201 subd5 allows the “court to set reasonable visitation for relatives,” which includes siblings.

Courts may have jurisdiction to order sibling visitation as a condition of separate adoptive or long-term foster placements (Patton & Latz, 1994).

If separated, sibling visitation must begin as soon as possible after placements have been made. If visitation is not possible, then siblings must be provided telephone numbers, pictures and addresses -- some way to maintain a connection.

Challenges to Practice

Separation may be a Threat to Reunification:

When planning visitation and family reunification, separate placements for siblings present additional barriers to successful reunion with birth parents. If siblings are together in one placement, it may be easier for parents to maintain regular visitation (Staff & Fein, 1992).

There is a lack of foster homes for large sibling groups. The larger the group, the more difficult it may be to find an appropriate placement.

If one or more siblings has serious behavioral, emotional or physical needs, this may overwhelm the foster home, and this sibling may need a more therapeutic setting.

Caseworkers are reluctant to jeopardize placement for all the siblings, if one sibling is disrupting in the foster home.

All of the siblings may not need out-of-home placements at the same time.

Some studies show that if there is a large age gap between siblings, they are more likely to be separated. Additionally, older sibling groups are separated more often than younger groups.

Sources: Kosonen, M. (1996). Maintaining sibling relationships: Neglecting dimension in child care practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 26, 809-822.

McFadden, E.J. (1983). Placement of sibling groups, single-parent adoptions, and transracial adoption: An analysis. In Hardin, M., & Dodson, D. (eds.), *Foster Children in the Courts*. Boston, MA: Bullsworth Legal Publishing.

Legal Standing of Siblings

All 50 states have recognized the importance of sibling relationships to some degree, with sibling registries and other statutory guidelines, but the right of siblings to associate is still decided with each individual case.

Currently, many courts do not offer due process to siblings in hearings, but this is slowly being challenged in the courts.

Minnesota's policy requires counties to show that "reasonable efforts" were made to place siblings together.

For children over 10 years of age, an attorney may be assigned to advocate for strengthened sibling relationships.

Source: Patton, W.W., & Latz, S. (1994). Severing Hansel from Gretel: An analysis of siblings' association rights. *University of Miami Law Review* 48, 745-808.

How do siblings find each other?

States that provide sibling registries enable siblings to find each other long after separation.

What types of families are best suited for large sibling groups?

The families with the following characteristics have been found to be the most successful adoptive homes:

- a. *Administrative skills* in order to handle multiple tasks and delegate effectively.
- b. *Coping skills* including flexibility and adaptability.
- c. *Strong foundation in group dynamics* to be able to set limits and meet needs of all the children.
- d. *Access to community services*, such as educational programs, religious groups and fun activities.
- e. *Intra-and inter-familial support*, including support from their own children, spouses and extended relatives.

Source: Ward, M. (1987). Choosing Adoptive Families for Large Sibling Groups. *Child Welfare* 66(3), 259-268.



Recommendations

Guidelines for sibling visitation should be developed.

A sibling registry should be maintained by the Commissioner, in order for adult siblings to find each other.

In adoption, large sibling groups may be treated as a “special needs placement,” which permits higher payment rates. This category of payments should be extended to large sibling groups in foster care.

A special recruitment effort for foster families that are willing to take large sibling groups should be initiated.

Reunification plans should be strengthened. If siblings are separated, workers should assess the placements within 4-6 weeks, to determine if the siblings can be reunified in another placement.

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Sources and For Further Reading:

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