

Siblings in the Child Welfare System:

Implications for Policy and Practice



A summary of county child protection agencies' approach to siblings from assessment through permanency planning in Minnesota.

What is Child Welfare?

The child welfare field includes human services in the areas of child protection, foster care, and adoption. This work is carried out in Minnesota through a state supervised, county administered system by government and non-profit organizations, and is supported by research and evaluation from government, academic institutions and non-profit organizations. The collective goal of child welfare practice is to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of children, youth, and families.

Background on Sibling Exposure to Child Maltreatment

Every day, children are exposed to violence in their homes, schools and communities as witnesses and/or direct victims. Data from a nationally representative study revealed that more than 60% of children were either directly or indirectly exposed to violence within the past year.¹ Children exposed to violence may have enduring physical, mental and emotional consequences, including difficulty with attachment, externalizing behavior, anxiety, and depression.² Additionally, children exposed to one form of violence are more likely to be exposed to other types of violence and abuse at some point in their lifetimes.³ In 2014, approximately 3.2 million children were the subjects of at least one report to Child Protective Services and 17.8% of those children had substantiated dispositions.⁴ Empirical research demonstrates that the effects of child maltreatment, including negative mental health, physical health and social outcomes⁵ are similar to outcomes of general violence exposure, but little is known about the prevalence and effects of children's exposure to child maltreatment.

Researchers have explored the prevalence and impact of children's exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) and estimate at least 15.5 million children live in families in which physical IPV occurred at least once in the previous year, with seven million children living in families in which severe IPV occurred.⁶ Recent research has shown that children exposed to a sibling's physical abuse compared to IPV exposure demonstrated more outward behavior toward others, such as aggression,⁷ while earlier studies revealed that children who witnessed the abuse of their sibling had behavioral health

outcomes that were similar to those found among victims of child physical abuse.^{8,9,10} Still, little attention has been paid to the potential effects of witnessing a sibling being harmed by a parental figure¹¹ and the developmental effects of children's exposure to child maltreatment remain largely unacknowledged and understudied. Our understanding of exposure to child maltreatment remains limited due to the inconsistent inclusion and definition of siblings within federal and state legislation, leaving the burden on individual counties to determine specific practices for assessment and service provision for these children.

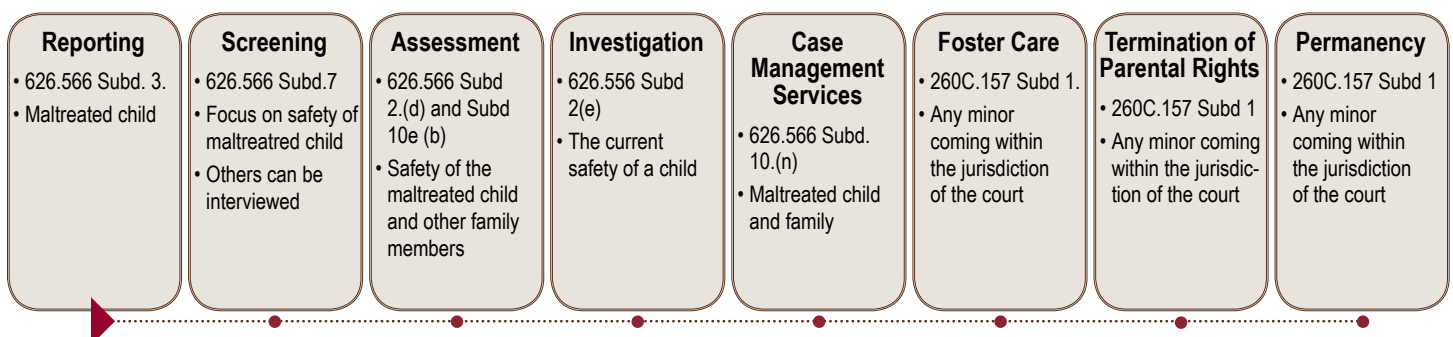
References to Siblings in Child Welfare Policy

NATIONAL

The key federal legislation focused on child maltreatment is the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). Under CAPTA, "Child abuse and neglect" is defined as "physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, negligent treatment or maltreatment of a child under the age of eighteen by a person who is responsible for the child's welfare under circumstances which indicate that the child's health or welfare is harmed or threatened thereby, as determined in accordance with regulations prescribed by the Secretary"¹² (Sec. 3. Public law 93-247). Within this definition, there is no mention of exposure to child maltreatment. Because indirect maltreatment is excluded in this definition, siblings who are exposed to child maltreatment are eligible for few service interventions. The exclusion of siblings' exposure to child maltreatment is not unique to CAPTA, however; exposure as a defining term of child maltreatment is lacking throughout federal policies.

Overall, the term 'sibling(s)' is infrequently used in federal policies focused on child maltreatment. When siblings are mentioned, it is most often in reference to placement options, with little emphasis on early intervention and prevention services for the siblings of maltreated youth. Although the term 'sibling' is infrequently used in federal policies relating to child welfare services, a number of other references, including "any other child under the same care who may be in danger of abuse or neglect" (CAPTA-Sec.4 (b) (2) (c)), "children's safety within the home and to preserve intact families in which children have been maltreated" (Promoting

Figure 1. The focal person(s) at each stage of the case process and Minnesota statutes that include siblings



Safe and Stable Families (Sec.431 (a)(1)) and “the child or another child of the parent” (Adoption and Safe Families Act, H.R. 867 (E)) are included throughout the policies to ensure that services are provided to all children in the family, not just those who are directly maltreated. These policies all aim to intervene on behalf of children other than the alleged victim of maltreatment (i.e., siblings exposed to child maltreatment), at various stages in the case process; yet, there is no consistent and common definition that specifically targets services for the siblings of maltreated children. Despite evidence that children who are exposed to child maltreatment are at risk for behavioral, academic and other social problems, they are afforded few intervention efforts under current federal policies.

STATE OF MINNESOTA

While other terms and definitions identifying who receives intervention services are used throughout the case process, Minnesota state policies include a definition of siblings that is consistently used throughout the statutes. Under 260C.007 Subdivision 32, Siblings are defined to mean “one of two or more individuals who have one or both parents in common through blood, marriage, or adoption, including siblings as defined by the child’s tribal code or custom.” What is problematic is the lack of reference to siblings in policies relating to child welfare early in the case process (see Figure 1) In some instances it is not until foster care placement, termination of parental rights and permanency planning that the specific reference to siblings of the maltreated child is introduced. When siblings are discussed in the later stages of Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement, it is primarily in regard to maintaining sibling relationships once the maltreated child is removed from the home and placed elsewhere.

Minnesota’s Child Welfare Sibling Identification Practices

Four methods may be used to identify sibling groups: child, maternal, paternal and address of residence¹³ (see Table 1). As noted previously, it was unclear how county child welfare professionals in Minnesota identified sibling groups at each stage of the case process.

In an attempt to uncover these practices, we conducted a survey to assess how siblings are defined and included in practice across Minnesota’s county-based child welfare system. We contacted every county child welfare director to determine what practices were in place related to identifying, assessing and providing services to siblings exposed to child maltreatment. County directors were first invited to participate in the survey via email in June 2015 and provided a link to an online survey. Full or partial survey responses were received from directors or supervisors from 51 of Minnesota’s 87 counties.

Administrators from 51 counties provided survey responses which capture the reporting practices of Minnesota county child welfare agencies relating to documentation, safety and well-being, assessment and service provision to the alleged maltreated youth and his or her family. Two policy issues have

Table 1. Four methods used to identify sibling groups

Sibling Identification Method	Definition
Child	Sibling groups based on relationships between children, including full, half and step siblings
Maternal	Sibling groups based on the relation between children and mothers
Paternal	Sibling groups based on the relation between children and fathers
Address of Residence	Sibling group identified as all children living at the same address of residence

emerged from the findings of this study related to sibling and child maltreatment definitions.

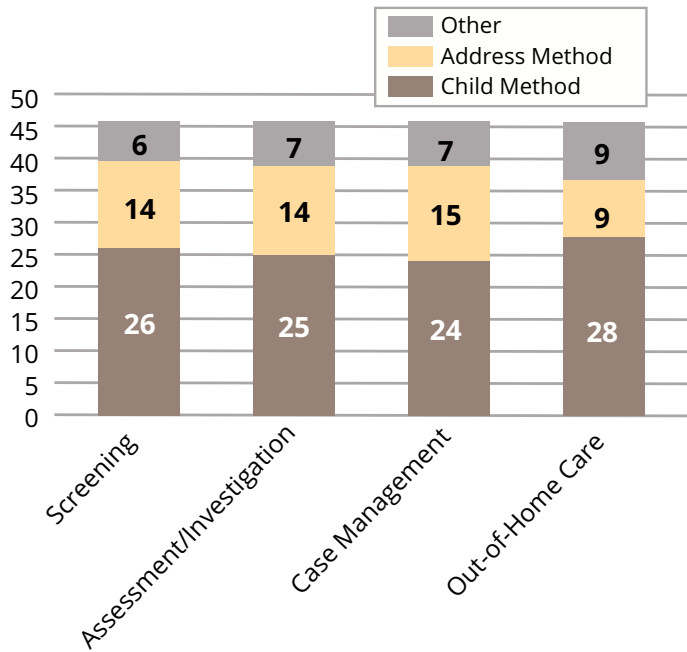
Issue 1

The definition of ‘sibling’ is consistent throughout the CPS case process but may not be used until considering placement outside of the home. The focus is on the child who is the target of maltreatment, and his or her family, in the early stages of CPS involvement but the inclusion of “sibling(s)” as a specific target for intervention is not considered until later stages.

Under current Minnesota state statute 260C. Subd.17, the inclusion of siblings is implicit in the definition of Family or household members, which means “spouses, former spouses, parents and children, persons related by blood, and persons who are presently residing together or who have resided together in the past, and persons who have a child in common regardless of whether they have been married or have lived together at any time.” A more deliberate inclusion of siblings in the definition of family will allow for more targeted services for siblings of maltreated youth in earlier stages of CPS involvement.

Information related to how siblings are defined within each Minnesota county was provided by 46 of the 51 survey respondents. The majority of Minnesota’s county managers reported that their county most frequently used the child method to identify siblings (see Figure 2). The use of the child method was consistently favored throughout the stages of the case process from screening to out-of-home placement but did vary, with the greatest number of counties using the child method for out-of-home care (60.8%) and the fewest for case management (52.2%). The second most frequently used method

Figure 2. The most frequent methods of sibling definition by stage of case (N=46)



Note: Respondents from five counties provided no data for these items

to identify siblings is the address of residence but again, there were discrepancies in its use throughout the case process. The address of residence definition for sibling groups was used by the most number of counties for ongoing case management (32.6%) and the least number for out-of-home placement (19.5%). To improve consistency in practice across the state, the authors of this report encourage counties to adopt a uniform definition to identify siblings and then apply this definition at each stage of the case process.

Issue 2

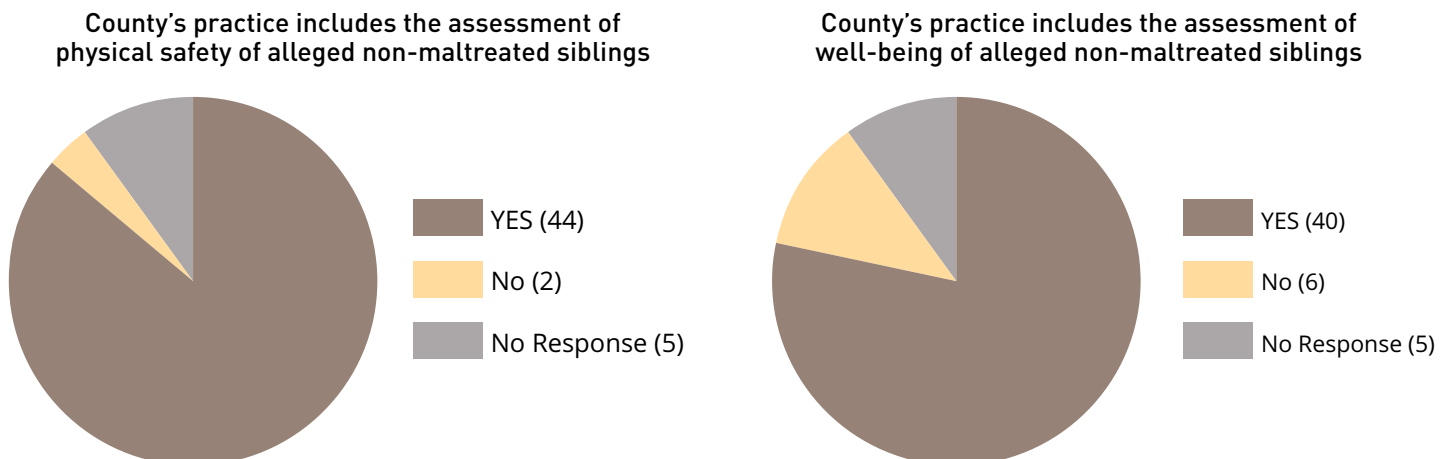
Exposure to child maltreatment is largely omitted in federal and state child welfare legislation.

Expanding the current definition of child maltreatment to include exposure to maltreatment will in turn extend the offering of CPS intervention services to children beyond the maltreated youth, including siblings. Such services could address child safety and developmental well-being and work to counteract the potentially harmful consequences of exposure to maltreatment.

All 51 counties provided information related to documentation of siblings in Minnesota counties on the person screen of SSIS, the state’s SACWIS system, with 96% documenting siblings in the person screen of SSIS. Counties also reported a consistent focus on assessing the physical safety of alleged non-maltreated siblings with 95.6% of responding counties reporting they assess physical safety of all children in the home. Even with a consistently high practice of assessing physical safety there is a slight decrease in focus on well-being of alleged non-maltreated youth, with only 87% of responding counties reporting that they emphasize this in their county practice (see Figure 3).

County managers noted an increased focus on family members during documentation and assessment, yet most of the services provided to siblings remained grouped within the larger family unit (see Figure 4). Many counties have started to recognize the need for services for the alleged non-maltreated youth, with 76% of counties providing mental health services and 63% providing individual counseling to siblings of maltreated youth. Managers reported that services are most frequently provided for the parent-child relationship (98% of counties), mental health concerns (96%) and behavioral problems (94%). These findings are promising; however, they do not specify whether the purpose of the service intervention is for the alleged maltreated child or for another family member. The authors of this brief would argue that a greater emphasis on individualized services for the siblings of maltreated youth is needed.

Figure 3. County focus on safety compared to well-being assessments for all children in the home, including allegedly non-maltreated youth (N=51)



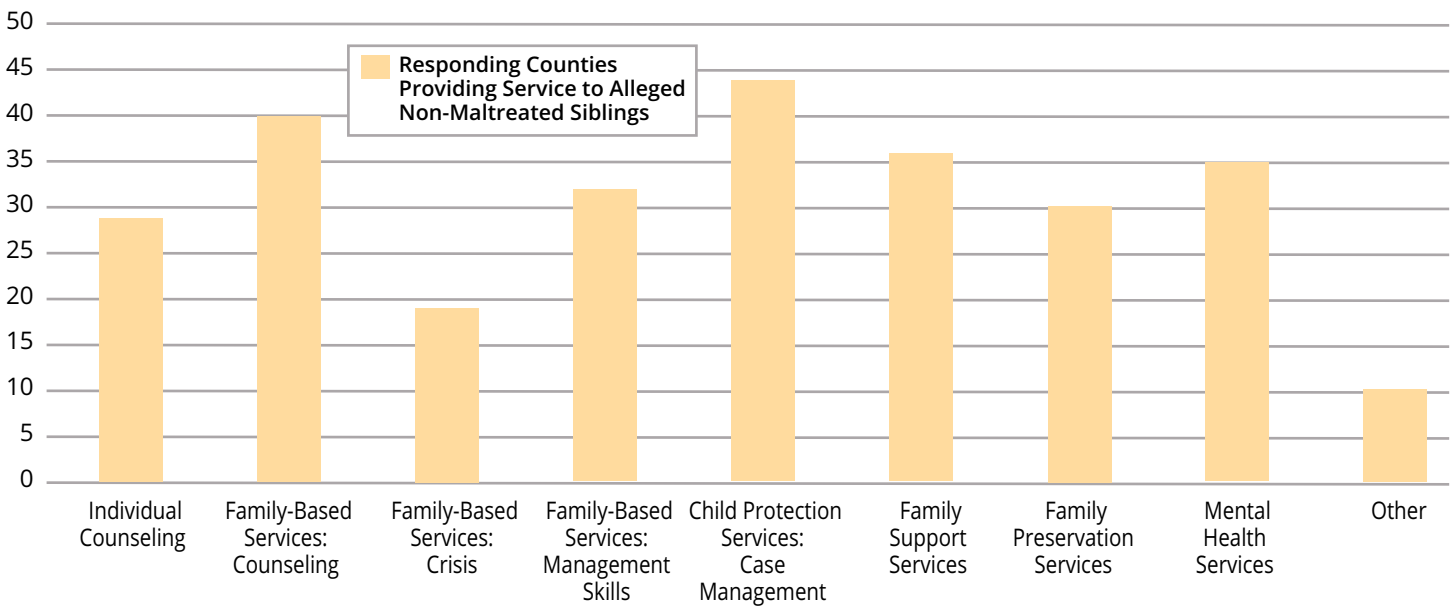
Promising Practices

Minnesota State Statute 262.556 Subd. 10n. describes a required referral to early intervention services for any child under the age of three years who is involved in a substantiated case of maltreatment. Under this statute the child shall be referred for screening under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, part C. This statute demonstrates an acknowledgment in Minnesota law of the importance of early intervention services in negating the harmful outcomes associated with child maltreatment. A similar required referral to intervention services could be made for siblings of maltreated youth who

have been exposed to maltreatment and could benefit from CPS involvement.

Some county respondents reported an increased awareness and understanding of “how trauma can impact all children in the family, maltreated or not” and that these children “may require intervention.” If a similar required referral to intervention services for any child who is exposed to maltreatment in the home were implemented, this would be a good starting off point to ensure the healthy development and well-being of these at-risk youth.

Figure 4. Services provided to alleged non-maltreated siblings (N=46)



Resources for further information and continued education

Visit the Minnesota Department of Human Services Child Protection website:

http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/idcplg?IdcService=GET_DYNAMIC_CONVERSION&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased&dDocName=id_000152

For papers and reports generated by CASCW-supported affiliates: <http://z.umn.edu/cwpubs>

For more information about federal child welfare policies, visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway <http://www.childwelfare.gov>

To access Minnesota State Statutes, follow this link: <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statute>

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- ³ Ibid.
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