

The Importance of Sibling Relationships

The focus in foster care is often on a child's relationship with his or her parent(s) and the efforts to restore that connection. Children in care live outside their parental home for a period of time, and in the case of some, for the remainder of their childhoods. We know these separations create anxiety, grief, and loss for both parent and child. Often, what further impacts the trauma of living apart is the separation from sibling(s).

A child's relationship with his or her siblings are some of the longest lasting relationships they will have, usually outliving parent-child bonds and sometimes even spousal relationships. Siblings are the first peer group that children have. Kids usually spend more time with their brothers and sisters than with any other group of kids. Cheering for each other at school events, celebrating holidays together, and even the mundane moments, like riding the school bus together, are everyday activities brothers and sisters share and bond over. The strong bonds between siblings may become even more vital when children are faced with the stress of their parents not being able to meet their needs. Children lean on their siblings during difficult times, and their bond may become even stronger than the ties they have with their parents.



Through the eyes of a child, a brother or sister may be someone different than those a caseworker or an attorney would identify. Children do not necessarily use biology to define who they feel their siblings are. Moreover, children in foster care may live with and form strong ties to children with whom they have not had a previous relationship. Whether connected by biology or not, those ties can be a source of strength and comfort for a child in out-of-home care, making it necessary for us to rethink who a child may regard as a sibling.

Asking the child who they consider a sibling is a good way to determine who they feel is a meaningful source of support. For example, this could mean:

- Full or half-siblings, including any children who were previously removed from the home
- Step-siblings
- Adopted children in the same household
- Other close relatives or nonrelatives living in the same home
- Foster children in the same family
- Other teens in group homes with

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whom the youth has a close relationship

- Children of the partner or former partner of the child's parent

These important relationships are even more vital to children when they enter care. Caseworkers and resource families can significantly improve the out-of-home experience for kids when they're aware of these sibling or sibling-like relationships and do their best to maintain these connections.

- When children are removed from their home and from their siblings, they suffer additional grief and loss through separation. "I spent 12 years in the foster care system, moving from place to place. Most painful of all, I was separated from my younger brother. I later learned he was living only a couple of exits down the highway, just a few minutes away, but we had no contact."-- Anthony, from A Tale of Two Brothers, FosterClub.com.
- Kids in care may feel an extra layer of safety when they are placed with their siblings. That comforting presence of a brother or sister provides an emotional buffer from the fear that many children experience when moving into an unfamiliar home.
- Kids in foster care usually wind up with smaller networks of relationships, making their sibling connections proportionally more important. These connections have been shown to increase the resilience of kids in

care.

- Children crave the connectedness of their sibling relationships. If children in out-of-home care lose track of their siblings, they will very likely go searching for them when they become adults. As many, if not more, adults search for their siblings than their biological parents. Brothers and sisters often turn out to be the most important family that children who have been removed from their homes have as adults.

The vast majority of children who are removed from their homes have siblings, and yet typically less than half of those are able to remain living



with those siblings. While placing kids with brothers and sisters is not always possible due to lack of resource family capacity or abuse histories between siblings, doing our best to maintain those connections will significantly improve the lives of kids in care. Without connections these relationships will wither.

Connections can mean visitation, phone or social media contact, or, at the least, being able to share information about the other siblings with the child in care. By supporting these relationships, we can help ensure a better experience for children in care, as well as a future with people these kids call "family."

When Siblings are Placed Separately

If you grew up with brothers or sisters, you know how impactful those relationships can be. Our siblings are with us through everything; together, we learn about things like socialization, conflict resolution, and negotiation. Siblings provide a kind of support and nurturing different from parents and can provide stability in an unstable environment. Imagine, now, how difficult it would be to be forced to be separated from them. Especially as a young child entering foster care, a pretty scary, confusing event in itself.

Siblings entering the child welfare system may be separated for a variety of reasons. Sometimes children are not placed together because there is not a placement option available that can accommodate two, three, or more kids. Or perhaps one or more of the children require a higher level of care than what is available. There may be

perceived safety concerns, or perhaps siblings enter care at different times. Regardless of the reason, there are many research resources that suggest siblings in the foster care system who are able to stay connected, even when they are not placed together, have better outcomes, such as fewer placement disruptions and an increased likelihood of reaching permanence.

In the busyness of our lives – especially the lives of parents and caregivers – it can be challenging to fit in another visit or appointment or meeting. If children are not placed near to one another, there may also be travel and financial implications to frequent or regular face-to-face get-togethers. However, there are more and more

ways that we can help children and youth in out-of-home care maintain their connections to their siblings even when they are not placed together. Below are some ideas that may work for your family:

- Arranged visitation—certainly distance can be a factor in how frequently visits occur, though, in Wisconsin, monthly visits are required. Communication among caregivers and workers is key here. Developing a consistent plan ahead of time, and regularly reevaluating it, can help keep regular face-to-face

interactions happening. It is suggested that regular sibling visitations occur independently of visits with birth parents.

- Pen, paper, and phone calls—a traditional way of keeping in touch. Siblings can send letters, cards, and photos to each other. Younger siblings can also participate in this form of

communication by sending drawings and pictures (caregivers may need to transcribe for little ones who cannot write yet). Phone calls can be reassuring, providing the ability to hear each other's voices.

- The Internet and social media—the Internet has forever changed the way our society communicates and interacts. Siblings can exchange emails in place of pen and paper, and there are a variety of platforms to video chat, such as Skype, that are free or low cost. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Snapchat offer ways for separated siblings to communicate regularly and easily.

- Joint outings/events—caregivers can plan



joint outings for siblings to connect. This could be a picnic, an afternoon at a water park, or celebration events, such as a birthday or holiday.

- Joint respite care—families can take turns providing respite for siblings in their care, providing the siblings with opportunities to spend time together.
- Have siblings share a therapist—jointly when possible, or subsequent appointments. While this may not always be appropriate, this may help siblings work through their emotions about being in care, help them with sibling relationship difficulties, and give them time to work on their life books.
- Camps—[Camp To Belong Wisconsin](#) is a camp just for siblings who have been separated through the child welfare system. This camp gives youth a fun camp experience to share with their siblings and an opportunity for them to connect. ***Wisconsin's camp dates for 2017 are August 14-19.***

Sibling relationships help promote resilience and strengthen ties to identity and history. When siblings are unable to be placed together, it is essential for them to have consistent contact with each other to preserve their relationship. As caregivers, providers, and advocates for children in out-of-home care, we are tasked with finding ways to encourage sibling relationships through contacts and visitation. The resources section of this newsletter has additional tip sheets, websites, and materials that may help you on your journey of caring for children and youth in out-of-home care.

Tip Sheets

<http://wifostercareandadoption.org/Reading-Room/Tip-Sheets>

- Fostering a Child Whose Sibling Lives Elsewhere
- Sibling Conflict in Adoptive Families

Books

- *Siblings in Adoption and Foster Care: Traumatic Separations and Honored Connections*, by Deborah N. Silverstein

Additional Information

- [Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption](#)
- [Fostering Together](#)
- [Camp To Belong](#)
- [Why Should We Focus on Sibling Relationships for Children and Youth in Foster Care?](#)
- [A Tale of Two Brothers](#)
- [Ten Myths and Realities of Sibling Adoption](#)



Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (WFAPA)

WFAPA provides great opportunities to network with other foster and adoptive parents. They also have an extensive website, wfapa.org, a newsletter, and a network of supportive WFAPA members and other foster parents who can be a resource for you.



We are always here for additional information, resources, and support. You can contact us toll-free at **800-947-8074** or via email at **info@wifostercareandadoption.org**.

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