

Caring for a Child Whose Sibling(s) Live Elsewhere

When siblings enter foster care, the goal is to keep the children together whenever possible. Sometimes, however, this cannot happen. Research shows sibling relationships are important for a child's development and emotional well-being. Sibling connections can provide a sense of family identity even if a child is not connected with other birth family members.

If you foster a child whose siblings live elsewhere, there are ways you can support, connect, and assist that child through any emotions and confusion that may arise.

Though you cannot control what happens in their sibling's placement, you can use this tip sheet to gather ideas about connecting with their family, facilitating visitations, and supporting the children in their feelings and struggles, given their unique circumstances.



Supporting the child in your home

In most situations, a child's relationship with their sibling is and will be the longest one they will have in their life. Being separated can feel isolating and can be devastating.

Siblings who are separated from one another may suffer from grief as a result of the losses they have experienced. Signs of grief could

include:

- Acting out
- “Clingy” behavior
- Crying
- Explosive temper
- Headaches
- Loss of appetite
- Running away
- Trouble sleeping
- Withdrawing from others

Most of us are aware of the five stages of grief: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The child in your care may go through some or all of these stages once or multiple times. If you notice a dramatic change in their appetite, sleep schedule, or school performance, it may be time to consider seeking out professional assistance or support.

When siblings are separated, it doesn't always mean they have to be disconnected. Here are some possibilities for helping keep siblings connected:

- Keep a photo of the sibling(s) in the child's room, perhaps even some photos of the children together.
- When possible, you could set up phone

Continued on page 2

calls. It would be helpful if this could be done when the children can talk with one another with few distractions.

- If visits can be done safely and appropriately (see more below), it can be beneficial for children to connect in person. A visitation plan between siblings, like a visitation plan between birth parent and child, will need to be approved by the case workers for each of the children and could include the two (or more) families going to a park, the zoo, or any place that provides a fun activity for the families to do together. Keep in mind that siblings may have lost touch with each other, and a visit where they have an activity to focus on can help re-establish the bond between them.
- For older children, emailing, connecting on social media, and video chatting online might be options you could consider. (Monitoring online and social media use for the children in your care is important.)
- For no-tech options, cards and letters can also be a great way to maintain connections.
- Siblings may also be able to get together at a local library during their after-school programs.
- Sending photos can go a long way toward keeping the sibling bond strong, especially for children who cannot see one another in person.

If and when siblings do have visits or other forms of contact with one another, it's helpful to have the contact information for the sibling (s) 's caregiver (s) so that you can keep communication open with the other family or families. For example, you might want to get in touch if you notice behavior changes after visits.

You may find that these other caregivers can provide some insight about what happened during the visit. You can also check in with the child after a visit or interaction. A gentle conversation can go a long way. Try asking a

few open-ended questions such as, "How was the visit with your brother?" or "How are you feeling?" These questions can be signs a child is waiting for to open up and share.

Determining if connecting is safe/ appropriate

If you are caring for a child in out-of-home care, the court or the child's case worker will determine if ongoing contact with a sibling is safe and appropriate. Visits are deemed unsafe and/or suitable for various reasons. For example, a visit may be considered unsafe or inappropriate if a birth family member has shown violent behavior at past visits or if a sibling has perpetrated sexual abuse on the other, and a visit would cause the victimized sibling further trauma. Every situation is different, and there are state standards that guide a case worker's decision-making in this matter.

You may want to check with the caseworker about historical interactions. In some cases, details about how the siblings interacted with each other before entering out-of-home care may shed some light on how they interact together at visits. It's especially important to alert the child's case worker as soon as possible if you notice anything that points to adverse outcomes of visits or continued contact between siblings.

Your role as a caregiver can be to advocate for visits between siblings when appropriate and to provide the necessary supervision to ensure all children are safe while they are together. Be sure to talk to the child's caseworker about the types of interactions that are allowed or not allowed, the type of supervision needed, any activities the children cannot do together, behaviors to be aware of, and other ways that you could help support the interaction.

In order to help facilitate a successful visit:

- Prepare the child in your care by ensuring

Continued on page 3

they are fed and alert before the visit. You can also give them a few ideas of conversation starters or favorite toys to share.

- If you are transporting to and from visits, try talking with the child in your care. Some kids may want to keep things light, others seek guidance, and some may not want to talk.
- If you can stay for the visit, you could use the time as an opportunity to get to know the parent or caregiver of the sibling(s).
- If the child has a life book, they could bring it to share or work on with their siblings. (For more about life books, please see the tip sheet link on this topic in the Resource section.)

As with any relationship, the one between siblings in out-of-home care will ebb and flow. Sometimes, you will need to remind the child in your care of this. There may be times when you will need to remind yourself of the uniqueness of the circumstance and have an extra understanding of how hard it must be for the children. The more you can help the child in your care feel supported by and attached to you, the easier it may be for him to handle the stresses of living apart from his sibling(s). You can facilitate the bonds and connections between siblings and help the child in your care grow, develop, and thrive.



Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *Siblings in Adoption and Foster Care: Traumatic Separations and Honored Connections*, by Deborah N. Silverstein
- *My Brother, My Sister: Sibling Relations in Adoption and Foster Care*, by Regina Kupecky
- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: [The Importance of Sibling Connections](#)
- Virtual Resource Kit: [The Importance of Maintaining Sibling Relationships & Connections](#)

Tip Sheets

- [Helping Children in Care Build Trusting Relationships](#)
- [Life Books: A Lifelong Priceless Treasure](#)
- [Digital Media Safety: Tips for Caregivers](#)
- [Sustaining and Strengthening the Sibling Bond](#)

Training From *Champion Classrooms*

- [Sibling Relationships](#)
- [Relational Permanency: The Role of Foster Parents in Supporting Child Relationships](#)

Additional Resources

- [Belong Wisconsin](#)