

## Sustaining & Strengthening the Sibling Bond

Sibling relationships are often the longest relationships we experience in our lives. Our siblings are our first peers. With them, we learn how to socialize and share; they are the people with whom we have our first arguments and disagreements and teach us how to make up. In many cases, siblings provide a kind of support and nurturing different from what our parents provide. In difficult times or in home environments that are chaotic, unpredictable, or unsafe, the bond between siblings can intensify—and become even more important.

Sibling relationships help promote resiliency, especially when children face a difficult situation together. In many cases, a sibling may be the only constant presence and safe haven for a child or young person.

### Staying Close, Living Apart

The goal for children and youth entering out-of-home care is to keep siblings together whenever possible; however, there are times when siblings are separated. When siblings can't be placed together, they need to have consistent contact with one another. Research shows that siblings in the foster care system who can stay connected even when not placed together have better outcomes. These improved outcomes include fewer placement disruptions and a higher chance of reaching permanence through reunification, adoption,

or guardianship.

Keeping siblings connected when they live apart can be a challenge for caregivers. Sometimes, the children live far apart, making in-person visits difficult to arrange. Travel time and costs associated with travel might further impede the frequency of face-to-face visits between siblings placed separately.

However, families are finding more ways to help children and youth in out-of-home care

maintain their connections and relationships with their siblings even when living apart. Following are some suggestions that might work for your family.



- *Pre-arranged visits*—Wisconsin's Foster Parent Handbook states that children must visit their siblings

face-to-face at least once per month when they are not seeing one another as part of the family interaction plan.

Communication between caregivers and workers is vital to ensuring those visits occur. Developing a consistent plan ahead of time and regularly re-evaluating it can further help keep visits on track.

- *Old-fashioned pen and paper*—Siblings can send letters, cards, and photos to one another via the mail. Younger siblings can also participate in this form of

Continued on page 2

communication by sending drawings or pictures. For little ones who cannot write yet, caregivers can help transcribe the messages.

- *Phone calls*—Hearing your brother or sister's voice and knowing that he or she is okay can be very reassuring. Children might also use a cell phone to send text messages or photos to a sibling in addition to traditional phone calls.
- *Internet/social media*—The Internet has forever changed the way we communicate with each other. Siblings can exchange emails, send each other Snapchats, or communicate through Facebook or Instagram, among other social media. This can be a fun and easy way for siblings to maintain day-to-day connections.
- *Video chatting*—Many options are available today to facilitate video chatting. Apps such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Facetime can be free or low-cost.
- *Respite care*—Families can take turns providing respite for siblings in their care, giving the children opportunities to spend time together in a home environment. This can also provide additional support for caregivers.
- *Joint therapy*—For siblings who may benefit from therapy, sharing a therapist might help them work through their emotions together. If they can be with their sibling (s), they may feel more comfortable and safe talking about being in care and healing from trauma.
- *Joint outings/events*—Caregivers might plan joint outings for siblings to connect. These could be picnics, a day at a water park, or celebration events such as birthdays or holidays.
- *Camps*—[Belong Wisconsin](#) is a camp for siblings who have been separated through the child welfare system.

### Importance of Sibling Connections

Most children and youth who enter the foster care system have at least one sibling. Unfortunately, only about half of those

children can remain living with their brothers and sisters. Regardless of whether or not children are sharing a home, it is still of utmost importance that children share a bond.

Siblings in foster care have already endured trauma and loss; when they then cannot live with their siblings, they may suffer an additional level of grief as a result. There is a risk of losing a part of their identities and connection to their pasts if efforts are not made to help siblings in care maintain their relationships with one another. Youth involved with the foster care system often share that they wished they could have stayed with their siblings or, at the very least, had the opportunity to stay connected to them. As one former youth in care says in “A Tale of Two Brothers” (FosterClub.com), “Most painful of all, I was separated from my younger brother. I later learned he lived only a few exits down the highway, just a few minutes away, but we had no contact.”

Children crave the connection to their siblings. If you grew up with brothers or sisters, you know how impactful those relationships can be. In truth, even as adults, many of us continue to turn to our siblings for support, counsel, and comfort. Committing to helping siblings in out-of-home care keep in contact with one another can go a long way in lessening the trauma they may be facing—and help ensure a better experience for children in care.



Resources on page 3

## Resources

### *From the [Resource Library](#)*

- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: [The Importance of Sibling Relationships](#)
- Partners Newsletter: [Siblings](#)
- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: [Sibling Relationships](#)
- *Siblings in Adoption and Foster Care: Traumatic Separations and Honored Connections*, by Deborah N. Silverstein and Susan Livingston Smith
- Virtual Resource Kit: [The Importance of Maintaining Sibling Relationships](#)

### *Tip Sheets*

- [Fostering a Child Whose Siblings Live Elsewhere](#)
- [Sibling Conflict in Adoptive Families](#)
- [Parenting Siblings Connected Through Trauma](#)

### *Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)*

- [Sibling Relationships](#)
- [Everyday Healing: Naming Adversity and Loss](#)

### *Additional Resources*

- [Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption](#)
- [A Tale of Two Brothers](#)
- [The Unbreakable Bond](#)
- [Protecting Sibling Relationships in Foster Care Act of 2022](#)