

10 Realities OF SIBLING ADOPTION

Sibling relationships are likely to be the longest-lasting relationships people will experience throughout their lives. For children in foster care and who are waiting to be adopted, remaining connected with siblings provides meaningful, powerful opportunities to experience strong relationships that can thrive throughout their lives. It is possible and crucial to keep siblings connected and placed together whenever possible. The realities described below offer hope and key approaches for countering some of the common reasons given for separating siblings.

1 Children experience better outcomes when they are placed with their siblings.

Keeping siblings together is often in the best interest of children and should be a priority. Many of the common concerns that may be used to justify separating siblings (e.g., concerns about older siblings taking on a parental role) can be addressed, avoiding subjecting children to the additional trauma of being separated from their siblings. By preparing adoptive families to meet the needs of sibling groups and by keeping siblings connected and placed together, child welfare systems can promote improved emotional and behavioral outcomes and overall well-being for children.

2 Sibling rivalry is a normal occurrence in sibling relationships.

Separating siblings who are experiencing sibling rivalry removes the opportunity for them to work through their issues and may teach them to walk away from conflict. The separation will likely increase the trauma they already feel from being separated from all that is familiar to them. Keeping siblings together in a healthy and supportive family environment will give the children an opportunity to learn to resolve differences and develop stronger sibling relationships.

3 You can keep siblings safe from each other without separating them.

Protection from emotional, physical, and sexual abuse between siblings is important; however, it is also important to understand that often this is a learned behavior and a result of past traumatic experiences. Professionals will need to distinguish between true abuse and all other forms of sibling hostility while considering measures other than separation to prevent further abuse. Simply removing a child from his/her sibling does not guarantee that the abuse will not continue in another setting. Having adoptive parents who are well-informed about trauma, aware of the abuse, and understand the dynamics of abuse will help in developing safety measures to address the behaviors while being able to keep siblings together.

4 Child welfare systems should view a child's need to be placed with siblings as a key need. This need to be placed with siblings should carry equal weight as a child's other needs as child welfare systems consider families who can meet the specific needs of children.

Children who are waiting to be adopted may have emotional, behavioral, or other challenges and needs as a result of the trauma they have experienced.

The adoptive family that is well prepared to meet the specific needs of a child will be able to keep the siblings together while also meeting each child's other needs.

5 A child may have a very different, more inclusive definition of “sibling” than the one used in law or policy.

Children who experience life in the child welfare system often form a variety of “sibling like” relationships with non-related brothers and sisters they have lived with both in their biological families and in foster care. Professionals placing children should take into consideration the child's definition of who is and is not a sibling before making adoption placement decisions.

6 Although there is a need for families for large sibling groups, most sibling groups waiting to be adopted consist of two or three children.

The majority of waiting children with siblings on the AdoptUSKids photolisting are in sibling groups of two (66%) or three (23%) siblings. Fewer are in sibling groups of four to six siblings (11%). (McRoy and Ayers-Lopez 2014)

7 There are many families who are interested in adopting sibling groups.

Most waiting families registered on the AdoptUSKids photolisting (84%) are interested in adopting more than one child. (McRoy and Ayers-Lopez 2014)

Many families who express the desire to adopt a sibling group are interested in “ready-made” families. Others have had positive experiences as being part of a sibling group or having previously cared for siblings. Policies and procedures that provide exceptions and incentives for families to adopt sibling groups are essential.

8 Targeted recruitment efforts specifically designed for sibling groups are critical – and can be very successful – to identifying potential adoptive families that can keep siblings together.

Strategies including tapping into resource families who have raised siblings to recruit and talk to potential families, using media to publicize the need for families willing to adopt these sibling groups, and featuring recruitment pictures of the children taken as a group have proven most effective in placing brothers and sisters together.

9 Siblings have a unique bond that, when nurtured through placement together, can be an important source of emotional support for each other.

Research indicates that siblings placed together benefit from the sibling bond in ways that do not present problems to the parent/child relationship. Older children in the sibling group are thought to provide emotional support to their younger siblings. There is evidence to suggest that siblings who are placed separately in adoption have more anxiety and depression than those who are placed together. (Groza 2003)

10 Placing siblings together can reduce emotional and behavior problems that children and youth might otherwise experience if they were separated.

Siblings who are placed separately are more likely to demonstrate greater emotional and behavioral problems. Research indicates that when siblings are placed together, they experience many emotional benefits, fewer moves, and a lower risk for failed placements. (Leathers 2005)



Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008 (Public Law 110-351)

Guidance on Sibling Placements

The title IV-E agency has discretion to:

- Define siblings or sibling groups.
- Set standards for visitation and contact (a minimum of monthly). Make exceptions when the agency determines that placement together or visitation/ongoing interaction is contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings.
- Determine appropriate settings and supervision of visits.

The Children's Bureau encourages an agency to:

- Develop standard decision-making protocols for workers.
- Conduct periodic reassessments of situations in which siblings are unable to be placed together or have frequent visitation.

The title IV-E agency must:

- Make reasonable efforts to place siblings removed from their home in the same foster care, adoption or guardianship placement. Set standards for visitation and contact (a minimum of monthly).
- Facilitate frequent visitation or ongoing interactions for siblings who cannot be placed together (as determined by the agency).
- Make exceptions when the agency determines that placement together or visitation/ongoing interaction is contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings.

10 REALITIES OF SIBLING ADOPTION

Resource List

Realities 1-4

Concepts taken from:

National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning. *NRCFCPP Sibling Practice Curriculum*. Hunter College School of Social Work. New York, NY.

National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections. *Working with Siblings in Foster Care: A Web-based NRCPPC Toolkit*. Available at: <http://www.nrcpfc.org/toolkit/sibling/index.html>.

National Adoption Information Clearinghouse. (1992). *The Sibling Bond: Its Importance in Foster Care and Adoptive Placement*. Retrieved from www.childwelfare.gov.

Reality 5

Cohn, M. (2008). *Sibling Placement: The Importance of the Sibling Relationship for Children in Foster Care*. National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning. New York, NY.

Realities 6-7

McRoy, Ruth, Ph.D., and Ayers-Lopez, Susan, M.Ed. (2014). Ad Hoc Report: *Characteristics Analyses of Children and Youth Photolisted with Siblings on the AdoptUSKids Website and Prospective Adoptive Families Registered on the AdoptUSKids and Open to Adopting Two or More Children*. The University of Texas at Austin, Center for Social Work Research.

Reality 8

Northeast Ohio Adoption Services. (2001). *The Sisters and Brothers Together Project: Final Project Report for Federal Adoption Opportunities Grant #90 CO 0821*. Warren, Ohio.

Reality 9

Groza, V., Maschmeier, C., Jamison, C., and Piccola, T. (2003). "Siblings and Out-of-Home Placement: Best Practices." *Families in Society*, 84, 480-490.

Groza, V. (1996). *Successful Adoptive Families: A Longitudinal Study of Special Needs Adoption*. New York: Praeger.

Reality 10

Kernan, E., (2005). "Keeping Sibling Together Past, Present, and Future." *Youth Law News*, Vol. 24 (4).

The original citation is:

Leathers, S. (2005). "Separation from siblings: Associations with placement adaptation and outcomes among adolescents in long-term foster care." *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27(7), 793-819.

Festinger, T. (1986). *Necessary risk: A study of adoptions and disrupted adoptive placements*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

Rosenthal, J.A., Schmidt, D., & Conner, I. (1988). "Predictors of special needs adoption disruption: An exploratory study." *Children and Youth Services Review*, 10, 101-117.



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