

Sibling-Friendly Agencies and Practices Keep Children Together

By Regina M. Kupecky, LSW

Although the child welfare field emphasizes birth family reunification and kinship adoption, the significance of sibling ties is often glossed over. However, when a joint placement is in the children's best interests, placing siblings together not only reduces the children's losses and preserves kinship ties, it also reduces stressed agencies' adoption costs. Siblings can help each other process the past, remember experiences, and move into the future together.

Creating a Sibling-Friendly Agency

Part of recruitment is having a sibling-friendly agency. First, educate the *entire* staff about the importance of sibling connections—everyone from the adoption recruiters and workers to the pre-service trainers, supervisors, intake workers, subsidy staff, administrators, foster care departments, and support staff. A clear understanding of sibling connections could eliminate problems that result from separation and lack of visitation in foster care. Everyone must be on board, whether from a sense of child-centered practice, or simply from the fact that placing four children in one home is cheaper than recruiting, educating, and providing post-placement services to four families.

Next, recruit for siblings all through the adoption process:

- **Intake:** That first telephone call from a prospective parent is key to setting up a friendly working relationship. The staff person should mention siblings as an option. Families need time to process new ideas.
- **First mailing:** When information packets go to families, do they mention siblings? Send a few child-specific flyers, at least one featuring a sibling group. For later education packets, the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (www.calib.com/naic or 888-251-0075) has a useful article or Three Rivers Adoption Council (312-471-8722) can share a pamphlet I wrote, called *Siblings are Family, Too*.
- **Pre-service training:** If you don't have a section on siblings, fold it into sections about loss, birth families, or attachment. Be sure that parent panels include at least one family that adopted or fostered a sibling group.

Also consider these on-going sibling-friendly practices:

- If your office displays posters of waiting children, are some of them sibling groups? Newsletter articles should also mention the need for homes for siblings.
- Do all staff members recruit, including secretaries, administrators, and janitors? If they go to churches, YMCAs, stores, or libraries, have they hung sibling-friendly posters?
- When recruiters go out to malls or fairs, do they always post pictures of sibling groups on their display?

- Are workers who complete family assessments talking about sibling groups in a positive way? Do they remind parents that few people adopt one child—families usually come back for more? By taking two or three at once, families eliminate extra paperwork.

No one wakes up one morning, calls an agency, and says "Do you have a sibling group of four children that includes three boys, ages 8–14?" The only way to successfully recruit families for specific children is specific recruitment.

- Siblings need a recruitment plan. List who is doing what and when. Ensure the plan's timely execution.
- A great picture of the sibling group together—especially if the children are touching—is a powerful tool. When separate pictures of each child are shown, it gives parents a feeling they can pick and choose whichever child they want (usually the youngest).
- Sibling groups almost always get the most calls when presented in the media. Feature sibling groups often in newspapers, television features, agency newsletters, posters, or wherever your agency recruits.
- Pre-service training groups are a great place to recruit—all the parents are there to adopt. Ask the trainer if you can have five minutes to present a sibling group. Pass out flyers and show a video of the children together.
- Don't eliminate singles or childless couples. They don't disrupt any more than married or repeat parents.
- Make sure recruiters know about available subsidies. Many parents feel they can't adopt a group because of costs and are reassured to learn of financial assistance.
- When an event such as a recruitment picnic is planned, buy each sibling in the group the same shirt so that prospective parents can spot them all in the crowd. Make sure they eat at the same table or play together.
- Measure success in terms of events, not time. Agencies separate children because "we haven't found a family in five months." But have you tried every recruitment idea once, then again? If so and still no response, then reassess the recruitment plan.

Some sibling groups cannot be placed together. Prior to recruitment, sibling groups' attachments to each other and their primary caretakers as well as their safety when in the same home should be assessed. But with lifebook work and careful preplacement preparation, many more sibling groups can be together than are presently. We have 117,000 children waiting in the United States. If we place them two by two that is only 58,500 homes—if three by three only 39,000 homes. So make your life easier and the children happier. Create a sibling-friendly agency and recruitment practice.

Ms. Kupecky has spent more than 25 years in the adoption field and frequently presents workshops about siblings, attachment, and preparing children for adoption. She co-authored Adopting The Hurt Child: Hope for Families with Special Needs Kids and works at the Attachment and Bonding Center of Ohio. Contact her at 440-230-1960 ext. 5 or regtraku@msri.com.