

## VIEWS ON FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION IN NORTH CAROLINA

# fostering perspectives

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## What You Can Do to Strengthen Sibling Connections

A great deal depends on our ability to maintain and strengthen sibling connections for children in the child welfare system.

### Placing Siblings Together Makes a Difference

Usually, the best way to maintain sibling connections in foster care is to place brothers and sisters with the same family. Research indicates that when they are placed together with at least one of their siblings, children experience an enhanced sense of safety (Shlonsky, et al., 2005) and fewer emotional and behavioral problems (Smith, 1998). They may also experience better outcomes. For instance, studies have linked joint placement of siblings to increased placement stability (Hegar, 2005) and to positive permanent outcomes—specifically, greater likelihood of reunification (Webster et al., 2005), adoption, and guardianship (Leathers, 2005).

### Separating Siblings Can Have Consequences

For most children, being separated from their siblings means losing one of the most significant relationship they have known. This can have a variety of negative consequences:

- Brothers and sisters separated from each other in foster care can experience trauma, anger, and an extreme sense of loss. Separating siblings may make it difficult for them to begin the healing process, form attachments, and develop a healthy self-image (McNamara, 1990).
- Studies have shown that even babies experience depression when separated from their brothers and sisters. In one study, a 19-month-old girl was better able to cope with separation from her parents than from her siblings. When the children in this family were placed in different foster homes the baby stopped talking, refused to eat, withdrew, and rejected affection. This persisted even after she was reunited with her parents. It was not until her

brothers and sisters rejoined the family that the child resumed her former behavior (Meyendorf, cited in Hegar, 1988).

- Sometimes it is only through their siblings that children have been able to gain any positive esteem. When they see good qualities in a brother or sister, they are less likely to see themselves as “a bad kid from a bad family.” Siblings are often able to reveal to each other parts of themselves that they are reluctant to share with anyone else, thus strengthening the bond between them (NRCFCPP, 2004).
- Children separated from their siblings in care may be at greater risk of placement disruption and less likely to exit to adoption or subsidized guardianship (Leathers, 2005).

## Keeping Siblings Together

The primary responsibility for keeping siblings together when they enter out-of-home care lies with child welfare professionals and the courts. However, kinship, foster, and adoptive parents (i.e., resource families) can make a big difference by doing the following:

- **Express an interest in sibling groups.** Sometimes siblings are separated for no other reason than that the agency involved cannot find a single family to care for them all (Shlonsky, et al., 2005). Resource families can help by clearly communicating to their agencies their interest in caring for sibling groups.
- **Be open to changes.** Children are more likely to be separated from their siblings if the children enter care at different times (Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005; Washington, 2007). Make it clear to your agency that you understand how important it is to keep brothers and sisters together, and that you would consider opening your home to the siblings of children already in your care, should the need arise.

## Maintaining Connections

Even when siblings are not in the same placement, resource families can maintain and strengthen sibling connections using the following strategies, most of which come from the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning’s *Sibling Practice Curriculum* (2004):

- Family-to-family visits and joint meals.
- Playgroup meetings during foster parent support groups or training.
- Have the children join the same sports association (e.g., play soccer together).
- Allow children to use the phone, email, Skype, or Instant Messenger to chat briefly on a daily basis.
- If your child’s sibling is being cared for by another resource family in the same community, explore the possibility of babysitting for one another or using the same babysitter, child care, or respite



provider. It is the social aspect of spending time together in an unstructured way that is valuable to building and maintaining sibling relationships.

- If you are an adoptive parent, consider allowing ongoing contact with your child's siblings even after the adoption is finalized.
- Children in foster care may live in homes with other children (foster, adopted, or birth) to whom they are not related, but with whom they develop ties. Ask the children in your home who is important to them and, in collaboration with the child's custodial agency, help the child maintain connections with these children as well.
- Look for opportunities to bring separated siblings together in settings such as reunion camps specifically geared to helping children connect with their brothers and sisters.

### Ways Agencies Can Support Sibling Placements

Siblings should have the same worker, if possible.

Place children in homes as geographically near to each other as possible.

When a family is recruited to foster sibling groups, don't fill up the home with individual children just because the beds are there. Some programs provide a stipend for families without placements, as an incentive to remain with the agency and keep beds open until a sibling group needs placement.

Siblings can be placed in stages, so that the foster home is not overwhelmed and each child can integrate into the family.

Provide extra supports to help the family deal with logistics – transportation, assistance with tasks such as school registration, day care, etc.

Make supportive services such as training and respite care available and accessible.

Encourage/start support groups in which resource families can share and learn from one another. Families who have adopted sibling groups have the capacity to act as mentors, support networks, and recruiters.

Make sure resource families, especially kinship caregivers, are receiving all the financial support to which they are entitled.

Ask community members and businesses to help support resource families by donating or providing at a lower cost items such as vans, bunk beds, etc.

If siblings must be placed separately, agencies can maintain the sibling relationship through joint therapy sessions, shared vacations, shared respite care, and by placing siblings in the same neighborhood or school district.

Sources: CASCW, 2000; McFadden, 1983; NRCFCPP, 2004

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