



The Importance of Preserving Sibling Connections

The statistics are staggering: 85% of the youth in out-of-home care have one or more sibling, and of these, 75% are separated and placed in separate foster, kin or adoptive homes – studies show the longer children remain in foster care the more likely it is that they will be separated from their siblings.

The reasons children are separated from their siblings may include:

- Being part of a large sibling group. Large sibling groups are more likely to be split up because of rules regarding the number of children allowed in a foster home
- Siblings that have a big age spread might lead to separation (some homes only take infants or younger children and do not/can not foster older youth and teens)
- The needs of the children may require different placements
- Relatives and kin may take the kids they are biologically related to but not half-siblings or step-siblings
- Behavioral issues, for example if one sibling is abusive to the other siblings

For children entering care, their relationship and bond with siblings can be a protective buffer to the hardships that led to their placement in out-of-home care. Research has shown that sibling relationships increase a child's well-being and ability to attach in future adult relationships, and may also lessen the impact from the loss of their parent(s).

For youth who come from families in crisis, siblings often take care of each other which can magnify the loss and trauma if they are separated. Studies also indicate that siblings that are placed together are less likely to exhibit emotional and behavioral problems and are also less likely to disrupt from an adoptive home.

Many parents and professionals recognize these sibling bonds between children who share the same biological parents, but sometimes forget that there are other ways children experience the sibling connection – for example, with half siblings, step-siblings, foster children in the same family, and for some children adopted internationally, orphanage or group-home mates. Each move in which a child lives with other children is a separation from a biological or “fictive” sibling.

Social workers and parents sometimes dismiss the importance of connecting children with siblings born to birth parents after an adoption, believing that there can be no connection between siblings who have never met. However, many adult adoptees have shared that they felt shocked and betrayed after discovering as adults that they had siblings. Sharon Roszia, Program Manager for The Kinship Center in Salinas, CA suggests that adoptive parents “think about how they would feel if they were separated from a sibling they knew nothing about and then were found by that sibling in later life.”

For the caregivers of youth separated from their siblings, maintaining contact is often difficult because of scheduling issues, the time involved in transportation and supervision and even because of negative behaviors that appear during or after a visit or contact. For siblings that have had a history of negative interactions, having a therapist help them resolve issues together is important in helping the siblings learn how to have healthy relationships in the future.

According to Roszia, adoptive parents and caregivers often feel that their adopted children should “forget the past and move on” or they find it difficult to schedule contact and visits because it’s a low priority over school, church, sports and other family commitments. Some adopted persons have described their separation from siblings and birth family as being in the FBI witness protection system, forced to give up their identity and important relationships.

A Youth Leadership Advisory Team (YLAT) described sibling separation as “like an extra punishment, a separate loss, and another pain that is not needed.” The YLAT outlined several recommendations for ways professionals and caregivers can help promote and maintain sibling connections.

These include:

- Giving the youth a say in their placement and visitation options
- When siblings must be separated in placement, place the siblings in the same community or geographical area, and with care-givers who will make a commitment to facilitating visits and contact
- Transportation should not be a reason for why visits do not occur; professionals must consider sibling visits a part of their case work and ensure appropriate transportation is provided
- Allow siblings to share material items such as photographs, letters, and gifts that serve to remind them about their relationship
- If a visit must be cancelled, the youth must be informed about the reasons why and given a voice in the re-scheduling of the visit
- Provide training to adoptive parents about the importance of maintaining sibling relationships
- Consider resources like summer camps or youth groups as an opportunity to connect siblings.

For more information on preserving sibling connections:

The Kinship Center at www.kinshipcenter.org

Sibling Ties Are Worth Preserving by Diana Riggs at <http://www.nysccc.org/Siblings/sibties.htm>

1 YLAT (2002). *Youth Leadership Advisory Team position paper: Siblings in foster care and adoption*. For this paper and the YLAT’s recommendations on practice regarding sibling connections, visit <http://www.ylat.org/leadership/policy/siblingposition.htm>.