

Sibling Adoption

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**I. Siblings**

**a. Definition of "Sibling."**

The concept of sibling relationships should include: children who share one or both biological parents, children who have lived together in placements or close proximity, and "fictive" siblings with whom children have connections based not on blood, but on caring relationships (Children's Bureau Express, 2003).

**b. Sibling Group Strengths**

- 1.) Siblings learn to interact with each other, problem solve and negotiate during conflicts.
- 2.) Siblings look out for one another and provide a sense of security and attachment for each other.
- 3.) Siblings are companions and playmates during early childhood and into later life
- 4.) Sibling relationships are unique and like no other bonds in life. In later life, the sibling group provides family lineage, emotional strength and belonging (Groza, Maschmeier, Jamison, Piccola, 2003).
- 5.) While the bonds may fluctuate, a person's longing for personal identity is undeniably interwoven with his or her siblings (Hochman, Feathers-Acuna, & Huston, 1992).

\*September 2004 picture of my biological brothers and me.



## II. Sibling Group Placement Decisions

### a. *Best Interests*

- 1.) It is important to place children with siblings in order to maintain as many family and community connections post-adoption as possible (Children's Bureau Express, 2003).
- 2.) The sibling bond exists in children raised in well-adjusted families, but it is even stronger for brothers and sisters from dysfunctional families. They learn very early to depend on and cooperate with each other to cope with their common problems.
- 3.) Therefore, when children are removed from their homes due to abusive or neglectful situations, decisions for placement should include the entire sibling group.
- 4.) Studies show that children who are placed with their siblings often have fewer emotional and behavioral problems than children who have been separated from their siblings. They are also more likely to remain in their first placement and less likely to experience multiple placements (Newberger).
- 5.) Siblings who remain together learn how to resolve their differences and develop stronger and healthier relationships.
- 6.) The responsibility felt by an older child for a younger sibling does not necessarily mean it is negative.
- 7.) Removing a sibling from a foster or adoptive home because he has abused his brother or sister does not guarantee that the abuse will not continue in another environment or within the new placement.
- 8.) Therapy may be a more appropriate intervention and should include the entire sibling group (Hochman et al., 1992).

### b. *Siblings Who Are Separated*

- 1.) When siblings are separated, they should be given the opportunity to know who their siblings are and where they are living. Adoptive families should be encouraged to facilitate communication and visits between siblings (Children's Bureau Express, 2003).
- 2.) When sibling relationships are severed through placement decisions, the impact can last a lifetime (Hochman et al., 1992).
- 3.) Separating siblings in placement decisions adds to the children's emotional burden. Already coping with the separation from their primary caregivers, they must also experience the grieving process when separated from their siblings.
- 4.) When a sibling is removed from a home because of behavior problems, remaining children get the message that the same thing can happen to them. It reduces their sense of trust in adults (Hochman et al., 1992).
- 5.) It is important to understand that children do not recognize good from bad, but familiar from unfamiliar. Additional separation from their sibling group further impacts their adjustment to an unfamiliar placement.

- 6.) Children's previous coping patterns and interactions with caregivers and siblings often continue to exist in the new placements. These previous styles of interactions may lead to difficult transitions to the adoptive home. Children who are separated from their siblings may also anticipate further rejection in the new placement, which may increase behaviors that evoke familiar patterns of the past (Dance, Rushton, & Quinton, 2002).



\*For some, the sibling bond begins before birth. Kate and Julia (March 2004).

**c. Assessment Guidelines: A Multidimensional Approach**

- 1.) Attachment relationships are important to assess in the context of the entire sibling group. Siblings who experience abuse and neglect from their caregivers may develop strong sibling bonds and attachment to one another. Siblings often provide the stability that parents have not been able to provide (Grigsby, 1994 and Ryan, 2002).
- 2.) Placement together may help alleviate children's feelings of abandonment, loss, and helplessness because siblings provide a natural support group for one another (Smith, 1998).
- 3.) Therefore, unless these sibling bonds are significantly impaired, then placement decisions should take into account the positive aspects of the sibling attachments.
- 4.) Assessment guidelines should include: description of the sibling relationship(s), safety issues, children's desires and expectations, available families for the sibling group, and the detailed benefits for both placement apart and together (Groza et al., 2003).

- 5.) Tools such as the Placement Genogram may also assist caseworkers in placement decisions and gathering information on existing kin and family relationships (McMillen & Groze, 1994).

### III. Agency Philosophy: Adoption is a lifelong process

#### a. *Waiting Children*

Children who wait the longest for adoptive families include: African American children; those over the age of ten; and/or children who are part of a sibling group (ODJFS, 2002).



1. Agencies often have a difficult time finding families willing to accept sibling groups. Most of these children come from neglectful situations and their combined problems make for difficult transitions into new placements.
2. Siblings often come into out-of-home care at different times, which requires agencies to have tracking information for other siblings in placement. Such tracking can be difficult when half-siblings have different last names.
3. 65%-85% of children entering the foster care system have at least one sibling; 30% have four or more. Current estimates indicate that 75% of sibling groups end up living apart after they enter foster care.
4. For most of these children, they will lose the only significant relationships they have ever known (Hochman et al, 1992).

#### b. *Agency Policy*

1. Agencies should have stated policies, which promote and support the intrinsic value of sibling relationships.
2. Sibling groups should be of immediate priority when they enter the child welfare system
3. Extended family and kin relations should be explored for sibling group placement.
4. Agency policy should advocate and promote flexibility and resources when working with willing adoptive families (ie family size, number of rooms, etc) that may otherwise negate the family's eligibility for placement.

5. Agency policy should also promote smaller caseloads in order for best practice from the social workers to be available for the families and children (Groza handout, 2004).
6. The professionals involved with the placement decisions should work as a team with each other, the children, and the adoptive family in order to make informed decisions (Newberger).
7. “If you have the support from the agency and the department, it's going to work out fine. That's the most important thing with this agency—I'm able to take care of these kids like they are my own” (Newberger, parent report).

**c. Recruitment Efforts**

1. Agencies should also have extensive recruitment efforts to find families for the sibling groups.
2. Social workers who are dedicated to keeping siblings together and who are willing to be flexible about prospective adopters can be successful in finding families for them.
3. These families often include: older persons, single-headed female households, and families who express a specific willingness to adopt special needs children.



\*The sibling bond is a strong and unique relationship that exists from childhood through later life. Siblings provide each other with support to weather the storms of life. (Reese and Ryleigh, 2003).

## Appendix A: Informational Resources

Children's Bureau Express <http://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>

National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information

<http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov>

TEL (800) FYI-3366 FAX (703) 385-3206

National Adoption Information Clearinghouse

<http://naic.acf.hhs.gov>

TEL (888) 251-0075 FAX (703) 385-3206

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