

Youth Leadership Advisory Team Position Paper: Siblings in Foster Care and Adoption

Introduction/Philosophy Statement:

When youth are separated from their family by court order, they should have a right to continue to live with their siblings unless this is determined to pose a specific danger or is not in the best interest of the youth. Sibling contact provides continuity and family stability during the separation from home and family. Brothers and sisters can be the best confidants at a time of great need for a confidant. They can provide one another with advice and support. They can talk about current issues without having to give history and background, because their history and background is most often shared. They are able to enhance healing from trauma as they have a shared experience related to the trauma, they can talk about it together, validate one another and understand each other. The sibling bond is important, separate from the bond between parent(s) and child(ren). They share the same heritage and biology, unlike any other relationship. The sibling relationship is unique and should be fostered in its own right.

Yet the sibling bond is often minimized or taken for granted. This is evidenced in the national foster care statistics:

- ◆ There are over 500,000 youth in foster care across the United States.
- ◆ 65% - 85% of children entering the foster care system have at least one sibling.
- ◆ 30% of youth in foster care have four siblings or more.
- ◆ 75% of siblings end up apart when they enter foster care; three out of four children placed in foster care are separated from at least one sibling.

The separation from sibling(s) is like an extra punishment, a separate loss, and another pain that is not needed. Generally youth don't need to be separated and protected from siblings. The Department of Human Services understands the importance of the sibling bond. This policy will guide caseworkers in placement planning, case planning; and refocus attention on the importance of the sibling relationship.

Legal Base:

Outcome Measures of the Child and Family Services Reviews by the US Department of Health and Human Services

Licensing law "sibling exception" that allows for increase of foster care license when siblings are placed together.

Definitions:

"Exceptional reasons" means that reasons for siblings being placed separately or for visitation being discontinued are profound, clearly evaluated and articulated, are based on

the majority opinion of those involved with the children, and are clearly based on the best interest of the youth.

“Biological Sibling” means a sibling by birth of a person in foster care or in an adoptive placement. This could be a brother, sister, or half-sibling of a youth who is being placed in foster care or being placed for adoption. **(Confusing)**

“Sibling group” means biological siblings who have been raised together or have lived together.

Purpose of Sibling Placement:

Placement of siblings together should be made a priority in case planning and implementation of the case plan. Valid reasons must be provided for failure to place siblings together. Placement of siblings together serves many purposes.

The primary purposes are:

- ◆ To preserve of the sibling relationship and bond.
- ◆ To provide healing from impact of separation from family and familiar environment
- ◆ To enhance healing from trauma and understanding each other because of their shared experiences in their family and their shared history.
- ◆ To support one another in their current situations; it is a genuine and irreplaceable relationship.
- ◆ To provide support through developmental changes and growth.
- ◆ To establish a healthy bond between siblings who may or may not have had any significant prior relationship or bond with one another is essential.
- ◆ To strengthen youth’s self esteem through acceptance, unconditional love and sense of belonging.
- ◆ To strengthen youth’s relationship skills through support, resolving conflicts with one another and communication.

Placement decisions:

- 1) Youth should have an opportunity to voice their views about placements, and have their views included in the final placement decision.
- 2) When placing youth in foster care, the placement plan should be to place siblings together, unless there is a danger of specific harm to a youth or it is not in a child’s or youth’s best interest to be placed together.
- 3) Siblings who are not initially placed together shall be reunited in the same foster care setting, unless exceptional reasons exist that preclude reunification as soon as possible.
- 4) Siblings whose case plan is not to reside in the same setting should follow the following placement preference criteria:
 - ◆ to be placed in the same town/community
 - ◆ to be placed in the same geographic region

- ◆ to be placed in settings where the caregiver will promote and facilitate frequent, meaningful contact.
- 5) An older sibling ought to be considered as a placement option for younger siblings, provided that the older sibling could adequately care for younger siblings with the same support that is provided to foster or adoptive parents and given that there is no danger of specific harm to a youth or it is not contrary to a youth's best interest.

Purpose of Sibling Visitation, Contact, Knowledge of:

Visitation between siblings should be made a priority with a documented case plan. Valid reasons must be provided for failure to implement a visitation plan. Sibling visitation serves many purposes. The primary purposes of sibling visitation are:

- ◆ Preservation of the sibling relationship and bond.
- ◆ Providing healing from impact of separation from one another, family and familiar environment
- ◆ Enhancing healing from trauma and understanding each other because of their shared experiences in their family and their shared history.
- ◆ Supporting one another in their current situations; it is a genuine and irreplaceable relationship.
- ◆ Providing support through developmental changes and growth.
- ◆ Establishing healthy bond between siblings who may or may not have had any significant prior relationship or bond with one another is essential.
- ◆ Strengthens youth's self esteem through acceptance, unconditional love and sense of belonging.
- ◆ Strengthens youth's relationship skills through support, resolving conflicts with one another and communication.

Decisions Regarding Visitation, Contact, Knowledge of One Another:

- 1) Youth should have an opportunity to voice their views about visitation, and have their views included in the final visitation decision.
- 2) Visitation between siblings is a requirement unless there is a danger of specific harm to a youth or it is not in a youth's best interest to visit one another.
- 3) A written visitation plan should be drafted to include frequency, locations, events and activities to facilitate bonding.
 - a. Visits should happen in resourceful ways, eg. sleepover, respite care, fun day trips, etc.
 - b. Visits will be held in agreeable, comfortable settings for the youth.
 - c. Visits should occur with and without biological and/or foster parents present.
 - d. When youth are older, visitation can occur without supervision. Caseworker will work with youth on a safety plan, as needed, with public, unsupervised visitation.
 - e. Visits should be as frequent as possible, as frequent as the youth wish.

- 4) If visits are cancelled, not scheduled or otherwise doesn't happen, this should be fully explained to each sibling.
- 5) There should be specific reasons for supervised visits, particularly when previously unsupervised; an explanation of any changes must be provided to each sibling. Youth should have an opportunity to voice their views about any changes in visitation, and have their views included in the visitation decision-making.
- 6) Transportation issues should not prevent any visitation between siblings. The Department of Human Services should provide transportation to visits for siblings not in care.
- 7) In the initial court hearing for custody, the Department of Human Services will advocate for a court ordered visitation plan between siblings in care and/or siblings who remain with their birth family.
- 8) Siblings should be able to write and call each other without supervision unless there is a danger of specific harm to a youth.
- 9) Allow siblings to share things that maintain contact/relationships with physical reminders such as: letters, pictures, gifts, etc.
- 10) When a youth moves, the following should occur:
 - a. Siblings are informed that a move has occurred.
 - b. Siblings are informed of the new location
 - c. Siblings may be informed of reasons for relocation.
 - d. When a youth moves, that youth can decide how much information will be provided to their siblings. That youth may wish to inform siblings themselves and should be afforded the right to do so.
- 11) Any youth in care has a right to confidentiality. They have a right to decide how much information is shared with their siblings and their family. An exception to confidentiality is when withholding the information is detrimental to the youth or to others.

Adoption Considerations:

- 1) When placing youth for adoption, the placement plan should be to place siblings together, unless there is there clear evidence that separation is necessary.
- 2) In the case of separation, the Department of Human Services will encourage pre-placement and adoptive homes to have sibling visits. The Department of Human Services will stress that youth should have an opportunity to voice their views about visitation, and have their views included in the final visitation decision.
- 3) The Department of Human Services will provide training to adoptive parents about the importance of the sibling bond, sibling placement together and continued visitation when placement together does not occur. Visits should happen in resourceful ways, eg. sleepover, at the park, fun day trips, etc.
- 4) When a youth is being adopted, they, their sibling(s) and other family should be educated about the adoption registry.