

# Supporting Sibling Relationships



## THE ROLES OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS



**WHY SHOULD WE FOCUS ON  
SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS FOR  
CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN  
FOSTER CARE?**





# **WHY IS PLACING SIBLINGS TOGETHER IMPORTANT?**



# Sibling Placement Together



**“Practice wisdom and limited research support the basic premise that children experience better outcomes when placed with their siblings. These outcomes include greater stability, fewer emotional and behavioral problems, fewer placements, and fewer days in placement.”**

**Groza, et al., 2003**

# Sibling Placement Together



• Studies have shown that when siblings are placed together in foster care, they are:



- More likely to feel safer in the new home
- Less likely to experience emotional and behavioral problems
- More likely to score higher on the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL)
- More likely to show more positive dealings with peers and function better at school
- More likely to be reunified, adopted or placed in permanent guardian arrangements

# Sibling Placement Together



- Studies also indicate that separating siblings when they are in foster care can have negative consequences:
  - Separate siblings can experience trauma, anger and an extreme sense of loss that can impact their ability to heal and form attachments.
  - Their sense of self esteem may be negatively impacted. When children see positive qualities in their brothers and sisters, they are less likely to see themselves as “a bad kid from a bad family.” They are more likely to exhibit problematic behavior than are siblings who are not separated They maybe at greater risk of placement disruption.



# How many children in foster care have siblings?



- **Nationally:**

- 65% to 85% of all children
- FY 2010: between 265,500 and 347,000
- Estimated that more than  $\frac{1}{2}$  are separated from at least one sibling



- **Nebraska (2010):**

- Of 1,178 cases reviewed in 2010,
  - ✦ 537 (48%) had no siblings or were placed with siblings
  - ✦ 651 (52%) were not placed with their siblings

# Youth Voices: My Siblings



- “My sister is only three years old, but she has a big heart with me in it. Jayden is braver than me – she is not scared of the dark like me. When I was left along in a big house, all I had was my sister to keep me company till someone returned. I love her, even if sometimes I want peace and quiet. I would be lost without her.” Joseph, age 7

# Youth Voices: My Siblings



- “[When they moved us and placed us all in different homes, I felt as if God was punishing me for something. It broke my heart . . . I had sleepless nights wondering: Is my sister OK? Has she been fed? Have they left the light on for her? . . . I could not see myself without siblings. . . . I am an only foster child I my home. It feels as if I am drowning . . because my sister is not with me.”

Arlene, age 16



- “My siblings meant everything to me, but over the course of the last two years, our relationship has slowly deteriorated. There were five of us altogether but now I appear as an only child . . . The group home that we went to changed us forever. . . . I see them and it feels like I don’t even know them at all. . . . We were a close knit family. Now I am out in the cold. I have faith that one day this will get better.”
- Cierra, age 17



**WHICH SIBLING GROUPS ARE  
MOST LIKELY AND LEAST  
LIKELY TO BE PLACED  
TOGETHER?**



# Most Likely



- **Smaller sibling groups**
- **Siblings are closer in age**
- **When placed with kin**
- **Enter foster care on the same day or within 30 days of one another**

# Less Likely



- **When placed in group care**
- **Do not enter foster care at the same time**
- **Assessed differences in siblings' placement and service needs**

# Other Factors



- **Organizational policies and practices regarding sibling placement**
- **Adequacy of placement resources and supports**
- **Agency rules re: maximum number of children who can be placed in a foster home**

# Fostering Connections To Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008



- **In Section 206, the Fostering Connections Act requires States to make:**

“reasonable efforts to place siblings removed from their home in the same foster care, kinship guardianship, or adoptive placement, unless the State documents that such a joint placement would be contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings; and in the case of siblings removed from their home who are not so jointly placed, to provide for frequent visitation or other ongoing contact interaction between the siblings, unless that State documents that frequent visitation or other ongoing interaction would be contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings.”

# ACYF-CB-PI-10-11



- ***Sibling Placement and Visits.*** A title IV-E agency must make reasonable efforts to place siblings removed from their home in the same foster care, adoption or guardianship placement, or to facilitate frequent visitation or ongoing interactions (for example, letters, phone calls, text, email and other electronic communication) for those that cannot be placed together, unless it is contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings to do so.

# ACYF-CB-PI-10-11



- ***Policies.*** The Children's Bureau expects agencies to revisit their existing sibling visitation and placement policies to determine if there are ways to bolster them to ensure that siblings are always placed together unless there is a bona fide safety or well-being concern that prevents placement together or frequent visitation.



# NEBRASKA LAW ON SIBLINGS



# Who Are “Siblings”?



- Children’s/youth’s view of who is a sibling
- Legal and policy definitions of a “sibling”
  - No federal definition
  - State definition?

# National Resource Center on Permanency and Family Connections: Sibling Toolkit



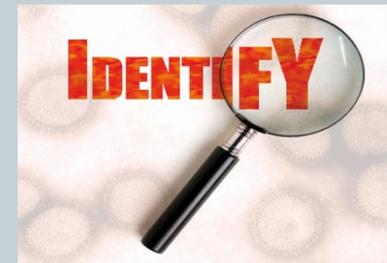
- **Component #1.** Identification of All Siblings
- **Component #2.** Assessment of Sibling Groups
- **Component #3.** Decision Making Regarding Sibling Placement Together
- **Component #4.** Youth Voice in Sibling Placement Decision Making
- **Component #5.** Reasonable and Ongoing Efforts to Place Siblings Together
- **Component #6.** Siblings Visits and Contacts
- **Component #7.** Documentation
- **Component #8.** Sibling Placement Resources
- **Component #9.** The Courts
- **Component #10.** Training on the Importance of Preserving Sibling Connections

# Component #1. Identification of All Siblings



When a child enters foster care, child welfare agencies make efforts to identify all of the child's siblings, including determining whether the child entering foster care already has siblings in foster care or who have been adopted.

- How can key stakeholders ensure that all siblings of the child are identified?



## Component #2. Assessment of Sibling Groups



- During intake, it is essential that social workers complete a thorough assessment of sibling groups as a whole as well of each individual child, including children and youth in all discussions.
- Social workers talk individually with each child, asking age-appropriate questions and learning about that child's experiences and feelings.
- In completing assessments, it is important to recognize that sibling relationships vary greatly in both positive and negative qualities.

## Component #2. Assessment of Sibling Groups



**What should be assessed?**



# Assessment Issues



- **Warmth and affection or alternatively hostility between siblings**
- **Interdependence**
- **The relative power and status in the relationship**
- **How much time the siblings have spent together (have never lived together, have lived together at some point in their lives, have always lived together)**

# Assessment of Siblings



- In conducting the assessment, it is important that individualized and sibling group assessments – and not myths about sibling placements -- guide the decision making process.

# Assessment of Siblings



- How would you rate the following:
- *The “parentified child” should be separated from younger siblings in order to give him/her a chance to be a child.*
- *Brothers and sisters should be separated to prevent sibling rivalry.*
- *A child with special needs should be placed separately from siblings to receive more focused attention.*

# Assessment of Siblings: Assessment Tools



- **Adoption and Permanency Taskforce.** (2004). *Permanence Planning: Notes for Practitioners. Assessing Sibling Groups.*
- **Sibling Relationship Inventory.** Developed by Stocker and McHale, this inventory measures the dimensions of sibling affection, hostility and rivalry.

## Component #3: Decision Making Regarding Sibling Placement Together



- Federal and state guidelines require that reasonable efforts be made to place siblings removed from their home in the same foster care, adoption or guardianship placement, or to facilitate frequent visits or ongoing interactions (for example, letters, phone calls, text, email and other electronic communication) for those that cannot be placed together, unless it is contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings to do so.

# Decision Making



- **The Children's Bureau encourages child welfare agencies to develop standard protocols for caseworkers to use in making decisions about when it would be contrary to a child's well-being or safety to place siblings together.**
- **A standard decision making tool can assist social workers with guidelines in making this important decision, and address difficult situations.**
- **The Children's Bureau also encourages the agency to periodically reassess sibling foster care placement decisions in cases where siblings are separated to determine if a change is warranted.**

# Decision Making



**What factors might indicate that sibling placement together would not be appropriate?**

# Decision Making



- **Special needs of one sibling**
- **An abusive relationship between the sibling where therapy, with a safety plan in place, is not effective or not the appropriate intervention**
- **A foster placement lacks the resources/capacity to care for all the children**
- **One or more siblings is in residential treatment, hospitalized or in juvenile detention**
- **One child is so dependent upon the other that the healthy development of one or both children is impaired**

# Decision Making



- **Significant behaviors that may indicate separation are:**
  - Intense rivalry and jealousy with each child totally pre-occupied with and unable to tolerate the attention which their siblings may be getting
  - Exploitation, often based on gender
  - Chronic scapegoating of one child
  - Maintenance of unhelpful alliances and birth family conflicts in the group
  - Maintenance of unhelpful hierarchical positions from the family (e.g. a child stuck in the role of victim or bully)
  - Sexualized behavior with each other

# Component #4: Youth Voice in Sibling Placement Decision Making



- A growing number of states have recognized the importance of hearing the youth's preferences when making decisions about sibling placements or, at minimum, to explain to youth why he/she is not placed with his/her siblings.

What are the policies and practices in Nebraska around youth voice in sibling placements?



# Some Promising Practices



- **Iowa** law instructs the Department of Human Services, when siblings are not placed together, to provide the siblings with the reasons why and the efforts being made to facilitate joint placement or why making efforts for joint placement are not appropriate.
- **Virginia's** *Child and Family Services Manual* states that in making placement decisions, including decisions about placing siblings together, the social worker shall “consult with the child if the child is age 12 or older or obtain input from the child if the child is under age 12 and capable of communicating his wishes.”

# Some Promising Practices



- New **Connecticut** legislation requires that the Commissioner of Children and Families meet with the members of each branch of the Youth Advisory Board to gather recommendations for and draft a "Sibling Bill of Rights", which may include, but is not limited to, ways to protect the relationships of siblings separated as a result of the Department's intervention and an affirmation by the Department of its commitment to preserve the relationships between siblings who have been separated from each other while under department care. On or before October 1, 2013, the Commissioner and Youth Advisory Board must submit the Sibling Bill of Rights to the select committee of the General Assembly with responsibilities relating to children for consideration of possible legislative action.

# Some Promising Practices



- The **Vermont Sibling Bill or Rights** states that every child in foster care, among other rights, has the right to be placed with siblings, be in close proximity to siblings if unable to be in the same setting to facilitate frequent and meaningful contact, and to maintain consistent and regular contact that will be included in service planning.

# Component #5: Reasonable and Ongoing Efforts to Place Siblings Together



- Best practice in sibling placements requires that reasonable efforts be made to place siblings initially together; ongoing efforts be made to place siblings together when they have been placed in separate foster care settings; siblings in separate placements be placed as near to one another as possible; and the needs of siblings when joint placements disrupt be assessed and addressed.



# Initial Placement Together



**“It is critical to place children together from their initial placement forward. This requires a commitment to having foster care resources available to accommodate siblings, especially for larger sibling groups. For children entering foster care after their siblings, it means identifying children immediately as part of a group and uniting them in their first placement, unless the decision is contraindicated by the needs of any given sibling.”**

**Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005**

# Initial Placement Together



**How can stakeholders help ensure that siblings are initially placed together unless it would be contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings?**

# Initial Placement Together: Promising Practices



- **Oklahoma** policy provides the following examples of reasonable and ongoing efforts to place siblings together:
  - Conducting family team meetings that address sibling placements;
  - Diligent search for relatives and important people in the child's life who are appropriate and capable of providing placement and connections for the sibling group;
  - Ongoing discussions with the foster care specialist or county of placement specialist regarding placing siblings together;
  - Requesting that placement providers for the siblings notify the Child Welfare (CW) specialist or foster care specialist when there is an opening in the placement provider's home for a sibling(s).

# Initial Placement Together: Promising Practices



- **Idaho's standards outline the following:**
  - Find out the current location of all siblings at intake
  - Begin with the assumption that all siblings should be placed together at the first placement unless there is evidence that placement together is contrary to either child's safety
  - Inform foster and potential adoptive parents that they are siblings and the permanency plan will be to keep together or reunite them
  - Have one worker responsible for all the children in the sibling group
  - Explore the children's placement preferences; prioritize placement with relatives when appropriate resources are available

# Ongoing Efforts to Place Siblings Together



Some states have developed practices and policies that require ongoing efforts to reunite siblings placed in separate foster care settings.

What are some best practices in Nebraska?



# Ongoing Efforts to Place Siblings Together: Promising Practices



- **Monitoring placement decisions for opportunities to place siblings together**
- **Regular reassessments of siblings' split placements**
- **Assign all siblings to the same social worker regardless of when they enter care**

# Ongoing Efforts to Place Siblings Together



**What steps should be taken when siblings cannot be placed together?**

# Ongoing Efforts to Place Siblings Together



- **South Carolina** requires that when siblings cannot be placed together, reasonable efforts must be made to place them in close proximity to facilitate contact.

# Ongoing Efforts to Place Siblings Together



- **Texas** policy requires that after all efforts to place siblings together are exhausted and it becomes necessary to place siblings separately, the following issues must be considered: (1) close proximity of placement between siblings, including the same community, school, church, or the like; (2) caretakers ability and willingness to continue the child's contact with all siblings. Children should be allowed to have frequent and regular contact. Contact can include phone calls, e-mail, letters and visits; (3) therapeutic needs for siblings' continuity of relationships; and how placement of a sibling group separately might impact permanency outcomes for these children.

# Disruptions of Sibling Placements



**What steps should be taken when a joint placement of siblings disrupts and one or more siblings is moved to another placement?**

# Ongoing Efforts to Place Siblings Together



**The Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services’** policy on sibling disruptions states that every effort should be made to avoid and prevent sibling disruptions. Any potential disruption which could result in a sibling being separated must be staffed.

# Ongoing Efforts to Place Siblings Together



- The policy outlines the following:
  - (1) services should be provided to prevent sibling disruptions;
  - (2) in most situations, consideration should be given to moving all siblings if one child needs to be moved.
  - (3) if separated, every effort should be made to reunite the siblings as soon as possible;
  - (4) if sibling separation occurs, the separation must be reviewed within the first 90 days and at each subsequent case review;
  - (5) staff must document any compelling reasons justifying the continuing separation of the siblings AND efforts that will be taken to expedite sibling reunification OR alternative permanency plan based on the child's best interest.

# Component #6. Sibling Visits and Contacts



- The *Fostering Connections to Success Act* does not define “frequent visitation or other ongoing interactions” for siblings who are not placed together.
- The sibling provisions of the Fostering Connections Act apply only to children removed from their homes. It does not require efforts to maintain connections between children removed from their homes and any siblings who are not removed, although states are free to implement policies and practices to sustain these connections.

# Component #6. Sibling Visits and Contacts



**What is best practice around:**

- **Planning for sibling visits?**
- **The frequency and duration of sibling visits?**
- **Cancelling sibling visits?**

# Component #6. Sibling Visits and Contacts: Planning



- **The Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services'** policy requires that all visiting plans should provide locations and schedules that are easily adaptable for the siblings to visit and that siblings should be involved, if appropriate, in the development of the visiting plan.
- **Virginia** requires that when siblings are placed in separate foster homes, a plan must be developed within 15 calendar days after placement to encourage frequent and regular visits or communication between the siblings.

## Component #6. Sibling Visits and Contacts: Frequency and Duration



- **Idaho** policy states that at minimum, face-to-face visits between siblings who are in out-of-home care and were in the same household when the child was removed should occur monthly. Additional contact between siblings placed in different homes or facilities may include telephone calls, e-mail and letters. Reasons for exceptions to monthly visitation or contact between siblings must be documented.

# Component #6. Sibling Visits and Contacts: Frequency and Duration



- **Illinois Department of Child and Family** rules require that sibling visits be scheduled and provided at least two times a month for all siblings placed apart. Visits should begin no later than two weeks after temporary custody unless: 1) the court order requires less frequent or no visitation; 2) a child requests less frequent visits; or 3) the visits present risk of physical, emotional or mental harm. Visits may also be less frequent for siblings placed in residential care under certain circumstances. However, visitation may not be reduced based on the unavailability of a visit supervisor or as a form of discipline.

## Component #6. Sibling Visits and Contacts: Cancelling Visits



- **Illinois** regulations provide that neither the Department nor its contractual agencies shall reduce nor seek to have a court reduce the frequency of visits based on the unavailability of a supervisor or as a form of discipline.
- **Missouri** policy) states that at no time should a sibling visit be cancelled or rescheduled because of unexpected situations with the caseworker's schedule; a back-up plan should be in place. Sibling visits are to occur unless such visits are deemed contrary to the welfare of the child by the agency or when prohibited by the court.

# Component #7: Documentation



- If an agency determines that the siblings cannot be placed together and/or cannot have frequent visits, the agency must document the reasons that it is contrary to the safety or well-being of the siblings to be placed together or to have frequent visitation.

What should be documented when siblings are not placed together?

# Documentation When Siblings are Not Placed Together



- **Colorado** procedures state that if siblings are not placed together, the social worker must document in detail all efforts to place the siblings together; when applicable, why those efforts would be contrary to the safety and well-being of any of the siblings; and what, if any, efforts are ongoing to facilitate a placement together or why the efforts are not appropriate.

# Documentation When Siblings are Not Placed Together



- **Texas** requires that the following issues be documented in the case record: any reasons that siblings are not placed together or in close proximity; all efforts to maintain regular sibling contact and relationships, or why this is not occurring; and continual assessment and efforts to reunite siblings in placement. In the event siblings cannot be reunited within 60 days, continued documentation of all efforts to reunite the siblings must be kept in the record and addressed at the initial and subsequent Permanent Planning Team meetings (PPTs).

# Documentation of Sibling Visits



**What should documentation address  
about siblings' visits?**

# Documentation of Sibling Visits



**Maryland** policy states that all sibling visits are to be documented in the case plan which is to include visit frequency, participants and the planned location. If a child refuses to visit a sibling, the caseworker is to clearly document the refusal in the case plan. The caseworker should continue to work with the child and revisit the idea of sibling visits.

**Washington State's *Practices and Procedures Guide*** states that the social worker is to document visits in the case notes, including: observations, progress, concerns or changes; visit reports from contracted agencies (and notes from approved natural supports who provide visits); and the reasons why visits did not occur within the recommended timeframes. \*

# Component #8. Sibling Placement Resources



- **Sibling Placements with Relatives**
- **Current Caregivers for One or More Siblings**
- **Specialized Foster/Adoption Families For Siblings**
- **Training for Foster, Adoptive and Kinship Families on Sibling and Grief Issues**



# Component #8. Sibling Placement Resources



- **Support for Sibling Caregivers**
  - Financial assistance
  - Logistical supports such as transportation, assistance with such tasks as school registration, and day care
  - Sufficient material resources for families who care for large sibling groups such as additional household items.
  - Supportive services such as respite care
  - Support groups in which resource families can share and learn from one another.

# Component #9. The Courts



The courts can play an important role in sibling placement and sibling visitation.

- Judge Len Edwards (2011) states that “judges will find that attention to sibling contact will accomplish the law’s goals and be greatly appreciated by the children appearing in court.”

How might the court ensure the siblings’ relationships are sustained and supported?

# Component #10. Training on the importance of preserving sibling connections



**What are the training opportunities in Nebraska?**



# Comments and Discussion



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