

Practice Principles for the Recruitment and Retention of Kinship, Foster and Adoptive Families *for Siblings*

The Importance of Keeping Siblings Together

In defining the term “sibling,” agencies may use a broad definition to embrace the traditions, faith affiliations, and unique family structures of various cultures and extended families. Therefore, “sibling” can include those who share a birth parent or legal parent, step-parent and/or others who have lived together in a family and identify themselves as siblings.

Maintaining and supporting sibling relationships is essential to the healthy development and well-being of all children, and it is especially important for children in out-of-home care.

When children experience parental losses, neglect and abuse, they depend on one another to survive. In the absence of reliable parental care, children turn to siblings for support, leading to strong sibling bonds. Being with siblings in placement helps to mitigate the impact of separation and loss and offers continuity, support and a sense of safety and security for children.

Practice wisdom and research support the premise that children experience better permanency outcomes when placed with their siblings. These outcomes include greater placement stability, fewer emotional and behavioral difficulties, fewer placements and fewer days in placement. Most older youth who age out of the system originally came into care with one or more siblings.

Preserving the bond between brothers and sisters is an essential part of their long-term emotional well-being. Placing siblings together, or enabling them to maintain contact when they are separated, preserves their connections with one another and to their family. This results in improving long-term safety, well-being and permanency, whether the ultimate plan is reunification, adoption, or permanent placement with kin.

For the child welfare agency to be successful in keeping siblings together, all participants in the child welfare system need to be educated and supported in maintaining siblings together and facilitating contacts and visits through legislation, policy, practice and resources. Training in the philosophy and advantages of keeping siblings together can include all agency staff, foster and adoptive parents, attorneys, judges and others involved in child welfare, e.g., therapists, residential staff and mental health providers.

Accurate data and accountability systems will need to be in place to track siblings in care and continuously evaluate services provided for them.

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Public Law 110-351)—Guidance on Sibling Placements

The title IV-E agency must:

- Make reasonable efforts to place siblings removed from their home in the same foster care, adoption or guardianship placement.
- Facilitate frequent visitation or ongoing interactions for siblings who cannot be placed together (as determined by the agency).
- Make exceptions when the agency determines that placement together or visitation/ongoing interaction is contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings.

The title IV-E agency has discretion to:

- Define siblings or sibling groups.
- Set standards for visitation and contact (a minimum of monthly).
- Determine appropriate settings and supervision of visits.

The Children's Bureau encourages an agency to:

- Develop standard decision-making protocols for workers.
- Conduct periodic reassessments of situations in which siblings are unable to be placed together or have frequent visitation.

Applying Principles to Practice

Effective recruitment of families for siblings is driven and supported by an attitude of abundance regarding the availability of families to keep siblings together. This includes having a belief that kinship, foster and adoptive families are willing to step forward to assist the agency in keeping siblings together.

The following principles—which grow out of, and align with, these attitudes—are offered to frame an agency's recruitment and retention practices related to siblings:

- 1 The agency will train all staff in the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to be effective in finding and supporting kinship, foster and adoptive families to parent siblings.
- 2 The agency will proactively pursue placing siblings together with kinship and/or fictive kin, including paternal kinship families, whenever possible.
- 3 The agency will diligently recruit and prepare a sufficient number of quality homes for siblings coming into care, who reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of children in care.
- 4 The agency will use best practices and consider non-traditional families and innovative ways to recruit and retain families to keep siblings together.
 - Accurate data regarding children in care and current foster and adoptive families will be made available to staff to assist in planning and targeting recruitment for siblings.
 - Community-based organizations, including faith-based communities, will be engaged to help recruit and support families to foster and adopt siblings.
 - Existing foster, adoptive and kinship families who care for siblings will be involved in finding and supporting new resource families for siblings.
 - Evaluation of methods will be used to inform planning.
 - Technical assistance and training will be utilized to improve methods as needed.
- 5 Licensing and/or approval standards will encourage placement of siblings together and be applied flexibly to qualify families to care for siblings together, except when safety precludes placements.
- 6 Special funding and resources will be available for concrete items and/or services, such as beds, transportation, arranging sufficient space to help families qualify to care for sibling groups.
- 7 All foster and adoptive families will be offered training to help them provide care for sibling groups. Mentoring, orientation, and ongoing training will be strengthened to highlight the importance of keeping siblings together.
- 8 Support services will be provided to help resource families keep siblings together, e.g., respite care, supportive counseling, community-based support and other incentives.
- 9 Families who are parenting different members of a sibling group will be supported and encouraged to use natural means to bring siblings together, e.g., going to temple or church together, going to sporting events, holiday events, family gatherings and reunions.
- 10 If siblings are not placed together, the agency will make all reasonable efforts to provide for frequent visitation and ongoing contact among the siblings. When siblings are separated in placement, efforts will be made to place children in homes that are in close proximity to one another.

Sibling Group Considerations at Every Step for the Recruitment and Retention of Kinship, Foster and Adoptive Families

<i>Targeted Recruitment</i>	<i>1 First Contact</i>	<i>2 Initial Orientation</i>	<i>3 Pre-Service Training</i>	<i>4 Application Process</i>	<i>5 Mutual Assessment Home Study</i>	<i>6 Licensing and/or Approval</i>	<i>7 Placement</i>
<p>T.1 To what extent is keeping sibling groups together a priority for your agency and staff?</p> <p>T.2 Does your data tell you the number and characteristics of the families you need to recruit for sibling groups?</p> <p>T.3 How can you be successful in searching for relatives to keep siblings together?</p> <p>T.4 How are community based resources engaged in recruiting families for siblings?</p> <p>T.5 How do you recruit across jurisdictions to keep siblings together?</p> <p>T.6 What policies, strategies, and incentives are and/or need to be in place to support recruiting and retaining families for siblings?</p>	<p>1.1 How do you insure consistency and quality of the intake process?</p> <p>1.2 How do you insure that all of your staff are aware of and sensitive to the need for foster and adoptive families for siblings? How is this trained throughout the agency?</p> <p>1.3 How do you involve families who already have siblings to support new and inquiring families?</p> <p>1.4 What do you do to create a welcoming atmosphere for families?</p>	<p>2.1 How do you promote the need for families for siblings during orientation?</p> <p>2.2 How do you include experienced families of siblings to encourage support and interest?</p> <p>2.3 What materials are provided at orientation regarding sibling placements?</p> <p>2.4 What else could you do at orientation to promote the need for families for siblings?</p>	<p>3.1 How do you train prospective families about the importance of sibling relationships; the myths; the challenges; the rewards of parenting siblings?</p> <p>3.2 How do you include the need for continuous birth parent involvement?</p> <p>3.3 How do you emphasize the agency's philosophy and beliefs about keeping siblings together?</p>	<p>4.1 How do you encourage and handle applications from relatives/kin of siblings?</p> <p>4.2 What supports are available to help relatives qualify?</p> <p>4.3 What else do you do to help encourage and qualify non-kin foster and/or adoptive families to provide care for siblings?</p> <p>4.4 What do you do to assure that all families have equal access to the application process?</p>	<p>5.1 How are staff trained to do effective home studies and prepare families to care for and support siblings?</p> <p>5.2 How are staff trained to do effective home studies with relatives/kin?</p> <p>5.3 How do you explore a family's interests, myths and fears about fostering and/or adopting siblings?</p> <p>5.4 How do you help a family prepare to foster and/or adopt a sibling group?</p>	<p>6.1 How are staff trained to know about and utilize the agency's policies, such as exception policies, for placing sibs together?</p> <p>6.2 Can your procedures be simplified and time-bound to assure timely approval of exceptions?</p> <p>6.3 How are staff supported in completing their work in a timely way?</p> <p>6.4 Is there a way to expedite licensing and/or approval for relatives and/or others qualified for sibling placements?</p>	<p>7.1 Does the agency have clear and consistent policies, procedures and accountability for keeping siblings together in placement?</p> <p>7.2 How are siblings kept together when they come into care sequentially?</p> <p>7.3 How do you assure that siblings are reunited in care?</p> <p>7.4 How do you assure that when a child has to move that sibling reunification is seriously re-considered?</p> <p>7.5 How do you insure that siblings who could not be placed together are connected in meaningful ways?</p>

Do all families have equal access and staff responsiveness at all steps in the process without regard to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, national origin, socio-economic status, language, age, sensory impairment, disability or other factors such as literacy?