

Sustaining & Strengthening the Sibling Bond

Sibling relationships are, very often, the longest relationships we experience in our lives. Our siblings are our first peers. With them, we learn how to socialize and how to share; they are the people with whom we have our first arguments and disagreements and the people who teach us how to make up. Siblings provide a kind of support and nurturing different from what our parents provide. In difficult times, or in home environments that are chaotic, unpredictable, or unsafe, the bond between siblings can intensify – and become even more important. Sibling relationships help promote resiliency, especially in cases where children are facing a difficult situation together. In many cases, a sibling may be the only constant presence and safe haven for a child or young person.



better outcomes. Some of these improved outcomes include fewer placement disruptions and a higher chance of reaching permanence through reunification, adoption, or guardianship.

Keeping siblings connected when they live apart can be a challenge for caregivers. Sometimes the children live quite far from

one another, making in-person visits difficult to arrange. Travel time and costs associated with travel might further impede the frequency of face-to-face visits between siblings placed separately.

However, families are finding more and more ways to

help children and youth in out-of-home care maintain their connections and relationships with their siblings even when they do not live together. Following are some suggestions that might work for your family.

Staying Close, Living Apart

The goal for children and youth entering out-of-home care is to keep siblings together whenever possible; however, there are times when – and various reasons why – siblings are separated. When siblings, for whatever reason, can't be placed together, it is essential for them to have consistent contact with one another. There is a lot of research available that says siblings in the foster care system, who are able to stay connected even when they are not placed together, have

- *Pre-arranged visits*—Wisconsin's Foster Parent Handbook states that children must have face-to-face visits with their siblings at least once per month when they are not seeing one another as part of the family interaction plan. Communication between caregivers and workers is key to ensuring those visits occur. Developing a consistent plan ahead of time, and regularly re-evaluating it, can further help keep

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visits on track.

- *Old-fashioned pen & paper*—Siblings can send letters, cards, and photos to one another via the mail. Younger siblings can also participate in this form of communication by sending drawings or pictures. For little ones who cannot write yet, caregivers can help transcribe the messages.
- *Phone calls*—Being able to hear your brother or sister's voice, and knowing that he or she is okay, can be very reassuring. Children might also use a cell phone to send text messages or photos to a sibling, in addition to traditional phone calls. (Most carriers have a variety of plans to choose from and there are many pre-paid plans available, as well, to help keep costs down).
- *Internet/social media*—The Internet has forever changed the way we communicate with each other. Siblings can exchange emails in place of pen and paper, send each other Snap Chats, or communicate through Facebook or Twitter, among other types of social media. This can be a fun and easy way for siblings to maintain day-to-day connection.
- *Video chatting*—There are many options available to facilitate video chatting today. Apps such as Skype, ooVoo, and Facetime can be free or are low cost. This can be used in addition to phone calls and are relatively easy to install on phones,



tablets, and computers.

- *Respite care*—Families can take turns providing respite for siblings in their care, providing the children with opportunities to spend time together in a home environment. This also can provide additional support for caregivers caring for siblings.
- *Joint therapy*—For siblings who may benefit from therapy, sharing a therapist might help them work through their emotions together. They may feel more comfortable and safe talking about being in care, healing from trauma, and working on life books if they can be with their sibling(s). As an added benefit, this gives children another opportunity to develop their sibling bond further.
- *Joint outings/events*—Caregivers might plan joint outings for siblings to connect. This could be a picnic, a day at a water park, or celebration event such as a birthday or holiday. This is a nice way to have face-to-face contact especially if siblings live a great distance away from each other and regular face-to-face visits are limited.
- *Camps*—[Camp To Belong Wisconsin](#) is a camp just for siblings who have been separated through the child welfare system. This camp gives youth a fun camp experience to share with their siblings and an opportunity for them to connect.

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Importance of Sibling Connections

By far, the majority of children and youth who enter the foster care system have at least one sibling. Unfortunately, only about half of those children are able to remain living with their brothers and sisters. Regardless of whether or not children are sharing a home, it is still of utmost importance that children share a bond.

Siblings in foster care have already endured trauma and loss; when they then cannot live with their siblings, they may suffer an additional level of grief, as a result. There is a risk of losing a part of their identities, as well as connection to their pasts, if efforts are not made to help siblings in care maintain their relationships with one another. In fact, youth who have been involved with the foster care system often share that they wished they could have stayed with their siblings or, at the very least, had the opportunity to stay connected to them. As one former youth in care says in “A Tale of Two Brothers” (FosterClub.com), “Most painful of all, I was separated from my younger brother. I later learned he was living only a couple exits down the highway, just a few minutes away, but we had no contact.”

Children crave the connection to their siblings. If you grew up with brothers or sisters, you know how impactful those relationships can be. In truth, even as adults, we continue to turn to our siblings for support, counsel, and comfort. Making the commitment to help siblings in out-of-home care keep in contact with one another can go a long way in lessening the trauma they may be facing – and help ensure a better experience for children in care.



Resources

- [Fostering Across Wisconsin newsletter](#), Winter 2017
- [Partners newsletter](#), Winter 2017
- Tip sheet: [Fostering a Child Whose Siblings Live Elsewhere](#)
- Tip sheet: [Sibling Conflict in Adoptive Families](#)
- [Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption \(PDF\)](#), Child Welfare Information Gateway
- [Ten Myths and Realities of Sibling Adoption](#), AdoptUsKids
- [Foster Club: The Unbreakable Bond](#)
- [Foster Club: A Tale of Two Brothers](#)



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