

Fostering a Child Whose Sibling(s) Live Elsewhere

When siblings enter foster care, the goal is to keep the children together whenever possible. Sometimes, however, this cannot happen for a variety of reasons. We know from research, that sibling relationships are important for a child's development and emotional wellbeing. Sibling connections can provide a sense of family identity even if a child is not connected with other birth family members.

If you find yourself fostering a child whose siblings are living somewhere else, there are ways you can support, connect, and assist that child through the emotions and confusion that may come up.

Though you cannot control what happens in their sibling's placement, you can use this tip sheet to gather ideas about connecting with their family, facilitating visitations, and supporting the children in their feelings and struggles given their unique circumstances.

Supporting the child in your home

In most situations, the relationship a child has with his sibling is and will be the longest one he will have in his life. Being separated can feel isolating – and can be devastating. Siblings who are separated from one another may suffer from grief as a result of the losses they have experienced. Signs of grief could include:

- Crying

- Headaches
- Loss of appetite
- Trouble sleeping
- Withdrawing from others

Most of us are aware of the five stages of grief: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The child in your care may go through some or all of these stages, once or multiple times. If you notice a dramatic change in her appetite, sleep schedule, or school performance, it may be time to consider seeking out

professional assistance or support.



When siblings are separated, it doesn't always mean that they have to be disconnected from one another. Here

are some possibilities for helping keep siblings connected:

- Keep a photo of the sibling(s) in the child's room, perhaps even some photos of the children together.
- When possible, you could set up phone calls. It's helpful if this can be done when the children can talk with one another with few distractions.
- If visits can be done safely and appropriately, (see more below) it can be beneficial for children to connect in person. A visitation plan needs to be approved by the case workers for each of the children, and

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could include the two (or more) families going to a park or the zoo, or any place that provides a fun activity for the families to do together. Keep in mind that siblings have often lost touch with each other and a visit where they have an activity to focus on can help to re-establish the bond between them.

- For older children, emailing, connecting on social media, and video chatting online might be options you could consider. (It is important to monitor online and social media use for the children in your care. The Coalition has some tip sheets on social media and Internet safety that you may want to refer to.)
- For no-tech options, cards and letters can also be a great way to maintain connections.
- Sending photos can go a long way to keeping the sibling bond strong, especially for children who aren't able to see one another in person.

If and when siblings do have visits or other forms of contact with one another, it's often helpful to have the contact information for the caregiver(s) of the sibling(s) so that you can keep communication open between you and the other family or families. You might want to get in touch, for example, if you are noticing behavior changes after visits.

You may find that these other caregivers can provide some insight about what happened during the visit. You can also check in with the child after a visit or interaction. A gentle conversation can go a long way. Try asking a few open-ended questions such as, "How was the visit with your brother?" or "How are you

feeling?" These questions can be the sign a child is waiting for to open up and share.

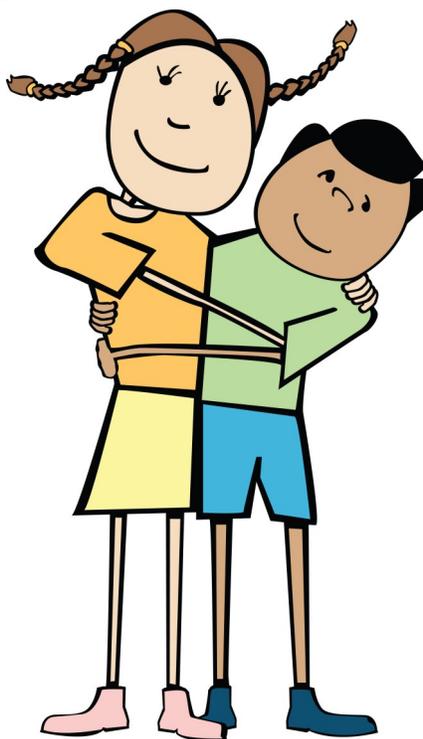
Determining if connecting is safe/ appropriate

If you are caring for a child in out-of-home care, the court or the child's case worker will determine if ongoing contact with a sibling is safe and appropriate. Visits are deemed not safe and/or appropriate for a variety of reasons. For example, a visit may be deemed unsafe or inappropriate if a birth family member has shown violent behavior at past visits, or if a sibling has perpetrated sexual abuse on the other and a visit would cause the victimized sibling further trauma. Every situation is different and there are state standards which guide a case worker's decision making in this matter.

Your role as caregiver can be to advocate for visits between siblings when appropriate and to provide the necessary supervision to ensure all children are safe while they are together. Be sure to talk to the child's case worker about types of interactions that are allowed or not allowed, the type of supervision needed, any activities the children cannot do together, behaviors to be aware of, and other ways that you could help support the interaction.

You may also want to check with the case worker about historical interactions. In some cases, there are details about how the siblings interacted with each other before entering out-of-home care that may shed some light on how they are interacting together at visits. It's especially important to alert the child's

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case worker as soon as possible if you notice anything that points to negative outcomes of visits or continued contact between siblings. To help facilitate a successful visit:

- Prepare the child in your care by sending them fed, alert, and with a few ideas of conversation starters or favorite toys to share.
- If you are transporting to and from visits, try to keep the conversation light and happy, and do your best to be on time for dropping off and picking up the child in your care.
- If you can stay for the visit, you could use the time as an opportunity to get to know the parent or caregiver of the sibling(s).
- If the child has a life book, she could bring it to share or work on with her siblings. (For more about life books, please see the link to the Coalition's tip sheet on this topic in the Resource section.)

As with any relationship, the one between siblings in out-of-home care will ebb and flow. There might be times when you will need to remind the child in your care of this. And there may be times when you will need to remind yourself of the uniqueness of the circumstance and be extra understanding of how hard it must be for the children. The more you can help the child in your care feel supported by and attached to you, the easier it may be for him to handle the stresses of living apart from his sibling(s). By working to do all that you can to facilitate the bonds and connections between siblings, you will be helping the child in your care grow, develop and thrive.



Resources

Books:

- *Siblings in Adoption and Foster Care: Traumatic Separations and Honored Connections*, by Deborah N. Silverstein
- *My Brother, My Sister: Sibling Relations in Adoption and Foster Care*, by Regina Kupecky
- *Kidstress: What It Is, How It Feels, How to Help*, by George Witkin

Web Resources:

- [Camp to Belong](#) – a camp for siblings to attend together
- [Camp to Belong Wisconsin](#)

Coalition Tip Sheets

Visit wifostercareandadoption.org, navigate to “Reading Room” and select “Tip Sheets”

- Helping Children in Care Build Trusting Relationships
- Life Books
- The 411 on Social Media, Networking, and Texting
- Internet Safety Tips for Caregivers



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