



The Fostering Communities Programme

Briefing paper: Supporting sibling relationships

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Purpose of this paper

This paper will provide a short overview of sibling relationships within the wider context of family dynamics and past experiences.

This guide will talk through some of the key issues and ways to support those children fostered in the relationships they have with siblings, their sense of belonging in their family, and their circumstantial issues which may affect these.

1. Background

1.1 About The Fostering Network

[The Fostering Network](#) is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children. We support foster carers to transform children's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice. We work to ensure all fostered children and young people experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change, so that foster care is the very best it can be.

We have been leading the fostering agenda for more than 40 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level. As a membership organisation we bring together individuals and services involved in providing foster care across the UK. We have approximately 60,000 individual members and nearly 400 organisational members, both local authorities and independent fostering providers, which cover 75 per cent of foster carers in the UK. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research; in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

1.2 The Fostering Communities programme

[Fostering Communities](#) is a national programme of improvement and support led by The Fostering Network in Wales and funded by the Welsh Government from 2020 – 2023. The programme supports looked after children and their foster families throughout Wales, by improving wellbeing outcomes for children and increasing the competence, confidence and motivation of the fostering workforce.

As part of our Fostering Communities programme we will be producing a [series of briefing papers](#) for the fostering community in Wales which will cover a range of relevant and useful topics.

1.3 What do mean by sibling group?

For this paper, when we refer to a sibling group, this means two or more children related to each other by blood, adoption, or affinity through a common legal or biological parent. It includes full siblings, half siblings and step siblings etc. There can also be what is referred to as 'sibling like' relationships.

1.4 The importance of maintaining sibling relationships

When we think of fostering, we often think of a child or young person wellbeing enhanced and benefiting from the safety and security of being part of a foster family. But a significant proportion of children and young people who are fostered belong to sibling groups in which staying together represents their real sense of security and home. But resource constraints often results in separation, whether temporarily or not, from their brothers and sisters.

The Fostering Network believes that for their wellbeing, siblings should always be placed together unless, of course, it is not in their best interest. If siblings have to be separated, for whatever the reason, a Contact Plan is vital to ensure they keep in contact and with practical support to keep relationship immediate and alive. This is not only for the interests of the children and young people, but it is also to the children's family network and also in the interests of foster families and the placement.

To find out more click here: <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/policy-positions/stability>

1.5 The challenges facing sibling groups in foster care

It can be challenging to keep sibling groups together and there are many reasons for this. It may well be that the sibling groups are large and there may not be foster carers available with the space needed to accommodate them.

Within these sibling groups there will also often be a range of ages, with a range of different needs, which can also be a challenge for a foster carer, who may well already have other children living at home. A foster carer may well not have the resources to fully meet the needs of a number of children, who are at very different stages of development and age.

Based on a birth parents' circumstance and family networks, sibling children and young people may enter the care system at very different times. This may mean that one child may already be in foster care before the need to assess the needs of their other siblings. It is also possible that siblings may be placed in different types of placements, for example, kinship care, rather than mainstream foster care, or even adoption. When this happens, it is vital that contact is maintained or there is a danger that the longer children are in care and possibly separated from their siblings, the more likely it is that they will lose contact with their siblings and impact negatively on their long-term wellbeing.

2. The importance of sibling relationships

*'Sibling relationships are likely to last a lifetime and can be an integral part of a child's sense of identity, while potentially also providing support, companionship, continuity, annoyance, competition and conflict.'*¹

Edwards et al 2005

¹ Edwards, R., Hadfield, L. & Mauthner, M. (2005) *Children's Understanding of their Sibling Relationships*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation/NCB

Sibling relationships are often the most enduring relationships we have. Our siblings live in our generation and, therefore, are at similar life stages and are usually still here once our parents have passed away. Siblings typically share and overlap chapters in their life story and shared experiences in their childhood. With 80% of the population having siblings, foster carers are likely to encounter and be required to carry out their part in the Contact Plan in order to support and encourage positive permanent sibling relationships. This includes children in placement together or apart.

2.1 Lifelong relationships

For most of us with siblings, this is the longest relationship we will have in our lives. Siblings represent a long-term permanent sense of identity for us. It relates to who we are and where we come from. Sibling relationships will often outlive friendships, partnerships, marriages and even our relationship with our birth parents. For children in care, it is essential for both fostering services and foster carers to pro-actively continue and nurture these relationships.

2.2 Wellbeing

It is widely recognised that children and young people who are fostered often experience attachment issues. This may be because they have been subjected to abuse and trauma in their past. As a result, they may suffer guilt at not being able to help to 'fix' their home lives and, for many, they experience a loss of identity at being removed from their birth families. Some of these issues can be reduced if they are able to remain with a least one or more of their siblings. It would be invaluable for them to continue to live with someone who has the same shared experiences and understands what they have been through.

Adapting to the placement and their new foster family is made far less daunting if it is done with a brother or sister at their side. Research indicates that being able to live with siblings encourages more positive relationships in their foster home and allows children and young people to view their care experience more positively.

Research has shown that there are a number of positive impacts on children and young people in foster care, if they are placed with siblings. This can range from them having fewer emotional and behavioural issues and performing better in school.

Examples of research include:

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/siblingissues.pdf>

<https://www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide07/placement/siblings/>

2.3 Permanency

Research has also shown that being able to keep children and young people in care together with their siblings can have a positive impact on the stability and permanency of that fostering placement.

3. Supporting sibling relationships

Sibling relationships are complex. When we consider these relationships in the context of fostering, we need to consider the wider birth family dynamics, circumstantial and historical issues, safety and wellbeing, and the children's future.

This section of this paper will discuss some of these key issues and ways for foster carers to support children with the relationships they have with siblings, their sense of belonging in their birth family, and their circumstantial issues which may affect these.

3.1 Introduction

The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) sets out the rights of all children and young people. The UNCRC includes siblings in respect of children's right to family life. Siblings are also recognised in 'Family Life' in the European Convention of the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms ECHR.

Sibling relationships are a key part of a child's history which will move forward through to their future. Sibling relationship is one of our most enduring, typically outliving our parents. The nature of this relationship, (even the challenges with absence of a relationship), will have a lasting impact on a child into adulthood.

The child looked after in the foster home, will also have some experiences yet to be shared with you, and a history of complex and challenging relationships. As a result the child may have a confused sense or memories of belonging in multiple places. It is important that they are supported to gain a 'join up' understanding of these varied experiences. This should be led by the child, in which Life Story book activities may be a useful tool for the foster carer.

3.2 Functional family dynamics

It is important to take some time to consider the wider context and the bigger picture, when we think about supporting children:

- You might ask yourself about your own family dynamics and values.
- How many people are in the fostering household?
- How do individuals relate to each other?
- What do you do to promote a sense of belonging, for the children for whom you care?

Family dynamics include being supportive of each other and working together as a network to resolve conflict and challenges. Unfortunately, not all families have these qualities and the children you care for may have experienced unhealthy, confused or dysfunctional roles within their families. For some, they may have had some parenting responsibility despite being a minor, may have played a protective role with other siblings, may have been the scapegoat, or may have been subjected to abuse.

When caring for siblings, it is important to consider the family dynamics from the lens of their previous care and family dynamics. As their foster carers, it is your

role to acknowledge the challenges and worries children are facing, and through your parenting, support children to heal. We don't always have a detailed history, but behaviour can tell us a lot about what is going in their mind and what might have been past experiences. Here are some starting points for promoting positive sibling relationships.

3.2.1 Begin by promoting positive interactions, positive role models and encouraging opportunities for children to have fun together. When children are playing, or interacting, nicely together, take notice and encourage this kind of activity more often. Try not to interrupt positive play unless it is unavoidable.

Oxytocin is the feel-good hormone which is linked to attachment and is released when we enjoy time with others. It helps us de-stress, build relationships, feel love and much more. Energetic play, music, dance and laughing can help release oxytocin. This will help children feel good, in the company of their siblings and foster carers. This, in turn, will improve relationships. When children have experienced early trauma, the production and release of oxytocin is reduced, which impacts the way they respond to cues in their surroundings.

Early trauma impacts several biological systems, including the HPA axis² (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis), which includes the production and release of oxytocin.

There are a number of practical ways of helping to maintain connections between siblings not living together. The regulations (Fostering Regs 2019, Regulation 19: Duty of contact) state that foster carers need to *'promote contact between a child placed with them and the child's parents, relatives and friends, in accordance with the child's care and support plan and any court order relating to contact.'* The guidance for this states that children should be supported to 'maintain and develop family contacts and friendships in accordance with the child's care and support / pathway plan'. These plans are informed by the law, which prioritises children's right to their relationships with their siblings. The relevant case law and best practice guidance relating to siblings can be accessed here: The Children's Act 1989, Article 8 of the Human Rights Act, and the Adoption and Children's Act 2002 s1(4).

Any contact arrangements should be discussed and reviewed regularly. When these relationships are challenging, foster carers can seek support to manage the contact effectively to ensure the children's needs are safeguarded and that contact can move to a positive experience for all. There are several options for the form that contact takes. There are times where children's contact moves into different formats to enable the maintenance of their relationship until face-to-face contact is in the children's best interests.

² <https://internal-journal.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fphar.2018.00154/full>

3.2.2 Introducing activities that they can relate to and easily get involved with together, can lift the mood. Perhaps baking or messy play. Encouraging positive interactions can include adding into their bedtime routine, the opportunity for children to say goodnight and that they love and care for each other.

3.2.3 Promote activities where children cooperate together, reflecting the diversity of the children's culture, language and faith. This can include projects like creating the decorations for an occasion, making a big poster or banner for someone, a scavenger hunt where the children help each other rather than competitively.

Visit <https://www.thebestideasforkids.com/indoor-activities-for-kids/>

'I wanted to win!'

For many looked after children, a competitive game is unbearable and the trigger for cheating, distress, destruction and flight. This becomes particularly challenging when you have more than one child, and encouraging a cooperative environment through family games.

To tackle this, we need to be curious about and attempt to understand the child's behaviour and attitude. Often, it comes down to attachment and low self-esteem. Children may be unable to tolerate losing a game because they use external cues for their self-worth. By being the best, fastest and winner, they're doing their best to avoid shame when their internal view of themselves is so poor.

Allowing others to win at games will take time and will improve with their self-esteem, through your positive parenting and cooperative environments. Children will cheat to protect themselves from losing and, if that doesn't work, they will leave or end the game for everyone. Helping siblings to 'take it in turns to be the winner' in a planned way, will help them experience not being the winner in a controlled and planned way, and being emotionally supported by you to do so.

Sharing is a challenging concept, and one which we begin to learn as a toddler. We must learn to share to enjoy mutual games and reduce conflict. However, this developmental process is impacted by our experiences and trust that we will 'get enough'. When children experience neglect, or their needs are met inconsistently, giving up something they want can be a trigger for deeper issues. Allowing children to define which items they do not have to share (food, favourite and sentimental toys, their bed and their clothes) can mean they can begin to differentiate between play and threat. Maintaining these rules with siblings can mean that they also develop respect for belongings of others, the concepts of borrowing and sharing, as well as having their own sense of possession.

A functional family unit provides support for individuals but also working together to resolve conflict, tensions, disappointments and challenges. When children have experienced dysfunctional family life, they will not have experienced the positive steps, the understanding and skills contributing to conflict resolution, respect and warmth. A key aspect of healthy relationships is the repair of relationships and moving on we disagree. You can help children through modelling, such as apologising to them when necessary, or planning appropriate resolutions when things go wrong.

3.3 Childhood early experiences

Children with poor early care experiences and attachment difficulties have a negative view of themselves, others and the world, owing to the inconsistent messages and reinforcements they've had. They may also have experienced intentional harm. Often, these children misinterpret facial expressions and gestures which are neutral or intended to help.

Practical steps to take, all is calm, ask the child what they thought was happening, and suggest possible alternatives such as "maybe Sue was taking your plate away because she thought you had finished" or "maybe Jon didn't realise you were still playing with that" or "maybe he wanted to play too" can help children reflect and see other perspectives. Help children to work out conflicts without choosing who was right and wrong, achieving shared resolutions.

If one child is hurt, the other can become your helper tending to them (such as applying a plaster). This can help in relationship repair when the hurt is a result of the children's conflict, misunderstanding or disagreement.

'Together or Apart'

When we say siblings have 'a shared story', we mean that they have shared experiences from shared time and or shared key people in their lives. Siblings will experience this time and these relationships differently, as each person's perspective, memories, feelings, personality, and resilience are unique.

Assessing children's needs

Most siblings will value and benefit from being placed together. However, there are some circumstances where children's needs cannot be met in the same household as their sibling. Social services assess children's needs both individually and in sibling groups. The assessment is known as 'Together or Apart'.

Unfortunately, some children have experienced harmful early experiences which impact their ability to relate to others. Sibling interactions may be destructive and dangerous or reinforce previously experienced abuse. There are times where dysfunctional family dynamics in previous care continue to play out challenging behaviours, once in foster care. For the wellbeing of all children involved, difficult decisions can be made to separate children based on carefully considered assessment and the views of the siblings.

When children are placed separately, they require an updated Care and Support Plan, contact plan additional support services from adults around them to support their relationship and to help them to recover. Children placed separately from their siblings often experience a strong sense of loss. A loss of the day-to-day sibling interactions and bereavement for another relationship at a distance. This loss can occur even when siblings have a negative impact on each other.

A Contact Plan needs to be carefully considered, to ensure that each child's wellbeing is protected, whilst working towards a shared goal of a safe and functional relationship for the future with the siblings and the wider family network. It is helpful for foster carers to develop positive working relationships

with the sibling's foster carers and the wider family network. Talking to the foster child about their sibling and family network positively and in a balanced way will maintain the message that you respect the importance and significance of their relationship despite the challenges. The Contact Plan will promote indirect contact, including their sibling in opportunities to connect through cards and other small gestures, where appropriate. The Contact Plan will provide focus and maintain a relationship even when children require time apart. The Plan will be discussed and updated at each Children Looked After Review

Despite the challenges, siblings can be supported both individually and together, to overcome many challenges and contribute to improving long term relationships for a positive future. There are many examples where children are reunited during their placements in foster care.

4. Additional reading

Markham, L. (2015) *Calm Parents, Happy Siblings: How to stop the fighting and raise friends for life*: Vermilion

Life Story Book and storytelling

<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/blogs/cathy-glass/life-story-book>

Social Care Wales

<https://socialcare.wales/hub/improving-lives-through-storytelling>

Scottish Government

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/staying-together-connected-getting-right-sisters-brothers-national-practice-guidance/>

UK Parliament

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2020-03-04/debates/D607E931-466B-43A6-B594-54258BA1AC4D/ChildrenInTheCareSystemSiblingContact>

5. How The Fostering Network can help

The Fostering Network offers advice, information and support. Our expertise and knowledge are always up-to-date and available through our vital member helplines, publications, training and consultancy.

Advice

[Fosterline Wales](#) provides a free help and advice line, providing information about all aspects of foster care, including tax and national insurance, benefits, allowances and insurance. It also offers confidential support, including to those who face an allegation, or who may be concerned about a care plan, or who are unclear about the legislation and guidance related to foster care in Wales.

Call us on 0800 316 7664 from 9.30am - 12.30pm Monday to Friday.

If you call outside this time, please leave a message and someone will call you back as

soon as possible.

You can email us at fosterlinewales@fostering.net

Support and resources

Our website is an essential source of information, while our online community brings together foster carers for peer support and advice. Members can log in to share their experience and get advice from other foster carers. Our online community is a safe and secure area to discuss foster care matters.

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk

Training and consultancy

Wherever you are in your fostering career, as a foster carer, social worker or manager, The Fostering Network has a range of [training](#) designed to meet your development needs. For more information please email wales@fostering.net.

Contact details

If you would like more information please contact:

maria.boffey@fostering.net

The Fostering Network in Wales

33 Cathedral Road, Cardiff, CF11 9HB.

Telephone: 029 2044 0940

Email: wales@fostering.net

Website: thefosteringnetwork.org.uk

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