



Maintaining the sibling bond

Siblings relationships are important across the lifespan. This summary focuses on biologically related siblings, in the context of foster care and adoption.² US-based research on adults who exited care found that those who grew up with more access and stronger relationships with biological siblings reported higher levels of social support, self esteem and income, as well as stronger adult sibling relationships than those who did not.¹

Children in care have emphasised the importance of siblings in their lives. This is support by evidence suggesting that siblings provide social support that can ease adaptation to being in care and associated stressful situations.³ Research by the CREATE Foundation, the peak body for children in out-of-home care, reported that siblings were the relatives most frequently contacted.⁴ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care expressed their desire to be placed with siblings or to remain in regular contact. This enables them to express their cultural responsibility of community and caring for each other.⁵

The importance of placing siblings together, however, is not reflected in NSW legislation. While the *NSW Adoption Act 2000* and *Children and Young Persons (Care & Protection) Act 1998* make provisions for contact with siblings, there is no specific requirement for the consideration of co-placement. In some overseas jurisdictions, legislation has specific inclusions for the co-placement of siblings. For example, the UK *Children's Act 1989* requires co-placement when in the child's best interests and reasonably practical.⁴ In the U.S., the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act 2008* imposes the requirement for States to make 'reasonable efforts' to keep siblings together in out-of-home care placements.⁴

Approaches that support relationships between siblings in permanent care and adoption include well-defined sibling co-placement policy; agency-based plans for facilitating and implementing sibling

contact visits; and training for caseworkers, carers and other professionals about the importance of sibling relationships.⁶

Australia has no comprehensive statistics on sibling co-placement, but research by the CREATE Foundation⁴ reported high rates of children in care who were separated from some or all of their siblings. The NSW *Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study* found that approximately half of children on permanent care orders had regular contact with siblings (excluding children living with siblings).⁷

Promoting sibling bonds through co-placement and contact is an important issue for policy and practice. This summary provides an overview of literature on sibling co-placement and contact in permanent care, and reports on interviews conducted with caseworkers, from Barnardos Australia, regarding co-placement of newborns with siblings who had been placed in permanent care or adopted between 2015-2018.

Key Findings

- Sibling co-placement can be a protective factor for children in permanent care and adoption, but co-placement is limited by available carers who will take sibling groups
- Serial entry, where children enter care at different times, is a key barrier to sibling co-placement
- Caseworkers and carers/adoptive parents have an important role in facilitating contact for separated siblings
- Research with Barnardos Find-a-Family found that the majority of newborn siblings who came into care could not be placed with their older siblings. Reasons include the needs of children already in the placement
- Newborn siblings who were separated were more likely to have contact with their siblings if those older siblings were also placed with Barnardos, compared to children who remained with their birth family or were placed with another agency.

Sibling co-placement

For children who have been adopted or placed in out-of-home care, co-placement with siblings can be a protective factor, except where there is abuse among siblings.^{8,9} While the research is limited, studies suggest that co-placement with siblings has a neutral or positive impact on the stability of out-of-home care and adoptive placements.^{3,10} Overall, studies that have examined functioning, mental health and educational outcomes, have found that children placed with some or all of their siblings tend to do better than children separated from all siblings.² Research in NSW found that children placed in out-of-home care with at least one sibling were as stable as children placed without any siblings. A positive correlation in mental health and peer relationships was identified for girls when they lived with siblings.¹⁰ Joint placement with siblings can assist the children to cultivate a sense of self and provide a link to their history.⁹

While best practice strongly encourages co-placement of siblings, this is not always possible. International child protection research, particularly in the United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US), has examined the proportion of children in care who are placed together or separately from siblings as well as factors related to co-placement.³ Serial entry, meaning entry into the care system at different points in time, is a key contributing factor to the separation of siblings.^{11,12} Longitudinal research in the UK suggests that while it is common for younger siblings to enter care, it is unusual for them to be placed with older siblings in the same adoptive family.¹³

In most cases, siblings are separated because a placement is not available that would allow for co-placement with siblings, rather than child-centred reasons. Situational and demographic factors associated with siblings co-placement, noted across a number of studies, include:¹

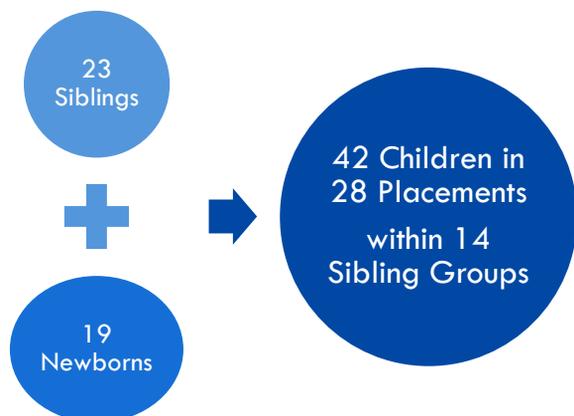
- Large size of sibling group
- Wide age gap between siblings
- Differences in the needs of siblings
- Type of placement, with children most likely to be co-placed in kinship care than other types of care
- Behavioural problems (a sibling with a behaviour problem is more likely to be removed)
- Agency factors, including policies and procedures and adequacy of placement resources and supports.

Sibling co-placement & contact: Children in Barnardos Australia Find-a-Family

Barnardos Australia (Barnardos) is a leading non-government, non-denominational child protection charity in Australia. Barnardos provides a range of programs including family preservation and restoration services; short-term foster care; permanent foster care; and open adoption. Established in 1984, the Barnardos Find-a-Family program aims to find permanent homes for children who cannot be safely restored to birth families (as determined by the NSW Children's Court). As of March 2018, there were 222 children in the Find-a-Family program. Barnardos' policy is to co-place siblings, and this is usually achieved when children enter care at the same time.

Interviews were conducted with 10 Find-a-Family caseworkers between April and May 2018.

Co-placement of newborn siblings



All were overwhelmingly positive about co-placement of siblings unless there were identified safety concerns. They viewed the co-placement of siblings as relevant to identity, belonging and keeping families together. However, the majority of newborn infants were unable to be placed with older siblings.

The placements for the newborn siblings are described in Table 1.

Placement type:	# children:
Placed with all siblings	4
Split (placed with at least one sibling)	3
Separated (placed alone)	9
Pending	3
Total	19

Barriers to sibling co-placement

Of the 16 newborns who had a final placement during the study, 12 were unable to be placed with their older siblings. 1-3 barriers were reported for each child who could not be co-placed with siblings.

The barriers reported by caseworkers to co-placement are outlined in Table 2.

Reasons	# of children*
Needs of child already in placement	8
Timing (age gap between children)	6
Carer preference regarding number of children	5
Single carer	2
Complexity of contact for half siblings	1
Perceived agency intrusion	1

*Note: More than one reason may have been reported per case

Needs of children already in the placement (n=8)

The most common reason why a younger sibling was not placed with his or her older sibling(s) was due to the needs of the older sibling and concerns for the stability of the placement. Older siblings had either emotional, developmental or behavioral needs and presented with issues such as anxiety, speech delay and/or behavioral issues due to past trauma and separation.

Timing (n=6)

Close age gap between siblings was the second most common barrier to co-placement, due to concerns about the subsequent short time the older siblings had been in their permanent placement.

Carer preference for number of children (n=5)

The third most common barrier stated by the adoptive parents/carers for not accepting a subsequent sibling was that they had already reached their preferred family size, although the number of children for an "ideal sized" family varied. Some had changed their mind about family size since their initial assessment.

Other obstacles to co-placement (n=4)

- In two cases, the older child was cared for by single carers who felt unable to take on a second child.
- One younger child was a half-sibling and the carers felt unable to take on contact visits with additional birth family members.
- In one case the carers described the 'intrusive and lengthy' process of adoption as an obstacle in accepting placement of the subsequent sibling.

In all cases, where carers/adoptive parents made the final decision to decline a younger sibling due to the needs of the child/children already in their care, the Case Manager described their feelings of guilt:

"...they did feel... this tug that they had to. They are siblings and they have to be together. But it would have been the straw that breaks the camel's back."

Sibling contact in permanent care

While there has been considerable focus on birth parent contact, less attention has been paid to contact between siblings in permanent care.¹⁴ Australian and international studies have found that children generally report wanting more contact with siblings than they currently have.^{15,16,17}

Children rely on adults to help maintain their relationships with siblings. More than one-third of children and young people surveyed by CREATE noted that caseworkers provided support with organising contact visits and assisting with transport. Caseworkers found it more difficult to arrange sibling contact when children were in multiple different locations or when children were placed via separate agencies.⁴

Carers and adoptive parents are often 'gatekeepers' for facilitating sibling contact¹⁸ and support children's social and emotional responses to contact. In a small qualitative study, foster carers in the US recommended early connections should be forged among carers of separated siblings, so they can facilitate regular contact, rather than relying on supervised contact by caseworkers.¹⁹

Shared activities, such as holiday camps, can allow siblings separated in care or adoption with special time together to build connections and shared childhood memories.⁶

Sibling contact

All siblings in this sample who were placed via Find-a-Family had contact with their separately placed siblings. Out of the 8 sibling groups with split or separated placements, 3 had four annual “official” contact visits with their siblings and 5 had six annual “official” sibling visits, as stated in their Care Plan or Adoption Plan. The level of informal contact was found to vary greatly; caseworkers noted that placing siblings with carers who shared similar lifestyles and values and lived in the same geographical area encouraged friendships to flourish and greater contact to occur.

The level of contact with siblings who remained with their birth family or were placed with other agencies varied from none to 6 annual visits. There were also logistical challenges reported when children had different case managers.

Case study: Sibling contact

When the newborn sibling entered care, his 3 older siblings (aged five, three and two) were already placed together in a permanent placement with the aim of adoption. Initially, the older siblings’ placement had been rather challenging; not only were the three boisterous siblings close in age, the oldest child displayed emotionally deregulated behaviors with frequent temper tantrums and aggression. A joint decision was made between the carers and agency not to place the newborn sibling with his 3 older siblings due to the individual needs of all the children involved. A permanent placement was found for the youngest child with carers in an adjoining suburb. In addition to the 6 annual contact visits stipulated in the children’s Adoption Plans, the two families facilitated regular informal contact, such as birthday parties, lunches and visits to each other’s homes or attending local community events. Due to the proximity of the two families, not all visits were pre-planned; sometimes they just ran into each other locally and decided to visit a café together. The adoptive mother of the older children said the 3 older children had developed a relationship with their youngest sibling that she would compare to a relationship between cousins. They were aware of their shared biological background and although they enjoy each other’s company, they were also aware that they were growing up in different homes.

The research described in this summary was conducted by Jenny Norderyd, Barnardos Find-a-Family Case Manager, as a Policy Lab Fellow with the Institute of Open Adoption Studies

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Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on this study:

- Target prevention efforts to factors that result in multiple children from a family entering care
- Develop carer training and assessment about potential sibling co-placement and supporting children’s emotional regulation around sibling contact
- Provide adequate support and funding for foster and adoptive parents to encourage sibling contact
- Conduct more research on the impact of sibling co-placement and contact for children in out-of-home care and in open adoption.

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