

# **STANDARD FOR SIBLING PLACEMENT**

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this standard is to provide direction and guidance to the Child and Family Services (CFS) program regarding sibling placements. This standard is intended to achieve statewide consistency to the development and application of CFS core services and will be implemented in the context of all applicable laws, rules, and policies. The standard will also provide a measurement for program accountability.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The importance of the sibling relationship must be recognized and respected. Sibling relationships often provide needed continuity and family stability during a child's placement in foster care. The sibling bond is important, separate from the bond between parent(s) and child(ren). Siblings typically share the same history, heritage and biology, unlike any other relationship. The sibling relationship is unique and must be fostered in its own right.

Children placed in out-of-home care suffer many losses and experience intense grief. They are separated from their parents and possibly other family members. They are often separated from neighbors, friends, schoolmates, teachers and the security of a familiar environment. Additional losses may include those of pets, cherished possessions, babysitters or childcare providers, and other trusted adults. Separating siblings in foster care or through adoption is often the hardest loss of all. Children often have some understanding about why they are separated from their parents, but separation from siblings is not understandable. Adult adoptees and foster care alumni both describe the loss of sibling contact as the most devastating loss they experienced.

Placement of siblings together should be made a priority in case planning and implementation of the case plan. Placement of siblings together can serve many purposes such as:

- Preserve the sibling relationship and bond or establish a healthy, rewarding bond between siblings who may or may not have had any significant prior relationship or bond with one another;
- Minimize or mitigate the impact of separation from family and familiar surroundings;
- Minimize the impact of the trauma from abuse and neglect. Because of their shared experiences in their family, siblings understand each other and their shared history;
- Provide support through developmental changes and growth;
- Strengthen the siblings' self esteem through acceptance, unconditional love and a sense of belonging; and
- Strengthen the siblings' skills at relationships, support, communication and resolving conflicts with others.

## **IMPLEMENTING THE STANDARD**

The Department must make reasonable efforts to place siblings together when they are in foster care. Siblings are to be placed together in foster care and adoption at the earliest possible time unless it is determined not to be in the best interests of a sibling or it is not possible after appropriate documented efforts by the Department. It is the responsibility of the Department to develop resource family options sufficient to meet the needs of sibling groups. This is one of the reasons that the Department prioritizes the placement of children in relative homes. The Department must make reasonable efforts to provide ongoing interaction between siblings in situations where sibling groups are unable to be placed together. It is essential that both staff and the families who foster and adopt children with siblings understand the importance of sibling relationships.

Social workers/clinicians making a placement will follow the following procedures:

### **At Initial Placement**

- Find out the current location of all siblings at intake;
- Begin with the assumption that all siblings should be placed together at the first placement unless there is evidence that placement together is contrary to either child's safety;
- Inform foster and potential adoptive parents that there are siblings, and the permanency plan will be to keep them together or reunite them;
- One worker should have the responsibility for all the children in the sibling group;
- When a child comes into placement, determine if there are siblings already in placement. If so, look to that resource family as the first placement;
- Explore the child(ren)'s placement preferences. Prioritize placement with relatives when appropriate resources are available;
- If the children must be placed separately in their initial placement, continue to diligently search for a placement that can take all of the siblings. The importance of sibling connections is an area requiring ongoing assessment;
- Children who are not initially placed together should have contact within 48 hours of placement; and
- Seek permanent kinship/relative placements for all children to the greatest extent possible.

### **In Permanency Planning**

- Continue to seek permanent kinship/relative placements for all children to the greatest extent possible. A genogram and ecomap should be developed with the family to identify all possible resources;
- Involve the children and extended family members in planning that will enable siblings to live together if possible, or near one another and/or able to maintain contact if not. The use of Family Group Decision Making meetings would enhance the involvement of families in making placement decisions;
- Conduct specific recruitment for sibling groups – reach out to neighbors, school staff, and others who know one or all of the children;
- Unless an exception has been made and documented, present all the children in the group together when using Wednesday's Child, Northwest Adoption Exchange or

AdoptUSKids. Have their picture taken together and make it clear that a family is being sought for the entire group;

- If the permanency plan includes adoption and if siblings are placed separately, each foster family is to be approached about accepting the other sibling(s);
- In the event a child's sibling was previously adopted, the parents of the adopted child(ren) are to be approached regarding placement of new siblings when they enter foster care;
- If children are adopted separately, assist the family in establishing post-adoption contact and visitation plans; and
- If siblings will not be placed permanently together and at least one child is placed for adoption, the siblings should be educated about the Adoption Registry so they may establish contact after age eighteen.

### **When Siblings are Separated**

There are times when placement of siblings together is not possible. These situations may include:

- The special needs of one of the siblings;
- An abusive relationship between the siblings where therapy, with a safety plan in place, is not effective or not the appropriate intervention;
- A foster placement that lacks the resources and/or capacity to care for all the siblings;
- The need to establish timely permanency for one or more of the siblings;
- One or more of the siblings is in residential treatment, hospitalized, or in juvenile detention; and/or
- An older sibling who does not consent to adoption.

These situations should be assessed as part of the Region's Concurrent Planning Review, on an on-going, case-by-case basis, with the intent to maintain sibling contact when it is safe to do so, strengthen the relationships and possibly reunite the children in the future. All placements should consider the best interest and well being of the child. Any decision to separate siblings initially, during, or after placement must be handled as an exception to policy and must be clearly documented.

The following guidelines are to be followed:

- Valid reasons must be identified and documented for not placing siblings together;
- Never make the decision to separate siblings alone. Consider early use of the Sibling Decision-Making Matrix. Include the court, resource family, therapists/counselors, supervisors, permanency committee, GAL and others who have played an important role in the child's life when possible. If placement is made during on-call hours, decisions to separate siblings should be reviewed with the supervisor the next day and clearly documented;
- When the permanent separation of siblings is being considered, this decision must be made using the process outlined in the Placement Selection Committee Standard;
- One worker should continue to have case responsibility for all the siblings;
- Siblings should be placed in homes as geographically near to each other as possible;
- Siblings should be registered in the same school or district when those resources

- are available.
- Educate resource families on the importance of the sibling bond while the children are separated. Encourage activities such as family-to-family visits, sleepover visits, joint lunches/dinners, playgroup meetings, attendance at one another's school and sporting events, having siblings join the same sports teams;
  - The plan to separate is to be supported by a specific, concrete plan for future contacts between the children;
  - Write sibling visits into case and alternate care plans and provide transportation and other supports resource families need to make those visits happen regularly. The plan should clearly state who will be responsible to ensure visits happen;
  - At a minimum, face-to-face visits between siblings, who are in alternate care and were in the same household when the child was removed, should occur at least monthly. Additional contact between siblings placed in different homes or facilities may include telephone calls, e-mail, and letters;
  - Reasons for exceptions to monthly visits or contact between siblings must be clearly documented; and
  - If visits are cancelled, not scheduled or otherwise do not happen, this should be fully explained to each sibling and clearly documented.

**Any action taken not consistent with this standard must be pre-approved by the FACS Division Administrator or designee. The action, rationale and approval must be documented in the file.**