

Practice Guide: Planning contact with brothers and sisters

Introduction

There is strong evidence that in most cases contact with brothers and sisters is wanted by children and can be rewarding and beneficial. Therefore, it should generally be considered, promoted, prioritised and supported (at least with key siblings) unless there is good reason for it not to occur.

What do we know about the sibling networks of adopted children?

- > Sibling networks of adopted children can be large, complex and fragmented. Children and young people can be dispersed over different households (including living with birth parents or independently, or residing in other adoptive families, kinship, foster or residential care).
- > Adopted children who are the first or youngest in their family are likely to have subsequent siblings born to either or both of their parents after they are adopted.
- > Loss of sibling relationship as a consequence of adoption is widespread. The majority of adopted children (who have siblings) lose touch with at least some of their brothers and sisters. Paternal half siblings are particularly likely to be 'lost' to the adopted child.
- > Adopted children are most likely to stay in touch with siblings who are also adopted or who are in long-term foster care. Where siblings remain in the birth family, direct sibling contact is often lost because no direct contact with the adult birth relatives is planned.
- > Children often have strong feelings about who they want to stay in touch with and who is 'family' – that may include people they are not biologically related to, for example step siblings or foster siblings.

Why is sibling contact important?

- > Adopted children and children in care generally want contact with their separated siblings, particularly when they have previously lived together. They often want to see more of their siblings, and may worry about separated siblings, including those they have never met.
- > Older birth siblings, particularly those who have helped look after their younger brother/s and sister/s, may experience strong feelings of loss and anxiety when younger siblings are adopted. They can have an important role in helping adopted children to understand their parents' difficulties and life journeys.
- > Relationships with siblings may have provided comfort and support for children when home circumstances were difficult. Maintaining these relationships can provide a source of continuity for adopted children and help to mitigate some of the loss experienced.
- > Even when a child is separated from siblings, sibling contact can help provide links to a child's birth family. It can provide children with a sense of belonging and a shared history, a chance to identify biological connections and likeness. Siblings can continue to be a source of support in adult life.
- > Children and young people who are not able to see siblings may be very unhappy about this. Some may seek to reconnect using social media. This could expose them to dangers of unsolicited communication from others in the birth family, including with those they do not want contact from.

Key factors to take account of when planning keeping in touch arrangements for brothers and sisters

Section: Planning contact

- > Try and map out and document who and where each child's brothers and sisters are, including half-siblings, even those who are unknown to the child and/or the parents are no longer in contact with. Even if a child can't stay in touch with all their siblings, they are likely to value information about them and may wish to be in touch with them in the future.
- > Consider who the child views as a sibling, bearing in mind that children do always not class 'family' just in terms of 'blood' relatives.
- > Explore the wishes and feelings of children about each of their sibling relationships.
- > Consider the dynamics of the relationship between siblings, including where siblings may need help to repair or improve their relationships in order to make contact successful. Some forms of sibling contact can be problematic or negative when pre-existing problems in the sibling relationships are not addressed. Time may be given for this repair work to happen. It is important that there are plans in place for links to be maintained (at least between adults) and dates for reviews of the situation are set.
- > Planning will need to consider any risks associated with contact, such as emotional or sexual abuse by siblings.
- > Consider the ability and willingness of parents/carers to promote positive sibling contact. Support may be needed to explore negative fears and assumptions, and to help parents/carers empathise with how their child may feel in the future (**see Practice guide: supporting contact between brothers and sisters**).
- > Where there is a strong need for siblings to stay in touch with each other after adoption, this should be given high priority in the matching process.
- > An initial adult-to-adult facilitated face-to-face meeting with all carers of siblings should be planned so that all can discuss how they will collaborate to promote sibling relationships. It is also important that the two (or more) families have similar wishes and feelings about the nature and goals of contact, or that differences can be worked through to meet everyone's needs.
- > Contact with a sibling should not be automatically ruled out just because the sibling either lives with a birth family member or is in touch themselves with birth parents. A realistic appraisal needs to be made as to whether this poses serious risks to the adopted child. Any risks must be balanced against risks of severing the sibling relationship.
- > Think about the goals of contact when deciding on how much and what type of contact. If contact is wanted to enable siblings to build or sustain their relationship, face-to-face contact is likely to be more appropriate than indirect contact. Siblings who have just letters or who meet up just once a year are unlikely to feel they can build a meaningful connection or keep a close relationship going.
- > Where siblings do not have an established relationship and there is no plan to build this, the goal of contact may relate more to the children's identity needs. Lower frequency meetings or indirect forms of contact such as letters, phone calls, or exchanges on social media may be appropriate in the short term. In the longer term, children may wish to develop their relationship by meeting with each other.

- > Meeting family members that are unknown, or have not been seen for some time, could be awkward and planning should ensure contact is introduced gradually, with suitable preparation. Normalising contact as a family day out, where one may meet with extended family members at venues with activities for a mixture of ages and personalities, can work for some. In some cases, interaction between siblings may need to be encouraged to help build relationships and ideal venues will facilitate communication (such as a country park, theme park or zoo). In other cases, spending time together in a manner which involves actual little direct interaction between children (such as a theatre show or the cinema) may be more appropriate for a period of time. It is important to stay focused on ensuring that the contact meets the children's needs – whether this is continuing relationships, creating new relationships and long-term links, slowly building familiarity and trust, or providing reassurance as to the sibling's wellbeing.
- > Where trust has been established between the families of siblings, people may prefer to meet in their home environments; this can feel more natural and family like compared to always meeting in a public place.
- > Face-to-face meetings may not always be wanted by children or be practical or appropriate for a period of time. Other ways of keeping in touch can be considered during planning. Successful contact has occurred using a multitude of forms of communication including cards, phone calls, videos, video calls and email. Simply having regular news about family members can be very important to children and adoptive parents.
- > Plan for regular reviews to ensure keeping in touch arrangements adapt to changing needs as the sibling group grows and develops over time.
- > In some areas, specialist services to support brothers and sisters to stay in touch may be available and could be used.

What if sibling contact is not possible?

- > If children can't see particular siblings, they often want to know the reason for this and may feel an acute sense of loss or worry about them (for example wondering if they are being cared for and kept safe). They may need to be reassured with photos and videos or simply information about their siblings if meetings are not practical, unsafe or not wanted.
- > It can be difficult if one sibling wants to see another who does not want contact with them. Alternative methods of maintaining some connection could be considered in such cases (including through adult-only meetings or other methods of communication).
- > It is important to ensure an appropriate plan to meet young people's needs, curiosity and worries about siblings. Young people prevented from seeing, or not able to see, siblings may make contact over social media, exposing them to dangers of unsolicited communication from others in the birth family with whom they do not want contact.

Reviewing sibling contact

- > Reviews of contact should be built into the plan so that arrangements can be adapted to changing needs. Be alert to changing dynamics and personalities as siblings mature into independence or into different spheres of life (including reunification with birth parents for example).
- > See the **practice guide** on supporting contact between siblings

Useful resources:

Linking Lives Helping Siblings Living Apart to be Connected | Adoption England

Click [here](#) to view all of the *Staying in touch: Contact after adoption* resources.

An open access resource hub for practitioners working with individuals to maintain meaningful relationships after adoption.

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