

Practice Guide: Supporting contact between brothers and sisters

How does sibling contact work out?

- > There are generally high levels of satisfaction with face-to-face sibling contact; contact with brothers and sisters is seen by children and adopters as less complicated and more positive than contact with birth parents.
- > When siblings are placed in other adoptive families or long-term foster care, shared interests and concerns can sometimes lead to strong bonds between parents/carers and mutual support for each other. How well the two (or more) sets of adults get on is crucial to how the sibling contact progresses.
- > Meetings between brothers and sisters may not always be wanted by children or be practical or appropriate. But successful contact may happen using a multitude of forms of communication including cards, phone calls, videos, online games, Skype and email – instead of, or in addition to, visits. Simply having regular news about family members can be very important to children and adoptive parents.

Preparing adoptive parents

- > Preparation of prospective adopters and carers of siblings is important. Many adoptive parents struggle to see the value of contact over the long term. Carers of very young children particularly may need help to see the future value of maintaining links, building relationships, and understanding the importance of contact for the wider sibling group. Include in training the voices of adopted young people and adopted adults who can provide insight into the long-term benefits of keeping in touch with siblings, and the risks that can result from not keeping in touch.
- > Prospective adopters may also need a safe space in which to air their worries about sibling contact and to talk through how these worries may be addressed. Hearing from and discussing with other adoptive parents who have navigated successful contact can help.
- > Even where an adopted child is the only child in their birth family, it is still important to assess and support prospective adoptive parents' views around sibling contact as it is possible that further children will be born to either or both birth parents.

Challenges around sibling contact

- > Some forms of sibling contact can be problematic or negative when pre-existing problems in the sibling relationships are not addressed. Sibling groups subject to very poor parenting may have learnt to respond negatively to each other and/or may try to control each or blame one another for their separation. In extreme cases, children may be subjected to physical, sexual or emotional abuse by siblings during contact. Work to repair relationships should be prioritised and plans put in place for links to be maintained (at least between adults) during this process.
- > Sometimes sibling contact may bring feelings of sadness and loss to the surface, as visits involve parting from siblings again. This can provide opportunities for this loss to be acknowledged and for children to be comforted by their adoptive parents.
- > Siblings may pass on information from or about birth parents during contact. This exchange of information may be helpful (for example an older sibling reassuring a younger sibling that adoption was the right decision, or passing on valued news about other family members). Sibling conversations can also create tensions or pose risks (for example a sibling telling a birth parent where the adopted child lives).
- > Siblings may have very different views about birth parents or the adoption. This can be difficult for some children to manage, but sometimes these different views can provide a good opportunity for adoptive parents to talk to their child about their family situation.
- > Arranging contact between larger sibling groups often poses practical challenges in terms of the need to contact multiple families, and finding a suitable date, location and activity that will work for all. Meetings may also be complicated by the varying ages and needs of the siblings and their differing views of the birth parents/family background.

Ongoing support for keeping in touch arrangements

- > Some less complex sibling contact situations may require little support (for example, visits between two adoptive families who get on well, or where trusted relationships with foster or birth family carers have been built over time).
- > Relationships with siblings or extended family members can be less complex than that with birth parents and similar to that of 'cousins'. When siblings are placed in other adoptive families or long-term foster care it may be easy for adoptive parents to integrate them into their social/kinship network. A shared family form, with similar interests and concerns related to the care of their connected children can sometimes lead to strong bonds between carers and mutual support for each other. Sibling contact can positively evolve to become more frequent or natural and open, prompted by adoptive parents, with more frequent visits, sleepovers, and shared holidays.
- > In such cases, the most helpful approach may be to encourage parents/relatives/carers to develop their own ideas and solutions about how best to achieve the goals of contact. Parents and carers should be given information about where and how to seek support if they feel they need this at any stage.
- > However, many adopted families struggle to maintain contact with their child's siblings. For some carers with other immediate pressures, it can be difficult to see the immediate value of putting effort into establishing contact. Help to prepare the adults and to set up and maintain meetings between brothers and sisters may be important.
- > Busy family lives can lead to practical challenges to meetups. Children with little in common can result in difficulties finding activities that will be enjoyed by all. A sibling group of individuals raised with different values can lead to fears of negative influence and management of potential risk. Overall, there must be an understanding that one approach will not fit all, and adults may need to be supported to meet and discuss what works for them and be encouraged to collaborate together and work flexibly for the benefit of the children.
- > The support needs of siblings who remain in the birth family also need to be considered. Some may need help dealing with feelings of loss or guilt. Older siblings may need support to gradually let go of feelings of responsibility for younger siblings. Reassuring older children that their younger adopted siblings are well looked after may be important, alongside acknowledging and valuing the experience of the older sibling in caring for their brother or sister and recognising the difficult transition they are experiencing.
- > Kinship carers may need support with feelings of loss or guilt or to explain to the child/young person why they could not look after them full time, but still very much care about them.

Venues and activities

- > Aim for relaxed meetings in natural settings that are child friendly and where there are activities of interest to the children. In some cases, meetings in the adoptive or foster home may be the most natural and relaxed setting.
- > Think carefully about venues and activities. In some cases, interaction between siblings may need to be encouraged to help build relationships. Think about if and how the venue and activities might enable children to interact. 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.
- > When thinking about contact venues it is important to recognise and be sensitive to the fact that there may be significant differences between families in their ability to fund trips to certain more expensive venues (for example theme parks).
- > Some siblings may not have learnt to play positively together, and carers may need encouragement to work through difficulties to reap longer term benefits.
- > Specialist schemes are available to support brothers and sisters living in different care arrangements to meet up, providing opportunities for all ages to enjoy creative activities and with staff available to help children work through difficult dynamics. For example **Siblings Reunited** (which is run on farmland in Scotland) and **Siblings Together** (which runs monthly siblings activity sessions, residential summer camps and weekend trips across the UK).

Prioritising adult relationships

- > It is important to encourage parents and carers to be flexible, empathic, and to collaborate. It is crucial that adults can model positive relationships, feel able to talk through worries and concerns with each other and work through any initial difficulties.
- > At least one early adult-to-adult facilitated face-to-face meeting (or phone calls/video calls) with all carers of siblings should take place so that all can discuss how they will work together, have an opportunity to get to know each other and negotiate around any differences in wishes/expectations so that arrangements can meet everyone's needs.
- > Encouraging ongoing direct communication between adults can be helpful in most cases. This can be via anonymous email addresses/phone numbers if required. Some large family groups have found WhatsApp/email group messages or Zoom calls between adults are useful to update each other in between meetings to ensure that all are kept informed of family events and can discuss issues away from the children.

Addressing risk

- > Where there is history of abuse between siblings, children need to be helped to feel safe during contact. This might include openly discussing rules and boundaries with children before the visit and being clear about how these will be maintained, and/or using a specialist setting to facilitate the meeting.
- > Some children may appreciate a secret word or sign to indicate to their adoptive parents that they need time out or to end the meetup in a discreet manner.
- > It is neither reasonable nor realistic to expect children to keep secrets or not talk to each other. Adopters should be encouraged to create a climate of openness and honesty so they can talk through with their child any worries they have after talking with siblings. Adults talking openly with the children can help them make sense of issues and learn important general life lessons in maintaining privacy and keeping safe.
- > Sometimes sibling contact may reveal children's feelings of sadness and loss. However, contact that is temporarily upsetting should not necessarily be stopped. Contact can help with communication around adoption allowing a child's difficult feelings and memories to be expressed and talked about, aiding their coping with grief.
- > Meeting between siblings often pose fewer risks than meetings with parents and it is often not necessary for a worker to 'supervise' meetings. In some cases, it may be helpful for workers to facilitate contact (e.g. ensuring meetings start and end smoothly, encouraging positive relationship building, offering emotional support, managing practical issues etc.).
- > Much older siblings, particularly those who may have left home/care and do not have supportive adults in their life, may need and value practical and emotional support to keep in touch with younger brothers and sisters.
- > It is important to respond to 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.

Keeping contact going

- > Contact needs to be reviewed periodically and adapted to changing needs. Attention should be paid to changing dynamics and personalities as siblings mature into independence or into different spheres of life (including reunification with birth parents for example). New children joining families may also require a reconsideration of contact.
- > Looked after siblings or care leavers of unsettled residence can be difficult to keep track of and social workers of children in care can change frequently, making communication difficult. It may help to have one key worker who can keep track of all the siblings and help ensure the different parties can contact each other (directly or indirectly) so contact can continue.
- > 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.
- > If face-to-face contact needs to be paused or ended, alternative methods of maintaining some connection could be considered (including through adult-only meetings or other methods of communication).
- > Sometimes poor communication, misunderstandings or simply lost contact details can lead to missed opportunities for a connection or a closer relationship to be developed and a review or brief social work input can move contact forward. Adult-to-adult meetings or mediation can be important if there are difficulties or disagreements that need to be worked through between carers. Often, a simple opportunity to share feelings can make a considerable difference to contact satisfaction.

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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