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# Leicestershire

## Guidance

### Planning Aid for Sibling Assessments

#### Applies to-

#### All children

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## **Planning Aid for Sibling Assessments**

### **Purpose of Document**

This document is intended to be a resource for social workers and managers who are engaged in permanency planning. However it is also useful for all social workers engaged in assessing families and understanding the part sibling relationships play for all children.

### **Introduction**

It is widely acknowledged that historically in planning for permanence there has been a knowledge gap in relation to the complexities of sibling relationships. This is hugely significant in terms of how we make decisions for sibling groups.

Additionally we understand that sibling assessments evoke strong emotions for practitioners which adds further to the complexity and sensitivity of this area of practice. We need to both challenge and support our workforce to guard against a reliance on 'intuition' and professional optimism and encourage a measured critical analysis which fully focuses on the longer term outcomes for each child.

### **The Position in Leicester**

The legislation is clear that siblings should be placed together unless it conflicts with their welfare. The specifics are set out later in this document. The decision to place together or apart must be taken in the best interests of each child and the sibling group as a whole. In Leicestershire the starting point is that where ever possible we keep families together, close to their communities.

Additionally we believe the following points are important to note.

- The relationship we have with our siblings is one of the longest and most fulfilling relationships we may have throughout our life. We must acknowledge therefore that it is extremely difficult to contemplate the permanent separation of siblings. Consequently a sibling assessment must be undertaken with great care and with the utmost sensitivity
- Our sibling relationships can be critically linked into our sense of identity and connectedness
- We must hear the views of our children in care who have told us that their relationships with their brothers and sisters are hugely valued and contact is very important to them. We must not underestimate the sense of connection

siblings may have for each other. Children who are fostered or adopted tend to have more complex and fragmented family relationships than other children (Rushton et al 2001). It is often difficult for practitioners to consider separation of siblings when dealing with or seeing first-hand the impact on the child of separation from their parents.

- The primary need for every child is to have a stable base (both physically and emotionally). Children in care need to make sense of what has happened to them. A secure base is essential for their emotional and psychological recovery and for their future development and achievement. In many, many cases children and young people are dealing with the aftermath of significant trauma and adverse life experiences. The impact of developmental trauma means that a comprehensive assessment of each child and their sibling relationships is a vital part of any placement decision making and informs us as to how their primary need for a stable base might be impacted by those relationships
- One child's needs should not be sacrificed in order to meet those of a sibling.
- It may take some time to fully ascertain a child's view point. We must hear, and take account of, each individual child's wishes and feelings in relation to their current situation and their future options. In order to remain objective, we also need to be mindful that we are not making assumptions, are aware of our own biases and are specifically noticing what children's behaviour and needs are telling us.
- Sibling relationships are frequently a significant strength in families. From first contact, a worker should develop an awareness of and full understanding of all the sibling relationships.
- Decision making for sibling groups should be informed by a full understanding of the quality of their attachment relationships with primary carers and the bonds they have with each of their siblings.
- A decision to place siblings separately must be taken with the greatest of care and sensitivity. A 'Together or Apart Assessment' must carefully weigh up the longer term forecast of each of the siblings' needs and take full account of their needs to have a stable base.
- Maintaining positive relationships when siblings are placed separately must be prioritised. Enormous efforts must be made to ensure that the loss experienced through permanent separation is reduced. They should be allowed to spend significant amounts of time together in each other's homes as well as maintaining contact electronically, where possible. There may be value in them attending the same school or be involved in after school activities together. Children need to hold on to their connections and their

‘shared story’. The quality of the contact arrangements is likely to be a critical factor in meeting children’s individual needs and in supporting placements stability.

- Decisions to place children together or apart cannot be made with integrity unless there is a robust understanding of both the individual and collective needs of a sibling group. Without this understanding support plans focused on meeting individual needs will be tokenistic and will likely fail.
- Recording of all decisions must be fully transparent. It is vitally important that all parties (now and in the future) can easily understand how decisions were made and on what basis. In essence it is important that records ‘show our working out’ so that there is a clear line of logic and supportive evidence for decisions taken. Where the wishes of children are overridden it is vital that the rationale for this is very clearly set out.

## Legislation

The following legislation is fundamental to the assessment process and should be taken into account (and included) when analysing assessment findings.

- **The Children Act 1989 s23(7)(b)** places a duty on local authorities to accommodate a child together with his/her siblings so far as is ‘reasonably practical and consistent with his welfare’.
- **The Adoption and Children Act 2002 s1 (4)** requires the court to consider “the likely effect on the child (throughout his life) of having ceased to be a member of the original family and become an adopted person” and “the relationship which the child has with relatives including the likelihood of any such relationship continuing and the value to the child of its doing so”. The Act also requires the court to consider contact arrangements, and it allows the child and any relative to apply for contact (s26).
- **Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998** covers the right to private and family life and prohibits interference with this. Provided that family life is established, each member of the family including siblings has their own right to respect for family life. Exceptions can be made to protect ‘health and morals’ and the ‘rights and freedoms of others’ (e.g. child protection cases) but the actions of public authorities (including the courts and adoption agencies) must be reasonable
- The local authority circular, **Adoption – Achieving the Right Balance (LAC(98)20) (1998)**, states: In the exceptional case where siblings cannot be placed together with the same family, it is important for agencies to ensure

that contact arrangements with other siblings are given very careful attention and plans for maintaining contact are robust.

- **The Statutory Guidance on Adoption 2013 (para 4.12) tells us:** “Siblings should be adopted by the same prospective adopter unless there is good reason why they should not be. Where an agency is making a placement decision on two or more children from the same family, it should be based on a comprehensive assessment of the quality of the children’s relationship, their individual needs and the likely capacity of the prospective adopter to meet the needs of all the siblings being placed together. Where it is not possible for the siblings to be placed together the agency should consider carefully the need for the children to remain in contact with each other and the need for adoption support (see paragraph 27). Where a placement is sought for a child whose sibling(s) have already been adopted, it will be important to consider whether it is possible to place the child with the parents who have already adopted the sibling(s). It must be recognised however, that this could be placing too great a burden on the adoptive parent, and risk destabilising the existing adoptive family”.
- While the **Statutory Guidance on Adoption 2014** remains in draft, it provides a steer on recent government thinking. It calls for a clear decision making process with supporting information and evidence so that a child can in the future see how the decision was reached whether it was in their best interests to be placed together or separately. It also states AAR 12A (2) requires the agency, where considering adoption for 2 or more siblings, to consider whether they should be placed separately or together.
- **Social Care Institute for Excellence** – The statutory guidance within the UK is that siblings should be placed together, unless this would not be in the best interests of one or more of the sibling group, or there is a good reason not to (Department for Education, 2012a). If it is deemed necessary to separate siblings, guidance in the UK suggests that the reasons why should be clearly documented and reviewed, with judgments based on an assessment of the relationships and consideration of individual circumstances (DfE, 2012a; Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2004. The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Reg’s Volume 2 – Care Planning Placement and Case Review)

## Who are siblings?

The term ‘sibling’ is not legally defined. It can include step-siblings, half-siblings, or unrelated children who have been brought up together. The most important issue here is not what we define as a ‘true’ or ‘real’ sibling’ but the child’s perceptions of their close relationships as a result of their experiences.



## **The Purpose & Focus of Sibling Assessments**

As stated earlier a sibling assessment provides an in-depth analysis of the sibling bonds and quality of attachments. It should explore how the nature of their attachment with their primary care giver may have impacted on them as an individual but also the development of their sibling relationships as well. It should cover how the siblings interact together including how specifically each child would be affected by separation and of them remaining together.

A sibling assessment examines in depth the individual needs of each child and the impact of these needs on the other children in the sibling group. The assessment should also identify what skills / experience/ support carers would likely need to meet both current needs and likely future needs which may emerge at a later developmental stage.

A judgement is required as to how well the placement is going to be able to meet both current and future needs and should identify what sort of input would be required to strengthen that support offer and promote sustainability

## **Who does a sibling assessment?**

Children's Social Workers undertake sibling assessments, with advice and support from the Permanence Team.

In some situations, the court orders a sibling assessment to be completed by a child psychologist. The children's social work team should ensure that in these circumstances the guidance provided here is shared with that professional to ensure there is a shared clarity and where available will assist on providing information to support complex decision making.

## **When are sibling assessments required?**

A specific sibling assessment must be completed in every situation where permanency plans are envisaged or in development. However even at the start of a child's journey a good assessment should include deliberate observations of the sibling interactions.

- Sibling assessments should be identified and undertaken as early as possible in order to decide whether the siblings should be placed together or apart. Within the Children's Decision making panel there needs to be clear reference to any sibling assessment required.

- This should also include situations where children are placed or may be placed in kinship placements.
- If children have been placed separately before permanence plans have been finalised, sibling assessments are still required

This means that a sibling assessment should be included in the papers when a child is considered by:

- The Agency Decision maker in relation to proposed adoption plans
- The Key Decision Discussion where care planning is reviewed, and final care planning decisions are made
- The Permanence Panel where recommendations are made regarding long term future plans.

## Theory and Research

Evidence based practice means that social work should be supported by theory and academic literature and research. Whilst there tend to be less research findings available in relation to siblings, there are some key messages which are useful to bear in mind. These are summarised below:

- The collective placement of siblings has been identified as a protective factor against placement breakdown.
- Sustained contact with siblings can promote emotional stability and wellbeing for children in care. Siblings share an identity, which can promote their self-esteem and provide emotional support while going through care proceedings<sup>1</sup>.
- Most brothers and sisters share years of experiences that form a bond, a common foundation, they do not have with anyone else (Viorst 1986).
- If parents are unable to provide the necessary care, sibling attachments can be even closer (Banks & Kahn 1982)
- Separating siblings may make it difficult for them to begin a healing process, make new attachments and develop a healthy self-image (McNamara 1990)
- Trauma bonds are rooted in a shared experience of adverse and traumatic life events which are often central in creating powerful emotional bonds. This develops from two specific features of abusive relationships – power

<sup>1</sup> Schwenke, H., Hudd, S. and Vicary, D. (2006): **Sibling relationships in the care system: attachment, separation and contact issues**. Children Australia, 31(1): 5-11.



imbalance and intermittent and alternating good/bad treatment. This has important implications for sibling relationships and how children need to be supported to process and integrate their traumatic experience and avoid re-enacting this in anyway later in their development.

However it is important to note contrasting evidence. Julie Selwyn's research on adoption disruption studied adopted children who had left home and those who were still living in the adoptive home. She cautions that -"Fractious relationships between siblings had usually been evident from the very early days and adopters described how the strained dynamics between their children had been central to the parenting challenges they had faced over the years.. In the group where child had 'left home', parents were most concerned about serious physical aggression and sexually inappropriate behaviours. They also worried about the way in which these children bullied, manipulated, and controlled brothers or sisters". 75% of adopters in the 'left home' group said that sibling conflict had usually been initiated by the study child, whereas only 40% in the 'at home' group believed this to be true. The majority of parents whose child still lived at home were more likely to say that the child and their sibling were equally responsible for causing the conflict. She goes on to say that;

"For some parents, sibling conflict had devastated family life". Several parents described how the aggression between their children had ultimately led to their child moving out of home. The demands of parenting more than one child meant that many parents (68%) said that they had felt guilty that the study child's siblings had received less attention than they would have wished. Parents described how they had been so preoccupied with parenting the study child that they had taken their "eye off the ball" with their other children and in some instances, this had led to behavioural and emotional problems emerging for a sibling. Parents knew that their other children felt keenly the disproportionate amount of time the study child had taken up. One mother described feeling very upset by her daughter's recent comment that life was "always all about" her brother and that she sometimes felt "quite lonely in her family."

### **The Relevance of 'Developmental Trauma' in Sibling assessment**

'Developmental trauma' is not a formal diagnosis in psychiatry. However the concept is becoming increasingly accepted in social work and related fields as it seems to fit well with what social workers in particular see in children and young people following traumatic life experiences. Unlike the formal diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder the concept provides an understanding of how the impact of trauma and abuse can adversely affect development into adulthood. It recognises that trauma experienced in early childhood can have longer term detrimental impact

on a child's health and wellbeing and indeed developmental progress. Such trauma can arise from maltreatment, family violence, or a disruption in attachment to their primary caregiver(s). The effect of living in an environment which has caused significant harm for a protracted period means that there is likely to be an increased risk of developmental harm for that child and/or later mental health difficulties.

An understanding of the impact of trauma on children's development is also significant because:

- Sibling relationships are impacted by such early toxic experiences

The nature of 're-parenting' these children will require (both in terms of style and intensity) is directly linked to these early adverse experiences and the nature of the dynamics set up between siblings when living in their birth family.

### **Approaching the assessment – planning and methodology**

- For professionals involved in this aspect of the work with children, it is important that 'head and heart' factors are properly explored in supervision. Managing the emotive element of these decisions is helped by deciding from the outset on a clear framework or methodology so that information on the key issue of 'together or apart' is consciously, objectively and holistically gathered prior to any analysis.
- At the end of a sibling assessment, the reader should have gained a good understanding of each child as a unique individual. The assessment should draw on multiple sources, parents, carers, family members, other professionals who are likely to have a wealth of knowledge about the children.
- Given the importance of this work, there will need to be good early planning so that the range of work required is fully understood and this can be properly matched against the children's available time, bearing in mind their age and stage of development. Contact plans proposed within court proceedings should take account of the demands on siblings' time in terms of sibling contact and focussed observations of siblings in various combinations by professionals.

### **Who is involved in the work?**

- Birth parents
- Each child's social worker
- Each child's foster carer
- Adoption worker/s
- Other carers including schools, nurseries and childminders
- Any other professional with knowledge of any or all of the children.

## Structuring the assessment

There should be a flow and logic to the structure of the assessment. The assessment will likely include many of the aspects set out below:

- A history of each child, to provide an understanding of the experiences which have been shared and those which were different in the group. This will need to include key events in the children's lives, including any significant harm they have experienced and how has this impacted on each child? It will be important to reflect on the timing of this in relation to the developmental stage of the child and the impact these experiences may have had in respect of future development
- A full profile of each child which covers all key domains. Clearly, aspects such as physical health and their emotional and mental health will need to be addressed. Do they seek comfort appropriately and allow themselves to be parented? Consider eating and sleeping patterns, self-care skills. Can they play independently, do they need support, do they have imaginative play?
- Parents and carers and school professionals will have much to offer here particularly in describing the likes and dislikes of each child, and the overall behavioural, social, emotional and academic development of each child. The children's response to care at school or nursery is important will give some significant clues as to the levels of support a child is likely to need in the future.
- From the work of Furman and Buhrmester 1985 key factors to consider include,
  - + the degree of warmth
  - + the degree of conflict - Is there a scapegoated child?
  - + the degree of rivalry (have boys and girls been treated differently?)
  - + the degree to which one of the siblings nurtures or dominates the others e.g. was there a favoured child in the family?
  - + Is there a child who parents other child (ren) in the absence of an adult?
- An analysis of how the children behaved in different settings and their ability to self-regulate for example. Their reactions to specific situations such as how contact is managed and each child's reaction to time with their siblings in these circumstances is a vital part of the assessment.

- The social development of each child, their sense of themselves as a unique individual, their identity and self-esteem will be important aspects to address as well as being able to identify any behavioural issues and what these may be communicating. For example, has there been sexualised behaviour displayed by a child or witnessed within the sibling group? Are there any concerns regarding sibling abuse between the children or worries about emerging issues?
- Are you able to identify the nature of the attachments formed for each child with the primary care giver and the impact of this on each child? A description of the day to day parenting needs for each child will be important and the predictions as to how these may change over time.
- Reporting on the direct engagement work completed with the children to ascertain their views, their wishes and feelings.
- A summary and analysis of the group's collective needs and each child's individual needs should be included.
- The evidenced rationale for separating siblings or placing them together must be clearly set out as part of the assessment.

### **Observations to inform the assessment**

It is important to observe the children's interactions in as many different environments as possible. This includes home, school/nursery and in the community.

Depending on the children's ages and stages of development it may be useful to structure a session using a task or a problem so all the children can take part. This will allow the worker to observe the interactions, the dynamics in the group and gauge how the siblings engage with each other in 'day to day' life.

Observations should include sessions with and without parents/carers perhaps using games to observe siblings taking turns, sharing, and observation of conflict resolution for example.

Observing various combinations of the sibling group may help deepen the understanding of the group dynamics.

### **Some additional questions to inform the analysis**

- What would be the impact of separation for each child? How can future contact mitigate this?
- How would the siblings' combined needs be met by one family in the long-term?
- What impact will separation have on each child and their relationship?
- What are the barriers that may prevent each child making progress if placed together or apart? For example a scapegoated child, multiple and varied developmental needs.
- What type of parenting would best support each child?
- What is the risk of further trauma to a child if placed with siblings given their past experiences? Argent (2008) suggests that "Respite from siblings who share a history of abuse may be the only way to promote healing and to enable each of them to make a secure attachment to an adult".

### **Maintaining ties between separated siblings or when siblings cannot live together**

**In circumstances where siblings are not placed together**, carers need to understand the importance of maintaining sibling contact for the child they are caring for. They should be supported to address any potential barriers to contact such as anxiety about the effect of contact

Practitioners should consider setting up meetings between carers (adoptive and foster carers as appropriate) of separated siblings to draw up a contact plan. This can be mutually supportive experience for carers but importantly can maintain connections and support continued life story work.

### **Support Planning**

A sibling assessment contributes significantly to future support planning. In order for children to have stability once placed permanently, there must be a viable support plan in place. Whilst there will be a range of immediate needs and issues to address to support the placement - the work with carers to anticipate and plan for future and likely issues emerging is essential.

All support plans should also include some contingency planning. The Signs of Safety/Stability/Success methodology lends itself well to this aspect of work. For example a shared mapping exercise would assist in:

- Identifying the carers' network of support that will assist when carers need it
- Identifying explicitly the current and future worries the carers' family network may have
- Identifying the skills, resources and knowledge the carers' family has in parenting well/dealing with challenges
- Identifying what more needs to happen so that the carers' network gain the additional skills, resources or knowledge they may need to feel more confident about managing future challenges' (contingency planning)

## **Placement Preparations**

When making transitions to a new family, a child is likely to revert to behaviour patterns previously seen at times of high stress. While this may in the past have been an adaptive coping mechanism to cope with that stress, it is unlikely to be helpful in a new family. It is important that carers understand the meaning behind such behaviours and are well prepared for them. Placing siblings one at a time gives carers and professionals more chance to be proactive in coping with these pre-existing learned behaviours and over time providing new strategies which are more functional for the management of stress and anxiety. Clearly this has implications for carers' availability and care planning timescales.

## **The Role of the Supervisor**

Given the practical and emotional challenges of sibling assessments, the supervisor is pivotal in providing oversight and challenge. Possible questions for supervisors include:

- Is the methodology purposeful and the work well planned?
- To what extent has the worker been able to use different sources of information; is this sufficiently broad, who has been missed?
- Is there good critical analysis with all options carefully weighed up? Can you follow the logic of the conclusions reached: Is this evidenced?
- To what extent has the worker drawn on the research evidence base – how well have they used this to further their understanding of the child and children's needs? How does the research relate to the conclusions reached?
- Is the language clear and free from jargon? Will the person accessing their files in 20 years be able to understand what we did and why?



- Are the recommendations realistic and sustainable?
- What is the quality of the future support planning? Can you see how the child's or children's needs will be managed - both now and in their next stage of development?
- Is there an active support network in place who understand their role?

## Resources and further reading

Examples of resources which may be useful to consider using in your assessment include:

- Board games
- Lego or building blocks
- Cars and road maps – telling a story
- Use of puppets or dolls to make up a story
- Guided activity such as cake decoration or a craft activity
- Listening to a story
- Doing a jigsaw
- Diary or journal ( by carers) to capture detail of a child's daily routine
- Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
- Parenting daily hassles questionnaire
- CoramBAAF carers report
- CoramBAAF sibling relationship checklists
- Day in the life Diary by Family Futures
- MIM Assessment (Marshchak Intervention Method- theraplay assessment tool that considered a child's ability to receive engagement, nurture, challenge and structure
- Trauma/ nurture timeline- a chronology of child's experiences to consider the positive and negative experiences and likely impact on child development

There is a wealth of resources available to enable workers to properly plan and structure this work and to assist in the analysis. Some of these can be found below:

- Argent, H (2008) ten Top Tips for placing siblings, BAAF
- CoramBAAF: "Together or Apart Good Practice Guide," Jenifer Lord and Sarah Borthwick (2008) is an excellent book which gives good detail of the different factors to consider. 'Sibling Together or Apart' is an excellent document that provides guidance, theory and research and is a good starting point before the assessment process takes place. link:

<https://www.familyfutures.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Siblings-Together-or-Apart-Practice-Paper.compressed.pdf>

- The Sibling Assessment Form is a useful tool when it is used to collate information from a range of sources as part of your assessment. It is given to each care provider for each child with a full explanation. Care providers may be foster carers, parents, family members, schools and nurseries in advance of your assessment interviews. This allows carers to reflect on each answer and allow the worker to explore answers more fully during interview. It is not a substitute of interviewing key people.

Link:

<http://www.cwpsalem.pdx.edu/activityguide/Appendix/SiblingAssessmentTool.pdf>

- BAAF: We are family. Sibling relationships in placement and beyond. 1999. Edited by Audrey Mullender.
- BAAF 10 Top Tips Placing Siblings by Hedi Argent.
- Family Futures – Siblings together or apart 2009. Alan Burnell, Kathy Castell, Gwen Cousins.
- “The Influence of Adoption on Sibling Relationships: Experiences and Support Needs of Newly Formed Adoptive families”. Sarah Meakings; Amanda Coffey; Catherine H Shelton.  
British Journal of Social Work, Volume 47, Issue 6, 1 September 2017, Pages 1781
- “Beyond the Adoption Order: Challenges, Interventions and Adoption Disruption Research Report” Julie Selwyn, Dinithi Wijedasa, and Sarah Meakings - University of Bristol School for Policy Studies Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies. April 2014
- “Research Briefing: Supporting Sibling Relationships of children in fostering and adoptive families”. Dr Christine Jones and Dr Gillian Henderson. School of Social Work and Policy Briefing no 1, February 2017
- Rushton, A & Dance, C & Quinton, D & Mayes, D (2001): Siblings in late permanent placements, BAAF

