



# Briefing on Placing Siblings Permanently

## *Legislation and guidance*

**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' (eg. child protection cases) but the actions of public authorities (including the courts and adoption agencies) must be reasonable and proportionate.

The local authority circular, *Adoption – Achieving the Right Balance (LAC(98)20)*, 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.*

**This briefing summarises key research findings on sibling relationships and placements but cannot address the full complexity of this issue. References are quoted throughout and details of the various studies, including the sample and methodology used, are provided in a table at the end of the briefing.**

## *The importance of sibling relationships*

Sibling relationships are likely to last a lifetime and can be an integral part of a child's sense of identity, while potentially also providing support, companionship, continuity, annoyance, competition and conflict (*Edwards et al 2005*).

Despite having the same parents and living in the same family, siblings are usually very different. Psychological experiments with identical twins and adopted siblings indicate that “genetic influence is substantial and ubiquitous for most domains of behaviour” but most differences between siblings can be explained by “non-shared environment” (Plomin *et al* 1994).<sup>1</sup> This is because parents respond differently to children according to their age, gender, temperament and stage of development - factors which also mean that children have different friends and move in different social circles at school.

Differences in sibling relationships are closely linked to differences in other family relationships and to the emotional climate of the family (Dunn 1988)<sup>2</sup>. A study of ‘normal’ siblings found that 84% thought that their parents had favourites and this had undermined sibling relationships, particularly if a child was rejected (Klagsbrun 1992).

### ***Who counts as a sibling?***

Due to social changes it is now not unusual for children to have full siblings, half siblings and step siblings, and they may also have fostered or adoptive siblings. Foster children’s relationships tend to be more complex and fragmented than those of other children (Kosonen 1999; Rushton *et al* 2001). Kosonen found that foster children had an average of 4.4 siblings per child (compared with an average of 2.4 siblings for children living in the community) and they also had an average of 13.3 changes in their living situation, often involving the loss of the family home and the disruption of relationships. ***This makes research into looked after siblings very complicated, and wider conclusions often cannot be reached because studies are based on different definitions.***

### ***How do looked after children perceive their siblings?***

Kosonen (Kosonen 1999) found that children placed with siblings valued the presence of their sisters and brothers, and sometimes worried about being separated. Many acknowledged conflict with their siblings but wanted to live close to them, perhaps ‘across the road’ or ‘next door’. The foster children perceived their siblings as being of considerable importance in their lives in the long term – more so than children living in the community. The vast majority of foster children expected to live close to their siblings in future, to ‘do a lot together’ and to enjoy seeing their siblings, and 87% said they would miss their siblings if they never saw them again.

### ***The views of adult birth siblings***

After birth mothers, siblings are the next largest group of relatives putting their names on the Adoption Contact Register for England and Wales in the hope of finding ‘lost’ sisters

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<sup>1</sup> Plomin, R., Chipuer, H.M. & Neiderhiser, J.M. ‘Behavioral Genetic Evidence for the Importance of Nonshared Environment’ in E.Hetherington, D.Reiss & R. Plomin (eds) (1994) *Separate Social World of Siblings*, Lawrence Erlbaum Ass., Hove and London.

<sup>2</sup> Dunn, J. ‘Annotation - Sibling influences on childhood development’ in *Child Psychology & Psychiatry* (29) 2, 1988, 119-127.

and brothers (*Mullender and Kearn, 1997*). Research involving 24 of these adult birth siblings (*Pavlovic and Mullender, 1999*) found that they had an intense interest in finding someone whom they had never met but to whom they were related. Their motivation for searching included a notion of the sibling as part of themselves, curiosity, a sense of loss and grief, a search for identity and simply wanting to know if their sibling was all right. Those who remembered being parted felt grief, anger, resentment and even betrayal.

### ***Why are so many siblings not placed together?***

About 80% of looked after children have siblings, but in 1998/99 only 37% of those placed for adoption in England were placed with siblings. Over 50% of adopters willing to take 2 children had single children placed with them. Of adopters willing to consider 3 children, 20% had single children placed and 33% had 2 children placed (*Ivaldi 2000*).

Research involving 133 children in late permanent placements (*Rushton et al 2001*) found that they had a total of 146 siblings living elsewhere, including 38% living elsewhere in the care system and 40% remaining with the birth parents (usually younger half-siblings). The separation of singly placed children was usually because of their individual needs.

An international overview of sibling studies (*Hegar 2004*) notes that siblings are more likely to experience separation in foster care when they are older, are further apart in age, come from large sibling groups, enter foster care at different times, have special needs, or require placement other than kinship foster homes. Recent research evaluates ways of identifying siblings on databases to promote reunions (*Lery et al 2004*).

### ***The potential benefits of placing siblings together***

An international overview of sibling studies (*Hegar 2004*) concludes: “Findings of the studies support the tentative conclusion that joint sibling placements are as stable as or more stable than placements of single children or separated siblings, and several studies suggest that children do as well or better when placed with their brothers and sisters.”

The findings of a recent study in England (*Rushton et al 2001*) are “in line with many other studies that show sibling placements to be associated with greater stability”. However, “it would be premature to conclude that the greater problems of singly placed children would have been lessened had they been placed with siblings” because children placed singly had suffered more adverse family experiences.

### ***Reasons for placement disruption and poor outcomes for siblings***

A child’s violent or sexually abusive behaviour to other children was the apparent cause of all placement disruptions in 226 adoptive families (*Lowe & Murch et al 1999*). How behavioural problems affect relationships with family members is crucial: poor outcomes were most closely associated with difficulties in the children’s interaction with the new parents or their siblings, whether placed singly or jointly (*Rushton et al 2001*).

Placements of older children are more likely to break down (eg. *Fratter et al 1991*), but placing older and younger siblings together may reduce this risk (*Wedge & Mantle 1991*).

Long-term placements were more likely to disrupt when adolescents were placed alone after a history of joint sibling placements (*Leathers 2005*). Behaviour problems did not account for the increased risk. Separation or inconsistent placement with siblings was associated with a weaker sense of integration and belonging in the foster home. This suggests that consistency of placement with siblings is more important than placing a large group of siblings all together. ***This needs to be confirmed by further research.***

Children placed on their own into established families were at increased risk of poor outcomes, often associated with conflict with new siblings (*Quinton et al 1998*). Adoptive parents were more likely to evaluate the adoption negatively if the child was close in age to their own child, but problems reduced over the years. (*Beckett et al 1999*)

Rejection by birth parents has been identified as a major risk to the security of placements (*Quinton et al, 1998*). It seemed to be associated with overactive and restless behaviour, and when rejected children were placed alone in established families, they were more likely to receive less responsive parenting. However, rejected children placed with siblings had better outcomes than those placed singly (*Rushton et al 2001*).

Girls separated from their siblings were reported to have poorer mental health and socialization than girls placed with at least one sibling (*Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell 2005*).

### ***The placement of sexually abused and abusing siblings***

A study of 40 sexually abused children (*Farmer and Pollock 1998*) found that 40% of children who displayed abusive behaviour never saw their brothers and sisters. Close supervision was often needed for sibling placements, as there was a real risk of sexual activity involving younger siblings during contact visits or in the foster home, sometimes including foster siblings. In 45% of placements carers had not been informed about the child's history of abusive behaviour. (*See also Head & Elgar 1999*)

### ***Maintaining contact with siblings***

A study of 226 adoptive families (*Lowe and Murch et al 1999*) found that sibling contact was set up in 49% of cases, mostly involving children placed elsewhere in the care system. Contact with siblings living in the birth family only occurred in 18% of cases. This could be useful in reassuring the child that their siblings were not in danger, but children who felt that they had been rejected while their siblings remained at home sometimes did not want any contact. Some children resisted contact until they felt secure.

A study of late permanent placements found that half were made without any plan for sibling contact, although this was viewed positively by the families and had positive outcomes, particularly for singly placed children (*Rushton et al 2001*). (*See Thomas & Beckford 1999 for children's views about having contact with their siblings*).

### ***The impact of fostering on birth children***

A study involving 684 foster siblings in Sweden (Hojer, 2004) found that the sons and daughters of foster carers were highly involved in the foster care arrangement and most had a 'very good' (41%) or 'rather good' (34%) relationship with the foster children. Sources of conflict included differences in upbringing, dishonesty and behavioural problems, particularly when the foster parents were no longer able to give their own children so much individual attention. The birth children were usually aware of the abuse and neglect that the foster children had suffered, and many worried about the safety and welfare of their foster siblings during contact visits.

### **Key findings on siblings placed for adoption or long-term fostering**

*The following table of research studies provides details of samples and methodology. Studies carried out in the UK are listed first in reverse date order, followed by studies from other countries. The research findings are mentioned elsewhere in the briefing.*

<b><i>Author and Title</i></b>	<b><i>Sample</i></b>	<b><i>Method</i></b>
<b>Edwards, R., Hadfield, L. &amp; Mauthner, M. (2005)</b> <i>Children's Understanding of their Sibling Relationships</i> , Joseph Rowntree Foundation/NCB.	<b>58</b> children (aged 7-13) from 46 households were recruited from 1,112 parents who took part in the NOP Parentbus survey. Their family circumstances were varied but they were fairly evenly split by gender and by those who had 1 or 2 siblings or 3 or more.	Qualitative interviews with the children included a flexible format (to adapt to each child's interests and preferences) and child-focused tools such as charts with stickers, drawing activities and short stories to comment on. Grounded analysis of each interview.
<b>Rushton, A, Dance, C., Quinton, D. and Mayes, D. (2001)</b> <i>Siblings in Late Permanent Placements</i> , London, British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF)	<b>133</b> children being placed for adoption or long-term fostering by 16 agencies. 101 were in 40 placed sibling groups (36 in child-free placements and 4 in established families) and 32 were placed singly with 13 in established families.	This prospective study involved interviews with the child's social worker, family placement social worker and new parents at 3 months and again at 12 months into the placement, when telephone interviews were done.
<b>Ivaldi, G. (2000)</b> <i>Surveying Adoption: A comprehensive analysis of local authority adoptions 1998 – 1999</i> , England, London, BAAF.	Survey aimed to cover all looked after children who were adopted in England during 1998-1999.	Data was collected from government statistics on the numbers, characteristics and histories of looked after children who were adopted.

<p><b>Kosonen, M. (1999)</b> ‘Core and Kin Siblings’ in <i>We are Family</i>, London, British Agencies for Fostering and Adoption (BAAF)</p>	<p><b>21</b> children (aged 8– 2) in short-term <i>foster care</i> in a Scottish local authority were compared with a <i>community sample</i> of <b>69</b> children (aged 9 – 12) taken from 3 schools in the area.</p>	<p>Data obtained from children by questionnaire, by using Family Relations Test (Bene-Anthony, 1978) and by interview. Both groups completed a questionnaire and social workers too.</p>
<p><b>Head, A. &amp; Elgar, M. (1999)</b> ‘The placement of sexually abused and abusing siblings’ in Mullender, A. (ed) <i>We Are Family</i>, London, BAAF.</p>	<p><b>85</b> children (in 35 families) who had been sexually abused and the subject of care proceedings. A sub-sample of <b>51</b> children from 24 families was followed up.</p>	<p><b>53</b> carers (foster carers, adoptive parents, residential staff and some parents and relatives) were interviewed and also the guardians ad litem.</p>
<p><b>Lowe, N. &amp; Murch, M., Borkowski, M, Weaver, A., Beckford, V., Thomas C, (1999)</b> <i>Supporting Adoption: Reframing the approach</i>, London, BAAF.</p>	<p>A survey of 160 adoption agencies in England and Wales had 115 responses. <b>41</b> agencies identified 515 families, of whom <b>226</b> completed questionnaires <b>48</b> families were selected to represent different stages of adoption and levels of contact, contested cases and a range of ethnicity, gender, age and sibling placements.</p>	<p>Adoption agencies were selected by postal survey and adoption officers were interviewed. 41 agencies identified families who had a child aged over 5 placed with them for adoption between Jan 1992 and Dec 1994. <b>226</b> families filled in questionnaires. Interviews were conducted with <b>48</b> families and <b>41</b> children.</p>
<p><b>Thomas, C. &amp; Beckford, V. with Lowe, N. and Murch, M. (1999)</b> <i>Adopted Children Speaking</i>, London, BAAF.</p>	<p>57 families who had taken part in the <i>Supporting Adoption</i> study (see above) were contacted, and <b>41</b> children (25 girls/16 boys) agreed to be interviewed.</p>	<p>A children’s invitation pack, fact sheet, leaflet, tape and project logo were used to recruit the children. Most children were interviewed privately in their homes; some with their siblings.</p>
<p><b>Pavlovic, A. and Mullender, A. (1999)</b> ‘Adult Birth Siblings: who are they and why do they search?’ in Mullender, A. (ed) <i>We Are Family</i>, London, BAAF.</p>	<p><b>15</b> women and <b>9</b> men selected from 347 siblings searching Adoption Contact Register for their siblings (<i>Mullender &amp; Kearn 1997</i>). Sample stratified according to age, sibling status (full or half) and gender.</p>	<p>24 telephone interviews were carried out with 15 women and 9 men - the only way to preserve the confidentiality required by the Office of National Statistics, which maintains the register.</p>

<p><b>Beckett, C., Groothues, C. &amp; O'Connor, T.G. (1999)</b> 'The role of sibling group structure on adoption outcomes' in A. Mullender (ed) <i>We Are Family</i>, London, BAAF.</p>	<p>A stratified sample of <b>165</b> children was recruited from Home Office and DoH records on 324 Romanian children adopted into England in the early 1990s.</p>	<p>Adoptions were evaluated at age 4 and age 6 using interviews &amp; questionnaires completed by the mothers. The Revised Pre-School Behaviour Questionnaire was also used with parents.</p>
<p><b>Farmer, E. &amp; Pollock, S. (1998)</b> <i>Sexually abused and abusing children in Substitute Care</i>, Chichester, John Wiley and Sons Ltd.</p> <p>(See also Farmer &amp; Pollock (1999) 'Sexually Abused and Abusing Children' in Mullender, A. (ed) <i>We Are Family</i>, London, BAAF).</p>	<p>96 sexually abused or abusing children identified from 250 files on looked after children in two local authorities. After lengthy consent procedures, only 25 children over age 10 were still in care, so 15 more children were recruited in the second phase to make a minimum sample of <b>40</b>.</p>	<p>Analysis of case files and semi-structured interviews with carers, social workers and young people. Kovaks &amp; Beck Child Depression Inventory and Achenbach Youth Self Report Schedule used to assess children's behaviour and emotional well-being. Children were interviewed again.</p>
<p><b>Quinton, D., Rushton, A., Dance, C., and Mayes, D. (1998)</b> <i>Joining New Families: A study of adoption and fostering in middle childhood</i>, Chichester, John Wiley and Sons, Ltd.</p>	<p>18 out of 27 social services depts in and around London identified 84 placements. One child was randomly selected from sibling groups to make sample of <b>61</b> children (aged 5-9) placed with permanent substitute families Possible bias as parents with siblings were more likely not to take part.</p>	<p>Social workers interviewed 1 month after placement and a year later. New parents interviewed at 2, 6 and 12 months and attachment questionnaire &amp; Rutter A2 scales completed each time. Comparison data on 54 primary school children. If parents agreed, teachers completed Rutter B2 Scale on index child &amp; classmate.</p>
<p><b>Fratter, J, Rowe, J. Sapsford, D &amp; Thoburn, J. (1991)</b> <i>Permanent Family Placement: A decade of experience</i>, London, BAAF.</p>	<p><b>1,165 children</b> defined as having special needs (ie. not illegitimate) and placed for adoption by 24 <i>voluntary</i> agencies in Britain from 1980-1984. Local authority placements were excluded but most children were in local authority care.</p>	<p>Questionnaire sent to all voluntary agencies placing children with special needs for adoption. Questions limited to data easy to obtain from case files. As study is retrospective, there may be problems of interpretation.</p>
<p><b>Wedge, P. and Mantle, G. (1991)</b> <i>Sibling Groups and Social Work: A study of children referred for permanent substitute family placement</i>, Aldershot, Avebury.</p>	<p><b>160</b> children in sibling groups within 642 children referred to five voluntary agencies and two local authority Family Finding Units for permanent substitute family placement.</p>	<p>A questionnaire was used to analyse case records in each agency. Social workers were sometimes asked to clarify information in the records.</p>

<i>International studies:</i>	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Method</i>
<b>Leathers, S.J. (2005)</b> 'Separation from siblings: Associations with placement adaptation and outcomes among adolescent in long-term foster care' in <i>Children and Youth Services Review</i> 27 (7) July 2005, 793-819.	A cross-sectional sample of <b>197 adolescents</b> (aged 12-13) in long-term foster care was randomly selected in the USA. Cross-sectional selection over-represents children who remain in care longer, so findings cannot be generalised to all fostered children and more research is needed to test the validity of the findings.	Data collected by telephone interviews with caseworkers and foster parents and by examining electronic data files. Multivariate analyses on placement patterns, size of sibling group, history of placement movements, attachment, externalising behaviour problems, and permanency outcomes tracked over 5 years.
<b>Tarren-Sweeney, M. &amp; Hazell, P. (2005)</b> 'The mental health and socialisation of siblings in care' in <i>Children and Youth Services Review</i> 27 (7) July 2005.	819 children (aged 4-9) placed in foster or kinship care in New South Wales, Australia were identified. Inability to obtain parental consent reduced this to 621 and <b>347</b> children (aged 4-11) were recruited. Mental health problems may be over-estimated due to under-representation of children fostered as infants.	Baseline survey conducted using a carer questionnaire, and computer database for child protection cases. The Child Behaviour Checklist and Assessment Checklist for Children were used to assess behaviour problems and social competence. Data analyses focused on comparisons of sibling-related outcome variables.
<b>Hojer, I. &amp; Norderfors, M (2004)</b> 'Living with foster siblings – what impact has fostering on the biological children of foster carers?' in <i>Residential Care, Horizons for the New Century</i> (eds H.G.Eriksson & T.Tjelflaat, Ashgate, Aldershot, pp99-118. (See also <i>Child and Family Social Work</i> , 12, 2007, pp73-83).	<b>684 sons &amp; daughters of foster carers</b> responded to 1,065 questionnaires sent to foster families with children placed by fostering organisations or by social services in Gothenburg and 6 other municipalities in Sweden. 30 birth children of foster carers were invited through Gothenburg social services to take part in discussion groups, and <b>16</b> agreed. <b>17</b> children and young people were also recruited similarly for focus groups.	3 focus groups (divided by age) identified key issues, which were then explored by discussion groups (also divided by age) which met 3 times. All sessions were taped and transcribed. This information was used to construct a questionnaire, which was sent out by post and also placed on some popular websites for young people. The median age of those responding to the questionnaire was 18.
<b>Hegar, R.L. (2004)</b> <i>Children and Youth Services Review</i> , 27 (7) July 2005 , 717-739.		Overview of 17 studies from several countries on sibling placements.



<p><b>Lery, B., Shaw, T.V. and Magruder, J. (2004)</b>  ‘Using administrative child welfare data to identify sibling groups’ in <i>Children and Youth Services Review</i> (27) 7, July 2005, 783-791.</p>	<p>All children (<b>90,671</b>) who had an active case in California child welfare supervised foster care on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2003.</p>	<p>This cross-sectional study analyzed data from a state-wide longitudinal data system on all children in out-of-home care to evaluate 4 different methods of identifying siblings.</p>
<p><b>Klagsbrun, F. (1992)</b>  <i>Mixed Feelings: Love, Hate Rivalry and Reconciliation Among Brothers and Sisters</i>, New York, Bantam Books.</p>	<p>Survey sample of <b>272</b> people recruited from 3 business firms in large metropolitan areas of USA. Volunteers were recruited from the survey by adverts &amp; personal recommendation and <b>122</b> people interviewed.</p>	<p>In-depth interviews were conducted with every sibling in a selected family to fully understand their relationships. The survey questionnaire collected data on key aspects of sibling relationships.</p>