

Siblings Together or Apart



Recognising that 80 percent of the general population in the UK have one or more brothers or sisters and that this relationship is often the longest lasting of all our family relationships helps us understand why relationships between siblings can be among the most ambivalent and changing family relationship each of us may have. There are 'natural' changes that are wrought by the passage of time and increasing age and there are relationships that change as a result of changes in the nature of family dynamics. Families today come in a variety of forms. The increase in divorce and separation has created reconstituted families where step siblings and relationships where siblings have only one parent in common has become almost a norm. Although blood ties are still a significant factor another important dynamic in sibling relationships is family position, which has also been highlighted in literature about the effect on a child of their position in the family hierarchy.



What all of this means is that understanding the dynamics of sibling groups particularly those which are larger and have complex histories, needs to begin with asking children who they regard as their brothers or sisters and who they feel close to or estranged from. Thus the significance of sibling relationships is personal and interpersonal rather than biological or legal and this understanding should therefore guide our thinking and practice in our work with siblings.



In a study of siblings, children defined who belonged in their family based on:

- What the family members do for each other
- The love they provide
- Their involvement in the family

(Kosonen 1999). This research gave rise to another important concept when looking at sibling relationships: the distinction between *core* sibling groups as against *kin* sibling groups. It would seem from the literature that although genetic influences are substantial in defining differences between siblings, the most significant differences can be explained by environmental and experiential factors.

Siblings Looked After or Adopted

If you ask the man or woman on the Clapham omnibus whether siblings should live together and whether efforts should be made to keep them together the answer would invariably be “yes”. There is a strong biological and no doubt evolutionary imperative that drives us to keep siblings together. Research on Jewish children who survived the second world war either as ‘kinder transport children’ or as concentration camp survivors showed that, when siblings had managed to stay together as a family group, they appeared to have survived their traumas better and were physically and mentally in better shaped than children who had been separated from their kin.



Post second world war research in the 1950's and 60's carried out on diverse groups of foster children showed that children who were fostered together in sibling groups settled better, developed well and were more likely to return home. 20th century research therefore tended to support the assumption that siblings who were separated from their parents fared better if they were kept together. This led to a view amongst social workers and other child care professionals that keeping sibling groups together was a protective factor. This thinking was enshrined in the 1989 Children Act which placed an obligation on local authorities to endeavour to place children together. The 2002 Adoption and Children Act added to this by requiring the court to consider the effect on the child of no longer being a member of their original family and to consider the relationship the child has with birth relatives.

Leading up to the 1989 Act research on the view adults adopted as babies had of sibling relationships, particularly where they had been separated, showed that a lot of distress was caused by separating siblings and by denying them contact. This strengthened the view that siblings should not be separated and that when they were efforts should be made to maintain contact between them. More recent research studied by Kosonen 1999 found that siblings in the care system expressed the view that they wished to remain together and that if they had to be separated or were separated they wished to remain close by.



Balanced against this is the reality of children in the looked after system where 80% of children looked after have siblings but only 37% of them are placed with their siblings (Ivaldi 2000). The reasons for this are varied but probably reflect the differences between 'looked after' and 'non-looked after' children. Children who are fostered have on average 4.4 siblings whereas children living with their birth families in the community tend to have 2.4 siblings. Children who are fostered or adopted also tend to have more complex and fragmented family relationships than other children. (Kosonen 1999 and Rushton et al 2001). Resource issues may also be a factor, where availability of foster placements may well determine whether children can be placed together.

Keeping Siblings Together?

In contemporary literature there is still a view that, on balance, placing siblings together is a good thing for placement stability and for child development. Rushton et al (2001) found that children who had been rejected by birth parents had a better outcome when placed with their siblings. For the child there is continuity, security and an affirmation of identity. However on the converse other recent research has shown that disruption is more likely to follow when a child is violent or sexually abusive to other children and siblings (Lowe & Murch et al 1999). In a study of sexually abused children it was found that, where there were high levels of sexual acting out between siblings, this led to placement breakdowns (Farmer and Pollock 1998). Behavioural problems and conflictual relationships with carers and adoptive parents are highly correlated with destabilising placements. This means that we need to have a more open mind when considering the issue of 'together or apart' when considering sibling groups and the needs of individual children within their sibling group.

The Effects of Infant Trauma on Normal Sibling Development

There is a view held by many professionals including those of us working at Family Futures that the population of children currently requiring permanent placements has changed since the Children Act of 1989. Since that Act was passed the threshold criteria for children coming into care were raised, a consequence of which has been that children are taken into public care at a later age and often in sibling groups rather than as individual children. The effect of living in a family environment that has caused 'significant harm' for a longer period of time inevitably means that greater developmental harm ensues for the child. In a recent study by the Hadley Centre published in 2006 of a cohort of children who had 'adoption best interest decisions' made found that over 50% had what were regarded as four or more 'risk' factors in their history (e.g. neglect, physical and or sexual abuse, multiple placements etc). This study confirmed the complexity of the needs of children who needed permanence today.

Because of our enhanced understanding of brain development and how the central nervous system develops and operates it is possible now to paint a much more accurate picture of the impact of trauma on children. This understanding was used by a group of child psychiatrists who formed a working party in America to look at the impact of traumatic events on infant and childhood development. (*Cook et al 2002*) They concluded that all aspects of infant development pre and post birth are severely affected by repeated trauma in infancy. The conclusion of this working party was that a new diagnostic classification of Developmental Trauma should be included in the next classification for childhood disorders. Many American clinicians such as Bruce Perry, Bessel van der Kolk and English practitioners now embrace this concept when thinking about children in the public care system. One aspect of child development that is impaired and impacted by developmental trauma is, of course, the development of sibling relationships.

The Practice Consequences of Developmental Trauma in Childhood for Sibling Placements

One consequence of the emerging awareness of developmental trauma in considering the needs of children in the care system has been to revise our thinking on sibling placements. As the Hadley Centre study shows, children placed for adoption today have significant risk factors in their background and must as a consequence of their adverse early experiences be suffering some degree of developmental trauma. This developmental trauma affects sibling relationships and the type and intensity of parenting children require.



In 2001 Lord and Borthwick in their book, 'Together or Apart' listed the following conditions which may, in exceptional circumstances, indicate that siblings should be placed separately.

- Intense rivalry and jealousy, with each child totally pre-occupied with, and unable to tolerate the attention their sibling(s) may be getting.
- Exploitation, often based on gender, e.g. boys may have been seen and see themselves as inherently superior to their sisters, with a right to dominate and exploit them.
- Chronic scapegoating of one child.
- Maintaining unhelpful alliances in a sibling group and family of origin. Sibling patterns of behaviour may be strongly entrenched and may prevent re-parenting or learning new cultural norms.
- Maintaining unhelpful hierarchical positions e.g. the child may be stuck in the role of victim or bully.
- Highly sexualised behaviour with each other.
- Acting as triggers to each others traumatic material potentially re-traumatising each other. The triggers may well be unconscious, unintentional and mundane.

It is our view these 'exceptional circumstances' have become less exceptional in the population children placed for adoption today. Indeed Lord and Borthwick in their 2009 update of their book have removed the term 'exceptional circumstances' and are arguing for a comprehensive assessment of the child and their sibling relationships as a pre-cursor to making decisions about sibling placements.



A framework that has been devised in the light of the recent awareness of the impact of trauma on child development is the one outlined in the Family Futures assessment handbook published in 2007. This framework looks at four key elements in assessing the sibling relationships of fostered or adopted children:

- Parenting intensity: The degree of developmental trauma experienced by children in the looked after system means they often require very intensive developmental re-parenting. Deficits and damage caused by early poor parenting means that, in order to heal and catch up, children require to be parented as much younger children. It is common knowledge that parenting babies and very young children is very time and energy intensive.
- The nature of the sibling relationship: When assessing a sibling relationship the assessor should take into account the intensity of parenting required if the siblings were to be placed together. This needs to include not only an assessment of the individual needs of each child but also the sibling dynamic. Parenting siblings who have been harmed by early parenting experiences and whose sibling relationships have been pathologised can be extremely demanding. In making family placements it is important that the primary objective of developing a secure attachment between child and parent is not jeopardised by the demands of managing sibling relationships.

The compatibility of sibling's parenting needs: In a healthy functioning birth family where children have developed secure attachments the natural style of parenting the parent offers usually works well for all children within that family and 'fits with' the family's culture. However when a child's development has been distorted by early adversity their demands and needs may be more extreme and displayed in diverse ways. In this situation it is difficult for a parent to exercise one consistent style that will meet the demands of children across a sibling group. For example, a young boy with a disorganised attachment style and a tendency towards aggressive self reliance may require one style of parenting whereas his sister who is highly dissociative and withdrawn might require quite another. The active demands of the brother may overshadow the less obvious but no less important need for parents' time and attention the sister requires. Furthermore the parenting approach that would meet the brother's needs may well be inappropriate to meet the needs of his sister.

The security of the sibling attachment relationship: Though there are clear classifications for children's attachment styles to parents and primary carers in the literature (Howe et al 1999) there has been little attempt to analyse the implications of this for sibling relationships. The Family Futures handbook outlines an approach to analysing sibling relationships based on the work of Jaak Panksepp (Affective Neuroscience, 1998). From his extensive research on rats he has determined that there are four main systems in the primitive brain which are essential for survival and are activated by attachment behaviour. These systems are common to animals and humans alike, they are: Aggression, Fear, Comfort seeking and Play.



This framework can be applied to observations of children, particularly young children and children who have experienced early trauma. Rating a child as high, medium or low on each dimension in terms of the level of activation of each of these four systems can lead to an assessment of the security of the sibling attachment relationships. In this model secure attachment behaviour is represented as exhibiting medium levels of aggression and fearful behaviour since these behaviours are adaptive and essential for survival. Comfort seeking and playful behaviour are also at medium levels of activation as they too are adaptive and linked to survival and development of the animal or person. Play in this context refers to normal age appropriate interactive play e.g. rough and tumble, hide'n'seek, chasing etc. In contrast traumatised children may exhibit high levels of play but the play will be traumatised and characterised by repetition, ritual, violence and scary themes. When played out between children it is not reciprocal and collaborative; instead domination, power and control are characteristic of the interaction as it is a re-enactment of unresolved traumatic experience.

The matrix on the following page shows how information gathered about the nature of sibling relationships between one child and another can be analysed using this framework. To complete the analysis direct observation of the children's actions by the assessor and conversations with primary carers and people who know the children well are the best sources of information. The judgement has to be made in comparison with what the assessor would perceive as 'normal' for siblings of an equivalent age. Contra indications are extremes in any of these four dimensions.

Five Siblings' Attachment Style

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Children	A	B	C	D	E
A Age Style Intensity Comfort Seeking Fearfulness Aggression Playfulness					
B Age Style Intensity Comfort Seeking Fearfulness Aggression Playfulness					
C Age Style Intensity Comfort Seeking Fearfulness Aggression Playfulness					
D Age Style Intensity Comfort Seeking Fearfulness Aggression Playfulness					
E Age Style Intensity Comfort Seeking Fearfulness Aggression Playfulness					

Rating Sibling Attachments

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CHILD A ↔ B	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
Parenting Intensity			
Compatibility of parenting needs profile			
Security of sibling attachment			

CHILD B ↔ C	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
Parenting Intensity			
Compatibility of parenting needs profile			
Security of sibling attachment			

CHILD C ↔ A	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
Parenting intensity			
Compatibility of parenting needs profile			
Security of sibling attachment			

By using the above tables the key areas of sibling relationship can be put together in one tabulation, the above table representing a way of reducing all the available information about sibling interaction and allowing for clearer planning. For example a sibling interaction between child A and B which was high or very high on parenting intensity, low on compatibility with a low rating for security of sibling attachment would raise concerns about placing those two siblings together; whereas a rating of parenting intensity of medium, compatibility high and sibling security of attachment as medium would indicate a possible or probable sibling placement together.

Placing Separately Fostered Siblings Together Permanently

Traumatized children function predominantly at the level of the primitive brain with feelings and feeling states driven by biochemistry rather than inter-personal co-created realities. They rarely develop, without therapeutic work and high quality parenting, to mid-brain expressions of attachment and a more sophisticated development of emotions. This needs to be considered when thinking about placing siblings together.



In the past, when a decision has been made to place siblings together in a permanent placement it has been common practice to move all siblings simultaneously to their new carers. This may have been preceded by a period of increased contact between the siblings. Typically, the introduction to a new family for all children would take place over a relatively short period of time: 2-3 weeks. From our post-adoption perspective the feedback we have had from parents and carers has often been that this period of introduction and the early months of placement were very difficult. Meeting the needs of two children whilst coping with the children establishing a sibling relationship sets up a complex dynamic. The children in their attempt to establish control within their new family become intense rivals, alternating this with forming alliances against parents and being attachment avoidant. In worst case scenarios where Family Futures have been involved and families have come to us in crisis, parents have found this process too difficult to manage, leading to disrupted placements.

In order to prevent some of these stresses and pathological dynamics, Family Futures has developed a model for placing siblings together which is based on our understanding and interpretation of attachment theory. The introductions follow a developmental and organic approach which seeks to mirror the normal biological process of family formation. The principals of this are as follows:

- One child should be introduced at a time
- Start with the oldest child
- Longer rather than shorter periods of introduction are required
- Placement transitions as an opportunity for positive change
- Deferred starting of school

One Child Should Be Introduced At a Time

The rationale for this is the biological norm for one baby to be born at a time allowing the parents to have 'a primary preoccupation' with that child and giving the time and space for the intense and complex attachment forming behaviours to take place. Everyone is aware of the increased complexity and difficulty of parenting biological twin babies; in effect moving two children into a placement together replicates the difficulties that are recognised in parenting twins. Indeed it is more complex than this since fostered and adopted children come with disturbed attachment patterns which will make the child more likely to be attachment avoidant or ambivalent, making the process of attachment formation to a new parent slower and more complicated.

Start With the Oldest Child

It is probably common sense that, if you are placing the children separately as serial rather than parallel placements, the oldest child should be placed first in order to replicate the family age hierarchy. There may be exceptions to this, for example where a younger child's placement is disrupting and they need to be moved as a matter of urgency. However in general the rule would be to follow the normal age progression in sibling groups.



As the attachment forming process is complex and time consuming and often made more difficult by a child's resistance, each sibling requires something in the order of six to nine months introduction and settling in period.

For the second or subsequent children they would remain for the short to medium term with a foster carer who was known to them and could help them manage any stress or distress caused by the older child moving on. They would maintain contact with the older child by visiting their older sibling with the foster carer in the older sibling's new home and their home to be. In this way there is continuity and an opportunity for younger children to build a relationship with their new parents gradually with the support of the foster carers they know.

Longer Rather Than Shorter Periods of Introduction are Required

In our experience, it is not uncommon for introductions to be carried out over a 2-3 week period even for older children of 4-6 year olds. This model, in our view, is based on baby placements and not on the needs of the children who are currently in the 'looked after' system.



In an age of 'safe care' where children are schooled not to talk to strangers there appears to be an inherent contradiction in moving children swiftly into the homes of strangers. We therefore believe that, for the transition from short term foster home to permanent family to be as non-traumatic as possible, the more familiar the future parents and their home environment are to the child, the better. We therefore believe that introductions for older children need to be longer than they often are. An extended introduction allows a much more natural process of familiarisation to take place. Ideally, this requires a high level of collaboration between short-term carers and permanent carers or adoptive parents which, as we know, is not always possible to achieve. However if the process of longer introductions became a more standard approach foster carers would be prepared for this during their training and their very positive contribution to it, as facilitators of attachment, supported.

After this extended introduction the parents and the child need six months to have the 'luxury' of significant periods of time for one-to-one interaction. During this time, one would hope that, with therapeutic input tailored to the individual needs of that child facilitating this process, the new parent can form a positive attachment to their new child. By the time the sibling is introduced the parent should feel confident and comfortable in their relationship with the first sibling so that they are able to focus on the needs of the second sibling in a similar way as they did for the first sibling.



Placement Transitions as an Opportunity for Positive Change

When a child makes a transition to a new family, they are likely to revert to patterns of behaviour and coping strategies they have used during previous transitions and times of high stress. These strategies, though adaptive in the past, are usually counterproductive in the context of a permanent new family. When one child is placed at a time there is more opportunity for the parents and professionals to be proactive in tackling dysfunctional behaviour. Issues such as superficial compliance, dissociative behaviour or angry and defiant resistance can be worked with by the parents and professionals involved in a positive way. In the melee of parallel sibling placements, such behaviours are harder to address in a systematic and proactive way because of the complexity of the demands made upon the parents. The high levels of anxiety children experience when moving from one family to the other and the child's strategies for coping, provide the opportunity for parents and professionals to offer empathetic reflection for the child on the connection between their present state and their past experiences.

Deferred Starting of School

For children of school age, moving to a new family even with a gradual transition is a highly anxious experience. This is compounded when a child has to also change schools and make new attachments to teachers and peers. Because of the 'double whammy' of a placement move, the child should have an opportunity to become familiar and settled in the family home before progressing to full time schooling. Again, this replicates what happens in biological family formation. Children have normally 3-4 years in a child carer/ parent environment before progressing to school and learning to cope with separation and peer relationships. In view of this we would advocate that children have at least one term out of school when they move to a permanent placement.

A further reason for delayed school entry is to allow a child and parent significant periods of time together to develop their relationship and form attachments in a singular fashion. For school age children it is hard for them to form attachments to parents when they:

- 1) Are in a highly anxious state because of coping with the double transition.
- 2) Are spending as much time out of the house as in it.
- 3) Are expected to develop age appropriate peer relationships when they do not have secure attachment to a parent figure.

The corollary of this is that there should be an expectation that parents should be at home and available to be with the child during this period. We would therefore advocate that, when going through the introductory period, adoptive parents or permanent carers are encouraged to seek extended adoption leave or leave employment for a period.



A recently published guide (Argent 2008) Ten Top Tips gives a very simple guide for practitioners on things to consider when looking at sibling placements. One of the tips is that, should siblings be separated, maintaining reasonable levels of contact is essential for the future mental health and well being of the child. We would certainly advocate this approach. While we do not believe that siblings should remain together 'come what may' we do believe that sibling relations are important and should be promoted in a way that allows the child to develop attachments to the significant adults in their lives while 'holding onto' their joint sibling 'story' and relationships. Indeed children who are helped to form secure attachment relationships with adults are, in our view, more able to form secure sibling relationships and maintain these even when they are not living in the same household as their sibling.

Sibling Contact



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Alan Burnell, Kathy Castell, & Gwen Cousins
contact@familyfutures.co.uk

Family Futures was established in 1998 in order to develop a specialist service for children in adoptive families, foster families and families living with children who have experienced separation, loss or early trauma. It is now recognised as a first class centre of excellence, specialising in therapeutic work for children who have experienced early trauma and who have attachment difficulties. Family Futures is now an Ofsted regulated Adoption Agency and we are actively seeking applicants who wish to become adoptive parents.