

Together or Apart? Assessing siblings for permanent placement.

Jennifer Lord and Sarah Borthwick BAAF

Legislation

Children Act 1989 Section 23(7(b) Emphasises the need to place siblings together *'so far as is reasonably practicable and consistent with his welfare'*

July 2014 draft stat. guidance concerning sibling assessments states that **'there should be a clear decision making process which enables social workers to decide early on whether it is in the best interests of each child to be placed together or separately, and the impact of each child of that decision. The decision making process should be set out clearly with the supporting information and evidence so that all the professionals who are involved in making decisions about each child's future can see how and why the decision was reached'**.

'This means that the agency is better able to make robust, evidenced decisions on whether it is in the interests of each child to be placed separately or together'.

'Family finding should begin as soon as adoption is under consideration and before the ADM decides that the child should be placed for adoption or a placement order is made'.

The intention is that the assessment takes place as soon as possible in order to decide whether the siblings should be placed together or apart.

Factors to consider

- Age Factors: Where one older child has parented a younger child-can be difficult when this is no longer needed. They could still act as a consultant to new parents .May be quicker to place younger child, but this needs to be balanced against life-time loss of a sibling.
- May be necessary to place younger children on their own if joint placement has not been sought in the agreed timescales.
- From when social worker becomes involved with a family they should develop an awareness/assessment of sibling relationships.
 - e.g. Is there a favoured child?
 - Is there a scapegoated child?
 - Is there a parenting child?
 - Are boys and girls treated differently?
 - Are children modelling behaviour on parents?
 - How much warmth and care is there between siblings?

How much conflict?

Are siblings abusing each other-emotionally, physically or sexually?

- Consider what work could be undertaken to support relationships.
- Ascertain children wishes and feelings what has happened to them including their feelings about brothers and sisters. How much do they identify with each sibling?
- Assess each individual child's relationship with each other.
- Include observations of how they are with each other.
- Observations of others who have seen children eg: teachers, foster carers, social worker.

4 Key Factors which need to be assessed (Furman and Buhrmester 1985)

1. The degree of warmth
2. The degree of conflict
3. The degree of rivalry
4. The degree to which one of the siblings nurtures or dominates the other.

- Look at overall dynamics of large sibling group.
- Consider what work could be done to improve sibling relationships e.g.: consider therapy, understand reasons for the behaviour.
- **Circumstances which may indicate that siblings should be placed separately**
- Intense levels of conflict
- Dominant , abusive behaviour
- Consider carefully siblings who have been sexually abused

Gerrilyn Smith-factors which may indicate separate placements

- Intense rivalry and jealousy-unable to tolerate any attention given to other sibling
- Exploitation-based on gender Eg boys seen as superior.

- Chronic scapegoating of one child-maintaining unhelpful alliances-entrenched behaviours. Maintaining unhelpful positions e.g. a child may be stuck in the role of victim or bully.
- Highly sexualised behaviour with each other.
- Acting as triggers to each other's traumatic material.
- An older sibling may not be able to invest emotionally in a new family or may hinder emotional investment of younger child. Care plan for older children may include direct contact with parents but a younger child may need adoption with no contact.
- One sibling may have significant attachment to another carer which would be damaging to disrupt

Placing large sibling groups

Following assessment of each sibling's relationship, consider which relationship works best.

Consider placing alternative siblings if very close in age-may reduce rivalry.

Adoptive parents should learn about individual children-meet all children on first occasion-but also during introductions, spend time individually.

Place children at same time, or if there are specific reasons, consider placing the oldest first.

Sibling Relationship Checklist

Particular significance should be given to:

- Sharing in boisterous play
 - Resolving conflict through age appropriate reasoning
 - Reciprocal attempts to alleviate distress
1. Look at behaviour of child A to child B
 2. List of behaviours Child B to child A
 3. Interactions
 - A) What evidence is there of sharing e.g.: boisterous play, rituals, jokes, fun.
 - B) Are there differences e.g.: In roles they adopt, activities, interest, behaviour.

C) What evidence is there of reciprocity? E.g. Pride in each other, praise and mutual help.

D) Do they model on each other e.g. Think they look alike, imitate each other, unite in the face of problems.

4) What are these siblings own views of their relationship.

5) Sum up positives and negatives that their relationship holds for each sibling.

Conclude on basis of all above information and explain reasons why a decision is made.

Notes taken by Jacqui Hardman from

Lord, J and Borthwick ,S. (2008) Together or Apart: Assessing siblings for Permanent Placement (2nd edition) BAAF

12.05.2014