

Standard: Sibling Placement

Purpose

The purpose of this standard is to provide direction and guidance to the Child and Family Services (CFS) Programs regarding sibling placements. CFS Standards are intended to achieve statewide consistency to the development and application of CFS core services and shall be implemented in the context of all applicable laws, rules, and policies. Standards will also provide a measurement for program accountability.

Introduction

The importance of the sibling relationship must be recognized and respected. Sibling relationships often provide needed continuity and family stability during a child(ren)'s placement in foster care. The sibling bond is important, separate from the bond between parent(s) and child(ren). Siblings share the same history, heritage and biology, unlike any other relationship. The sibling relationship is unique and must be fostered in its own right. Children placed in out-of-home care suffer many losses. First and foremost, they are separated from their parents and possibly other family members. They often are separated from neighbors, friends, schoolmates, teachers and the security of a familiar environment. Additional losses may include those of pets, possessions, extended family, babysitter or childcare workers, and other trusted adults. Separating siblings in foster care or through adoption adds to their emotional burden. Children removed from their homes have already had to cope with the separation and loss of their parents. When separated from siblings, they experience the grieving process all over again and may lose the one person with whom they still have a lifetime connection.

Placement of siblings together should be made a priority in case planning and implementation of the case plan. Placement of siblings together can serve many purposes such as:

- Preservation of the sibling relationship and bond.
- Minimize or mitigate the impact of separation from family and familiar environment.
- Minimize the impact of the trauma from abuse and neglect. Because of their shared experiences in their family, siblings understand each other and their shared history; it is a genuine and irreplaceable relationship.
- Providing support through developmental changes and growth.
- Establish a healthy, rewarding bond between siblings who may or may not have had any significant prior relationship or bond with one another.
- Strengthen the sibling's self esteem through acceptance, unconditional love and a sense of belonging.
- Strengthen the sibling's relationship skills through support, resolving conflicts with one another and communication.

Standards

The Department must make reasonable efforts to place siblings together when in foster care. Siblings are to be placed together in foster care and adoption at the earliest possible time unless it is determined not to be in the best interests of a sibling or unless it is not possible after appropriate documented efforts by the Department. It is the responsibility

of the Department to develop resource family options sufficient to meeting the needs of sibling groups. The Department prioritizes the placement of children in relative homes. The Department must make reasonable efforts to provide ongoing interaction between siblings in situations where sibling groups are unable to be placed together. It is essential that both staff and the families who foster and adopt children with siblings understand the importance of sibling relationships.

Social workers/clinicians making a placement will follow the following procedures:

At Initial Placement

- Find out the current location of all siblings at intake.
- Begin with the assumption that all siblings should be placed together at the first placement unless there is evidence that placement together is contrary to the child's safety.
- Inform foster and potential adoptive parents that there are siblings, and the permanency plan will be to keep them together or reunite them.
- One worker should have the responsibility for all the children in the sibling group.
- When a child comes into placement, determine if there are siblings already in placement. If so, look to that resource family as the first placement.
- Explore the child(ren)'s placement preferences. Prioritize placement with relatives when appropriate resources are available.
- If the children must be placed separately in their initial placement, continue to diligently search for a placement that can take all of the siblings. The importance of sibling connections is an area requiring ongoing assessment. A genogram should be completed within the first 60 days of placement.
- Children who are not initially placed together should have contact within 48 hours of placement.
- Seek permanent kinship/relative placements for all children to the greatest extent possible.

In Permanency Planning

- Continue to seek permanent kinship/relative placements for all children to the greatest extent possible. A genogram and ecomap should be developed with the family to identify all possible resources.
- Involve the children and extended family members in planning that will enable siblings to live together if possible, or near one another and/or able to maintain contact if not. The use of Family Group Decision Making meetings would enhance the involvement of families in making placement decisions.
- Conduct specific recruitment for sibling groups – reach out to neighbors, school staff, and others who know one or all of the children.
- Unless an exception has been made and documented, present all the children in the group together when using Wednesday's Child, Northwest Adoption Exchange or AdoptUSKids. Have their picture taken together and make it clear that a family is being sought for the entire group.
- If children are adopted separately, try to have sibling visitation and on-going communication written into the Adoption Placement Agreement.
- Siblings should be educated about the Adoption Registry.

- If parental rights are terminated on a child or the permanency plan is adoption, and if the child's sibling(s) is in a pre-adoptive placement, the family who has the sibling is to be approached about accepting the other sibling(s). In the event of a previously finalized adoption, the adoptive parents of those children are to be approached regarding the placement of new siblings free for adoption.

When Siblings are Separated

It is recognized that there are many situations when placement of siblings together is not possible. These situations may include:

- The special needs of one of the siblings,
- An abusive relationship between the siblings where therapy, with a safety plan in place is not effective or not the appropriate intervention.
- A foster placement that lacks the resources and/or capacity to care for all the siblings,
- The need to establish timely permanency for one or more of the siblings,
- One or more of the siblings is in residential treatment, hospitalized, or in juvenile detention, and/or
- An older sibling who does not consent to adoption.

These situations should be assessed as part of the Region's Concurrent Planning Review, on an on-going, case-by-case basis, with the intent to maintain sibling contact when safe to do so, strengthen the relationships and possibly reunite the children in the future. All placements should consider the best interest and well being of the child. Any decision to separate siblings initially, during, or after placement must be handled as an exception to policy and must be clearly documented.

The following guidelines are to be followed:

- Valid reasons must be identified and documented for not placing siblings together.
- Never make the decision to separate siblings alone. Include the court, resource family, therapists/counselors, supervisors, permanency committee, GAL and others who have played an important role in the child's life when possible. If placement is made during on-call hours, decisions to separate siblings should be reviewed with the supervisor the next day and clearly documented.
- One worker should continue to have case responsibility for all the siblings.
- Siblings should be placed in homes as geographically near to each other as possible.
- Siblings should be registered in the same school or district when those resources are available.
- Educate resource families on the importance of the sibling bond while the children are separated. Encourage activities such as family-to-family visits, sleepover visits, joint lunches/dinners, playgroup meetings, attendance at one another's school and sporting events, having siblings join the same sports teams.
- The plan to separate is to be supported by a specific, concrete plan for future contacts between the children.
- Write sibling visitation into case and alternate care plans and provide transportation and other supports resource families need to make those visits

- happen regularly. The plan should clearly state who would be responsible for making sure visits happen.
- At a minimum, face-to-face visitation between siblings, who are in alternate care and were in the same household when the child was removed, should occur monthly. Additional contact between siblings placed in different homes or facilities may include telephone calls, e-mail, and letters.
 - Reasons for exceptions to monthly visitation or contact between siblings must be clearly documented.
 - If visits are cancelled, not scheduled or otherwise do not happen, this should be fully explained to each sibling and clearly documented.

Relevant Rules Governing Family and Children's Services and FACS Standards

Standard on Visitation between Parents, Siblings, Relatives, and Children in Out-of-Home Care.

Standard on Placement with Relatives

Standard on Concurrent Planning

Standard on Family Group Decision Making

IDAPA 16.02.08.402 Registration System for Adult Adoptees (Adoption Registry)

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Public Law 110-351)

Any variance to these standards shall be documented and approved by the Division Administrator, unless otherwise noted.