

Chapter 1

Introduction

Brothers and sisters who share a childhood and grow up together have potentially the longest lasting, and one of the closest, relationships of their lives with each other. In common with all relationships, sibling relationships have enormous capacity for shared understanding and activity, can stimulate warmth, care and joy, and can help to sustain children and adults through distressing times. They also have the potential to be undermining, riven by conflict and marred by difficulty. Whilst these qualities are evident in most relationships, there are also differences and unique aspects of sibling interactions that are important to understand, think about and address when working with looked after children. Even when a child has never lived with his or her sibling/s, the significance of the relationship may be keenly felt during childhood with a sense of “what might have been” stretching into adult life.

“Sibling” is a convenient shorthand term and is used in this guide; much research and other guidance also use this term. However, this guide is about brothers and sisters and this description is preferred. It is more powerful and means more to most people and has therefore been used as much as possible.

In 2008, when an earlier edition of this guide was last published, the timescale for court proceedings was substantially longer. The Family Justice Review (2011) set out that care cases were taking on average over a year, with considerable variation between different areas. In July 2013, revised procedures, called the Public Law Outline, were introduced with the aim of completing care proceedings within 26 weeks. Since this introduction, timescales have reduced significantly but remain challenging, most especially for the children involved. Assessments of sibling relationships are now required earlier and the way in which this work is planned merits fresh focus.

Over the past decade, our knowledge about sibling relationships and the impact of multiple adversities experienced in childhood has also grown, though attention and priority continue to be accorded far more readily to adult-child relationships. Many reports – over many years – have exhorted us to listen to the voices and experiences of children and young people. Nowhere is this more needed than in respect of siblings. Children and young people have much to tell us about the importance of brothers and sisters in their lives.

In a mixed-methods study of sibling contact in England and Wales, Monk and Macvarish (2018, p. 2) set out that:

Routine decision making in the Family Courts can have a significant impact on children and young people's sibling relationships. The impact is most profound in care and adoption proceedings in public law, as they can result in siblings being separated with limited or no effective provision for contact.

and furthermore that:

When siblings are not placed together, adoption is the most serious risk to the continuity of their relationship. Three powerful assumptions may outweigh the promotion of anything other than indirect contact: that expectations of direct contact will deter potential adopters; that post-adoption contact should and can only take place with the agreement of adopters; and, that the security and stability of placements will be undermined by contact with siblings living with or in contact with birth relatives.

Considering the ethical issues in adoption planning for siblings, a report by BASW (Featherstone *et al*, 2018, p27) noted that:

There was consensus that there is no one solution that works for all, and it is crucial to attend to particular children's and families' circumstances. In principle, siblings should be placed together, but an individualised and nuanced response is vital. If siblings are separated some form of contact between them should be aimed for, and direct contact should not be rejected simply because one child is living with, or in contact with, the birth family.

The report stated that the importance of children's sibling relationships was recognised by all groups of respondents. Birth parents wanted their children to be placed together, if possible, and also stressed the importance of acknowledging the needs and views of siblings; some adopted people highlighted that the loss of relationships with brothers and sisters had life-long implications for them and their sense of self:

I feel it would be very important for the adoptees to have the rock of where you have come from and it's very important for self-confidence, security, identity and roots. You have a mirror image of where you have come from. It's so important to keep siblings together if both going through adoption.

(Quoted in Featherstone *et al*, 2018, p26)

and:

I will be legally unrelated to my birth sibling for my entire life, and our children will also be unrelated. This is in spite of us always considering ourselves as siblings and acting as such.

(Quoted in Featherstone *et al*, 2018, p27)

However, research on outcomes in respect of sibling placements is not straightforward. Different definitions have been used, study samples vary (for example, whether or not older children who experienced greater adversity are included), and whilst some associations have been identified, causality is far harder to determine. As Dibben *et al* (2018, p5) recently summarised:

Overall, the research in the area of sibling placement is, however, only marginally favourable to sibling placement together. Although it is possible to identify strong research that points in favour of sibling placement together, similarly, it is possible to find research that points against sibling placement.

Research on outcomes is important but is not the only consideration. Human rights and the need to value children's existing relationships are also significant considerations. There are clearly many challenges but a determined focus on high quality, child-centred services for brothers and sisters has huge potential benefits for large numbers of children. The vast majority of children who are looked after have siblings and typically they come from larger and more complex sibling groups: an average group size of just over four (Kosonen, 1999; Jones and Henderson, 2017) compared with community samples of just over two children. Jones and Henderson also noted that more than two-thirds of looked after children were living apart from at least one of their familiar biological siblings and two-fifths were living apart from all of their familiar biological siblings.

These sibling groups are more likely to include one or more children who share one rather than both parents; they may be of different ethnicity; and the children are highly likely to have some additional needs. The timing of children's entry into care may differ – one or more siblings may become looked after whilst others remain at home or are placed with relatives. When brothers and sisters are placed in different settings, children may deeply grieve the loss of these relationships. Older children may have cared for younger siblings from whom they become separated. They may cherish memories of and for them, which might be accessed by younger brothers and sisters many years later. For others, this opportunity may never arise as life paths diverge and differences become unbridgeable.

There is both evidence and experience that challenge us to better understand and address the impact of early trauma within birth families, some of which can and does impact on relationships between brothers and sisters. Given this context and complexity, it is unsurprising that decisions about placing siblings "together or apart" weigh heavily on those involved. These decisions will be some of the most emotionally demanding and challenging ones that social workers make, so how can we conduct the fairest assessments for all involved? How should we involve children and those who know them best? How do we evidence

and explain the decisions that we make? And, if brothers and sisters cannot live together, what contact and knowledge might benefit them, and their carers? These and other key questions are considered and efforts made to explore and address them within this practice guide.

The guide primarily focuses on the needs of brothers and sisters, individually and in groups, for whom a permanent placement seems likely or has already been determined as the plan. However, some of the material is also relevant for managers and practitioners working to provide a service that proactively considers the needs of siblings who become looked after. For example, the importance of effective early planning when siblings enter foster care together, or enter care sequentially in quick succession, is emphasised (see Chapter 3). A central tenet of the guide is that a step-by-step approach from the outset will help promote better outcomes for children both individually and as a sibling group. Initial decisions and planning – particularly whether brothers and sisters are placed together or not – will inevitably affect how relationships are subsequently viewed and assessed by practitioners. For example, there is an inherent risk that the initial placement decisions will be maintained rather than challenged and changed.

Many children entering public care in the UK are separated from one or more of their siblings – typically this happens because there are insufficient foster placements to meet the needs of sibling groups in general and larger groups in particular. The use of residential care to keep brothers and sisters together is now rare. In some instances, brothers and sisters enter care at different times. Others are separated because of abusive or problematic interactions that have already been identified within the family. Hastily-made, pragmatic and resource-driven decisions as to which children are placed together may have a long reach, yet within this context there are still many choices that we can actively make – in particular, the ways in which children living apart are supported to develop or maintain relationships with brothers and sisters placed elsewhere. For example: should overnight sibling contact be expected as accepted good practice in foster care rather than a rarity?

With regard to assessments, there is a strong emphasis in this guide on multi-sourcing information and corroborating evidence wherever possible. The importance of a collaborative approach between families, social workers and foster carers, working together and with others, to understand and nurture children's needs, is core to a high-quality service. The ways in which links and contact are promoted between foster carers and the children for whom they are providing care is one key component that will not only benefit children but also, and crucially so, can inform the assessment process. Similarly, it is evident that parents and relatives hold a deep reservoir of knowledge about

children's sibling relationships. The context of each child's experiences and history, and whether adults have shaped and reinforced patterns of interaction, or valued one child over another, will be crucial to understand. The impact of differential treatment and other factors are explored to help practitioners make plans that are more likely to promote better outcomes for children.

The contributions of other key professionals are emphasised. Health visitors' observations of pre-school children can include helpful information regarding siblings within the family home as well as the impact of early care and parenting factors. Similarly, pre-school and school staff are likely to have a good understanding of young children with whom they work and typically this might include working knowledge of a child's family and sibling relationships. The ways in which we plan assessments and seek out and make use of significant, available sources of knowledge and understanding will impact on the quality and coherence of sibling assessments. Within the appendices to this guide, you can access semi-structured forms and other tools to help frame and inform your own observations. The challenge of analysis and making considered plans is addressed: for example, how do you understand and balance the information and evidence before you?

The experiences of families who adopt intact sibling groups or who care for one or more children are reviewed alongside the voices and experiences of siblings who are adopted. Adoptive parents tell us that they want and need more help with sibling relationships and issues but that this is not readily available. Contact and support services to promote better outcomes for children and families are briefly considered (see Chapter 11).

This guide focuses on children being placed permanently away from their birth families, but has wider applicability. Chapter 2 on sibling relationships will be especially relevant for practitioners working with families where brothers and sisters have experienced adversity. Given the complexities of sibling relationships, the guide encourages all of those working with looked after children to avoid "all or nothing" choices and planning decisions for siblings. Whilst individually we may aim to avoid unnecessary losses for children, in practice this is much more difficult to achieve if policy and service provision do not underpin our work. If children are placed separately in foster care, how do services set out to encompass and try to address children's needs and concerns? What might a truly "sibling-friendly" service look like from the perspective of children? For example, if we focus on what each child might need to know and might need to have, then the following charter for brothers and sisters might become more anchored in practice.

A CHARTER FOR BROTHERS AND SISTERS

In foster care

Information and explanations for separated brothers and sisters in foster care are crucially important. A quality service from the perspective of children might helpfully include the following:

- I know why it wasn't possible to place us together.
- I know where my brothers and sisters are living.
- I know how I can contact my brothers and sisters.
- I know when I will see my brothers and sisters.
- I have photos of my brothers and sisters.
- My social worker has talked to all of us about why we are in foster care.
- I sometimes have/have had life history sessions that include my brothers and sisters.
- My foster carer knows important details about my brothers and sisters.
- I know that I can talk to my foster carer and social worker about my brothers and sisters – including any mixed up, confusing feelings that I might have.
- I know that my foster carer and social worker will help me to maintain links with my brothers and sisters.
- My social worker has written down the dates of my brothers' and sisters' birthdays and given these to me.
- I know that my foster carer knows how to contact the foster carers of my brothers and sisters.
- I know that my social worker thinks carefully about how to help me and my brothers and sisters and wants to make the best plans for all of us.
- I know that my social worker and foster carer will try to help if I have problems or fall-outs with a sibling.
- I know that my social worker works in a department that thinks relationships between brothers and sisters are really important – not just now but for when I'm older.

In permanent placements

In the context of separation by adoption or other permanent placements for one or more children...

- I know the reasons why I am not living with all my brothers and sisters.

- I have information and explanations in my life story book about my brothers and sisters.
- I have met the family who care for my brothers and sisters.
- I know that my family met my brothers and sisters and have photos of us all together.
- I receive news about my brothers and sisters and how they are doing.
- I have recent photos of my brothers and sisters.
- I know when I will see my brothers and sisters (or why I cannot see them).
- I know that I can talk about and ask questions about my brothers and sisters.

Many children who become looked after and require a permanent placement to meet their needs will be young, pre-school-aged children and will have “future needs” for information and explanations to be accessible to them and their family. The importance of planning and addressing these issues requires a life-course perspective, as the decisions that are made will ripple and resonate throughout each child’s journey into and throughout adulthood.

CORE VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

This guide asserts that practice should stem from a rights-based and child-centred approach, wherein children’s relationships with their brothers and sisters are valued and accorded priority alongside each child’s individual needs. We need to listen to and be thoughtful about what children tell us through their words and behaviour. When their views have been sought, children and young people have consistently told us that their sibling relationships are important to them and should be respected. This does not mean that these relationships are always loving and straightforward, nor does it mean that all children can be placed together with their siblings. However, it does mean that:

- sibling relationships always need to be carefully considered; and
- we should be rigorous in making plans that not only recognise the current state of children’s sibling relationships but also their capacity for change during childhood and beyond.

HOW TO MAKE BEST USE OF THIS GUIDE

There is a lot of material in this guide that should be of general interest to child care practitioners and managers, whether their focus is on early intervention with families, foster care or adoption. Each chapter covers distinct aspects but also, to varying degrees, builds on what has been set out in earlier sections. Children's journeys from entry into care are followed through to placement for adoption and beyond. Some chapters will be of particular value to practitioners as they embark on specific pieces of work. For example:

- **For social workers who are working with a sibling group that is about to come into care or has recently been placed in foster care**, Chapter 3, *Becoming looked after: placement, contact and early planning for brothers and sisters*, is likely to be most relevant. This chapter encourages a clear focus on taking steps to promote children's needs and their sibling relationships as well as to start to collate information that will be useful – for example, see the various forms provided in Appendix 2. Chapter 2 will also help to provide a good background knowledge of what factors impact on children's relationships with their brothers and sisters.
- **For practitioners who are conducting an assessment of children's sibling relationships and permanent placement options**, Chapter 5, *Assessment: what you should include and why*, will probably be the best place to start, as well as reading Chapter 2. There is a clear focus on multi-sourcing assessments by involving parents, children, carers, contact supervisors, and professionals working in health and education settings (see forms in Appendix 2). Chapter 6 focuses on the importance of involving children and provides a range of resources to support assessment work with them. An understanding of research and placement outcomes, as set out in Chapter 10, will also be important to consider before permanent placement decisions are made.
- **Fostering teams** may find Chapters 2, 3, 5, 7 and 8 especially relevant to their work. Particular attention is drawn to Chapters 3 and 5 in respect of the role of foster carers in supporting and assessing children's sibling relationships, whether this is through a shared foster placement or by providing observations about contact. Chapter 8 focuses on working with foster carers during transition to permanence. The emotional readiness of foster carers to prepare children to move is emphasised, alongside ways in which carers can work well with adoptive parents; experienced foster carers provide their own ideas and tips for successful transitions.
- **Adoption teams** are likely to find much of the above also relevant to their work. In particular, Chapter 2 helps to provide a good background knowledge of what factors impact on children's sibling relationships, and some of this will be useful to share with prospective adopters and adoptive parents at different points in their journey. Having an

understanding of what should be included in a comprehensive sibling assessment, as set out in Chapter 5, will clearly be important and sometimes adoption staff may be tasked with undertaking these assessments or advising on them. Chapter 7 will be of particular relevance to staff involved in the recruitment, preparation and assessment of adopters and this chapter also includes both messages from research and ideas to incorporate at different stages. Chapter 8, *Preparing to move, matching and introductions*, encourages a clear focus on the emotional needs of the adults, but most importantly those of the children. Chapter 9 addresses post-placement contact, highlighting research findings, the importance of carefully balancing risks as well as benefits for children, and emphasising support to all parties. Chapter 10, *Research: how children and their families fare*, provides an overview of research on outcomes, whilst Chapter 11 draws this together to focus on *Planning the right support for children and families*.