

Siblings Together

Delma Hughes, PDG member. September 2009

'**SiblingsTogether**' is just one way of helping to address this void for children in care. Established it as a pilot holiday camps & contact initiatives after three years of research, a visits to the US, developing a small, safe camp model for 20-25 young people, much of this research came from both professional & personal experiences. The first pilot sibling camp was held last year, after vetting staff from Children's services, Charities & professional volunteers to help with running these camps. Creative art's therapies input is integral to this initiative, as is phototherapy since children find this a most useful vehicle to work with, which can often be most meaningful, playful & memorable for them.

Children have the time of their lives!!! & leave with some pretty special shared memories to treasure with their brothers & sisters. All had their own photograph albums etc; something often forgotten for children in care. To keep forever, to share & reflect upon whenever.

SOME FACTS ABOUT SIBLINGS IN CARE

- Many children are separated from their brothers and sisters once they come into care. (Research states that up to 80% of children have at least one or more siblings, they don't live with them).
- Contact between separated 'brothers and sisters' does not always happen, for some there is no contact at all.
- Where it does happen, it is not always good enough; it's brief, often relying on meeting with parent's, which can sometimes be difficult.
- It is not uncommon that brothers & sisters do not see each other again until after they have left care. Some are adopted, without any arrangements for contact whatsoever!
- This is wrong and parliament should be congratulated for trying to put it right through the Children and Young Persons Act 2008.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE REASONS GIVEN FOR SEPARATING SIBLINGS

As you listen to some of the reasons that local authorities give for splitting up siblings in care, I want you to ask yourself: '**Would any of these be acceptable reasons for separating brothers and sisters living in families**'?

"They fight all the time(another term for arguing & squabbling)"
"He or she has become too old to stay in this placement".....
"He or she needs to be moving on to independence".....
"They are a bad influence on each other".....

***“The placement is not appropriate to meet his or her needs”** they are saying the foster home or the children's home cannot keep them together!!, what can they do to remedy this?.*

***“This placement does not take that type of child”** age?*

“He or she cannot stay because this placement is only registered to take up to six children aged 8 to 14 years old”

***“We would like to keep them together but there isn't the funding for it”,** why isn't funding available to keep children together?.*

***'We have to focus on the needs of the individual!'** Don't forget siblings are a family group, they are individuals within that group, and this should not be an excuse to keep them apart.*

It is only in exceptional circumstances that children need to be placed apart, usually when recovering from very difficult early experiences. However this is often reason used when separating sibling groups no matter what their history! There are rarely any considerations or long term plans for re-uniting siblings together in one home as in other countries such as the US, which is in their legislation.

SO, WHY IS SIBLING CONTACT STILL NOT HAPPENING?

- **There's enough research to show there is a need; informing us about the long term mental & emotional damage caused by separating siblings, There is little evidence to show we are doing anything at all to address this crucially important issue!!**
- **In spite of the recent change in law it is still not a priority for many of local authorities.**
- **There are currently no 'consequences' for the poor practice, in not maintaining sibling contact,** despite it being the cause of great distress in children.
- **Social workers do not always have the time or resources to make it happen.** Many social workers say they have paperwork to complete & cannot do the very job they chose & trained to do.
- **Reasons for separating brothers and sisters are 'not' properly challenged.** Children often feel they are to blame for being in care, which is rarely, if ever true. Not having contact is seen as part of the punishment they feel they have to endure.
- **Sometimes older siblings are not even acknowledged in court proceedings, some say;** 'Trying to arrange to see your siblings is virtually impossible. Some Children's services don't even acknowledge this vital contact, and make no arrangements for it whatsoever.
- **Mass murderers have visiting rights!! Why not children in care & adoption.**

WHAT CAN WE DO TO MAKE THINGS BETTER?

- **Listening to children is a good start, towards arranging contact. Again case by case, some siblings may choose not to have contact as should be their right also.**
- **Research evidence shows there's a higher rate of disruption of placements when children are parted from their siblings, compared with those placed with their siblings. In both short & long term care. Berridge & Cleaver...**
- **We need to make sure that inspectors for social services are checking that siblings are kept together wherever possible, & where not, that good contact arrangements are made for them. (*Good contact arrangements don't mean a quick visit to McDonald's, this is not a good place to get to know one another!*)**

IRO's Independent Reviewing Officers must have a particular role in making sure that sibling contact is promoted.

- The Children Act 1989 s23 (7) (b) places a duty on local authorities to accommodate a child together with siblings so far as is 'reasonably practical and consistent with his/her welfare'.

Legislation and Guidance *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.

Article 8 of the Human right act 1998 covers the right to contact.

- When court orders are applied for, courts need to be asking more about arrangements for keeping siblings together, and in contact if this cannot be arranged.
- Some foster carers ask, why can't siblings have overnight stay?, what are the rules?..No such rules exist? Carers need to work with the social workers to ensure this happens, so they can manage this.

We can support holiday schemes, like '**Siblings Together**', as a way of providing Brothers and Sisters separated by care, with some quality time together.

- **Berridge & Cleaver** (1987) found more success in foster placements where children were placed with some or all of their siblings.
- **Robert Sanders**, "Negative sibling behaviour (within the category of 'squabbling') should not be used as a basis for separating Siblings". In terms of assessing the quality of sibling relationship (which is also important but relatively neglected in practice) the presence or absence of warmth in the relationship is a more important indicator than the presence or absence of conflict & or rivalry. When children are actually abusive towards siblings then one has to be more cautious.

- **Professor Allan Rushton** et al 1999, found slightly better outcomes for siblings placed together. High levels of conflict & rivalry were found which improved over time, and low levels of warmth. The severity of the sibling disputes was associated with high levels of strain on parents.
- **Ellen Singer** Quote; just as adoptive parent's honour connections to birth parents, it is important that all those who touch the lives of children in foster care & adoption give serious consideration to sibling relationships. Whether the goal is to maintain a strong sibling connection, heal sibling relationships, or foster new connections, these ties should not be broken.

Offering nurturing & respect toward these most fundamental 'life - long' relationships & maintaining contact can be one of the biggest emotional investments we offer a children, offering them a sense of belonging. When leaving Care, they have family for the rest of their lives?

More research is required into this issue, recommendation needed re NICE. Children's Rights Director Roger Morgan has just completed a big survey on this issue to be published soon.

Useful reading

Audrey Mullender: 'We are family' Sibling Relationships in Placement & Beyond, London British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering.

Rushton, A., Dance, C. Quinton, D. and Mayes, D. (1999) Children's relationships in late permanent placements, pp 151-155 in Parker, R. (ed) Adoption Now messages from research, Chichester, UK, John Wiley & sons.

Prof Robert Sanders; Swansea: 'Siblings' Book for Social work practitioners. **'Brother & Sisters' A National Voice survey for children in care.**

Professor Audrey Mullender; Hansard Archives- Select Committee on the Adoption and Children Bill Appendix 18, Minutes of evidence.

The Hadley Centre Briefing Paper; *'Briefing on Placing Siblings Permanently', 'What do we know about permanent sibling placement'*

Siblings Bonds & Separation; out of sight but not out of mind; Paper 2002, Ellen Singer Centre for Adoption support & Education US.

Elaine farmer & Roy Parker (1991)

Faber, and Mazlish, E (1987) Siblings Without Rivalry: How to help your children live together so you can live too, New York Avon Books.

Vera Fahlberg, A Child's Journey Through Placement.