




Importance of Sibling Placement Forum

Call to ACTION





The Importance of Sibling Placement Forum (the Forum) was held in Melbourne on 20th May 2015. The Forum included the launch of CREATE's latest video¹ highlighting the importance of siblings to children and young people in out-of-home care. CREATE's Young Consultants and Dr Joseph McDowall spoke on the importance of sibling placement and contact, as did a group of panellists: Katie Hooper (Foster Care Association of Victoria), Pauline Ugle (Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency), Lynne Clarkson (Mirabel) and Mary Kyrios (Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare).

There was a wide range of issues raised, including:

- Addressing the interstate movement of children and young people in care systems and their separation from siblings;
- Finding practical solutions for maintaining contact, like obtaining a big enough car, therapeutic supports, or allowing natural carer networks to develop;
- Increasing awareness of the language used when talking to children and young people about maintaining relationships with their siblings. For example, don't use terms like "access" or "contact" when speaking to children and young people, but talk about "visiting your brother or sister or family" or "catching up with" etc.;
- Avoiding terms like "half siblings" as it is not helpful and not representative of how children and young people generally see themselves and their relationships – they are brothers and sisters;
- Raising awareness in child protection work of the importance that children and young people place on living and staying in touch with their brothers and sisters;
- Encouraging agencies, carers, and caseworkers to do what they can to keep sibling groups together, and when they can't to make contact arrangements a priority;
- Resourcing carers to help them support siblings to stay in touch (for example, help provide fuel, transport, and find appropriate locations); this needs to be explicit in care planning.


What follows are the Key Actions suggested by participants to improve the placement of siblings in out-of-home care and the ongoing contact between siblings where at least one of them is in out-of-home care.

Key Actions² for policy and practice:

- **Knowledge:** Record keeping needs improvement so that children and young people are able to find out who their siblings are and how they can be contacted. Children and young people need to know who their siblings are as early as possible when they come into care. This information must be kept up-to-date when new siblings are born.
- **Information:** Accurate information is critical. On case plans the section for "Sibling Information" should not be blank. Details of siblings should be recorded; "None" should be entered where it is known that children have no siblings, and "Unknown" where it is not possible to determine if siblings exist. This information must be passed on to the agency with oversight of the child or young person.
- **Location:** Care agencies need to insist that departmental divisional boundaries are considered at intake and during any placement changes so that children are either (a) placed with their siblings or (b) living in the same area as their siblings, wherever possible. If children and young people must be placed in different departmental regions, and it is difficult for them to make contact, (e.g., when interstate), action should be taken to minimise bureaucratic policy barriers for the children and

¹ Video can be viewed at <http://create.org.au/what-we-do/resources/>

² All of the actions are predicated on safe contact between siblings in out-of-home care, the protective factors of being placed with siblings, and the value of regular visits with siblings who do not live together.



young people to maintain contact. These potential problems should be dealt with at the highest level to minimise young people having to address what are systemic issues.

- **Genograms:** Every child and young person in out-of-home care should have a copy of their personal Genogram, and a copy must be placed on their file. This needs to be resourced as it may require extended discussions with family members. The information collected is personal and must be handled respectfully. The National Standards should incorporate the use of a genogram for all children and young people placed in out-of-home care.
- **Planning:** Care Plans and Case Plans should have “Sibling Contact” as a separate heading within “Birth Family Contact” so that it is planned and followed through. Contact needs to be reviewed and monitored, with notes on how and when it happens, how it goes for the children and young people, and how they are feeling about it. “Sibling Contact” must be reviewed regularly as the needs, wishes, and circumstances of children and their siblings may change, and may be able to be met in better ways.
- **Transition:** Planning with young people for their future must consider the continuing relationships with their siblings after they turn 18 years and they move out of care.
- **Technology:** Investigate how existing and new technology can be used to improve sibling contact for children and young people in care. Potential examples include: Cost effective mobile phone plans or pre-paid SIMS that allow for phone contact regardless of distance; explore the use of Skype and Facebook as vehicles for contact, particularly when children and young people are placed in different states, towns, or cities to their siblings.
- **Recruitment and Training:** Carer and caseworker recruitment and training MUST cover the importance of contact with brothers and sisters for children and young people in care. Caseworkers and carers need to feel confident that the child or young person’s placement will support safe family contact, as this is essential for the well-being of the child or young person. There are a growing number of older siblings who are becoming carers, which needs to be recognised. It may be an option that isn’t always explored.
- **Resources:** Sibling relationships can be enhanced through paying for travel, assisting to buy vehicles big enough to transport families and other resources. Carers should be supported where possible to facilitate their developing networks with the carer or carers of their children’s siblings. Look for the “natural” networks in the child’s life as you can sometimes find an Aunt or another “known” host who can facilitate contact between siblings.
- **Relationships:** It should be acknowledged that relationships between families and carers with siblings are not always “easy”. When there are problematic relationships between carers, it can be beneficial to use a respite house for a weekend, where the children can socialise easily and adults can have as much or as little contact with each other as desired. Think about how sibling contact can be facilitated when siblings do not want to see each other on a regular basis, and look at whether, with support, sibling contact could be achieved when it is safe to do so. One example is Mirabel’s use of camps for splintered sibling groups who can come together on neutral ground.

CREATE asks that you consider these Key Actions and how you can make a difference to improve outcomes for children and young people in care. CREATE’s resources for children, carers, and caseworkers are available at <http://create.org.au/publications/> and can be shared via Facebook, internet and in printed form.