



Sibling Connections In South Australia

For young people coming into out-of-home care (OOHC), decisions about whether they stay with their sibling/s is important but not always prioritised.

Keeping siblings together in co-placement is widely accepted as the best pathway because the sibling connection can act as an important protective bond for a young person in OOHC and beyond. If co-placement is not possible and the young person desires connection, a commitment to maintaining connection across different sibling placements is vital.

Positive sibling bonds are linked to social, emotional, and physical wellbeing. Unstable or complex sibling relationships should be approached through trauma-informed and therapeutic practice and, where safe to do so, asking the young person what contact arrangements they want.

CREATE spoke with 26 young people, aged 12–18, in South Australia about their relationships with siblings; how much say they have when talking to carers and caseworkers about living with their siblings or having contact; what connection strategies work; and possible factors that impact communication with siblings.

69%

not living with any siblings

NONE living with all their siblings and

73% with siblings outside the care system

52%

felt they didn't have enough of a say about living with siblings when talking to carers; 57% didn't when talking to caseworkers.

62%

who did not live with their sibling/s scored spending time with them as Very Important.

31%

only saw their siblings once every three months

73%

wanted more contact in their current living arrangements.

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I keep in contact with my two younger siblings a bit but haven't seen older siblings in QLD for years. I've wanted to see them but haven't gotten approval. I want to go with my younger siblings... Access would be more comfortable if it's not in the office. I'd prefer a park or my house. His social worker watches us through glass which makes me feel very observed. I feel like I can't be myself. (Female, 16 years)

I have had a say what I want to happen [with siblings], but my brother's father is being difficult. (Female, 16 years)

It's hard as one of my sisters is adopted and not technically in care. (Female, 17 years)

I've said a lot to my carers and DCP about living with my siblings but no one listens. (Male, 12 years)

We have some hectic young people in my resi care placement which can make it harder for me to see my family (Female, 16 years)

I've lost contact with my sister and it makes me upset. She now lives by herself and my mum has tried to contact her. (Male, 16 years)

[Carer] makes sure it [contact] happens and helps me with transport. Makes sure DCP make it happen and that after I leave care there's a plan in place so I can still see my siblings. They also let my brother come over for sleepovers in the holidays. (Female, 17 years)

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Key Messages

Young people identified that sibling bonds are unique and often stand in to represent the larger "family" unit. Siblings can support emotional wellbeing and act as role models or comforters. They may represent closeness/companionship/belonging; and they are often someone to feel safe with and where familial love and care can be experienced. In some cases, siblings strengthen opportunities for cultural connection and become healthy lifelines within First Nations Kinship Systems.

Barriers to sibling connection include siblings being split over multiple placements; geographical distance; lack of Departmental resources; being blocked from seeing siblings by adults; being too young to speak up and have a say; limited/no relationship with siblings to begin with; limited/no communication with carers/caseworkers for support; COVID restrictions (communication disruption, out of routine, physical restrictions); and lastly, the logistics of entering care (siblings entering care at different times, how many siblings there are, their ages, and do they have different/specialised needs)?

Key Terms:

- Sibling rights
- Sibling Groups (and Intervention Programs)
- Quality time (regular, frequent, in-person)
- Sibling bond (protective)
- Splintered, Split, and Alone Placements
- Communication and relationship building

We don't really talk about it as there's no space for my siblings nor do my carers have the time to host my siblings so it's not a possibility. (Female, 17 years)

I keep in contact with my siblings as I have my own phone and I can see them sometimes at my Nan's house. (Female, 16 years)

I'm not able to see them... I'm not able to say what I want. (Female, 17 years)

As I've gotten older I've become more independent and most of them [siblings] are now not in DCP and are 18 so we can organise things more easily and have more of a chance. (Female, 17 years)

My siblings are my world. For a while I was in a really dark place in my life and they're the reason I get out of bed every morning. They're the reason I'm still here today and making sure my siblings are as happy as they can be and knowing how much I love them. It's very important to me to see them and tell them I love them, so they know they're loved. (Female, 17 years)

Actions

- Include sibling rights in legislative child welfare reform in South Australia.
- Strengthen opportunities for sibling connection either through co-placement, or connection with the goal to co-place (for example, through therapeutic sibling intervention programs designed to enhance chances of sibling group placements succeeding).
- Where sibling co-placement is not possible, establish a framework for ongoing sibling connection; with improved scheduling and better visits, and opportunities for siblings to connect in ways that make them feel supported.
- Support diverse familial structures and priorities such as Kinship Systems and The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle.

Consultation
completed in 2023