



Sibling Connections

In Victoria

For young people coming into out-of-home care (OOHC), decisions about whether they stay with siblings are often beyond their control.

Keeping siblings together in co-placement is widely accepted as best practice because the sibling connection can act as an important protective factor for a young person in OOHC and beyond. Positive sibling bonds are linked to resilience, stability, positive identity and self-esteem, and social, emotional, and physical wellbeing. Unsafe or complex sibling relationships should be approached through trauma-informed practice and asking the young person what they want. If co-placement is not possible (and the young person desires connection), a commitment to maintaining strong links across different sibling placements is vital.

In Victoria, CREATE asked 34 care-experienced young people, aged 12–17, 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 activities/strategies work well; and possible factors that impact on communication with siblings.

76%

young people consulted did not live with all their siblings. Of these, 35% lived with NO siblings.

33%

felt they didn't have enough of a say about living with siblings when talking to carers; 75% didn't when talking to caseworkers.

72%

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

27%

only saw their siblings once in six months
64% wanted more contact in their current living arrangements.

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I don't like that it is called contact or access and everything [that] goes with it. I just want to catch up with them [siblings] ... more natural ... without everyone needing to be involved in it—like hanging out at each other's house. It's important for our history ... we can talk to each other like no-one else can. We understand each other.
(Young person, 13 years)

Sibling contact is important for peace of mind, so he's not forgotten about.
(Young person, 12 years)

Being around them. I'm the oldest so I am showing them things; being the role model.
(Young person, 14 years)

Some kids don't have parents so keeping in contact with their siblings is important. Sometimes that's the only person you have to rely on.
(Young person, 15 years)

Carers advocate for more contact. Do phone calls and video calls when they can. Biggest problem is when CP or FC staff try to organise face-to-face contact. It's just not done by them. I don't know if it's too hard. It's really up to the FC and CP agencies to get in the calendar but it rarely gets done.
(Young person, 12 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 and belonging. 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 separated across multiple placements; geographical distance; lack of departmental resources; being obstructed 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 to support sibling contact; balancing life commitments; 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 whether they have different/specialised needs).

Key Focus Areas:

- Prioritise sibling identities, sibling rights, and sibling research (particularly sibling relationships as protective factors)
- Flexible and culturally informed definitions of "sibling"
- Sibling group intervention programs
- Decision making should be safe, trauma-informed and include the young person
- Quality time (normal time and special time).

"I've tried and I want to have contact with them, but none of them live with me. I am currently in therapeutic foster care which means I cannot live with my siblings. I have tried to have one of my younger siblings who is in foster care live with me, but it isn't allowed. I am trying to have respite with my sister instead.

(Young person, 13 years)

So that we can at least be with someone we care about. (Young person, 14 years)

One of my brothers I have no contact with and [I] don't know how to contact. [With] my other sister ... the adults just make the decisions. (Young person, 14 years)

I am happy with having varied contact with my siblings. They all live with different parents and I am happy as is. (Young person, 16 years)

Actions

- Include sibling research and sibling rights in legislative reform in Victoria.
- 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 (extended, special, or normal time) and opportunities for siblings to connect in ways that make them feel supported.
- Support diverse familial and kinship systems and prioritise the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle.

Consultation
completed in 2022