

LOOKED-AFTER CHILDREN

Sibling revivals

Summer camps are bringing together looked-after siblings, living apart under separate care arrangements, to reconnect with shared experiences of growing up. **Louise Tickle** discovers that ensuring these family bonds are maintained is vital for the emotional wellbeing of this vulnerable group of children

When siblings are taken into care, they can easily find themselves placed hundreds of miles from each other. Contact is sporadic and supervised. Meeting up for an all-too-brief hour in the dismal confines of a motorway service station with your social workers in tow is not unheard of.

On a contact visit, there's little opportunity for spontaneous fun and far too much pressure for an easygoing catch-up. If you have a row, there's no time for things to blow over, so you might leave a contact meeting more upset than when you arrived. With no way of developing a shared history of a childhood spent together, sibling relationships between children in care can fragment to the point where the bond is broken entirely. And to endure yet another loss in a young life where so much has already gone desperately wrong can cause emotional damage that lasts a lifetime.

Travelling long distances to ensure siblings can meet puts pressure on social workers' packed diaries, so arranging to go on holiday with your brother or sister – a normal part of growing up for most children, but rare for looked-after siblings – would seem to be something of a distant dream.

The fact that it shouldn't be was the impetus for Delma Hughes, herself a care-leaver, and now an art therapist, to suggest to children's charity Shaftesbury Young People that a summer activity camp dedicated to the needs of looked-after siblings would be worth piloting.

Clearly, you can't just plonk such vulnerable children in a standard Mark Warner-type activity programme and hope they'll thrive. Research on how other countries run holidays for looked-after children involved a trip to the US to explore the longstanding Camp to Belong

model. The pilot Hughes subsequently set up, called Siblings United, was smaller and deliberately less intense.

Aimed at children aged eight to 18 (though one seven-year-old attended), Siblings United ran for the first time at the charity's own adventure centre in 2008, catering for 18 siblings from across the UK.

It was realised early on that children would need the help of skilled experts to draw them out, enable them to feel secure in a new environment, encourage them to try new things, and give them the support they needed to cope with the emotional demands of spending a significant amount of time with brothers and sisters they might barely know.

All sorts of activities were on the menu, from hiking to swimming, crafts to storytelling. It was staffed by trained physical education staff, child psychologists, art therapists and trainee social workers, many of whom volunteered their time.

Creating a safe and secure atmosphere was vital for sibling groups who needed support to get to know each other once again, says Hughes. A continuous thread running through the week were the phototherapy sessions, in which children were encouraged to take pictures of time spent with their siblings and compile their own photo albums.

"They may not realise it, but they're investing in their own memories," she explains.

The albums were, she says, taken away from the camp clutched by the children like treasured possessions. Such activities can also have longer-term benefits. "There's a stronger relationship with my brothers and sisters now," says Aaron, now 19, who attended the camp with his four siblings, including his twin sister from whom he was separated when they were taken into care.

"I got to chat about what they were doing, not like in contact sessions, which is just a quick meal with social workers."

Aaron was taken into care at the age of eight: how has a decade-

worth of short and unsatisfactory contact sessions affected him? "I think it's damaged the relationship. I see them more as friends than as family now."

Siblings who have been separated when they're taken into care can crave each others' company constantly, confirms Professor Audrey Mullender, principal of Ruskin College, Oxford and co-author of *I am here waiting* published by the British Association for Adoption & Fostering.

"After birth mothers, siblings are the next largest group of those who put their name on the Adoption Contact Register for England and Wales for tracing," says Prof Mullender, who did research on adult relatives of people who had been adopted.

She says the importance of sibling bonds is underestimated, with little research done on the subject. "My findings were that siblings care very much about each other. Children look to each other for support. It's stunningly obvious when you think about it."

Of course, brothers and sisters often fight, even when they've been brought up together. How did it work out for Aaron spending a whole week with his siblings?

Aaron laughs as he remembers what happened. "Actually, me and my twin went absolutely nuts at each other one time. We made up after a couple of hours. In contact you wouldn't be able to do that, but we were there for a whole week."

Developing the ability to resolve and move on from conflict with loved ones is a learned skill that the normal arguments between siblings can teach, points out Kate Haley, service manager at Shaftesbury Young People.

"If you've not had that practice, a hurtful comment can be brooded on and can lead to a bigger thing," she says. Many of the children were anxious when they first arrived, she notes; some expressed concern about being away from home and carers, and worried that they wouldn't get on with their siblings.

"Sometimes they'd been separated partly because they didn't get on," explains Haley.

"We negotiated in advance with their social workers. If they weren't enjoying it, of course they weren't nailed to the floor and made to stay." And even though one girl expressed worry all week, Haley says, she felt supported enough to manage her fears and was able to finish her holiday.

Securing enough referrals however has been hard. Getting the information to the right person, and then persuading the local authority to loosen its purse strings has been one problem, Haley explains. Another was convincing social workers that this new service was going to benefit the children sufficiently to take the risk of sending them to stay in an unfamiliar environment for a week.

This year, Hughes, who has now set up her own therapeutic activity holidays for looked-after children called Siblings Together, has found getting a foot in the door easier because social workers have heard children enthuse about how they enjoyed the experience. And social workers have noted and appreciated the positive results.

"Some siblings are taking the initiative to go and see each other and push for more contact. Social workers are even considering placing some separated siblings together who have previously lived apart after seeing how they'd got on," adds Hughes.

At Hammersmith and Fulham Council, senior social worker Lucy Arthur is re-referring two sets of siblings who attended last summer and has recommended this type of experience to professionals internally and at outside agencies.

"In his feedback afterwards, one of the boys [I referred] said he'd 'never felt so normal,'" she says. "That's because every other person there was a looked-after child, so he didn't feel left out. At school there was always hearing about stuff the other pupils do with their mums and dads, and they can't join in."

For Aaron, the camp experience prompted all the siblings to try harder to see each other.

"We've moved closer – we asked to move nearer and placements turned up – so four of us are within 10 miles now. I like the fact that I can go and say hello to them."

Case study

Bristol social worker Sandy Phoenix referred two brothers to the Siblings United camp last year, and plans to send children again this summer.

"Alex and Samson had an excellent holiday. Both boys are in long-term foster care and were initially placed together but had to be separated due to their individual level of needs being too much to manage in one placement.

"It is not easy finding fun and safe places for siblings to attend where they can really relax and have good quality time together. Siblings United provides this.

"It not only enhances the young peoples' relationship, but their resilience and confidence is also enhanced by doing well in the activities with support and encouragement [during the week]. This benefits the young people in their daily life.

"It would be advantageous if such holidays were available as weekend breaks and could be used as an alternative to respite."

One short week per year however does not create the foundations needed for a lifetime's relationship, says Hughes.

"What I want is for children who are spread out around the country to have regular opportunities to see each other, year after year," she says. ■

Further information

Siblings Together will run a residential camp in October. Cost £300. <http://cp.siblingsitogether.co.uk>
Siblings United will run two camps in Kent during August. Cost £320. www.shaftesbury.org.uk/siblings-united

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Water sports are just some of the activities that children take part in when on the sibling camps