

Sibling United

Case Study – From separation to supportive relationships

Julie and Robert

Julie and Robert were 8 and 5 when they were initially placed together in temporary foster care after their mother's death. Within months, Robert was found an adoptive family and separated from his sister. Despite the court having agreed contact between them, as Julie moved around a succession of carers and social workers, their relationship was neglected.

Julie began to forget what her brother looked like; expressing her distress at the loss of this relationship through running away. But when Julie was thirteen she was placed with a carer who saw her distress, and made contact with Robert's adoptive family to arrange for the siblings to meet and have letterbox contact. Their restored relationship began to have a positive effect on the children, especially in stabilising Julie's placements.

Now 24, Julie speaks fondly of how her relationship with her brother has 'saved her life' in many ways since leaving care. When she suffered a breakdown he was there for her consistently. There is now an incredibly strong bond between them despite their childhood apart, and with a supportive relationship they feel they are a family.

Importance of sibling relationships

Sibling relationships are likely to last a lifetime and can be an integral part of a child's sense of identity, while potentially also providing support, companionship, continuity, annoyance, competition and conflict ¹

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.

Many children still continue to be placed away from siblings with little or no contact.

Research evidence

There is a general agreement that, where placement together is not possible, contact assumes particular importance. Yet, in one permanent study, nearly half the placements lacked a definite contact plan and it was rare to include all siblings. Many children had other siblings with whom there was no contact at all, even where social workers thought this might cause difficulty.

In another study of young children placed for adoption, two thirds of those who were separated lacked the potential for contact with any of their siblings. Even where there is contact, it may not be at the most desirable frequency or organised in such a way that it provides the children concerned with meaningful relationships.

In one study of children placed for adoption, 95% of those with birth siblings were living apart from at least one of them. Foster children have an average of 4.4 Siblings per child compared with an average of 2.4 siblings for children living at home. They also have an average of 13.3 changes in their living situation, often involving the loss of the family home and the disruption of relationships.²

Neither Social Work theory nor practice has strong enough foundations to justify claims to “assess sibling relationships” so as to guarantee that the pain and sadness of separation can be avoided. Given the consistent lack, too, of policy and practice guidelines on sibling placements and on contact in care and placement agencies, children frequently become separated for adult reasons that have little or nothing to do with their current or future needs, even when expressed in terms of the latter.³

¹ Edwards et al 2005

² Kosonon. 1999; cited in the Hadley Centre, ‘briefing on placing siblings permanently’.

³ Professor Audrey Mullender, University of Warwick; Evidence ,Select Committee on the Adoption & Children Bill, UK Parliament. (11-5- 2001)

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