

Split up but not cut off: making and sustaining contact arrangements between siblings, Shelagh Beckett in Staying Connected (ed. Hedi Argent), BAAF 2002

Beckett's starting point: human rights considerations, National Adoption Standards & our increased awareness of importance of sibling relationships all require us to give much greater attention to promoting sibling links, including contact.

Even where sibling relationships may have been distorted by parental abuse or neglect, inter-sibling contact can be an important source of continuity, shared history, identity & support throughout life. **The complete severance of sibling links carries profound consequences.**

Children are entitled to know what arrangements will be made to maintain their relationship with siblings living elsewhere & for such arrangements to be reviewed as needs change. All adopters & foster carers should receive preparation & support that assists them to value & promote children's connections with siblings.

While the majority of children are likely to benefit from sibling contact, a minority may be unable to make progress when sibling contact continues. Sibling relationships may have become so distorted by earlier abuse that contact exposes them to damaging and abusive experiences or memories that are too painful.

Agency policies should arguably be based on a presumption of inter-sibling contact but recognise that assessments must always take account of each individual's history and needs, and that needs change – example: a child who cannot cope with sibling contact when placed as a nine-year old may need to check out shared history with siblings during the teenage years.

Does the child understand why they aren't going to live with some or all of their sibs?

- Direct work as preparation for placement & contact plans needs to build on earlier work that has begun to help the child make sense of their evolving life story. (Otherwise unhelpful fantasies develop.) Carers & birth relatives may be able to contribute usefully to direct work.
- This direct work needs underpinning by explanations within life story books & later life letters.

Children's wishes & feelings need to be ascertained.

- Their perceptions about their siblings (including any differences between them) will impact on wishes & feelings. Examples: parental favouritism tends to increase hostility between siblings, child who feels emotionally rejected by parent & siblings may react by expressing reluctance re contact or conversely cling to contact in the hope of putting past wrongs right.
- Child's feelings of responsibility & concern for siblings may have considerable impact on their need for contact. Think carefully about the significance of any established roles within the sibling group as this may impact on children's perceptions & behaviour when together. Roles may have

been functional at one time but appear less so now (eg the parenting sibling). Important to understand context in which behaviour has developed, the ways in which behaviours have been reinforced & the meaning certain behaviours & roles have for each child within the sibling group

- Highly aggressive, destructive & sexually abusive patterns of sibling behaviour: outwardly these may indicate siblings are not particularly close but this may belie strong bonds of loyalty, shared past & powerful sense of connectedness. Placing separately will not in itself resolve problems – safe care issues relevant not only when planning placements but also contact arrangements.
- Whatever the reasons for separation, circumstances change so assure children that contact arrangements can also change.

Acknowledge to all parties that plans are not always ‘agreements’, ie sometimes not everyone will be entirely happy with the contact level proposed.

- But ensure everyone knows what is planned & why. Encourage focus on the importance of trying to make the planned contact work in the interests of the children involved.
- Where differences are significant, name the potential consequences of causing avoidable distress & not respecting the boundaries of contact planned.
- Where children want more contact than is thought feasible or sibling contact that is deemed too risky, ensure reasons for decisions are explained to child and acknowledge this is counter to their expressed wishes. Can be helpful to do this in tangible ways, eg lists of things that would be good, things that might cause problems, worries that SW/courts/others have about contact.

Key issues for assessing & planning sibling contact

- Child’s individual needs as well as relationships within sibling group
- What can reasonably be learned & anticipated from children’s background histories, & previous & current behaviour?
- What is the purpose of contact? Everyone should be clear about reasons for planning contact
- Any specific risks? How can these be managed & minimised? (cf importance of safe care practices)
- Do some but not all of the siblings have contact with adult birth relatives? If so, what are the potential implications?

Issues to address when drafting written contact agreements for siblings placed with different families

- Encourage adults to meet before the new child(ren) placed
- Purpose of contact
- Type & frequency
- What info are the families happy to share, eg addresses, tel. numbers?

- How can memories be kept alive between contact, eg phone calls, use of photos, video material? Important to take account of children's timescales & capacity to remember
- Who will make the arrangements?
- Geography – arrangements need to be seen to be fair in terms of each family's expenditure of time, effort, expense
- Identify significant areas of compatibility & difference between the families & consider implications of these
- Consider ages & age spread of siblings, individual needs & interests, eg what sort of activities might they enjoy & how might these change as they grow older?
- Existing children within the families – how will they be involved & affected? Consider special implications for unrelated adopted siblings with different contact arrangements
- Any special or additional needs to be taken into consideration?
- What sort of venues might be appropriate/inappropriate & why?
- With adopter to adopter contact, is it possible to have contact in either family's home, either now or later?
- Practical & financial aspects
- Who will provide support to all parties?
- How can arrangements be reviewed & if needed, changed?

Maintaining links through indirect contact

- “ For a minority of children it may be assessed that the risks inherent in maintaining direct contact outweigh the potential benefits ...for some children indirect contact will be the only type of contact that can be maintained.”
- Siblings living elsewhere can still be 'held in mind' even in the absence of direct contact: adopters can help their children do this by eg involving them in choosing info to be put into letters, selecting photos, contributing a drawing etc
- Computers, email, mobile phones etc can open up more ways of keeping in touch but also make it harder to maintain confidentiality
- Video material can be a useful means of reinforcing memories (NB Beckett says nothing about the potential difficulties & risks in their use)

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