

The Crisis Facing Siblings in Foster Care

According to a 2005 study, approximately 70 percent of United States foster care children have a sibling in care as well. Keeping siblings together is a priority for Washington state. However, with a lack of foster homes licensed to care for three or more children, finding a foster home that is able to care for multiple children is a challenge and may not always be possible. While some sibling groups are comprised of two children close in age, other sibling groups can consist of three or more children who may range in age from infant to teen. Since most foster homes are not licensed to care for multiple children of all ages, larger sibling groups often have to be placed into multiple homes.

The longest relationship many of us experience is with our siblings. The strong connections made between brothers and sisters are important throughout childhood and over the course of a lifetime. Sibling relationships are even more important for foster care children, since they often support and nurture each other in ways not provided by their birth parents. A sibling relationship may be the only secure and consistent attachment these children have been able to form.

For siblings entering care, being placed together can enhance their sense of safety and well-being. It also reduces anxiety since they don't have to wonder where their siblings are and whether or not they are safe. Siblings placed together also provide natural support to each other, as well as a sense of stability and belonging for foster children who have been traumatized by the separation from their parents.

The Barriers to Placing Sibling Together

Many barriers prevent siblings from being placed together. These include, but are not limited to:

- Size of the sibling group. Larger groups are more often split up.
- Age gaps. A wide age span makes it difficult to place siblings together.
- Differences in the needs of siblings.
- Differences in family. Relatives may decide to foster only the children to whom they are related, and may not want to foster half-siblings or step-siblings.
- Behavior problems. A child with behavioral issues is less likely to be placed with siblings. Even when placed together, that child is more likely to be removed, while their siblings remain.
- Inadequacy of placement resources. Rules regarding the maximum number of children who can be placed in a foster home.
- Safety issues that may exist between the siblings.

What You Can Do

Washington social workers are required to make reasonable efforts to place even large sibling groups together and document their efforts to locate a foster family who can take all the children. When children cannot be placed together for safety or other specifically identified reasons, (such as a child in the hospital, or one who has run away from home) the social worker must document the reasons why siblings are not placed together. Finding foster families who can take three or more children is always a challenge. If you have the capacity to care for "an instant family," we need to hear from you!

While not everyone can open up their home to a large sibling group, there is always a need for homes willing to provide care to smaller sibling groups. Foster families willing to partner together to provide care to a large sibling group will receive help and support to maintain those relationships and promote frequent visits for the children. There are many things to consider when making this decision. If you would like more information, you may speak to a Fostering Together liaison or attend an orientation class.