Siblings – together or apart?

A “sibling assessment” must be attached to every Child Permanence Report (CPR) when a sibling group is presented to the Adoption Panel to make a recommendation about the permanent plan for each child’s future. While the starting point is always that the siblings should be placed together, an assessment must be completed in each case to ensure that the plan is in the best interests of each child individually, all the children as a group and that the plan to place together is possible.

The Definition of sibling is children who share at least one parent and/or children who live or have lived for a significant period with other children in a family group.

The Children Act 1989 states that “where a local authority provide accommodation for a child whom they are looking after, they shall ...so far as is reasonably practicable and consistent with his welfare ... where the authority are also providing accommodation for a sibling of his, they are accommodated together.” (Section 23(7) (b))

The Department of Health’s guidance (DH 1990) which accompanied the 1989 Act states that “Siblings should not be separated when in care ...unless this is part of a well thought out plan based on each child’s needs...... However, a child’s needs should not be sacrificed in order to meet those of a sibling.”

NCC Children in Care Policy Statement, July 2010, section 7.7 states “Wherever possible, siblings will be placed together, unless this conflicts with their welfare. Where placements cannot be found or where it is inappropriate to place a whole sibling group together, contact arrangements will be made as may be appropriate to each sibling’s care plan and subject to review as plans develop.”

Assessing Sibling relationships

Many factors effect the final decision to place sibling groups together or not; policies, procedures, staffing issues, availability of placements on entering care, and the personal beliefs of social workers, foster carers and Panel members, solicitors, Magistrates, Judges, Guardians and as far as possible you should be aware these factors exist. These are further complicated by the ages of the children, their ethnicity, and level of disability, whether they came into Sue Lowe 2011
care together or not, their legal status, long term plan, contact needs and views and wishes of birth relatives. And yet it should be clear that each child’s own wishes and feelings, the assessed quality of the relationship between the siblings, and each child’s assessed needs are the most important factors which should inform decisions about whether siblings are placed in a permanent new family together or separately.

a. Clarify who the siblings are:
   Include those coming into the system together, those already in the system, those adopted, half and full siblings

b. Who should be involved:
   Each child’s social worker, each child’s foster carer, an adoption worker and any other professional with a knowledge of each or all the children. The birth parents may feel able to contribute to the assessment. Use the HMSO questionnaire (attached) with each child’s carer as well as your own observations to develop a view of how each child relates to each other.

c. Children in separate foster homes:
   It is essential they have regular contact with each other for more than a couple of hours a week and preferably in a foster home without other children around, and separate from and contact with their birth parents. This is so that their interaction with each other can be observed and evaluated.

d. Assessing each child’s needs
   The relationship with and attachment to siblings is important, but it is important to assess each child as an individual with his/ her unique needs and balance these needs with the need to be with siblings.

e. Context in which the relationship has developed
   Children’s position in the family, their gender, cultural and family expectations of each child, the emotional age at which the child is functioning, shared history, the role the child was deemed to have played in the children leaving the family, the individual child’s innate temperament and resilience. Factors in the birth family can also affect the relationship for example parental favouritism, neglect, abuse etc.

f. Each child’s attachment to and relationship with each sibling.
   It is important to assess each individual child’s relationship and attachment to each of its siblings.

g. Dynamics of the sibling group.
   Is one child acting out for the others, do two siblings relate well until joined by a third etc.
h. **Identify who should be placed with whom or alone if a sibling group is to be split.**
   This should be based on their individual needs, their wishes and their relationships.

i. **Adoption Triangle – child, adopters, birth family.**
   Most of the above is about child’s needs but when making an assessment about the placement of the siblings together or separately you need to be aware of the reality of an adoptive family coping with all the children, do the children have different contact needs with birth family, etc.

**Assessment and evaluation**
You will need to identify the themes that emerge from the use of the checklists and all the other information gathered during the assessment process, consider research and seek advice when making your recommendation about the placement of siblings together or separate.

**Recording**
It is very important that the reasons for deciding to separate siblings or to place them together is clearly recorded and evidenced. The record should include the children’s own views and the reasons, where applicable, why it was decided to override these.

**Reading:**

BAAF We are family. Sibling relationships in placement and beyond. Edited by Audrey Mullender.
BAAF 10 Top Tips Placing Siblings by Hedi Argent.
“Adopting Large sibling groups” research by Hilary Saunders and Julie Selwyn August 2010 (summary available on Hadley Centre website, full report to be published by BAAF).