



STRATEGY BRIEF

STRONG FAMILIES

How are child protection agencies promoting and supporting **joint sibling placements and adoptions?**

Child protection investigations and removals are [traumatizing for children](#). Being placed with siblings can serve as a protective factor against the adverse experiences associated with placement in foster care,¹ provide [continuity and connection](#) to family, and [help to expedite the management and delivery of services](#). Preserving and promoting sibling relationships has been found to result in better outcomes for children, including:

- Greater placement stability (fewer placement disruptions).²
- [Fewer days](#) in placement.
- Higher rates of reunification.^{3,4}
- Increased likelihood of achieving permanency, outside of reunification.⁵
- Fewer emotional and behavioral difficulties.⁶
- Increased mental well-being.^{7,8}
- Improved school performance.⁹
- Better adjustment to their new home.^{10,11}



Approximately two-thirds of children in foster care have a sibling in care, and yet — despite the benefits of joint sibling placements — it is estimated that **more than 70% of children with siblings are separated from one or more of their siblings while in care.**¹²

Barriers to siblings being placed or adopted together^{13,14}

In general, child protection agencies understand the importance of maintaining sibling connections and have embraced approaches that support sibling placements. Thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia have statutes requiring agencies to make reasonable efforts to place siblings together unless a joint placement would not be in the best interests of one of the siblings, such as when one sibling poses a risk to the other. Additionally, 35 states and Puerto Rico have statutes requiring agencies to [make provisions for siblings who cannot be placed together](#), including opportunities for visits and/or other forms of contact or communication.¹⁵

Agencies report difficulties placing children with siblings when:

- The sibling group is very large, or siblings enter foster care at different times.
- Siblings have significant age gaps, need different levels of care and support, or have undeveloped or unclear sibling connections (for example, siblings who lived apart from one another, or siblings with different last names).
- There is insufficient placement capacity or organizational policies and procedures that promote and support families caring for siblings, including training for staff and families and support services for resource families.

Strategies for keeping siblings together¹⁶⁻²⁰

Child protection agencies can work to increase the number of viable homes available for sibling groups and ensure that internal policies and practices affirm, promote, and support sibling placements. Several

strategies are designed to mitigate the barriers to joint placements for siblings.

- **Prioritize placement with kin:** Being in a kinship placement [increases the likelihood of children living with or staying connected to their siblings](#). Relatives are generally more open to taking a sibling group and offer the further advantage of preserving family connections. Resources and funding also should be identified specifically for kinship providers to ensure they have the supports they need.
- **Establish clear policies:** Provide training for caseworkers and foster/adoptive parents about the importance of preserving sibling connections, and ensure siblings are assigned to the same caseworker, regardless of when they enter care. A system to locate and track siblings — including those in care, those still in the home, and those who have been adopted or who have aged out of the system — can enable this to happen more seamlessly. If siblings must be separated for an emergency placement, review the case within the first week to plan for reunification.
- **Involve children in placement decisions:** Include children in the decision-making about placement with siblings and regularly discuss any issues at case reviews.
- **Utilize targeted foster/adoptive parent recruitment and retention strategies:** Recruit foster and adoptive homes specifically for sibling groups, and homes that are reflective of the racial and ethnic diversity of children in care. It can be helpful to provide special ancillary funding and resources for foster/adoptive families that take in large sibling groups so they can purchase additional household items and access needed services, such as respite care, peer mentoring, and supportive counseling. Providing a thorough assessment of the sibling group as a whole and of each individual child can help foster and adoptive parents proactively address any needs and concerns.

The [Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008](#) was the first federal law to address the importance of keeping siblings together, **requiring states to make reasonable efforts to maintain sibling connections in order to receive federal funding**. This includes placing siblings removed from their home in the same foster care, kinship, guardianship, or adoptive placement, unless there is documentation stating why it is not in the best interest of one of the siblings.

[When children cannot be placed with their siblings](#), biological and resource parents can be helpful in the discussion about how best to promote and maintain sibling ties. Placing siblings near each other (in the same city, community, and/or school district) makes it easy to plan visits, outings, and experiences for siblings to spend as much time together as possible. In addition, connections can be supported through phone calls, letters, and social media.

Jurisdictional highlights

Given the vast array of priorities child protection agencies must balance, successfully prioritizing sibling placements and connections requires the implementation of sibling-focused policies and practices. This section highlights examples of policies and procedures child protection agencies in three jurisdictions (Connecticut, Idaho, and New Jersey) have developed and implemented to promote sibling placement. Across all three states, **maintaining sibling connections is the priority, and permanency planning for siblings begins as early as possible**.

Connecticut²¹

The Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) provides workforce training on the importance of sibling connection and permanency to ensure that sibling placement is a casework priority. The

department also offers training for potential resource parents and community members on the value of sibling relationships and connections.

Recognizing the importance of maintaining sibling connections, DCF's [Sibling Bill of Rights](#) outlines the policies for sibling visitation for those who are separated, including the expectation that siblings will be able to visit one another at least once every two weeks. While visitation cannot be enforced after legal adoption has occurred, DCF invests significant work upfront (during initial training and licensing classes) to ensure families understand the importance of the sibling/biological connection.

When adoption is the permanency goal, DCF uses its [Permanency Resource Exchange](#) — which includes all families eligible to adopt in the state — to facilitate permanent placements for individual children as well as siblings. The exchange helps match families to children, and after the caseworker and supervisor identify the five best matches, the Permanency Planning Team meets to discuss and identify the one that is best for the child(ren). Identifying the family is a team decision, with the goal of reaching consensus in all adoption cases. When consensus is not reached, the caseworker and supervisor make the final decision, although in rare cases the child's attorney or the judge can overrule the decision.

Idaho²²

Large families often are the norm in Idaho, a rural state with a high proportion of Mormon families, who [tend to have more children](#) than other religious groups. These factors make it relatively easy for the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (DHW) to find placements for large sibling groups.

However, if children have been separated from their siblings in foster care, a sibling priority [Permanent Placement Committee](#) meeting is held to develop a plan that supports sibling permanency. One of the committee's guiding principles unequivocally explains the importance of prioritizing sibling placements:

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“A key component of a child’s well-being is their continued connection to relatives. Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, the Idaho Code and IDAPA rules all support the engagement of and priority placement with relatives. Siblings are relatives; and joint sibling placements are relative placements. Children often understand why they must be separated from their parents, but separation from siblings is not understandable. Adult adoptees and foster care alumni both describe the loss of contact as the most devastating loss they experienced.”

The siblings’ caseworker and supervisor attend the placement committee meeting, as well as other pertinent stakeholders, such as biological and resource parents, permanency staff, experienced foster parent mentors, and community partners. During the meeting, sibling relationships are examined, safety concerns are reviewed to see if they can be mitigated, and sibling and family preferences are considered. When adoption is the goal, the committee decides if siblings should be adopted together. If so, the members will consider only families willing to adopt all the siblings.

DHW created a sibling matrix for the committee to use to guide the placement process. Results from the [Child and Family Services Reviews](#) conducted by the federal Children’s Bureau indicate that DHW is doing better with maintaining sibling relationships since introducing the matrix.

New Jersey²³

New Jersey’s Department of Children and Families (DCF) makes every effort to [prioritize sibling](#)

[placements](#) when children first enter care, and has successfully placed approximately [80% of sibling groups together](#). When identifying placements for siblings, DCF considers relatives in the same community first, followed by unrelated resource families. Families that foster are required to support the sibling connection, even if the siblings are not placed together, and a family’s ability to support sibling connections is a major consideration when selecting an adoptive family. While DCF cannot guarantee that adoptive parents will support the connection, it strongly encourages all families to do so.

DCF provides a [Siblings in Best Settings](#) incentive to families that accept large sibling groups — families willing to foster five or more siblings are kept on a \$200 a month retainer, even when they are not fostering children. So far, the incentive has helped DCF maintain foster homes for large sibling groups. Resource families fostering or adopting large sibling groups also can access a higher foster care subsidy to help with logistics and needs, including purchasing a bigger vehicle to fit a large sibling group. Relatives who foster/adopt large sibling groups can access the same subsidy as non-relatives, but they are not eligible for the \$200 monthly retainer.

In addition to financial supports, DCF recognizes that concrete supports and mental health services also are key to retaining resource families. DCF also provides emotional support to grandparents as they navigate their changing role when adopting their grandchildren, and to process the grief they may experience over their son or daughter being unable to parent their grandchildren. Several support organizations are used to offer these services, including [Umbrella](#), [KinConnect](#), [Family Success Centers](#), [Tuning in to Teens](#), and DCF’s [Children’s System of Care](#).

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- 22 Interview on July 9, 2019, with staff at the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare.
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P 800.228.3559

P 206.282.7300

F 206.282.3555

casey.org | KMResources@casey.org

