Sibling relationships are likely to be the longest-lasting relationships people will experience throughout their lives. For children in foster care and who are waiting to be adopted, remaining connected with siblings provides meaningful, powerful opportunities to experience strong relationships that can thrive throughout their lives. It is possible and crucial to keep siblings connected and placed together whenever possible. The realities described below offer hope and key approaches for countering some of the common reasons given for separating siblings.

1. **Children experience better outcomes when they are placed with their siblings.**
   Keeping siblings together is often in the best interest of children and should be a priority. Many of the common concerns that may be used to justify separating siblings (e.g., concerns about older siblings taking on a parental role) can be addressed, avoiding subjecting children to the additional trauma of being separated from their siblings. By preparing adoptive families to meet the needs of sibling groups and by keeping siblings connected and placed together, child welfare systems can promote improved emotional and behavioral outcomes and overall well-being for children.

2. **Sibling rivalry is a normal occurrence in sibling relationships.**
   Separating siblings who are experiencing sibling rivalry removes the opportunity for them to work through their issues and may teach them to walk away from conflict. The separation will likely increase the trauma they already feel from being separated from all that is familiar to them. Keeping siblings together in a healthy and supportive family environment will give the children an opportunity to learn to resolve differences and develop stronger sibling relationships.

3. **You can keep siblings safe from each other without separating them.**
   Protection from emotional, physical, and sexual abuse between siblings is important; however, it is also important to understand that often this is a learned behavior and a result of past traumatic experiences. Professionals will need to distinguish between true abuse and all other forms of sibling hostility while considering measures other than separation to prevent further abuse. Simply removing a child from his/her sibling does not guarantee that the abuse will not continue in another setting. Having adoptive parents who are well-informed about trauma, aware of the abuse, and understand the dynamics of abuse will help in developing safety measures to address the behaviors while being able to keep siblings together.

4. **Child welfare systems should view a child’s need to be placed with siblings as a key need.**
   This need to be placed with siblings should carry equal weight as a child’s other needs as child welfare systems consider families who can meet the specific needs of children. Children who are waiting to be adopted may have emotional, behavioral, or other challenges and needs as a result of the trauma they have experienced.
The adoptive family that is well prepared to meet the specific needs of a child will be able to keep the siblings together while also meeting each child’s other needs.

5 A child may have a very different, more inclusive definition of “sibling” than the one used in law or policy.

Children who experience life in the child welfare system often form a variety of “sibling like” relationships with non-related brothers and sisters they have lived with both in their biological families and in foster care. Professionals placing children should take into consideration the child’s definition of who is and is not a sibling before making adoption placement decisions.

6 Although there is a need for families for large sibling groups, most sibling groups waiting to be adopted consist of two or three children.

The majority of waiting children with siblings on the AdoptUSKids photolisting are in sibling groups of two (66%) or three (23%) siblings. Fewer are in sibling groups of four to six siblings (11%). (McRoy and Ayers-Lopez 2014)

7 There are many families who are interested in adopting sibling groups.

Most waiting families registered on the AdoptUSKids photolisting (84%) are interested in adopting more than one child. (McRoy and Ayers-Lopez 2014) Many families who express the desire to adopt a sibling group are interested in “ready-made” families. Others have had positive experiences as being part of a sibling group or having previously cared for siblings. Policies and procedures that provide exceptions and incentives for families to adopt sibling groups are essential.

8 Targeted recruitment efforts specifically designed for sibling groups are critical—and can be very successful—to identifying potential adoptive families that can keep siblings together.

Strategies including tapping into resource families who have raised siblings to recruit and talk to potential families, using media to publicize the need for families willing to adopt these sibling groups, and featuring recruitment pictures of the children taken as a group have proven most effective in placing brothers and sisters together.

9 Siblings have a unique bond that, when nurtured through placement together, can be an important source of emotional support for each other.

Research indicates that siblings placed together benefit from the sibling bond in ways that do not present problems to the parent/child relationship. Older children in the sibling group are thought to provide emotional support to their younger siblings. There is evidence to suggest that siblings who are placed separately in adoption have more anxiety and depression than those who are placed together. (Groza 2003)

10 Placing siblings together can reduce emotional and behavior problems that children and youth might otherwise experience if they were separated.

Siblings who are placed separately are more likely to demonstrate greater emotional and behavioral problems. Research indicates that when siblings are placed together, they experience many emotional benefits, fewer moves, and a lower risk for failed placements. (Leathers 2005)
The title IV-E agency must:

- Make reasonable efforts to place siblings removed from their home in the same foster care, adoption or guardianship placement. Set standards for visitation and contact (a minimum of monthly).
- Facilitate frequent visitation or ongoing interactions for siblings who cannot be placed together (as determined by the agency).
- Make exceptions when the agency determines that placement together or visitation/ongoing interaction is contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings.

The title IV-E agency has discretion to:

- Define siblings or sibling groups.
- Set standards for visitation and contact (a minimum of monthly). Make exceptions when the agency determines that placement together or visitation/ongoing interaction is contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings.
- Determine appropriate settings and supervision of visits.

The Children’s Bureau encourages an agency to:

- Develop standard decision-making protocols for workers.
- Conduct periodic reassessments of situations in which siblings are unable to be placed together or have frequent visitation.
10 REALITIES
OF SIBLING ADOPTION

Resource List

Realities 1-4
Concepts taken from:
National Resource Center for Foster Care and 
Permanency Planning. NRCFCPP Sibling 
Practice Curriculum. Hunter College School of 

National Resource Center for Permanency and 
Family Connections. Working with Siblings in 
Foster Care: A Web-based NRCPFC Toolkit. 
Available at: http://www.nrcpfc.org/toolkit/ 
sibling/index.html.

National Adoption Information Clearinghouse. 
(1992). The Sibling Bond: Its Importance in 
Foster Care and Adoptive Placement. Retrieved 

Reality 5
Cohn, M. (2008). Sibling Placement: The Impor-
tance of the Sibling Relationship for Children 
in Foster Care. National Resource Center for 
Family Centered Practice and Permanency 
Planning. New York, NY.

Realities 6-7
McRoy, Ruth, Ph.D., and Ayers-Lopez, Susan, 
Analyses of Children and Youth Photolisted 
with Siblings on the AdoptUSKids Website and 
Prospective Adoptive Families Registered on 
the AdoptUSKids and Open to Adopting Two 
or More Children. The University of Texas at 
Austin, Center for Social Work Research.

Reality 8
Northeast Ohio Adoption Services. (2001). The 
Sisters and Brothers Together Project: Final 
Project Report for Federal Adoption Opportuni-
ties Grant #90 CO 0821. Warren, Ohio.

Reality 9
Groza, V., Maschmeier, C., Jamison, C., and Pic-
Placement: Best Practices.” Families in Society, 
84, 480-490.

Longitudinal Study of Special Needs Adoption. 
New York: Praeger.

Reality 10
Past, Present, and Future.” Youth Law News, 
Vol. 24 (4).

The original citation is:
Associations with placement adaptation and 
outcomes among adolescents in long-term fos-
ter care.” Children and Youth Services Review, 
27(7), 793-819.

Festinger, T. (1986). Necessary risk: A study of 
adoptions and disrupted adoptive placements. 
Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of 
America.

“Predictors of special needs adoption disrup-
tion: An exploratory study.” Children and 
Youth Services Review, 10, 101-117.

More free resources at:
www.nrcdr.org

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