



NSW Department of
Community Services

PLACEMENT OF SIBLINGS IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE

1. Focus of policy

This policy is designed to provide guidance to caseworkers in situations where a sibling¹ is already in care at the time one or more other siblings come into care.

The intent of the policy is to provide guidance to caseworkers making decisions about placements and placement changes of siblings. The particular issue that the policy seeks to address relates to balancing the needs of siblings to be together against the imperative to maintain stable placements where positive attachments have been formed.

2. Background

In relation to achieving positive outcomes for children in care research shows:

- there are considerable benefits in placing siblings together with a shared parent or carer
- the greater the stability and permanency associated with a placement the better individual life outcomes will be.

The general practice principle is that siblings be co-located in care (co-placed), but there are also cases where this principle should not override other equally important policy principles.

Caseworkers can be confronted with situations where the principles of co-location and placement stability are in tension with one another. This can occur where siblings enter care at different times and placement with the carer of the child who first entered care is not practical. In these cases the desirable general principle of reuniting siblings would potentially involve removing a child from an existing stable placement.

There will also be situations where it is not in the best interests of children to be co-located, generally because of the dynamics of risk that caused entry to care or issues associated with the well being of a particular child.

Co-location of siblings in care should therefore be balanced with the need for placement stability and the safety and well being of each of the children.

The key features of the policy can be summarised as follows:

- The practice principle of co-locating siblings in care should generally be complied with

¹ Siblings have been traditionally defined as full or half brothers and sisters, with full siblings sharing both biological parents and half siblings sharing one parent. This policy primarily relates to sibling groups in this sense. However, it should be noted that there are certain situations where children have significant attachments to other children within their extended family whom they view as siblings, even though they do not fit the traditional definition of sibling.

except where this principle would override other equally important policy principles such as each child's need for stability, permanence and safety.

- The policy proposes general principles about circumstances in which co-placement should not be the automatically prevailing practice preference. Cases where attachments and stable placement would be disrupted is one such principle and to operationalise this principle, the length of time in a placement for a sibling currently in care is identified as a trigger for closer consideration and assessment of the balancing consideration of placement stability as against re-location of the sibling to be with later entering siblings.
- Time is applied as a trigger for consideration as to whether attachment is such that co-placement should not be favoured at the expense of disrupting the placement. There is also recognition that the age of the child affects the nature and extent of attachment.

Where a sibling under the age of two has been in a short term placement for **less than 6 months** caseworkers should seek to place siblings together by:

- asking the child's carer if they can accommodate the sibling group;
- asking DoCS foster carers in the same region as the children's family if they can accommodate the sibling group;
- asking non government agencies if they can identify or provide a sibling placement; and
- considering other placement types such as supported family group homes, intensive foster care or supported independent living.

If the sibling in care is older than 2 years, the placement term may be up to **12 months** before there is an assumption that an attachment has formed such that co-location objectives may be displaced.

- Where it is necessary to place siblings apart to avoid disrupting a stable placement, caseworkers should endeavour to:
 - place as many of the siblings together as possible;
 - place siblings in reasonable proximity to each other;
 - ensure regular contact between siblings; and
 - conduct a case review within 6 months of placement which considers contact arrangements and specific actions to reunite children where appropriate.
- Aboriginal children must be placed in accordance with the Aboriginal Placement Principles **and** the proposed policy. Priority must be given to placing Aboriginal siblings with a member of their Aboriginal community, or a member of another Aboriginal family residing in the vicinity of the child's usual place of residence. To help identify a placement that best matches each child's needs for kinship, attachment and permanence, consultation should occur with members of the siblings' extended family or kinship group, Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal caseworkers.
- Priority should be given to placing siblings from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with carers from the same cultural, linguistic or religious background as their own.

3. Assessment and case planning

In developing individual case plans for children coming into care, the views, preferences and situation of each sibling should be assessed to determine the desirability of co-

locating siblings. An assessment of attachment issues should be undertaken by a psychologist, or by a caseworker in consultation with a psychologist.

Once a child under 2 has been in a placement for 6 months, and 12 months for children older than 2, and there is no practical way of co-locating the later entry sibling with the child who is already in care, there is a need for assessment to guide placement decisions. The key objective of this assessment is to establish whether the degree of attachment in the pre-existing placement is such that this placement ought to be secured over and above opportunities for co-location.

Co-placement should **not** be pursued where:

- it is in the best interests of one or more of the children to be placed apart - considerations here would include whether there is any suggestion of sibling involvement in the risk of harm to the other (eg sibling sexual abuse, physical or emotional harm); or
- a child has been assessed as requiring a separate placement, in order to address serious health, behavioural, or emotional needs; or
- it is in the best interests of a child to be placed with a relative who can provide a safe and stable home, but is not able to accept care for another child; or
- a child has entered care 6 months or more after their sibling who is two or younger, or 12 months if older, significant attachment is considered to have occurred and the carer of the first child to enter care is unable to care for another child.²

4. Where a sibling two years of age or less has been in a short term placement for less than 6 months, or less than 12 months for older children:

Except in cases where the best interests of the child or assessment contra-indicate co-location of siblings, caseworkers should place siblings together by:

- asking the foster carer or relative carer of a child already in care whether they can accommodate the child's siblings for the short or long term;
- asking available DoCS foster carers in the same region as the children's family whether they can accommodate the sibling group;
- asking non-government foster care agencies in the same region as the children's family if they can identify or provide a sibling placement.

In addition to general foster care other placement types such as supported/family group home care, intensive foster care, or supported independent living placements, where appropriate should be considered.

5. Where a sibling two years of age or less has been in a long term stable placement for over 6 months, or over 12 months if older than two years of age:³

Caseworkers should seek to place siblings together by first asking the foster carer or relative carer of a child already in care whether they can accommodate the child's siblings.

² Aligns with endorsed *Permanency Planning Policy and Guidelines for interpretation of child protection and out-of-home care performance indicators*, AIHW 2002 p. 35, in which Australian practitioners and stakeholders generally agreed that placing siblings entering care within 6-12 months of each other was desirable to achieve placement stability.

³ *Guidelines for interpretation of child protection and out-of-home care performance indicators* (AIHW 2002, p.35) – 'General agreement amongst Australian practitioners and stakeholders consulted that placement together of siblings entering care within 6 to 12 months of each other was desirable'.

If this is not possible and the siblings cannot be placed together without disrupting a stable placement, an alternate option should be pursued in line with the principles outlined in section 7.

6. Number of children in a foster care family

The number of children placed in foster care should not exceed the maximum number of children a carer has been authorised to care for. Generally, no more than six children, including the carer's own children, can live in the carer's home.⁴

The Manager, Client Services, may approve an exemption to policy to secure an otherwise appropriate placement for a large sibling group of three or more children, provided:

- the foster carer's capacity to adequately care for all children has been assessed;
- the carer is authorised to care for the number of children; and
- the home meets the basic housing⁵ and privacy needs of all children.

7. Placement of siblings apart

When it is necessary to place siblings apart to avoid disrupting a stable placement, caseworkers should:

- place siblings within reasonable proximity to one another, where appropriate;
- place as many of the children together as possible;
- assign one caseworker to all of the siblings, if possible;
- ensure regular contact between siblings in accordance with their case plans (see 8 below); and
- conduct a case review within 6 months of placement where a child is in long term care to ensure contact is occurring.⁵

The case review should involve consideration of specific actions to reunite children where this would be in the best interests of all children involved.

8. Sibling contact

Sibling contact is a key issue to be addressed in the child or young person's case plan. In developing contact plans it is important to include the participation of the child or young person, as well as their carers, in the planning process.

When it is necessary to place children apart, their relationships with other siblings in care or who remain at home should be retained through regular contact including visits, phone calls, letters and email, unless:

- a Children's Court has ordered that no contact should occur;
- the child is at risk of harm during contact and supervision would be inadequate to eliminate this risk; or

⁴ Business Help, *Assessment and Approval of Carers*

⁵ This is in keeping with current practice. Business Help, *Placement Reviews for Children and Young People in Out of Home Care – "Initial review within 2 months of final order if child is under 2 years and within 4 months of final order if child is 2 years or older and thereafter annually"*.

- a young person aged 15 or over has stated that they do not want to have contact with their siblings.

Children should be given an opportunity to voice their views about the type and frequency of contact. They should also be provided with information about their siblings whereabouts unless there is a court order prohibiting the disclosure of this information, or when a caseworker considers that disclosing this information could place the child or others in the household at risk of harm, or when contact is not in the best interests of the child or other children in the household. Retention of sibling relationships should be promoted by:

- providing children aged seven and older⁶ and their foster carers with each siblings name, birth date, address and telephone number and providing the same information to siblings who remain at home where possible;
- informing siblings if a child has moved to another placement and providing details;
- encouraging carers to assist children with writing, emailing and phoning their siblings as often as they wish; and
- undertaking effective life story work with children and young people

9. Placement of Aboriginal siblings

Aboriginal siblings must be placed in accordance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child and Young Person Placement Principles and in accordance with this sibling placement policy.

Priority must be given to placing Aboriginal siblings with a member of their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community or with a member of another Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family residing in the vicinity of the children's usual place of residence. Members of the siblings' extended family or kinship group, Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal caseworkers should be consulted to help identify a safe placement that best matches each child's demonstrable needs for kinship, attachment and permanence.

Where Aboriginal siblings are placed separately, contact plans should include arrangements that enable them to participate in cultural activities in their communities as a sibling group.

10. Placement of Children and Young People from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds

Children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds should be placed in accordance with the principles in Sections 9 (c) and 9 (e) of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*, and in accordance with this sibling placement policy

Priority should be given to placing siblings with carers from the same cultural, linguistic or religious background as their own, and to placing siblings together wherever possible.

Placement of siblings together is a strategy that could significantly assist them to retain connections with culture, language and religion. When making these decisions, consideration should be given to disadvantages that may arise if this involves disturbing

⁶ Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, , Placement & Visitation Services, *Section 301.230 Contact Among Siblings Placed Apart*, 2001 and DoCS Draft *Contact Policy for Children and Young People in Out-of-Home care*, 2006

placement of one sibling who is with carers committed to maintaining the child's culture and identity.

Where it is not possible to place siblings together with carers from the same cultural, linguistic or religious background, then caseworkers should carefully assess whether the carer has sufficient understanding and appreciation of the cultural, linguistic or religious background of the siblings and is committed to maintaining their cultural identity.

11. Record keeping

All decisions to place siblings together or separate should be documented on KiDS.⁷ The following types of documentation may be required to support these decisions:

- mental health assessment, behavioural evaluations, sibling and carer relationship assessments;
- responses to any known objections to the placement decision by interested parties such as parents, other relatives/kin, current carers, therapists, teachers, or medical professionals;
- efforts taken to locate an appropriate sibling placement;
- efforts taken to place separated children in close proximity to each other;
- plans to reunite children in placement; and
- plans to maintain sibling relationships while separated in placement.

⁷ Adequate fields currently exist in KiDS to record relevant information in relation to siblings.