

Information leaflet

Sibling interactions

Sibling relationships can be fraught with conflict but if they are cherished and worked on children will have a relationship which they can turn to for support throughout their lives.

It might be the case that the child a special guardian is caring for has siblings who they were either unable to take care of or who have been placed with different family members, are in foster care or have been adopted. It can also be the case that the child's birth parents have gone on to have more children since the special guardian started caring for the child.

Although they can be difficult to manage, relationships with both birth siblings and children in a special guardian's own family can be very significant to children. For a child in a special guardianship arrangement they can help them rebuild their sense of identity and move forward with more confidence.

Why sibling relationships matter

A child and their sibling have a shared history and life story and even if this history or life story is difficult or fragmented they may have lived through a lot together and are likely to have a powerful bond. Learning to move forward and heal with the right support can be easier to do together than alone.

A sibling bond can bring a sense of family, belonging and a strong sense of identity which children who have experienced abuse, neglect or other trauma can otherwise lack.

Birth siblings

Though siblings may be present when children meet their birth parents, it is often not the best time for siblings to meet. Children often fight for attention with the birth parent, especially if there has been neglect. They may not have time to play with or focus on each other meaning the sibling relationship can be pushed to one side. Sibling contact is often not spelled out as a requirement in the Special Guardianship Order (SGO) in the way contact with birth parents is and a special guardian may want to make the case for why this is important for the child they are caring for. When siblings are placed together into a new family this can increase a sense of division and new and old family members can split into different 'camps'. However, the prior experiences of siblings who have been placed together can also cause conflict between them too.

In some cases children who are the subject of a SGO may have a sibling who is not placed in the same family. This can often be very distressing to children. If they are aware, or become aware of the child it is possible that they will try to make contact with them.

Where contact with siblings is only occasional it can lead to relationships becoming formal and distant. When the sibling bond becomes weaker, relationships with non-birth siblings may overtake those with birth siblings.

Children already in the family

When a child arrives in a new family they may not always feel able to share their new carers with other children in the family. They may worry that the special guardian likes their children more than them. It is important for special guardians to try and prepare the child and all of the other children in the family by talking to them individually about their anxieties so that they can resolve as much as they can and at least be aware of the rest.

Tensions from the entry of a new child into the family may increase if the child has poor boundaries and is showing challenging behaviour. Older children in particular may struggle with feelings of jealousy and resentment.

Special guardians need to try and consider and talk about everyone's feelings and fears, including their own feelings and fears. This will help clear the air and help the new child to be accepted into the family. Special guardians should ask their other children for their help and let them know they have a really important role to play in supporting their new siblings and developing relationships and reward them for positive support.

Forming attachments might be an issue for the new child so it is important for special guardians to spend one-to-one time with them as well as time together as a family.

Practical tips for special guardians to help with sibling contact

- Special guardians should remember that conflict is natural between siblings especially if they have not seen each other for a while.
- When arranging contact carers should have a positive activity planned, whether a picnic, trip to the cinema or a practical activity such as baking. Choosing positive settings helps
- siblings find a new way forward and see each other in a new light. This will also help the child to strengthen their sense of identity and to move forward.
- Carers should try to get siblings to agree and negotiate what they want to do themselves, alternating who gets to choose each time. It can be empowering for them to understand if things go wrong that they can choose to make it better.
- Special guardians may want to build contact up slowly. Rather than spending the whole day together, they could start with an hour or two. A clear plan can help the relationship build and endure.
- Supporting contact is usually much better than trying to stop it, but special guardians should always ensure that the children are safe.
- Special guardians can struggle to find the time to supervise contact between siblings while balancing time spent with their own family. Having a strong support network of friends and family who can be called on to provide practical help when needed can help make sure their own needs and the needs of the child and the other children are met consistently and well.
- When a new child arrives it is crucial for the special guardian to be honest with their own children. They should make it clear from the start that the new child has equal rights within the family and is entitled to equal treatment.

- Special guardians should treat each child as an individual and be fair and consistent.

Key points

- Relationships with birth siblings and with children in a special guardian's own family can be very important. They can help a child to strengthen their sense of identity and to move forward.
- A sibling bond can bring a sense of family, belonging and a strong sense of identity which children who have experienced abuse, neglect or other trauma may otherwise lack.
- When arranging contact special guardians should try to have a positive activity planned, whether a picnic, trip to the cinema or a practical activity such as baking.
- Special guardians need to be absolutely clear about expectations. The new child is going to demand their attention and they need to set clear boundaries and expectations.

Useful links

Siblings together

020 7394 8708

www.siblings-together.co.uk

Siblings Together is a UK charity that promotes positive contact between brothers and sisters separated in special guardianship, foster care, kinship care, residential care, or adoption. They run monthly activity days, residential camps, creative workshops and trips to give separated siblings a chance to spend time together engaged in enjoyable activities.

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