

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 you are caring for has siblings who you 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 your child's birth parents have gone on to have more children since you took on your child.

Although they can be difficult to manage, relationships with both birth siblings and children in your 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 story and even if this story is difficult they have lived through a lot together and are likely have a real 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 you may want to make the case for why this is important for the child you 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've 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 your child it is possible they will try to make contact with your child. In the same way your child might try to find and contact 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 your 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 you like your children more than them. It is important to prepare the child and all of the other children in the family by talking to them individually about their anxieties so that you can resolve as much as you 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.

Carers need to talk about and address everyone's feelings and fears, including your own feelings and fears! This will help clear the air and help the new child to be accepted into the family. Ask your 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 your child so it's important to spend one-to-one time with them as well as time together as a family.

Practical tips to help with sibling contact

- Conflict is natural between siblings especially if they haven't seen each other for a while. It is important to remember this is natural. Experiencing conflict with siblings can be a positive as overcoming it can help children learn to stand up for themselves.
- When arranging contact have a positive activity planned, whether a picnic, trip to the cinema or a practical activity such as baking. Do something special and memorable. 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 rebuild their identity and move forward.
- 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.
- Build contact up slowly. Rather than spending the whole day together, start with an hour or two. A clear plan can help the relationship build and last.
- Supporting contact is always preferable to trying to stop it, but ensure that they are safe. Be cautious, be involved and make sure contact is supervised.
- Carers often 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 can help make sure your needs and the needs of the child and your other children are met.
- When a new child arrives it is crucial to be honest with your other children. Make it clear from the start that the new child has equal rights and is entitled to equal treatment. You have made a commitment for the whole of their childhood and it is important that everyone understands this.
- You need to be absolutely clear about expectations. The new child is going to demand your attention and you need to set clear boundaries and expectations.
- Treat each child as an individual and be fair and consistent.

Key points



- Relationships with birth siblings and with children in your own family can be very important. They can help a child to rebuild 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.
- It is important to prepare the child and your own children by talking through their anxieties.
- When arranging contact have a positive activity planned, whether a picnic, trip to the cinema or a practical activity such as baking.
- You need to be absolutely clear about expectations. The new child is going to demand your attention and you need to set clear boundaries and expectations.

Useful organisations

Siblings Together

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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