

My Family Matters Too

By April Curtis

Imagine yourself as a child—taken away from your parents and separated from your siblings and then placed in a new home. This is not only scary, it can be confusing to children that do not understand why they are being taken away from the only homes that they know, regardless as to whether the homes were abusive or neglectful. Imagine yourself having all kinds of questions as to why you are being punished and taken away from your family, but no one answers. In this kind of situation, whom would you turn to for comfort?

For myself, these questions were all too real. I came into the foster care system when I was 3 years old. Originally, I was placed in a relative's home, which allowed me to maintain contact with my extended family. However, when this placement ended, I was put into a traditional foster home and separated from all of my family except for one brother. I never understood why I was only able to visit

with my mom and siblings but not the rest of my family—many of whom had been integral to my life. It was as if my family had disappeared.

This article will explore the magnitude of sibling bonds and the importance of maintaining these bonds even after one of more of the siblings obtains permanency or is emancipated. The article will also explore the critical need to expand the “family” definition in the child welfare system to include extended kin as well as fictive kin who have been key stakeholders in the lives of the children.

Importance of Maintaining and Strengthening Sibling Relationships

The bonds between siblings can be stronger than the bond between parent and child and often outlast parent/child or husband/wife relationships (Hochman, et al, 1992). Yet in the child welfare system, sibling bonds are often downplayed and sometimes totally overlooked. By focusing on the

best interest of individual children and youth, the foster care system sometimes neglects the best interest of siblings and families. This phenomenon often occurs when there is a significant age difference between the siblings and/or young siblings who are separated. Maintaining sibling relationships decreases the loss children/youth go through and provides life-long supports to individuals who may have few other resources. As a result, siblings should be seen as key family members and efforts made in maintaining these relationships should be considered family preservation.

When parents are completely out of the picture, siblings may be the only accessible family members. Siblings can be there for the emotional trials and tribulations of life, alleviating the stress of isolation. It should be noted that most lifetime transitions, maybe with the exception of marriage, revealed stronger emotional bonds between siblings than that of parents (Kang, 2002). Going through life transitions together can give siblings a sense of stability. In foster care, children face many obstacles including placement instability. Sibling relationship may be the one consistent thing that children and youth in care have to hold onto. Additionally, siblings can help guide each other through the unique experiences associated with being in care.

Retaining sibling ties can also help children/youth maintain their culture, family traditions, shared history, connectedness, and identity. This is who they are, something that no one can take away from them. It provides them with an understanding of their roots, a history, and share memories

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of their families. It also brings a sense of peace to children and youth when they know that their siblings are safe. This peace can be critical in allowing the entire sibling group to grow individually while also minimizing guilt associated with being in their new homes.

Maintaining Family Ties after Permanency

From the point of initial assessment and placement—past permanency, it is crucial to continually support sibling bonds and family relationships. Child welfare systems need to find ways of maintaining bonds when one or more of the sibling group are emancipated or obtain permanency. Unfortunately, when parental rights are terminated, this often results in a minimization of sibling ties. Likewise, when sibling groups are split and some are adopted, their right to maintain contact with their siblings no longer exists.

At a minimum, child welfare systems should include requirements for on-going visits and assistance in making these visits take place even after one or more siblings obtains permanency or ages out of care.

Child welfare systems could also develop search and connection sites that allow youth to reconnect with family members and mediation services that help youth and families negotiate on-going contact. Maintaining sibling bonds should be addressed prior to movement to permanency and then included in post-permanency planning and supports.

Illinois has taken this one step further and passed a sibling law (Public Act 97-1076) in 2012. The new law seeks to preserve sibling relationships when in a child/youth's best interest.

The law supports children and youth in care by putting into place systemic supports and requiring the Department of Children and Family Services to preserve sibling relationships when in a child/youth's best interest. The law supports relationships between siblings in care and those emancipated. It also requires training on all levels and develops brochures for children and youth in care about siblings' rights. Furthermore, the law requires ongoing juvenile court review of sibling relationships, establishes the use of pre- and post-permanency sibling contact agreements, and makes available Adoption Registry services to former wards of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services at age 18 rather than 21.

The law can be viewed in entirety at <http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/97/PDF/097-1076.pdf>.

Expanding the Definition of Family

Instead of defining family as the siblings and biological parents, child welfare systems need to expand this definition to include extended kin. Similar to sibling bonds, these relationships can be critical for children and youth to establish their identity and a sense of grounding. These relationships can also be critical when a child/youth is no longer in the child welfare system and may not have a large support network.

When a child or youth first enters care, creative ways to identify and establish relationships with all family members needs to be completed. Even if the family members can't be placement resources, they should be included in case planning. Likewise, all family members should be invited for visits—perhaps changing parent

visits to family visits. The key is to find creative ways for all family members to engage in the lives of the children and youth.

Conclusion

All child welfare systems can improve the emphasis placed on family relationships. With the growing use of technology (Skype, emails, social media, etc.), we should be able to identify ways to maintain family bonds even when the logistics pose challenges.

Simple changes can be made to improve the bonds with family members such as, taking pictures at every visit to maintain memories, allowing family members to go to performances and events, asking family members to put together a family album for the children/youth, allowing family members consistent times to meet in person and/or via phone calls. Siblings in particular should not have to wait until their visit to say things like “happy birthday” or “Merry Christmas.”

The harsh reality of it all is that to address that siblings have rights to be together, is to have to acknowledge that siblings have constitutional rights (Patton, 2001).

Child welfare systems need to reframe how they think about birth family. Instead of focusing on the challenges of maintaining these bonds, the focus should be on the opportunities these bonds allow for growth and identity.

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