Cuyahoga County Division of Children and Family Services (CCDCFS) Policy Statement

Policy Chapter:	Substitute Care
Policy Number:	6.01.04
Policy Name:	Sibling Policy

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Approved By:	Jacqueline M. Fletcher

PURPOSE: To increase the number of siblings placed together in out-of-home care and to promote healthy bonded sibling relationships. Siblings who are separated will have frequent high-quality visits and case plan services will be provided to address the barriers that keep siblings apart.

SCOPE: This policy applies to all staff of the Cuyahoga County Division of Children and Family Services (CCDCFS), all out-of-home caregivers, and all contracted provider employees.

POLICY

CCDCFS believes that every effort should be made to place siblings together, to facilitate frequent quality visits between siblings, and to reunite siblings who have been separated. Siblings are defined as full, half, step, adoptive or fictive siblings. Fictive siblings are children or adults who have formed a relationship with one another, but who are not necessarily blood-related. **The federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 requires states to make reasonable efforts to place siblings together unless the state documents that such joint placement would be contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings. In the event siblings cannot be placed together this Act requires frequent visits or ongoing contact interaction unless the state can document that frequent visits or communication are contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings. The State of Ohio further requires that the Sibling Visitation Plan be documented in writing (OAC 5101:2-38-05).** The following illustrates the CCDCFS practice in fulfilling these requirements and preserving sibling relationships.

PROCEDURES

I.   Identifying Siblings at Initial Placement and Placement Change

A.   The WOR searches SACWIS, the Traverse reading file, the case record, Accurint, the Family Tree and interviews family members to determine the complete list of full, half, step, and fictive siblings including adults' siblings.

B. The WOR searches two places in SACWIS to determine if the child(ren) being placed has any siblings who were adopted by searching:

1. Legal Custody/Status Record
2. Placement Record

Instructions for conducting required sibling searches, referenced in paragraph (B) (1-2) above, are accessible via [CCDCFS internal website](#) for WOR usage.

C. The WOR documents all known sibling information, including name, date of birth, custody status, address, and caregiver information in SACWIS under active, inactive or associated family members as appropriate, at the time of every placement request.

1. The WOR includes information about all siblings regardless of age, custody, or legal status.
2. The WOR shall exhaust all efforts included in the procedures listed above in (I.A) to identify siblings before submitting a placement request.

D. Contacting Caregivers and Adult Siblings

1. If there is a sibling who resides with a relative, non-relative or is an adult sibling, the WOR contacts the caregiver(s) or adult sibling(s) and documents their ability and willingness to provide support, visits, placement and possible permanency for the sibling(s) entering out-of-home care. The WOR documents their contact information and responses to these questions in a SACWIS activity log.

   a. The WOR completes the Kinship Caregiver Approval process for a relative, non-relative or adult sibling wishing to provide care (see CCDCFS policy # 6.04.00).

2. If a sibling resides in an active foster home, the placement worker contacts the resource manager or network provider. The resource manager/ network provider and placement worker will make contact with the caregiver(s) and document their ability and willingness to provide support, visits, placement and possible permanency to the sibling(s) entering out-of-home care. The placement worker documents their contact information and responses to these questions in a SACWIS activity log.

3. If a sibling resides in a closed adoptive home, the WOR notifies the post-adoption supervisor or senior manager. The WOR is not authorized to contact closed adoptive families regarding their adopted child's sibling(s). Post-adoption staff contact the adoptive parent(s) about their willingness and ability to provide support, visits, placement, and possible permanency to the sibling(s) entering out-of-home care. The post-adoption staff documents their contact information and responses to these questions in a SACWIS activity log.

a. If the adoptive family of a sibling is able and willing to care for a sibling being placed, and the family is not currently licensed/approved as a foster or adoptive family, the WOR completes the Kinship Caregiver Approval process for placement. The identified family is kin to the sibling being placed. If preliminary safety screening indicates no concerns, the sibling shall be placed with this family immediately while the kinship caregiver approval process continues. The WOR must discuss the potential differences in the permanency goal for the child being placed and inform the family of concurrent planning options and details before placing the child in their home.

II. Sibling Separation

A. If the WOR believes a safety concern justifies separation of siblings, s/he shall consult with the supervisor of record (SOR) and senior manager before the request for initial placement or placement change.

B. If there are no known safety concerns for the sibling group to reside together, the WOR and placement worker complete the interview and seek a placement for the entire sibling group.

C. If after all identified resource managers and network providers have been contacted through multiple means (telephone, email, fax) and none are able or willing to care for the sibling group, the placement worker notifies the WOR, supervisor, placement supervisor, senior manager of record, and placement administrator, who determines if any other options are available.

D. If the children are placed separately, solely because there is no family able to care for the entire sibling group, the placement worker continues to actively seek a family for the sibling group.

1. This search continues until:
   a. One family has been secured, or
   b. Kinship placements have been secured and after placement, the WOR assesses the arrangement to be in the children's best interests.

2. After 60 days, the placement worker initiates an email exchange between the WOR, supervisors, senior managers, placement administrator, and both deputy directors to discuss progress. The two deputy directors shall determine on a case by case basis whether the search for one family will continue or close.

E. If there is more than one sibling placed in more than one home, the WOR assesses the appropriateness of each home and consults with his/her supervisor to determine which family is the best fit for the child needing placement.

1. The placement worker and the WOR attempt to reach consensus on which home will be the best fit.

2. If an agreement cannot be reached, the WOR makes the decision in consultation with their chain of command.

F. The WOR contacts all caregivers and makes diligent efforts to reunite all siblings in one placement.

1. If siblings cannot be placed together, the WOR documents reasons for separation in a SACWIS activity log and case plan services to work towards reunification.

III. Sibling Preservation

A. When caregivers show indicators that they **or** the children are overwhelmed or have unmet needs, the WOR **and** resource manager shall work together proactively to expedite services and monitor to meet their needs.

B. The WOR, in consultation with their supervisor, shall consider moving all siblings if one child needs to be moved, based on the children's best interests.

C. The WOR shall amend the case plan to specify services being offered to meet the needs of children and caregivers and safely stabilize the placement.

IV. Sibling Reunification

A. At the time of sibling separation, the WOR prepares a case plan amendment for a custody or placement change. The WOR shall include in the amendment all efforts and services in the case plan to preserve the sibling relationship and work towards sibling reunification.

B. The WOR shall include case plan services to facilitate the best chance to reunify siblings into one placement (e.g. sibling therapy, recreational activities, same school attendance, neighborhood placement, family finding, exchange of letters or pictures.) Again, safety concerns must be considered first, as applicable, in consultation with the supervisor and service providers.

1. Research shows that caregivers for different siblings benefit from getting to know one another.

2. The WOR shall strongly encourage caregivers to take part in sibling therapy, participate in activities with the children, and/or plan their own activities.

C. Designated CCDCFS staff shall document in every Case Review, SAR and staffing report any compelling reasons justifying continued separation of the siblings AND efforts that will be taken to expedite sibling reunification (including

time frames) OR an alternative permanency plan and how that plan is in the child's best interests.

V.   Sibling Visits

    A.   CCDCFS recommends sibling visits for all children in care who are separated to occur at least weekly for a minimum of two hours regardless of whether parents are visiting.

        1.   Visits must occur outside of structured activities such as school, church, and sports.

        2.   The WOR shall coordinate with family members, caregivers, and other supports to coordinate and arrange sibling visits.

    B.   Siblings should have a minimum of weekly contact. However, there are situations when this is not possible. In such situations, the WOR, SOR, and senior manager determine the visit frequency.

        1.   The WOR documents the decision in SACWIS.

        2.   Designated CCDCFS staff shall document the quantity (frequency and duration) and quality of sibling visits, including solutions to resolve any barriers in every staffing, Case Review and SAR report.

    C.   CCDCFS staff and caregivers collaborate to arrange overnight and weekend visits for siblings as respite for one another and valuable family time for siblings.

    D.   The WOR shall assure all visits are in a comfortable environment, preferably in a family setting where they feel free to interact.

    E.   The WOR shall document a Sibling Visitation Plan in the case plan filed with Juvenile Court.

VI.   Sibling Permanency Planning

    A.   The WOR and SOR shall consider sibling relationships as well as all other family and caregiver relationships in creating a primary and concurrent permanency plan.

        1.   The WOR shall identify all kin and family supports before or at the time of sibling placement and check in with them regularly to determine any changes in circumstances in their willingness or ability to participate in a permanency plan.

    B.   The WOR shall create sibling group permanency plans in collaboration with youth, parents, relatives, caregivers, providers, and fictive kin.

1. The WOR acts in the best interests of children by considering their bonds and relationships with current caregivers, among siblings, and other family members.

2. The WOR consults with all service providers and their chain of command during the permanency planning process to assist in determining best interests.

3. The WOR shall include in SACWIS documentation of the primary and concurrent plans and how sibling relationships will be preserved in the event the decision to separate siblings is part of a permanent plan and determined to be in the children's best interests.

SEE ALSO:

Relevant Code(s)
- Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008
  Ohio Administrative Code 5101:2-38-05

Location: DCFS Intranet

Guidance Material
Conducting Sibling Searches in SACWIS