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- ⇒ Placement decisions are often based on the priorities of adults rather than children's preferences.
 - ⇒ Children's views are not regularly sought and not always recorded.
- ⇒ Siblings are often defined narrowly, not allowing for children's perceptions or Aboriginal kinship structures. The tools used for case work decisions reflect this definition.
 - ⇒ Children's views of relationships are individualised rather than about the sibling group.
- ⇒ Relationships between siblings change over time and contact arrangements need to provide for regular review and adjustment.
 - ⇒ The experience of formal contact among siblings is affected by the behaviour of supervising adults, the physical environment and the activity.
- ⇒ Telephone or social media cannot substitute for face-to-face contact.
 - ⇒ The success of sibling contact partly depends on support of the contact by adults.
- ⇒ Recommendations

'She's my sister and she will always mean something to me...'



The SA Guardian's Inquiry into contact among siblings who are in state care was conducted between January and September 2011. It included a review of the literature and legal/regulatory framework, a review of 100 randomly selected case files of children who had siblings, in-depth interviews with 18 young people and a focus group of young people to validate the themes that emerged.

This is a summary of the major findings from the Inquiry and its recommendations. For details of the evidence, references and full discussion, see the Inquiry Report.

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The review of literature and previous research showed that co-placement or contact with siblings was very beneficial, except in a very small number of situations where contact was detrimental to physical or emotional wellbeing.

The Inquiry evidence showed that not only do sibling relationships ameliorate the trauma, guilt and grief that children often experience prior to and when entering the child protection system, these relationships assist in the development and maintenance of self-esteem, identity, placement permanence and love.

Previous research also showed that family reunification was more likely to be successful when siblings had been placed together and that co-placement benefited placement stability.

Inquiry interviewers noted that in some situations there were negative impacts which included 'young people reportedly feeling hurt, scared, angry, confused, sad and frustrated through the contact arrangements.' However, they concluded that

...every sibling relationship analysed within the study had the potential to have both positive and negative impacts. In the majority of cases, thematic analysis indicated that contact between siblings had a primarily positive impact, with negative impacts manifesting only temporarily and in a manner that would be expected within most sibling relationships.

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Siblings have a prominent role in how a child constructs his or her idea of family. The research and interviews showed that children and young people can create their own definition of family, drawing on their biological relationships and those they develop in their foster care placement.

My brothers and sisters are my family because...I've grown up with them

[young person interviewed for the Inquiry]

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Well, I see them several times a week and it's fantastic because up to about a month or two ago I was seeing them once every fortnight, and for an hour, so it wasn't that much. Now that they've started doing all the things that I'm doing - yeah, like, the week-long camps - I'm spending more time with them.

[young person interviewed for the Inquiry]

Previous research showed that children generally prefer to be placed together with their siblings and when this is not possible they want frequent contact and information about each other.

Interviewers reported that children and young people wished for approximately 65 per cent of their relationships with their siblings to become closer than what they were. In the remaining 35 per cent of relationships the respondents indicated contentment, acceptance or resignation.

In practice guidelines published in 2007, the SA statutory child protection agency Families SA advised that 'contact with their siblings is sometimes more important for [children under guardianship] than contact with their parents.'

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Will is closer to my age - slightly - we talk about more things than Brad, but Brad's interested in computers and things like that, which I'm kind of interested in as well.

[young person interviewed for the Inquiry]

In a 2004 survey of 332 Australian children and young people in care, the CREATE Foundation (2004) found that, when asked what they would *most* like to change about their care experience, 10 respondents said that they wanted more contact with their siblings or to live with them.

Many of the children and young people interviewed for the Inquiry rated their relationships with their siblings as being equally important, if not greater, than their relationships with their parents. Likewise, in previous research:

...they all mentioned brothers or sisters, their concerns for, and worries about them. Some of the young people were explicit that a sibling relationship was more important to them than contact, direct or indirect, with a parent.... there was no necessary correlation between the amount of their life that they had lived together with a sibling (in the birth family or while in care) and the importance they attached to them...¹

1. Harrison, C 1999, 'Children being looked after and their sibling relationships. The experiences of children in the working in partnership with 'lost' parents research project', *We are Family: Sibling Relationships in Placement and Beyond*, ed. A Mullender, British Association for Adoption and Fostering, London, pp 102-103.

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The Inquiry acknowledged that placement choices are usually few and that professional opinion is divided about the due weight to be given to sibling relationships over the potential of new sustaining relationships with adult carers. From the audit of case files it was concluded that there is little focus on attachment between siblings as a significant area of assessment when considering placement options for children and young people.

Of the 66 cases of sibling separation viewed as part of the Inquiry only 18 documented that the separation was in the child's best interests and in 16 cases there was no explanation for the separation of siblings.

The Inquiry noted that 'in the case files reviewed for the Inquiry, children's views about their siblings appear to be overshadowed by professional advice and instruction about parental contact.'

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Of the 100 case files viewed, there were 13 children and young people who were dissatisfied with their circumstances of care and another 24 where the children and young people's satisfaction with their circumstances of care had not been documented in the preceding 12 months.

The Inquiry report says that 'in circumstances of unallocated cases and reduced case management response, seeking the child's views about their siblings, assessing sibling relationships and reviewing sibling contact arrangements is unlikely to happen regularly, if at all.

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Because ever since I was in foster care they've [foster parents' biological children] been there, like - how should I put it - they've played with me; they're like a sister and brother to me, all of them. They take me shopping and everything; they treat me as their sister.

(young person interviewed for the Inquiry)

Previous research and Inquiry interviews demonstrated that children and young people in care can identify both biological and non-biological siblings. Identified sibling relationships may include biological children of the carer and extended family, as well as unrelated foster brothers and sisters.

The interviewers for this Inquiry noted that, while two-thirds of young people defined siblings in biological terms, others used the term for non-biologically related foster children and/or caregiver's children. The interviewers recommended that sibling relationships be usefully defined as 'any self-determined relationship, which is defined by a young person as "sibling", "brother" or "sister", and which offers special qualities, importance or value to the young person'.

The Inquiry report noted that one in four children in care are from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families which makes it imperative for case workers and others to understand Aboriginal definitions of family and cultural relationships where, for example, children of maternal aunts and children of paternal uncles are regarded as the child's siblings.

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Previous research and the interviews conducted for this Inquiry showed that relationships were qualitatively different among siblings, in the way they saw each relationship and in the psychological benefits.

The interviews also showed that two siblings could view the same relationship quite differently.

In two of the three sibling groups residing separately, only one of the siblings wished for increased contact whilst the other reported being content with the existing arrangements. In another case, a young man described a desire to provide a caring and protective role for his sister whereas his sister interpreted his actions as controlling. This suggests that within sibling groups, individual young people have distinct needs which may at times compete with those of their siblings.

The Inquiry concluded that it is important that each relationship be understood, documented and considered in placement and contact decisions.

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Young person: *She's not here a lot because she works, so when she is here - we went shopping and stuff but we don't anymore really, a lot. I don't know; it's different from when we were younger.*

Interviewer: *What was it like when you were younger?*

Young person: *We used to do stuff together more, like - be around each other a lot more.*

Interviewer: *What has made the main difference?*

Young person: *What do you mean?*

Interviewer: *What has changed that?*

Young person: *We've got older.*

The Inquiry concludes that dynamic and individualised views and experiences of sibling relationships means that good assessment and planning for children has individualised and frequent review of sibling placement and contact arrangements.

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We used to have access at Families SA, in one of the rooms, and we couldn't really do much, otherwise we'd have to bring all the stuff in, and it felt really formal - yeah. Alex used to be really quiet and we didn't really talk about much; then it went to nanna's and Alex was talking a bit more and getting more involved in activities.

(young person interviewed for the Inquiry)

In 8 of the 26 cases of supervised sibling contact viewed as part of the Inquiry, sibling contact coincided with the child's contact with other family members, including parents. When sibling access is combined with parental access, young people interviewed sometimes complained of the dull stilted atmosphere and the lack of interesting activity.

Responses indicated that such environments placed additional pressure on the contact, and sibling communication and interactions were more restricted. In a more child-friendly environment, the quality of the contact improved.

I spent about six hours with her that day and we just, like, went on rides and stuff; we had heaps of fun. It was bonding...because when we have access it's not really us having fun together, it's just us talking about stuff that's happened, and when we went to the Show we were actually having fun together, which we haven't done in so long.

(young person interviewed for the Inquiry)

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The most consistent response provided by the children and young people interviewed for the Inquiry was that face-to-face contact between siblings was the most important means of improving relationship closeness. The interviewers noted that '...the majority of participants were ambivalent to the role and function of formal telephone contact as fostering relationship closeness'. However, *informal* use of electronic media, for instance Facebook (or other social networking sites) and informal mobile phone contact (voice or text) were valued.

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From the children's comments, the interviewers concluded that inter-sibling contact was most likely to be described in satisfying terms when the contact was facilitated and supported by the adults surrounding the young person. Families SA case workers, caregivers, biological family and volunteers supporting transport arrangements were all seen as important. When the adults were working in a cooperative manner, contact occurred with less reported stress. When difficulties were encountered, such as misunderstandings between foster carers and case workers about contact arrangements or when transport was not organised, inter-sibling contact was evaluated in less satisfying terms.

Interviewers noted that '... the case worker was identified as the most important person to influence the sibling contact process.' Case file evidence supported this, noting that of the 100 case files audited, 9 were unallocated at the time of data collection and 13 additional cases were receiving reduced case management response. Reviewing sibling contact arrangements in these circumstances was likely to be less frequent, if at all.

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The Inquiry made seven recommendations.

1. Case workers document the expressed opinions and views of children and young people about their sibling relationships, their satisfaction with contact and satisfaction with their circumstances of care. The documented views will then be considered at least once a year at the annual review panel discussion.
2. Case workers document sibling relationships as identified by the child. Particular attention is paid to sibling relationships as defined by Aboriginal family structure. These views are reviewed regularly with children and young people. To facilitate this, placement genograms are used as part of case management, to capture changes of placements and children's views about relationships with significant people.
3. Decisions about placement of siblings include and document:
 - assessment of the needs of the collective sibling group, individual needs of each child, including their views, and advice about attachment between siblings;
 - sibling relationships, as identified by the child(ren), including the significance of each relationship;
 - the child(ren)'s views even if their wishes cannot be met;
 - if siblings are separated, a review of the placement decision within one month of the initial decision; and
 - if siblings are separated, the preparedness of carers to support contact and proximity of placements.
4. Decisions about sibling contact arrangements include and document:
 - discussion at each care planning meeting, including annual reviews;
 - the child(ren)'s views about their satisfaction with sibling contact; and
 - ongoing assessment of relationships of significance to the child(ren).
5. The recruitment, assessment and training of carers emphasise the importance of sibling relationships and the expectation that carers will facilitate agreed contact.
6. Case workers are supported and expected to arrange joint activities for separated siblings, such as outings, shared recreation and sport, camps and after-school or vacation care.
7. Carers are actively encouraged to facilitate face-to-face contact among siblings and these arrangements become part of annual care review discussion.