

## Sibling Placement and Attachment by Deborah Hage

From the beginning of out of home placement for children the existence of siblings as a consideration of adoption was irrelevant. The decision revolved around the desires of the adoptive parents and how many children they wanted rather than the best interests of the child. With the research of Bowlby, Ainsworth, Mahler and others into the phenomenon of infant attachment to parents, interest in the attachment between siblings was awakened. Adoptive placement guidelines across the country gradually moved from separation of siblings as policy to maintenance of sibling relationships as policy. Overall, children have benefited from this policy shift as most sibling relationships are important to maintain. However, not all are. The factor to be considered with siblings is not whether there is a biological tie, but whether or not there is a functional attachment.

The same criteria that is applied to preservation or termination of parental rights needs to be applied to the maintenance of sibling ties. Social work practice and the courts do not consider the mere presence of the same genetic pool to be the determining factor of whether or not parental rights will be sustained or terminated. The current state of the relationship and the potential of the relationship to become healthy are of far more importance. Various interventions to enhance the parent/child bond can be applied - therapy, modeling, supervised visits, instruction, participation in parent groups, etc. They are all part of helping parents with a poor attachment to their child form a better, more functional one. When the interventions work the child remains in the home. When they are ineffective in achieving the desired results it is in the best interest of the child to be removed and another home found. State and federal law mandate that the child's best interest is the final determination of who will parent the child, not the biological connection.

With current policies dictating the placement of siblings together the pendulum has swung from siblings being irrelevant to siblings being of central importance. What has been lost is the original criteria - the presence or absence of a functional attachment.

It is not the presence of the biological connection which is of primary importance between siblings, it is the health of the bond. There is no more point to keeping siblings together if they are not good for each other than there is in keeping children in the biological home simply because they were birthed there. The current state of the relationship and the potential of the relationship to become healthy are far more important. Various interventions to enhance the sibling bond can be applied - therapy, modeling, supervised visits, anger management instruction, participation in sexual perpetration groups, etc. They are all part of helping siblings with a poor attachment to each other develop a better, more functional one. When they work the children remain in the same home. When they are ineffective in achieving the desired results it is in the best interest of the children for them to be separated.

Generally, the best course of action is to let the adoptive parents decide which child/children they have been able to achieve some sort of attachment with and then remove from the home the child/children they consider to be less functional. While sibling attachment is important, it does not supercede the importance of child/parent attachment. It is far more critical that children have parents than that they remain with their siblings. It is cruel and unnecessary to therefore remove children who have a workable relationship with their adoptive parents from the home simply because one or more of their siblings has not been able to create that same attachment. The parent and child bond between each child in a sibling group needs to be evaluated, not the parent and child bond between the sibling group as a whole.

Additionally, the quality and level of functioning of the children's bonds to each other needs to be carefully assessed. Children who prey on each other should not be living together, just as parents who prey on their children need to have their parental rights terminated. When there is sexual and/or physical victimization between siblings and the adoptive parents determine that they cannot keep all of the children safe, that decision needs to be evaluated carefully by the caseworker and respected.

That does not mean that all the siblings have to then be moved. Only the child which is most difficult to maintain by the parents needs to be moved. In all probability, the child who is considered the most disturbed emotionally and behaviorally may eventually need a more restricted setting than a home. It is not fair to the healthier siblings to follow that child from home to home until they all need a more restrictive setting - all in the name of maintaining a non-functional or poorly functioning sibling bond. Far better to allow the adoptive parents to work with the children remaining in the home to maintain the sibling bond, and whatever parental connection they were able to make, from a safe distance.

It is likely that the parents who have adopted the sibling group have passed rigorous screening, have had a positive homestudy and family assessment written regarding them, have taken parenting classes and have received extensive supervision from the placing caseworker. If they were not able to keep all of the siblings safe together in the same home, it is unlikely that another family will be able to. Moving them en masses has the potential of only perpetuating the problem. It can cause the children to suffer further and possibly traumatize a healthy adoptive family, which has done nothing wrong except to try to do what may have not been possible. That is, keep an unhealthy sibling group together for the mere sake of maintaining its biological ties at the expense of the individual health of the children.

Doing what is in the best interest of each child means following the protocols of good judgement and applying wisdom to each individual situation - not blindly applying a policy that states siblings are to be placed, and must remain placed, together. Most of the time that is, indeed, the best course of action. However, it is not always the best course of action. Good social work practice mandates that what is in the best interest of each child must prevail. That means the child with the most severe emotional and behavioral issues must not dictate where all his or her siblings will live.

The abusive birth parent is not moved into the adoptive home in order to maintain the biological connection as the children would then remain unsafe. By the same token an abusive sibling must not be allowed to continue living with his or her brothers and sisters, continuing the level of violence that forced their removal from their first home. Doing so would mean none of the children would be given the level of care they needed. The one with the most needs would not get the level of care required and those with fewer needs would continue to have their safety compromised.

A child friendly policy would then be written to state that it is desirable for sibling relationships to be maintained as long as it is in the best interest of each individual child. However, when a healthy relationship cannot be achieved then they need to go to separate homes. No child should continue to suffer at the hands of a relative, whether birth parent or birth sibling.