

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

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

**Original Effective Date:** 07/31/2006  
**Revision Date(s):** 02/01/2016, 09/01/2015, 03/31/2011, 06/14/2010  
**Current Revision Date:** 04/01/2016  
**Approved By:** Thomas D. Pristow

**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 resource parents (including kinship caregivers), and all private foster care agencies that provide contracted services to CCDCFS.

**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. Initial Placement and Placement Change
  - A. The WOR searches SACWIS, the FACTWIS 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 is required to provide all known sibling information, including names, date of birth, custody status, address, and caregiver information at the time of every placement request. The WOR includes information about all siblings regardless of age, custody or legal status. The procedure to identify siblings above (I.A.) must be exhausted before the placement request.

C. 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 a Kinship Caregiver Approval 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 and documents 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 Subsidy Supervisor or Senior Manager. Post-Adoption Subsidy staff contacts 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 a 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.

#### D. Sibling Separation

1. If the WOR believes a safety concern justifies separation of siblings, s/he is required to consult with a supervisor and senior manager before the request for initial placement or placement change.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.
  - a. This search continues until:
    - i. One family has been secured, or
    - ii. Relative placements have been secured and this has been fully considered and agreed to be in the children's best interests.
  - b. After 60 days, the Placement Worker initiates an email exchange between the WOR, Supervisors, Senior Manager of record, Placement Administrator, and both Deputy Directors to discuss progress. The two Deputy Directors will determine on a case by case basis whether the search for one family will continue or close.
5. 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.
  - a. The Placement Worker and the WOR attempt to reach consensus on which home will be the best fit. If an agreement cannot be reached, the WOR makes the decision with their chain of command.
6. The WOR contacts all caregivers and makes diligent efforts to reunite all siblings in one placement.
  - a. The WOR emails a list of the sibling visit dates at the first 90 day point of separation to his/her Supervisor, Senior Manager, and Deputy Director. Thereafter, Supervisors and Senior Managers will monitor sibling visits.

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

#### E. Sibling Preservation

1. When caregivers show indicators that they or the children are overwhelmed or have unmet needs, the WOR and Resource Manager must be proactive and work together to expedite services to meet their needs.
2. In most situations, consideration should be given to moving all siblings if one child needs to be moved.

### II. Sibling Reunification

- A. At the time of sibling separation, the WOR prepares a case plan amendment for a custody or placement change. This amendment must include services on the case plan to address reunification of siblings. If reunification is not possible due to safety concerns this must be documented in the case plan services along with any efforts to preserve the sibling relationship.
- B. CCDCFs requires case plan services be added 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. Caregivers for different siblings benefit from getting to know one another. They are strongly encouraged to take part in sibling therapy, participate in activities with the children or plan their own activities.
- C. Staff documents on the Case Review, SAR or staffing reports 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. Staff documents the frequency, duration, and quality of sibling visits in all Case Review, SAR or staffing reports for at least one child in care.

### III. Sibling Visits

- A. CCDCFs recommends sibling visits for all children who are separated in care to occur at least weekly for a minimum of two hours regardless of whether parents are visiting. Visits must occur outside of structured activities such as school, church, and sports.
- B. Siblings should have a minimum of weekly contact. However, there are situations when this is not possible. In such situations, the WOR, Supervisor, and Senior Manager determine the frequency of visits. The WOR documents

the decision in SACWIS. Every case review and SAR report includes documentation of the quantity and quality of sibling visits and ways to resolve any barriers.

- C. CCDCFS encourages staff and caregivers to collaborate to arrange overnight and weekend visits for siblings as respite for one another and valuable time for siblings.
- D. Visits are in a comfortable environment, preferably in a family setting, where they feel free to interact.
- E. By federal law, The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, a written Sibling Visitation Plan is mandated. CCDCFS requires this be part of the case plan filed with Juvenile Court.

**SEE ALSO:**

**Relevant Code(s)**

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