

	<b>GEORGIA DIVISION OF FAMILY AND CHILDREN SERVICES CHILD WELFARE POLICY MANUAL</b>			
	<b>Chapter:</b>	(10) Foster Care	<b>Effective Date:</b>	September 2020
	<b>Policy Title:</b>	Preserving Sibling Connections		
<b>Policy Number:</b>	10.20	<b>Previous Policy #:</b>	N/A	

### CODES/REFERENCES

O.C.G.A § Section 15-11-2(71)

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 [FCA] (P.L. 110-351)  
Title IV-E of the Social Security Act Sections 471(a)(31) and 475(12)

Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-183)

### REQUIREMENTS

The Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) shall:

1. Consider a 'sibling' to be an individual with whom a child shares one or both parents in common by blood, adoption or marriage, even if the marriage was terminated by death or dissolution. Such an individual shall still be considered a sibling of the child following termination of parental rights (TPR) up until a finalized adoption occurs. Such an individual shall also still be considered a sibling of the child following the death of their common parent(s).
2. Make reasonable efforts to place siblings removed from their home in the same foster care, kinship, or adoptive placement unless:
  - a. Joint placement is contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings due to unresolved physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse among the siblings where therapy, with a safety plan in place, is not effective or appropriate as documented by a licensed clinician and approved by the County Director/Designee;
  - b. Special needs of one or more children in the sibling group requires a specialized placement setting (e.g., documented medical, physical, cognitive or behavioral needs requiring residential treatment, hospitalization, juvenile detention, etc.);
  - c. Siblings are placed or reside in another state.

**NOTE:** Georgia has opted out of the Kinship Guardianship program.

3. Require documentation of the specific circumstances and written approval of the County Director to place siblings in separate placement settings and include the explanation for separating a sibling group in the case plan submitted to the court for approval (see policy [10.23 Foster Care: Case Planning](#)).
4. Ensure siblings who are not placed together have frequent visitation or other ongoing interaction between each other beginning as soon as possible, but no later than seven calendar days from sibling separation at initial placement or any subsequent placements. Siblings shall maintain weekly face-to-face contact with each other, except under the following circumstances:
  - a. Visitation is rendered contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings due to unresolved physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse among the siblings where

*therapy, with a safety plan in place, is not effective or appropriate as documented by a licensed clinician and approved by the County Director/Designee.*

b. Siblings are placed or reside in another state.

**NOTE:** Weekly contacts include formal or informal opportunities to interact.

5. Make ongoing efforts to place together siblings who are separated for reasons unrelated to their safety or well-being (e.g., no placement available to accommodate the entire sibling group).

## PROCEDURES

**When siblings require out-of-home placement,** the Social Services Case Manager (SSCM) will:

1. Determine if there are siblings already in out-of-home care. If so, DFCS must determine if this resource is able to accommodate the siblings of children currently in their home/facility.
2. Inform potential placement resources that placement is being sought for a sibling group and the plan is to keep them together throughout the foster care episode.
3. Place all siblings together at the first placement unless there is evidence that placement together is contrary to a child's safety and/or well-being.
4. Prioritize kinship placements (see policy [10.1 Foster Care: Placement of a Child](#)).
5. Place siblings in close proximity to each other, if unable to place them in the same home, in order to increase opportunities for them to have contact (e.g., attempt to place them where they may attend the same school, church, etc.).
6. Make diligent efforts to place siblings back together when they are separated due to emergency removal. Efforts include, but are not limited to:
  - a. Monthly contact with Resource Development (RD) staff or the Room Board and Watchful Oversight (RBWO) provider regarding ongoing efforts to locate or recruit a placement resource for the entire sibling group;
  - b. Ongoing follow up with members of a family's kinship network who may be potential placement resources for the siblings or know of other potential kinship resources; and
  - c. Targeted recruitment for sibling groups, including reaching out to neighbors, teachers, counselors, other school staff, and others who know one or all of the children.
7. Include the explanation for separating a sibling group in the case plan submitted to the court for approval. The case plan should include:
  - a. A statement that it is contrary to the safety and/or well-being of a child;
  - b. A statement that reasonable efforts have been made to place the siblings together and will continue to be made throughout the life of the case;
  - c. A visitation plan documenting ongoing frequent visitation and other interaction between the siblings:
    - i. Formal visits at the DFCS office, placement provider's location, visitation center, etc.;
    - ii. Informal visits (e.g., birthday parties, play dates, social gatherings, sleepovers, sporting events, lunches, dinners, Skype, etc.).
8. Facilitate weekly face-to-face visitation (formal or informal) between the siblings:
  - a. Siblings who are not initially placed together or who are separated thereafter should have a minimum of a phone contact within 48 hours of separation.

- b. The initial sibling visit is held as soon as possible, but **no later than** seven calendar days from sibling separation at initial placement or any subsequent placements.
  - c. A sibling visitation plan (included in the case planning process) is developed in conjunction with the family, caregivers and children (as appropriate) to clearly state who is responsible for scheduling visits, supervising visits, providing transportation to visits, etc.
9. Document the following in the log of contacts in Georgia SHINES:
- a. Initial and ongoing efforts to place the siblings together;
  - b. Explanation of why siblings cannot be placed together;
  - c. County Director/Designee approval of the clinical professional's written recommendations regarding the need to separate siblings due to safety and well-being concerns;
  - d. Ongoing visitation and other interaction between the siblings; and
  - e. Ongoing assessments to determine when sibling visits can resume (If suspended).

The Social Services Supervisor (SSS) will:

1. Communicate to each case manager the significance of maintaining sibling groups intact, including when seeking adoptive placements.
2. Discuss with staff all actions taken to place siblings together or reunite them if they were previously separated during placement. Discussions are to occur as part of ongoing supervision, including during case staffing, individual conferences, unit meetings, etc.
3. Document discussions regarding preserving sibling connections in Case Staffing Notes. Documentation must be entered on the Contact Detail page in Georgia SHINES.

## **PRACTICE GUIDANCE**

### **Preserving Sibling Connections through Sibling Placement**

“Sibling” means a person with whom a child shares one or both parents in common by blood, adoption or marriage, even if the marriage was terminated by death or dissolution. Such individuals are still legally considered a sibling following termination of parental rights (TPR) up until a finalized adoption occurs. The bond between brothers and sisters is unique. It is the longest lasting relationship most people have, including the parent-child or husband-wife relationship. Separating siblings in foster care or for permanency adds to their emotional trauma. For some children, separation from their siblings can be even more traumatic than separation from their parents. Placing siblings together lessens separation trauma, eases the stress on their parents, reinforces the importance of family relationships, and facilitates visits and communication between children and their parents. Therefore, when children enter the care and custody of DFCS, preserving sibling connections must be a crucial component of the case planning process. Reasonable efforts must be made to place siblings together whether in foster, kinship, guardianship or adoptive homes.

There may be situations in which children do not meet the legal definition of siblings but have established such a bond that they consider themselves to be siblings. They may have grown up in the same household or shared caregivers for an extended period of time. Moreover, they may have been led to believe by others that they share one or both parents. In such instances, the agency should be sensitive to that relationship and make every effort to preserve that connection in the same manner as it does for legal siblings (to the extent allowed by law). That

includes trying to maintain such children in the same placement or arranging frequent visitation.

### **Preserving Sibling Connections through Visitation (formal and informal)**

When siblings cannot be placed together, ongoing diligent efforts must be made to ensure siblings have the opportunity to interact with each other to maintain their relationship. Enlisting the support of parents and placement providers in the sibling visitation and “other interaction” plan is important to maintaining the sibling bond. Think about naturally occurring opportunities for the siblings to interact, not just created or “formal” opportunities (i.e., DFCS supervised visit at the office, visitation centers, etc.). Formal visits provide opportunities for DFCS, RBWO or other agency staff to observe and assess sibling interaction. However, other “informal” opportunities for siblings to interact provide siblings the ability to bond naturally. Such informal opportunities include birthday parties, graduations, sporting events, family outings, sleepovers, attending church, school, or other community events, etc. Whether formal or informal, the plan for sibling visits must be documented in the visitation plan, which is a part of the case plan.

### **Permanency Planning**

Permanency planning should always be done for the sibling group as a unit. Unless an exception has been made and documented, children who become free for adoption should be presented as a group during adoption recruitment activities (e.g., Wednesday’s Child, Northwest Adoption Exchange or AdoptUSKids). Use a group photograph when utilizing photo listings (e.g., My Turn Now), and make it clear that an adoptive family is being sought for the entire sibling group. If children are adopted separately, consider writing sibling visitation and ongoing communication into the Adoption Placement Agreement. Moreover, siblings placed for adoption should be educated about the Adoption Registry.

### **Photographs**

During visitation, DFCS staff and service providers should take the opportunity to photograph a child’s interaction with his/her parents, siblings, extended family, friends, etc. Children should be encouraged to add the photographs to their Life Book, which will offer a record of their experiences in foster care. Photographs may also help promote sibling connectivity, especially for siblings not residing in the same out-of-home placement.

### **Skype**

Skype is a service that allows users to communicate with other people over the internet by voice (using a microphone), by video (using a webcam) and by instant messaging. There is no charge for calls between users within the Skype service. However, there is a charge for calls to landline telephones and mobile devices. Charges are processed via a debit-based user account system.

<b>FORMS AND TOOLS</b>
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[Decision Guide for Sibling Separation for Foster Care Placement](#)