



## WHO IS MY BROTHER? WHO IS MY SISTER? WHEN SIBLINGS SHOULD AND SHOULD NOT BE SEPARATED

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“The bond between siblings is often the longest lasting relationship most people have, and these bonds help children develop their own unique personal identity throughout their lifetime.” (Indiana DFC Child Welfare Manual: 403.33) When children must be removed from a birth home for cause, every effort should be made to keep the siblings together. Problems arise when children have remained for six months or more in a foster/adopt home and may have bonded with their new parents, brothers and sisters.

The Child Welfare Manual goes on to say: “If...the permanency plan for a child is adoption, and the child’s sibling(s) is in a pre-adoptive placement, the family who has the sibling is to be approached about accepting the other sibling(s).” (403.332) Again, the effort should be made to keep siblings together initially. But what if the first pre-adoptive home is unwilling or unable to adopt additional biological siblings? What if the child to be adopted has never met or known his other siblings? What if he has formed significant attachments (bonds) with a new set of brothers and sisters? Should children be removed from a home where they have bonded simply to place biological siblings together?

Who is my brother? My sister? Is he the one with the same biological parents? Or the one with whom the child has been raised for a significant period of time? What if a choice must be made between a “blood” brother and the foster brother with whom the child has bonded?

What about half-brothers? Step-sisters? Foster brothers? Sisters of the heart? The dictionary defines “sibling” as a brother or sister. It goes on to define brother all the way from “a child of the same parent or parents” to a “comrade or friend.” Some caseworkers consider only genetic siblings, despite the popular consensus for a much broader interpretation.

Like “parent,” the word “sibling” refers to a child’s relationship with a person who plays a significant role in his life. Significant relationships are established in a variety of ways:

- Through a sharing of genes
- Through marriage (this bond requires that **no** genetic relationship exist)
- By contract (an objective and binding legal promise of reciprocity)
- Through a significant attachment known as “bonding”
- Through friendship, an important but less vital relationship

Bonding is a significant reciprocal attachment which both parties want and expect to continue, and which is interrupted or terminated at considerable long-term peril to the persons involved. Bonding results from sharing over time important events in daily life, such as eating, sleeping, and playing together.

The Indiana DFC Child Welfare Manual (805.13) details four different ways to evaluate bonding between an adult and child, any one of which is sufficient to indicate its presence. These can easily be modified to apply to sibling bonding. The categories are the time spent together, the behavior of the child, the commitment offered by the parties, and family identification. In general, bonding is likely after three months together, probable after six, and almost certain after 12 months.

Bonding takes precedence over kinship. Bonding **is** kinship. The research literature is full of pathological results arising from the disruption of significant attachments (bonding), including high correlations with adult mental illness, crime, poverty, and homelessness. For this reason it is critical to define bonding and to be able to identify it when it occurs.

Once siblings have been separated, for whatever reason, other factors must be considered in future placements. Is a genetic tie more important than bonding? No. It is not in a child's best interests to remove him from a foster/adopt family with whom the child is bonded to place him in the home of a biological sibling he has never known.

To separate a child from his siblings at the outset, and then to do it again after he has bonded to new parents and brothers and sisters, is misguided and cruel. Even worse, to remove a child from a home where he has bonded and place him with later-born siblings whom he has never known or with an unknown relative represents a failure to understand the true meaning of relationships. Genetic connections are only one way that attachments come about. Bonding, when it is demonstrated, outweighs mere genes in common.

The policy of the Indiana Division of Family and Children (DFC) is equivocal. On the one hand, four different definitions of bonding are provided (DFC Child Welfare Manual: 805.13), with the strong implication that bonded relationships should be preserved. On the other hand, the Manual stresses the importance of keeping siblings together. Both concepts are wise and can be applied. They need not be contradictory.

No one would oppose the policy that keeps siblings together when they are first removed from an abusive home. This is important not just because of their genetic ties, but because they have lived together and are probably bonded to each other in ways that transcend their blood tie. Every effort must be made to find a foster home that can accept all the children.

In rare cases it may be advisable to separate siblings at the outset. Two categories where an initial separation of siblings might be considered are:

- When the relationship is clearly dysfunctional (e.g. where extreme violence or sexual activity between the children has been a serious problem)
- When one child needs full-time attention and would take all the parents' time (e.g. a medically handicapped child who requires daily therapy, or a child who suffers from severe AD/HD)

"If a child is placed in a relative or foster family home in which the criteria for an adoptive placement are met, continuance in that home in which the child has formed strong positive attachments is in the child's best interests." (Indiana DFC Child Welfare Manual, Section 713) So here is how the Indiana DFC resolves the matter of conflicting relationships. If a child has bonded to the members of a new family and that family is willing to make a permanent commitment, bonding prevails.

Protecting both sibling relationships and bonded relationships need not be a contradiction. Wherever possible, siblings should be placed together at the time of

removal. If, however, siblings are separated for six months or more, then the new relationships that have been formed should be evaluated before disrupting them to “honor” genetics.

Family refers to the people you live with, not simply your family of origin. Sibling refers to all your brothers and sisters, not only those with whom you have a blood tie. There are other “ties.”

Careful attention to bonding is required whenever a child has lived in a foster home for six months or more. Research, federal and state law, and the Indiana DFC Child Welfare Manual all reflect the importance of a six-month time span. Bonding evaluations should be offered to the court in disputed matters. Mere blood does not presume bonding. Blood ties must be honored, but when disputes arise, bonding takes precedence.

Biological siblings and other blood relatives are sometimes discovered too late. If a child is free for adoption and the foster family has had the child for more than six months and wishes to adopt, that family usually represents the child’s best option for permanence.

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