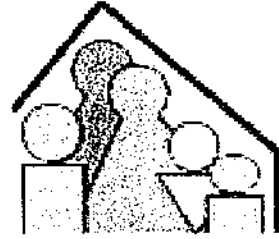


NRCFCPP Sibling Practice Curriculum
Module 2: Practice



Session at a Glance (3½ hrs)

What Makes Good Practice? 60 minutes

In the Courts 15 minutes

Resources and Challenges 10 minutes

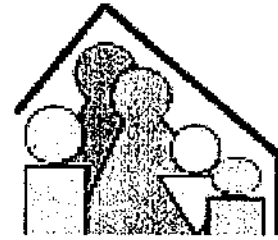
Break 15 minutes

Case Reviews 90 minutes

Commitment to Action and Wrap-Up 10 minutes

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NRCFCPP Sibling Practice Curriculum Module 2: *Practice*



Session Objectives

At the end of this module, participants will be able to:

- describe good casework practice in the areas of casework decision-making, recruitment, preparation of resource families, supporting/retaining resource families, placements, and separated siblings;
- recognize the role of the courts in ensuring good practice with sibling groups;
- prepare for court hearings in order to present relevant and appropriate information;
- recognize the supports and limitations presented by state policies and legislation in working with sibling groups; and
- describe at least one area in which their personal practice with sibling groups can be improved.

Time 3½ hours

Materials

Easel, flip charts, markers, tape

Handouts:

Handout 2.1 Practice Issues: Placement Decision-Making

Handout 2.2 Practice Issues: Recruitment

Handout 2.3 Practice Issues: Preparing Resource Families

Handout 2.4 Practice Issues: Supporting and Retaining Resource Families

Handout 2.5 Practice Issues: When Siblings are Separated

Handout 2.6 Commitment to Action

Appropriate Participants

Module 2 is intended for presentation to caseworkers and supervisors.

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NRCFCPP Sibling Practice Curriculum

Module 2: *Practice*



Facilitator Preparation

What Makes Good Practice? Facilitator should read through the entire activity and then determine the best presentation method for his/her audience from the alternatives given at the beginning of the activity. If a guest panel or group of experts who will participate in small group discussions will be invited, extend invitations and make preparations for their appearance well in advance of the training day.

In the Courts: Prepare a flip chart with the sibling issues that should be covered in permanency hearings.

Resources and Challenges: Be prepared to point out examples in state law and/or policy that either support good practice or (generally by omission) fail to do so. See preparation for Module 1.

Prepare a handout listing national/local/state organizations that can provide information or support. See **Sample Handout: Sibling Resources** list for examples.

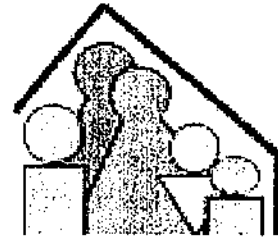
Case Reviews: At least two weeks before a training of caseworkers, contact participants and advise them to bring with them the facts about a case currently in either their own caseloads or in their offices. Cases should be selected for challenges they pose due to one or more of the following factors:

- large sibling group, no appropriate placement resource available;
- siblings currently placed separately;
- one or more siblings previously adopted, competing interests in adoption of a new baby;
- siblings placed together, resource family wishes to provide permanency for only one or some children, not the entire group; or
- other issues affecting siblings.

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Module 2: *Practice*



If Module 2 is presented on its own, begin with the Welcome activity from the beginning of Module 1, as follows:

Welcome/Introductions

10 minutes

Welcome participants to the session – Sibling Practice Issues – and introduce yourself as the trainer. Inform participants of the session’s objectives and what they can expect from the training – an opportunity to expand their understanding of sibling issues as well as to learn best practice guidelines. Review the agenda (**Handout 1.1**) and learning objectives (**Handout 1.2**), pointing out the subject matter and timeframe of the training.

Give information about basic housekeeping functions such as location of restrooms, smoking policy, request to turn off cell phones and pagers, etc.

Have participants introduce themselves, giving their name and whatever information you wish to elicit and ending with the answer to the question “What is your role in supporting siblings in out-of-home care?”

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What Makes Good Practice?

60 minutes

This session can be conducted in a number of different ways, depending on the make-up of the participant group and the specific objectives you may have for the training. Some suggested delivery methods are:

1. Facilitator leads a large-group discussion through the practice areas relevant to the participant audience.
2. Participants break into small groups to discuss one or more practice areas among themselves, then report out to the larger group for continued discussion.
3. A panel of individuals who value sibling connections and have experience in various areas – for example, volunteers, attorneys with experience in placement cases, caseworkers, youth and adults who experienced sibling separation – present on the practice areas, or join small group discussion (see number 2 above) to contribute their expertise.

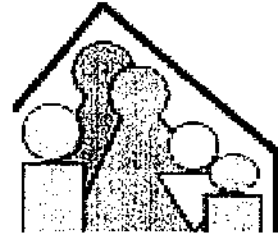
Using one of the methods listed above, lead a series of discussions on the question “What practices result in good placements for sibling groups?” for each of the following areas:

- Placement Decision-Making
- Recruitment
- Preparation of Resource Families
- Supporting/Retaining Resource Families
- When Siblings are Separated

See suggestions below for items to cover. These are also listed on **Handouts 2.1- 2.5**, to enable participants to take part in discussion without taking quantities of notes.

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After each area of practice is covered, encourage participants to share their experiences in that area, following up with questions such as:

- What would you do differently in this situation now?
- How was that good (or bad) for the children in the sibling group?
- What suggestions do others in the group have for handling that situation?
- Who else involved in the case might be an effective advocate/resource?
- Could that (judge, attorney, supervisor, CASA, resource parent) benefit from receiving training or information about sibling issues? How might that be accomplished?

Ask for examples of good as well as poor practices for each area. Be sure to discuss the reasons practices would be considered good or poor.

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Placement Decision-Making

This section is vital for caseworkers, supervisors, and agency managers.

Begin the discussion with a question such as “What practices would contribute to the placement of siblings together in foster care and adoption?” Be sure the following points are covered:

- Find out the current location of all siblings at intake. Begin a family history.
- Begin with the assumption that all siblings should be placed together at the first placement, every time.
- Sometimes children are placed separately in their initial placement simply because there are no families available who are able to take the group. If this is the case, the worker should continue to diligently search for a placement that can take all of the siblings, and move them at the first possible opportunity.
- When a caretaker requests that siblings be separated, examine the case carefully.
 - Does the request stem from a serious issue, such as sibling abuse, that must be addressed?
 - Is the caretaker unprepared for the task of caring for multiple children, or not receiving sufficient support such as respite?
 - Does the caretaker have other motives, such as the desire to adopt only one of the children?
 - Is it the needs of the sibling group or the needs of the resource family that will be served by disrupting the placement?

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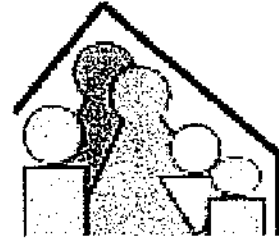


- Caseworkers should pay special attention to monitoring sibling placements. Families may have difficulty caring for multiple children for some time before the case erupts into a crisis. Attention to the needs of both the children and the resource family from the beginning can pay off in a stable placement. Potential warning signs might include:
 - children receive unequal attention from resource parents in regard to provision of services such as therapy or respite; or
 - resource family either calls for help very frequently, or is unusually withdrawn from contact with the worker.
- One worker should have responsibility for all the children in the sibling group.
- Keep the case files of all children up-to-date with placement information about all the children.
- When a child comes into placement, always research the records to determine whether there are siblings already in placement or who have been adopted. If so, look to that family as the first placement.
- Always ask the children what their preference is regarding placement with or apart from each other. Explore their preferences. For example:
 - a teen may request separate placement, but he/she is experiencing developmentally appropriate individuation issues or is tired of being the caretaker of younger children;
 - children may be temporarily angry at one another, as all siblings are;
 - one or more siblings may be angry at the one who disclosed abuse.

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None of these are sufficient reasons to separate siblings without delving more deeply into the problems and looking ahead to the continuation of the sibling relationship.

- Determining the best interest of each individual child includes consideration of the best interest of the sibling group.
- Some agencies will place one child separately because they know the placement is available, allowing siblings to be placed elsewhere because the first family is unable or unwilling to take the group. While permanency for the one child may be achieved, the price to each of the children and the total group may be too high. If this has occurred, continue to seek a placement for all of the children together. Caseworkers should not become complacent about sibling separation merely because the individual placements might be doing well.
- When siblings are separated, even if the initial plan is reunification, they often become attached to different caregivers. If the plan changes, the decision to let them remain separated is often made on the basis of that attachment, or it may be difficult – or impossible – to convince a judge that it is in a child’s best interest to be moved away from foster parents who now want to adopt only one child.
- Make sure life books tell the story of the whole sibling group. Include information about court records.
- Don’t forget about babies born later who also come into care!

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Recruitment

This section is most relevant for agencies seeking to recruit resource families.

Begin the discussion with a question such as “What practices would contribute to effective recruitment of resource families for sibling groups?” Be sure the following points are covered:

- Recruit specifically for sibling groups; use messages that tap into people’s own experience as siblings.
- Prepare families recruited for sibling groups for a possible wait before children will be placed in their homes, to avoid filling beds that might be needed when a group comes into care.
- **Share examples if available.** See Suggested Resources at the end of Module 1.
- Seek kinship placements for all children to the greatest extent possible.
- Conduct specific recruitment for sibling groups – reach out to neighbors, co-workers, school staff, others who know some or all of the children.
- Have an adoption party tailored specifically to recruiting families for sibling groups.
- Recruit from among existing resource families – educate them about the need for homes for sibling groups.
- Use resource families who have cared for sibling groups in your recruitment efforts.
- Use the media to publicize the need for families who can keep siblings together; emphasize relationships and the emotional attachment of siblings to one another.

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Preparing Resource Families

In this section, which can be presented to caseworkers, resource families, or mixed groups, it would be especially helpful to have resource families with experience in caring for sibling groups of various sizes join in the discussion.

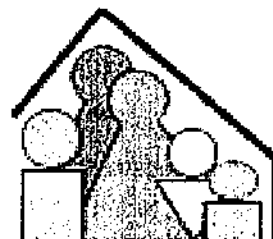
Begin the discussion with a question such as “How can agencies prepare resource families to better support and care for sibling groups?” Be sure the following points are covered:

- Provide training on issues that are connected to taking on several children at one time, including
 - logistics and organization skills of large families: Have parents with large families (biological, adoptive, foster, blended) offer tips, suggestions, checklists
 - handling the parentified child: how to gradually encourage the child to release responsibility for younger siblings and allow him/herself to be a child
 - sibling conflicts: recognizing the difference between “normal” conflict and problematic or abusive behaviors; conflict resolution skills
 - incorporating the special needs child into the family along with his/her siblings
- Include a discussion of differences between caring for small sibling groups (2-4 children) and larger groups – e.g., what different sets of skills may be required, what to expect from the children, etc.

See **Suggested Resources** at end of Module 1 for curricula that might be used for preparing families for sibling groups.

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Supporting and Retaining Resource Families

This section is appropriate for agency staff, from caseworkers through management, as well as community partners who can be instrumental in providing needed supports.

Begin the discussion with a question such as “What practices would contribute to effective recruitment and successful retention of resource families for sibling groups?” Be sure the following points are covered:

- When a family is recruited to foster sibling groups, don’t fill up the home with individual children just because the beds are there – save them for groups. Some programs provide a stipend for families without placements, as an incentive to remain with the agency and keep beds open until a sibling group needs placement.
- Families who have been recruited to foster sibling groups who are currently without children are an excellent resource for providing respite to families who are caring for siblings. This both gives the families with children a needed break and gives the respite family an opportunity to experience caring for multiple children.
- Provide extra supports to help the family deal with logistics – transportation, assistance with tasks such as school registration, day care, etc.
- Help schedule appointments for children so that resource parents don’t have to make multiple trips to doctors, therapists, visits with family, etc.
- Make respite available and accessible.
- Encourage/start support groups in which resource families can share and learn from one another.

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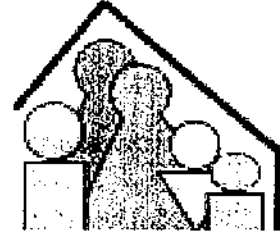


- Make sure resource families, especially kinship caregivers, are receiving all the financial support they are entitled to. These may include specialized or difficulty of care foster care rates, adoption subsidies, housing assistance, etc.
- Solicit community members and businesses to help support resource families by donating or providing at a lower cost items such as vans, heavy duty washing machines, paper goods in bulk, bunk beds, etc. Provide support for the individual needs of each of the children as well as to the sibling group as a whole; make sure each child has the appropriate components in his/her case plan. Similar supports may be needed by biological families when they are reunited with their children.

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When Siblings Are Separated

This section should be presented to caseworkers, supervisors, resource families, guardians ad litem, and anyone else with responsibility for the case plan.

Begin the discussion with a question such as “Sometimes, despite our best efforts or because it truly is in the best interest of the children, siblings are separated. When this happens, what steps can agencies take to minimize the trauma of that separation?” Be sure the following points are covered:

- One worker should continue to have case responsibility for all the siblings.
- Place children in homes as geographically near to each other as possible.
- Have children registered in the same school, if they are in grades covered by one school, or in the same district if not.
- Write sibling visitation into case plans and provide transportation and other supports resource families need to make those visits happen regularly. The plan should clearly state who will be responsible for making sure visits happen.
- Monthly visits for an hour are not sufficient. Exceed minimum requirements; facilitate visits more frequently, for longer times, and under conditions in which the children can feel comfortable.
- Educate resource families on the importance of the sibling bond and their role in helping maintain that bond while the children are separated. Encourage activities such as family-to-family visits, sleepover visits, joint lunches/dinners, playgroup meetings during foster parent support groups or training,

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attendance at one another's school and sporting events, having children join the same neighborhood sports association to play soccer together, etc.

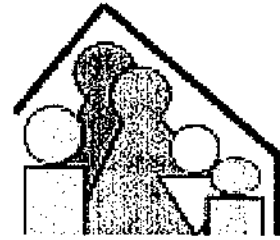
Have participants brainstorm creative possibilities for maintaining connections when siblings in care are separated; then encourage them to brainstorm with their resource families in the same way.

- Help resource families with different members of a sibling group in care set up ways for children to communicate with one another – preferably on a daily basis – such as regular phone calls, nightly short calls, providing writing materials for cards and letters, etc.
- Encourage resource families to allow children to use telephone, email or Instant Messenger to chat at least briefly on a daily basis. When families do not have computers or Internet access, explore opportunities to provide this access to them through community groups, small grants, etc.
- Have families take photographs and exchange them often, and take photographs of all the siblings when they are together.
- Encourage resource families to babysit for one another, or use the same babysitter, child care or respite care provider. It is the social aspect of spending time together in an unstructured way (i.e., not a “visitation”) that is valuable to building and maintaining sibling relationships.
- Ongoing contact should be continued even after one or more children are placed permanently, either in an adoptive home or reunified with birth parents.

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- When one or some of a sibling group must be adopted separately, an open adoption that encourages continuing contact should be pursued.
- Children in foster care may live in homes with other children (foster, adopted, or birth children) to whom they are not related, but with whom they develop ties. Help children who move on to another placement, adoption, or reunification to maintain connections with these children, as well. Ask the children – respect their wishes.
- Use life books to make sure each child maintains a record of his/her family and sibling connections. Consider bringing children together to work on their life books in a fun atmosphere (not the agency office). Look for opportunities to bring separated siblings together in settings such as reunion camps that are specifically geared to helping children connect with their brothers and sisters.

Refer participants to **Handout 1.5**, an annotated bibliography of material on sibling issues. Point out the article by Groza, Maschmeier, Jamison, and Piccola, which can be downloaded from the Internet, as a source for additional ideas about good practice.

Summary: We've talked about ways caseworkers can support the connections of siblings, starting with initial placement and continuing throughout their involvement with the child welfare system and possibly beyond.

Transition: Good practice isn't limited to the work you do in the office, in case planning conferences, and in the homes of birth and resource families. Courts play a vital role in placement decision-making, and it is essential that CASAs, attorneys and judges have a good understanding of sibling issues.

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In the Courts

15 minutes

Cover the following information in a brief lecturette:

- Judges and attorneys need to be informed about sibling bond issues in general and the status of siblings of any child they have in court for placement decisions.
- The social worker must present the facts and his/her opinion about sibling issues. Give the judge a recommendation and any reasons siblings should be placed together or separately.
- The child's advocate should have a good understanding of general sibling issues and the specifics of this child and his/her siblings.
- ASFA gives caretakers, including foster parents, the right to attend permanency planning hearings and be heard.
- Items to be included in the hearing (*flip chart*):
 - Number and placement of all siblings
 - History of sibling placement – have the children been together, separated, etc?
 - How the children feel about remaining together
 - Permanency options that permit siblings to stay together (guardianship, kin)
 - Presentation that describes the best interests of each child and the sibling group, not simply the desires of potential resource

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families

- Evaluation of the strength/importance of the sibling bond, assessed by an experienced worker or mental health professional

Summary: Caseworkers cannot effectuate good placements for sibling groups on their own; it is essential that attorneys, judges, CASAs and guardians ad litem understand the issues and have sufficient knowledge to make their own good decisions.

Break – ask participants to take a 10-15 minute break.

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Resources and Challenges

10 minutes

Lead a discussion around the following questions:

- What in your state's statutes/policies assists you in
 - keeping siblings together in out-of-home care?
 - providing for visits when siblings are separated?

(Be prepared to point out sections of state law or policy that support good practice in sibling placements).

- What presents challenges to you in
 - keeping siblings together in out-of-home care?
 - providing for visits when siblings are separated?

(Be prepared to point out areas in which state law or policy are silent and therefore fail to provide support for good practice).

- What resources are available in your area?

*Prepare a handout listing national/local/state organizations that can provide information or support. See **Sibling Resources** list for examples.*

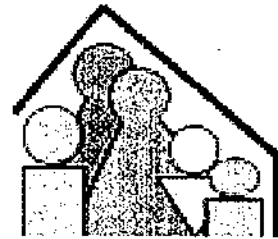
Summary: *Sum up the general state of legislation, policy, resources and challenges in the jurisdiction.*

Transition: *I asked you to bring sibling case information with you. Let's take a look at how the supports and challenges you are facing play out in real cases involving brothers and sisters in your state.*

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Case Reviews

90 minutes

Have each participant “bring” a case involving sibling placement or post-placement contact with them to the training. See **Facilitator Preparation** for more information.

Divide participants into groups of 2 to 4 and allow 20-40 minutes (10 minutes per participant in each group) for participants to work together, reviewing the facts of one another’s cases and identifying action steps that address (1) things that were done well in the case, supporting sibling relationships and connections; (2) things that could have been done differently that would have resulted in building, strengthening, or maintaining sibling bonds more effectively (to improve future practice with other cases); or (3) things that can be done in the future with this case to better serve the sibling bond.

Have each group report out on the issues discussed, with special attention to practice changes that could be made to improve outcomes for the children in each case. Remind participants that confidentiality means that “what is said in the room stays in the room.” Point out examples of good practice and make sure suggestions for improvement are framed constructively. Questions to ask as groups report out might include:

- What could have been done to place these children in the same home right from the beginning (or to reunite them quickly after the initial placement)? What can be done at this time?
- What responsibility does the agency have for ensuring that foster parents understand the importance of the sibling bond, particularly when they are caring for a younger child who may be

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moved to unite him/her with siblings? How can you accomplish this?

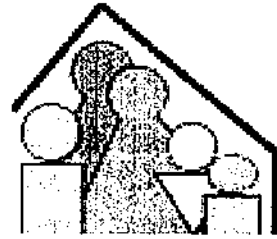
- What seems to be the most prevalent issue in your agency/state handling of siblings? Why is this so? How might it be addressed?

Summary: Sum up your sense of the case review activity, focusing first on practices you heard that exemplify good practice, and then moving into areas where improvement can be accomplished.

Transition: We've looked at legislation, policy and practice, and we've discussed ways to improve outcomes for brothers and sisters in out-of-home care. Now let's see what commitments we're willing to make on the level of our own personal practice to make that happen.

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Commitment to Action

10 minutes

Ask participants to work in pairs to complete **Handout 2.6**, making commitments to personal action that take into account the supports and challenges posed by their state's statutes and policies.

When all are finished, ask for volunteers to share their action commitments.

Wrap-up

Thank participants for their efforts, answer any remaining questions, and have participants complete an evaluation of the training session.

Notes

**National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning
Hunter College School of Social Work –
A Service of the Children's Bureau/ACF/DHHS**



Sample Handout: SIBLING RESOURCES LIST

State Youth Advisory Board

Maine Youth Leadership Advisory Team
Muskie School of Public Service
P.O. Box 15010
Portland, Maine 04112
Phone: 207-780-5861
Toll-free: 877-792-YLAT
Email: pburns@usm.maine.edu
Website: <http://www.ylat.org/>

State Foster Parent Association

Iowa Foster & Adoptive Parent Assoc.
6864 N.E. 14th St., Suite 5
Ankeny, IA 50021
Phone: 515-289-4567
Toll-Free: 800-277-8145
Fax: 515-289-2080
E-Mail: ifapa@ifapa.org
Website: <http://www.ifapa.com/>

State Youth in Care Organization

National Center for Youth Law
405 - 14th Street, 15th Floor
Oakland, California 94612-2701
Phone: 510-835-8098
Fax: 510-835-8099
Email: info@youthlaw.org
Website: <http://www.youthlaw.org/>

Statewide Organization

NYS Citizens' Coalition for Children
306 East State St., Suite 220
Ithaca, NY 14850
Phone: 607-272-0034
Fax: 607-272-0035 FAX
Email: office@nysccc.org
Website: <http://www.nysccc.org>

National Youth in Care Organization

FosterClub
753 First Avenue
Seaside, OR 97138
Phone: 503-717-1552
Toll-free: 1-877-216-7379
Fax: 503-717-1702
Email: support@fosterclub.com
Website: <http://www.fosterclub.com>

State Alumni Organization

California Youth Connection
604 Mission St. 9th floor
San Francisco, CA 94105
Phone:(415) 442-5060
Fax:(415) 442-0720
e-mail:jknipe@calyouthconn.org
Website: <http://www.calyouthconn.org>

Sibling Camping Experiences

Camp To Belong
P.O. Box 261638
Highlands Ranch, CO 80163-1638
Phone: 303-791-0915
Toll-free: 888-7-BELONG
Email: info@camptobelong.org
Website: <http://www.camptobelong.org/>

National Alumni Organization

UFosterSuccess
P.O. Box 1386
Sandy, UT. 84070
Phone: 801-918-6343
Email: bfeaster@ufostersuccess.org
Website:
<http://www.ufostersuccess.org/index.htm>

