CREATE's Position

CREATE believes that siblings in out-of-home care, wherever possible, must be supported to stay together; and where co-placement is not possible, they must be enabled to maintain connection (often referred to as having contact or access) with each other while in care. Sibling connection arrangements should be included in individual case planning and the frequency and method of contact (e.g., face-to-face, phone, mail/email etc.), should be directed by each individual child (as age appropriate) or young person in care, unless there is particular risk of harm. In situations where siblings cannot be placed together due to concerns with safety, appropriate supports could be provided to help address the relationship issues.

CREATE urges state and territory governments to ensure that the provision of sibling placements or regular, ongoing connection between sibling groups in care is consistently implemented in practice.
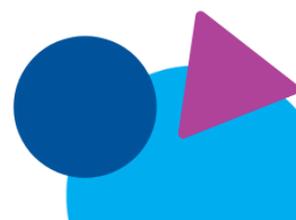
Evidence

- Standard 9 of the *National Standards for Out-of- home care* states that children and young people are supported to safely and appropriately maintain connection with family, be they parents, siblings or other family members (FaHCSIA, 2011).

- Research conducted nationally with 1275 care-experienced children and young people (McDowall, 2018) found:

  – only 53% of respondents with siblings in care were living with at least some of their siblings, but 30% were separated from all of their brothers and sisters in the care system.

- A consistent theme across CREATE's research has identified that siblings are the most commonly contacted family member for young people in care, and many children and young people wish to connect more with their siblings whom they do not live with (McDowall, 2013; 2018).

- Siblings who are co-placed in care generally experience more placement stability and are more likely to reunify with their birth families (Meakings et al., 2017).

- Children who experience stronger relationships with their biological siblings whilst in care are found to have greater levels of social support, self-esteem, and continuing adult sibling relationships than those who do not have such childhood relationships (McCormick, 2010).

- Nurturing sibling bonds while in care can help reduce the impact of previous negative experiences and trauma, and can provide valuable support well into adulthood (Aguiniga & Madden, 2018; Herrick & Piccus, 2005).

- Co-placement of siblings or maintaining sibling connections in care can act as a protective factor for a child or young person's mental health (Jones, 2016).

- Family and culture, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, play a pivotal role in the child's development (Moss, 2009).

- The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle* states that siblings should be placed together to ensure that these relationships remain strong and connection to family is supported (SNAICC, 2019).

Actions

CREATE has compiled a national report into sibling placement and contact in out-of-home care (McDowall, 2015) that shows it is essential for governments to better accommodate the needs of siblings in care. This includes ensuring co-placement whenever possible (i.e., where

harm is not a concern), and regular ongoing connections between siblings are maintained when co-placement is not possible. The importance of sibling relationships, including the different cultural interpretations of the term "sibling", should be better recognised within relevant legislations.

In addition, CREATE has developed information resources aimed at caseworkers, carers, and siblings in out-of-home care expressing the same messages and encouraging the active participation of all stakeholders. The resources outline the benefits for children and young people if siblings are enabled to stay together in care.

Research tells us that when siblings stay together, children and young people:

- are happier;
- have more self-esteem;
- achieve better at school;
- have better relationships with their siblings;
- form stronger bonds with their foster family and experience more stable placements; and
- are more likely to be reunited with their birth family.

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