

Sibling Connections In Western Australia

For young people placed in OOHC, staying connected to siblings is a complex issue that can have profound consequences on quality of life.

Sibling connections may offer a protective bond for a young person in OOHC, so keeping siblings together in co-placement is widely accepted as best practice. Positive sibling bonds are linked to social, emotional, and physical wellbeing, as well as resilience; stability; and identity formation. However, complicated or problematic sibling relationships should be approached through trauma-informed and therapeutic practice and, where safe to do so, by asking the young person what they want.

If co-placement is not possible, but the young person desires connection, a commitment to maintaining strong connective links across different sibling placements is vital.

In WA, CREATE spoke with 27 care-experienced young people, aged 12–17, about their relationships with siblings; how much say they have when talking to carers and caseworkers about living with their siblings; levels of contact; what connection activities/strategies work well; and possible factors that impact communication with siblings.

37%

young people not living with any siblings.

No young people were living with all their siblings.

50%

felt they didn't have enough of a say about living with siblings.

However 88% thought their carers were quite/very supportive about contact.

25%

only saw their siblings once every six months.

40%
wanted more contact in their current living arrangements.

96%

who did not live with sibling/s scored spending time with them as very/quite important.

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I always feel they could do more. (Male, 14)

Maybe once a year they ask about sibling connection at my care plan meeting but then wouldn't do anything after that. (Female, 17)

[Carer] provided contact with my siblings. Gave me phone numbers of my sibling's fathers so I can contact them. We visit with them almost every holiday... and we send them birthday gifts.
(Female, 16)

We talk on the phone, but I only get to see my little sister about once per year and they don't let her sleep over, she just comes during the day and goes to stay at a hotel. I wish I could see her more and spend longer together. I just want more contact and visits with my baby sister. (Female, 17)

We need to build memories together. (Female, 17)

Family is important. It is part of our cultural beliefs. (Male, 14)

My little sister has her own phone, so we call whenever we want. (Female, 17)

With my brother, we don't have any say. His carer stopped all contact and we don't get any say. We have all tried but we don't get to see him. It is really hard on all of us. (Female, 17)

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Key Messages

Young people identified that sibling bonds are unique and often stand in to represent the larger "family" unit. Siblings can support emotional wellbeing and act as role models, comforters, and protectors. They may represent companionship/belonging; and they are often someone to feel safe with and where familial love and care can be experienced. They may also represent family history, memory, and identity. In some cases, siblings also strengthen opportunities for cultural connection and become healthy lifelines within First Nations Kinship Systems. Importantly, young people also recognise that they have a right to a relationship with their siblings.

Barriers to sibling connection include siblings being split over multiple placements; geographical distance; lack of Departmental resources; being blocked from seeing siblings by adults; being too young to speak up and have a say; limited/no relationship with siblings to begin with; limited/no communication with carers/caseworkers for support; and lastly, the logistics of entering care (siblings entering care at different times, how many siblings there are, their ages, and do they have different/specialised needs)?

They are family. They are my connection to all that is me.
(Male, 14)

I like to think that I can protect them and take care of them. I like to keep in contact as much as possible to make sure they are doing OK. (Female, 16)

We have to organise any contact amongst ourselves. It would be helpful if they [carers] were supportive of us seeing each other. (Female, 17)

It is important to know your family, to know your siblings, and to see those ones that don't live with you. Kids in care need other people in their lives, to have connection to their own family and not be all alone and not have anyone else. (Female, 17)

Actions

Include sibling research and sibling rights in legislative child welfare reform in Western Australia. This also includes ensuring young people have a voice in decision making and that more flexible definitions of "sibling" that extend beyond biological determination.

Strengthen opportunities for sibling connection either through co-placement, or connection with the goal to co-place (for example, through therapeutic sibling intervention programs designed to enhance chances of sibling group placements succeeding).

Where sibling co-placement is not possible, establish a framework for ongoing sibling connection; with improved scheduling and better visits (extended, special, or normal time), and opportunities for siblings to connect in ways that make them feel supported.

Support diverse familial structures such as Kinship Systems and The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP).

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