

**Philadelphia Department Of Human Services
Children and Youth Division
Policy and Procedural Guide**

Issue Date: October 21, 2009

TO: All CYD Social Work Staff and Service Providers

FROM: Dell Meriwether, Deputy Commissioner
Pamela Mayo, Operations Director



RE: Sibling Placement and Visitation Requirements

EFFECTIVE: Immediately

Purpose

The purpose of this Guide is to inform CYD and provider staff of the requirement to place siblings together when making a dependent out-of-home placement and to provide consistent, frequent visitation between siblings who are not, for reasons of safety or well-being, placed together.

Discussion

Consistent visitation is one of the single most important factors in achieving a successful reunification. Siblings have the right and the need to maintain sibling relationships that are not disrupted by placement in out-of-home care. Regular visitation between siblings is critical to maintain family relationships while children are in care and to strengthen existing bonds among siblings. Research has shown that sibling bonds influence a child's lifelong sense of attachment and well-being. Sibling connections are important to the emotional and social development of children in foster care since siblings often provide connection and stability for each other. Recognizing the importance of maintaining sibling relationships, regular visitation is mandated by the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, 42 U.S.C. 471(a)(31) and the DPW Special Transmittal "Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act" dated February 24, 2009.

POLICY

CYD and provider social work staff will make every effort to place siblings together in dependent out-of-home care, unless placing them together would be contrary to their safety or well-being. When siblings cannot be placed together, all efforts will be made to keep them in close proximity of each other and to facilitate ongoing contact.

'Every effort or attempt' means that CYD must consider all kin, relative, and provider agency homes that will allow the child(ren) to remain in or as close to their home community as possible. If a waiver is required in order to place all siblings together, CYD must request a waiver (See CYD Procedural Guide, *Request for a Waiver of Regulation of the Number of Children in an Approved Foster/Kinship Caregiver Home*, June 1, 2003). Efforts to keep the siblings together must be documented in the case record. If siblings are initially placed together and then need to be separated, the CYD social worker must document the reason in the case progress notes.

Sibling visits will be provided to all children in out-of-home care, including those children on Board Extensions, as long as they remain in DHS custody. To expedite visits the CYD social worker will develop an initial schedule of visitation which must include, at a minimum, face-to-face monthly visits between dependent siblings in placement. The provider

social worker will coordinate with the CYD social worker to further develop the visitation plan and provide contact for separated siblings. The provider worker will have ongoing responsibility to develop the plan, coordinate and supervise the visits. An exception to the monthly visitation requirement, where the visit would be contrary to the safety or well-being of one or more of the children, must be approved at the CYD Director level. The reason for the exception will be documented in the case record and in the sibling visitation plan in the Child Permanency Plan (CPP). A more frequent visitation schedule (which may involve siblings not in care) is highly encouraged for all families whenever possible.

In addition to face-to-face monthly visitation other methods of contact and communication among siblings who are not placed together, such as phone calls, emails or letters, should be encouraged. This is especially important for siblings placed out of state, or living at great distance from their sibling.

Sibling visits:

- must be scheduled so that they do not disrupt the children's educational or therapeutic activities, unless the siblings are having supervised therapeutic visits,
- shall occur at a time and place convenient to the parties and at a location that will permit natural, safe and effective interaction,
 - need not only rely on the use of agency visiting rooms, when possible visits should be planned in family-friendly locations,
 - can take place during naturally occurring life events such as birthdays, school events, performances, sports, events within the resource family. The inclusion of siblings in these activities will help satisfy the placed child's need for regular sibling contact, as well as strengthen the family and sibling relationship,
- may occur at the same time as the parent/guardian visitation, if appropriate and convenient.

Siblings Not In Placement

The sibling visitation requirement mandates visits between siblings who are in DHS custody, but sibling visits between children in placement and their siblings who are not in placement are also encouraged. As part of best social work practice, visits with all known siblings are recommended and can include siblings in delinquent facilities. Face-to-face visits may be scheduled, as well as telephone contact and other types of interaction to assist siblings in maintaining their connections. The CYD social worker must document efforts to maintain contact between children in dependent placement and their siblings not in placement.

Termination of Parental Rights

The court ordered termination of parental rights (TPR) ends the legal obligation for sibling visits but practice dictates ongoing visits should be discussed with the social work supervisor and considered on a case by case basis.

PROCEDURES

Transportation and Supervision for Sibling Visits

- The following people may transport and supervise:
 - CYD
 - Parent
 - Provider
 - Resource Parent
 - Supervisor approved visitation resource
- The method of transport must be verified and confirmed.
 - Must meet transport requirement regulations (licensed, seatbelts, insurance, inspected, etc.)
- For Out-of-state visits, parental consent or a court order allowing the visit must be obtained.

CYD Social Worker:

- The CRU will attempt to place siblings together. If siblings cannot or should not be placed together because it is contrary to the safety or well-being of one or more of the siblings, the CYD social worker must request that the CRU not place the siblings together.
- If the siblings cannot be placed together for any reason documentation of the CRU's efforts (CRUTS printout) must be placed in the CYD case file with specific reasons why the sibling placement could not occur (e.g. specialized treatment need).
- The CYD social worker will ensure that the provider develops and implements the sibling visitation plan (scheduling, supervision, participants and transportation). The plan developed by the provider will be reviewed at the FSP/CCP meeting or the Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) meeting, whichever meeting occurs first, unless directed differently by the court.
- When siblings are placed with different providers the CYD social worker is responsible for coordinating visitation plans between agencies.
- Every effort should be made to locate all siblings; i.e. interview parents, relatives, and children to determine their location and include them in the Child's Permanency Plan.
Note: The sibling visitation requirement mandates visits between siblings who are in CYD custody. However, visits with all known siblings are recommended as best social work practice.
- The CYD social worker will, prior to the FSP/CCP and FGDM meetings, obtain the names and addresses of all siblings. The CYD social worker will provide the child's provider social worker and/or the FGDM Coordinator with contact information on known siblings of the child who are in placement and their social workers.
- The sibling visitation plan in the CPP should include information about the frequency of the visitation, location, and participants. The plan should also include a phone contact schedule.
- If the sibling visits are to be supervised, the visitation plan should include who is responsible for supervising the visit. The level of required supervision may vary for sibling visits depending on circumstances.
- Resource families should be encouraged to facilitate some of the visits. Supervision of visits remains the responsibility of the Provider Social Worker.

Provider Social Worker:

- The provider, like the DHS social worker, is responsible to make every effort to locate all siblings; i.e. interview parents, relatives, and children to determine their location, and include them in the visitation plan. This information must be given to the CYD social worker immediately.
- The provider social worker will contact the siblings' CYD social worker upon placement to

develop a visitation plan and coordinate regular visitation and/or contact for siblings separated by placement.

- The provider social worker will develop a written visitation plan in the child's Individual Service Plan (ISP) which includes at least monthly face to face visitation with all siblings (the ISP should reflect the visitation schedule in the CPP). The plan must include how often the sibling's visits are scheduled, where they will visit, and who will be present at the visit. Other kinds of ongoing interaction, such as phone calls, emails, or letters among siblings who are not placed together should also be encouraged. Phone contact information should be included in the child's CPP and subsequently in the ISP.*
- If the sibling visits are to be supervised, the visitation plan should include who is responsible for supervising the visit. The level of required supervision may vary for sibling visits depending on circumstances. Resource families should be encouraged to facilitate some of the visitation. However, the coordination and supervision of visits remains the responsibility of the provider social worker.*
- Notify CYD worker in advance of any changes to the visitation plan, i.e. changes to location, time or dates.*
- The provider social worker must document all sibling visits and missed visits in his/her quarterly reports and in the child(ren)'s case record.*
- During visits the social worker will provide activities that encourage interaction between siblings especially those of different age groups.*

Questions regarding this policy and procedural guide can be addressed to:

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