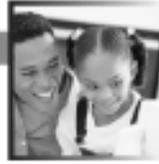


Improving Outcomes for Children and Families



PIP TIPS: Item 13 Visits with Siblings in Foster Care

Each monthly issue of Program Improvement Plan (PIP) Tips focuses on one aspect of the safety, permanency and well-being of children in Minnesota. This issue examines the second part of Item 13, visits with siblings in foster care, a performance indicator included in Permanency Outcome 2.

Permanency Outcome 2:

The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.

Related Performance Items:

Item 11: Proximity of foster care placement

Item 12: Placement with siblings

Item 13: Visits with parents and siblings in foster care

Item 14: Preserving connections

Item 15: Relative placement

Item 16: Relationship of child in care with parents

The Minnesota Child and Family Service Review assesses visits with siblings in foster care based on the following criteria:

- Frequency of visits between siblings in foster care
- Visits meet the needs of siblings in foster care
- Efforts made by the agency to promote and support visitation.

First and foremost, siblings should be placed together in foster care unless it is determined not to be in their best interest. When sibling groups must be separated, plans for sibling visitation should be initiated immediately.

Nationally, a lack of consistent agency effort to ensure sufficient visitation between siblings in foster care was the most commonly identified concern when states received a rating of Area Needing Improvement on Item 13, during federal Child and Family Service Reviews in 2001 and 2002.

Statewide performance on visits with parents and siblings in foster care, measured by the Minnesota Child and Family Service Reviews in 2003, improved by nearly 19 percent from performance measured by the federal Child and Family Service Review in 2001.

The Minnesota Child and Family Service Reviews rated visits with parents and siblings a Strength in 87 percent of the cases reviewed in 2003. In a ranked order of performance on all items, visits with parents and siblings ranked 10 out of 23.

The bond between siblings is special, yet sibling groups are often separated when they require out-of-home placement. Supporting the connections between siblings is critical to their long-term sense of permanency and well-being (Barbell, 2002).

**The Minnesota Department of Human Services and County Social Service Agencies:
Working Together to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families**



Putting good practice into practice

In one county, diligent efforts to place a large sibling group together were unsuccessful. They made careful plans for placing the children in two separate foster homes. The foster homes were located in the same general area of the county, allowing for ease in arranging visits. The agency actively engaged and supported the two foster families in planning and implementing visits between the siblings. The visits occurred often, in addition to times the siblings spent visiting with their parents. Visits were planned around the children's schedules and routines, and included shared mealtimes, overnights, and participation in common activities.

Frequency of visits

Visits between siblings in foster care should be frequent and correlate with children's ages, development and nature of their sibling relationship. Sibling visits may be achieved concurrently, with visits that occur between the children and their parent(s). However, sibling visitation should not be reliant on successful implementation of visits between parent(s) and children. Special efforts to plan for visits between siblings, distinct from visits between children and parents, may be necessary in some cases.

Opportunities to celebrate birthdays, holidays and other family events together are important ways to maintain sibling connections. In addition to frequent in-person visits, siblings should be encouraged to supplement contact with phone calls, e-mails, photos or letters.

Meeting the needs of siblings in foster care

In families requiring agency intervention because parents are unable to meet their children's needs, the usually strong ties between siblings may be even stronger. When siblings cannot be placed together, visits are essential to maintaining their emotional attachments and family connections. Planning for

meeting the needs of individual children should be carefully considered within the context of their sibling relationship.

Agency efforts in sibling visits

Agencies must ensure consistent and diligent efforts to support and preserve the vitally important sibling relationship when siblings are placed separately in foster care. Agencies can promote and support sibling visitation by:

- assigning one worker per sibling group;
- engaging the family, including children, in the development of written visitation plans;
- actively encouraging visits during worker visits;
- arranging transportation or other supports to facilitate attendance at visits; and
- providing for flexible visitation locations and schedules.

Agencies can further promote frequent and meaningful sibling visits by educating foster parents on the importance of sibling relationships, engaging them in visitation planning and providing services necessary to support their role in facilitating sibling visitation.

Minnesota requirements

Minnesota Rules and Statutes require placing siblings together in foster care whenever possible and appropriate. If siblings are not placed together, Minnesota Statutes, section 260C.201, subdivision 5, allows the court to set reasonable visitation for relatives, which include siblings. Minnesota Statutes, section 260C.212, subdivision 1 requires the agency to develop a plan for visitation between siblings placed separately in foster care.

DHS Bulletin #03-68-04, *Improving Outcomes for Children*, provides considerable practice and policy guidance for developing and implementing effective sibling visitation plans.

DHS Bulletin #02-33-01, *Revision of Out-of-Home Placement Plan for Children* provides general guidance for developing visitation plans as a required component of placement plans.

Counties can improve and monitor performance on visits between siblings in foster care

- Conduct regular supervisory reviews that target sibling visitation
- Promote case practice that clearly acknowledges and demonstrates the significance of sibling relationships
- Develop agency policies regarding the process and content of visitation plans
- Develop agency policies regarding visitation plans that address sibling visitation as a separate need from parent and child visits
- Develop guidelines that define the roles and responsibilities of workers, parents, and foster parents for visits between siblings in foster care
- Institute naming protocols in SSIS chronology to clearly track the development and progress of sibling visitation plans
- Assess adequacy of agency resources and community-based services necessary to promote and support visits between siblings
- Assess adequacy of foster parent recruitment and training necessary to promote and support visits between siblings
- Discuss sibling visitation plans and the frequency and quality of sibling visits during supervisor consultations.

Resources and technical assistance

- Barbell, K. (2002). *Is Our Family Focus Wide Enough to Include Siblings?*, National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning. Available:
<http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp.html>
- Case Review and Consultation Guide (Based on Minnesota Child and Family Service Review Instrument). Available: Supervisor Web site:
http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/county_access/documents/pub/dhs_id_000310.hcsp
- Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) Practice Notes, Fall 2000 and January 2003. Available:
<http://ssw.che.umn.edu.cascw.html>
- DHS Bulletin # 02-33-01, *Revision of Out-of-Home Placement Plan for Children*, issued February 2002.
- DHS Bulletin # 03-68-04, *Improving Outcomes for Children*, issued April 2003.

Quality Assurance Regional Contacts

Christeen Borsheim, NW Region,
christeen.borsheim@state.mn.us (320) 563-8890

John Hanna, NE Region, john.hanna@state.mn.us
(651) 296-3972

Steve Johnson, Lower SE Region,
steve.h.johnson@state.mn.us (651) 282-5306

Lori Munsterman, SW Region,
lori.munsterman@state.mn.us (320) 634-0048

Larry Wojciak, Upper SE Region,
larry.wojciak@state.mn.us (507) 359-4666