

# Sibling Connections

Building and Maintaining Sibling Relationships in Separated Youth





# Objectives

- ▶ Participants will be able to describe the importance of sibling relationships and the impacts of relationship disruption and preservation on youth in care.
- ▶ Participants will be able to identify strategies for cultivating enduring sibling relationships during and between visitations, and consider ways to implement these with youth they serve.
- ▶ Participants will be able to describe strategies for collaborating with caregivers and providers to facilitate these relationships.



# Scope of the Problem

- ▶ ~400,000 youth in out of home care nationally (AFCARS)
- ▶ ~10,000 youth in out of home care care in Georgia (CWLA)
- ▶ 2/3 of youth in care have at least one sibling also in care (Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005)
- ▶ Separations are common, due to limited resources and divergent needs; between 1/3 and 1/2 are separated from their sibling



# Policy & Law

- ▶ Essentially, reasonable efforts must be made for co-placement unless there are safety concerns
- ▶ If siblings are separated, ongoing efforts will be made to ensure frequent visitation and weekly face-to-face contact unless contraindicated
- ▶ Federal Law
  - ▶ The Fostering Connections Act of 2008
- ▶ State Law & Policy
  - ▶ GA Code Title 15, § 15-11-135 (d)(2)
  - ▶ GA DFCS Child Welfare Policy Manual Chapter 10

# Sibling Importance in Traditional Families

## Characteristics

- ▶ Longest lasting relationships in most people's lives
- ▶ Variable dependent on ages, gender, birth order, and family circumstances
- ▶ A balance of conflict, competition, and joining



# Sibling Importance in Traditional Families

## Benefits

- Social skills
- Emotional support and regulation (Kosonen, 1996)
- Reduced loneliness
- Feeling of belonging & identity (Herrick & Piccus, 2005)
- Improved self-worth
- Reduced behavioral problems (Stocker, 1994)






# Sibling Relationships in Foster Care

- ▶ In abusive or neglectful families, siblings:
  - ▶ Provide support and nurturance
  - ▶ Protect against the harmful effects of parental mental illness and substance abuse  
(Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007; Kittmer, 2005; Sanders, 2004)
- ▶ Compensate for social isolation



# Sibling Relationships in Foster Care

- ▶ In out-of-home placements, siblings:
    - ▶ Help maintain sense of identity & belonging (Wojciak, 2017)
    - ▶ Create a sense of familiarity and safety
    - ▶ Provide models of coping and resilience (McWey, Benesh, & Wojciak, 2015)
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# Sibling Relationships in Foster Care

- Siblings are the relative youth feel closest to

(Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010)

- Sibling contact improves self-esteem

(Farineau, Stevenson-Wojciak, & McWey, 2013)


- Loss of siblings – due to separation, adoption, or aging out –  
is **traumatic**

- Siblings want contact, even if it's uncomfortable

(Smith & Logan, 2004)



# Benefits to Case Management:

- ▶ Greater likelihood of reunification or adoption (Albert & King, 2008; Webster, et al., 2005)
  - ▶ Fewer placement disruptions (Drapeau et al., 2000, Leathers, 2005)
  - ▶ Strong sibling relationships reduce internalizing behaviors and mediates the impact of trauma (Wojciak, McWey, & Helfrich, 2013)
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# Sibling Separation

- ▶ When siblings are separated, they have:
  - ▶ Greater risk for running away (Courtney, et al., 2005)
  - ▶ Greater risk for behavioral problems  
(Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009)
  - ▶ Increased rates of mental health problems  
(Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005)
  - ▶ Reduced academic performance  
(Hegar & Rosenthal, 2011)



# Ideas for Sibling Connections

- ▶ What are some ideas for siblings connections?
  - ▶ What are some of the problems that occur in regards to these Ideas?
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# Barriers to Building Sibling Relationships



## **Safety**

- ▶ Risk of violence or abuse by siblings
- ▶ Exposure to abusive or neglectful caregivers/family members



## **Geography & Resources**

- ▶ 50 miles within sibling(s)
- ▶ Visitation in the community/mutually accessible areas to visit



# Barriers: Foster Parents

## ► Attitudes

- 55% of foster parents think it's easier for children to fit into foster families without sibling co-placement

(Smith, 1996)

- Sibling visits can be emotionally painful for foster and adoptive parents

(James, Monn, Palinkas, & Leslie, 2008)

- Particularly early in placement, sibling visits can be seen as a source of distress and conflict



# Challenges to Sibling Relationships

## ➤ **The Illusion of Connection**

- Co-placement in the same group home, but minimal shared time
- Unstructured visitations may not facilitate connection

## ➤ **Developmental Differences**

- How to facilitate a relationship between a 5 year old and a 15 year old?
- Disabilities – autism, etc.

## ➤ **Strangers who Happen to be Related**

- How do you become a sibling after being apart for 5 years?
- Is it worth the emotional risk to connect if you'll never meet again?

## ➤ **Anxiety, Guilt, Loss, & Grief.**

- Visiting can be an emotionally complicated situation for youth



# Building Sibling Relationships:

## Considerations for Building Connections

### ➤ **Gatekeepers/Facilitators**

- Caseworkers and caregivers must commit to allowing and facilitating sibling relationships (Fratter, 1996)
- If the adults cannot see the benefits, then connections will not happen

### ➤ **Structure & Flexibility**

- Have a designated coordinator (Groza et al., 2003)
- Activities need to be pre-planned in a safe-environment
- Providers need to be able to adapt to the changing needs of each sibling

### ➤ **Framing & Support**

- Caregivers should help youth prepare for visitations, and process their experiences afterwards
- Supporting relationships between visits – mementos, memories, stories





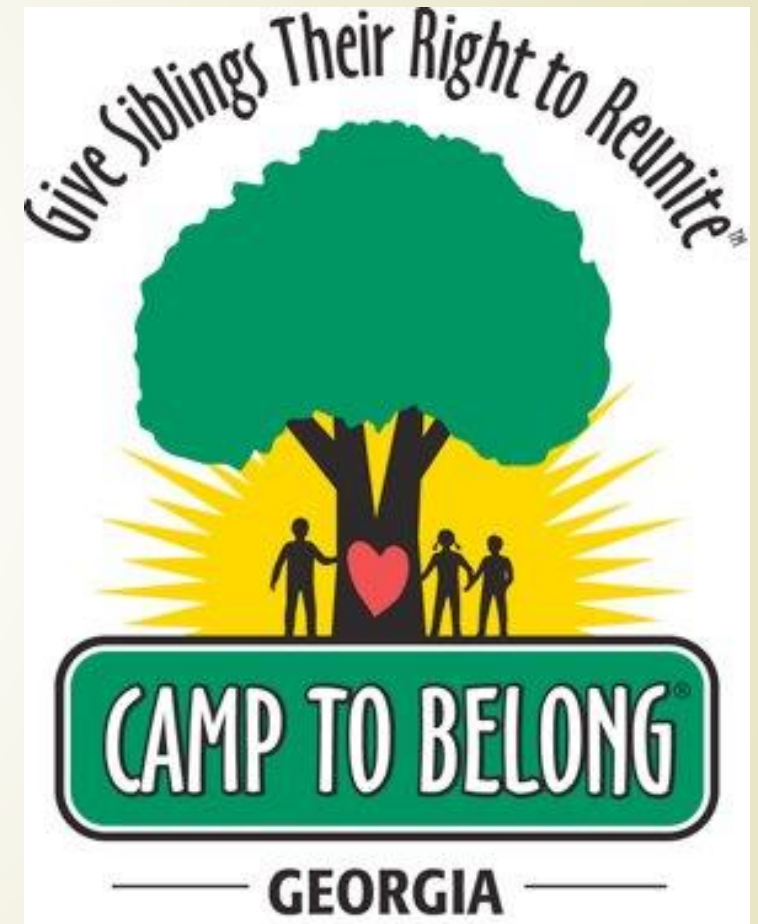
# Building Sibling Relationships:

## Existing Models and Programs

- ▶ **Sibling Kinnections** (Pavao et al., 2007)
  - ▶ Initial meeting between caregivers and clinicians to discuss goals and preparation
  - ▶ Pre-visit meeting with siblings individually and clinician to address any concerns and set expectations
  - ▶ Sibling co-visit with planned cooperative games and activities to support emotional expression
  - ▶ Concurrent adult visit between caregivers to develop mutual support
  - ▶ Periodic check ins with adults after clinical visitations end
  - ▶ \*Proposed for specialized circumstances

# Camp to Belong

- ▶ Weeklong summer camp for siblings separated by placements
- ▶ Parents and siblings complete pre-camp interview to set expectations
- ▶ Trained counselors work with each sibling group to facilitate relationship development
- ▶ Daily activities with other sibling groups to enhance cooperation, emotional expression, and modeling of healthy sibling relationships
- ▶ Special events throughout the week to build lasting memories (Birthday party, etc.), with take home mementos (pillow exchange, pictures, etc.)
- ▶ Optional sibling connection events throughout the year (GA Fair, Aquarium, etc.)







# Building Sibling Relationships:

## Build Your Own - A Guide for Caregivers/Case Managers

### ➤ **Before Visits**

- Framing visits ahead of time; build excitement!
- Safe environments – can we talk here?
- Process anxiety about visits
- Explore hopes & goals for visits

### ➤ **After Visits**

- Validate and help youth manage emotions – good, bad, & ugly
- Encourage reflection on time together
- Roll with resistance; sometimes it's safer to be defensive after a visit
- Allow for individual time



# Building Sibling Relationships:

## Build Your Own - A Guide for Caregivers/Case Managers

### ▶ **Regular Visits**

- ▶ Planned activities – cooperative games, food, etc.
- ▶ Skilled Facilitator to help with connection and boundaries
- ▶ Some conflict and reluctance is normal!

### ▶ **Special Visits / Events**

- ▶ Joint Outings – Camp, Vacations, Trips
- ▶ Joint Respite Care
- ▶ Make memories – create shared stories
- ▶ Recognize milestones – birthdays, performances, graduations, Holidays
- ▶ Give TIME



# Building Sibling Relationships:

Build Your Own - - A Guide for Caregivers/Case Managers

- ▶ **Between Visits**

- ▶ Phone calls

- ▶ Social Media (when appropriate)

- ▶ Go old school – letters and cards!

- ▶ Talk about siblings – give updates

- ▶ Sharing mementos, stories, photos

- ▶ Build connections between caregivers


- ▶ **Work with caregivers to Build and Maintain Commitment**

- ▶ Help them process their anxieties

- ▶ Plan for continued relationships after adoption or aging out



# Reflections

- ▶ What can you do to facilitate sibling relationships with youth you currently serve?
  - ▶ What untapped resources exist in your community for building memories and shared stories?
  - ▶ How can you better engage caregivers to facilitate sibling connections?
  - ▶ What other resources or guides would help you better support sibling relationships?
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