

Fostering Siblings

By Martin Barrows



My wife and I both come from large families. Between us we have 11 brothers and sisters. Many have their own children and grandchildren. Family get-togethers require regimental planning these days.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that much of our fostering lives over the past 10 years has revolved around siblings. Our foster children and young people tend to come in twos and threes. Fostering services are constantly looking for families to provide a home to siblings and we are ready to accept the challenge.

Outside fostering (and sometimes within) there is an expectation that keeping brothers and sisters together must be the right thing to do. Yet over the years we have learned that sibling relationships and experiences are complex. Each child must be treated as an individual, with distinct needs and aspirations.

Most people still assume that when we talk of 'siblings', we mean children of the same mum and dad (or with at least one parent in common), who have been growing up together. The ideal of mum, dad and 2.5 children is deeply entrenched, even today. But modern families are complicated. A family unit may well include half-siblings or step-siblings. Sometimes children have sibling-style relationships with other children in their home with no single parent in common. Siblings may have grown up together and spent significant time apart. They may be of different race or faith. They might have grown

up in different towns, even in different countries. They may speak different languages but communicate between themselves in English.

Yes, we are committed to siblings but we keep an open mind. Children and young people also have different relationships with the adults in their family homes. As they begin to reflect on the reasons why they are no longer living at home, their trauma can be compounded by recalling behaviours or loyalties rooted in abusive relationships forged over months or years. How to come to terms with any sense of blame or anger that a young child can feel when they begin to understand the importance of positive relationships?

Being taken into care is a terrifying experience for any child, under any circumstances. Moving with your brothers and sisters can make that experience a little less harrowing. It is also true that not understanding why you have been separated from your sibling or knowing where they are, in the middle of the night, is traumatic. Being together can make a profound difference as children meet new people and learn new routines. For foster carers it can make it easier to open up the conversations that begin to create a picture of home life and an early insight into the children's strengths and needs.

can be traced back to those early, traumatic days that they spent together in foster care.