First and foremost, siblings should be placed together in foster care unless it is determined not to be in their best interest.

Placing siblings together in foster care facilitates reunification with parents and provides for more stable foster care placements. However, national studies reveal that up to 75 percent of children are separated from at least one of their siblings when placed in foster care (Casey Family Programs, 2003 and CASCW, 2000).


The Minnesota Child and Family Service Reviews rated placement with siblings a Strength in 95 percent of the cases reviewed in 2003. In ranked order of performance on all items, placement with siblings ranked two out of 23.

“Children have an inherent right to maintain their sibling relationships and live with their siblings whenever possible.” (DHS Guiding Principle)
Putting good practice into practice
Casey Family Programs has developed best practice guidance for recruiting and supporting “sibling group foster/adoptive homes.” Sibling groups are featured in all recruitment materials. Prospective foster/adoptive parents are educated from the beginning that most children coming into care have siblings and they will be placed together. Supports are in place for families who care for sibling groups. Respite care, specialized training and support from extended family members and informal community helpers are included in children’s placement plans (Casey Family Programs, 2002).

Placement with siblings
Placing siblings together is critical to maintaining family connections and promoting children’s sense of permanency and well-being. Sibling groups are most likely to remain together when they are placed with relatives. Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) is an effective resource for identifying potential relative caregivers and extended family supports needed to promote and maintain sibling group placement.

If placing siblings together is not possible, the placement agency must develop a plan, and make active and continual efforts to reunite the children in placement. The agency must immediately plan for sibling visitation in the meantime.

Sibling separation
Sibling relationships are significant and unique. Children often express feelings of loss and grief as a result of separation from one or more siblings. Agencies must give consideration to maintaining sibling relationships in all placement decisions and work to keep all siblings together when it is in their best interest (Casey Family Programs, 2003).

Sibling separation must be based on circumstances in which a child’s individual needs can be met only in a separate placement. These may include situations in which one sibling is abusing another and separation is necessary to manage safety risks; or a sibling has special needs necessitating therapeutic services, available only in a separate placement setting. In these situations the agency must continue to assess sibling needs and plan for reuniting siblings in care whenever possible and appropriate.

Agency efforts and resources that support sibling placements
Agency efforts that promote sibling group placements include:
- placing all siblings together at the time of initial placement
- placing sibling groups in relative foster care
- conducting specialized foster/adoptive parent recruitment for a sibling group
- assessing needs and providing services to support foster/adoptive parents caring for sibling groups
- using treatment and therapy, rather than separation to address sibling issues
- using a team approach, such as FGDM, for decisions regarding placement, supporting placement and separating sibling groups.

Minnesota requirements
Minnesota Statutes, section 260C.212, subdivision 2, requires placement of siblings together in foster care and adoption at the earliest possible time, unless it is determined not to be in the best interests of a sibling or is not possible after appropriate efforts have been made to keep them together. Children under state guardianship cannot be separated for the purposes of adoption or foster care without the Minnesota Department of Human Services commissioner’s consent, Minnesota Rules, part 9560.0450, subpart 2 (g).

Out-of-home placement plans require documentation of efforts to place siblings together, and a plan for reuniting siblings placed separately in foster care.
DHS Bulletin #03-68-04, Improving Outcomes for Children, provides considerable practice and policy guidance for placement of siblings.

**Counties can improve and monitor performance on sibling placement**

- Ensure that policy, case practice and agency resources are aligned to support placing siblings together in foster care.
- Define clear expectations for placing all children in a sibling group together in foster/adoptive care whenever possible and appropriate.
- Conduct regular supervisory consultations and case reviews that target sibling group placement.
- Use data systems and reports to monitor performance on sibling placements. SSIS General Report: Children in Placement by Date Range may be used to determine the location of siblings in foster care.
- Track reasons for sibling separations. Clearly document decisions regarding sibling placements and separation in SSIS case chronology. Institute naming protocols to clearly identify sibling placement activity. For example, “sibling placement” could be used to identify all activities related to sibling placement decisions.
- Assess adequacy of foster/adoptive care resources and community-based services necessary to support sibling group placements.
- Conduct timely and comprehensive relative searches and provide supports to relatives caring for sibling groups.
- Recruit, prepare and support foster/adoptive families to care for sibling groups.
- Educate all individuals involved in placement decisions, such as caseworkers, supervisors, attorneys, guardians ad litem and judges, on the importance of sibling relationships, the effects of sibling separation and other sibling issues.

**Resources and technical assistance**

- SSIS Reports: *Children in Placement by Date Range and Case Chronology*.

**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