

How to connect with your brothers and sisters



*Information for youth,
parents and caregivers*

Illinois Department of
DCFS
Children & Family Services

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Introduction

Have you been separated from a family member by foster care or adoption? The information in this booklet can help you find and reconnect with them. If you are in foster care or another type of placement now, this booklet explains your rights to be with your brothers and sisters (your “siblings”) while you (or they) are in placement, your rights if you are separated from your siblings, and how DCFS supports sibling relationships. There is also important information for your birth parents and caregivers who play an important part in your life.

When it is possible and in the best interests of the child and his or her siblings:

- Siblings should be placed together in the same home, even if a child enters care after other sibling(s) came into foster care or were adopted through DCFS;
- Children should be placed with caregivers who will support frequent sibling contact and visits;
- When it is not possible to place children together, children in foster care should be told where their siblings are living (including



any placement changes) and how to contact them, even if parental rights are terminated;

- If one of the siblings is being adopted through DCFS or placed in private guardianship, the caseworker will talk with the adoptive parents or guardians about a plan for continued contact or visits among the siblings after the adoption or change in guardianship; and
- When a sibling becomes an adult and other younger siblings remain in DCFS care, or have been adopted through DCFS or placed in private guardianship, the caseworker will encourage the adult sibling and the younger siblings' caregiver, adoptive parent or private guardian to allow contact and visitation among all the siblings.



Youth: Your rights when you come into placement are:

- To be placed together with your brothers and sisters;
- If you are not placed together, to know why;
- To know where your brothers and sisters are placed and how to get in touch with them;
- To have ongoing contact with your brothers or sisters while you are all in placement;
- To visit in person with all of your siblings at least twice per month while you are all in placement; and
- To live in a placement (whether with a foster family, relative caregiver, or another type of placement) that encourages and supports your ongoing relationship with your siblings.

If you are entering placement after a sibling has been in placement or has been adopted through DCFS, your caseworker will contact that caregiver or adoptive parent to ask if you can be placed there, too. However, sometimes that isn't possible. Placement together might not be the best for you, or it might not be in your sibling's best interest. If you are not placed together, you have a right to have regular contact with your brothers and sisters while you are all in placement as long as it is in both your best interest and your sibling's best interest.

These rights do not apply if for some reason contact is not possible, or if contact or placement together is not in your best interest or the best interest of your sibling(s).

Become your own advocate! If your caregiver or placement is not allowing you to contact or visit your brothers or sisters, or your caseworker is not making sure contact and visits are happening according to the **Visitation and Contact Plan**, there are other people who can help you!

- Call the caseworker's supervisor;
- Contact the DCFS Advocacy Office for Children and Families or the DCFS Youth Hotline;
- Ask for a Service Appeal;
- Tell your CASA worker, guardian ad litem (GAL) or attorney; and
- Bring it up at your next Administrative Case Review or court hearing.

Some important contact information and phone numbers are listed at the end of this booklet. Be sure to read it so you know how to find help.

If you or a sibling are adopted through DCFS or placed in guardianship through DCFS, a Post Permanency Sibling Contact Agreement should be created.

This Agreement is voluntary and created with everyone's involvement: DCFS or private agency workers, adoptive parents, caregivers, adult brothers and sisters, and you (when age-appropriate). It states when, how and how frequently contact between brothers and sisters will take place.

If your brother or sister has already been adopted through DCFS and you cannot be placed with them,

your caseworker must encourage the adoptive parents to allow you to contact or visit your brother or sister. If the adoptive parents agree to consider visitation and contact, your caseworker (or their adoption worker) will



arrange for a meeting to talk about creating a **Post Permanency Sibling Contact Agreement**.

If your brother or sister has been placed in guardianship through DCFS and you cannot be placed with them, you have the right to contact and visit them. If you are in care, your caseworker must contact the legal guardian to arrange for visits and contact.

If you are an adult sibling or a sibling who still lives at home with your birth parents, and you want to visit with a brother or sister who is in placement, you can call the DCFS Advocacy Office for Children and Families and ask about creating a **Post Permanency Sibling Contact Agreement**.



Frequently asked questions about sibling contact

Q: I just came into placement. So did my brother or sister. Now what will happen?

A: Your caseworker must try to place you with your brother or sister whenever it is possible and in your (and your brother or sister's) best interest. However, that will not always be possible. When you are placed apart from your brother or sister, your caseworker must create a **Visitation and Contact Plan** within 10 days (not including weekends and holidays). The plan will explain why you are placed apart from your brother or sister and what your caseworker did to try to place you all together. It will also give the times and places where you will have visits with each other and list other ways you will be allowed to contact each other (such as by phone or e-mail).

If you are not allowed to visit your brother or sister, the caseworker must explain why and put the reason in writing in the **Visitation and Contact Plan**. The Visitation and Contact Plan will be reviewed at least quarterly to see if it is possible to allow more contact and visitation with your siblings.

Q: I just came into placement and I have a brother or sister who has been adopted. Can I be placed with my brother or sister?

A: Your caseworker will look through the DCFS data base and records to see if you have a brother or sister who was adopted or placed in private guardianship through DCFS. If so, your caseworker will contact that brother or sister's adoptive parent or legal guardian and let them know you have come into care. Your caseworker will ask whether placement with them is possible. If you cannot be placed with them, the caseworker will talk with them about allowing contact and visitation.

What if I don't agree with the Visitation and Contact Plan? Speak up! Tell your caseworker. Talk to your caregiver, caseworker's supervisor, CASA, attorney, or guardian ad litem (GAL). Raise your disagreement at your Administrative Case Review. You can also ask for a Service Appeal to have your disagreement heard or express your concerns and disagreement at the next court hearing.

Q: Why are my visits supervised? Will they always be supervised? Can I have a say in who will supervise the visits?

A: The answer to this depends on the ages of all the children. Younger children may require close supervision. Older youth may be allowed to have an unsupervised contact or visit when they have demonstrated maturity, can safely get themselves to and from the visit location, and there are no safety issues. Your caseworker will make that decision on a case by case basis.

Q: Who makes sure the visits and contact happen? My placement does not want to allow visits and contacts with my brother or sister. Will my caseworker help me, or can I be moved to another placement that will allow me to see my brother or sister?

A: The **Visitation and Contact Plan** will state where and when the visits will happen and who is responsible for getting you and your brother and sister to the visits. Your placement and caseworker may both have a role in making sure that contacts and visits happen.

Foster parents and other types of DCFS-approved placements can't refuse to let you visit or contact your brother or sister, and can't withhold contact or visitation as a form of punishment or discipline!

Under Illinois law, DCFS and private agencies working with the department must actively help support your relationship with your siblings. This means your caseworker and caregivers should encourage you to build a relationship with your brothers and sisters.

Your caseworker will try to resolve any issues raised by your placement so you can contact your siblings and not have to move to another placement. But when issues can't be resolved, the caseworker may need to move you to a placement that will support contacts with your family.



If you (or your siblings) are adopted, the adoptive parents have the right to decide who the adopted siblings can visit or contact – at least until they are 18 years old. Adoptive parents do not have to agree, although they are strongly encouraged to voluntarily allow sibling contact for the well-being of the children they adopted. When you turn 18, you can contact the **DCFS Closed File Information and Search Service through the Midwest Adoption Center (MAC)** for help reconnecting with any family member, including siblings who were adopted.

Q: My birth mom won't allow me to see my siblings who still live at home. Can DCFS help me?

A: Parents (or legal guardians) have the right to decide who their children living with them can visit or contact (when the children are under age 18). Sometimes parents are angry with a youth in placement, and they may or may not realize that this separation can be very painful – not just for you, but for all the children involved.

If you or your siblings have an open DCFS case, the caseworker can talk to your mother, explain how important it is to have continued contact among siblings and family members, and try to resolve the issues your mother raises. You can also talk to your caregiver, caseworker's supervisor, CASA, attorney, or guardian ad litem (GAL); raise your disagreement at your Administrative Case Review; ask for a Service Appeal to have

your disagreement heard or express your concerns and disagreement at the next court hearing. If the caseworker is unsuccessful, or your family does not have an open case, you may have to wait until your siblings reach age 18. As each one reaches 18, you can request that the **DCFS Closed File Information and Search Service program at MAC** contact that sibling to re-establish contact.

Q: I have brothers and sisters who are adults, living on their own. Can I have contact with them?

A: If you are in placement, and you have siblings who are adults living independently, your caseworker can contact and encourage them to visit and have contact with you. If an adult sibling agrees, your caseworker will include him or her on your **Visitation and Contact Plan**.

Q: Can I see my siblings more than twice a month?

A: Your caseworker must allow at least two in-person visits per month for you and your siblings. You can ask your caseworker to try to set up more frequent visits (or even allow longer visits). That may or may not be possible. Remember, your **Visitation and Contact Plan** should also list some ways that you and your brothers and sisters can use to contact each other between visits (such as phone calls or e-mails).

Q: Will I get in trouble if I contact my brother or sister when I am not supposed to?

A: The contact times in your **Visitation and Contact Plan** are scheduled around everyone's school hours, extracurricular events, homework, bed times, etc. Your caseworker or a caregiver may ask you not to disturb your brother's or sister's schedule by calling or texting while they are doing homework, at practice or in bed. You should respect that request.

If a time set aside for contact with your brother or sister is not working out, ask if it can be changed. (It's OK to be your own advocate!) Remember, though, that the times in the plan have to work for your brothers or sisters, and their caregiver or placement, too.



Q: My sibling is being adopted through DCFS. Can I still visit or have contact with him or her?

A: If a brother or sister is being adopted or placed in private guardianship through DCFS, your caseworker will encourage the adoptive parents or legal guardian to continue to allow contact or visits with you. The caseworker and adoptive parents or legal guardian will meet to talk about creating a **Post Permanency Sibling Contact Agreement**.



If they make this Agreement, it will set out what contact and visitation will be permitted after the adoption or private guardianship.

These Agreements are voluntary. The adoptive parents or legal guardian have the right to agree to allow visits or contact, but they also have the right to change their mind about anything in the Agreement. You cannot make them follow the Agreement. Neither can DCFS.

The adoptive parents or legal guardian may ask you not to disturb your brother or sister's schedule by calling or texting (for example) except when specified in the Agreement. You should respect that request. You (or your caseworker or caregiver) can contact the DCFS Post Adoption Unit at 888-96-ADOPT (888-962-3678) for help if the adoptive parents or legal guardian won't follow the Agreement. The unit can contact the adoptive parents or legal guardian and try to resolve any issues they have about the Agreement.

Q: I was adopted and want to find a sibling who is now an adult (and no longer in DCFS care), or was also adopted or placed in private guardianship through DCFS. How can I find him or her?

A: If you lose touch with a brother or sister, the social workers at the **DCFS Closed File Information and Search Service at MAC** are there to help you reconnect with your family. MAC can help locate and reach out to siblings, grandparents and other relatives—even if there was not a connection in the past. If you are under 18, your caseworker or caregiver can ask MAC to help you. When you turn 18 you can call MAC yourself and ask them for help finding and reconnecting with your family. You can also ask them for information from your own DCFS file about the time you were in care.

You can also contact the Illinois Adoption Registry to see if a brother or sister is listed there and has given permission to share information with other family members. The Illinois Adoption Registry receives and stores information from people who were adopted or whose parental rights were terminated. You must be age 21 or over to register.

Q: I am “like a brother” (or sister) with one of my foster brothers (or sisters). We lived together for many years. Can we stay in touch?

A: The services designed to support sibling relationships may also be used to maintain a “sibling-like” relationship that you develop with another child that lived with you at your parent’s home (for example, a step-brother or sister), or in a placement or after you were adopted. If you have an open DCFS case, let your caseworker know how important this relationship is to you and ask the caseworker to help you stay connected or reconnect with this child. If you are no longer in DCFS care (for example, an adult or an adopted child), the DCFS Advocacy Office for Children and Families or the **DCFS Closed File Information and Search Service at MAC** may be able to help you get reconnected.

Parents: While your children are in care, they have a right to contact and visit each other.

Children in DCFS custody and guardianship have the right to be placed with their brothers and sisters. If this is not possible, they have the right to have visits with their brothers and sisters (siblings). This includes siblings of all ages (including adults) no matter where they live: foster care, a group home or residential placement, private guardianship, adoption, living independently, at home with you or in the home of a relative.

Parents and legal guardians play an important part in helping their children develop strong relationships with one another. When your children are placed apart from one another, you have a right to be involved in planning their visits with each other so long as the permanency goal is “return home”, contact and visitation is in each of their best interests, and a court has not prevented it.



As members of your children's Child and Family Team, you, the caseworker, the caregiver(s) and other team members will write and update a **Visitation and Contact Plan** that sets out when and where the sibling visits will take place, who will provide transportation and supervise the visits, and what other contact among the siblings are permitted between visits (phone, e-mail, etc.). You will get a copy of this plan and any updates that are developed.

You should always speak up for your needs, the needs of your children who are in foster care and the needs of any children still living at home with you. Sibling visits will also be discussed at court hearings and Administrative Case Reviews, so be sure to attend these when they are scheduled. If a decision is made to restrict or prohibit contact or visits, the caseworker must provide written notice explaining why, so you can appeal that decision if you wish, under the Service Appeal Process.

Caregivers (foster parents, adoptive parents and legal guardians): The children in your care have a right to maintain relationships with their siblings.

Relationships between a child and his or her brothers and sisters (siblings) are unique and essential. DCFS is required by law to help support relationships between a child in care and his or her siblings whenever possible and in the child's and siblings' best interests. This includes siblings of all ages (including adults) and in all living arrangements (including foster care, a group home or residential setting, private guardianship, adoption, home of a parent or relative, or living independently). **While children are in DCFS care, their right to visit and have contact with their siblings is not negotiable.**

The child's caseworker and Child and Family Team will write and update a **Visitation and Contact Plan** that sets out when and where the sibling visits will take place, who will provide transportation and supervise the visits, and what other contact among the child and his or her siblings is permitted between visits (phone, e-mail, etc.). As a member of the Child and Family Team, you have the right to participate in these decisions. You should always speak up for what you need and what you think is best for the youth in your care. Sibling visits will also be discussed at court hearings and Administrative Case Reviews, so be sure to attend these when they are scheduled. If a decision is made to restrict or prohibit contact or visits, the caseworker must provide written notice to you and the youth in your care explaining why, so that decision can be subject to review under the Service Appeal Process.

When a child is placed for adoption or legal guardianship, the subsidy worker will strongly encourage the prospective adoptive parents or legal guardians to enter into a **Post Permanency Sibling Contact Agreement** with the child's siblings so he or she can have lasting relationships with his or her brothers and sisters.

Important definitions

Adoption: Adoption means making a lifelong commitment to a child. The court makes an adoptive parent the legal parent of a child, and the adoptive parent has the same rights and responsibilities as if the child had been born to the parent. Once a foster child is adopted, DCFS is no longer involved in or responsible for the care, supervision or custody of the child. The adoptive parent assumes all rights and responsibilities to make important decisions for the child, including the right to decide who the child will be able to visit or contact.

Best interests: This term is used to describe decisions or activities that are helpful and have a positive impact on a child's health, safety and sense of security and well-being.

CASA: In some Illinois counties, the juvenile court judge will assign a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA volunteer) to advocate for the best interests of children who have been abused or neglected. CASA volunteers meet with children and then objectively gather information about children and their families. The CASA volunteers report to the juvenile court about the status of each child.

Child and Family Team: includes the youth (when emotionally and developmentally appropriate), custodial parent (from whom the youth was removed), caseworker and the caseworker's supervisor. The team may also include the non-custodial parent, current caregiver, extended family members and service providers.

Contact: Contact means how people communicate, and can include phone calls, letters, e-mails and may include social media (like Facebook), exchanging pictures and information, etc.

Guardian ad litem (GAL): The GAL is a adult (usually an attorney) appointed by a juvenile court judge to represent a child in court.

MAC (Midwest Adoption Center): MAC provides the DCFS Closed File Information and Search Service for children and adults who have lost contact with members of their birth families. You can use this service while you are in placement, after you have been adopted or placed in guardianship, or if you return home or 'age out'. This is a free service. MAC can help locate and reach out to siblings, grandparents and other relatives – even if there was not a connection in the past. When you are no longer in placement, you can also ask for information from your own DCFS file about your time in care. For more information about MAC and to get forms for requesting service, visit their website (www.macadopt.org) or call 847-298-9096.

Post Permanency Sibling Contact Agreement: This Agreement is voluntary and is created with everyone's involvement: DCFS or private agency workers, adoptive parents, caregivers, adult brothers and sisters, and you (when age-appropriate), and states when, how and how frequently contact between brothers and sisters will take place.

Private guardianship ("legal guardian"): When a foster child is placed in private guardianship, DCFS is no longer involved in or responsible for the child's care, supervision or legal custody. The court appoints the child's caregiver to be the child's "legal guardian" and the caregiver assumes all of those rights and responsibilities. The guardian receives a monthly subsidy, a medical card for the youth and access to DCFS post-adoption services. Guardianship lasts until the child reaches 18 years of age and the court will retain jurisdiction until that time.

Sibling: A brother or sister who share at least one parent. You will always be "siblings" even if parental rights have been terminated and a brother or sister has been adopted, or has been placed in private guardianship.

Visitation and Contact Plan: The caseworker and Child and Family Team prepare a written Visitation and Contact Plan within 10 days after children enter DCFS temporary custody. The caseworker will note:

- If siblings coming into care at the same time were placed together in the same foster home;
- If a sibling coming into care is placed with a brother or sister who is already in care, or is adopted or in private guardianship;
- If siblings are not placed together, what efforts the caseworker made to place the siblings together, including efforts to locate a placement that would accept an entire sibling group entering care together; and
- When the siblings are placed apart, when, where and how frequently visits and contact between the siblings will occur.

The Visitation and Contact Plan is part of the Family Service Plan.

Service Appeal information

To request a Service Appeal (fair hearing) to review a caseworker's decision that affects you or your child, or a child for whom you are providing care, write to:

DCFS Administrative Hearing Unit - Service Appeal
406 East Monroe Street, Station #15
Springfield, IL 62701

Important contact numbers

Additional information about maintaining sibling relationships is available at these toll-free phone numbers:

- **Youth Hotline (8:30 a.m. - 5 p.m., Monday through Friday)**
800-232-3798
Call this number if you are (or were) in DCFS custody or guardianship, or if you have been adopted or placed in private guardianship through DCFS. The Youth Hotline is available to handle complaints, concerns, inquiries and suggestions made by youth served by the department.
- **Advocacy Office for Children and Families (8:30 a.m. - 5 p.m., Monday through Friday)**
800-232-3798
E-mail: dcfs.advocacy@illinois.gov
The Advocacy Office for Children and Families responds to complaints, concerns, inquiries and suggestions about DCFS. The staff provides referrals to appropriate DCFS staff and suggestions to executive staff for improvements and changes to the department.
- **Child Abuse Hotline (24 hours a day, seven days a week)**
800-25ABUSE (800-252-2873) TTY/TDD 1-800-358-5117
This is the number that people call to report child abuse or neglect. This office never closes. There is always someone there to answer the phone day or night, weekends, and holidays. If you are not safe, call this number and ask for help.
- **DCFS Closed File Information and Search Service at MAC**
800-526-9022 or 847-298-9096
E-mail: mac@macadopt.org
Website: www.macadopt.org
This agency provides a "search service" for DCFS and can help connect brothers, sisters or other relatives.
- **DCFS Statewide and Regional Youth Advisory Boards**
Website: www.youthincare.illinois.gov/Socialize/YouthAdvisoryBoard.htm
Youth are eligible to join the Youth Advisory Boards (YAB) if they are between the ages of 14 and 21 years old and currently or formerly in the care of DCFS, adopted, or in subsidized guardianship. YAB members receive information about resources, opportunities, policies, and programs that affect all youth in care. The YAB is committed to youth empowerment, development, leadership, and achievement across the state of Illinois.

For more information, visit the DCFS website:
www.DCFS.illinois.gov

Other important phone numbers

Your caseworker

Your caseworker should be your first contact.

Name: _____ Phone: _____

Your lawyer/guardian ad litem (GAL)

The guardian ad litem is often called the GAL. This is someone that the judge appoints to look out for your best interests. The GAL is often a lawyer, but not always.

Name: _____ Phone: _____

It is important that you get the help you need. If you are nervous about talking to your foster parents or caseworker, remember the other numbers like the Youth Hotline, your GAL or CASA or get someone else to call or write for you, like:

Teacher: _____ Phone: _____

Minister: _____ Phone: _____

Neighbor: _____ Phone: _____

Friend: _____ Phone: _____

Notes: _____
