

# Seldom seen sibling support: exploring the changing experiences of siblings in Scottish residential childcare services

**Mary Morris**

## **Abstract**

The Promise, published in February 2020, outlined the findings of Scotland's Independent Care Review. The review heard evidence from over 5,500 care experienced children and adults, where being separated from siblings was identified as one of the most serious and negative consequences of going into care. The Promise has called for radical changes in how Scotland supports children and families, with family, scaffolding, voice, and people being integral to moving forward differently. One of the foundations for family is recognising the importance of sibling relationships for care experienced children and young people. The Promise outlines that children should as far as possible be supported to live with their families, but if that is not possible children must stay with their brothers and sisters when safe to do so. If they are not able to live with each other then they must be supported to keep in touch and be a part of each other's lives. The Scottish Government has committed to implementing the recommendations of the Promise. The rights of brothers and sisters to grow up together and stay connected throughout their childhood so they have enduring bonds are being recognised through changes in legislation, guidance, and practice. Residential workers are embracing this and making a real difference to children's experiences with an emphasis on promoting their sibling relationships. This article outlines some of the work that is happening and explores how residential childcare can continue to support children and young people in their relationships with brothers and sisters.

## **Keywords**

Relationships, children's rights, skills, fun, support, the Promise

**Corresponding author**

Mary Morris, Team Manager, Care Inspectorate,

[mary.morris@careinspectorate.gov.scot](mailto:mary.morris@careinspectorate.gov.scot)

## Scene setting

*The Promise* (Independent Care Review, 2020)<sup>i</sup> highlighted the importance of relationships between brothers and sisters. The Independent Review heard evidence from care experienced children and adults that being separated from their brothers and sisters had a detrimental impact on their wellbeing and sense of self. Part of the evidence from the discovery phase of the Independent Care Review in the report *1000 Voices* outlines the pain separation caused, compounded by uncertainty about arrangements to spend time with brothers and sisters.

There is a strong commitment in Scotland to acting on these important messages. There has been increasing recognition across the sector of the need to do more to ensure care experienced children and young people in Scotland have enduring relationships with their brothers and sisters. The Looked After Children (Scotland) Amendment Regulations (2021) have strengthened the rights of children regarding these important relationships, and these changes and the heightened awareness are welcomed. This article outlines some of the important work and changes that are quietly taking place across the residential childcare sector in Scotland to support children's rights and experiences. While many aspects of this work are not new, there is a renewed energy and commitment across the residential sector to support sibling relationships from the outset. This fits in with some of the re-focusing of residential work and the important difference it makes for some children and young people. While there have been many challenges, this work shows there is also resilience and growth across the sector. The phrase 'seldom seen' is used in the title to draw attention to the work that is happening and to hopefully widen awareness of the role, experience, and skills the residential childcare sector brings.

## Support for siblings

Residential workers across Scotland are keen to support the rights of care experienced children and young people to know their brothers and sisters, and to ensure these important relationships are nurtured. There is increasing

recognition that these key sibling connections need to be on the agenda for each child or young person when residential care is considered. Careful reflection on the whole child and what is important in their life is vital. Helen McKenzie, residential childcare manager at Aberdeen City Council, outlines that for them this is now very much part of any matching considerations. A recent example involving a brother and a sister, where initially the discussion regarding a residential placement was only about one of the young people, led to a wider discussion about the needs of both young people. Having a forum where questions can be asked, and assessments widened, is a big part of shifting culture and practice and keeping *The Promise*. Taking the time to consider the needs of both young people, and importantly to involve them in the decision-making process, led to the siblings living together in one children's house. For the young people this was their first choice and continuing to live together has huge supportive benefits for them.

Jane Kerr, manager at Pebbles Care, similarly describes the advantages of two brothers aged 15 and 16 remaining together in a small two-bedded children's house. Again, they had strongly articulated that this was what they wanted. Ensuring sensitive, individualised support has allowed both young men to enhance their own individual identity while staying together. A robust referral process and having options - for example about sharing bedrooms if siblings prefer this - allows for flexible and responsive care.

Thinking very carefully about the needs of each child and young person and how best their needs can be met, in the shorter and longer term, involves intricate planning. It may not be possible, or at that time the right thing, for brothers and sisters to live together. It is important that these decisions are kept under review. *The Promise* (Independent Care Review, 2020, p.62) emphasised the importance of: 'Robust management processes that facilitate and support good practice relating to sibling relationships and addressing any sibling estrangement.'

There will be advantages for most children and young people coming into residential care in maintaining and building relationships with their brothers and sisters. *The Promise* and the voices of care experienced children and young

people have evidenced that paying attention to these relationships and scaffolding is essential, thereby ensuring that the rights of children regarding these important relationships are integral to planning and decision making. Marcello O'Brien, manager with Curo Salus, identifies this as something that is part of their company's approach at the referral stage. They recognise the need to invest in this important aspect of supporting young people. On a practical level this means being well organised and having the right resources in place. Ensuring there are enough staff around, and carefully planned rotas, as outlined in the Care Inspectorate's 'Guidance for providers on the assessment of staffing levels' (2021), is key. Thinking about suitable transport, enough drivers, and working out where the best venue to meet up might be, must be factored in too. It won't just happen. The Care Review's report, 'Follow the Money' (2020), advocates investing in what is important in children and young people's lives.<sup>ii</sup> Practical barriers, costs and poor organisation should not obstruct children's rights, such that leaders and managers responsible for children and young people in residential care settings need to take a proactive approach. Those responsible for placing children and young people should ensure they have open discussions from the outset about all the practical support that will be needed to make sure the rights of care experienced children and young people are met. The Care Inspectorate's guidance 'Matching looked after children and young people: Admissions guidance for residential services' (2022) outlines important considerations for services.

There needs to be real commitment, investment, and energy to make children and young people spending time with their brothers and sisters a reality. There is increasing recognition within residential childcare that time together for brothers and sisters who live apart should be part of fun childhood experiences. Stilted, awkward times spent in social work offices are now much less common. Such experiences are the opposite of having a good childhood. Instead, residential workers are organising fishing trips, outings to the beach, sleepovers, and holidays. Special times that can build sustaining memories are central. Celebrating birthdays and spending time together at Christmas and other important holidays are also seen as part of a good childhood. One of the care experienced Young Inspection Volunteers<sup>iii</sup> at the Care Inspectorate has

articulated some of her feelings about her experience in residential care and powerfully shows how important it is to do better: 'Special times like birthdays and Christmas are important. After coming into care, I never spent Christmas with my sisters. It never happened and I never asked. I now realise we missed out so much.'

Children and young people in residential care may need support and help at these times to maintain or re-establish bonds. They may need help with buying cards and gifts. Sometimes they will ask, but they may not, and if it is part of the culture and on the radar of residential staff this can make a big difference. Lee Robson from Care Visions has found that having visual reminders about important dates such as family birthdays really helps to ensure they are prepared.

Sometimes there can be an element of spontaneity to brothers and sisters spending time together and having a settled and welcoming culture can contribute to this. Sam Whannel, team leader at Angus Council, describes always having a chair at the table for the younger brother of two brothers who live together, all of whom have complex needs. As well as having the right equipment, this approach is informed by recognising that this is the home of these young people, and their rights and wishes are the priority.

Most children and young people coming into residential care settings in Scotland will have experienced trauma and loss, as outlined by Furnivall and Grant (2014). They may associate human contact with stress and anxiety, and struggle to interpret interactions or to understand play. Their sense of self may be poor. Sometimes this can impact on their relationships, including those with brothers and sisters.

Treisman (2017) places emphasis on the importance of working in a trauma informed relational way, recognising the need for sensitivity, safety, and trust, and the need to consider the whole person. Endings may have been difficult both for the children and young people and the adults involved. There may be situations that can lead to disconnections and siblings being split up. Finding a way for brothers and sisters to keep in touch in delicate circumstances requires

diplomacy and sometimes tenacity. There can be resistance from the adults involved, such as family and other carers. They may need help and support to put aside their own sometimes raw feelings of hurt to prioritise the needs, rights and wishes of the children and young people. There needs to be a focus on the immediate situation, as sometimes the easier option is to leave things as they are.

Social workers may not have the time or desire to navigate and negotiate such scenarios. Skilled and knowledgeable residential workers can help find a way forward, helping to repair and restore fractured relationships. They can work alongside families to provide reassurance and support. When children and young people have trusting, attuned, loving relationships with the residential staff who support them lots of things start to become possible. For example, a young person who has not seen siblings for several years may feel they can start to express some of their emotions around this. Residential staff who understand the importance of these relationships and are committed to keeping *The Promise* can work alongside the young person and advocate, if necessary, on their behalf. Ross Buchanan, manager at Care Visions, acknowledges the importance of this aspect of the residential role. Over several years, they have supported brothers who had not spoken for three years to gradually get to re-know each other. They were helped to understand each other's perspectives, resolve some of the entrenched difficulties and move on to a better place.

There may well be glitches on the way. Residential staff can help with this, exploring some of the tensions and difficulties with the young people. Skilled residential staff who have an informed understanding of the impact of trauma and a thorough knowledge of child development, as detailed by Daniel, Wassel and Gilligan (1999), can help support children and young people through what can feel like a fragile maze. Knowing what the key child developmental stages are enhances understanding in relation to each child and young person and their unique circumstances. Squabbling and fall outs are very much part of the usual sibling experience, but they can be amplified when children and young people are not living together and have experienced trauma. Residential workers can get underneath some of this messy, complex and at times difficult stuff. They

can help children and young people understand that it is possible to get through things and promote resilience. They are also often able to engage, work alongside, and provide support for families.

## Conclusion

It is important that this vital work residential workers do is recognised and valued. For care experienced children and young people in residential care, residential staff can and do make a huge difference to ensuring the rights of these children are upheld. The legislation outlined in the introduction strengthens children's rights regarding their rights to family life. Legislation and guidance, especially 'Staying Together and Connected: Getting it Right for Sisters and Brothers: National Practice Guidance' (2021), are a great starting point. The voices of care experienced children and young people and groups such as Stand up for Siblings have influenced these. To make the spirit and intent of the legislation and practice guidance the reality of all care experienced children and young people in Scotland is a challenge. It will need huge commitment and energy from everyone working in the sector. The residential sector is very much part of taking this forward and can play a leading role. The innovative and skilled work that is already happening, which has been touched upon in this article, should be acknowledged and valued. Residential work is developing and evolving to ensure that *The Promise* is kept. Work to support the rights of care experienced brothers and sisters is very much part of keeping *The Promise*. It would be great if this work was more fully 'seen', recognised, and understood. Many thanks to the residential childcare managers who have contributed to this article and have given their permission to be included herein.

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## About the author

Mary qualified as a social worker in 1990 and has worked in and managed several residential childcare settings. She is a Team Manager with the Care Inspectorate and has represented the Care Inspectorate as part of the Stand Up for Siblings partnership since 2019.

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<sup>i</sup> The Promise-evidence framework: Siblings- A review of the evidence on the circumstances and experiences of siblings in the 'care system', and the factors which promote or inhibit relationships.

<sup>ii</sup> The Reports, the Money and Follow the Money published as part of the Independent Care Review in February 2020 explain how Scotland can invest better in children and families. Investing money wisely at an early stage can lead to greater financial savings in the longer term.

<sup>iii</sup> The Care Inspectorate has a group of care experienced Young Inspection Volunteers who work alongside inspectors as part of the scrutiny of children's care services. They enhance the work of the Care Inspectorate in a range of ways bringing valuable insight and experience.