



My name is Lisa Dickson. I am a former foster youth, and I serve as co-facilitator of the OHIO Youth Advisory Board and Communications Chair for ACTION Ohio. I entered foster care at age 11 due to my mother's death and my father's abusive behavior. During my time in foster care, I saw my little brother only once.

I clearly remember that day. It was Easter Sunday, and I was 14 years old and living in an all-girls group home. I did extra chores in advance in order to earn money to prepare a special surprise for him; an Easter basket overflowing with marshmallow rabbits, multi-colored jellybeans and a huge chocolate rabbit strewn across green, plastic grass. I arranged it carefully, wanting it to be perfect for him, and then sat anxiously awaiting his arrival.

When my brother arrived and I handed him the basket, his chocolate-brown eyes were as round as saucers as he told me, "I've never seen so much candy before." In that moment, I wanted to hug him and squeeze him and never let him go. I wished there were some way to take all the love I'd been saving up for the past three years and wrap it up for him. The love I had for my brother felt so immense that there just wasn't enough room in the basket to express its magnitude.

Thirty minutes felt like a painfully short amount of time to spend with my brother after our lengthy separation. We played kickball in the backyard of the group home. My brother ran around the bases, and then stood at home plate, panting with triumph. Even though I could have tagged him out easily, I didn't have the heart to hit him with the ball.

I asked him question after question, wanting to know everything about him. I felt the need to hoard up knowledge about my brother to treasure until I was able to see him again. Our time together was over too soon. As he walked toward the door, I had a childish desire to hide my brother in my room and keep him with me forever. I stood on the front porch, watching my father's car drive away. From that day forward, I never saw my little brother again.

But today is not about my story. It is about the 16,000 children and teenagers who are currently entrusted to foster care in the state of Ohio. Based on national research, we can estimate that half of these young people have siblings. In 2007, I was honored to travel to DC and help advocate for the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act become federal law. This act passed in 2008, and is our nation's first federal law to address the importance of keeping siblings together.

The 2008 Fostering Connections Act requires states to make reasonable efforts to maintain sibling connections, in order to receive federal funding. Provisions in section 206 of this act specify that *reasonable efforts shall be made to place siblings removed from their home in the same foster, kinship or adoptive placement, unless the state can demonstrate and document that such a joint placement would be contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings.*

This federal law also specifies that, in the case of siblings removed from their home who are not jointly placed, *the state is required to provide frequent visitation or other ongoing interaction between the siblings, unless the state can demonstrate and document that frequency of sibling contact would be a detriment to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings.*

Having been a part of helping the 2008 Fostering Connections Act become law, I look back on it now with two regrets. The first is that the phrase “reasonable efforts” is vague. Asking states to make reasonable efforts does not mean that each state is making its “best efforts.” It does not mean that states throughout the nation, including our state, are moving forward and leaving no stone unturned, and exercising consistent due diligence to maintain sibling connections for those entrusted to out-of-home care.

My second regret is that, like many federal laws, this Act maps out a national direction while leaving it up to individual states to decide how vigorous their approach will be in supporting and maintaining sibling connections. Children and teens entrusted to the foster care system need and deserve consistency. Their ability to stay in contact with their siblings should not be reliant on what state, what county, what agency, what worker, or which placement has custody of them.

Entry into foster care is often accompanied by anxiety, pain and grief. Many foster children report feeling that they have lost “a part of themselves.” Research demonstrates that siblings who are placed together in foster care tend to experience greater placement stability, less problematic behavior, more positive dealings with peers, and better functioning at school.

Ohio has the opportunity and responsibility to do more to identify siblings of children who enter the child welfare system, to place siblings together whenever possible, and to maintain contact between separated siblings.

I would like to end with this quote from Time Magazine, from an article called *The New Science of Siblings*:

“From the time they are born, our brothers and sisters are our collaborators and co-conspirators, our role models and cautionary tales, our protective barrier against family upheaval. They are our scolds, protectors, goads, tormentors, playmates, counselors, sources of envy, objects of pride. They teach us how to resolve conflicts and how not to; how to conduct friendships and when to walk away from them. Sisters teach brothers about the mysteries of girls; brothers teach sisters about the puzzle of boys. Our spouses arrive comparatively late in our lives; our parents eventually leave us. Our siblings may be the only people we'll ever know who truly qualify as partners for life.”

Thank you for understanding that the sibling bond may be the longest lasting relationship most people have; outlasting relationships with parents, spouses or children. And thank you for caring that maintaining this bond is vitally important for traumatized children and teens.

Lisa Dickson