

# FINAL BILL REPORT

## ESSB 5779

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Synopsis as Enacted

**Brief Description:** Preserving sibling relationships for dependent children.

**Sponsors:** Senate Committee on Children & Family Services & Corrections (originally sponsored by Senators Stevens, Hargrove, Kohl-Welles, McAuliffe, Winsley and Oke).

**Senate Committee on Children & Family Services & Corrections**  
**House Committee on Children & Family Services**

**Background:** A dependent child is one who has been abandoned, is abused or neglected, or has no parent capable of adequately caring for him or her. The Department of Social and Health Services must coordinate services for child dependency cases. This includes developing service plans and activities to address the family's needs, and ensuring that dependent children who have siblings have regular visits with them. When a court determines that a child should be removed from a home because he or she is dependent, the court must consider whether it is in the child's best interest to have contact with siblings. However, there has been no legal requirement that the court consider placing a child with siblings if they are also placed out of the home. If parental rights are terminated, there has been no statutory requirement that the court consider sibling status. It is not unusual for siblings to be placed apart. Advocates in this area speak of the trauma of being removed from an abusive home as being secondary to that of being separated from siblings.

**Summary:** It is the intent of the Legislature to recognize the emotional ties siblings form without creating legal obligations that do not already exist. When ordering a child removed from the home in a dependency proceeding, the court presumes that placement, contact or visits with siblings who are also placed out of the home is in the best interest of the child, unless to do so would jeopardize the child's health, safety or welfare. In the event that parental rights are terminated, the court must note the sibling status in the termination order. If the court has ordered a termination petition to be filed, reasonable efforts must be made to ensure contact and visitation between siblings, unless it is not in the best interest of the child. If the child is placed with the Department of Social and Health Services, the department must take reasonable steps to ensure that the child maintains relationships with siblings.

**Votes on Final Passage:**

Senate	48	1	
House	93	0	(House amended)
Senate	43	0	(Senate concurred)

**Effective:** July 27, 2003