

CHILDREN AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTER

Sibling Relationship in Out-of-Home Care Literature Review

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Executive Summary

The sibling bond is very important in children's development. Despite the importance of sibling relationships in child development, many children in out-of-home care continue to be placed apart from their siblings (Begun, 1995). The preservation of the sibling bond in out-of-home care has now become a prominent issue in child welfare. This review includes studies on sibling separation patterns and factors, differences between children placed with siblings and children placed alone, foster mothers' and caseworkers' views on sibling placement, and the relationship between sibling separation and child functioning.

Primary Findings

What are the reasons for and patterns of sibling separation in out-of-home care?

- Some research reveals reasons other than the child's best interest in explaining sibling separation. (Begun, 1995; Smith, 1996).
- Staff and Fein's study (1992) revealed that siblings are separated due to therapeutic concerns, rather than for practical reasons.
- Kosonen (1996) found that caseworkers gave both practical reasons and reasons related to the children's best interest: the siblings were not in care; the children were brought into care at different times; a child needed individual attention and care; placement with siblings was disrupted; siblings had large age gaps; and a child chose to be placed separately.

What are the differences between children placed with siblings and children placed apart?

- Children placed together were more likely younger than children placed apart; more likely from single-parent families; and often had parents with severe personal

problems. The main reasons for the out-of-home placement were parent-related problems (Boer, Westernberg, and Van Ooyen-Houben, 1995).

What are foster mothers' and caseworkers' views on sibling placement?

- Both caseworkers and foster mothers well recognize the importance of the sibling bond for children in foster care, but they expressed practical difficulties in placing siblings together (Smith, 1996).

What relationship, if any, exists between sibling separation and child functioning?

- Children placed with siblings were better off in terms of emotional and behavioral problems than children placed separately. Conversely, children placed apart from one another seemed to be better off in terms of cognitive development (Smith, 1998).

Introduction

The sibling bond is very important in children's development. Brothers and sisters share friendship, warmth, and caring. Sibling relationships play a major role in the development of social skills since children spend the majority of time with their siblings and learn how to interact with others (Begun, 1995). In addition, evidence shows that siblings influence the development of a sense of attachment. Children who are separated from their siblings are likely to be preoccupied with thoughts about their siblings, leading to depression (Hegar, 1988). Festinger (1983) asserted the importance of facilitating sibling ties for children in foster care. In her survey of adults who experienced foster care, she found that only one third of subjects reported satisfaction with the amount of contact they had with their siblings.

Despite the importance of sibling relationships in child development, many children in out-of-home care continue to be placed apart from their siblings (Begun, 1995). It was estimated that 35,000 siblings are placed separately annually (Patton & Latz, 1994). The issue of preservation of the sibling bond in out-of-home care now has become prominent in child welfare practice and academia. This review includes studies on sibling separation pattern and factors, differences between children placed with siblings and children placed apart, foster mothers' and caseworkers' views on sibling placement, and the influence of sibling placement on child functioning.

Search Strategy

The following electronic databases were searched using the keywords "sibling" AND ("adoption" or "foster" or "visitation") 1) Eric; 2) Psych INFO; 3) Social Service Abstracts; 4) Social Work Abstract; and 5) LegalTrac. The search yielded a total of 304 references. The key words used were; sibling bond, sibling relationship, and sibling in foster care.

Results

Sibling Separation Patterns and Factors

Several studies explored the question of why siblings are separated while in foster care. According to Begun (1995), in most cases, siblings are separated by accident, resulting from complicated processes of child welfare practice: removal of children at different points of time, assignment of different caseworkers for siblings, or lack of available placement resources. However, there are situations in which siblings are intentionally separated. Sometimes workers believe children have a better sense of belonging in their foster homes if they are placed separately from their siblings or, if siblings are placed together, they would bring conflict or roles from their family of origin.

In cases of sibling abuse, siblings are inevitably placed apart. Even in these situations, Begun (1995) claimed that separation is not the best means to prevent abuse. Rather, careful assessment of sibling and family dynamics and therapeutic intervention were recommended. Begun asserted “nonsegregation” approaches for siblings in foster care should be a goal of child welfare practice. To achieve this goal, workers should be aware of the long-term impact on children of sibling separation and promote greater placement options.

Through examination of empirical data, other studies (Kosonen, 1996; Staff & Fein, 1992) tried to explore the factors and the pattern of sibling separation. Staff and Fein (1992) explored the patterns of sibling foster care placements. They included all children who were placed in foster care by five Casey Family Services’ offices from the beginning of the program in 1976 through 1990. There were methodological difficulties in categorizing siblings as being together or being apart. For example, two out of a total of three siblings placed together could be categorized as either being together or not being together. For this reason, the authors formulated

all siblings as pairs. As a result, 134 children who had siblings were categorized as 109 sibling pairs for analysis.

Results showed that decisions regarding whether siblings were placed together or apart seemed to be made based on therapeutic concerns, rather than for practical reasons. Over half of the children with siblings (53%) were placed apart, and 47% of the siblings were placed together with at least one other sibling. Children's gender, age, race, and office site were found as major factors in sibling placement. For example, boy-boy pairs were more likely placed together initially than girl-girl pairs or boy-girl pairs. There was a strong relationship in younger aged children being placed together in the initial placement. However, for subsequent placements, this relationship weakened. In terms of race, Caucasian siblings were less likely to be placed together than were children of other races. Finally, the various Casey sites had different rates of placing sibling together, in spite of having identical policies. The authors interpreted this result as due to inevitable difference among styles and emphases at the different sites. According to the authors, caution is needed in generalizing these results to other agencies due to the greater funding Casey Family Services received than do other agencies, likely creating different working environments for workers.

Kosonen (1996) examined the reasons for sibling separation and the patterns of sibling placement in Scotland. Data were collected through asking social workers to complete questionnaires on children in foster care or adoptive homes. The sample included 337 children (285 in foster care and 52 in adoptive placements). Findings showed that 40% of the children with siblings were placed with at least one of their siblings. The living situations for the 294 siblings who were separated from at least one sibling varied: 38% were living with their parents, 28% were in foster or residential care, 16% were already adults and were living independently,

12 % were adopted, and 6 % were living with other adults (e.g. relatives). The study also looked at why the children were separated. Reasons given by social workers were: the sibling(s) were not in care; the point of time that the children were admitted to care was different; child had needed individual attention and care; placement with siblings was disrupted; siblings had large age gaps; and the child chose to be placed separately.

Differences between Children Placed with Siblings and Children Placed Alone

Boer, Westernberg, and Van Ooyen-Houben (1995) conducted a secondary analysis of 140 out-of-home placements in the Netherlands in order to explore differences in background characteristics between children placed separately and children placed together. The data were derived from a study of first out-of-home placements of children up to 11 years old (Van Ooyen-Houben, 1991; 1992). The results showed that children placed singly, apart from other siblings at home, were most frequently boys, that they usually had behavioral problems, and that the reasons for the out-of-home placement were primarily child-related problems. There was no difference in gender distribution among children placed together with siblings.

Several differences emerged when siblings placed together were compared to children placed alone. Children placed together were more likely to be younger than children placed alone; they more were more likely to come from single-parent families; their parents had severe personal problems; and the main reasons for the out-of-home placement were parent-related problems. The authors called for caution in comparing children's functioning between children placed with siblings and those placed alone. The two groups might have different characteristics at the starting point of placement.

Foster mothers' and Caseworkers' Views on Sibling Placements

Smith (1996) examined how foster mothers and caseworkers think about sibling placement. Specifically, Smith asked about foster mothers' beliefs and attitudes about caring for siblings together and the importance of the sibling bond for children placed in foster care. Similarly, caseworkers were asked about their beliefs regarding placing siblings together and their experiences in the placing of siblings. Respondents consisted of 38 foster mothers and 31 caseworkers. Foster mothers were given survey questions through one-hour home interviews; caseworkers completed the survey on their own.

Results showed that there were similar responses by foster mothers and caseworkers regarding the importance of siblings in child development: over 90% of the sample responded either that siblings are very important or that sibling relationships are "fairly" or "somewhat" important. Over half of the sample (53.6%) responded that there is no difference in difficulty/easiness in caring for unrelated children and siblings. However, a little more than half of the foster mothers responded that placing siblings together was not beneficial for foster mothers in helping children adapt to the foster homes, even though 80% of the foster mothers believed in the importance of helping children develop and maintain a relationship with siblings.

As in the case of foster mothers, caseworkers were aware of the importance of the sibling relationship. However, over 50% of the caseworkers responded that they found it "very" or "somewhat" difficult to obtain foster parents who were willing to take sibling groups. The majority of the caseworkers indicated their preference to place sibling groups in kinship care (i.e. with relatives) whenever possible. The caseworkers listed the most common reasons given by foster parents who did not want to take sibling groups:

- There was no space available (65%);

- The siblings were the wrong age or gender (65%);
- Siblings had too many behavioral problems (45%); and
- Siblings were unwilling to integrate with the foster family (13%).

The caseworkers also provided the most common reasons why foster parents want to take sibling groups:

- The parents believed in the importance of the sibling relationship (77%);
- The parents did not want to lose a child who was already placed with them (26%);
- Space was available (19%); and
- Schedules were easier to make when the foster parents had sibling groups.

The caseworkers were asked the factors affecting placement of children with their siblings: the siblings will help each other to lessen the sense of loss (69.9%); provide support for each other (59.7%); and have less emotional or behavioral problems (37.1%). The most frequently mentioned factors affecting separation of siblings were: the lack of available space (26%); the belief that siblings will not integrate into the foster family if they were placed together (26%); and too large an age gap between the siblings (26%). The reasons given by foster parents and caseworkers indicated that siblings might often be separated for practical reasons (e.g. no available space) rather than by consideration for the best interests of the children. These results are contradictory to those of Staff and Fein's study (1992), in which therapeutic consideration was the primary reason for sibling separation rather than were practical concerns.

Relations between Sibling Placement and Child Functioning

Smith's study (1998) is one of a few empirical studies that examine the relationship between sibling placement status and concurrent child functioning. The study looked at 38

preschool-aged children in foster care. Data collection procedures consisted of, first, reading case records and having caseworkers' complete a questionnaire about the children's case history and, second, conducting interviews with foster parents through two-hour home visits for each participant. Dependent measures of the children's functioning were child behavioral and emotional problems, social competence, and receptive vocabulary.

Results indicated that children placed with siblings were better off in terms of emotional and behavioral problems than were children placed separately from siblings. The separated siblings displayed more aggressive behaviors and depressive symptoms than did children placed with siblings. Conversely, children placed apart seemed to be better off in terms of cognitive development. However, the author acknowledged that this study did not take into account the effect of placement on child functioning. In addition, there was a possibility of interviewer bias since the interviewers were aware of the siblings' placement status.

Conclusion

This review found that studies on sibling relationship in foster care have focused on sibling separation factors and sibling placement patterns. Based on these studies, there are several reasons why siblings are separated in placement. Begun (1995) and Smith (1996) indicated that the reason might be practical or accidental rather than in consideration of the children's best interest. In contrast, Staff and Fein (1992) presented findings indicating there were therapeutic concerns, rather than practical reasons, for sibling placements. Only one study (Smith, 1998) was found to empirically examine the relationship between sibling separation and child functioning, finding that siblings were better off in terms of emotional and behavioral problems, but not in cognitive development, than were children placed separately from siblings.

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