Conservation of Sibling Bonds

Public child welfare has long been concerned with guardianship of the person and the property of youth who have been removed from parental custody as a result of child protective intervention. Authorities are charged with the responsibility of promoting foster youths’ development by securing their property in trust to insure that their assets are available to them when they become adults, by providing them with adequate educational opportunity and by training them for their transition into adulthood. Economists define these kinds of resources as human and financial capital because they can be conceived of as inputs to a young person’s future social well-being and economic productivity.

Economists are now seeing that both the quantity and the quality of youths’ social and community ties — what they call social capital — is as critical a determinant as other assets to future economic productivity and social well-being. As of now, however, policies and procedures for safeguarding social capital for foster youths are far less developed in most public child welfare systems than is the guardianship of their person and other concrete assets.

An important source of social capital derives from strong sibling attachments. Relationships with siblings are among the longest lasting and most dependable resources for social support over the life span. Research shows that sibling relationships play a major role in children’s development and capacity to successfully interact positively with other people. Sibling bonds, just as parent-child bonds, shape children’s developing attachment to those around them. Siblings provide a well-spring of emotional comfort during childhood, and in adulthood, siblings can also become a vital source of material and financial assistance.

Adult sibling relationships have received less attention than childhood sibling relationships. Until recently, both the extensiveness and significance of adult sibling connections were not widely studied. Cicirelli finds that middle-aged and older adults maintain some kind of contact with their siblings over their lifetimes. Moyer identified the following specific contexts of sibling relationship that might have importance for older adults: caregiving for parents, caregiving for each other, reconciliation of past differences and family histories, friendship, and support through changes in family structure and roles.

Despite the significance of sibling relationships for childhood development and subsequent well-being in adulthood, the importance of conserving sibling ties has been ignored until recently in child welfare practice. Foster children are frequently kept apart from their brothers or sisters, and may even lack any contact or knowledge about their siblings. Consequently, foster children are too often deprived of a potentially important source of social capital both during their childhood and later adult lives.

Illinois statutes recognize sibling ties to be a factor in a best interest determination of where children should be placed once separated from their parents, but the courts have stopped short of recognizing a right of sibling association. Termination of parental rights and adoption may change biological siblings into legal strangers. Although some adoptive parents permit ongoing contact between biological siblings, there is no legal recourse for siblings who are denied such opportunity. A right of sibling association becomes especially pertinent when all siblings cannot be adopted into the same home.

The opportunities for sibling association before and after legal permanence are related to the type of care into which children are placed. Table 1 presents Illinois data on the proportions of siblings placed together, and shows that sibling group placements decline the more restrictive
matched, traditional care sample compared to 71 percent in the Neighbor to Neighbor program. The Hull House program proved substantially more successful in placing siblings together than the child protective system. While the study found no differences in rates of reunification between the two samples, there was a higher rate of adoption in the matched sample of children placed via traditional means during state fiscal years 1993-96. This difference may reflect the easier adoption of separated siblings or the challenges of converting professional foster homes into permanent adoptive or guardianship homes when reunification is not possible. Despite the challenges, disruption rates were lower in Neighbor to Neighbor than in the matched sample.

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References: