

THE SIBLING RELATIONSHIP IN FOSTER CARE: POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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The majority of children placed into foster care are separated from their siblings upon entering the child welfare system. Some research suggests that siblings enjoy more stable home environments and fewer behavioral problems when placed together in care. The sibling relationship may provide stability, consistency, and unconditional positive regard to the children most at risk for poor outcomes such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and loss of identity. This paper argues that foster care and child welfare agencies must institute the changes necessary to make sibling relationships a priority. Recommendations for integrating the protection of sibling relationships in the placement process are proposed.

Nearly 17,000 New York City children are in foster care (Administration for Children's Services, 2005). The majority of children in foster care have siblings (Herrick & Piccus, 2005), yet strong efforts to preserve this critical relationship have yet to be put into practice within most states' foster care systems. As a result, the majority of children with siblings in foster care are separated from their siblings (Herrick & Piccus). This paper will outline the arguments for the protection of, and support for, sibling placements in foster care, as well as offer practical recommendations for the child welfare and foster care systems.

The Sibling Relationship

A sibling relationship is usually the longest relationship in an individual's life course (Groza, Maschmeier, Jamison, & Piccola, 2003). Children who are separated from siblings in foster care face potentially traumatic and long-term effects from this loss. Older children are "attachment figures for younger siblings" according to Groza et al. (p. 481). Children in chaotic homes with inconsistent parenting may come to rely more upon one another than on a parental figure (Hegar, 1993) such that the loss of this sibling relationship may, in fact, be more damaging than the loss of the parent.

Through the sibling relationship, children develop relationship skills

including how to successfully negotiate, empathize, and communicate emotions. Siblings who are separated based on a history of disagreements will learn to retreat from conflict rather than resolve it (Groza et al., 2003). Siblings placed separately may show more aggression and be more depressed than children who are placed with siblings (Smith, 1998). These two factors may be related in that children who have fewer interpersonal skills may experience greater conflict while together and then more aggression or depression when separated from their siblings. It is reasonable to believe that children might benefit by learning new communication skills while remaining with their siblings, even in the face of conflict, and could apply such skills across their life course.

The foster care system too frequently acknowledges the importance of sibling relationships for children in care without integrating the necessary supports for the preservation of those relationships into the system's structure. Out of respect for the primacy of this relationship and its duration, New York State regulations mandate diligent efforts toward placing siblings together whenever it does not jeopardize the safety, health, or well-being of one of the siblings (Smith, 1996). However, in practice siblings may often be separated in foster care for reasons other than those specified by Administration of Children's Services (ACS) regulations. These issues must be rectified in order to uphold the mandate and best serve children in foster care. Similarly, the importance of sibling placement has been recognized on a federal level. The Administration for Children and Families' Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSR), a national effort to monitor state agency compliance with child welfare requirements, also considers sibling placement in its examination of child and family outcomes (Administration for Children and Families, 2004).

Risks and Consequences of Separation

Families facing chronic poverty and its potential stresses including high levels of internal chaos, a lack of clearly defined roles, or a want of parenting and disciplining skills, may be more likely to produce highly stressed and maladjusted children. These lower functioning children are in greater danger of being placed in foster care and, at that time, being separated from siblings due to behavioral or safety concerns. Older siblings are particularly at risk since they may have lived in adverse conditions for a longer period of time than their younger siblings and are at increased risk of reactive behavioral

problems (Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005). These behavioral problems and safety concerns, in turn, are used as arguments for separation of siblings during placement.

In a sample of nearly 12,000 children in care, less than half were placed with all of their siblings, while one third were not placed with any sibling (Shlonsky, Webster, & Needell, 2003). According to Hegar (2005), the greatest risk factors for separate placements are: age, sibling group size, timing of entrance into care, and the presence of special needs within the sibling group. Specifically, Hegar found that older children are kept with siblings less frequently, large sibling groups are harder to place, and children entering care at different times are not tracked as a sibling unit but as individuals. Children deprived of their sibling relationships may react behaviorally and emotionally, showing signs of guilt, a loss of self-esteem, grief, anger and acting out, anxiety, developmental setbacks (especially in identity formation), and depression (Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005; Herrick & Piccus, 2005).

The emotional and behavioral symptoms of children who have been separated from their siblings in care may resemble the symptoms of children experiencing the death of a parent or sibling. Many children in foster care experience multiple losses, which include the loss of parents, of home, of siblings, of school, of peers, and of their role within the family system. These losses are seldom acknowledged by others, leaving the children with disenfranchised, or, as Boss (1999) terms it, ambiguous grief; this is a grief that has no name, no rituals, and sometimes no end. DeVita-Raeburn (2004) warns that such losses, unacknowledged by others, can create a life of ennui ranging from strained relationships and dissatisfaction to self-destructive or even suicidal behaviors.

Certain demographic characteristics also place children at an increased risk for separation from siblings. For example, because of their developmental needs, younger children are often most attached to their siblings, yet are the least likely to be kept with their older siblings (Shlonsky et al., 2003). Gender, age, and ethnicity regularly limit the placement options for siblings (Smith, 1998). Sisters are more frequently kept together than brothers (Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005), even though some studies show that boys benefit more from the presence of their siblings (Smith). Mixed gender sibling groups are more frequently often apart than same gender siblings (Shlonsky et al.). Thus, children are often frequently and permanently deprived of an important relationship with someone of the opposite gender and all the

learning and growth that such a relationship offers. They are also deprived of the roles they play for one another: chaperone, confidante, challenger, mentor, caretaker, guardian, and clown. Wendy Piccus (2005), an author who has worked and published literature on sibling foster care, entered foster care and lost her “sole purpose” in life, which was being a big sister; she described her separation from her sibling as “devastating” (p. 848).

Recommendations

Though more research is needed on the best practices for making sibling placement decisions (Chapman, Wall, & Barth, 2004; Shlonsky et al., 2003; Smith, 1996; Smith, 1998), there is evidence that points to some of the potential benefits of keeping siblings together. Such benefits include less time in placement, fewer placements overall, and more stable behavior and emotions in the children who remain with siblings (Groza et al., 2003; Smith, 1998). Children who were placed with a consistent number of siblings, though not necessarily the same siblings, during the length of their out of home care were better adjusted to their foster homes than children separated from siblings or placed inconsistently with siblings (Leathers, 2005). Foster children placed with siblings were also more likely to be adopted (Leathers) and thus more likely to experience a long-term stable home environment. For children from unstable home environments, siblings may provide “a sense of safety and emotional continuity” (Shlonsky et al., p. 29). These children, perhaps more than any others, need stability, which siblings can offer (Herrick & Piccus, 2005).

The following changes would help foster care agencies meet the New York State standard for the best interests of siblings in foster care:

1) *Ensure that children entering care are assigned to the same agency and the same worker.* As it now stands in practice, children in foster care may be served by different caseworkers, or even different agencies. This is especially likely when children enter care at different times. Children entering care within one month of one another were found to be four times as likely to share a residence than if they entered care at separate times (Shlonsky et al., 2003). The need for consistency in caseworker assignment was furthered by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, which sped up the process of terminating parental rights in hopes of placing children

into permanent homes more quickly. As a result, however, siblings separated during removal from their homes have less time to be reunited (Groza et al., 2003). Foster care workers now have less time to find a suitable home for a sibling group, which poses unique challenges to the system. Therefore, it is crucial that sibling relationships be considered from the very beginning of the placement process, otherwise it becomes unlikely that siblings may ever be reunited.

2) *Work to recruit foster families and reserve foster homes specifically for sibling placements.* At this time, foster care agencies do not specifically recruit foster homes for sibling groups. Often, those foster homes able to care for multiple children have already been filled by individual children and are unavailable when a sibling placement is needed. Homes that could potentially accept sibling groups should be reserved for sibling groups, rather than filled with single children as they enter the system (Leathers, 2005). Also, as Groza et al. (2003) note, the amount of physical space required per child could be reduced from the requirements currently in place for single children, potentially freeing up more homes to accept sibling groups.

Even though most foster parents and caseworkers report that they want siblings to remain together and believe there is no added burden in keeping them together, caseworkers report that intact placement options are difficult to find (Smith, 1996). In contrast to the caseworkers' views, foster parents generally felt that sibling groups were no more difficult to care for than non-related children (Smith). The foster mothers also felt that siblings integrated more easily into the foster family (Smith). Caseworkers believed the opposite: caseworkers felt that siblings had more trouble integrating into a new family (Smith). There seems to be a disconnect between the views of the workers and foster parents. Personal biases or preconceptions may be overriding policy and professional education is needed to address these discrepancies.

3) *Set up regular case reviews for siblings who are separated after initial placement with the goal of sibling reunification whenever possible and as quickly as possible.* Children in placement who have siblings should receive more frequent reviews of their placements (Groza et al., 2003). Whelan (2003) suggests that siblings should not always be kept together, especially if the presence of one endangers another or hinders that child's development. He argues that older siblings who may have a parent-like

role in the context of an abusive home may be freed from this burden of responsibility, and ultimately benefit from an opportunity to take on a new, more appropriate role, if his siblings are placed elsewhere. Sensitivity to the roles children have played in what was likely an unsupportive home is critical. However, a parentified role may be a healthy coping response to an abusive situation and may change as children are given the opportunity to redefine their roles and relationships with one another in the context of a more supportive environment. Again, professional training would be helpful for caseworkers to be able to support foster parents as they attend to each child's development. Morton and Browne (1998) and Whelen support the drive to attune workers to these relationships.

Though siblings may not always get along, if they are separated due to normal sibling rivalries and coping responses, they may regret the loss of that relationship as adults. Sibling relationships should be expected to be fluid and evolving. The regard one sibling has for another at any given point in time does not represent the breadth and depth of the relationship and should not determine the future of that relationship. Regular and frequent reviews of placements should be mandatory so that if siblings are placed separately they may be reunited as soon as possible, whenever possible.

4) *Educate caseworkers on attachment theory, disenfranchised grief and ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999), and the importance of sibling relationships.* The influence of siblings upon development should be mandatory training for all caseworkers so that keeping siblings together becomes an informed priority, rather than an unlikely hope. Caseworkers seem to need more training about attachment relationships (Grigsby, 1994). In a sample of caseworkers and foster mothers, nearly half did not view a sibling relationship as very important in a child's life (Smith, 1996). Furthermore, caseworkers, legal representatives, and politicians may often overlook the "enormity of the losses" (Leathers, 2005, p. 817) already endured by children removed from their homes. For these children, as with children whose parent or sibling has died, the world loses its predictability (DeVita-Raeburn, 2004). Siblings have the unique ability to offer each other continuity and stability. Siblings, perhaps more than parents or other adults, help us to create and understand ourselves. Without them, that identity may be fractured or even lost (DeVita-Raeburn), which graduates of the foster care system acknowledge as a common feeling among separated siblings (Herrick & Piccus, 2005).

5) *Empower the children to name their family members, to emphasize key relationships, and to build on their strengths.* Very few studies cite the preferences or experiences of children in foster care, yet children know their family better than any caseworker. Children are best equipped to guide workers towards maintaining close sibling relationships (Leathers, 2005) or supporting existing roles within the family system (Herrick & Piccus, 2005). Sibling relationships may serve as “permanent, unconditional relationships” (Herrick & Piccus, p. 851) that the children can no longer experience with their birth parents nor can they anticipate enjoying from anybody unrelated to them. Siblings represent a lifetime relationship.

6) *For those children who are separated from siblings, ensure and enforce their rights to regular visitation.* Children in separate placements are supposed to have regular visitation with each other. However, there is no guarantee of any sibling visits in different placements, and indeed very little support of regular visitation is built into the child welfare system. Grigsby (1994) found that siblings placed separately into care lacked documentation of sibling visitations. Researchers have found that less than half of these children see their sibling at least monthly, while nearly 80% expressed the desire for more contact with their absent siblings (Chapman et al., 2004). Only half of children in separate placements believed they would ever live with their siblings again (Chapman et al.). Also, once children are separated, even if visitation plans are made, the foster and adoptive families may relocate to different communities, geographically severing the sibling bond.

7) *Sibling supportive placement practices must be integrated into the foster care placement as a framework more than a goal.* All forms should include, as a priority, sibling information including ages, educational needs, amount of time spent with the primary sibling, and other factors pointing to shared histories and emotional and practical interdependence. Forms could also include the children’s placement desires. Children in foster care are rarely given a voice, and, accordingly, emphasis should be placed on strengthening efforts to document children’s preferences as related to sibling placement.

Conclusion

New York State's commitment to sibling relationships has been solidified by the best interests standard to keep siblings together in foster care whenever possible. It is now time to put policy into practice. New systems must be developed to accurately track siblings in placement. Sibling groups, even if placed separately, should all be guarded by the same caseworker who has been educated on sibling issues and supports the policy to reunite siblings as quickly as possible when it does not endanger one of the siblings to do so. Foster families have already indicated their support of sibling relationships and their belief that siblings are no more difficult to care for than unrelated children. Foster families, then, may be more receptive to accepting sibling groups than caseworkers imagine them to be.

More research needs to be conducted on the best practices when making sibling placement decisions. Future research should especially focus on the long-term effects of sibling separation from the point of view of the children themselves, particularly emotional well-being as measured by self-esteem, feelings of worth, and interpersonal skills. This information, along with the appropriate and supportive theoretical and practical frameworks, should be regularly disseminated to caseworkers in order that they may best serve the interests of the children they work to protect.

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