

Together or separate?

Sibling placements

A review of the literature

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This paper draws on a substantial body of anecdotal, therapeutic and research-based literature on sibling relationships and sibling placements. It draws attention to the nature and significance of sibling relationships which are usually of lifelong importance in terms of both identity and support. Placement of sibling groups in out-of-home care, especially when the children have high emotional and physical needs, are complex whether they are placed together or are separated. Consideration is given to the long-term psychological consequences of separation of siblings, as well as the resource issues involved in keeping siblings together or separating them. It is suggested that, even when children appear very disturbed, separation is not necessarily appropriate.

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SIBLINGS – RELATIONSHIPS AND THE LIFE COURSE

Relationships with siblings are likely to be the longest relationships which most people have (Cicirelli 1994). The importance of these relationships over the life course is acknowledged in a large body of literature – anecdotal (Markowitz 1994; Sandmaier 1995; Waskow & Waskow 1994), therapeutic (Bank 1992; Charles 1999; Coles 1998; Kivowitz 1995) and research-based (Bedford 1989; Dunn 1992; Dunn & McGuire 1992; Teti 1992).

This section gives an overview of the psychological research on sibling relationships. It is important to note that the majority of research studies in this area are based on samples of white, middle class, usually North American people (Begun 1995)¹ and that the research itself tends to be based on measurements of very limited relationship factors (Mullender 1999a). It is also unusual in this research for children to be asked for their views.

Children are thought to spend as much time with their siblings in childhood as they do with their parents (Waters 1987). While sibling relationships over time tend to be characterised by stability, change also occurs which may be associated with temperament, differences in parents' behaviour to each child and major life events (Stocker & Dunn 1994). Some longitudinal research has shown consistencies in the way mothers relate to each of their children as they pass

through the same stages, ie, mothers enjoy (or find difficult) a particular age in successive children (Dunn 1993; McGuire & Dunn 1994).

It also appears that, despite common parentage and a similar family environment, children in the same family are likely to differ in temperament and their experiences of family life (Dunn 1994). Siblings may therefore have very different views of one another and their relationships and this adds to the complexity of assessing sibling attachments, especially in large families (Dunn & McGuire 1994; Furman 1993; McGuire, McHale & Updegraff 1996).

The quality of relationships between siblings (based on observation of sibling interactions, qualitative interviews with children and questionnaires) has been found to be stable through childhood, ie, relationships in middle childhood tend to be similar to those before the children entered school (Dunn, Slomkowski, Beardsall & Rende 1994).

However, sibling relationships tend to become less intense and more equal during middle childhood, although it is unknown whether this is because of an increase in power by younger siblings or a decrease in power by older siblings – or both (Buhrmester & Furman 1990; Dunn & McGuire 1992). Sibling relationships in middle childhood are also likely to be affected by the increasing importance of peer relationships (Dunn, Slomkowski & Beardsall 1994).

Siblings of adolescents who have been hospitalised for psychiatric problems appear to have poorer relationships with their siblings than siblings of non-hospitalised adolescents (Deal &

¹ Sibling relationships in other cultures are often based on different expectations (Prevatt Goldstein, 1999; Weisner, 1993).

MacLean 1995). Not surprisingly, adolescents with severe antisocial behaviour report more negative relationships with their siblings than adolescents with other psychiatric disorders (Slomkowski, Cohen & Brook 1997). Positive sibling relationships may serve as a buffer against the development of depression. Conversely, conflictual sibling relationships have been associated with (but not necessarily caused by) greater depression (Kaslow, Deering & Racusin 1994) and loneliness (Ponzetti & James 1997).

Sibling relationships in larger families have been associated with more conflict than in smaller families and yet also more emotional closeness and sibling support. In addition, wider spacing between children (4+ years) is associated with less overtly problematic relationships between siblings, although this may also be because they are less close (Newman 1996).

Older siblings may act as alternate caregivers and/or attachment figures in the absence of a parent (Johnson & Fein 1991) and for some children, sibling relationships may be more important than those with birth parents (Harrison 1999).

Overall, research has shown that siblings provide considerable support to each other in families where there is conflictual and/or inadequate parenting (Bank & Kahn 1982; Dunn & McGuire 1992; Dunn, Slomkowski & Beardsall 1994; Stormshak, Bellanti & Bierman 1996; Waters 1987),² although siblings in these families appear more likely to have aggressive relationships with each other (Jenkins 1992; Moore, Pepler, Weinberg, Hammond, Waddell & Weiser 1990).

Negative relationships between siblings may be modified with skilled professional input. An interesting study showed that the use of a social skills training model with siblings was associated with increased warmth and decreased aggression between siblings (Kramer & Radey 1997).

² Studies of child concentration camp survivors have shown the protective influence of both siblings and peers (Waters, 1987).

SIBLINGS AND THE CARE SYSTEM

Policy, practice and some of the apparent complexities and consequences of placement together or apart are explored here, albeit within a context of relatively limited information about the intentions and operation of the many elements of the care system (legislation, courts, welfare authorities and carers).

THE CONTEXT

In the UK, it is thought that 80-90% of children in care (including adoption) have siblings, but only 25-43% of these children are placed with at least one sibling (Beckett 1999; Kosonen 1996). In the USA, it is estimated that 56-85% of children in care have siblings (Eastman 1982, cited in Smith 1996). Similar figures for Australia are unavailable, although Szwarc (1992, cited in Fischer 1999) found that approximately 33% of siblings in alternative care were placed separately from one another.

The Victorian Children and Young Persons Act 1989 makes no reference to siblings, although it does stress the importance of maintaining family ties (Children and Young Persons Act 1989). In contrast, the UK Children Act 1989 states that siblings should be kept together whenever 'reasonably practicable and consistent with the child's welfare' (cited in O'Leary & Schofield 1994, p. 31). Similarly Smith cites New York State law, which mandates placement together of siblings and half siblings 'unless such placements would be contrary to the health, safety, or welfare of one or more of the children' (Bane 1992, cited in Smith 1996, p. 358).

Nevertheless, there are practice standards, both national and in Victoria, which advocate for the needs of siblings to stay together in placement, while allowing for separation to occur in particular circumstances (Fischer 1999).

Siblings may share some, or all, of the following: 'common genes; common history, family values and culture; and common legal status' (Elgar & Head 1999, p. 20). They may have a shared upbringing or very little upbringing in common and some children who come

into care sequentially at a youngish age, may not even know that they have siblings (Neil 1999).

Horrocks and Milner (1999) suggest that young people in residential care are likely to experience sibling-like relationships and that residential homes could be considered to be 'serial step-families'. Similarly, unrelated children adopted together grow up as siblings.³

While siblings are widely portrayed in the research literature as providing continuity, a sense of identity and general support for each other in out-of-home care (Begun 1995; Fahlberg 1991; Kosonen 1996, Smith 1996), it is interesting that only 56% of a sample of case workers and foster mothers in the USA viewed sibling relationships as 'very important' for child development (Smith 1996). This may have some influence (at least in the USA) on whether siblings are separated in out-of-home care.

TOGETHER OR SEPARATE?

Among the material specifically concerned with joint or individual placement, Fahlberg (1991, p. 274) suggests that 'when caseworkers separate siblings, at some level they are accentuating the impression that family relationships are not really important'. The issue of placing siblings together, or separating them in different placements,⁴ is one which child welfare professionals grapple with frequently.⁵ Dance and Rushton (1999, p. 80) comment:

the need to achieve permanency may in some cases be in competition with the aim of maintaining siblings together. Bringing together these aims would only be feasible if there were sufficient

³ The tentative early findings of a longitudinal British study following children adopted from Romania suggest that 'there may be no greater risks to the adjustment of unrelated children than of related children, placed simultaneously, provided the children are both young' (Beckett, Groothues & O'Connor, 1999, p. 93).

⁴ Ironically, until the mid 1970s, siblings were far more likely to remain together in out-of-home care than at present, due to the provision of care in children's homes (Jones, 1999).

⁵ This issue is also of considerable concern in divorce situations - 'split custody can potentially be harmful to the sibling system and thus should be entered into cautiously' (Kaplan, Hennon & Ade-Ridder, 1993, p. 140).

professional time and skill available ... a greater emphasis on improving the behaviour of the children or the relationships between them might reduce the need for separation.

Decisions regarding siblings often appear to be made on the grounds of pragmatism – the availability of foster placements for sibling groups; children's special needs⁶ including age (Department of Health 1991) and disabilities (Blacher 1993); race (Department of Health 1991; Staff & Fein 1992); geography and timing of the placement; the perceived needs of individual children; the dynamics between the children and the wishes of older children and adolescents (Drapeau, Simard, Beaudry & Charbonneau 2000; Hollows & Nelson 2000; Kosonen 1996; Smith 1996).

US and Canadian research has found that siblings are more likely to be separated when they are older and when they have larger age gaps between them (Drapeau et al 2000; Hegar 1988). British research has found that siblings are more likely to be separated when they have only one parent in common or when their ages are very different (Dance & Rushton 1999).

One of the practice patterns in sibling placement seems to be that of separating younger, less damaged, easier-to-place children from their older, more emotionally damaged siblings (O'Leary & Schofield 1994). However, this practice is likely to be particularly painful for older children who have had a caretaking role with younger siblings (Harrison 1999).

There is a significant risk that children who have been sexually abused in their families of origin will also abuse other children,⁷ including siblings, and that the dynamics of a sibling group which has experienced sexual abuse may prevent children from making healthy attachments to caregiving adults (Head & Elgar 1999). Nevertheless, a British study found that siblings from sexually

abusive backgrounds were only slightly more likely to be separated than siblings from non-abusive backgrounds (Farmer & Pollock 1999).

There is very little research which looks at the issue of choosing between attachment with an adult and maintaining siblings together. One group of researchers has written:

without a healthy adult-child bond, traumatized children cannot proceed with individual development or build the type of strong ego structure required for facing and working through a history of severe trauma (Gallagher, Leavitt & Kimmel 1995, cited in Leavitt, Gardner, Gallagher & Schamess 1998).

However, it is important to note that creating a healthy attachment with an adult does not necessarily mean separating the siblings (Leavitt et al 1998; Tomlinson 1999).

Siblings may ... have very different views of one another and their relationships and this adds to the complexity of assessing sibling attachments ...

POST-SEPARATION CONTACT

Separation of siblings is likely to be associated with low contact, no contact or levels of contact which decrease over time (see review of research in Drapeau et al 2000; Harrison 1999; Tomlinson 1999). In recent British research, plans had been made for contact between separated siblings in only 50% of the cases and it is interesting to note that contact was more likely if separated siblings were all in care (ie, in different placements) than if some of the children remained with the birth parents (Dance & Rushton 1999).

Barriers to contact have been found to include distance, resource implications and antagonism to contact by one or more parties (Harrison 1999). Further complications are that official records often do not even record the fact that a child has siblings (Neil 1999) and

seldom appear to contain the reasons why siblings were separated or maintained together (Harrison 1999).

Children appear only rarely to be asked what their views are regarding separation from, or contact with, siblings (Selwyn 1999).

COMPARATIVE OUTCOMES

Comparing the placement outcomes of siblings who have been placed together, with those who have been separated, is one way of attempting to develop an understanding of the circumstances in which siblings might or might not be separated. Outcomes may be seen in terms of placement stability or long-term psychological adjustment.

One British study of long-term foster placements found that there were more disruptions when the child had siblings in care and was separated from all of them (50% disruptions), than when the child was placed with all siblings in care (33% disruption) or with some siblings (26% disruption) (Berridge & Cleaver 1987, cited in O'Leary & Schofield 1994). Other British research has also found that sibling placements disrupt less often than single child placements (Department of Health 1991; Thoburn & Rowe 1991, cited in O'Leary & Schofield 1994).

Research in the United States appears to have come to the same conclusion that children separated from their siblings have more placements than those who are kept together (Smith 1996; Staff & Fein 1992), although at least one study showed no differences in the disruption rate between split and maintained sibling groups (Smith 1996).

According to one review of research, there are some conflicting findings on psychological outcomes of sibling placement. However, in general, children in intact sibling groups are more likely to have positive relationships with each other than those who are separated (Drapeau et al 2000).

Dutch research involving over 2000 intercountry adoptees has found that, although siblings adopted together tended to be older than single adopted children (and would therefore be expected to have more emotional difficulties), they were nevertheless reported to have less behavioural

⁶ However, some professionals have noted that sibling separation due to children's 'special needs' may in fact be due more to the lack of caregivers for sibling groups.

⁷ Farmer and Pollock (1999) report that, in one study, 50% of children who had been sexually abused, in turn abused other children.

problems (Boer, Versluis-den Bieman & Verhulst 1994). These researchers speculate that this finding may be associated with the stabilising influence of siblings together with the fact that the adoptive parents tended to be childless prior to the adoption.⁸

Not surprisingly, research has also found that single children placed out-of-home when all other siblings remain in the birth family, have more severe personal problems than children placed with their siblings as a result of parental crisis (Boer, Westenberg & van Ooyen-Houben 1995).

However, this research needs to be evaluated with a considerable degree of caution, as Drapeau et al (2000) state that, while children placed with siblings display fewer behavioural problems and have fewer previous placements (ie, less disruptions), the children placed together are less likely to include older children, larger sibling groups or children with developmental disabilities.

Other variables in this kind of outcome research include the quality of sibling relationships to begin with and how long into the placement the research was undertaken (Smith 1995).

Although separating sibling groups may, in some situations, improve relationships between them, the children themselves overwhelmingly report a sense of loss in being separated from their siblings (Drapeau et al 2000). In addition, separated siblings may even cease to regard each other as family members. Recent Victorian research has found that children in foster care tend to exclude their separated biological siblings in representations of their 'family' and are more likely to include foster siblings (Gardner 1996).

SIBLING AND CAREGIVER VIEWS

There is a growing literature on children's views of being placed with and without their siblings and a similar literature on adults who were separated from their siblings during childhood. The majority of this writing emphasises the need of children from disrupted families to maintain continuous

relationships with siblings (see review in Kosonen 1994).

O'Leary and Schofield (1994) cite several British studies which found that placement with siblings is mostly valued by children and that separation from siblings is usually associated with strong feelings of loss, grief and bewilderment.

An issue which is only rarely discussed in the literature is the willingness and ability (in terms of space and other resources) of foster parents to care for large sibling groups, especially where the children present very challenging behaviours.

Thomas et al's (1999) research with British children in adoptive placements showed a range of views towards siblings and the desire to see them – however, the majority seemed to value the contact they had and often wanted more of it. Although one child was adamant that she did not want any contact with her siblings placed elsewhere, and some children seemed content not to have contact, other children without any contact very much wanted contact to be established.

In Kosonen's qualitative research with children in placement, she found that, even when children did not actually want to live with their siblings, they still wanted them to be close by, including as close as next door. In addition, the children in the study wanted a close relationship with their siblings in adult life, to live nearby and to share activities with them (Kosonen 1999).

Accounts written by adults about the search for, subsequent contact with, or inability to find siblings who they had not seen since early childhood (or may never have seen), convey the deep

desire to relate to a sibling, the poignancy of the search and the intricacy of these relationships (Hodgkins 1999; Pavlovic & Mullender 1999; Prynne 1999; Shobha & Marylin 1999). Similarly, first hand accounts by caregivers of raising siblings placed together at an older age convey the complexities of undertaking this kind of placement (Wilkins 1999).

PRACTICE GUIDELINES

Given the lifelong importance of sibling relationships, and the necessity to make decisions about separating siblings or maintaining them together, it is tempting to believe that there might be a formula for getting it right. Unfortunately, this is not a simple matter.

Nevertheless, some guidelines do emerge from the research and practice literature.

Firstly, early judgements, which may be unavoidable and made at a time of crisis, should be reviewed very quickly (within a few weeks), so that they do not 'become part of the drift, or judgement creep, that develops into long term strategies' (Hollows & Nelson 2000, p. 9). It must be kept in mind that decisions about separating siblings can impact on the child's entire life, because 'the lack of contact between siblings during childhood significantly decreases the likelihood that contact will be maintained during adulthood' (Drapeau et al, 2000, p. 84).

Secondly, although there are circumstances in which the separation of siblings may be seen as the only possible choice, these should be seen as being more likely due to a lack of resources rather than an assessment of the siblings' individual needs.

Thirdly, there are many ways in which siblings can be kept together, or reunited. When this option is impossible, there are also many strategies for assisting siblings to maintain contact with each other and their wider family networks.

Fourthly, it must be recognised that, due to the often fragmented nature of the lives of children in out-of-home care, siblings can hold an even greater importance for these children than for other children living with their families (Kosonen 1999) and may in some cases

⁸ This issue is also noted in the work of Fischer (1999).

be more important than relationships with birth parents (Harrison 1999).

Accordingly, when decisions about placements are being made, children need to be consulted about their relationships with their siblings and if they would like to remain together. Whether or not this is possible, children do need to be asked (Hollows & Nelson 2000; Mullender 1999b).

CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH MAY WARRANT SEPARATION

According to Fahlberg (1991, p. 275), separation of siblings should only occur in exceptional circumstances, ie, when keeping them together would interrupt a normal parent-child relationship; mean that one child's needs would not be met; maintain a destructive relationship (after attempts to normalise it); or threaten someone's safety.

This does not take into account some of the very real practical difficulties which professionals encounter in placing children belonging to larger sibling groups or placing children at times of crisis. An issue which is only rarely discussed in the literature is the willingness and ability (in terms of space and other resources) of foster parents to care for large sibling groups, especially where the children present very challenging behaviours. Also at stake is the presence of other children in the foster home (Fischer 1999).

Bearing this in mind, the practice research is clear that some of the criteria used by workers for separating siblings are not well founded.

Firstly, it is important to recognise that sibling rivalry is common in sibling groups, that it is not necessarily associated with destructive jealousy and hostility, and that its effects may only be evident over time (Hegar 1988).

Secondly, separating siblings because of a concern that the emotional coalition between siblings will interfere with the creation of new relationships within the foster family, should not be an issue in placements which are envisaged to be short term (Begun 1995).

Similarly, just because siblings appear very disturbed, this does not automatically indicate separation. Begun (1995, p. 244) states:

Family therapy approaches would indicate that it is important to utilize the sibling subsystem as a therapeutic milieu for resolving these issues, rather than forcing each individual child to accomplish resolution in isolation. Separated siblings will have no opportunity to resolve the pre-existing conflicts or restructure the roles which may have made separation seem desirable. They may need an opportunity to experience being siblings without the influence of disharmonious modeling by the parents from whose care they were removed ... in the long run, providing extensive family therapy with the sibling subsystem intact may prove more successful (than separating the siblings).

... sibling relationships are very likely to be of lifelong importance, in terms of both identity and support, and ... these relationships should be nurtured whether or not siblings live together.

Fourthly, separation should not occur simply because an older sibling has a caretaking role towards a younger one, as this is part of many sibling relationships (Hegar 1988), particularly in non-Anglo Celtic cultures (Prevatt Goldstein 1999).

Finally, even when siblings are found to be sexually involved with each other, separation may not necessarily be the only option (Hegar 1988)⁹ – as Begun (1995, p. 246) states 'separation itself is not a therapeutic intervention'. Indeed, separation may simply mean that the sexual behaviour is re-enacted with other children or that it is resumed if the children are subsequently reunited. Whether or not siblings are separated, therapy for the siblings as a group

appears to be the most relevant course of action.

ASSESSMENT OF SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

Assessment creates a space in which issues can be thought about carefully. It has the effect of taking everyone's concerns seriously and engaging everyone (including the children) in the process of thinking about the children's needs (Hindle 1995). It is crucial that both children and birth parents are adequately consulted about their wishes regarding placement, even if these cannot be fulfilled (O'Leary & Schofield 1994).

Some professionals advocate a routine, comprehensive, multi agency assessment, including an intensive child psychiatric assessment (Kosonen 1996; O'Leary & Schofield 1994), for each child as well as the sibling group.

Fischer (1999) proposes an analysis of the following four factors in assessment – the children's experience of parenting and family life, relationships between the children, the circumstances of the placement (number of children and length of placement) and administrative factors (availability of carers and capacity of the agency to resource the placement).

She goes on to propose at least a time limited placement (eg, three weeks) where the children would be placed together (if at all possible), to allow for an intensive assessment of the children's needs.

The UK Department of Health (1991) promotes a detailed assessment framework, 'Sibling Relationships - A Check List', to facilitate better understanding of sibling relationships (including those between children who have lived together but who are not biologically related). This can be used to compare sibling relationships over time and is likely to provide useful information relevant to placement decisions.

PRACTICE POSSIBILITIES FOR KEEPING SIBLINGS TOGETHER

There are undoubted policy and resource implications of placing, and maintaining together, large sibling groups (Fischer 1999; Kosonen 1996).

⁹ In these situations, separation should be based on assessment of the level of stress experienced by each of the children (Drapeau et al, 2000).

Some writers advocate the re-establishment of small residential units for sibling placement (Tomlinson 1999), while others have more radical suggestions such as paid caregivers replacing the birth parents in the children's own home on a long term basis (Begun 1995).¹⁰

Some of the factors which may increase the likelihood of keeping sibling groups together, or in contact, are:

- Enhanced payments for foster parents caring for sibling groups (Beckett 1999; Begun 1995);
- Foster carers able to care for large sibling groups should be reserved for these families (Kosonen 1996);
- Active professional involvement in assisting caregivers with the promotion of attachment behaviour (Head & Elgar 1999);
- A clear framework for planning sibling placements (Beckett 1999);
- The possibility of children joining a long-term alternative family in a staged way, ie, at different times, to ease the transition for the new family (Head & Elgar 1999; Mullender 1999a; O'Leary & Schofield 1994). Neil's (1999) finding that young siblings may come into care sequentially leads to the possibility of foster or adoptive families being informed at the time of the first placement that there may be later children coming into care. This strategy is also suggested by other researchers, especially in situations where each of the children has significant emotional needs (Dance & Rushton 1999; Head & Elgar 1999). Similarly, children who have already been admitted to separate care situations could be reunited in this way (Kosonen 1996).

WORKING WITH SEPARATED SIBLINGS

Just as there are resource implications in placing siblings together, there are also resource implications in adequately supporting separated siblings if contact between siblings and information on the extended family are to be maintained regularly. Sufficient time, worker supervision and other support are needed in recognition that work with siblings in different placements is intensive and complex (Beckett 1999).

If siblings need to be separated, it may be possible to place them in existing networks of carers (Owen 1999; Prevatt Goldstein 1999) or in the same geographical area and/or the same school (Hegar 1988). In addition, if at all possible, the same social worker should work with different siblings to maximise contact between them (Hegar 1988; O'Leary & Schofield 1994).

When siblings have already been separated, maintaining frequent contact between them is seen as crucial, even though this is undoubtedly resource intensive (Drapeau et al 2000; Kosonen 1996). Similarly, information about the children's extended families, including siblings, should be kept up to date on files, as well as given to the children verbally (Kosonen 1996; Mullender 1999b).

Other means of maintaining contact might include joint therapy, joint activities, shared holidays or respite care with each other's families (Hegar 1988).

CONCLUSION

This paper has considered a substantial amount of research literature concerning sibling relationships and the complexities involved in sibling placements.

On the basis of the literature located, it would seem that there is no simple formula for making decisions about the balance between a child's need for attachment to a parent figure and the need to remain with siblings. What is clear is that sibling relationships are very likely to be of lifelong importance, in terms of both identity and support, and that these relationships should be nurtured whether or not siblings live together. However, given that the

research shows that contact tends to lessen over time when siblings are separated, and that separation is not necessarily appropriate even when children appear very disturbed, separation should only be a consideration of last resort.

Sibling placements, where the children have high emotional needs, raise complex issues and almost certainly have resource implications. Measures such as added financial and other support to caregivers and the provision of intensive support and/or therapy to the children, may appear costly. However, the serious lifelong consequences of separation are also likely to have profound emotional and social costs – and therefore resource implications – which impact on individuals, families and communities in both the short and longer term. ♦

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¹⁰ While Begun (1995) advocates the removal of the birth parent/s in these situations, it may also be possible to consider different models of support, in which the paid caregiver/s work in collaboration with birth parents over a longer period than is commonly funded in intensive family support models of care.

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