

Placing sibling groups together in foster care

The Oz Child sibling group placement program

Fiona Fischer

Sibling groups placed in out-of-home care are often separated due to the relatively small number of caregivers who are able to care for large sibling groups, as well as the individual needs of the children. This article briefly explores the complexities of sibling placement within the international, national and Victorian contexts. It continues with a description of the Oz Child Sibling Group Placement Program which was implemented in Victoria's Southern Region to place sibling groups of three or more children together in foster care. The results of a review of the program are presented, including referral statistics, placement data and caregiver feedback. The article concludes with the consideration of recommendations for change as a result of the review.

The development of the sibling group placement program at Oz Child has been in response to the significant changes that have occurred in the out-of-home care sector. The Victorian child welfare legislation, the Children and Young Persons Act (1989), places an emphasis on the need to reduce the numbers of children in institutional settings, and only using out-of-home placements as a 'last resort' (Community Services Victoria 1992, p.33).

Furthermore, the introduction of the policy of de-institutionalisation has caused marked changes to occur in the foster care system. This policy has resulted in a reduction in residential units and group home facilities and a clear shift towards foster care as the preferred model of alternative care (for all children, including large sibling groups). Previously, large sibling groups were placed in a family group home or residential care facility, or the children were separated and placed across a number of foster families. However, there has been a move away from this model of out-of-home care and a subsequent downsizing of the residential care field. Furthermore, there has been a greater emphasis on the foster care / home based care system as the most appropriate model for the placement of children.

Given this, the Department of Human Services has shifted funding previously directed towards residential care to foster care in an attempt to fill the gap for sibling placements. In 1998, Oz Child Family and Children's Services – Foster Care received specific funding from the Department of Human

Services for the development of a sibling group placement program. This was an attempt to place large sibling groups (three or more children) in foster care / home based care.

POLICY RELATING TO THE PLACEMENT OF SIBLINGS

The international context

From the American policy and legislative context, Smith (1996) indicates that,

... placing siblings together when they must enter family foster care is either mandated by state law or is the strong preference of both voluntary and public child welfare agencies (p.357).

Ward (1984) refers to the standards of the Child Welfare League of America (1978) which states that,

... brothers and sisters should be placed together unless it would be of greater benefit for them to be placed in separate homes (p.321).

However it is highlighted that the problem for workers is in the determination of 'greater benefit'. The standards also consider that in each placement decision, 'the loss of siblings must be weighed for each child against the benefit of a permanent home' (Ward 1984, p.322).

Smith (1996) further notes that,

... although there is no current legal recognition of siblings' rights, legal decisions have viewed keeping siblings together to be in the best interests of the children (p.358).

Fiona Fischer
Team Leader, Sibling Group Placement Program
Oz Child Services
PO Box 7157, Dandenong, Vic 3175
Tel: 03 9791 5423
Email: f.fischer@ozchild.com.au

This author highlights an administrative directive issued in New York State, which reminded caseworkers that,

... state law mandates placement together of siblings and half siblings unless such a placement would be contrary to the health, safety or welfare of one or more of the children (Smith 1996).

Again the concept of placement together, unless contrary to health, safety and welfare, leaves this legislation and subsequent directives open to interpretation and subject to the assessment of the case worker, who may also be influenced by their own bias, beliefs and views about the benefits of placing sibling groups together.

Legislation and policies in the United Kingdom also attempt to address the issue of sibling placements. Kosonen (1996) notes that,

... the separation of siblings in care or accommodation is contrary to both the statutory requirements in Scotland, England and Wales, and to the stated policy of many agencies to place siblings together or, if this is not possible, as close to each other as practicable (p.810).

Bilson and Barker (1993) refer to the British child welfare legislation, The Children Act (1989), which

... stresses the importance of contact between children in care or accommodation and their families (p.307).

The practice guidance on the Act states that,

... for the majority of children there will be no doubt that their interests will be best served by efforts to sustain or create links with their natural families (Bilson & Barker 1993, p.307).

It is further noted that The Children Act (1989) (Section 23(7)(b)) requires that children be accommodated together whenever reasonably practicable and consistent with the child's welfare. However, Bilson and Barker (1993) consider that,

... the Act, its regulations and its guidance documents make virtually no direct reference to siblings as a key or central area for maintenance of links,

and that the legislation focuses in the main on the rights of parents and other adults to have contact (p.307).

It is further raised by Bilson and Barker (1993) that,

... issues about the placement of sibling groups are not specifically included in the key areas to be considered at the child's review... it is as if, despite the emphasis on family links, contact and placement of siblings is of little or no special significance and can be subsumed within references to other relatives. Whilst this would be less important if the practice of placing children in sibling groups was common, ... such practice is far from the norm and the majority of children with siblings in care are separated from some or all of them (p.307).

The Australian context

It is important to examine Australian policy and practice relating to foster care and siblings in care. With respect to policy at a national level, the 'Baseline Out-of-Home Care Standards' were developed in late 1995 by the Standing Committee of Community Services and Income Security Administrators (Commonwealth of Australia). These standards were developed in consultation with relevant peak bodies, consumer groups, non-government organisations and government agencies relating to child welfare. The document was designed to provide a framework for the implementation of a core set of minimum standards consistent across States and Territories. It was considered that these standards would consolidate Australian and international best practice and establish baseline standards for out-of-home care, which may further inform program development.

Similar to the issue raised by Bilson and Barker in the United Kingdom, these standards make no direct reference to the placement of siblings in alternative care. It appears that this aspect of the child's life would be considered with respect to standard (1): case management, the purpose of which is 'to ensure that each child/young person who requires out-of-home care receives a service which is planned and reliable and which meets his or her needs in the most appropriate manner'. The supporting standard (1.2) states that

A CASE EXAMPLE – SCENARIO 1

This is a fictitious case example, which may be reflective of the daily work practice of protective, and foster care workers, and the experience of many carers. Unfortunately, it may also be the experience for many children.

Annie (aged 5) has a brother Luke (aged 4) and a sister Sarah (aged 13 months). The young children accompany their parents to a regional Child Protection office, the parents request help, admitting their drug dependency and accommodation issues. They seek a placement for the three children – if possible together.

Later, as she wakes in a strange bed, in a strange room, alone, Annie reflects to herself on the happenings of the previous day.

"Mummy and Daddy talked to some ladies. I tried to listen to the grown ups but I didn't hear everything. Mummy and Daddy looked very sad. Mummy told us she needed help and that we are going to stay somewhere else, like a holiday. Mummy tells me I am going to sleep at another lady's house tonight, I ask if Luke and Sarah are coming too, but the worker lady says 'No, you are going to a different house, there is no-one who can take all three children. Because Luke and Sarah are the smallest they will go together and because you are biggest you can go on your own'. I say nothing but I feel terrible inside, I don't want to cry because I am a big girl but I can't help it – I don't want to be the biggest and all on my own.

After what seems like a long time, I see Luke and Sarah. Mummy and Daddy were supposed to come too but they must have forgotten. Luke is very angry – he hits me and tells me he hates me. Sarah looks at me strangely. The worker ladies say, 'Lucky they are not placed together – what a handful for one carer'.

CASE EXAMPLE – SCENARIO 2

An alternative placement experience for Annie and her siblings.

Annie wakes in a strange bed, in a strange room; she looks across and sees Luke in the bed and Sarah still asleep in the cot. Annie reflects upon the happenings of the previous day.

'Mummy tells me I am going to sleep at another lady's house tonight. I ask if Luke and Sarah are coming too, and the worker lady says 'Yes, you can all go together to Julie's house'. Although I am very frightened it seems better that we will be together and I can still look after every-one. Mummy and Daddy leave and Luke screams – I tell him it will be O.K and he stops screaming.

After what seems like a long time, I still live at Julie's house. Luke and Sarah still live here too – and so does our new baby brother Lee. When he was born Mum still needed help so Julie said he could live with us too. Julie has told me that looking after the other kids is her job but I can still help. Now I go to kinder, so I only help when I am not busy!

the 'agency will ensure that the principles of continuity of significant relationships' and standard (1.4) states that 'the individual service plan for each child/young person will incorporate the individual life needs in order to maximise the individual's potential, these include family and significant relationships, social and emotional well-being' (Baseline Out-of-Home Care Standards 1995, p. 7)

The Victorian context

The legislation which directs the child welfare system in Victoria is the Children and Young Persons Act 1989 and the Children and Young Person's (Amendment) Act 1992. As with the national standards, the importance of maintaining family connections and links are stressed, however, no direct

reference is made with respect to siblings.

The policy and service standards for the Oz Child sibling group placement program, as outlined in the service agreement between the Department of Human Services and Oz Child, were developed in accordance with the Departmental Instructions relating to Community Services (Sept. 1991) and the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care Services (otherwise known as the Baseline Out-of-Home Care Standards, 1995). The Departmental Instructions relating to Community Services (Practice Standards Manual Sept. 1991) in Section Six sets out the information and standards of practice relating to policy and practice procedures. It is in this section that sibling placements are addressed.

It is noted in these practice standards that 'whilst it is protective services' preferred practice for siblings to be placed in the same setting, there are times when separation is inevitable'. It is further noted that,

... such a decision should not be made on the basis of unavailable resources, however, there will be times when decisions have to be made in the context of whether or not continued waiting for a sibling placement will be more detrimental than seeking separate placements (Departmental Instructions relating to Community Services, Sept. 1991, p.6(2)).

These guidelines also offer factors for consideration with respect to maintenance or separation of sibling groups and in assessing the strength of the sibling attachment.

OZ CHILD SIBLING GROUP PLACEMENT PROGRAM

The Oz Child Sibling Group Placement Program aims to provide substitute care for family groups of at least three children with a foster family. The program is considered to be a specialised foster care placement service, which enables children/young people to live in a family environment, and is an alternative to institutional care.

The project was first piloted at Oz Child - Family and Children's Services Moorabbin (previously known as Bayside Foster Care) in 1996-1997. The Department of Human Services, in conjunction with Oz Child Family and Children's Services developed the initial program service plan for the 1996 pilot project. At this time it outlined that the service aim was to 'provide two placements of three or more children at any one time in reception, emergency or long term care'. The service standards were developed to be in accordance with the Departmental Instructions relating to Community Services (Sept. 1991) and the National Out-of-home Based Care standards. The legislation directing the program was noted as the Children and Young Person's Act 1989 and Children and Young Person's (Amendment) Act 1992. The program was subsequently refunded for the 1997-1998 period. The program continued to be based at the Moorabbin office with a similar service agreement and target.

In July 1998, in line with the amalgamation of the Oz Child foster care programs, the sibling group placement program was expanded to encompass all the Oz Child foster care programs (Dandenong, Mornington and Moorabbin). The Department of Human Services modified the service agreement and target, envisaging that the program would cater for five sibling groups of three or more children/young people at any one time within the Southern Region.

The program fits within the foster care service and is funded for 1.2 EFT workers. This has been structured to provide for a Team leader (.2 EFT) and five case workers, each being allocated one day per week for a sibling group placement (5 placements x .2 EFT).

Carers for the sibling groups are recruited from the general foster care program pool and have therefore already been assessed, trained and had experience in foster care. Initially, carers were made aware of the program through an article featured in the foster carers newsletter, and foster care workers approached those whom they felt had the capacity to care for three or more siblings. Whilst they have been identified as suitable sibling group

carers, they also remain available for general foster care.

In recognition of the difficulty in fitting three or more additional children into a standard car, and the greater travel demands placed on a foster care family by a sibling group, funds are allocated from the program's annual budget for the provision of a 7-8 person vehicle for each family, including running costs. Additional supports are offered to carers on an individual basis, tailored to specific placement needs as agreed between the family and the foster care worker. Contingency funds are available to cover the provision of supports such as:

- child care (either in home or at child care centre);
- in home support, eg, cleaning, help with meals, bathing;
- clothing costs;
- costs of children's activities, eg, sports, crafts, music;
- medical costs or pharmacy requirements, eg, medication, nappies.

Foster care workers are available to assist with transport if required, eg, taking a child to an appointment.

REVIEW OF THE OZ CHILD SIBLING GROUP PLACEMENT PROGRAM

In June 1999, a review of the program was undertaken by Fiona Fischer (Sibling Group Placement Program Team Leader) and Susan Pitman (Oz Child Senior Research Officer). The review considered the performance of the program and also explored issues and recommendations for future service delivery.

The review revealed that during a ten month period (1 July 1998 - 21 May 1999), there were a total of 115 foster care referrals to Oz Child for sibling groups of three or more children. Of these referrals, 48 were eligible for the sibling group placement program (as per the criteria: three or more children; DHS involvement; referral from DHS accommodation and support; emergency; reception; or transitional placement).

The referrals to the sibling group placement program can be further defined into three types of foster care placements requested. Of the referrals 56% were for reception placements (during which time DHS sought to prove a protection application), 6% were for transitional placements (protection application proven period of case planning) and 38% for emergency placements (DHS involved, yet to seek a court order).

Referrals came from 22 suburbs across the Southern Region. The children referred to the sibling group program ranged between 0 and 15 years with 63% aged 6 years or under.

There were 20 children placed through the sibling group program at the time of the review. The largest age group is children aged 6 years while 70% are aged 6 years or under. The mean age of all children in the program was 6.25 years. The children in the program were predominantly female (70%).

The total number of children placed during the period under review is 70. The target for the daily average number of children to be placed through the program is 15, which is the equivalent to five placements of three children. The target was achieved in October 1998 with an average of 15.7 children. The target was exceeded each subsequent month with the over-performance being greatest in March at 165%, with a daily average for that month of 24.8 children. The cumulative average over the 10 months is 16 children per day.

THE CARERS' PERSPECTIVE

As part of the review of the sibling group placement program, eight carers were interviewed by phone, four of whom currently had sibling groups and four of whom had had placements in the past. As the sample of carers interviewed was small it is hard to generalise on the basis of information gathered. The carers were invited to give their views on the following: length of placement, number of children in placement, workload as influenced by size of the sibling group, impact on carers' own children, placement support, worker support, satisfaction regarding levels of support, carer payments, accommodation issues, and

willingness to accept another sibling group placement.

Length of placements

At the time of the evaluation, all of the placements were relatively long term, ranging from 5 months to a year. In two of these placements the original referral had been for a short period but the children's stay had been extended well beyond this. In one case the request had been for a fortnight and the children were still in care ten months later. The carer indicated that she viewed it as being a long term placement, which she would like to 'stick with' until a Permanent Care placement was arranged because 'every move damages them more'. However she also commented that she would have 'thought twice' about extending the placement if she had realised its actual length.

Size of sibling group

When asked whether the size of the group made a difference, the consensus was that the impact was more related to the degree of emotional and behavioural disturbance within the group than the number of children involved. A carer with a sibling group of five, for example, had no problems, whereas a sibling group placement of three had broken down, largely due to the difficulties of dealing with the behaviours of two of the children (with the case plan being to move them into individual placements in an effort to more effectively meet their needs). A sibling group was seen by one carer to be an advantage as it provided a van, which in turn enabled them to do more as a family, whereas a placement of two children created difficulties because it was not possible to all fit in the family car. Another preferred the larger groups because she felt 'it worked better when the house was full' and it enabled them to 'bounce their needs off each other' and to 'grow through each other's development'.

The amount of work involved in caring for sibling groups was mentioned by five carers, particularly in terms of the demands on the carer's time. Each of these carers had had placements which had lasted more than a week. As one carer put it, 'you have to be prepared to do nothing - it has to be your life'. Another said, 'you have to be there for

all their needs and to be prepared to sacrifice your time for the kids' needs'. All but one of the carers interviewed had a partner or spouse, each of whom helped with the care of the children. In addition two carers had adult children living with them who provided additional support.

Impact on carers' children

All but one of the carers had other dependent children living with them while the exception had an adult daughter living at home. One carer decided to take a break as she felt her children were missing out due to the demands fostering made on her time. Her assessment was that the impact was mostly to do with how 'annoying' the foster children's behaviour was for her children. However she saw benefits for both sets of children when a placement worked well. The impact on her own children of the very disturbed behaviour of a set of siblings was a significant factor in another carer indicating she was no longer able to continue with the placement.

Placement supports

Vehicle

Carers believed that the provision of the multi-person vehicle (leased by Oz Child) was essential to maintain the placement. One carer stated the vehicle is:

... a godsend. You can battle through with the housework and the lack of sleep if you have independent transport and can go on outings.

Payment for petrol was also considered to be important, particularly as several carers commented on the amount of travel required of them with meeting the demands of three additional children.

Child care

Creche and family day care provided respite for carers and helped them when the placement was extended beyond the original planned length of time. These supports also provided additional opportunities for the children to learn and consolidate social skills.

Babysitting was used by a number of carers, the only comment being from one carer that there was an irony in the fact that the babysitter was paid more

for two nights' work than the carer family received for the whole week.

In-home support

The longer term carers used home help and cleaning services to support the placement. This was seen as an important support for, as one carer commented, 'otherwise you'd never get anything done'. Another said that in-home support was particularly important in the early stages of the placement when 'the work was very intensive'.

Other practical supports

The children in one placement had received a number of specialist services to address their developmental and behavioural problems. These included speech therapy, occupational therapy, tutoring and input from a behavioural psychologist. Another had needed to use a Laundromat to cope with the washing created by a bed-wetter, while a third carer had bunk beds installed and received funds towards the cost of repairs to her washing machine and contributions towards bills.

All but one carer was satisfied with the level of support provided. The exception believed that the level of support provided was insufficient given the difficulty of the placement and that she had been financially disadvantaged by taking it on. Three carers identified additional support, which they did not get but would have liked. The support was all of a hands-on nature, namely someone to help with cooking meals, transporting, homework, housework and/or putting the children to bed.

Carer payments

The level of carer payment was not a problem for the majority of carers. One stated, 'I can manage to provide what the kids need on the payment - it's not there to create an income'. However, another carer commented that it is sometimes difficult for carers to finance the initial outlay needed. She felt that an up-front payment of around \$200 would alleviate some of these financial difficulties for sibling group carers. One of the two carers who expressed a concern about the level of payment was the carer cited above in relation to the payment of babysitters. The other carer felt she was financially out of pocket

because she cared for a sibling group. She said that the carer payment was insufficient to cover the food bill and tripled utilities cost for three children. This carer felt the payment should be doubled in recognition of both the extra costs and the work involved.

Willingness to take on another placement

The program has been able to identify sufficient carers from within the general pool of foster carers to respond to the referrals. However, the fact that three of the eight carers interviewed were not prepared to make themselves available again indicates the difficulty of finding and retaining carers of sufficient experience and motivation to take on a demanding sibling group placement, particularly if it is to be for more than a limited number of days.

The commitment to keeping siblings together despite the difficulties involved came through very clearly in some of the comments made. One carer said,

the program is so important. I'm glad it is off the ground as it is so important to keep kids together. If they get separated their sense of loss would be devastating.

Another commented,

I believe that it is much better to place children together. They are more at ease and comfortable together.

RECOMMENDATIONS / PROGRAM CHANGES FOLLOWING THE REVIEW

A number of issues were identified through the review of the Oz Child sibling group placement program. The issues and recommendations were then raised with the Department of Human Services and a number of changes were introduced to best meet the needs of both the children and the carers.

With regards to placement length, the pattern, which was noted in the review, was that of placements being extended often for significant periods beyond the initial time negotiated with carers. The extension of placements well beyond the initial agreement reinforces for the carers the lack of certainty in placement length and further highlights the difficulty with throughput. Both these factors point to a need for a more

structured review process to avoid placement drift whilst also considering the ability of the current placement to meet the needs of the sibling group both as a family unit and as individuals.

It is notable that the Oz Child sibling group program had minimal placement changes during the period of review. Furthermore, the program ensured that any placement changes or decisions to split siblings had been carefully planned following thorough consultation with all concerned parties, including the foster care worker, foster family, family of origin and Department of Human Services staff. The lack of moves for these children and the stability the program offered is significant. However, in some instances the behaviour of the children was extremely difficult to manage and a more formal assessment may have offered direction regarding their needs and whether maintaining the sibling group together was in fact the best option for the care of the children.

Therefore, the inter-related issues of throughput, uncertainty in placement length and placement change could be addressed by considering the initial placement as a time-limited period for assessment. As highlighted in the literature, the initial placement is important in that it allows siblings to remain together at the crisis time of separation (Kosonen, 1994; 1996; Hindle, 1995; Hegar, 1988; Morrison & Brown, 1986). The literature also recommends that an assessment is required to consider the capacity of a placement to meet the needs of the siblings both as a family unit and as individuals (Bilson & Barker, 1992-93; Morrison & Brown, 1986).

Using a sibling group placement to focus on assessment requires a shift in perspective away from regarding it as an open-ended solution in which movement of siblings is regarded as disruption. However such a shift will enhance the potential of the program to offer best practice by ensuring that the needs of the individual children in the sibling group are met, whether together or apart, and may minimise the potential for a later placement disruption. It will also provide carers with a more certain time frame for the placement, prevent carer burnout and improve retention of carers.

Overall carers were satisfied with the level of placement support provided through the contingency fund. The two largest components utilised were child care and in-home support. Both of these appear to be largely related to the age of children in placement in that child care was required for the younger children, and housework was more difficult when the children were not at school during the day. Furthermore, these children were often very needy and many of them have a developmental delay which puts additional demands on the carer's time. One problem which was identified was the budgeting difficulty for some carers when they needed to make purchases of food and other articles at the commencement of a placement, but were not reimbursed until 1-2 weeks later. This could be overcome by workers being more purposeful in determining whether an establishment sum is required from the contingency fund.

The children in the sibling group placements are often very needy and may be significantly traumatised by the circumstances which brought them into foster care. The task of taking on the care of these children as a group requires a considerable commitment and expertise, which is not recognised in any monetary way. While most carers do not see themselves as needing to be recompensed beyond the costs incurred by having the children in their home, there are sound arguments for acknowledging the value of their considerable volunteer effort through an enhancement of their payments. This would also be a contribution towards the additional costs incurred in caring for a large sibling group such as wear and tear on the home and its contents.

In recognition of the value of the carer's contribution and to enhance placement stability and carer motivation, particularly in longer term placements, Oz Child now provides enhanced carer payments. ♦

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