Sibling relationships in the care system
Attachment, separation and contact issues

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A number of key authors maintain sibling relationships are absolutely crucial when considering out-of-home care options, while policy derived from theory and practice must guarantee that the best interests of the child(ren) are taken into account. Furthermore, placing siblings together is most likely to be a protective factor against placement breakdown. This being the case, care plans should focus on ensuring sibling connectedness and the maintenance of emotional bonds into adulthood.

This paper discusses current out-of-home care policy and practice in Western Australia which incorporates research from (1) attachment theory, (2) family structure, (3) cultural diversity, (4) development, (5) contact, (6) care planning, and (7) long-term care to provide guidance when considering siblings entering the out-of-home care system. The authors contend that this approach improves decision making practice and is consistent with new legislation – the Children and Community Services Act 2004, which is expected to be introduced in Western Australia on 1 March 2006, and which has as its underlying principle the best interests of the child.

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ATTACHMENT AND FAMILY SYSTEMS

Attachment can be defined as an affectional tie to another specific individual but is not a term to be applied to any transient relationship or one based solely on dependency. Attachment occurs when a child seeks security and comfort in the relationship with a person (Cassidy & Shaver 1999). The child is considered securely attached if a sense of security is achieved – it is the seeking of security which is the defining feature of successful bonding of children to parents and parent figures (Rolfe 2004). Further, clinicians and researchers have recognised how closely related the family system is to styles of learnt attachment. For example, Family Systems Theory describes the structures in which we live and places attachment theory at the root of all relationships within the family, providing insight into how carers shape children's social and emotional development.

According to Carlson (2003), learnt styles of attachment during early parent-child-sibling relationships and early learning patterns can shape the attachment style which carries into the next generation. Therefore, the importance of a consistent parental figure and good parenting in infancy is essential to a child's sense of security and later well-being. A child is at risk of social and emotional maladjustment into later life when early attachments are insecure through the absence of a stable carer, when the carer fails to respond consistently to the child's needs, or when the child's trust in the carer is broken (Kobak 1999; Talbot & McHale 2003). Some authors (Carlson, cited in Dozier et al. 1999; Masten & Coatsworth, cited in Marshall & Watt 1999; Perry et al, cited in Dozier et al. 1999) contend that sustained stress, trauma or emotional neglect early in life can affect brain function, including the capacity to experience empathy and the ability to regulate emotions, and may lead to the development of disorganised attachment in childhood. However, the variance in attachment status or disorders is not explained by parenting styles alone. It is better understood in the context of the whole family emotional dynamic that directly influences children's working models of relationships (Byng-Hall 1999).

Only by about the age of 12 years do children reach the most advanced stage of role understanding to correctly deconstruct or qualify the concepts that they have formed about family roles (Talbot & McHale 2003). According to Mackey (2003), adolescents who have experienced insecure

or disrupted attachment can be the most difficult to work with because many have denied their needs for connection with their parents and present themselves as invulnerable.

Clinical experience and studies suggest that improvement in behaviours and relationships can take place. However, early intervention is the key to minimising the long-term and permanent effects of traumatic events on the child's brain development to improve a child's physical, cognitive and emotional abilities (Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption and Dependent Care 2000; McCain & Mustard 1999). Both research and practice experience have demonstrated that children are able to reduce the degree of risk by their own individual characteristics, despite negative actions by adults (Marshall & Watt 1999). These characteristics include high intelligence, good communication and language skills, ability to get on well with teachers and peers, normal hearing, problem solving skills and an ability to achieve academically (Masten & Coatsworth, cited in Marshall & Watt 1999).

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OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENT AND ATTACHMENT

The out-of-home care system can add to attachment difficulties and loss experienced by children and young people who enter care (Fahlberg 1991). Movement from foster home to foster home is not uncommon. Placement movement and breakdown can disintegrate peer and other social networks, shatter fragile trust in the permanence of adult relationships, evoke memories of earlier separations and encourage emotional disturbance and learned indifference (Delfabbro, Barber & Cooper 2000; Harper 1998; Poehlmann & Fiese 2001; Thoburn 1998).

Abrupt moves from one foster home to another should be the exception rather than the rule although it is acknowledged there are circumstances which may require a child to be moved quickly. Often it is the placement agency which can diminish the value of relationships by not providing adequate supervision and support to foster parents who believe emergency moves are the only solution for coping with a problem child (Fahlberg 1991). Others (Australian

Foster Care Association 2004; Lowe & Murch 2002; Penzerro & Lein 1995) have noted the danger that short-term, rather than long-term, solutions are being found to look after such children, even though research identifies that children and young people with conduct disorders display exceptionally clear patterns of alienation because of frequent transitions from placement to placement.

Mullender (1999b) notes that the importance of keeping siblings together at entry into care is a crucial decision-making point for care managers and practitioners. Agencies need to consider the necessity for alternative placements that can assist in placing and keeping siblings together.

SIBLINGS: RELATIONSHIPS AND CULTURE

Siblings have been defined as those with degrees of shared history and relationships within 'core' or 'kin' arrangements (Kosonen 1999). The diversity of meanings of brotherhood, sisterhood and cousinship among different ethnic and cultural groups cannot be measured by the western concept of siblings, including half and step siblings (Graham 1999; Prevatt Goldstein 1995, 1999). A child's identification of who is a sibling within 'core' and 'kin' arrangements can be rated differently, in that a sibling may receive a low rating simply indicating low emotional involvement, but the child may still identify that sibling as their sister or brother (Kosonen 1999). Siblings share their identity, according to Elgar and Head (1999), and consequently they are able to offer each other a sense of stability and permanence. Siblings can provide the longest lasting relationships, often for a lifetime (Heger 1988; Kosonen 1994). Such shared experiences, history or culture may also give children a sense of sibling and family identity.

Relationship practices or styles, as typified in current understandings of the attachment literature, may be culturally bound and not translate to those of different cultures (Harwood, Miller & Irizarry 1995). For example, Aboriginal Australians do not necessarily identify as non-Aboriginal regardless of multicultural ancestry and despite past attempts to permanently distance mixed descent children from their heritage (National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families 1997). In response to past practices, Australian States and Territories have enacted legislation or policies to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are placed within their kin and community network as a first preference. Somerlad (cited in National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families 1997) argues that a supportive environment which has been assessed and provided by Aboriginal people is seen as crucial so that a child can identify as Aboriginal. Aboriginal families are extended through a system of kinship and language groups which also

determine the degree of social roles and obligations in the care of children (Telethon Institute for Child Health Research 2004). Essentially blood ties, skin groups, country of birth, totem or marriage and kin classifications will determine who is a sibling (Berndt & Berndt 1983; Collard 2000; Crawford 1989, 2000; Crawford et al. 2000; Forrest & Sherwood 1988).

Graham (1999) suggests that the notion of half-siblings prevalent within theory and practice does not exist within an African-centred worldview. She states that it has become a value-based supposition that is manifested where contact arrangements with half-siblings may be viewed as less important than those with full siblings. She further suggests that the notion of half-siblings is not reflected in the reality of black children, nor does it capture the more complex family relationships which include members not biologically related. It is acknowledged that overseas research on cultural groups does not easily transfer to the Australian context; however, the concept proposed by Graham is worthy of consideration when working with children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent and children from diverse cultural backgrounds.

According to Rolfe (2004), there is a basic tenet that the formation of attachment relationships is universal across cultures but this does not deny that the particular culture into which the child is born influences the way relationships are moulded and expressed. If, as Van Ijzendoorn & Sagi (1999) conclude, attachment theory may claim cross-cultural validity, the selecting of carers who are accepting and respectful of the specific cultural and religious needs of children and their siblings and who have an understanding of the attachment process, attachment needs and how separation affects children (Rolfe 2004) must take precedence.

PLACEMENT – TOGETHER OR SEPARATELY?

The dilemma often facing welfare professionals is to determine whether to place siblings together or apart (Jones & Niblett 1985; Wedge 1999). According to Mullender (1999c), the lack of recorded information about siblings and subsequent placement practice has often resulted in separation without intent or on the basis of assumptions not borne out by research. That siblings matter to each other, even though they have no shared history, is demonstrated in repeated accounts of adults separated as children by adoption, foster care or other trauma in their lives in their quest for a biological connection or lasting familial relationship (National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families 1997; Wedge 1999). Children within sibling groups will have different relationships with each other and these differences need to be assessed and understood by practitioners when making decisions about where children should live, and whether separately or together. Decisions

about placement for siblings need to take into account sibling relationships, involve children as decision makers in their own lives, and make available a range of placement types for siblings as individuals or as a group (Ellison 1999).

Siblings who have had early care experiences resulting in insecure or disrupted attachments can positively attach to another carer who is able to provide a nurturing and secure environment, and sustain attachment to a sibling, even though they are in separate placements. Whether siblings are in care together or in separate placements, maintenance of their attachment to each other is important to their future well-being. Attachment theory appears to support the view that secure infant-mother attachment in early childhood goes hand in hand with harmonious sibling interactions (Berlin & Cassidy 1999).

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The voice of the child is still not being heard (Selwyn 1999; Vicary & Tennant 2005; Vicary et al. 2005) and children's wishes are often not reflected in their placement circumstances (Carter 2004; Kosonen 1999; Wedge 1999). Children and young people in care need to have a voice in the way decisions are made about them, especially where they live and how often they see family members, including siblings (Cashmore 2002). The new Western Australian legislation (Children and Community Services Act 2004) includes a Principle of Child Participation that stipulates children, including siblings, must have the opportunity to have a voice in decisions that impact on their lives. However, the child's and their siblings' safety is paramount at all times, and children need to be informed that, although heard, their wishes may not be acted upon due to concerns for their safety.

It needs to be clear what all the siblings want (Mullender 1999b) and these views should be incorporated into their assessments, decisions and care plans (Australian Foster Care Association 2004; Thomas & Beckford, cited in Lowe & Murch 2002). The key is for practitioners to establish who the children's siblings are and to whom they are emotionally attached before decisions are made about placement (Kosonen 1999; Wedge & Mantle 1991).

It has been suggested (Mullender 1999b) that children are unlikely to have been asked their views apart from

responding to psychological tests, with decisions about their placement more likely to have been influenced by carers, teachers or other adults. Such measures are insufficient for making placement decisions according to Jenkins (1992). Children who lose contact with siblings suffer further emotional loss over and above that already suffered through loss of parents and extended family which can impact on the child's personality development (Jones 1999).

If a child is in placement and other siblings come into care later, the decision to move the child from a placement where there are established attachments, to live with siblings, needs to be carefully considered. Research is limited on the advantages and disadvantages of reuniting siblings, either within their family or in an alternative out-of-home care placement after each sibling has spent time in separate foster homes. However, attachment theory would support consideration for reunion being based on each child's social and emotional development and degree of attachment to the carer.

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Attachment theory alerts us to the important role that all caregivers, parents and others have in contributing to a child's emotional health (Rolfe 2004), and the removal of children from secure placements for the sake of keeping siblings together may lead to blame or self-blame for the loss and separation. When a sibling is subsequently taken into care, it is important to quickly make a decision about reunification or permanent out-of-home care and the maintenance of contact between siblings (Australian Foster Care Association 2004).

While not all siblings are attached to each other, acknowledgment of the sibling connection is important and siblings need to be encouraged to see and be supportive of each other (Mackey 2003; Mullender 1999b, 1999c). However Fratter et al. (1991) found that children placed singly are more likely to lose contact with siblings for good. Bilson and Barker (1992) found almost half the children with siblings outside the care system saw them only irregularly or not at all, and the lack of contact between siblings within the care system was even higher. CREATE Foundation (2004) interviewed 331 Australian children and young people in care regarding their level of sibling contact. Eighty three per cent who did have contact felt unhappy with the amount and wanted more contact with siblings.

FACTORS IMPACTING ON SIBLING PLACEMENTS

Various studies over time have found that sibling placements were no more likely to be disrupted than were single child placements (Barth & Berry 1988). The success of such placements depended on siblings being placed together (Berridge & Cleaver 1987; Thoburn & Rowe 1988) rather than being placed alone. Being placed alone has emerged as a risk factor for placement breakdown (Fratter et al. 1991; Wedge & Mantle 1991). Farmer and Parker (1991) suggest that family restoration may be more successful when one or more siblings are involved, but also noted that the presence of new siblings in the household to which children were returning, decreased the likelihood of success. Others (Beckett 1999; Staff & Fein 1992; Wedge & Mantle 1991) reported no significant statistical difference in the rate of breakdown of placements when siblings were completely separated. However, Wedge and Mantle (1991) found increased contact between children and their natural parents was related to a reduced level of breakdown.

The prevailing view of researchers is that decisions are based on what adults can offer the child, and decisions do not generally incorporate the benefits of the relationship of children with their siblings. Contact is most often in parent-child terms and sibling groups are regarded as a single unit in reports to the court where individuals are singled out as a problem or a threat to the stability of a placement, not as a resource to the other child(ren) (Elgar & Head 1997; Farmer & Pollock 1998; Selwyn 1996). Some separated children displayed grief similar to feelings experienced by relinquishing birth mothers and did not know why different plans had been made for them and their siblings (Harrison 1999; Howe, Sawbridge & Kinings 1992).

Dance and Rushton (1999) examined children in their first year of placement with unrelated families, looking at the possibility of reunion between siblings who had been separated because of the behaviour of one sibling or the level of conflict between the siblings (some siblings were still placed together). The study found that there were no specific factors that differentiated between the separated siblings or those who remained together in the temporary placement despite difficult behaviour or conflict in their relationships. The authors suggest this could be due to factors like the tolerance of carers or practitioner commitment to maintaining sibling ties.

A cohort study of the British and Danish out-of-home care systems found that the lack of specialised placements for siblings was clearly identified by social workers as an impediment to effective sibling continuity planning. There was some evidence that continuity planning seems to increase the likelihood of siblings being placed together (Ellison 1999). The need for assessment frameworks for working with sibling groups, a more systematic approach to recruiting foster carers and adoptive families for sibling

groups, specialist training and support for foster carers, caseload weighting systems to take account of extra demands when working with sibling groups, and research into whether or not separating siblings affected their likelihood of achieving healing and reunification, have been suggested to improve the outcomes for siblings in out-of-home care (Beckett 1999).

Carers (adopters, related and non-related carers, residential workers) need to be trained about the importance of children's contact with relatives, including siblings (Mullender 1999b). In Western Australia, contact will be considered in every care plan as part of concurrent planning to meet a child's need for a sense of identity in the long-term. Concurrent planning is a case management method that provides for a focus on reunification services while simultaneously developing an alternative plan, should it be required (Katz, Spoonemore & Robinson 2000). Concurrent planning begins when a child enters care. If it is determined that return home is not possible, concurrent planning enables a smooth transition in preparing a child for long-term care, with minimum disruption in their lives.

Barnardos (2003) identified the importance of foster carers being selected for their professionalism as the relationship between the child, carers and birth parents can be complex and a potential source of conflict unless realistic plans for contact and exchange of information are set. Further, they recommend that in long-term care arrangements, a range of contact options should be considered, including parents, extended family and siblings. Contact can either support or inhibit a child's attachment (Hess, cited in Barnardos 2003) and the aim of contact needs to differentiate between contact for eventual return to family and contact for continuity of family relationships. Frequency of contact needs to be established at a level that is manageable for all parties and where the age, developmental level and emotional resilience of the child is taken into account (Macaskill, cited in Barnardos 2003). Contact visits should cease only after psychological input which confirms that maintaining face to face contact is causing serious damage to the child (Barnardos 2003).

CONCLUSION

Research since the 1970s examining the histories of children who have experienced out-of-home care, identifies that siblings need to be placed in care together, on entry to out-of-home care, unless there are sound reasons to separate them singly or in groups (Ainsworth & Maluccio 2002; Fischer 2002; O'Neill 2002). The research also confirms that sibling group placements are a protective factor against placement breakdown whereas placement alone emerges as a risk factor for breakdown, together with the likelihood of permanent or long-term loss of contact with siblings.

In planning out-of-home care for children, placement authorities have a responsibility to ensure that sibling genealogy and a register of the whereabouts of all siblings, whether in care, adopted or remaining with parents, is maintained. Placement authorities need to make available a range of care placement options that enable siblings to be placed together. To ensure that siblings do have the opportunity for joint placement, there will need to be a significant shift in the current Australian political environment that would see more resources allocated to increase placement type, placement support and quantity of carers.

The continuity of sibling relationships into adulthood is an essential element in promoting a child's future well-being and, where siblings are unable to be placed together, contact must be maintained. Strategies that support practitioners and carers to promote contact between separated siblings will promote a child's longer term well-being. Practitioners must include the views of children in placement decisions, including who is identified as a sibling. Children's views of who is important in their lives, and with whom they wish to retain a relationship, may differ from the views held by adults. This difference is particularly relevant for children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or culturally and linguistically diverse descent and those who are developmentally challenged.

To ensure that siblings do have the opportunity for joint placement, there will need to be a significant shift in the current Australian political environment that would see more resources allocated to increase placement type, placement support and quantity of carers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The literature discussed in this paper identifies several practical actions placement agencies can implement that will support the placement of siblings and their long-term well-being.

- Contact aimed at eventual return to family should be clearly distinguished from contact designed to ensure continuity and connectedness for children in long-term care, through concurrent planning at the onset of care for reunification with carers/family or long-term care.

- Children and young people need to be engaged wherever possible in determining who they wish to have contact with and the level of that contact.

- Placement authorities should make available a range of care placement options suitable for sibling groups wherever possible and feasible.

- Strategies to promote contact between siblings where separation is the only option need to be developed and resources made available to support carers to achieve this goal.

- Professionals and carers should receive support and training in the care of sibling groups.

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