

SIBLINGS IN FOSTER CARE:
ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICE AND STAFF ATTITUDES

Rebecca L. Hegar, DSW, Assistant Professor
School of Social Work and Community Planning
University of Maryland at Baltimore

Background and Literature Review

Although extensive professional study of the parent/child relationship has fueled efforts to reform child placement practice, the more sparse research into the sibling relationship has yet to have major influence on decisions about placement of siblings. Yet it can be inferred from the existing literature that brothers and sisters are of great importance to many children who enter foster care. The literature review for this study suggests:

- (a) that brothers and sisters have meaning for each other that unrelated children may lack (Cicirelli, 1976);
- (b) that rivalry is associated with particular parental behaviors and with specific characteristics of children, and there is no evidence that destructive levels of conflict are common (Bowerman & Dobash, 1974; Pfouts, 1976);
- (c) that juvenile siblings frequently are able to help each other learn and change (Ranieri, 1978; Rosenberg, 1980);
- (d) that sibling bonds are major sources of support for many adults (Cicirelli, 1980; Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1982), and
- (e) that separation and loss are traumatic events in sibling relationships (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Meyendorf, 1971).

Further, several theorists and researchers suggest that parental absence or disorganization promotes especially close bonding between siblings (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Minuchin et al., 1967).

Given the nature of the problems that lead to placement of children outside their parental homes, it is not surprising that many groups of siblings are found in the foster care population. Despite evidence that that population is made up of family groups of children (Zimmerman, 1982), research has tended to focus on foster children as individual subjects.

Several older British studies are among the limited research concerning siblings in placement (Heinicke & Westheimer, 1965; Isaacs, 1941; Trasler, 1960). Although

they indicate that presence of siblings is associated with favorable adjustment of foster children, these findings cannot be generalized to U.S. foster care populations. The only recent U.S. study lends some support to the British findings, but, due to uncontrolled variables, its conclusions must be regarded as tentative (Aldridge & Cautley, 1976).

Not only is current U.S. research about placement outcome unavailable, but basic descriptive data, such as the proportion of foster children placed separately from siblings, is also lacking. It is not known whether children are separated largely by accident, by design, or by circumstances beyond control of child placement staff. Finally, there is no available data concerning the attitudes of child welfare workers toward the separation of brothers and sisters in foster care.

Study Questions and Methodology

In light of the scant attention to sibling groups in the foster care population, this study addresses the following questions: (a) what is the incidence of separation of siblings in foster care; (b) what characteristics of the children and their placements are associated with separation; (c) what are the attitudes of foster care staff toward sibling relationships; (d) what are their perceptions of the organizational and other barriers to placing siblings together; and, (e) what background characteristics of the workers are associated with specific attitudes or perceptions?

The present study has two primary data sets. The first is a random sample of 202 children from sibling groups who were in the custody of the Louisiana Department of Health and Human Resources on July 15, 1982. Descriptive data about the children were obtained from agency records during August and September 1982, including, for example, their ages, sex, and the types of facilities where they were placed. These and other characteristics of the subjects, their sibling groups, and their placements were analyzed to determine which ones were associated with separation from siblings.

The second part of the study involved surveying the child welfare workers who were administratively responsible for the sample foster children at the point in time the data were obtained. The survey instrument, a precoded, self-administered questionnaire that was designed for this study, asked the workers to agree or disagree with statements of opinion concerning family ties, sibling relationships, and

placement practices. The questionnaire also included personal characteristics of the respondents, so that associations between these independent variables and the subjects' opinions could be tested. The unusually high return rate of 96% was related to agency support for the study and to the distribution and collection procedures used (n=108).

Both data sets were analyzed using bivariate analysis to test the relationships between the dependent and independent variables. Cross-tabulation, Chi Square, and Phi or Cramer's χ^2 measures of strength of association were used for nominal and ordinal level variables; Spearman non-parametric rank-order correlations were done for interval level variables.

Findings

Of the 202 randomly selected children from sibling groups in state custody in Louisiana, 66.8% live with at least one sibling, and 38.1% share placement with their whole family group. Siblings placed together are closer in age, on the average, than those placed separately, and more children live with a same-sex sibling (71.1%) than one of the opposite sex (43.7%). The children significantly more likely to be placed with siblings are: younger, having no developmental disabilities, living in emergency shelters or with relatives, with reunification or adoption planned, from smaller sibling groups, and having come into state custody at the same time as their siblings ($p < .05$). These associations are presented in summary form on Table 1 on the following page.

The second data set, from the survey of foster care staff, yields a profile of the 108 respondents that shows them to be distributed throughout the geographical regions of the state. Rural parishes statewide accounted for 52.8% of the respondents.

In terms of professional characteristics, most of the workers held bachelors as their highest academic degrees (69.4%), and 18.5% of them had BSW's. A total of 44.4% had either a bachelors or a masters degree in social work. The respondents' experience with the state child protection agency varied greatly, with the largest group having less than three years' tenure (38%). However, the respondents reported having considerably more experience in social work (including AFDC eligibility work); 61.7% had worked in the field for more than six years.

Table 1:
Variables Associated With
Placement With Siblings

Variable	Group More Likely to Be Placed with Sibs	Signif.	Correlation or Strength of Association
<u>Characteristics Of Children:</u>			
age	younger children	p<.03	0.14 (Spear.)
disability	those with none	p<.01	0.20 (Phi)
<u>Of Plans and Placements:</u>			
facility	those in shelters or with relatives	p<.01	0.34 (Cram. <u>Y</u>)
case plan	reunification or adoption planned	p<.02	0.24 (Cram. <u>Y</u>)
<u>Of Sibling Groups:</u>			
size	from smaller groups	p<.01	0.32 (Spear.)
custody date	same custody date	p<.01	0.25 (Cram. <u>Y</u>)
age gap	close in age mean age diff.= 1.91 yrs. for united sibs mean age diff.= 2.30 yrs. for separated sibs		
sex	same sex 71.1% placed with a same-sex sibling 43.7% placed with an opposite-sex sib		

The personal characteristics of the staff reveal that a preponderance of 47.2% reported being in their thirties, and that 90.7% were female. The racial breakdown shows that 71.7% were white. Most were parents of children (61.0%), and 88.6% had siblings in their families of origin. Of those having siblings, the largest group were less than two years apart from their sibling who was closest in age (48.9%), and 53.8% reported being in contact with a sibling weekly or more often.

The attitudes of direct service child welfare staff, as reflected in scores on four scales constructed from items on the questionnaire, cluster in patterns that show high

valuation of family and sibling ties. Their perceptions of the organization's placement practice reflect general pessimism about siblings finding shared placements, despite the strong perception that the agency encourages such placements.

Of all of the organizational, professional, and personal characteristics investigated, those that were found to have significant relationships with any of the four attitude scales were parenthood, siblinghood, and the region of the state where the respondent was employed ($p < .05$). Perceptions of agency placement practice, as measured by scores on three constructed perception scales, were related to number of siblings in the respondent's family of origin, length of social work employment, and geographical region where employed ($p < .05$). These findings are presented in Table 2 on the following page.

Workers' perceptions of their organization's policy and practice are related in some interesting ways to its actual success in placing siblings. Optimism is low about the chances of siblings being placed together, despite moderate agency success in doing just that. Furthermore, optimism varies regionally in a pattern showing no relationship to regional success in uniting siblings.

Implications for Social Work Practice

This study provides the state child welfare organization with its first feedback about placement practices concerning sibling groups in foster care. Where previously the proportion of foster children placed with siblings was unknown, it is now clear that a majority of the children who have siblings in care are placed with at least one of them.

Beyond reporting what percentage of children are separated, this study also provides information about the types of children who are most at risk of placement away from siblings. That knowledge would allow the organization to develop means of promoting better placement planning for these types of children.

For example, one way of increasing the visibility of siblings who do not enter care at the same time might be a "tickler" system, based on computerized cross-reference data, for alerting workers when a new foster child already has siblings in care. The agency might also, as a matter of policy, combine the child-in-need-of-care (dependency and neglect) court petitions for siblings, so that agency and court reviews for all of the children would coincide.

Table 2:
Variables Associated With Workers'
Attitudes and Perceptions

Characteristics of High-Scoring Respondents By Scale	Signif.	Correlation or Strength of Association
<u>Attitudinal Scales:</u>		
Scale I: Importance of Natural Family Ties		
those with more children	p<.05	0.17 (Spear.)
those with own siblings	p<.01	0.30 (Cram. <u>V</u>)
those in North Louisiana	p<.01	0.30 (Cram. <u>V</u>)
Scale II: Different Age Siblings Have Strong Bonds		
those with own siblings	p<.05	0.24 (Cram. <u>V</u>)
Scale III: Siblings in Problem Families Have Strong Bonds		
those with own siblings	p<.02	0.27 (Cram. <u>V</u>)
<u>Placement Perception Scales:</u>		
Scale V: Optimism About Likelihood of Joint Sibling Placement		
those with fewer own siblings	p<.01	0.23 (Spear.)
those in rural parishes	p<.01	0.33 (Cram. <u>V</u>)
those in North Louisiana	p<.01	0.31 (Cram. <u>V</u>)
Scale VI: Optimism About Likelihood of Opposite-sex Placement		
those in North Louisiana	p<.05	0.26 (Cram. <u>V</u>)
Scale VII: Perception that Agency Supports Joint Placements		
those employed longer in social work	p<.02	0.20 (Spear.)

Also, awareness that children with developmental disabilities are at risk for separation might promote efforts to develop foster care placements that accept both special-needs children and their siblings.

This research also informs the organization of the attitudes and perceptions of its staff concerning siblings in foster care, and it suggests topics for in-service training. For example, the general pessimism of workers concerning their agency's success in placing siblings could be addressed by informing staff about the current rates of joint sibling placement and by involving them in efforts to improve on those rates.

There is also some evidence from this study that, within each geographical region, optimism about agency success in placing siblings has little relationship to actual agency performance. A factor such as morale might account for regional patterns of optimism. This would indicate that some regions might become special targets for agency efforts to improve staff morale.

Implications for Social Work Education

Schools of social work have had an opportunity to educate, at the bachelors or masters levels, over 44% of the child placement staff surveyed in this study, a finding that suggests that schools should offer curricula emphasizing the special problems of child welfare practice, including working with involuntary clients and disrupted families in bureaucratic, state agency settings.

The percentage of state workers with professional educations also indicates that, as of 1982, schools of social work were a major resource for helping the state child protection system meet its staffing needs. The proportions of BSW's and MSW's in this study are slightly higher than in the most recent national profile of child welfare staff (Vinoker-Kaplan & Hartman, 1986). If the schools and the state agency are interested in increasing further the proportions of professionally educated staff, a cooperative system of encouraging social work education for current employees and of promoting state employment for new graduates could help meet that goal.

For educators, one of the most interesting implications of this study is that, on the whole, education appears to have little effect on staff's attitudes and perceptions about siblings in foster care. This is not surprising for two reasons. First, the literature review for this study concludes that sibling relationships, and especially sibling

separations, are neglected in the professional literature of several disciplines, so that students in any professional school probably are taught little about sibling relationships. Second, the factors in this study that are associated with attitudinal differences concern family experiences such as having siblings and having children, and it is unknown whether professional education could alter these patterns, even if relevant content were taught.

One way for schools of social work to begin to emphasize the sibling subsystems within families is for faculty and students to engage in primary research into sibling relationships. This could take many forms, as the literature review for this study indicates. A few of the most specific issues for further study of siblings in foster care are outlined below.

Implications for Social Work Theory Development

This study of foster children uses a Louisiana random sample, and its findings can be generalized only to that population. It would be very interesting to know how the findings about prevalence of separation, and factors associated with it, compare to other foster care populations. As is noted in the review of the literature, studies reporting the proportion of children separated from siblings are rare, and none exist identifying factors that put children at risk for separation.

There is little published data about social workers' attitudes toward family and no identified research about attitudes toward sibling ties in any population. Therefore, it is unknown whether the respondents in this study differ from the general population in their beliefs about kinship or sibling bonds. Research addressing these questions would also allow exploration of other issues raised by this study, including whether people who self-select into social work share similar family values, and whether co-workers become a reference group that influences the attitudes of members.

This study has been exploratory in nature, asking new questions about foster children and their assigned foster care workers. It does not address some of the issues that are of ultimate importance for child placement practice. These include what difference it makes for foster children to be placed with siblings and whether worker attitudes affect the placement decisions they make. These and other important questions can only be answered by longitudinal investigations, which are the logical next steps in the study of siblings in foster care.

References

- Aldridge, M. J., & Cautley, P. (1976). Placing siblings in the same foster home. Child Welfare, 55, 85-93.
- Bank, S. P., & Kahn, M. D. (1982). The Sibling Bond. New York: Basic Books.
- Bowerman, C., & Dobash, R. M. (1974). Structural variations in inter-sibling affect. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 36, 48-54.
- Cicirelli, V. G. (1976). Siblings as teachers. In V. L. Allen (Ed.), Children as Teachers: Theory and Research on Tutoring (pp.99-112). New York: Academic Press.
- Cicirelli, V. G. (1980). A comparison of college women's feelings toward their siblings and parents. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 42, 111-118.
- Heinicke, C. M., & Westheimer, I. J. (1965). Brief Separations. New York: International University Press.
- Isaacs, S. (Ed). (1941). The Cambridge Evacuation Survey: Wartime Study in Social Welfare and Education. London: Methuen and Co.
- Lamb, M. E., & Sutton-Smith, B. (1982). Sibling Relationships: Their Nature and Significance Across the Life Span. Hillside, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Meyendorf, R. (1971). Infant depression due to separation from siblings: Syndrome of depression, retardation, starvation, and neurological symptoms: A re-evaluation of the concept of maternal deprivation. Psychiatrica Clinica, 4, 321-325.
- Minuchin, S., Montalvo, B., Guerney, B. G., Rosman, B., & Schumer, F. (1967). Families of the Slums: An Exploration of their Structure and Treatment. New York: Basic Books.
- Pfouts, J. H. (1976). The sibling relationship: A forgotten dimension. Social Work, 21, 200-203.
- Ranieri, R. F., & Pratt, T. C. (1978). Sibling therapy. Social Work, 23, 418-419.
- Rosenberg, E. B. (1980). Therapy with siblings in reorganizing families. International Journal of Family Therapy, 2, 139-150.

Trasler, G. (1960). In Place of Parents: A Study of Foster Care. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Vinokur-Kaplan, D., & Hartman, A. (1986). A national profile of child welfare workers and supervisors. Child Welfare, 65, 323-335.

Zimmerman, R. B. (1982). Foster care in retrospect. Tulane Studies in Social Welfare, 14, 1-125.