

Guardian for Children
and Young People

*‘She’s my sister and she will always
mean something to me...’*

**Report on the inquiry into what children say
about contact with their siblings and the
impact sibling contact has on wellbeing.**

November 2011



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of South Australia**

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Preface

Most of us who have siblings enjoy the support and comfort of sharing family history, decisions and identity. Children and young people in state care should enjoy the same, with relationships built in childhood and sustained throughout their lifetimes. The obstacles though are significant and building that relationship with brothers and sisters cannot be left to possibility or fate.

As one young person said in interview: “Before, it was kind of every now and then we’d see them, or every fortnight we’d see them for an hour and it was really controlled... [now] I see them and it’s become real casual and – seeing them several times a week and learning more about them, definitely feels more – I really feel like they’re my siblings.”

Based on information from my Office’s monitoring of the circumstances of children in care we became concerned that a significant minority of children were distressed and disadvantaged by separation from their siblings. On the other hand there was also some evidence of an unexamined assumption that the placement of siblings together is, in and of itself, beneficial.

The inquiry sought children’s views about contact with their siblings and the impacts of co-placement, separation and contact. We wanted to know more about how children defined sibling relationships, what their experiences had been and what worked best for them. We also examined case files for case worker definitions of siblings and the arrangements for building sibling relationships. The inquiry commenced in January 2011 and concluded in September, followed by discussion with the South Australian statutory child protection authority.

The findings were enlightening and moving, with heartening stories of close bonds between siblings assisted by carers and social workers and some stories of heartache and loss. The case file evidence demonstrated how difficult it can be for case workers to manage expectations but also how parental access arrangements overshadowed contact among brothers and sisters.

There was much in this inquiry to remind me of the need to listen carefully to what children have to say and to learn from their experience and views. Sibling relationships are very important to children here and now, and the benefits can be immense. I look forward to participating in the discussion that will follow the release of this report and thank all those who contributed to it.

Pam Simmons
Guardian

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Families SA gave the ready cooperation required for this inquiry. Particular thanks to the offices of Adelaide, Elizabeth, Murray Bridge and Port Pirie for your participation and support.

Members of the Project Reference Group provided expert guidance throughout the inquiry.

Thank you to the carers who supported the children and young people in their participation.

The team who expertly conducted the inquiry are Amanda Shaw as project manager, Kendall Crowe who wrote the literature review, and Ivan Raymond and Tracey Jane from *Connected Self* who conducted the interviews.

1 Background

1.1 Introduction

The Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People (GCYP) works with others to improve services to children and young people in out-of-home care, promote and protect children's rights and to strengthen their voice. One of the functions of the GCYP is to investigate individual and systemic matters of concern. The Guardian provides advice to the Ministers for Education and Child Development, and Communities and Social Inclusion, on these matters.

The *Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care* states the rights for children and young people, and includes the right to:

- understand where your family is
- keep in contact with the people who help you feel good about yourself
- express your opinion about things that affect you
- be involved in what is decided about your life and your care.

Based on information from our monitoring activities the Guardian is concerned that a significant minority of children and young people in care are distressed and possibly disadvantaged by separation from their siblings. The Guardian acknowledges that there is also evidence of an unexamined assumption in placement decisions that the placement of siblings together, or co-placement, is, in and of itself, beneficial.

There were significant issues in defining 'siblings' for the purpose of reporting and the inquiry. This inquiry accepted how children identify siblings and inquired into what relationships are viewed as sibling relationships by children in care.

The purpose of undertaking an inquiry into the significance of sibling contact was to seek children's views on contact with their siblings and the impacts of co-placement, separation and contact. The findings will help the GCYP and others understand who children and young people view as siblings, how children and young people view contact with siblings they do not live with, what they get from sibling contact and how sibling contact can be improved. With this information the GCYP and others will be able to advocate for decision-making and planning for sibling contact that meets the needs and rights of children and young people in care.

1.2 Methodology

The inquiry has been guided by a reference group, with members from key stakeholders including, but not limited to, youth advisors, carers, alternative care providers and the statutory child protection agency.¹

The inquiry's focus was children and young people currently or formerly under the guardianship, or in the custody, of the Minister.²

The inquiry was conducted by:

- The engagement of key stakeholders including Families SA and non-government service providers in the child protection system, largely through the reference group;
- A literature review regarding the co-placement and separation of children and young people in care;
- Considering existing guidance on sibling contact, such as legislation, government and non-government policy and standards;
- A case file audit to understand how social workers define sibling relationships and to ascertain sibling contact arrangements; and
- Interviews with children and young people in care.

The inquiry did not include an examination of whether existing resources to government and non-government service providers are sufficient and/or used efficiently.

1.2.1 Literature review

The review of national and international literature explored the construct and nature of sibling relationships for children and young people who are in care and decisions made about co-placement, separation and contact. Previous research has often overlooked the views and experiences of children and young people in care.

1.2.2 Case file audit

With cooperation from Families SA, the GCYP randomly selected 100 files of children who had siblings from the Connected Care teams³ from four district offices. The two metropolitan and two country offices were selected on the basis of location and likelihood of gathering a representative sample. The number of cases

¹ See Appendix A for a listing of reference group members.

² In this report children and young people under guardianship are also referred to as children and young people in care. The groups are not coterminous with some children living in alternative care but not under guardianship or custody orders and some under court orders but not living in alternative care.

³ Connected Care Teams is the term used for teams of social workers with case management responsibility for children and young people under long-term court orders of guardianship of the Minister.

selected from each office reflected a percentage of the total number of guardianship cases managed by the office, that is, the larger number of children the office had responsibility for the larger the number of case files examined.

The gathering of case file evidence was not for the purpose of evaluating case management practice, but to provide the GCYP with a better understanding of the defined sibling relationships, and decision-making and planning for sibling contact.

1.2.3 Interviews and focus group

With cooperation from Families SA, the GCYP conducted interviews with children and young people in care to hear about their experiences of sibling relationships, living with siblings and contact arrangements when separated from their siblings. Connected Care Teams within the Families SA district offices where case file evidence had been taken were asked to nominate children and young people under guardianship orders to 18 years who may be interested and had the capacity to participate in an interview or focus group.

Upon receiving nominations from district offices, consent was obtained from the child, carer and the child's legal guardian.

The GCYP contracted *Connected Self* to conduct the interviews and focus group. A focus group of young people was used to validate the themes identified from the interviews. Guided by the reference group, and tested by young people in care, questions were developed to facilitate the interviews and focus group.

1.3 Children under guardianship

At 30 June 2011, 2 410 children and young people were under the custody or guardianship of the Minister. They were under either a 12 month care and protection order or a guardianship to 18 years order. They had the following characteristics:

Type of guardianship

- Order to 18 years – 87.6%
- 12 month order – 12.4%

Ages

- 0 to 4 – 21.5%
- 5 to 9 – 30.9%
- 10 to 14 – 28.4%
- 15 to 17 – 19.2%

Gender

- male - 53%
- female – 45.2%
- undetermined – 1.8%

Aboriginality

- Aboriginal – 24.6%
- non-Aboriginal – 73.4%
- undetermined – 2.0%

Disability

As at June 2011, Disability Services reported there were a total of 236 children under guardianship receiving a service from Disability Services and Novita Children's Services. This represents 9.8 per cent of the total children and young people under guardianship.

Accommodation arrangements

Of the 2 318 children and young people in alternative care at 30 June 2011, the care arrangements were as follows:

- foster care – 44.1%
- relative and kinship care – 42.0%
- residential care – 6.4%
- emergency and short term accommodation – 7.4%
- financially assisted family care – 0.2%

1.4 Guidance on sibling contact

1.4.1 Legislation

There is no requirement within the *Children's Protection Act 1993* (SA) (the Act) for sibling contact when children have been placed under care and protection orders. The Act makes clear the principle that the primary responsibility for a child's care and protection rests with the family and that a high priority must be given to supporting and assisting the family in carrying out that responsibility.

However, when a child cannot remain in the care of their birth family, the fundamental principles (Section 4) of the Act include that

(4) In determining a child's best interests, consideration must be given to the following:

(b) the need to preserve and strengthen relationships between the child, the child's parents and grandparents and other members of the child's family (whether or not the child is to reside with those parents, grandparents or other family members);

(c) the need to encourage, preserve and enhance the child's sense of racial, ethnic, religious, spiritual and cultural identity and to

respect traditions and values of the community into which the child was born;

(d) if the child is able to form and express his or her own views as to his or her best interests – those views;

The *Act* allows the Youth Court to order contact arrangements for a child under sections 21, 23 and 38. The Youth Court may or may not make a specific order regarding a child or young person's contact with his or her birth family. At times the Court may make a general order, granting contact with the birth family 'at the discretion of the Minister'.

1.4.2 Policy

Families SA officers are guided by policies and procedures that acknowledge the importance of a child's connection to their birth family. Some elements of such documents briefly refer to sibling contact. The contact and relationship between child and parent is given priority.

1.4.2.1 Standards of Alternative Care in South Australia

The *Standards of Alternative Care in South Australia* (Department for Families and Communities (DFC) 2008a) are applicable to all contracted alternative care service providers, Families SA employees and all carers. The document sets the overarching benchmark for delivering quality services for children, young people, families and carers across the alternative care sector. The Standards incorporate the aims and principles of the *Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care* and the *Foster Carers' Charter*.

The *Standards of Alternative Care in South Australia* incorporates numerous expectations relevant to a child or young person's (in care) contact with their brothers and sisters. However, only *one* standard specifically addresses sibling relationships.

Within the core standard of *Entering Care*, the roles and responsibilities of Families SA case workers are spelled out. *Standard 1.1* directs that 'where siblings are being assessed and placed, the collective needs of siblings are considered, as well as the individual needs of each child and young person. Where it is possible, and appropriate siblings are placed together' (DFC 2008a, p.21). In addition, *Standard 1.2* requires the case worker to provide the carer with information about family contact (p. 24).

Standards 2.1, Case worker, and *2.2, Case worker Contact*, are necessary to ensure the achievement of other *Case Management* standards, such as those relating to the requirement for a three-generational genogram, guardianship case

plan, family contact, community connections and reviews⁴. The *Standards of Alternative Care in South Australia* state that all of these standards are undertaken in consultation with the child and that the child is encouraged to actively participate in decision-making.

The expected outcome of *Standard 2.1* is that 'every child or young person in care has an allocated worker who is responsible for case management, maintains regular contact and is a key support to the child or young person' (DFC 2008a, p. 27). *Standard 2.2* directs the case worker to have independent contact with the child or young person, to seek and encourage the child's or young person's views and demonstrate the child's or young person's participation through documented case notes (p. 28). The document attributes to Families SA case workers the responsibilities of making and maintaining contact and communication with the child and seeking assistance where there are barriers to communication.

1.4.2.2 Guardianship and Alternative Care Manual of Practice

The *Guardianship and Alternative Care Manual of Practice [Version 6]* (Families SA 2011) highlights the concepts and principles informing Families SA policy:

- Child-centredness to protect the child's interests
- Attachment to provide for nurturing
- Permanence to provide for stability
- Family contact to provide for identity
- Care to provide for development
- Partnership to provide for participation and responsiveness (pp. 6-8).

The *Manual* also refers to the state's obligation to provide care for children who are unable to return to the care of their birth family and says that Families SA must '...attempt to ensure that the full range of a child's needs are met to the optimum extent' (p. 9). This includes the expectation that the child or young person's contact and relationships with their birth family will be maintained, regardless of whether the child resides with their birth family, except where there is an ongoing risk of harm.

Procedures and practice guidelines for developing case plans are detailed in the *Manual* although the section *Work with children and young people in long term care* does not incorporate direction or guidelines regarding promoting best connections with birth family, and specifically siblings.

⁴ Refer to *Standards of Alternative Care in South Australia*, pages 35 to 43.

In the appendices, the *Clinical Case Discussions* (p. 123) provides guidance to assist discussions and reflections on case direction:

- What contact is occurring (between siblings, family, etc.)?
 - What is the aim of the contact? Is this being achieved?
 - What issues have emerged during contact?
 - Does quality of contact need to be improved? How could this be done?

It does not, however, encourage any reflections on the child's views and wishes regarding sibling, and other family contact.

1.4.2.3 Care Planning Policy

The purpose of the *Care Planning Policy* is to promote care for children and young people that 'gives them a lifelong sense of belonging and connectedness to their families and communities, and supports them to reach their full potential' (DFC 2010, p. 2). The *Policy* says that relative and kinship care is a first preference placement for children and young people who require long term alternative care.

Recognising that continuing and lifelong relationships and connections are vital to a child or young person's identity and wellbeing, the *Policy* prioritises stable care arrangements and secure attachments to carers. 'Children should not be disrupted...for the sake of placing children within their family or community system or to reunite siblings' (p. 14). The requirements for a family contact plan, and where relevant, cultural maintenance plan, are documented (p. 19). However, the *Care Planning Policy* does not make any other specific reference to maintaining contact and relationships with siblings for a child or young person in care.

1.4.2.4 Growing Up Strong in Care (Aboriginal Identity: Planning Guide)

The *Aboriginal Identity: Planning Guide* focuses 'on establishing, reconnecting and maintaining connection with family, community, country and culture' (DFC 2009, p. 3). The *Guide* provides information about Aboriginal identity, kinship and family systems and strategies for workers to collect and understand cultural information. Within the Aboriginal Family Circle⁵ siblings are located as being just as significant as parents to an Aboriginal child (p. 8). Importantly, within Aboriginal family structures, children of maternal aunts and children of paternal uncles are regarded as the child's siblings rather than cousins. The *Guide* encourages workers to use

⁵ Adapted from NSW Office of the Children's Guardian, Section 1: Casework Practice, Kinship Placements Benchmark Policy 1.5b.

genograms and ecomaps to visually represent the child's relationships, connections and resources.

1.4.2.5 Contact for Children and Young People in Care Policy

The *Contact for Children and Young People in Care Policy* aims to ensure that decisions made about contact are child-centric and in the child's best interests. The *Policy* does specifically identify contact with siblings and details factors to achieve child-centric decision-making, including, but not limited to, the 'need to preserve and strengthen' the child's relationships with family members and where a 'child is able to express his or her own views...those views must be taken into account' (DFC 2007a, p. 4).

1.4.2.6 Practice Guidelines for Contact

The aim of the *Practice Guidelines for Contact* is "to assist Families SA staff to make informed decisions about the contact needs of children and young people placed in alternative care" (DFC 2007b, p. 1). For children under long term guardianship orders, contact promotes a child or young person's 'best connection' with their parents, siblings, extended family and significant others. The *Practice Guidelines* recognise that the 'case worker is the lynchpin' (DFC 2007b, p. 4) and that sibling contact should be given a high priority in case management.

The *Practice Guidelines* refer specifically to a child or young person's contact with their siblings.⁶

It is necessary to be mindful of the child in the context of their sibling relationships. Families SA affirm (sic) the importance of placing siblings together, if this is in the child's best interests and facilitating contact when placement together is not possible...

Contact should be frequent and correlate with the children's ages, development and nature of their sibling relationship.

(DFC 2007b, p. 13)

With regard to children and young people under long term guardianship orders and the promotion of 'best connection', the *Practice Guidelines* emphasises that 'there is no substitute for face-to-face contact' (DFC 2007b, p. 22) and that where capable, the child or young person's views must be encouraged and obtained to inform contact arrangements. Further in the document, the need to frequently review the child's wishes about contact is also highlighted.

⁶ Refer to page 13.

1.4.2.7 Relative and Kinship Care: Family Contact

The information sheet *Relative and Kinship Care: Family Contact* (Department for Families and Communities, undated) promotes the continuing connections between children and young people in care and their birth parents, extended family, kin and community but does not refer specifically to a child or young person's continuing connections with their sibling(s).

1.4.2.8 Non-Family Based Care Policy

The *Non-Family Based Care Policy* applies to residential, congregate care, emergency accommodation and independent living facilities and commits to 'maintaining continuity of significant relationships' where it is safe to do so and where the child or young person 'makes an informed choice' to do so (DFC 2008b, pp. 9-10).

1.4.3 *The Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care*

The *Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care* is specific to children and young people in care in South Australia and comprises 37 rights. The *Charter*, developed by the GCYP with young people in care and other key stakeholders, informs children and young people in care about their rights and entitlements in the care system. To date 46 agencies have endorsed the *Charter* and have pledged to apply the rights in their policy and day to day practice.

Of particular relevance to this inquiry, the *Charter* states that those in care have the right to:

- Regular support and contact from your worker
- Knowing who you are and your history
- Knowing that people care about you
- Understand where your family is
- Keep in contact with the people who help you feel good about yourself
- A plan which shows how and where you will be cared for
- Express your opinion about things that affect you
- Be involved in what is decided about your life and your care
- Speak to someone who can act on your behalf when you cannot do this

2 Literature review

Siblings provide our longest lasting relationships, often extending throughout lifetime. Children growing up apart from their brothers and sisters, lacking contact or knowledge about their siblings may be deprived of family support in adult life. Much more should be done to foster sibling relationships for children who are separated from their families.

(Kosonen 1996, p. 280)

Siblings are extremely important, but for children and young people in care the situations surrounding these relationships are often highly complex. Adding to the complexity are the differences in definition because who children view as their siblings can differ remarkably from traditional definitions.

The number of siblings, the time they enter care and care options available contribute to the complexity. No two children are alike. No amount of research and data-crunching can provide an accurate picture of each child's experience and needs.

2.1 Definition of sibling

The Macquarie Dictionary (1998) defines 'sibling' as simply 'a brother or sister'. The definitions for sibling in the context of children in care, however, are rarely this straightforward.

Many reconstituted families include full, half- and sometimes step-siblings in the same household and these children may have any combination of common genetic make-up and common history and culture, length of shared upbringing and legal parents (Elgar and Head 1999).

Different definitions of what constitutes a sibling relationship make it difficult to compare research conclusions. For example, one study included only children who were born to the same parents and who had lived together for at least one year (Drapeau, Simard, Beaudry and Charbonneau 2000), whereas another studied 'full or half biological' siblings (Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2005). In much of the literature, there is a lack of a definition of sibling.

Cultural background also plays a major role. Indigenous Australians, for example, are not limited by traditional, 'western' definitions. 'The Aboriginal concept of family is based on different philosophical and spiritual beliefs' and a brother or sister may not be biologically related, but by "clan" or "skin" (Families SA 2009b).

The definition of a sibling might best be determined by the children themselves:

While laws and policies may have restrictive definitions of siblings that typically require a biological parent in common, child- and family-centred practice would respect cultural values and recognize close, non-biological relationships as a source of support to the child. In these cases, the child may be one of the best sources of information regarding who is considered a sibling.

(Children's Bureau 2006, p 2)

2.2 Decision-making

Any decisions regarding looked after children taken in the context of assessment, care planning and review procedures should consider the potential impact of these decisions on the child's relationship with their siblings in the short, medium and long term. Even short-term decisions can have implications for sibling relationships that persist over a lifetime.

(Kosonen 1999, p. 46)

There is no mention of siblings in the South Australian *Children's Protection Act 1993*. Examination of literature shows that this is not uncommon. Herrick and Piccus (2005) found that of all out-of-home care related legislation in the United States, approximately half of the states mention siblings to some extent; with the most common mention compelling relevant agencies to 'consider siblings in placement and permanency planning practices and to make provisions for maintaining sibling contact when children are placed separately' (p. 846). Further, some states also require post-placement sibling visits, formal reports on efforts made to keep siblings together and the consideration of sibling relationships in determining the child's best interests.

In the United Kingdom, the Department of Health supports the placement of siblings together⁷, and whilst the *Children Act 1989* stipulates that siblings should be placed together whenever 'reasonably practical and consistent with [the child's] welfare' (Ellison 1999, p. 128), there is no legislated requirement for sibling contact if they are separated (Elgar and Head 1999).

In an international context, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution in 2009 welcoming the SOS Children's Villages' *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children*. These guidelines include:

⁷ Limits on the number of children who could be placed together in a care setting were removed for this reason.

Siblings with existing bonds should in principle not be separated by placements in alternative care unless there is a clear risk of abuse or other justification in the best interests of the child. In any case, every effort should be made to enable siblings to maintain contact with each other, unless this is against their wishes or interests

(SOS Children's Villages, 2009, p. 8).

Whilst child protection policy might advocate for a relationship between siblings to be maintained at the highest level possible, Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (1999) highlight that there is a lack of empirical information to guide social workers in their decision-making about placement and contact with siblings. In practice there are other, often extenuating, factors which mean that co-placement or sufficient contact does not eventuate (Mulligan 2003).

Decisions about siblings are often made on the grounds of pragmatism (O'Neill 2002). For example, a major barrier to sibling co-placement is insufficient placement options. Leathers (2005) writes that difficulty in finding and maintaining placements for sibling groups is common and suggests this can be ameliorated by a policy that carers who will accept more than one child be kept on 'standby', pending the need for a sibling group, instead of being used as the first available carer for a single child.

Australian researcher Cas O'Neill suggests that early decisions made in a time of crisis should be reviewed shortly afterwards so that they do not determine future decisions made on a child's behalf. This can be especially important when sibling groups are separated following emergency removal from their birth family (O'Neill 2002). Schwenke et al. (2006), referring to Mullender's earlier work, highlighted the crucial decision-making at the point of entry into care and stressed the need to consider placements that can assist in placing and keeping siblings together.

There is a paucity of data on sibling co-placement at a national level. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare does not collect information about siblings from states and territories in their reporting in the *Child Protection Australia* series (Wise 2011).

A study in the United States found that large groups of siblings were not placed together because of coming into care at different times (Wulczyn and Zimmerman 2005). Generally, larger sibling groups were less likely to enter care together. That said, the reasons why larger sibling groups enter placement over extended periods of time probably reflect family dynamics rather than service issues per se. For example, children may be followed into placement by siblings who were not yet born when the first members of the sibling group entered care (Wulczyn and Zimmerman 2005).

Children in a sibling group may also have substantially different needs, which cannot be provided in one care setting. Behavioural and mental health problems can be barriers to co-placement or reason for separation of a child from their siblings (Leather 2005). So too, behavioural problems and conflict between brothers and sisters increases the difficulty in providing care for a sibling group. Sibling sexual abuse is an extreme example of conflict between siblings and is often cited as a major reason for separation (Wulczyn and Zimmerman 2005).

“Enmeshed” siblings - where siblings are so closely involved that barely any individuality is permitted – and intensified allegiance to birth family can also lead to significant difficulties in a placement and can lead to separation (Leathers 2005).

Whether it is because of a barrier to sibling co-placement or an outcome of children’s needs, the greater the age difference between siblings, the more likely they are to be separated. So too, the older the siblings the more likely they are to be separated (Leathers 2005).

Children placed in care at different times have also been found to be less likely to be placed together (Webster, Schlonsky, Shaw and Brookhart 2005). One explanation is a current placement’s incapacity to take more children. Children placed in kinship care, however, are more likely to be with their siblings after six months regardless of whether they were initially placed together or separately (Wulczyn and Zimmerman 2005).

Much of the literature presumes that it is in the child’s best interests to be placed with their sibling(s) and implies that co-placement should be put ahead of all other factors. Little is mentioned of other fundamental factors, such as attachment to carers. For example, one child may have been in care for some time before a sibling is born. Schwenke, Hudd and Vicary (2006) reported limited research on the advantages and disadvantages of sibling reunification when individuals of a sibling-set have entered care at different times and are in established placements. Is it then prudent to terminate a nurturing, long-term placement to ensure that a close sibling relationship is achieved? As Depp (in Wulczyn and Zimmerman 2005) states:

...case workers justified separating siblings when the needs of individual members diverged from those of other children in the sibling group, when the case workers perceived the possibility that placing siblings together would undermine the placement...

2.3 Co-placement

...the presence of a sibling provides at least one predictable element in a frightening situation, since placement with a sibling retains an important link with the past.

(Herrick and Piccus 2005, p. 851)

In Australia, there is a lack of research into co-placement and outcomes for children in out-of-home care. It is widely accepted in the literature elsewhere that the benefits of sibling co-placement are considerable. However, as discussed in the section above on decision-making, it is also clear that costs must be weighed against benefits in each child's particular circumstances.

A child can learn a great deal from interaction with their sibling: social play, cooperation, positive peer interaction, conflict resolution, how their behaviour impacts others, and empathy. Jones (1999) and Herrick and Piccus (2005) say that not only does the sibling relationship provide an ameliorating effect against the trauma, guilt and grief that children often experience prior to and when entering the child protection system, it assists in the development and maintenance of self-esteem, identity, permanence and love.

These relationships validate the child's fundamental worth as a human being because the love he or she receives does not have to be earned (Herrick and Piccus 2005).

Children placed together are noted to be reassured by the presence of a sibling, have more positive behaviour towards their peers, have fewer emotional and behavioural problems, and that they performed better at school (Heinicke and Westheimer in Hegar, 1988; Smith in Herrick and Piccus 2005; and Thorpe and Swart in Herrick and Piccus 2005). Mullender (1999) drew on Jenkins' earlier findings that siblings can assist each other in times of stress and disharmony that can help some avoid a pathological reaction and to grow up with fewer problems.

The presence of a sibling in day-to-day life can also serve to provide long-term attachment, which is fundamental to a child's healthy development (Elgar and Head 1999). Maintenance of an ongoing relationship with a sibling also provides continuity for a child in an often rapidly changing environment (Kosonen 1996). Further, children growing up with their brothers and sisters can provide them with valuable support in adult life.

On the other hand, a child's stability and psychological wellbeing may be adversely impacted by co-placement. Separation may be in a child's best interests and assumptions about the benefits of co-placement must be examined. Research has found there is little focus on attachment as a significant area of assessment when

considering placement options for siblings (O'Neill 2002). Whilst respecting the 'historical roots' of maintaining sibling groups in out-of-home care placements, Whelan (2003) argues that attachment theory should be applied to decisions about whether siblings should be placed together or separately. He says:

...siblings can potentially contribute to, or detract from, a secure attachment environment. When siblings are supportive of each other they can contribute to it. When the sibling relationships are chronically abusive... [they] are precluded from achieving a secure attachment environment.

(2003, pp. 21-22)

Whelan suggests, therefore, that assessment of siblings' relationships and its impact on future attachment is imperative and will lead to improved decision-making when determining whether sibling groups should remain intact.

The findings of most studies about outcomes of sibling placement confirm the benefits of co-placement. One such study found that siblings placed together in care are more likely to be reunified with their parents than those placed separately (Webster et al. 2005). Another found that children placed alone (apart from their siblings) were likely to have lost their sibling for good (Mullender 1999). Children with an inconsistent sibling placement pattern have been found to be less integrated into their foster home, whereas those children consistently placed with siblings were less likely to experience placement disruption (Leathers 2005).

Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005) found that girls have significantly poorer mental health and socialisation when separated from all of their siblings, and that boys were more likely to be separated from their siblings for reasons other than problem behaviour.

Siblings can provide effective support for children returning to their birth family, with the placement back home more likely to succeed when siblings return together (Farmer and Parker 1991).

Separation from a sibling has also been found to contribute to impermanency, with children separated from their siblings less likely to be either adopted or in 'subsidised guardianship homes'⁸ than children placed with a consistent number of siblings in all of their placements (Leathers 2005).

⁸ In the United States 'subsidised guardianships' provide financial assistance to caretakers who assume legal guardianship of a child from out-of-home care.

Parentification in relation to co-placement is also referred to with differing opinions.⁹ One train of thought sees it as something which must be avoided - the 'parentified' child should be afforded the opportunity to be looked after, reclaim their childhood and not have the responsibility of being a care-giver. The other opinion is that the parentified child benefits from taking on additional responsibility; such as self-worth, when caring for a younger sibling and avoidance of the older sibling's possible guilt and self-blame if they are separated (Elgar and Head 1999; Leathers 2005).

2.4 Likelihood of separation

Children most likely to be separated from their siblings were older, from larger sibling groups, had developmental disabilities, were placed in residential settings, or came into care at different times than their siblings (Hegar 1988; Wulczyn and Zimmerman 2005). Older sibling groups were more likely than younger sibling groups to be separated (Drapeau et al. 2000; Leathers 2005; Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2005). Staff and Fein (1992) in the United States found that sibling pairs of boys and children from 'minority ethnic backgrounds (black, Hispanic, and mixed-race children)' were more likely to be placed together.

Leathers (2005) found that two factors accounted for the majority of decisions to separate siblings in out-of-home care: limited placements willing to accept sibling groups, and behavioural problems of the children. Multiple entries into care also increase the chance of sibling separation.

Reasons for separating siblings include the risk to one child from another (for example, sibling sexual or physical abuse), and problems associated with 'enmeshed' sibling relationships (Leathers 2005). Ainsworth and Maluccio's (2002) review of existing research in the United Kingdom and United States show there is limited research on sibling violence. However, they conclude that where sibling abuse is occurring, the safety of all children is paramount.

Children in kinship care are more likely than children in foster care to be placed with at least one sibling (Kosonen 1996; Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2005; Wulczyn and Zimmerman 2005) and when the children in the sibling group are closer in age, they are more likely to be placed together (Wulczyn and Zimmerman 2005).

Sibling co-placement has also been influenced by the 'period in time' that placement occurred. A study of sibling co-placement in New York City found that the likelihood of co-placement was lowest from the mid-1980s to 1989 (Wulczyn

⁹ For clarification, this paper refers to the term parentification as the adoption of the parenting role by a sibling. However, it can also be understood to be a switch in roles in the child-parent relationship.

and Zimmerman 2005). From 1990 to 1995, the incidence of co-placement increased, followed by a sharp decline after that. On closer inspection it was noted that the incidence of co-placement corresponded with the number of children admitted into out-of-home care, that is, the more children admitted, the less likely that sibling groups were placed together.

For the most part, research has been quantitative rather than qualitative, based more on data analysis than children's experiences. The studies tend to focus on the outcomes rather than the situation leading to the decision to separate children. There appears to be a lack of research about *why* siblings are separated at the outset. Leathers (2005) advocates that it is necessary to know the factors that contribute to sibling separation, to best inform appropriate policy development to promote sibling co-placement, where it is safe and in the children's best interests.

2.5 Placement stability

Sibling placements are as stable, or more stable, than placements of single children or separated siblings, and several studies suggest that children do as well or better when placed with their brothers or sisters.

(Hegar 2005 p. 731)

Placing siblings together has almost consistently been found to lead to more stable placements (Hegar 1988; Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2005). In turn, Dance and Rushton (1999) drew on a number of previous studies regarding stability in adoptions and long-term fostering. They found that children placed in care without their siblings have a higher risk of placement disruption and difficulties. In a British study, Berridge and Cleaver (1987, in Leathers 2005) found that of 88 children in long-term foster care, 50 per cent of children placed in care alone experienced placement disruption, compared with 26 per cent of children placed with some of their siblings and 33 per cent placed with all of their siblings. Similarly, sibling pairs placed together were more likely to remain in the initial placement than pairs who were initially placed apart (Staff and Fein 1992 in Leathers 2005). The presence of a child of the foster parents has not been found to lead to placement stability (Hegar 1988).

Whilst children placed in care with their siblings reportedly have fewer behavioural problems, behavioural issues and subsequent placement disruption may be due to many factors, including the difficulties inherent with foster home adaptation (Drapeau et al. 2000; Hegar 1988). Leathers, in her 2005 research, controlled for these issues to make findings independent of the effect of behaviour problems. She found that sibling co-placement played a role in placement stability and other permanency outcomes.

Children with a history of being placed with a consistent group of siblings were more integrated into their foster homes than those with an inconsistent history of sibling co-placement. This is supported by the suggestion that children placed with a consistent group of siblings had a stronger sense of integration and belonging in their foster homes and an increased capacity to form attachments, which facilitates their adaptation and bonding with foster parents (Leathers 2005).

The lack of *explanation* for the link between placement stability and sibling co-placement has been a limitation of many studies. Leathers reasons that placement breakdown might be due to

greater externalizing (sic) behaviour problems among children placed alone rather than a direct result of separation and that previous research also provides little information about the processes that might lead to increased rates of disruption among children placed alone...

(Leathers 2005, p. 796).

2.6 Children's voice

Anecdotal evidence elicited from young people in care suggests that sibling contact is an urgent issue for them. Some young people report "... that contact with their siblings is sometimes more important for them than contact with their parents" (Families SA 2007, p. 13).

Children's wishes regarding sibling co-placement or contact have been largely overlooked in primary and secondary research. This lack of qualitative research, however, has been well documented throughout the literature (Leathers 2005; Mullender 1999; O'Neill 2002; Schlonsky, Bellamy, Elkins and Ashare 2005). The distinct lack of 'experiential' research on the subject of siblings in care has been attributed to the underlying complexity of the problem (Wulczyn and Zimmerman 2005). Human experience is always notoriously difficult to rigorously research because it is so individual, as in:

...what a sibling relationship means or can potentially mean to any child in foster care is as diverse as the children who have experienced life in care.

(Herrick and Piccus 2005, p. 847)

In 2005 a study found that children generally prefer to be placed together with their siblings and when this is not possible they want frequent contact and information about each other (Herrick and Piccus 2005). Children and young people also want their opinions considered and supported more by professionals.

...some kids are forced to see their parents when they don't want to and others aren't able to see their parents when they [do] want to.

(Herrick and Piccus 2005, p. 847)

In a 2004 survey of 332 Australian children and young people in care, the CREATE Foundation (2004) found that, when asked what they would most like to change about their care experience, ten respondents said they wanted more contact with their siblings or to live with them.

Children and young people will have views and can give advice on what would work for them if siblings must be separated. For example, siblings who are separated solely on the basis of gender or age may be separated from their brothers and sisters based on a case worker's arbitrary decision (Leathers 2005). So too, separation from one another may mean different things for different children (Schlonsky and Bellamy et al. 2005). For example, an infant may not be upset by being separated from his or her older brother, but the older brother may suffer considerably.

...the final decision should be based on the needs and wishes of the children rather than on administrative expediency or difficulty in finding homes.

(Ward 1984 in Herrick and Piccus 2005).

It is imperative to seek children's views when devising sibling contact plans and placement even if their wishes cannot be met (O'Neill 2002). The information solicited must also include the question of who the child views as his or her sibling, which may be substantially different to that prescribed by law or policy (Schlonsky and Bellamy et al. 2005). A child's view may extend beyond the dictionary definition to include foster siblings, unrelated step-siblings and other unrelated foster children in the same family.

Cultural considerations must also be borne in mind when considering a child's view of their siblings. As noted above, the Aboriginal family structure differs significantly from that of the conventional structure, in that skin, moiety and clan all factor into the definition of family. Skin groups, for example, "...govern social behaviours and interaction, determining those with whom individuals can (and cannot) talk to, marry and trade with, as well as identifying their natural enemies" (Families SA 2009a).

Aboriginal people belong to one of two moieties, or divisions. Children belong to the same as their father, and their mother belongs to the other:

Everything – Spirit Beings, plant and animal species, clan groups, areas of land and water – belong to one of these two moieties. Within each moiety, people belong to smaller groups called clans... A clan usually consists of two or more family groups that share an area of land over which they have ownership.

(Families SA 2009b, p. 8)

It is likely that not all sibling relationships will have equal value for a child. For example, a brother by birth might 'rank' higher than a birth child of a foster parent, and a long-term unrelated foster sibling might outrank a half-sister. Appearances may also be deceiving, with a child's closest sibling sometimes being the one they fight with the most (Argent 2008). In a similar vein, some children and young people in care have said that their relationship with a sibling outweighs that with their birth parents:

...they all mentioned brothers or sisters, their concerns for, and worries about them. Some of the young people were explicit that a sibling relationship was more important to them than contact, direct or indirect, with a parent....there was no necessary correlation between the amount of their life that they had lived together with a sibling (in the birth family or while in care) and the importance they attached to them...

(Harrison 1999, pp. 102-103).

2.7 Sibling contact

Wherever placement together is not possible, there is general agreement that some form of contact should be maintained between related children, in order that they know each other's lives and have the opportunity to develop their relationship as they grow up.

(Dance and Rushton 1999, p. 82)

Siblings in care who are separated can become significantly emotionally detached from one another, despite abhorring being apart (Drapeau et al. 2000). On the other hand separating siblings when being placed in care can, sometimes, lead to improved relationships as rivalry and competition are reduced.

...children in care have very diverse sibling relationships... Some siblings remain strongly attached to each other in spite of prolonged separation, while others demonstrate superficial relationships that are symptomatic of an attachment disturbance.

(Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2005, p. 822)

Contact between siblings who are placed in care separately is generally viewed positively (Dance and Rushton 1999). When children are separated, however, there is a high risk that contact with siblings will be irregular, limited, or non-existent (Mullender 1999). A recent Australian study found that of the children whose siblings lived elsewhere, nearly half never saw their sibling or only saw them on an irregular or infrequent basis (Wise 2011). On this issue, Kosonen says:

Maintaining contact between the foster children and their siblings living apart involved a number of individual arrangements and considerable effort and resources by social workers and foster carers. The contact arrangements mirrored the unclear nature of the children's families. Some siblings maintained contact with different parents and step-parents, siblings and members of the extended family. For others, contact between separated siblings had already been infrequent before the child's arrival in foster care.

(1999, p. 42)

As described above, the “unclear” families and the multiplicity of sibling relationships often means that the resources to enable and maintain meaningful relationships between siblings are unavailable, or limited at best.

A child's caregiver plays a vital role in the contact between siblings placed separately. A 2007 study found that whilst some caregivers actively encouraged and facilitated contact between siblings, others felt disempowered to assist in the process, thought the children were ‘not responsive’, which created a “sense of helpless indifference” (James, Monn, Palinkas and Leslie 2007, p. 99). It was reported that some caregivers ‘actively controlled’ or limited contact in order to protect themselves and the child from ‘negative influences and painful experiences’ (2007, p. 99)

In *Ten Top Tips for Placing Siblings*, Argent (2008) says that whilst a child may have many siblings, it is imperative to unravel the seemingly complex situation to clearly identify the most significant brothers and sisters - by asking the child. After this, an agreed sibling contact plan can be devised that will be practical, flexible and sustainable.

2.8 Summary

The literature documents the many benefits of placing siblings together and authors invariably conclude that siblings should not be separated unless it is in the child's best interests. The likelihood that siblings will be placed together, however, is influenced by placement availability, age, group size and behaviour.

Placement decisions and management of sibling contact are made more complex by the varied interpretation of 'sibling'. Authors who have commented on the problems of definition point to the significance of a child's views in understanding who they consider to be siblings and who is important to them.

Children within sibling groups will have different relationships with each other. Authors conclude that those relationships need to be assessed well and understood when making decisions about placements and contact. Where it is not possible to support an important sibling relationship with co-placement, the issues of regular contact should be addressed in case planning and implementation.

There is a considerable lack of primary research about the experiences and opinions of children and young people in care and their relationships with their siblings. Whilst much of the literature considers the cause and effect of placing siblings in care together or apart, very little has been researched about children's experiences. This gap in the literature has been remarked upon however, and there have been several calls for more work to be done in this area (see Hegar 2005; Lery, Shaw and Magruder 2005; Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2005).

3 Findings – case file audit

3.1 Background

With cooperation from Families SA, the Office of the Guardian (GCYP) randomly selected 100 files of children who had siblings, from the Connected Care Teams¹⁰ from Adelaide, Elizabeth, Murray Bridge and Port Pirie offices. These were selected on the basis of location and best likelihood of gathering a representative sample. The number of cases selected from each centre was as follows:

- Adelaide – 15 cases
- Elizabeth – 35 cases
- Murray Bridge – 20 cases
- Port Pirie – 30 cases.

The data was gathered using an audit tool, developed in consultation with the reference group, and recorded by staff of GCYP.

Generally, the baseline demographic data demonstrated that the random selection of cases was a good representative sample reflecting the profile of children and young people under guardianship. With regard to the *allocation of a worker and sibling relationships and contact*, data was gathered for the 12 months preceding the date of evidence collection. It had been determined by the reference group that the previous 12 months would provide sufficient information regarding information known about the child, planning for family (including sibling) contact, what contact is occurring and the child's views regarding sibling contact.

The case file audit was limited to only those activities recorded (that is, information that was on the child's file). Primarily data was obtained from C3MS, the electronic database and records management system used by Families SA. However one office had not used the system exclusively for the preceding 12 months. In that instance, data was also obtained from paper based files.

It was expected that the case files would reflect a complete record of the child's circumstances and decisions made by Families SA. Although three offices had used C3MS exclusively for the preceding 12 months, case workers' familiarity and confidence in using the system was not known nor sought.

¹⁰ Connected Care Teams in Families SA are the social work teams with responsibility for children and young people under long-term guardianship orders.

3.2 Baseline data

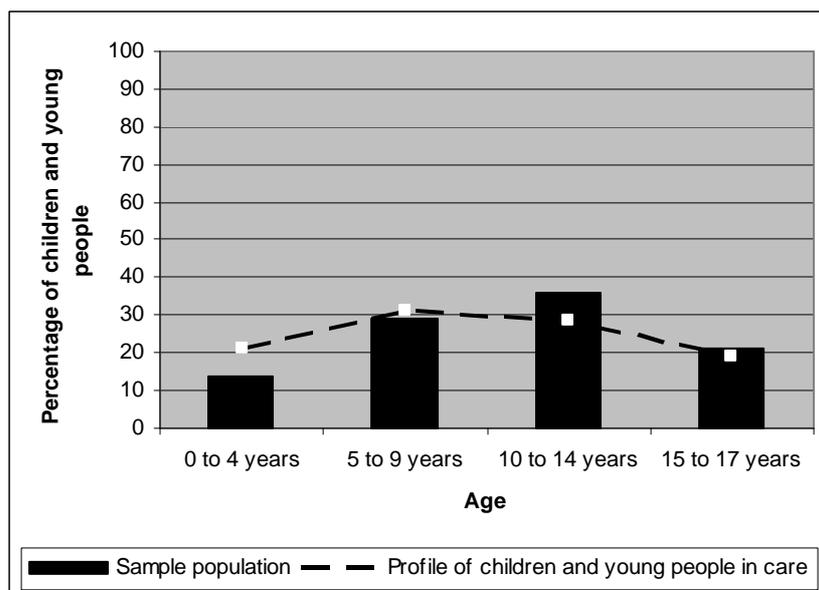
3.2.1 Gender

The sample (n=100) comprised 60 males (60 per cent) and 40 females (40 per cent). The profile of children and young people under guardianship, as at 30 June 2011, shows that males accounted for almost 53 per cent of those in care.

3.2.2 Age

Graph 1 illustrates the ages of those within the sample group. This closely resembles the profile of children and young people under guardianship, as at 30 June 2011.

Graph 1 – Ages of children and young people in care



3.2.3 Special needs

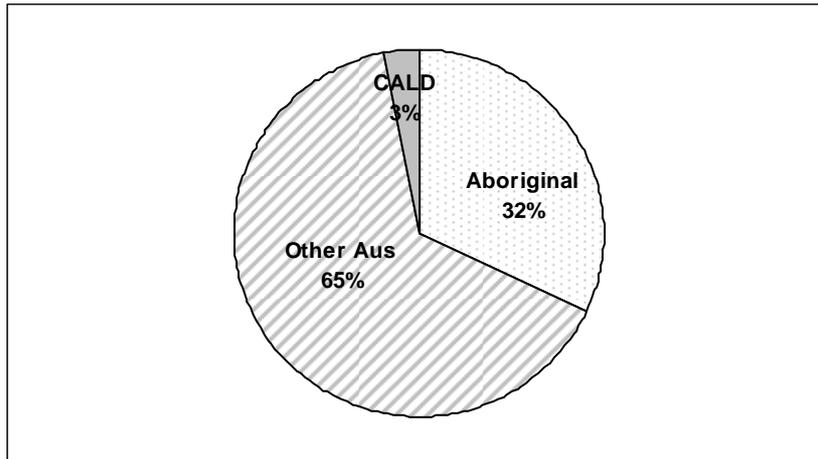
In 16 of the 100 cases, it was recorded that the child or young person had a disability (16 per cent of the sample). Data previously provided by Disability Services recognises that 9.8 per cent of children and young people in care have a disability. Within the sample group, another 28 children and young people were identified as having behavioural and/or psychological needs.

3.2.4 Cultural identity

Chart 1 illustrates the cultural identity of the children and young people included in the case file audit. The sample includes a slightly higher percentage of Aboriginal

children and young people than the profile of children and young people in care (almost 25 per cent are Aboriginal).

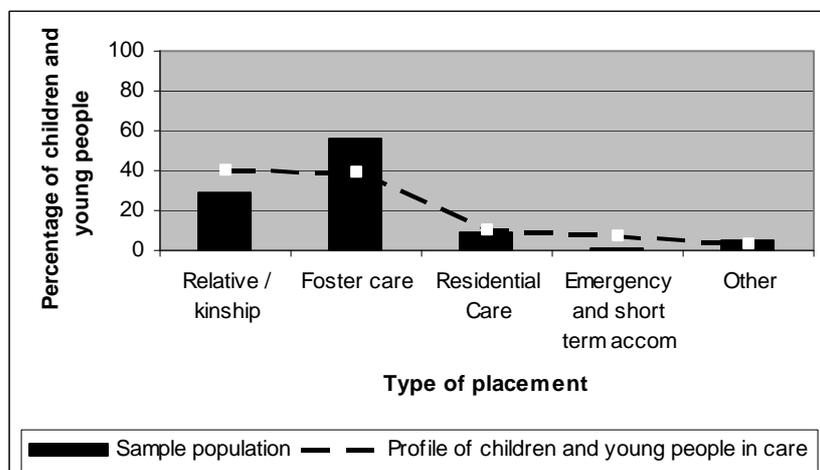
Chart 1 – Cultural identity of children and young people within the sample



3.2.5 Type of care arrangement

Eighty-five per cent of the children and young people were in family-based placements (either with relatives or non-relative foster carers). A further nine per cent were in residential care, two per cent were living independently and one per cent was in emergency care. Two young people had been reunited with their birth family and another young person's current care arrangement could not be determined as the information was not found on the case file. *Graph 2* illustrates the comparison of the sample population with the profile of children and young people in care, as at 30 June 2011.

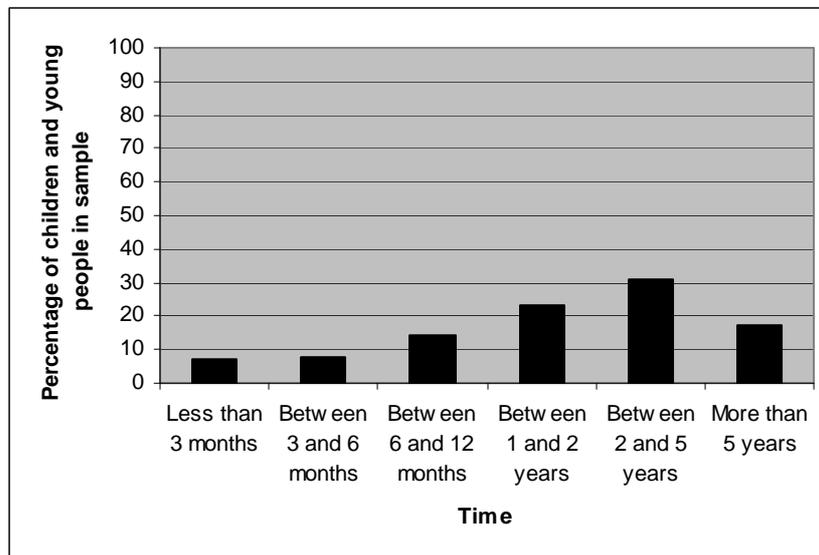
Graph 2 – Placement type for children and young people in care



3.2.6 Length of placement

Forty-eight per cent of the children and young people within the sample had been living in their current placement (at the time of the data collection) for at least two years. Fifteen per cent of children and young people were in newly-established or temporary placements (six months or less). *Graph 3* illustrates the length of time children and young people had been in their placements at the time of data collection.

Graph 3 – Length of placement



3.3 Case management and case work service

3.3.1 Case worker allocated

A case worker was allocated in 91 per cent of the cases at the time of data collection. In three of those cases, the child had been unallocated for a period of time within the preceding 12 months. Nine children and young people were unallocated at the time of data collection.

Three of the nine children and young people who were unallocated were living interstate with carers. One of the three case files documented a request for interstate casework service.

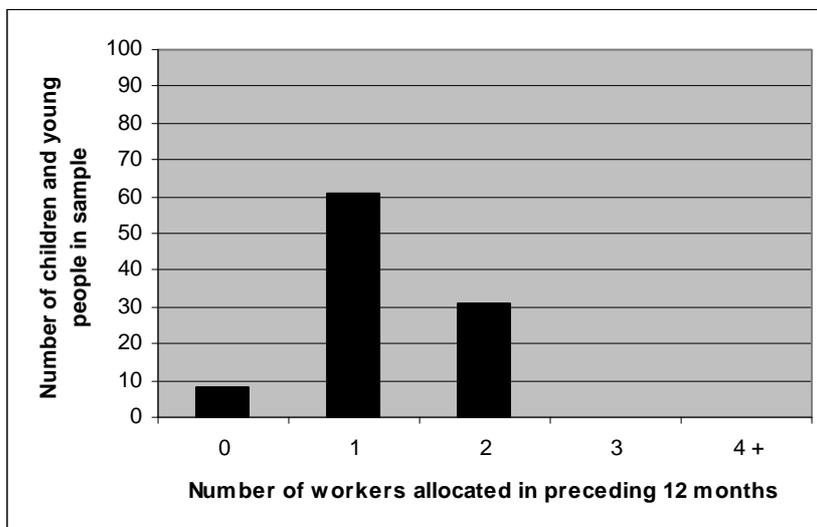
Eight children and young people, including the three who have relocated interstate, did not have any worker allocated in the 12 months preceding data collection.

3.3.2 Number of workers in the preceding 12 months

Graph 4 illustrates that almost two out of three children and young people had continuity of an allocated case worker. That is, at the time of gathering the case file evidence, 61 children and young people had the same case worker allocated for at least 12 months. In another 31 cases, two workers had been allocated in that period of time. There were no instances of a child or young person having three or more case workers allocated in the preceding 12 months. As reported above, eight children and young people did not have any worker allocated in the 12 months preceding data collection.

The reasons for the change of workers was documented in 20 out of 31 cases and included the transfer of a file between district offices, transfer of a file between teams within the same office and worker resignation. Reasons for the change were not documented in 11 cases.

Graph 4 – Numbers of workers allocated in the preceding 12 months



3.3.3 Differential case management response

A differential case management response was assessed and applied in 13 cases. Children and young people receiving a differential response are regarded as requiring low-level intervention. A differential response also reduces the minimum face-to-face contact with the child to once per quarter¹¹. A differential case management response can only be assessed and applied when it is necessary

¹¹ Compared with Standard 2.2 (Caseworker Contact) that states that "every child and young person in care will have face to face contact with their allocated worker a minimum of once a month." (DFC 2008, p.28)

due to high demand on the office. It appears that some offices decide to have unallocated cases, whereas other offices decide to reduce the level of intervention and frequency of contact based on assessment.

3.3.4 *Documented obstruction(s) to contact*

There was evidence in only one case that the Families SA office believed the carer was obstructing contact between the child and the case worker. In this case, the child was placed in relative care and the case file documented that the carer not only blocked contact with the allocated worker but also blocked contact with the child's sibling, who was separately placed with another relative carer. The case file documented the allocated worker's repeated attempts to have contact with the child and effort to resolve the issue.

3.3.5 *Supervisory directions*

Within the context of supervision, the broader topic of family contact had been discussed in 57 cases. Predominantly supervisory discussions were restricted to a review of the existing arrangements for family contact. In only four cases was there a specific discussion regarding the child's views of family contact. In an additional five cases, directions were issued to the allocated worker to attend to family contact arrangements.

Of the 57 case files:

- 14 cases of supervision occurred within the preceding month;
- 22 cases within the preceding one to two months;
- 16 cases within preceding three to six months; and
- 5 cases within the preceding six to twelve months.

3.3.6 *Case records*

In one case, there was an emergency warning on the system advising that if emergency placements were required (due to the carer's poor health) the three siblings were *not* to be separated. A specific carer had been approved to care for the siblings in an emergency and the respite carer had agreed to accept all three siblings.

There were three case files (out of 91 allocated cases) that had no records of the allocated workers' direct contact with the child. In those cases, all contacts documented were with the children's carers. In two of those cases there was no information documented on the files to indicate that the children were not capable of, or refused to have direct contact with the allocated workers. In the remaining

case there was evidence that the carer has obstructed the child's contact (as reported in 3.3.4).

In seven cases there were no current case plans or annual review outcomes documented in the C3MS record for the preceding 12 months.

3.4 Sibling relationships

For the purpose of data collection, the child protection agency's definition¹² and identification of sibling(s) was applied. Records incorporating case plans, annual review outcomes, genograms¹³, psychological assessments and case notes were sourced to determine sibling relationships. The C3MS records also enable a child's significant relationships, such as sibling relationships, to be identified and listed.

3.4.1 Identification of sibling relationships

In 67 per cent of cases, siblings were identified as sharing two parents. An additional 23 per cent of cases identified children as siblings where they shared one birth parent. The remaining 10 per cent of cases referred to children other than biological relations as siblings, such as unrelated foster children in the same placement and/or carers' children.

Sixty-one per cent of cases contained a genogram depicting sibling relationships. All of the relationships were biological and contained basic data, such as names and ages. None of the genograms detailed more than three-generations. Forty-two (of the 61) genograms only depicted two generations. There were no genograms detailing the child's care environment and/or care relationships.

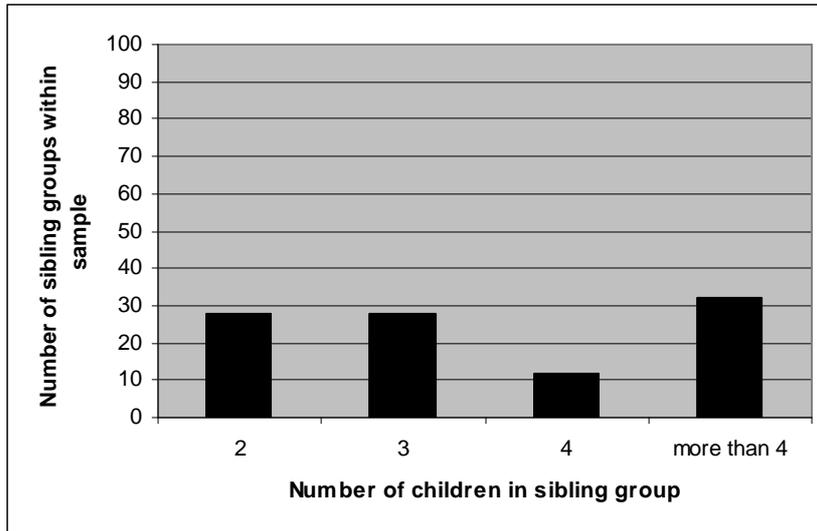
3.4.2 Size of sibling group

Graph 5 illustrates that nearly 50 per cent of children and young people within the sample are members of large sibling groups (44 children and young people are part of a sibling group of four or more children).

¹² 'Sibling' is defined as a biological brother or sister.

¹³ A genogram is a graphic representation of a family tree. Genograms can contain a wealth of information on the families represented including basic data such as the name, gender, date of birth, and date of death of each individual. Additional data may include major life events, chronic illnesses, social behaviours, nature of family relationships, emotional relationships, and social relationships. Genograms can vary significantly because there is no limit as to what type of data can be included.

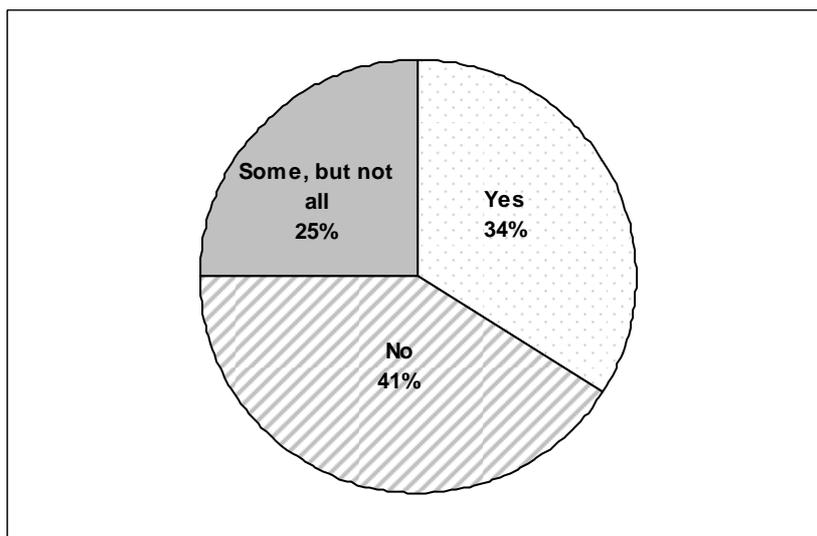
Graph 5 – Size of the sibling groups within the sample



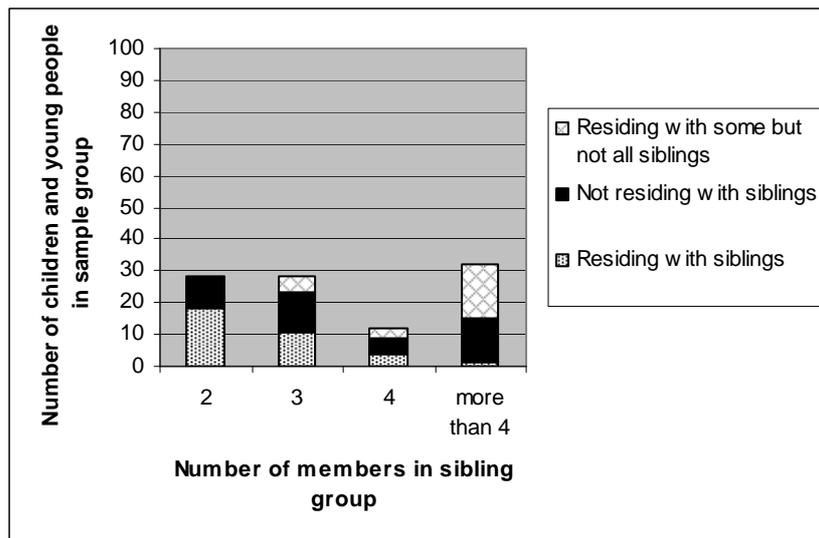
3.5 Co-placement and separation

Within the sample group, 34 children and young people reside with all of their siblings, 25 children and young people reside with some siblings, but not all, and 41 children and young people are separated from all siblings. *Chart 2* illustrates co-placement and separation results for the total sample group and *Graph 6* distinguishes co-placement and separation according to size of the sibling group.

Chart 2 – Child or young person resides with their sibling(s)



Graph 6 – Co-placement and separation according to size of the sibling group



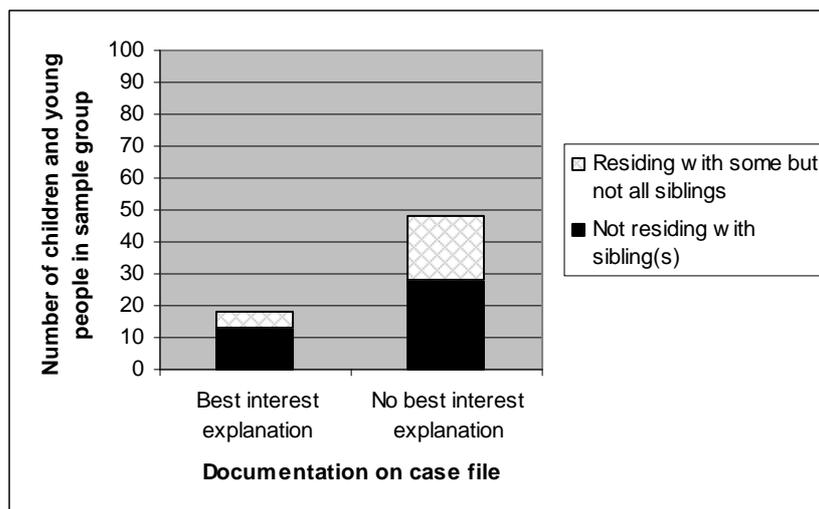
3.5.1 Reasons for separation of siblings

Of the 66 children and young people experiencing some level of separation from their siblings, there were 18 cases that documented that the separation was in the best interests of the child. The documented reasons included:

- Circumstances and timing of children entering care. Children and young people in these circumstances were part of larger sibling groups, often with a family history of transience throughout South Australia (and sometimes Australia). Individual children in care were reported to be in stable placements and it was not appropriate to place much younger siblings (with whom they had no previous contact) in the same placement. The capacity of the carers to manage large sibling groups was also seen to be a contributing factor.
- Significant trauma experienced by children and young people in parental care is exacerbated when siblings reside together.
- Sexual contact and/or violent behaviours between siblings.
- Complex individual needs of the children, such as significant disability, attachment disorder and/or considerable behavioural challenges.

The presence of a 'best interests' explanation has been distinguished between the level of separation – residing with some but not all siblings, and not residing with (any) siblings – in Graph 7.

Graph 7 – ‘Best interests’ explanation for separation of siblings according to level of separation



In 48 cases (of the 66) there was no documented information that sibling separation was in the best interests of the child or young person.

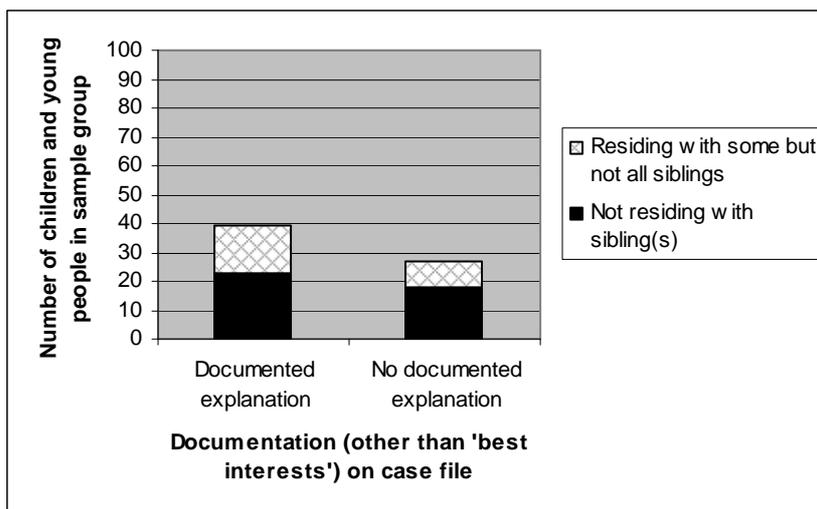
In 34 cases (of the 66), however, there was other information that explained the separation of siblings. In a few cases these were in addition to a ‘best interests’ explanation. These reasons included:

- Child or young person expressing a view that they did not want to live with their sibling(s).
- Other sibling(s) not in care. Children and young people in these circumstances often shared one birth parent or had older siblings who had aged out of care and lived independently.
- Larger sibling groups separated amongst numerous relative carers due to the incapacity of one relative to care for multiple children and young people.
- Child or young person’s behaviours were regarded as extreme and child had experienced multiple placement breakdowns. However, sibling(s) had been maintained in the first placement.
- Carers being ‘at exceed’ prior to birth of younger/youngest siblings who subsequently entered care.

In 16 cases there was no explanation for the separation of siblings.

The presence of other documented explanations has been distinguished between the level of separation – residing with some but not all siblings, and not residing with (any) siblings – in *Graph 8*.

Graph 8 – Other documented information to explain the separation of siblings according to level of separation



3.5.2 Child or young person's views regarding co-placement and separation

In 45 per cent of the cases, the child or young person's views about residing with their siblings was documented in the preceding 12 months. The child or young person's views would not have been available in 15 per cent of cases due to the child's age and/or capacity to contribute their views. Therefore, 40 per cent of files did not document the child or young person's views in the preceding 12 months where the child or young person was capable of doing so.

3.6 Sibling contact

3.6.1 Documented sibling contact plans

Forty-six children and young people (of the 66 separated from siblings) had sibling contact arrangements detailed on their case records. Graph 9 illustrates the documented sibling contact plans for separated siblings.

Just over half of those were arranged on a monthly basis. There were only 11 cases in which the child had contact with their siblings more frequently than monthly.

Families SA supervised sibling contact in 26 cases (of the 46 cases with documented sibling contact plans). In eight cases (of the 26) the sibling contact coincided with the child's contact with other family members, including, but not limited to, parents. In another seven cases (of the 26), there was information to indicate Families SA had assumed responsibility for supervising the sibling contact

due to the high and complex needs of the individual children and young people. Other reasons documented included:

- Location of, and distance between separated siblings required transport assistance for face-to-face contact. A case worker provided both transport and supervision of contact in these cases (n=3).
- Historical experiences of sibling contact had been unsuccessful or seen as 'not productive' without Families SA supervision and facilitation (n=3).
- Large number of children with sibling group (that is, four or more children) brought together for contact (n=2).

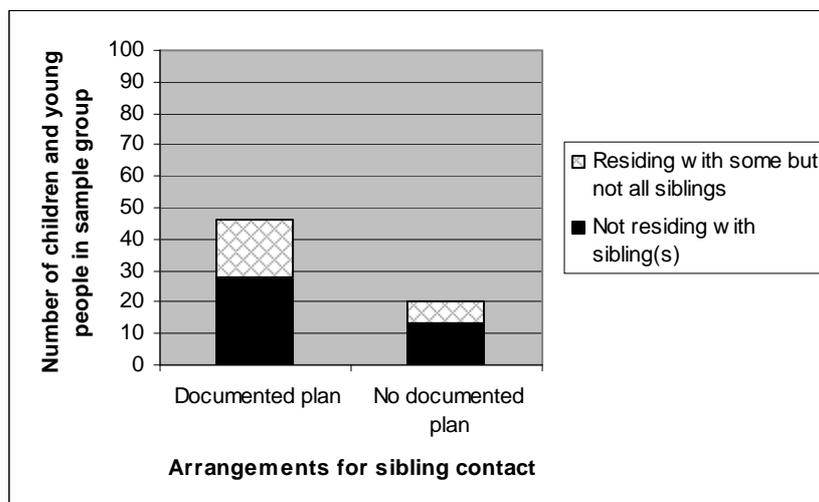
In the remaining three cases (of the 26) there was no information documented that explained the supervised arrangements.

Carers facilitated sibling contact in 16 cases (of the 46 cases with documented sibling contact plans). Other people including, but not limited to, grandparents also facilitated sibling contact in the remaining four cases (of the 46 cases with documented sibling contact plans).

There were two additional cases (to the 46 with documented contact arrangements) that noted informal contact arrangements were facilitated by the children's carers. There were no other details on the case records about the frequency of the contact and whether it reflected the child or young person's views.

Three case records indicated that there was some level of obstruction to sibling contact from carers.

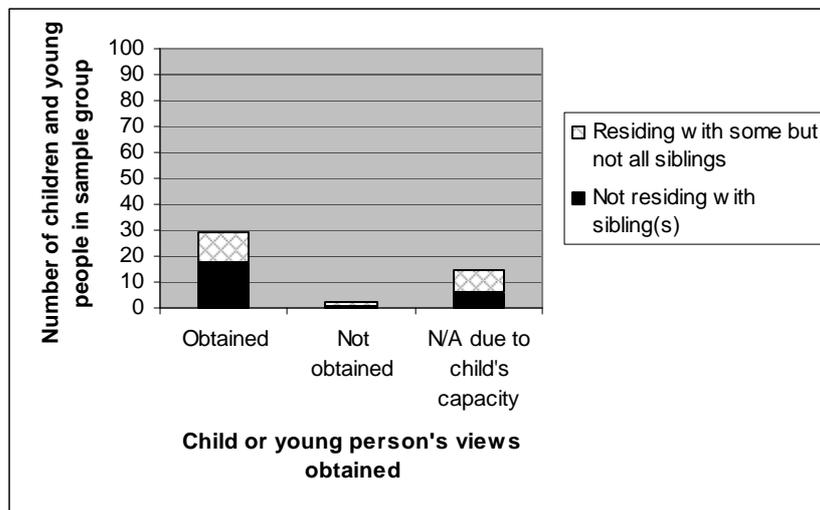
Graph 9 – Documented sibling contact plans for separated siblings



3.6.2 Child or young person’s views regarding sibling contact

Of the 46 cases that documented sibling contact arrangements, 29 case records contained the child or young person’s views about sibling contact. The child or young person’s view was not documented in another two cases, and fifteen children were not able to express a view due to their age and/or capacity to contribute their view. *Graph 10* separates these results according to level of separation.

Graph 10 – Child or young person’s views obtained regarding sibling contact arrangements



In 24 of the 29 cases documenting the child or young person’s views regarding sibling contact, the arrangements reflected the child or young person’s wishes.

3.6.3 Professional opinion regarding sibling contact

A professional opinion (provided by a psychologist, Principal Aboriginal Consultant, Principal Social Worker and/or existing therapist) regarding sibling contact was documented in 45 cases (of the 66 separated from siblings). In five cases, where there were detailed contact arrangements and a professional opinion, the sibling contact arrangements did not reflect the professional advice provided.

3.7 Child or young person’s views regarding their circumstances of care

In 61 cases (of the 100 within the sample), the child or young person’s views were obtained and documented regarding one or more of the following:

- placement
- family contact

- sibling co-placement and/or separation
- sibling contact.

Information on the case files indicated that 48 children and young people (of the 61) were satisfied with their circumstances of care. Therefore, 13 children and young people whose views had been documented had expressed dissatisfaction with their circumstances of care in the preceding 12 months.

Of the remaining 39 cases, the child or young person's view was not available from 15 children due to the child or young person's age and/or capacity to contribute. Therefore, there were 24 cases that did not document the child's views regarding placement, family contact, sibling co-placement and/or separation and sibling contact in the preceding 12 months.

3.8 Summary of key findings

The case file audit was not for the purpose of evaluating case management practice, but to provide the GCYP with information about the co-placement and separation of siblings, explanations for the separation of siblings and planning to provide for contact that promotes sibling relationships.

One hundred cases of children with siblings were randomly selected and reflected the profile of children and young people under guardianship. Data was recorded for the 12 months preceding the date of evidence collection.

The case file audit was limited to only those activities recorded (that is, information that was on the child's file). It was assumed that the records audited were complete files, that is, contained all information about the child or young person's circumstances and the case work service provided at the point of time of data collection.

3.8.1 Case worker allocated

A case worker was allocated in 91 per cent of the cases. Three of the cases allocated at the time of data collection had been unallocated for varying periods of time during the preceding 12 months. Nine cases were unallocated at the time of data collection.

3.8.2 Number of workers in the preceding 12 months

Almost two out of three children and young people had the same worker for at least 12 months. Another 31 children and young people experienced at least one change of worker within the preceding 12 months. In 11 of those cases the reason(s) for the change of workers was not documented.

3.8.3 Identification of sibling relationships

In 67 per cent of cases, siblings were identified as sharing two parents. An additional 23 per cent of cases identified children as siblings where they shared one birth parent. The remaining 10 per cent of cases referred to children other than biological relations as siblings, such as unrelated foster children in the same placement and/or carers' children. Sixty-one per cent of case files had a genogram depicting sibling relationships.

3.8.3.1 Size of sibling groups

Nearly 50 per cent of the children and young people within the sample group were members of large sibling groups (containing four or more children).

3.8.4 Co-placement and separation

Thirty-four children and young people within the sample group resided with their sibling(s). An additional 25 children and young people resided with some, but not all of their siblings and the remaining 41 children and young people were separated from all of their siblings.

3.8.4.1 Documented explanations for separation of siblings

In 18 cases (of the 66 separated siblings) it was documented that the separation was in the best interests of the child or young person. In 34 cases (of the 66) there was other information that explained the separation of siblings. In a few cases, these were in addition to the 'best interests' explanation. There was no explanation for the separation of siblings in 16 cases.

3.8.4.2 Child or young person's views regarding co-placement and separation

Forty-five per cent of files contained the expressed views of the child or young person regarding their co-placement and/or separation from their siblings. Fifteen per cent of children and young people within the sample were not capable of contributing their view due to age and/or disability. Therefore, 40 per cent of children and young people did not have their views about co-placement or separation documented in their case records.

3.8.5 Sibling contact arrangements

There were 46 files containing formal arrangements for sibling contact. Almost 50 per cent of these children and young people had monthly sibling contact scheduled. Families SA supervised sibling contact in 26 cases, for a variety of reasons. Twenty-nine files documented the views of children and young people

regarding sibling contact, and in 24 cases the sibling contact arrangements reflected the expressed views of the children and young people.

3.8.5.1 Professional opinion

In 45 cases (of the 66 separated siblings) a professional opinion regarding sibling contact had been provided. Opinions were provided by psychologists, cultural consultants, Principal Social Workers or the child or young person's therapist.

3.8.6 *Child or young person's satisfaction with their circumstances*

Forty-eight cases documented the child or young person's satisfaction with their circumstances of care related to placement and family contact. However, another 13 cases documented the child or young person's dissatisfaction. Fifteen children and young people, due to their age and/capacity limitations, were not able to contribute their views regarding satisfaction. Therefore, in 24 cases the child or young person's satisfaction with their circumstances of care had not been documented in the preceding 12 months.

4 Findings – interviews with children and young people

4.1 Background

With cooperation from Families SA, children and young people in care were interviewed about their experiences of sibling relationships and sibling contact.

The GCYP contracted *Connected Self* to conduct the interviews and focus group. *Connected Self* provides services for children, young people, adults, families and agencies that have direct involvement in improving the lives of children, young people and their families. Two psychologists (the interviewers), with extensive experience working with children and young people under the guardianship of the Minister, conducted the interviews.

Connected Care Teams within the four Families SA offices where the case file audit had been undertaken were asked to nominate children and young people under guardianship orders to 18 years who may be interested and had the capacity to participate in an interview.

This was not a randomised selection process and may therefore have biased the sample towards those who were better known to the office. The GCYP did not receive information as to the criteria used in participant nomination and/or exclusion.

Upon receiving nominations from each Families SA office, the interviewers contacted potential participants and their carers, inviting them to take part. Some of the young people involved in the inquiry were living independently and contact was made directly to them. Participation was voluntary. Consent for participation and publication of their views was obtained from the child, carer and the child's legal guardian.

Guided by the reference group, and tested by the GCYP Youth Advisors, a set of questions was developed to facilitate the interviews.

The findings are grouped under the themes identified through the interviews. Where a significant difference in views was expressed by children and young people of different age ranges, this is reflected by the use of the terminology 'younger' (those aged 9 to 13 years) or 'older' (those aged 14 to 17 years) age group. There were quite different comments made by the two groups. Younger

respondents tended to make comments in more concrete terms, while older participants were more likely to use abstract constructions.

Quotes have been used throughout to both reflect and respect the information given by the children and young people.

4.2 Baseline data

Thirty-nine children and young people were nominated by the four Families SA offices. A total of 18 children and young people participated in interviews. Their ages ranged from 10 to 16 years (Mean = 13.72, SD = 1.76). Fifty-five per cent of the participants were female.

Fifteen (83 per cent) young people resided in foster care placements. Two participants (11 per cent) resided in relative care placements and one participant was in detention at the time of the interview, without an identified placement. This is not reflective of the profile of children and young people in care.¹⁴

Four (22 per cent) participants identified as Aboriginal and two (11 per cent) came from non-English speaking backgrounds. Twelve (66 per cent) participants resided in country regions of South Australia, which were greater than 50 kilometres from Adelaide.

Eleven (61 per cent) participants resided in a placement with no other biological sibling(s). Four (22 per cent) young people resided with one or more biological sibling but not all siblings, and three (17 per cent) participants resided in a placement with their entire sibling group.

4.3 Construction of family

Young people were asked an open ended question 'who is in your family?', with subsequent questions designed to elicit responses exploring the nature, function and value of family relationships.

Because I love them and they're the most closest (sic) people to me; they're important to me.

A number of participants reported feelings of closeness to biological family members even if there was infrequent or no current contact. In most cases, participants constructed biological and foster families as distinct entities.

I class the people that I live with as family, but not really as family. I don't know how to describe it but I don't call them my family, but I see them as like, a second family.

¹⁴ Refer to Section 3.2.5, Graph 2 - Placement type for children and young people in care.

However, for some young people, their foster parents (and the foster parents' extended family) were defined as 'family' and not seen as separate or distinct from their biological family.

Well because I don't really keep in contact with my mum and, like, I don't know my mum or dad and I don't really see them as my mum and dad; I see Jill and Bob¹⁵ as my mum and dad because they've had me since I was five months old, so they've basically been my family.

4.4 Nature of sibling relationships

Participants were asked to identify their siblings, with the term redefined as 'brothers or sisters' where it was not understood by the participant. In approximately two-thirds of occasions, the term 'sibling' signified a biological sibling relationship, with the term associated with foster sibling relationships and/or relationships with the caregivers' biological children for the remaining instances. There was evidence that, given the right conditions, young people could develop meaningful and satisfying sibling relationships with non-biological family members.

Because ever since I was in foster care they've [foster parents' biological children] been there, like – how should I put it – they've played with me; they're like a sister and brother to me, all of them. They take me shopping and everything; they treat me as their sister.

4.4.1 Special and important

Sibling relationships had a prominent and important role in the young person's construction of their family. Many participants rated their relationships with their siblings as being equal, if not greater, than their relationships with their biological parents and/or caregivers in terms of closeness.

Participants defined sibling relationships as being different to other relationships (for example, friendships). The special nature of this relationship was defined by being 'blood related', 'growing up' together, having stronger relationship elements (for example, 'love') and the longevity and enduring nature of the relationship.

...my brothers and sisters are my family because...I've grown up with them.

...because they're blood and they're family and I love them.

¹⁵ Throughout the *Findings* section names cited within quotes have been changed to protect confidentiality.

...my sister has always meant something to me because she's like the only family that I really know.

Many young people reported feelings of closeness with their siblings, even if they had never had contact with them, had minimal contact with them, or if their relationship with their sibling was currently strained. The following highlights the enduring nature of the relationship in the face of sibling conflict:

Interviewer: *Is he more important in your life than your friends?*

Respondent: *A little bit yeah.*

Interviewer: *So he's more important than some friends, even though he frustrates you at times?*

Respondent: *Yeah.*

Interviewer: *How is he more important?*

Respondent: *Because he is family.*

In reflecting on two new sibling relationships who the respondent had not yet met in person, one young woman reported:

I don't know them at all, but...they're still important to me because they're my family.

4.4.2 Heterogenous

A strong and consistent theme was that children and young people reported distinct and individual relationships with each of their siblings. Within a sibling group, children and young people had individual sibling constructions for relationship closeness, the interests related to each relationship, the role and value of the relationship, and how they would like that relationship to look into the future. One respondent identified separate interest among his siblings, as follows:

"Will is closer to my age – slightly – we talk about more things than Brad, but Brad's interested in computers and things like that, which I'm kind of interested in as well."

Children and young people wished for approximately 65 per cent of their relationships with their siblings to become closer than what they currently were. In the remaining 35 per cent of relationships the respondents indicated contentment, acceptance or resignation.

4.4.3 Dynamic

Children and young people indicated that individual relationships with their siblings changed over time, in terms of closeness, the importance, role and function of the relationship and contact. There was overwhelming evidence that sibling

relationships are a dynamic construct that is mediated by child age, development and maturation, as well as placement proximity and contact arrangements. One respondent described the dynamic nature of her relationship with her older sister as follows:

Respondent : *She's not here a lot because she works, so when she is here – we went shopping and stuff but we don't anymore really, a lot. I don't know; it's different from when we were younger.*

Interviewer: *What was it like when you were younger?*

Respondent : *We used to do stuff together more, like – be around each other a lot more.*

Interviewer: *What has made the main difference?*

Respondent : *What do you mean?*

Interviewer: *What has changed that?*

Respondent : *We've got older.*

A number of young people who were separated from their siblings indicated that they had previously resided with sibling members (either with their biological family or in an alternative care placement). These young people reported qualitative differences in the role and function of the sibling relationship as a result of the placement change.

4.4.4 Experience dependent

Children and young people evaluated the closeness of their sibling relationships in the context of their previous experiences, including their pre- and post-care contact arrangements. Relationship closeness was negatively mediated by a range of experiences, including historical conflict, abuse and jealousy. One respondent reported that it took a significant length of time for closeness to be established after the early behavioural instability.

...she would break everything in the house. I remember her scribbling all over my dolls and breaking them, and she would do that to her dolls. She was just, like, out of control.

For siblings with a more positive history of connection, the process of growing up together was experienced as a positive predictor of current closeness, with shared history and experience creating a bond.

She's my sister and she will always mean something to me because she's my little sister and I've known her since she was born, so I think she knows me a lot more than other people do, because we've known each other for years; we've grown up with each other and stuff...because from moving

from house to house all the time, people don't really get to see the real you...and she has.

The roles assumed by young people prior to entering care were also relevant, with one young man indicating that his protective and caring role with a sibling prior to coming into care was linked to current experience of closeness with the sibling.

There was preliminary evidence that closeness between siblings was mediated by the variable of 'trust'. Trust was a factor that was shown to be developed or broken between siblings through earlier experiences. In this example, the interviewer asked a young person to describe the factors to improve relationship closeness.

Interviewer: *What else would you have to do to get it higher? Would anything else have to change?*

Respondent : *Be able to trust her again.*

Interviewer: *So what you're saying is that there is some hurt in that relationship?*

Respondent : *Yeah*

Interviewer: *Do those hurts relate to when she was living here [with you]?*

Respondent : *Well, living here and before we went into foster care.*

4.4.5 *Distinct sibling needs*

Individual children and young people within a sibling group (both living together and apart) constructed their relationships differently in terms of perceived closeness, value and function of the relationship, and desired future contact arrangements. This distinctness was noted by one respondent, in her evaluation of her sister.

She's got the same interests as me but she's different in some places.

At times, these constructions differed significantly from that of their siblings. For example, in two of the three sibling groups residing separately, only one of the siblings wished for increased contact whilst the other reported being content with the existing arrangements. In another case, a young man described a desire to provide a caring and protective role for his sister whereas his sister interpreted his actions as controlling. This suggests that within sibling groups, individual young people have distinct needs which may at times compete with those of their siblings.

4.5 Factors mediating sibling closeness

The interviewers asked each child and young person which (living apart) sibling relationships they would like to strengthen and the factors required to strengthen the relationship. Overwhelmingly, face-to-face contact was seen as being the most significant mechanism in improving relationship strength or closeness. A secondary theme was found in relation to the nature of the contact.

4.5.1 Face-to-face contact

The most consistent response provided by the respondents was that face-to-face contact between siblings was the most important means of improving relationship closeness. The majority of participants were ambivalent to the role and function of formal telephone contact as fostering relationship closeness. Instead, informal use of electronic media, for instance Facebook (or other social networking sites) and informal mobile phone contact (voice or text) were appraised in positive terms. Letter contact did not feature prominently as a factor mediating relationship strength.

One young person described recently improved contact with two siblings:

They're both now on Facebook so I learn more about them, you know, and they're kind of becoming my siblings again. Before, it was kind of every now and then we'd see them, or every fortnight we'd see them for an hour and it was really controlled and we weren't allowed to see them otherwise, but now that they're living with Paul and Jane they're doing all these things and whenever I go to Paul and Jane and we're not at school, I see them and it's become real casual and – seeing them several times a week and learning more about them, definitely feels more – I really feel like they're my siblings.

4.5.2 Satisfying contact experiences

When an inter-sibling contact arrangement was reported as satisfying, or meeting the young person's needs, this had a positive mediating impact on relationship closeness. Participant needs around contact varied across the participant group and within individual sibling groups. Thematic analysis was used to further identify factors that mediate satisfying contact arrangements. The following themes were identified within the respondents' discourse.

4.5.2.1 Frequent

Increased frequency of sibling contact was reported by young people as promoting satisfaction with contact and relationship closeness.

Well, I see them several times a week and it's fantastic because up to about a month or two ago I was seeing them once every fortnight, and for an hour, so it wasn't that much. Now that they've started doing all the things that I'm doing – yeah, like, the week-long camps – I'm spending more time with them.

4.5.2.2 Playful and fun activities

Sibling contact was universally positively evaluated when it included fun and playful activities and experiences. The act of 'doing an activity' was considered essential.

I'd like to go out and do something with her than just sit there all day – like, do something fun with my sister, because I don't get to see her on the weekends or anything, it's just that day, and I would want to do something fun with her instead of stay home and just be on the laptop and that.

Because when you're doing an activity I feel more closer to my sister, because we're having fun at the same time and she's got nothing to bitch about with me – like, she's happy and doesn't bring up stuff about Deidre and John, she's just having fun.

Contact was negatively evaluated in the context of low stimulation and monotonous environments, as described below:

It got boring and horrible because everyone wanted attention and we were just in the same boring room and stuff.

We used to have access at Families SA, in one of the rooms, and we couldn't really do much, otherwise we'd have to bring all the stuff in, and it felt really formal – yeah. Alex used to be really quiet and we didn't really talk about much; then it went to nanna's and Alex was talking a bit more and getting more involved in activities.

The nature of desired contact activities was mediated by the age of the siblings. For instance, older respondents often described a desire to play fun games (for example, trampoline, hide and seek) with younger siblings, and other age appropriate activities with older siblings (for example, shopping, fishing, attending the Royal Adelaide Show).

I spent about six hours with her that day and we just, like, went on rides and stuff; we had heaps of fun. It was bonding...because when we have access it's not really us having fun together, it's just us talking about stuff that's happened, and when we went to the Show we were actually having fun together, which we haven't done in so long.

4.5.2.3 Relaxed and natural

The nature of the environment was an important mediator of respondent satisfaction in sibling contact. Satisfying contact was described in terms of being relaxed and occurring in a natural manner. For instance:

- When contact occurred through extra-curricular activities jointly undertaken by siblings, such as swimming, youth group and camps.
- Incidental contact through school.
- Sibling sleepovers.
- For older siblings, mobile phone contact, texting and use of Facebook were regarded as positive contact experiences.

As succinctly put by one respondent, satisfying contact included:

...having a good barbie [barbecue]...and chilling with the kids and having fun, it's like normal families.

Natural contact (for example, as facilitated through a camp experience) opportunities would also appear to provide the means for siblings living apart to engage in rituals and routines characteristic of traditional families.

The camps were the first time that we spent more than a couple of hours together in about six years, me and Matthew so – that was in the January holidays. We hadn't spent more than a couple of hours together, and so spending a whole week with him – even though I was looking after my own dorm of girls, being a leader – I still got to have a lot of time with Matthew, and it was fantastic waking up and saying 'good morning' and going to sleep and saying 'good night' to him.

Supervised contact, and/or contact occurring within a Families SA office was characterised in less satisfying terms, although a small number of young people reported neutral responses to such a location. Key responses indicated that such environments placed additional pressure on the contact, and sibling communication and interactions were more restricted.

...someone just standing there and watching me.

I just don't like where it's supervised – they're really nosey and sit there, just watch what we do and stuff. If we could just sit in a room and not be supervised, and we can just talk and have a family and stuff.

Supervised, you can't really let loose – like, you can't be who you are so it's just like – I can't, how do I explain this? If someone is supervising us, they document stuff, so you have to be really careful about what you say, careful about what you do, make sure you're being so polite 24/7; there's a lot of pressure onto you. But if there's no-one there you can let loose a bit."

My social worker would butt in all the time, because when I'm trying to talk to my sister she butts in and it gets annoying.

4.5.3 Meeting expectations

Young people were able to describe their needs and expectations from having contact with their siblings. This included playing individually or collectively with sibling members, sharing a discussion with siblings, providing support and guidance, and having fun. When these needs were met young people tended to describe the contact positively.

However, as previously noted, young people have distinct needs and expectations from contact. This can result in a less than satisfying contact experience for some young people.

...all she wants to do is sit on Facebook and she doesn't want to talk to me, so I'd rather it be like me and her going out somewhere instead of just sitting at home all the time.

There was evidence that some case workers had been creative in facilitating satisfying contact arrangements for larger sibling groups, where there are likely to be distinct and individual expectations about the contact experience. For example, one young person described a contact experience which included bush walking with her sibling group. She indicated that this was a positive experience as it allowed her to spontaneously play with her younger siblings, but also provided her the opportunity to talk in depth with her older siblings.

4.5.4 System integration

Inter-sibling contact was most likely to be described in satisfying terms when the contact was facilitated and supported by the systems surrounding the young person (including Families SA case workers, caregivers, biological family and volunteers supporting transport arrangements). When these systems were working in an integrated manner, contact occurred with less reported stress. When there were issues within the system (for example, communication breakdown between foster carers and case workers about contact arrangements, or when transport was not organised) inter-sibling contact was evaluated in less satisfying terms.

Across the respondent group, there were examples of foster carers independently organising and facilitating sibling contact among themselves in a spontaneous or needs-based manner (for example, birthdays) between siblings. Such contact was universally regarded as satisfying for the respondents.

4.5.5 *Child-centric case management*

All respondents had distinct viewpoints of how their sibling contact arrangements could be improved or strengthened. When these child-centric views were reflected in practice, they were associated with more satisfying sibling contact arrangements. The case worker was identified as the most important person to influence the contact process. Overall, the majority of respondents reported that they were generally satisfied by the way their case worker was managing the contact process with their siblings. Across the respondent group, there was evidence that the case workers had employed creative and considered contact arrangements to foster satisfying contact between siblings, as well to as reduce issues related to sibling conflict.

There were a small but significant number of young people, however, who were not satisfied with their current sibling contact arrangements and a number of these participants indicated that their case worker had not listened to them about wanting to increase or change their contact arrangements with their siblings. Other participants had a level of ambivalence (or did not appear confident) about asking their case worker to change or modify their current contact arrangements.

4.5.6 *Sibling conflict*

Conflict or fighting between siblings during contact, as described below, impacted negatively on the young person's perception and experience of the contact:

Liam always be naughty when I want to play with him...sometimes he punches and pushes me around.

The last access we had...we went ice-skating and me and Jody were having an argument and I just stormed out – like, she kept on hitting me and I hit her, and I just stormed out of the ice arena and walked down the road because I was really angry at her. Sometimes we argue in situations, but it's gotten better when we were older.

Competition and jealousy between members of sibling groups during contact was sometimes reported to occur. This was also evaluated negatively by respondents.

4.6 Impact of sibling contact

Sibling contact, for both co-placed and separated siblings, was found to have a differential impact depending on the nature of the contact, and was found to mediate developmental processes (for example, identity formation, social and emotional development).

4.6.1 Differential impact

Contact between siblings, whether it relates to siblings living together or apart, had the potential to have either a positive or negative impact. Negative impacts included young people reportedly feeling hurt, scared, angry, confused, sad and frustrated through the contact arrangements, and/or exhibiting a pattern of aggression or avoidance in response to sibling contact. In contrast, positive impacts included young people reportedly feeling happy, confident and satisfied through the contact arrangement, and/or exhibiting a pattern of positive self-reflection and motivation for future contact.

Every sibling relationship analysed within the study had the potential to have both positive and negative impacts. In the majority of cases, thematic analysis indicated that contact between siblings had a primarily positive impact, with negative impacts manifesting only temporarily and in a manner that would be expected within most sibling relationships.

Interviewer: *What are some of the good things about living with John?*

Respondent : *Yeah, we're brother and sister – we help each other but sometimes we fight. All the brothers and sisters do that but, yeah – and after five minutes we, like, talk.*

Interviewer: *So sometimes you fight but it's over in about five minutes and you talk again?*

Respondent : *Yeah.*

Interviewer: *What are some of the things that are not so good about living together?*

Respondent: *He annoys me sometimes, but yeah – and I don't like him sometimes, and he's, like, bossy.*

For some young people, a temporary period of respite from their siblings was considered as being of benefit to the relationship.

Well it was good to be away from her because I need that too, to be away from her for a while. She does get annoying – really really annoying – but it was good to reunite on the third week, to see her again.

There was, however, a small number of young people who reported that sibling contact was characterised by more intensive or sustained levels of negative impact. This appeared to be associated with inter-sibling bullying or aggression. Some of these young people acknowledged that their relationships with their siblings had improved through living separately, as demonstrated below:

Interviewer: *Were you guys closer when you were living together?*

Respondent : *No.*

Interviewer: *You weren't?*

Respondent : *No. She would like, constantly pull my hair, cut my hair; she tried bashing me up all the time and, like, she would put me in hospital sometimes. She'd grab a trolley and smack me, and I remember her taking me into a room and grabbing the back of my head and smashing my head against the wall and me having a blood nose.*

Interviewer: *She's a little bit older, isn't she; she's two years older than you?*

Respondent : *Yeah.*

Interviewer : *What you're saying to me is that the fact that she's now living away from you has meant that your relationship has gotten stronger?*

Respondent : *Yeah.*

4.6.2 Developmental mediator

Thematic analysis produced a number of themes relating to the mediating role sibling contact assumes in the developmental processes of children and adolescents. These themes were developed with consideration given to the child psychology literature.

4.6.2.1 Identity development

Active sibling contact reinforces or provides ongoing exposure to an identity status or role, in terms of being a 'sister' or 'brother'.

Well, I am her big sister but I have to be her big, big sister because mine never come and see her either, so I try to be like her bigger sister.

Furthermore, many older siblings described a role or identity state to care, look after, guide or teach their younger sibling. Their role was often identified as a caring or loving role. Being the 'big brother' or 'big sister' was important for many of the older children, although it was acknowledged that not all siblings actually like their older sibling taking on this role. Older siblings also identified their roles in terms of mentorship:

She looks up to me.

I give her some advice when she needs it.

I had to be a really good role model for them.

I want that one to be real strong because I just want him to grow up with a big brother too, like, guide him.

Respondent : *I just want to be their big sister.*

Interviewer: *What does it mean to be a big sister?*

Respondent : *Just to listen to them if they want to say anything or see if there are any questions and stuff, or just any girl stuff – like, Kirsty is into make-up and stuff, so I try to help her with that – just like that. Kirsty has friend problems and I try to help her with that. I think she's good now; it was a while ago.*

4.6.2.2 Emotional support and reciprocation

Young people indicated that siblings provide them with emotional support and care and that they, in turn, also assumed a role in care for and supporting their siblings.

This is demonstrated by the following comments by participants:

Respondent : *That was, yeah, when my parents died – I couldn't believe that in my head but he kind of – he supported me.*

Interviewer: *How did it make you feel having him supporting you?*

Respondent : *It made me, like, really happy because having someone knowing I was upset and he can talk to me. He didn't really do much; he said 'It's okay, don't worry' and that stuff.*

When I got upset about it she kind of helped me – like, she came and gave me a hug.

Interviewer: *What do you and Paul do when you catch up together?*

Respondent : *We just talk and chill and I try to make him laugh and stuff.*

Interviewer: *Why do you like to make him laugh?*

Respondent : *Because he seems so sad because he's not very happy at times, because he's been moved around and he's all by himself and I know how he feels.*

Interviewer: *So you want to make him feel better, do you?*

Respondent : *Yep.*

Interviewer: *Do you worry about Paul?*

Respondent : *Yes.*

Interviewer: *What sorts of things do you worry about with Paul?*

Respondent : *Like if he will turn out all bad, or if he won't do good at school and gets in trouble and won't be happy and stuff.*

They're always there for me; I'm always there for them if they're feeling down.

Emotional support was also contextualised as supporting each other to understand and negotiate developmental experiences that have occurred during their lives (before or after entering care).

Well I guess Amy has experienced the same thing as me, with what happened at home, so she can be a bit more understanding than, say, some of my friends, who really don't know a lot of what happened. Quite a lot of my friends do know what happened but they don't know it to the full extent, and I guess with Amy we could have discussions of what it was like and – yeah. A couple of years ago we always used to say what we could have done to prevent it or whatever but – yeah.

A number of older respondents indicated that they worried about the welfare of their siblings living in other locations. Contact provided a means for them to understand how their brother or sister was and to provide advice, support and/or encouragement.

The act of providing support and kindness to a sibling was also noted to have a reciprocal effect on the sibling who provided the support, as evidenced below by one young person.

Respondent : *I wake up and tell her 'happy birthday' because I want to be the first person to tell her happy birthday.*

Interviewer: *Why?*

Respondent : *I don't know; it just makes me feel special.*

4.6.2.3 Feeling connected

Being placed away from a sibling changed how young people constructed their family. The family was maintained in a more whole state when siblings were placed together. Greater fragmentation of sibling placements appeared to impact on the perception of wholeness of family. A number of respondents indicated that a 'bond' had been broken when placed apart from their siblings. A number of

respondents indicated that they initially felt sad and disappointed when placed away from their brother or sister. Respondents indicated that contact increases feelings of safety and connection, and reduces feelings of loneliness and sadness.

Interviewer: *How do you feel when you can't see your brothers?*

Respondent : *Actually quite sad.*

Interviewer: *Why do you feel sad?*

Respondent : *Because I don't get to see my brothers much and I like to see my brothers, and I just love them.*

Interviewer: *Why do you love your brothers?*

Respondent : *Because my brothers mean more to me than my friends.*

Interviewer: *Why do your brothers mean more to you?*

Respondent: *Because they like give me things and share things...play with me and do lots of things.*

4.7 Siblings living together: accessibility and continuity of developmental mediators

The interviews provided an opportunity to explore the role and function of sibling contact for children in care living together and apart. However, because of the small sample size the threshold was not met to comment on the degree of impact as it related to siblings either living together or apart. Nonetheless, one theme that did emerge was that siblings placed together have increased access to the developmental mediators identified above (identity, emotional support and reciprocation, and connection) as a result of their ongoing contact with their siblings. Hence these processes are both more accessible and more continuous in the lives of participants living with their siblings on an ongoing basis.

Interviewer: *What are some of the really good things about living with your sister?*

Respondent : *That I've got a sister here that I can only call my real sister.*

Interviewer: *Is it important for you to call her your real sister?*

Respondent : *Oh I just call her 'sister' but it's good to be living with her because then I do have a blood related person here, even if it does feel like everyone else is related to me.*

Interviewer: *What are some of the good things about living with your brothers and sisters?*

Respondent : *I guess being in their life (sic) again and bonding with them all the time and seeing them all the time, and everyone's happy and everything.*

Ongoing living arrangements between siblings provides the opportunity for siblings to watch each other grow, and experience the feelings of being connected around mutual and changing interests on a continual basis. Young people without this experience frequently reported a level of disconnection from their siblings.

They're my little brothers. I've kind of missed out on seeing them grow up. Even though I did see them once a fortnight, I didn't really know them that well. I knew Dylan used to be really good at maths and I knew Jacob was having some problems with stuttering and bullying at school, but that was about all I knew; I didn't really know that much about them.

4.8 Summary of key findings

The main purpose of this qualitative part of the inquiry was to gain some understanding of the children and young people's experiences of sibling relationships and contact. The key areas that were looked at were:

- What relationships do children and young people consider to be sibling relationships?
- What benefits and costs are associated with being placed together?
- What constitutes good contact between siblings in care who are separated?
- What benefits accrue to the child or young person as a result of satisfying sibling contact, and what do children dissatisfied with sibling contact miss out on?
- What is needed to achieve good sibling contact?

4.8.1 Construction of family

The perceived importance and value of biological family, regardless of level of contact occurring, emerged as a strong theme from the interviews with children and young people in care. For a small number of young people, foster parents were also defined as 'family' and not seen as separate or distinct from biological family.

4.8.2 Nature of sibling relationships

Approximately two-thirds of respondents defined 'sibling' as a biological relation. However, the remaining participants also associated the term 'sibling' with non-biologically related foster children and/or caregiver's children. Young people can develop meaningful and satisfying sibling relationships with non-biological family members.

Sibling relationships had a prominent and important role in the child or young person's construction of family. Many young people rated their relationships with their siblings as being equal, if not greater, than their relationships with their parents.

Many young people reported feelings of closeness with their siblings, even if they had never had contact with them, had minimal contact with them or if the relationship was currently strained.

Young people reported distinct and individual relationships with each of their siblings. Approximately two-thirds of young people wished for their relationships with their siblings to become closer than what they were.

Respondents indicated that individual relationships with their siblings changed over time, in terms of relationship closeness, the importance, role and function of the relationship and in relation to contact. There was overwhelming evidence that sibling relationships are a dynamic construct that is mediated by age, development and maturation, as well as placement proximity and contact arrangements.

Individual young people within a sibling group (both living together and apart) constructed their relationships differently and have distinct needs. At times these needs may compete with those of their siblings.

4.8.3 Factors mediating sibling closeness

Face-to-face contact was the most important means of improving sibling closeness. The majority of participants were ambivalent to the role and function of formal telephone contact and letter contact did not figure prominently.

Increased frequency of sibling contact was reported by young people as helping with contact and relationship closeness.

Sibling contact was universally positively evaluated when it included fun and playful activities and experiences. Contact was negatively evaluated in the context of low stimulation and monotonous environments.

Satisfying contact was described in terms of being relaxed and occurring in a natural manner, such as out of school activities and sleepovers. Supervised

contact and/or contact within a Families SA office was characterised in less satisfying terms.

Young people were able to describe their needs and expectations from having contact with their siblings. When their needs were met, young people tended to describe the contact positively.

Sibling contact was most likely to be described in satisfying terms when the contact was facilitated and supported by the adults in the child's life. When everyone was working in an integrated manner, sibling contact occurred with less reported stress.

All children and young people had distinct viewpoints on how their sibling contact arrangements could be improved or strengthened. The case worker was identified as the most important person to influence the contact process. The majority of respondents were satisfied with their current sibling contact arrangements, however there was a small but significant number of children and young people who were not satisfied. These children and young people reported that their case worker had not listened to their views regarding sibling contact.

Sibling conflict, rivalry or jealousy impacted negatively upon a child or young person's perception and experience of sibling contact.

4.8.4 Impact of sibling contact

Contact between siblings, whether it related to siblings living together or apart, had the potential to have either a positive or negative impact. In the majority of cases, thematic analysis indicated that contact between siblings had a primarily positive impact, with negative impacts manifesting only temporarily and in a manner that would be expected within most sibling relationships. There were a small number of young people, however, who reported that sibling contact was characterised by more intensive or sustained levels of negative impact. Some of these young people acknowledged that their relationships with their siblings had improved through living separately.

4.8.5 Developmental mediator

Active sibling contact reinforces or provides ongoing exposure to an identity status or role, in terms of being a 'brother' or 'sister'. Many older siblings described a role or identity state to care, look after, guide or teach their younger siblings.

Children and young people indicated that siblings provided them with emotional support and care for, and, in turn, also assumed a role in caring for and supporting their siblings.

A number of older respondents indicated that they worried about the welfare of their siblings living in separate placements. In these circumstances, sibling contact was vital.

Being separated from siblings changed how children and young people constructed their family. Greater fragmentation of sibling placements appeared to impact on the perception of wholeness of family. A number of young people indicated that a 'bond' had been broken when placed apart from their siblings.

4.8.6 Siblings living together

Siblings who were placed together had increased access to the developmental mediators identified above as a result of their ongoing contact with their siblings. These processes were more accessible and more continuous in the lives of children and young people living with their siblings on an ongoing basis.

Siblings who live together had the opportunity to watch each other grow and experience the feelings of being connected. Young people who were separated from their siblings frequently reported a level of disconnection from their siblings.

4.9 Review of findings

This qualitative part of the inquiry undertook an exploratory and child-centred analysis of the way sibling relationships are constructed for children and young people in care.

Sibling relationships had a prominent and important role in the child or young person's construction of family and identity. The interviews with children and young people indicate that identified sibling relationships may include unrelated children and young people in the same (or previous) care placement. Some children and young people identify as members of both biological and non-biological families.

Children and young people can articulate their views regarding sibling relationships and contact. However the previous chapter showed that their views are not always reflected in decisions regarding sibling contact.

Sibling relationships are dynamic and changeable over time, and are strongly mediated by current and historical sibling relational experiences. Within sibling groups, children and young people will both construct and have different needs and expectations from individual sibling relationships.

Ongoing sibling contact, that is considered satisfying for the child or young person, promotes positive child and adolescent development. This part of the inquiry suggests that siblings placed together have greater access to and continuity of factors that promote such development.

There were a small, but significant, number of cases where children experienced a negative impact of co-placement and the relationship between siblings improved as a result of separation.

5 Discussion

The primary purpose of undertaking an inquiry into the significance of sibling contact was to better understand children's views on contact with their siblings and the impacts of co-placement, separation and contact. The findings help the Guardian for Children and Young People and others understand who children and young people view as siblings, how children and young people view contact with siblings whom they do not live with, what they get from sibling contact and how sibling contact can be improved.

5.1 Construct of family

Biological family has an important role in how children and young people construct their personal identity.¹⁶ The findings provide further support for the importance of seeking the child or young person's views, wherever possible, regarding who their family is and how they would like to maintain relationships with family members.

Siblings have a prominent role in the child or young person's construction of family. Indeed, many of the young people interviewed rated their relationships with their siblings as being equally important, if not greater, than their relationships with their biological parents. However, it appears that the child protection and alternative care systems prioritise parental contact over sibling contact. It is common for Care and Protection Orders to note provisions for parental contact (often at the discretion of the Minister), but it is uncommon for such orders to contain provisions to ensure sibling contact. The South Australian *Children's Protection Act 1993* fails to reference siblings.

Despite Families SA policies documenting the need to assess the collective needs of siblings, as well as the individual needs of children, and to give high priority to sibling contact in case management, the inquiry evidence indicates that assessments and case management regarding family contact has greater focus on parents than siblings.

The case file audit also showed instances of sibling contact occurring as part of parental contact arrangements. This is particularly complex when a sibling remains in the care of their parent(s). Sibling contact becomes reliant on the engagement and consistent participation of the parent(s). In a few case files it was documented

¹⁶ The reference group considered, but did not conclude, whether children in care in Australia are more tied to biological family than in countries where adoption of children in state care is more common.

that when parental contact did not occur (often at times due to parents' inconsistent attendance) sibling contact was also missed.

For a small number of children and young people interviewed, foster parents were also defined as 'family' and not seen as separate or distinct from biological family. However, of the genograms¹⁷ on file, only biological family was depicted.

The primary purpose of genograms used by child protection agencies has been to illustrate family connections and scope family placement opportunities. However, there are variations to the typical family genogram that have the potential to contribute more significantly to the child or young person's circumstances in care. For example, the Placement Genogram, developed by J Curtis McMillen and Victor Groze in 1994 (Altshuler 1999) incorporates changes over time, allowing case workers to capture changes of placement and other events in the lives of children and young people. The construction of such genograms with children and young people enables the case worker to learn the children's views about their relationships with siblings, biological parents, foster or kinship caregivers, and extended family. Additionally, a genogram developed in this way can contribute to, and facilitate, participative case planning by seeking and exploring the child or young person's perceptions of their relationships with significant people in their lives.

The inquiry evidence demonstrates why it is dangerous for case workers and others to make assumptions about how a child constructs his or her family. Additionally, the far greater emphasis when family is dealt with in formal proceedings, such as court orders and family assessments, is on the parent to child relationship rather than child to child. When genograms are used to document family, it is invariably as a static record primarily for the purpose of illustrating family connections.

With some effort, children with siblings could benefit from a deliberate shift of emphasis in planning to child-defined family relationships, through the use of tools such as placement genograms or ecomaps.

5.2 Definition of sibling

Children and young people in care can identify both biological and non-biological siblings. Identified sibling relationships may include biological children of the carer and extended family, as well as unrelated foster brothers and sisters. The inquiry findings support previous research that upholds the importance of using child-centred definitions of 'siblings' (Leathers 2005; Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell 2005).

¹⁷ Refer to page 29 for further information regarding genograms.

Indeed the literature review found a lack of definition of 'sibling' in many of the studies about siblings and children in care.

Connected Self, contracted to conduct the interviews with children and young people, suggests that sibling relationships may be defined as "any self-determined relationship, which is defined by a young person as 'sibling', 'brother' or 'sister', and which offers special qualities, importance or value to the young person" (Raymond and Jane, 2011).

The inquiry indicates that non-biological sibling relationships can be constructed in a similar manner to biologically determined relationships, and when this occurs, they afford the same psychological outcomes. This supports the view that children would benefit from case planning that identifies, monitors and strengthens such relationships.

O'Neill (2002) says that it is imperative to seek the views of the child or young person when case workers are devising contact plans and placements, even when wishes cannot be met. Further, she says that the child or young person should be encouraged to identify who they view as siblings, which may substantially differ to the definition prescribed by policy. Particular attention must be paid to recognising the sibling relationships as defined by Aboriginal family structure.

The inquiry evidence shows that case workers and others should not make assumptions about who children view as their siblings. Non-biological sibling relationships can be as important to children and afford the same positive contribution to their life and development. Additionally, one in four children in care are from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families which makes it imperative for case workers and others to understand Aboriginal definitions of family and cultural relationships.

The findings confirm that the planning and review of decisions for children in care need to thoroughly consider who the child views as siblings and understand Aboriginal definitions of family.

5.3 Nature of sibling relationships

The inquiry evidence confirms the special role and importance sibling relationships have in the lives of children and young people. These relationships were found to be qualitatively different in the way children and young people construct each relationship and in the psychological benefits they receive from each relationship.

The evidence also demonstrated that sibling relationships are dynamic, impacted by experience of each other, and that needs and expectations will be individual.

The impact of sibling relationships can be both positive and negative. For a small number of children and young people sibling contact is characterised by more

intensive or sustained levels of negative impact. The interviews with children and young people indicated that this is associated with historical sibling abuse and aggression, as well as recent conflict or bullying. Other research indicates that a high degree of conflict and/or sexualised behaviour between siblings is predictive of sibling separation (Wulczyn and Zimmerman 2005; Drapeau et al. 2000). This supports the view that robust decision-making must occur in relation to sibling placement and contact that includes the assessment of the specific developmental, psychological, emotional and behavioural needs of children (Drapeau et al. 2000) as well as reviews the historical relational experiences between siblings.

The dynamic and individualised views and experiences of sibling relationships means that sound assessment and planning for children in care requires individualised and frequent review of sibling placement and contact arrangements, including, but not confined to, annual reviews of a child's circumstances.

5.4 Nature of contact

One of the most consistent findings of the inquiry was that children and young people said that face-to-face contact with their siblings was important to improving relationship closeness. Also important was:

- frequent contact
- playful and fun activities
- a relaxed and natural atmosphere
- sibling conflict minimised, and
- expectations being met.

Communication via other means was not favoured, or was viewed by children as supplementary only in addition to face-to-face contact. Telephone contact appeared the least favoured. Keeping in touch via social networking sites was acceptable to some of the children interviewed and may become more important as children age. However, even this was seen as complementary contact, not a substitute.

The use of social networking causes some alarm among case workers and carers because of the additional safety risks for children in care from people who are prohibited or restricted from seeing them. However children and young people embrace social networking and will expect to use it as others of their age do.

Most interviewees did not, at the time of their interview, have office-based contact with siblings but had had previously and disliked it. The reasons for office based contact were not sought from children and young people during interviews. It is likely that the following factors contributed:

- early stage of the child protection intervention;
- presence of parents and a requirement to supervise parental contact;

- previous or current conflict between siblings;
- lack of suitable venues for supervised contact.

In eight of the 26 cases of supervised sibling contact (from the case file audit) sibling contact coincided with the child's contact with other family members, including, but not limited to, parents. The purpose of supervising contact is to protect the child or young person's safety and interests, or to undertake an assessment. The *Practice Guidelines for Contact* (Families SA 2007b) refer to supervised or monitored contact in the context of parent-child contact. However, there were other reasons to explain the presence and supervisory role of Families SA case workers during sibling contact.

In some cases the high and complex needs of the children, the size of the sibling group, the placement distance between separated siblings and the lack of carer facilitation resulted in case workers assuming the role and responsibility for actively assisting sibling contact. In circumstances where parents were not present, the contact did not often occur within an office, and the supervision of the contact appeared to be a secondary role. In these situations the case worker's primary role was to facilitate the sibling contact by providing transport, organising activities and behaviour management.

The inquiry findings show that children appreciate face-to-face contact with their siblings in a child's setting and involving activity. It is also evident that contact between siblings should not be considered as 'done' when the contact is driven by parental access requirements.

Office-based contact among siblings should be actively discouraged. Instead case workers should be supported to arrange joint activities for siblings, such as outings, shared recreation and sport, camps and after-school or vacation care.

Carers can also be encouraged to facilitate face-to-face contact among siblings and placement decisions should take the relative ease of this into account.

When social networking is used to supplement face-to-face contact, this can be used as an opportunity to discuss risks and reasons for restrictions with the young person.

5.5 Contribution to child's development

The inquiry found that when contact between siblings was satisfying, it had the potential to foster positive identity development, feelings of connectedness and emotional support and reciprocation. These are developmental mediators which can be broadly understood as attachment related constructs (Siegel 1999; Bowlby 1982; 1969). There is overwhelming support within the literature for the value and importance of such developmental experiences in the lives of children and young

people and they have the potential to impact positively on the developmental trajectories of children and young people in care.

The findings suggest that siblings placed together in care have greater access to and continuity of these developmental mediators. Considering that such mediators are associated with psychological resilience, it goes some way to explain why sibling co-placement provides significant benefits to children and young people (Holland et al. 2005), including a range of cognitive, psychological and social outcomes (Drapeau et al. 2000) and placement stability (Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell 2005).

Considering that children and young people in care have disproportionately higher rates of emotional, attention and conduct-related problems (Delfabbro, Barber and Bentham 2002; Sawyer, Carbone, Searle & Robinson 2007), this inquiry provides strong support to child protection agencies to give priority to the function and value of sibling relationships.

The reference group discussed the tendency for case workers and others to respond to entrenched sibling rivalry or aggression by keeping children separated. Their view was that working with children on sibling relationships that are predominantly competitive or aggressive can provide benefits beyond the repair to the relationships, for example in learning how to resolve conflict, protective behaviours and recovery from trauma.

The inquiry findings suggest that siblings placed together in care have the unbroken benefit of stronger connectedness, identity formation and reciprocity that sibling relationships provide. However siblings placed apart can benefit similarly if the contact among them is frequent and satisfying.

It is evident then that sibling contact that is positive and supportive is a significant contributor to a child's emotional and mental health and development. Therefore sibling contact should be included as part of planning for health and recovery from harm.

5.6 Decision-making

The reference group agreed that the level of professional advice sought on family contact was higher than they had expected. The inquiry evidence indicated that it was likely to be provided about family contact rather than specifically sibling contact. It appears from the documented evidence that case worker's decisions are more likely to be influenced by advice obtained from another professional rather than the views of the child.

In most of the cases of sibling separation, the reasons for separation were not about the children's best interests. There were other reasons that often explained

the separation of siblings, and these reasons were various. However, the separation of larger sibling groups indicates that sibling separation is more about system incapability and pragmatic decision-making.

There were a number of case files that did not have information about the child's current circumstances, such as an explanation for the child or young person's separation from their sibling(s), a current case plan or documented annual review. Without such documentation there is no, or limited, record of recent decision-making.

The inquiry evidence indicates disconnect between policy and practice. There were some references to siblings in policy documents, most significantly the need for the collective and individual assessments, and the prioritisation of sibling contact in case management. However, the case file evidence did not demonstrate that assessments about sibling contact and giving priority to sibling relationships was common in case management.

5.7 Team planning and cooperation

The factors found to affect satisfaction with sibling contact and relationships were the extent to which child-centric case management approaches were used and the level of cooperation among those supporting sibling contact such as carers, case workers and volunteer drivers.

What was frequently missing from case files was the child or young person's views regarding separation, sibling contact, the opportunity to be placed with their siblings and information indicating when the child or young person's opinions would be sought and considered anew.

Missing information may reflect a recording issue, which is either case records were not maintained or all information had not been documented¹⁸.

From the interviews with children and young people, the case worker was identified as the most important person to influence the sibling contact process. Of the 100 case files audited, nine were unallocated at the time of data collection and 13 additional cases were receiving reduced case management response.

Reviewing sibling contact arrangements in these circumstances is likely to be less frequent, if at all.

There were 13 children and young people whose case files were audited who were not satisfied with their circumstances of care and in another 24 cases, the children

¹⁸ A new electronic case management system had been introduced from 2009-10 which may account for some missing information. However, there did not appear to be any difference between information available on the electronic system to that on hard-copy files.

and young people's satisfaction with their circumstances of care had not been documented in the preceding 12 months.

From the literature review, the interviews with children and young people, and the case file audit it appears that planning for sibling contact works best when decisions are made and implemented by the 'care team'; that is, the child, their case worker, their carer, and, where appropriate, birth parent. In the absence of a case worker, in circumstances of unallocation or differential management, it is necessary for the child or young person's caregiver to actively support and facilitate the child's family contact, including sibling contact.

If a child is to truly benefit from sibling relationships, the adults in the child's life must be supportive and in agreement about the arrangements. The direction on sibling contact arrangements will usually be provided by the case worker. Carers, however, should be able to plan and facilitate positive contact among siblings, in the knowledge of the case worker.

The inquiry then points to the need for sibling contact arrangements to be an item for discussion at each care planning meeting and expectations about supporting and sometimes facilitating face-to-face contact should be agreed from the very beginning of a placement. This means too that placement decisions should include consideration of proximity to siblings when they are separated and the preparedness of carers to support contact.

6 Conclusion

The Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People (GCYP) works with others to improve services to children and young people in out-of-home care, promote and protect children's rights and to strengthen their voice. Based on information from our monitoring activities, the Guardian was concerned that a significant minority of children and young people in care were distressed and possibly disadvantaged by separation from their siblings.

A review of previous research showed significant issues with separation of siblings and with defining 'siblings'. The Guardian's inquiry invited and accepted the children's definition of 'sibling'. The purpose of undertaking the inquiry was to better understand children's views on sibling relationships and the impacts of co-placement, separation and contact.

6.1 Methodology

The inquiry was guided by a reference group with members from key stakeholder groups, including youth advisors, carers, alternative care providers and the statutory child protection agency. The inquiry comprised a literature review, case file audit and interviews with children and young people in care.

6.1.1 Literature review

The review of national and international literature explored the construct and nature of sibling relationships for children and young people who are in care and decisions made about co-placement, separation and contact. Previous research has often overlooked the views and experiences of children and young people.

6.1.2 Case file audit

With cooperation from the statutory child protection agency Families SA, the GCYP randomly selected one hundred case files of children with siblings from four Families SA district offices. Two metropolitan and two country offices were selected on the basis of location and the likelihood of gathering a representative sample. The case file audit provided GCYP with a better understanding of how sibling relationships were defined by case workers, and the decision-making and planning for sibling contact.

6.1.3 Interviews with children and young people

Eighteen children and young people were interviewed. Two child psychologists from *Connected Self* conducted the interviews. The four Families SA offices

nominated children and young people and consent was obtained from the children and their legal guardians. Information about the inquiry and the interviews was also provided to carers via Families SA. A focus group of young people was used to validate the themes identified from the interviews.

6.2 Findings and recommendations

Siblings provide our longest lasting relationships, often extending throughout lifetime. Children growing up apart from their brothers or sisters, lacking contact or knowledge about their siblings may be deprived of family support in adult life. Much more should be done to foster sibling relationships for children who are separated from their families.

(Kosonen 1996, p. 280)

6.2.1 Children's voice

Well I see them [siblings] several times a week and it's fantastic because up to about a month or two ago I was seeing them once every fortnight, and for an hour, so it wasn't that much. Now that they've started doing all the things that I'm doing – yeah, like, the week-long camps – I'm spending more time with them.

(young person in interview)

Sibling contact is an important issue for children and young people in care. In 2005 a study found that children in care generally want to be placed together with their siblings, and when this is not possible, they want frequent contact and information about their siblings (Herrick and Piccus 2005). Whilst a child may have many siblings, he or she can say who are the most significant brothers and sisters.

Previous research indicated that when children are separated there is a high risk that contact with siblings will be irregular, limited or non-existent (Wise 2011; Mullender 1999).

All of the children and young people interviewed had distinct views of how their sibling contact arrangements could be improved or strengthened. There were a small but significant number of children who indicated that their case workers had not listened to them about increasing or changing the contact arrangements. Children and young people have views and can give advice on what would work for them if siblings must be separated.

Recommendation 1

Case workers document the expressed opinions and views of children and young people about their sibling relationships, their satisfaction with

contact and satisfaction with their circumstances of care. The documented views will then be considered at least once a year at the annual review panel discussion.

6.2.2 *Construct of family*

My sister has always meant something to me because she's like the only family that I really know.

(young person in interview)

For children and young people in care, the situations surrounding sibling relationships are often highly complex. Many of the young people interviewed rated their relationships with their siblings as being equally important, if not greater, than their relationships with their parents. However, for separated siblings, the case file evidence indicated that assessments and case management regarding family contact has greater focus on parents than siblings.

For a small number of children and young people interviewed, foster carers were also defined as 'family' and not seen as separate or distinct from biological family. However, case file evidence demonstrated that genograms on case files depicted only biological family.

Many of the children and young people interviewed reported feelings of closeness with their siblings, even if they had never had contact with them, had minimal contact with them or if the relationship was strained. It is dangerous for case workers and others to make assumptions about how a child constructs his or her family. Children and young people in care can identify with both biological and non-biological siblings. Non-biological sibling relationships can afford the same psychological outcomes. The inquiry findings support previous research that upholds the importance of using child-centred definitions of 'sibling'.

In South Australia, one in four children in care are from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families which makes it imperative for case workers and others to understand Aboriginal definitions of family and cultural relationships.

Recommendation 2

Case workers document sibling relationships as identified by the child. Particular attention is paid to sibling relationships as defined by Aboriginal family structure. These views are reviewed regularly with children and young people. To facilitate this, placement genograms are used as part of case management, to capture changes of placements and children's views about relationships with significant people.

6.2.3 Decision-making

It [sibling contact] got boring and horrible because everyone wanted attention and we were just in the same boring room and stuff.

(young person in interview)

Only 18 of the 66 cases of sibling separation viewed as part of this inquiry documented that the separation was in the child's best interests. There were other various reasons for separation of siblings.

Decisions about sibling separation are difficult indeed. Legislation and policy direction focus on connection to birth family with little specific reference to siblings. Much of the literature presumes that it is in the child's best interests to be placed with their siblings. Placement choices are usually few and professional opinion divided about the due weight to be given to sibling relationships over the potential of new sustaining relationships with adult carers. Research has found that there is little focus on attachment between siblings as a significant area of assessment when considering placement options for children and young people.

Sibling relationships are dynamic, impacted by experiences of each child, individual needs and expectations. A small but significant number of children and young people experienced a negative impact of co-placement and the relationship between siblings improved as a result of separation.

Case managers are faced with competing interests in decisions about placements and sibling contact. From the case file evidence, the children's views about their siblings appear to be overshadowed by professional advice and instruction about parental contact. While assumptions about the benefits of co-placement must be examined closely, the benefits of siblings relationships should be given due weight.

Recommendation 3

Decisions about placement of siblings include and document:

- assessment of the needs of the collective sibling group, individual needs of each child, including their views, and advice about attachment between siblings;
- sibling relationships, as identified by the child(ren), including the significance of each relationship;
- the child(ren)'s views even if their wishes cannot be met;
- if siblings are separated, a review of the placement decision within one month of the initial decision and
- if siblings are separated, the preparedness of carers to support contact and proximity of placements.

Recommendation 4

Decisions about sibling contact arrangements include and document:

- discussion at each care planning meeting, including annual reviews;
- the child(ren)'s views about their satisfaction with sibling contact and
- ongoing assessment of relationships of significance to the child(ren).

6.2.4 Cooperation

They're my little brothers. I've kind of missed out on seeing them grow up. Even though I did see them once a fortnight, I didn't really know them that well. I knew Dylan used to be really good at maths and I knew Jacob was having some problems with stuttering and bullying at school, but that was about all I knew; I didn't really know that much about them

(young person in interview)

If a child is to more deeply benefit from sibling relationships, the adults in the child's life must be supportive and agree with the arrangements. Planning for sibling contact works best when decisions are made and implemented by the 'care team'.

The children and young people interviewed identified that their case workers were the most important person to influence the sibling contact process. In circumstances of unallocated cases and reduced case management response, seeking the child's views about their siblings, assessing sibling relationships and reviewing sibling contact arrangements is unlikely to happen regularly, if at all.

While direction on sibling contact arrangements will usually be provided by the case worker, carers should be able to plan and facilitate positive contact among siblings, in the knowledge of the case worker.

Recommendation 5

The recruitment, assessment and training of carers emphasise the importance of sibling relationships and the expectation that carers will facilitate agreed contact.

6.2.5 Sibling contact

They're both now on Facebook so I learn more about them, you know, and they're kind of becoming my siblings again. Before, it was kind of every now and then we'd see them, or every fortnight we'd see them for an hour and it was really controlled.

(young person in interview)

Ongoing sibling contact that is considered satisfying for the child or young person, promotes positive child and adolescent development. The interviews with children and young people support previous research conclusions that contact between siblings often fosters positive identity development, feelings of connectedness and emotional support. Siblings placed together in care have the unbroken benefit of stronger connectedness, identity formation and reciprocity. However, siblings placed apart can benefit similarly if the contact among them is frequent and satisfying.

Based on interviews with children, feeling close to their siblings was promoted through:

- face-to-face contact
- frequent contact
- playful and fun activities
- a relaxed and natural atmosphere
- sibling conflict minimised and
- expectations being met.

Other means of communication, such as telephone and letters, were not favoured, or were viewed as supplementary only and not a substitute for face-to-face contact. Young people who have experienced office-based contact with siblings disliked it.

The use of social networking causes some alarm among social workers and carers because of the additional safety risks for children in care from people who are prohibited or restricted from seeing them. However, children and young people embrace social networking and expect to use it as others of their age do.

Recommendation 6

Case workers are supported and expected to arrange joint activities for separated siblings, such as outings, shared recreation and sport, camps and after-school or vacation care.

Recommendation 7

Carers are actively encouraged to facilitate face-to-face contact among siblings and these arrangements become part of annual care review discussion.

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Appendix A

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The CREATE Foundation was invited to nominate a reference group member but could not do so due to low staffing.