



Government of South Australia

Office of the Guardian
for Children and Young People

Literature Review

Children in care and contact with their siblings

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1 Introduction

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.¹

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.

This literature review has been prepared by the Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People as part of the 2011 systemic inquiry: *What children in care say about contact with their siblings and the impact sibling contact has on wellbeing.*

¹ Kosonen, M 1996, 'Maintaining Sibling Relationships – Neglected Dimension in Child Care Practice', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 26, p. 820

2 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.²

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 year³, whereas another studied ‘full or half biological’ siblings.⁴ In much of the literature, there is a lack of *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’.⁵

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, nonbiological 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.⁶

² Elgar, M & Head, A 1999, ‘An overview of siblings’, *We are Family: Sibling Relationships in Placement and Beyond*, ed. A Mullender, British Association for Adoption and Fostering, London, p. 20.

³ Drapeau, S, Simard, M, Beaudry, M & Charbonneau, C 2000, ‘Siblings in Family Transitions’, *Family Relations*, vol. 49, no. 1, p. 78.

⁴ Tarren-Sweeney, M & Hazell P 2005, ‘The mental health and socialization of siblings in care’, *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 27, p. 830.

⁵ Families SA 2009, *Growing Up Strong in Care – Aboriginal Identity Planning Guide*, Department for Families and Communities, Adelaide, pp. 7-8.

⁶ Children’s Bureau 2006, ‘Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption’, *Child Welfare Information Gateway*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, p.2.

3 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.⁷

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 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.' 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.⁸

In the United Kingdom, the Department of Health supports the placement of siblings together⁹, and whilst the *Children Act 1989* stipulates that siblings should be placed together whenever 'reasonably practical and consistent with [the child's] welfare'¹⁰, there is no legislated requirement for sibling contact if they are separated.¹¹

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:

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

⁷ Kosonen, M 1999, 'Core and kin siblings. Foster children's changing families', *We are Family: Sibling Relationships in Placement and Beyond*, ed. A Mullender, British Association for Adoption and Fostering, London, p. 46.

⁸ Herrick, MA & Piccus W 2005, 'Sibling connections: The importance of nurturing sibling bonds in the foster care system', *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 27, p. 846.

⁹ Limits on the number of children who could be placed together in a care setting were removed for this reason.

¹⁰ Ellison, M 1999, 'Planning for sibling continuity within permanency – Needs led or needs unmet', *We are Family: Sibling Relationships in Placement and Beyond*, ed. A Mullender, British Association for Adoption and Fostering, London, p. 128.

¹¹ Elgar, M et al., op. cit., p. 24.

contact with each other, unless this is against their wishes or interests.¹²

Whilst child protection policy might advocate for a relationship between siblings to be maintained at the highest level possible, there is a lack of empirical information to guide social workers in their decision making about placement and contact with siblings.¹³ In practice there are other, often extenuating, factors which mean that co-placement or sufficient contact does not eventuate.¹⁴

Decisions about siblings are often made on the grounds of pragmatism.¹⁵ For example, a major barrier to sibling co-placement is insufficient placement options.¹⁶ Difficulty in finding and maintaining placements for sibling groups is common.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ Schwenke, Hudd and Vicary, 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.²⁰

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.²¹

¹² SOS Children's Villages 2009, *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. A United Nations Framework*, Austria, p. 8.

¹³ Tarren-Sweeney, M et al., op. cit., p. 822.

¹⁴ Mulligan, S 2003, 'Adoption and Long-Term Fostering: Themes and Research', *Child Care in Practice*, vol. 9, no. 2, p. 159.

¹⁵ O'Neill, C 2002, 'Together or separate? Siblings placements: a review of the literature', *Children Australia*, vol. 27, no. 2, p. 10.

¹⁶ Leathers, SJ 2005, 'Separation from siblings: Associations with placement adaption and outcomes among adolescents in long-term foster care', *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 27, pp. 807-810; and Wise, S 2011, op. cit., p. 6.

¹⁷ Leathers, SJ, op. cit., p. 794; and Hegar, R 1988, 'Sibling Relationships and Separations: Implications for Child Placement', *Social Service Review*, September, p. 461.

¹⁸ Leathers, SJ, op. cit., p. 816.

¹⁹ O'Neill, C, op. cit., pp. 12-13.

²⁰ Schwenke, H, Hudd, S and Vicary, D 2006, 'Sibling relationships in the care system: attachment, separation and contact issues' *Children Australia*, vol.31, no 1, pp 5-11.

²¹ Wise, S 2011, *All Together Now. Research examining the separation of siblings in out-of-home care*, Anglicare Victoria, Collingwood, p. 11.

A 2005 US study found that large groups of siblings were not placed together because of coming into care at different times:

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.²²

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.²³ 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.²⁴

“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.²⁵

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.²⁶ So too, the older the siblings the more likely they are to be separated.²⁷

Children placed in care at different times have also been found to be less likely to be placed together.²⁸ One explanation is a current placement’s incapacity to take more children.²⁹ 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.³⁰

²² Wulczyn, F & Zimmerman, E 2005, ‘Sibling placements in longitudinal perspective’, *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 27, p. 762.

²³ Leathers, SJ, op. cit., p. 807.

²⁴ Wulczyn, F et al., op. cit., pp. 794–795.

²⁵ Leathers, SJ, op. cit., p. 794.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 755.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 794.

²⁸ Webster, D, Shlonsky, A, Shaw, T and Brookhart, MA 2005, ‘The ties that bind II: Reunification for siblings in out-of-home care using a statistical technique for examining non-independent observations’, *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 27, p. 777.

²⁹ Wulczyn, F, et al., op. cit., p. 742.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 755.

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 et al 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.³¹ Is it then prudent to terminate a nurturing, long-term placement to ensure that a close sibling relationship is achieved? As Depp states:

...caseworkers justified separating siblings when the needs of individual members diverged from those of other children in the sibling group, when the caseworkers perceived the possibility that placing siblings together would undermine the placement...³²

³¹ Schwenke, H et al, op cit., pp. 5-11

³² Depp, CH 1983, 'Placing siblings together', in Wulczyn, F et al., ibid., p. 742.

4 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.³³

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 and Herrick and Piccus 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.³⁴

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.³⁵

Children placed together are noted to be 'reassured by the presence of a sibling'³⁶, have 'more positive behaviour towards their peers'³⁷, have 'fewer emotional and behavioural problems'³⁸, and that they 'performed better at school'³⁹. It has also been found 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.⁴⁰

³³ Herrick, MA et al., op. cit., p. 851.

³⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 850-851; and Jones, AM 1999, *We are Family: Sibling Relationships in Placement and Beyond*, ed. A Mullender, British Association for Adoption and Fostering, London, pp. 171-180.

³⁵ Herrick, MA et al., *ibid.*, p. 851.

³⁶ Heinicke, CM & Westheimer, IJ 1965, 'Brief Separations', in Hegar, R 1988, 'Sibling Relationships and Separations: Implications for Child Placement', op. cit., p. 458.

³⁷ Smith, MC 1995, 'A preliminary description of nonschool-based friendship in young high-risk children', in Herrick, MA et al., op. cit., p. 846.

³⁸ Smith, MC, *ibid.*

³⁹ Thorpe, MB & Swart, MD 1992, 'Risk and protective factors affecting children in foster care: A pilot study of the role of siblings.' in Herrick, MA et al., loc. cit.

⁴⁰ Jenkins, J 1992, 'Sibling relationships in disharmonious homes: potential difficulties and protective effects', in Mullender, A 1999, 'Sketching in the background', *We are Family: Sibling Relationships in Placement and Beyond*, op. cit., p. 12.

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.⁴¹ Maintenance of an ongoing relationship with a sibling also provides continuity for a child in an often rapidly changing environment.⁴² 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.⁴³ Whilst respecting the 'historical roots' of maintaining sibling groups in out-of-home care placements, Whelan 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.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶ Another found that children placed alone (apart from their siblings) were likely to have lost their sibling for good.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Elgar, M et al., op. cit., p. 19.

⁴² Kosonen, M 1996, 'Maintaining Sibling Relationships – Neglected Dimension in Child Care Practice', op. cit., p. 813.

⁴³ O'Neill, op cit, p. 11.

⁴⁴ Whelan, DJ 2003, 'Using Attachment Theory When Placing Siblings in Foster Care', *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, vol. 20, no. 1, September, pp. 21 -22.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 23-30.

⁴⁶ Webster, D et al., op. cit., pp. 765-782.

⁴⁷ Mullender, A 1999, 'Sketching in the background', *We are Family: Sibling Relationships in Placement and Beyond*, op. cit., p. 6.

⁴⁸ Leathers, SJ 2005, op. cit., pp. 808-810.

Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell found that girls have “significantly poorer mental health and socialization” 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.⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰

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 “subsidized guardianship homes”⁵¹ than children placed with a consistent number of siblings in all of their placements.⁵²

Parentification in relation to co-placement is also referred to with differing opinions.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Tarren-Sweeney, M et al, op. cit., pp. 821-836.

⁵⁰ Farmer E & Parker R 1991, *Trials and Tribulations: Returning Children from Local Authority Care to their Families*, in Kosonen, M 1996, ‘Maintaining Sibling Relationships – Neglected Dimension in Child Care Practice’, loc. cit.

⁵¹ US: ‘Subsidized guardianships’ provide financial assistance to caretakers who assume legal guardianship of a child from out-of-home care.

⁵² Leathers, SJ, op. cit., p. 811.

⁵³ 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.

⁵⁴ See Leathers, SJ, op. cit., p. 823; and Elgar M et al., op. cit., p. 22.

5 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.⁵⁵ Older sibling groups were more likely than younger sibling groups to be separated.⁵⁶ Staff and Fein 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.⁵⁷

In 2005, Leathers 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.⁵⁸ Multiple entries into care also increase the chance of sibling separation.⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰ Ainsworth and Maluccio’s 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.⁶¹

Children in kinship care are more likely than children in foster care to be placed with at least one sibling⁶² and when the children in the sibling group are closer in age, they are more likely to be placed together.⁶³

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. From 1990 to 1995, the incidence of co-placement increased, followed by a sharp decline after that. On

⁵⁵ See Hegar, R 1988, ‘Sibling Relationships and Separations: Implications for Child Placement’, op. cit., p.458; and Wulczyn, F et al., op. cit., pp. 750-751.

⁵⁶ See Maclean, K 1991, ‘Meeting the needs of sibling groups in care’, *Adoption and Fostering*, in Tarren-Sweeney, M et al., op. cit., p. 837; Drapeau, S, et al., op. cit., p. 83; and Leathers, SJ, op. cit., p. 795.

⁵⁷ Staff, I & Fein, E 1992, ‘Together or separate: A study of siblings in foster care’, *Child Welfare*, in Hegar, RL 2005, ‘Sibling placement in foster care and adoption: An overview of international research’, *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 27, p. 723.

⁵⁸ Leathers, SJ, op. cit., p. 814.

⁵⁹ Maclean, K 1991, ‘Meeting the needs of sibling groups in care’, in Hegar, RL 2005, ‘Sibling placement in foster care and adoption: An overview of international research’, op. cit., p. 723.

⁶⁰ Leathers, SJ, op. cit., p. 795.

⁶¹ Ainsworth, F and Maluccio, A.N 2002 ‘Siblings in out-of-home care: time to rethink?’ *Children Australia*, vol. 27, no.2, pp 4-8.

⁶² See Kosonen, M, 1996, ‘Maintaining Sibling Relationships – Neglected Dimension in Child Care Practice’, op. cit., p. 815; Testa, M & Rolock, N 1999, ‘Professional foster care: A future worth pursuing?’, *Child Welfare*, in Tarren Sweeney, M et al., loc. cit.; and Wulczyn, F et al., op. cit., pp. 752 and 755.

⁶³ Wulczyn, F et al., op. cit., pp. 750, 752 and 755.

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.⁶⁴

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 makes comment on this in relation to policy development:

If siblings are primarily separated due to a lack of placement resources, for example, a systemwide focus on resource development would be indicated. In contrast, if behaviour problems and conflictual relationships are primarily indicated, simply recruiting and supporting foster parents who are willing to accept sibling groups would be an inadequate strategy to increase the number of joint sibling placements.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Wulczyn, F et al., op. cit., p. 752.

⁶⁵ Leathers, loc. cit.

6 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.⁶⁶

Placing siblings together has almost consistently been found to lead to more stable placements.⁶⁷ In turn, children placed in care without their siblings have a higher risk of placement disruption and difficulties.⁶⁸ In a British study, Berridge and Cleaver 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.⁶⁹ Similarly, sibling pairs placed together were more likely to remain in the initial placement than pairs who were initially placed apart.⁷⁰ The presence of a child of the foster parents has not been found to lead to placement stability.⁷¹

Whilst children placed in care with their siblings reportedly have fewer behavioural problems⁷², behavioural issues and subsequent placement disruption may be due to many factors, including the difficulties inherent with foster home adaptation. 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.⁷³

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

⁶⁶ Hegar, RL 2005, 'Sibling placement in foster care and adoption: An overview of international research', op. cit., p. 731.

⁶⁷ See Tarren-Sweeney, M et al., op. cit., p. 823; and Hegar, RL 1988, 'Sibling Relationships and Separations: Implications for Child Placement', pp.458-159.

⁶⁸ See Barth, R & Berry, M 1988, *Adoption and Disruption: Rates, risks and responses*, in Dance C & Rushton, A 1999, 'Sibling separation and contact in permanent placement', *We are Family: Sibling Relationships in Placement and Beyond*, op. cit., p. 68; Holloway J 1997, 'Outcome in placements for adoption or long term fostering', *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, in Dance C et al., ibid.; and Quinton, D, Rushton, A Dance, C & Mayes, D 1998, *Joining New Families: Establishing permanent placements in middle childhood*, in Dance C et al., ibid.

⁶⁹ Berridge, D & Cleaver, H 1987, 'Foster home breakdown', in Leathers, SJ, loc. cit.

⁷⁰ Staff, I & Fein, E 1992, 'Together or separate: A study of siblings in foster care', in Leathers, SJ, ibid.

⁷¹ Hegar, RL 1988, 'Sibling Relationships and Separations: Implications for Child Placement', p. 458.

⁷² See Aldridge, MJ & Cautley, PW 1976, 'Placing siblings in the same foster home', *Child Welfare*, in Drapeau, S et al., op. cit., p. 78; and Hegar, RL 1988, 'Sibling relationships and separations: Implications for child placement', op. cit., pp. 457-460.

⁷³ Leathers, SJ, pp. 793 – 819.

homes' and 'an increased capacity to form attachments, which facilitates their adaptation and bonding with foster parents'.⁷⁴

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 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...'⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Leathers, SJ, *ibid.*

⁷⁵ Leathers, SJ, *op. cit.*, p. 796.

7 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.⁷⁶

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.⁷⁷ The distinct lack of "experiential" research on the subject of siblings in care has been attributed to 'the underlying complexity of the problem'.⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹

Herrick, in a 2005 study of what children said, 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.⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹

In a 2004 survey of 332 Australian children and young people in care, the CREATE Foundation 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.⁸²

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...might be separated from their closest family

⁷⁶ Families SA 2007, *Practice guidelines for contact*, Department for Families and Communities, Adelaide, p. 13.

⁷⁷ See Leathers, SJ, op. cit., p. 815; Shlonsky, A, Bellamy, J, Elkins, J & Ashare, CJ 2005, 'The other kin: Setting the course for research, policy, and practice with siblings in foster care', *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 27, pp. 706-707; Mullender, A, op. cit., pp. 10-11; and O'Neill, C, op. cit., p. 11.

⁷⁸ Wulczyn, F, et al., *ibid.*, p. 742.

⁷⁹ Herrick, MA et al., op. cit., p. 847.

⁸⁰ Herrick, MA et al., op. cit., pp. 846-7.

⁸¹ Herrick, MA, et al., op. cit., p. 847.

⁸² CREATE Foundation, 2004 *Being out best! A report on Australia's children and young people in care*, CREATE Foundation, Strawberry Hills NSW, p 34.

members based on a caseworker's arbitrary decision'.⁸³ So too, separation from one another may mean different things for different children.⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵

It is imperative to seek children's views when devising sibling contact plans and placement even if their wishes cannot be met.⁸⁶ 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.⁸⁷ 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.'⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹

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

⁸³ Leathers, SJ, loc. cit.

⁸⁴ Shlonsky, A, et al., op. cit., p. 707.

⁸⁵ Ward, M 1984, 'Sibling ties in foster care and adoption planning', *Child Welfare*, in Herrick, MA et al., *ibid*.

⁸⁶ O'Neill, c, op. cit., p. 13.

⁸⁷ Shlonsky, A, et al., loc. cit.

⁸⁸ Families SA 2009, *Clinical guidelines for undertaking psychological assessments with Aboriginal Families within Families SA*, Department for Families and Communities, Adelaide, pp. 14-15.

⁸⁹ Families SA 2009, *Clinical guidelines for undertaking psychological assessments with Aboriginal Families within Families SA*, *ibid*.

fight with the most.⁹⁰ 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...⁹¹

⁹⁰ Argent, H 2008, *Ten Top Tips for Placing Siblings*, British Association for Adoption & Fostering, London, pp. 7-14.

⁹¹ Harrison, C 1999, 'Children being looked after and their sibling relationships. The experiences of children in the working in partnership with 'lost' parents research project', *We are Family: Sibling Relationships in Placement and Beyond*, op. cit., pp. 102-103.

8 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.⁹²

Siblings in care who are separated can become significantly emotionally detached from one another, despite abhorring being apart.⁹³ On the other hand separating siblings when being placed in care can, sometimes, lead to improved relationships as rivalry and competition are reduced.⁹⁴

...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.⁹⁵

Contact between siblings who are placed in care separately is generally viewed positively.⁹⁶ When children are separated, however, there is a high risk that contact with siblings will be irregular, limited, or non-existent.⁹⁷ 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.⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹

⁹² Dance C et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 68-82.

⁹³ Gardner, H 1996, 'The concept of family: Perceptions of children in family foster care', in Drapeau, S et al., *loc. cit.*

⁹⁴ Drapeau, S et al., *ibid.*

⁹⁵ Tarren-Sweeney, M et al., *op. cit.*, p. 822.

⁹⁶ Dance C et al., *loc. cit.*

⁹⁷ Mullender, A 1999, 'Sketching in the background', *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

⁹⁸ Wise, S, *loc. cit.*

⁹⁹ Kosonen, M 1999, 'Core and kin siblings. Foster children's changing families', *op. cit.*, 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.¹⁰⁰

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’. 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’.¹⁰¹

In the recently published *Ten Top Tips for Placing Siblings*, Argent 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.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ See Kosonen, M 1999, ‘Core and kin siblings. Foster children’s changing families’, *ibid.*; and Mullender, A 1999, ‘Sketching in the background’, *loc. cit.*

¹⁰¹ James, S, Monn, AR, Palinkas, LA & Leslie, LK 2007, ‘Maintain sibling relationships for children in foster and adoptive placements’, *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 30, p. 99.

¹⁰² Argent, H, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-14.

9 Conclusion

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.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ See, for example, Tarren-Sweeney, M et al., op. cit., pp. 822-823; Hegar, RL 2005 'Sibling placement in foster care and adoption: An overview of international research', op. cit. pp.717-739; Lery, B, Shaw, TV & Magruder, J 2005, 'Using administrative child welfare data to identify sibling groups', *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 27, p. 790.

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