Published in final edited form as:

Child Youth Serv Rev. 2008 January ; 30(1): 90–106.

Maintaining Sibling Relationships for Children in Foster and Adoptive Placements

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Abstract

To better understand the nature of sibling relationships among children in foster or adoptive placement and the challenges and processes involved in maintaining these relationships, we conducted an exploratory analysis of data collected from semi-structured interviews with caregivers of 14 foster and adopted children in San Diego County. We identified three patterns of placement histories and living situations which appeared to impact the degree of contact maintained with siblings: (1) children who had never lived together and were not currently placed together; (2) children who at some point lived with or were placed together with their siblings, but were now separated from them; and (3) children who had lived with their siblings all their life and were placed together with at least some of their siblings at the time of the interview. Children's current living situations and placement histories, caregivers' experiences and perceptions of feasibility and desirability of sibling contact, and the sibling relationship itself are primary determinants in the development and maintenance of contact between siblings. Implications for child welfare policy and practice are discussed.

Every year, about 300,000 children are placed into out-of-home care due to abuse and neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Children in out-of-home care are considered a population at high risk for adverse outcomes across all domains of functioning. Rates of emotional and behavioral problems in this population have ranged from 30 to 80 percent depending on sample and method used (Burns et al., 2004; McMillen et al., 2005) and have been attributed to histories of abuse and neglect, backgrounds of general family dysfunction, parental substance abuse and poverty as well as the potential trauma associated with removal from home (Landsverk, Garland & Leslie, 2002). There is further evidence that aspects of the placement experience itself might adversely affect outcome (e.g., Newton, Litrownik & Landsverk, 2000; Webster, Barth & Needell, 2000). Longer stays in care, frequent placement disruptions, and placements with nonrelative caregivers or in residential facilities have been found to have a negative effect on child functioning and child welfare permanency outcomes (Harden Jones, 2004; Lawrence, Carson & Egeland, 2006).

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An important consideration in the placement of abused children involves the placement of sibling groups. It is estimated that about two-thirds of children in out-of-home care have siblings (Casey Family Programs, 2003; Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005). Removal from home due to abuse or neglect does not only involve separation from parents but can also involve disruption or loss of the sibling relationship. A growing body of literature supports the critical role of siblings in helping children in out-of-home care maintain a sense of continuity with family (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Hegar, 1988; Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Whelan, 2003). This is reflected in child welfare policy and practice, which have increasingly emphasized preserving and maintaining sibling relationships of foster children whenever possible (Shlonsky, Bellamy, Elkins & Ashare, 2005). More than half of U.S. states now have legislation in place that addresses sibling relationships in some fashion (National Resource Centered Practice and Permanency Planning, n.d.). Most policies stipulate, at a minimum, consideration of siblings in placement and permanency planning decisions as well as efforts for maintaining sibling contact when children are placed separately (Herrick & Piccus, 2005).

In general, joint sibling placement is viewed favorably by most child welfare professionals; it also tends to be the preferred placement option for youth themselves (Festinger, 1983; Knipe & Warren, 1999). Joint sibling placement has been linked to several positive child welfare permanency outcomes, such as greater placement stability (Hegar, 2005; Leathers, 2005; Staff & Fein, 1992), and greater likelihood of reunification (Webster, Shlonsky, Shaw & Brookhart, 2005), adoption, and guardianship (Leathers, 2005). Nevertheless, conclusions about the psychosocial benefits of sibling placement remain highly tentative and mostly impressionistic given methodological limitations of the few existing studies (see Hegar, 2005 and Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005 for a review of these studies). However, research in the developmental literature indicates that siblings are an important source of emotional support throughout life (e.g., Campbell, Connidis & Davies, 1999; Dolgin & Lindsay, 1999) and can play a vital role in helping a child adapt to stressful situations (Caya & Liem, 1998).

The placement of siblings into out-of-home care involves many complexities that are not readily apparent, as a recent analysis of New York City administrative foster care by Wulczyn and Zimmerman (2005) aptly demonstrated. This starts with the challenge of identifying and defining sibling groups. Sibling relationships may include step-siblings and half-siblings as well as other sibling relationships that do not involve biological relationships but hold psychological or social importance. There might also be multiple sibling groups separated by age or link to biological parents (e.g., siblings might have different fathers). Wulczyn and Zimmerman's analysis further revealed the complex placement patterns of siblings over time. More often than not, sibling groups do not enter out-of-home care on the same day. However, over time, many siblings eventually enter care. At that point, they may or may not be placed with their sibling(s) already in care. Sequential entry over time decreases siblings' chance to be placed together, but longer stays in care increase the likelihood of eventual joint placement. Factors such as smaller size of a sibling group and placement with relatives improve the odds of being placed together over time (Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005). However, some siblings will never be placed together or only for a portion of their time in care. Wulczyn and Zimmerman's data showed that 12% of sibling groups placed together into out-of-home care were placed partially intact and almost 10% were completely separated. Over time, 73% of partially intact siblings groups at entry into care remained partially or completely separated at 48 months, and of those completely separated at entry, almost half remained either partially or completely separated. Reasons for not placing siblings together include scant placement resources to accommodate sibling placement, differing permanency timelines among siblings of diverse ages, varying needs of individual siblings, and organizational barriers (Shlonsky et al., 2005; Webster et al., 2005).

When siblings are not placed together, the challenge is to help them maintain contact. However, very little is known about the mechanisms in place to support and facilitate maintenance of sibling relationships. Keeping in touch with siblings placed in different homes would likely require efforts by adults (caregivers or child welfare workers) to facilitate placing phone calls, arranging visits, or writing letters or emails. Limited research points to the role of foster caregivers in this process (Smith, 1996). Smith's exploratory study of foster caregivers and caseworkers' attitudes about sibling placement showed that both groups have decidedly different opinions about the nature and importance of sibling relationships, which have the potential to influence placement decisions and child-rearing practices. While caseworkers generally viewed the sibling relationship as an important source of support that should be encouraged and maintained if children are placed in different foster homes, 43.5% of foster mothers rated the sibling relationship to be no more than "fairly" or "somewhat" important for child development, and 22% felt that siblings are harder to foster than non-related children. The reasons for caregiver opinions and their influence on sibling placement, however, remain unknown.

In this study, we use data from semi-structured interviews with long-term nonrelative and relative foster and adoptive caregivers to shed light, from the caregivers' viewpoint, on the nature and effect of sibling relationships among children with behavioral problems in the child welfare system and the challenges and processes involved in maintaining these relationships. While this study offers only one lens through which sibling relationships can be understood, the caregivers' perceptions, beliefs and feelings about the challenges and benefits of sibling relationships and their actions on behalf of these relationships present an important and understudied perspective. Qualitative methods are ideal for this kind of exploratory inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; Geertz, 1973).

Methods

Data for this analysis are drawn from a qualitative study that examined foster and adoptive caregivers' experiences caring for children with academic or behavior problems (Leslie, Plemmons, Monn & Palinkas, 2007). Beyond questions related to service use and the treatment of emotional and behavioral disorders, interviews also included questions about the child's placement history and relationships with his/her biological and extended family. Responses to these questions generated through semi-structured qualitative interviews yielded data about the children's sibling relationships, which prompted the current analysis.

Study Participants

Participants in the original study were foster and adoptive parents of 17 children presenting to seven primary care offices in San Diego, CA, for academic or behavior problems. Using a maximum variation sampling procedure (Patton, 2002), recruitment of parents among the four ethnic/language groups continued until it was determined that sufficient saturation (i.e., ability to predict what informants would say about a particular topic based on what had been said by previous informants) of responses to the interview protocol was obtained through an iterative process of data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

Of the 17 children and their caretaking families, 3 had no siblings, yielding a final study sample for the current analysis of 14. This study sample included 7 Caucasian caregivers, 3 African-American caregivers, 3 Hispanic caregivers, and 1 African-Caribbean caregiver. Of the 14 caregivers, 4 were adoptive parents, 6 were relative caregivers and 4 were nonrelative caregivers. Four of the relative and nonrelative caregivers held legal guardianship status. Children's ages ranged from 6 to 14 years ($M = 10.5$); 10 were male. The children's reported race/ethnicities were the same as their caregivers', with the exception of 2 families: in the first, the child was Caucasian while her legal guardians were Hispanic and, in the second, the child

was Hispanic, while his foster parent was African-Caribbean. Children in this sample had come into contact with the child welfare system for a range of child maltreatment situations, including general abuse and neglect, severe physical abuse, parental drug use, abandonment, parental incarceration, and voluntary relinquishment. The study was conducted in California, which has explicit policies in place to consider siblings in placement and permanency planning decisions and to make efforts to maintain sibling contacts whenever possible (National Resource Centered Practice and Permanency Planning, n.d.).

Procedures

Procedures for data collection and analysis were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Children's Hospital of San Diego. Informed consent was obtained from each participant after the study objectives and data collection procedures had been fully explained. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over a 2-year period (March, 2003 through March, 2005). Interview guides provided a general framework for the interviews, but informants were permitted to elaborate or focus on issues they considered to be most important and/or on which they had an opinion. Interviews were conducted in study clinics or in participants' homes based on participant preference. Each caregiver was interviewed once; the average interview was approximately 2 hours in length. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Using a methodology of "Coding Consensus, Co-occurrence, and Comparison," outlined by Willms et al. (1990) and rooted in grounded theory (i.e., theory derived from data and then illustrated by characteristic examples of data) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), interview transcripts were analyzed in the following manner. First, the empirical material contained in the interviews was independently coded by the project investigators at a very general level in order to condense the data into analyzable units. Segments of interviews ranging from a phrase to several paragraphs were assigned codes based on a priori (i.e., questions in the interview guide) or emergent themes. In some instances, the same text segment was assigned more than one code. For this analysis, two investigators independently coded half of the interviews. Disagreements in assignment or description of codes were resolved through discussion and consensus between investigators. Peer debriefing sessions were held to discuss the coding structure and enhance the credibility of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). These procedures resulted in enhanced definition of codes. The final list of codes for this analysis consisted of a numbered list of categories related to sibling relationships of children in foster care or adoptive placement (see Table 1). With the final coding structure, including both general and specific categories, the two investigators each independently reviewed five randomly selected pages of transcript text. The level of agreement was .95, indicating excellent reliability (Kirk & Miller, 1986). The final coding structure was used to code the remaining interviews.

Based on the codes, the computer program QSR Nvivo (Fraser, 2000) was used to generate a series of categories arranged in a treelike structure connecting transcript segments grouped into separate categories or "nodes." These nodes and trees were used to examine the association between different a priori and emergent categories and to identify the existence of new, previously unrecognized categories. Through the process of constantly comparing these categories with each other, the different categories were further condensed into broad themes.

Results

At the time of the interviews, contact between the children in our sample and their siblings varied greatly in frequency and quality. Contact was maintained through phone calls and occasional visits. Some adult siblings also kept in touch with their younger siblings in

placement by sending gifts. Caregivers pointed to several factors that impacted the degree of contact between siblings. These included the child's placement history and current living situation, caregivers' experiences and perceptions, as well as the relationship between siblings. Finally, analyses illuminated the potential effects contact with siblings can have on the child placed in out-of-home care. We will discuss each of these themes in depth.

Factors Impacting Contact between Siblings

Current Living Situation and Placement Histories—Analyses revealed that sibling relationships among children in foster care are varied and complex, often due to complicated living arrangements and placement histories. We identified three patterns of placement histories and living situations in our sample which appeared to impact the degree of contact maintained between siblings: (1) children who had never lived together and were not currently placed together; (2) children who at some point lived with or were placed together with their siblings, but were now separated from them; and (3) children who had lived with their siblings all their life and were placed together with at least some of their siblings at the time of the interview. Below, we provide a more thorough description of each pattern (see Table 2 for an overview of the children's characteristics in each pattern).

Never lived together: Five of the children in our sample had never lived with their siblings. These children had been living with their current caregivers for many years (ranging from 6-11 years) and were in stable permanency situations (adoption, legal guardianship). Contact with their biological parents was either nonexistent or very limited. Caregivers did not always know why these children were not placed with their siblings initially, but birth of siblings following placement of the index child and complex family relationships appear to be primary reasons (see section entitled Factors Involved in the Placement of Siblings for a more detailed discussion of this issue). Children in this group had either no contact or very limited contact with their siblings.

Initially lived together, then separated: Four of the children in our sample lived with their siblings at some point in their lives, but were living separately at the time of the interview. Some of the children initially lived together with their birth parent(s); others were placed together into out-of-home care. These children were now all in kinship placements with one kin provider having obtained legal guardianship; they had lived with their current caregivers for an average of 5 years (ranging from 7 months to 14 years). Reasons for the separation of siblings included inability of the relative caregiver to take care of more than one child, return of one sibling to a non-shared biological parent, and conflict between siblings. In this group, one child had regular contact with his sister, one had limited contact, and two had no contact at all.

Currently placed together with (some) siblings: Children who were placed together with a sibling had spent the shortest amount of time with their current caregiver (3.4 years on average). They were in variety of placement/living situations, including kincare (n = 1), nonrelative foster care (n = 2), legal guardianship (n = 1), and adoption (n = 1). Four of the five children in this group had contact with their biological parents with two cases involved in reunification efforts. Two children were placed with all their siblings, at least according to caregivers. One lived with his brother in placement and was still in close contact with his half-sister in a different state; however, the whereabouts of five or six of his other siblings was unknown. One group of siblings no longer had contact with their adult siblings in another state; finally, one caregiver had adopted two sisters and her daughter was fostering the sisters' older brothers. This arrangement facilitated regular contact between the two sibling groups.

Our detailed review of the children's and siblings' histories suggested that siblings had unique living situations and placement histories. In almost all cases across the three groups, siblings had spent some time apart from each other over the course of years with their lives sometimes intersecting. This was true even for siblings who were currently placed together. One foster caregiver of three siblings currently in her home commented that, while the siblings had lived together most of their lives, the older sister had often been "pawned off" on other relatives when the parents experienced drug-related problems. We also found that children generally shared different placement histories with different siblings. For instance, a child might live with one sibling at the time of interview, but might also have several other siblings that s/he has never lived with. The general pattern for children in our sample was the more contact siblings had in the past by having lived together at some point with their families of origin or in placement, the more likely they were to have contact with their siblings in the present. Given the importance of children's placement histories to maintaining contact with siblings, we wanted to better understand the reasons that complicate or facilitate joint placement of siblings at time of removal by child welfare.

Factors Involved in the Placement of Siblings—We identified several factors that appear to play a role in whether joint placement of siblings occurs and is maintained: (1) complex family relationships with multiple parents and their respective relative networks; (2) willingness and ability of caregiver; (3) early adoption; (4) age differential between sibling groups; and (5) sibling conflict.

Complex family relationships: Interviews revealed that many siblings have unique living situations and placement histories based on the fact that they might only share one biological parent. Many of the children had step-siblings, half-brothers and sisters as well as de facto siblings (cousins or children of partners of a biological parent with whom they were raised). This creates a complicated web of relationships and caregiving responsibilities, which impact children's ability to establish and maintain relationships with siblings. The case of J. illustrates this point.

J., an 11- year old boy, and his 13- year old brother M. have been living with their aunt in a kinship placement for the past 11 months. The two brothers switched between living with their mother and their maternal grandmother until J. was about two years old, at which time J. moved to a different state to live with his biological father and his new family. M., who has a different father than J., remained with their mother, and the two brothers seemed to have had very limited contact during the next five years. Following his father's divorce, J. switched between living with his father and his father's brother, briefly moved back to his maternal grandmother and eventually returned to live with his mother and his brother, M. The two brothers were placed with the current caregiver after their mother abused and neglected them. Because of his years living with his father, J. also has a half-sister with whom he speaks regularly, and he continues to visit his father's family on occasion. The caregiver describes J. as being closer to his half-sister than to his brother M. She also reports that J. and M.'s birth mother had five or six other children, but only kept J. and M. The caregiver had no information on these children's whereabouts, and neither J. nor M. had contact with any of them.

Willingness and ability of caregiver: Caregivers seem to make decisions for or against fostering sibling groups based on many factors, including a subjective appraisal of their ability to handle multiple children. An elderly disabled grandmother indicated that she could only take her grandson, because taking her granddaughter as well would have been "too much" for her. However, the unavailability of other placement options and the unique and many times heartbreaking needs of some children also influence caregivers' willingness and at times

outweigh the perceived burden involved for the caregiver. A non-relative legal guardian of three siblings who were relinquished to her describes this ‘push- and-pull:’

What would you do with them? You can’t do that [not keep them]. I couldn’t; I couldn’t live with that.... My husband [said], “this is more work than we bargained for” ... I said, “Well, yep, but when have we ever backed down from a challenge ...” And how can you look at them and say, “Oh sorry, we don’t want you either....Yeah, I mean, it’s really hard ... I’m kind of trapped at least for my own person, conscience perspective. And, like I said, not trapped in a negative way! Just there is no alternative. There was no way to undo it at that point.

Adoption prior to birth of siblings: An additional reason siblings were not placed together involved being adopted prior to the birth of new siblings. In some cases, siblings that were born later remained with the biological mother, while, in other cases, they were placed with other families. Contact between the adopted child and his biological siblings is far less likely to occur in such cases. Generally, the caregivers knew very little about these siblings.

Age differential between sibling groups: Some caregivers reported the existence of older adult siblings who were sometimes considered as potential placement options when a child was placed into out-of-home care. Due to age, circumstances, and complex family relationships, these older siblings may or may not be in touch with their younger siblings. In one case, the three siblings placed with one caregiver had adult half-sisters who had been brought into the family by their parent’s marriage. One sister did not want any contact with her siblings; the other sister had maintained contact with her younger siblings by sending presents for a while. However, at the time of interview, this contact had stopped as well. The reason for the termination of contact was not known, but the caregiver commented how much the adult daughter “hated” her father who was also the biological father of her three younger siblings. This seems to suggest that the unique experiences of siblings with their family of origin can also shape the relationship they have with their brothers or sisters.

Sibling conflict: Finally, conflict or events occurring between siblings can impact initial placement with siblings or can lead to disruption of a joint placement. In our sample, a caregiver split up a set of siblings because the older brother was “beating up on” his younger sister. In another case, a joint sibling placement was terminated by the legal guardian, a grandmother, because the sister had accused her younger brother of sexual abuse. According to the grandmother, she terminated guardianship of the sister because she did not believe her allegations and because she believed her grandson was more in need of her care.

I finally said, you know, for my age and [child] needing really one-to-one care, I just terminated my guardianship with [sister]. Because I just, number one, I don’t believe it; I think maybe things were exaggerated ... So I thought ... I’ve got to make a choice here. So I made the choice for [child] ‘cause I need to help this child ... I just felt it was the better decision for me to just concentrate on him.

In a final case, the caregiver seriously considered sending a violent older sibling to a separate placement, but decided that the trauma of losing a sibling would be more damaging to the younger children in her care than the risks associated with joint placement. These cases demonstrate the difficult choices made by the caregivers in our sample regarding the costs and benefits of sibling relationships.

Caregivers – Gatekeepers of Sibling Contact?—Regardless of the child’s current placement situation, caregivers played a crucial role in modulating contact between siblings. There was a range of possible caregiver responses to sibling relationships. Some actively encouraged and facilitated contact. One elderly and physically fragile grandmother who cared

for her 12 year old grandson and appeared to be unable to also care for her granddaughter, now placed in a group home, stated: *"I bring her here ... for practically every two weeks I bring her to visit [child] and stay the weekend."* Another caregiver described reaching out to the foster parent of her adopted child's sister and calling on occasion to maintain some contact.

Other caregivers felt they had made efforts to maintain sibling relationships but felt siblings were not responsive. This created frustration and a sense of 'helpless indifference.'

Maybe ... they've totally forgotten about their little brother and sister, you know, whatever, I don't care; I like draw the line at caring about their family, to be honest. I used to try and I thought, "You know what, why am I doing this?"

Several caregivers actively controlled or limited contact as a form of boundary setting with the intent of protecting oneself and the child from negative influences and painful experiences. For instance, some caregivers perceived the biological family as so dysfunctional and disturbed that they believed it was in the best interest of the child to be kept away. One caregiver acknowledged not even letting her child make calls to her siblings who were living with their biological mother because she felt that it was "not a good place." The loss of the sibling relationship was clearly not a primary concern in such situations. Similarly, some caregivers indicated wanting to protect children from information about siblings they knew nothing about. They believed that finding out their mother had chosen to keep their siblings but not them, would be upsetting and too painful for the child to handle. In cases of relative placements, prior unresolved issues with the family of origin were one reason that caregivers limited or terminated contacts, often at the cost of the sibling relationship. This is poignantly expressed by a caregiver who adopted her nephew (age 11). His two older brothers (ages 13 and 22) lived in another state; the 13-year old brother lived with the caregiver's brother.

I was never close to my family because of the abuse and stuff in my family; and so that's why I live in [location] by myself. I do talk to a couple of them on the phone once in a while. I do go up once a year, once every two years. I'll go up to [location 2] and see my brother up there. I just don't want to be around it. They're loud people and they argue a lot; it's just I don't want it. I grew up with it; now I don't have to be around it. If I keep [child] away, that's better for him.

Finally, some caregivers simply felt no need to actively pursue sibling relationships. An adoptive grandfather talked about what family meant to him and about his experiences with his many cousins who grew up as brothers and sisters. His view that family is defined by who "raised you and takes care of you and provides for you" seemed to supply a reason for why he did not see a need to encourage contact between the siblings.

Relationship between Siblings—A final explanation for the degree of sibling contact is provided by the sibling relationship itself. Beyond the caregiver's influence, children's feelings about their siblings and vice versa also seemed to play a role in the disruption of contact. For cases where the siblings were originally placed together but were then separated or who always lived separately but maintained some contact, the children often seemed confused or unsure of their feelings about their siblings. In three cases, the children expressed some interest and curiosity about their brothers or sisters, but were reluctant to take steps to maintain the relationship. The ambivalent attitudes of their caregivers towards the sibling relationship helped to sustain the children's reluctance. In two other cases, the children expressed anger or aversion towards their siblings, and did not want to have a relationship. The caregiver of the boy accused of sexually abusing his sister reported that he did not want to see his sister. She reported him saying, *"Maybe someday ... when she's older I'll talk to her 'cause I love her. She's still my sister, but I'm angry at her."* Given that relationships involve reciprocity, siblings' responses also facilitated or hindered continued contact. For instance, one caregiver described how her brother's failure to remain in touch reinforced her child's reluctance to

maintain contact: *"Once in a while, he'll say he wants to see his brother, but his brother never calls him."*

The Impact of Sibling Relationships on the Child in Foster Care

In the majority of joint-placement cases, siblings were viewed as having a positive effect on one another. These positive influences included examples seen in traditional sibling relationships, such as older siblings being looked up to as role models and younger siblings providing a sense of worth and responsibility. For families working towards reunification, maintaining sibling relationships was also seen as an important element of preserving family cohesiveness. For instance, the grandmother who organized bi-weekly visits between the grandson in her care and the granddaughter in a group home, worked to maintain the sibling's relationship in preparation for their eventual reunification with their mother. In cases where reunification was unlikely or impossible, caregivers commented on the importance of sibling relationships providing a sense of stability. Even in cases where sibling conflict made joint placement extremely difficult, caregivers struggled with the question of whether to separate siblings. One caregiver, who dealt with a difficult and at times violent older sibling, explained that she chose to keep the child in her home to avoid the trauma his removal would cause for the younger siblings, stating: *"He's part of their family; he's what they have left of their family."*

The case of J. (presented earlier) demonstrates the potentially damaging effects of multiple placement changes and the loss of sibling relationships. J.'s caregiver stated that being moved from family to family made it difficult for J. to form attachments, including with his brother. In addition, the caregiver reported that J. experienced a great deal of guilt because he believed his brother's placement experiences were more difficult than his own. However, the caregiver also believed that the stability J. was experiencing within his current placement and the time he was spending with his brother were helping him learn to trust and build a relationship with his brother and other family members.

In cases where siblings were originally placed together but were then separated or who always lived separately but maintained some contact, the children often seemed confused or unsure of their feelings about their siblings. According to caregivers, children had varied responses to their siblings, ranging from curiosity and longing to anger and indifference. For cases where children had never lived with their siblings, and knew little or nothing about them, caregivers were often very reluctant to tell the children in their care about their siblings or to encourage contact. These cases demonstrate that sibling relationships can have both a positive and negative impact on children in out-of-home care. In our sample, it was left to the caregivers to determine whether the stress and confusion related to learning about a sibling or attempting to preserve contact were outweighed by the potential benefits of the siblings establishing or maintaining a relationship.

While this paper has focused primarily on children who are biologically related, we feel it is also appropriate to address the relationships between children who are not related, but were raised in the same household, and the effect separation can have on these children. Several caregivers noted that the children in their care missed their "brothers and sisters" from previous placements. One caregiver noted, *"She's mad, tons of grief I would think; I mean she's sad as hell because everybody she starts to love is ripped away from her. She's got more brothers and sisters than you'd ever know because of all the homes that she's been in."* However, little emphasis was placed on maintaining these relationships in comparison with relationships between biological siblings. This lack of emphasis reflects the difficulties in maintaining children's relationship across placement changes in the foster care system, as well as the weight the foster care system and society in general places on biological relationships.

Discussion and Implications

This exploratory study used interviews with foster and adoptive caregivers to advance inquiry on the nature of sibling relationships of children in long-term placement and the challenges and processes involved in maintaining contact between siblings. Findings need to be understood within the context of the study's limitations. The sample was small, voluntary, and heterogeneous. It included caregivers with children who had identified emotional and behavioral problems. Foster and adoptive children without such problems might have different experiences with their siblings. However, given the large percentage of children in child welfare with emotional and behavioral problems (Burns et al., 2004), findings from our study should be of interest to child welfare practitioners and policy-makers. Our study did not specifically examine the relationship between behavior problems and sibling contact, and we found little evidence of a link. However, this issue deserves specific investigation. Our findings further reflect the caregivers' view of the child's sibling relationship. While this enhances the current foster care sibling literature which has primarily relied on administrative data or data from caseworkers, findings need to be understood as presenting one particular perspective. To advance knowledge about sibling relationships in foster care, studies should be conducted which triangulate data from multiple sources. The size of the sample and the methods used also limit transferability of findings.

Despite these limitations, findings from this study build on current knowledge of sibling relationships placed into out-of-home care in several ways and could provide the launching point for further inquiry. First, they add "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) to prior quantitative analyses of administrative foster care data (Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005), which reported on the complex placement patterns of siblings over time. We identified three patterns in our study: children who never lived together with their siblings, children who were initially placed together but then separated, and children who were currently placed together with some of their siblings. The latter group had spent the shortest amount of time in out-of-home placement, and it is possible that, over time, siblings in this group would be separated. We further identified 4 factors that appear to be related to sibling contact: 1) placement patterns, 2) complex family relationships, 3) the role of the caregivers, and 4) the nature of sibling relationships. Quantitative analyses with more representative samples of children in out-of-home placements are advised to determine the generalizability of these factors.

Placement Patterns

Research indicates that initial placement status is a strong determinant of sibling placement over time with the percentage of siblings who remain together declining over time (Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005). This is supported by our study, which found that a child's initial and current placement vis à vis that of his/her siblings appears to be related to whether contact with siblings is developed and maintained. Our study further illustrated that siblings have unique living situations and placement histories, which appear to affect their ability to maintain contact. Even siblings living together most of their lives had experienced periods of separation, which not only resulted in disrupted sibling relationships in several cases but also contributed to a range of emotions toward a sibling. Findings underscore that the earlier siblings can be placed together following entry into out-of-home placement, the greater the chance of maintaining the sibling relationship. However, joint or early placement of sibling groups poses significant challenges for child welfare service systems already struggling with a shortage of foster care placements (GAO, 2004). Finding qualified foster parents who are willing to care for entire sibling groups, in particular siblings with identified behavior problems, will require special effort and support. It will also require a degree of frankness about the problems experienced by foster children along with the requisite specialized training to address these problems. Anecdotal reports by both child welfare worker and caregivers suggest that

information about a child's problems is often minimized or concealed or simply not available when a child is initially placed. The majority of caregivers in our study certainly indicated that they were given little information about the child's background and problems.

Complex Family Relationships

Our study underscores the difficulties of defining 'who is a sibling.' Even within our small sample of 14 cases, we found significant relationships between biological siblings, step-siblings, half-siblings, and de facto siblings (e.g., cousins, siblings gained through being placed in out-of-home care). Hegar (2005) discussed these definitional challenges in a recent review as they concern child welfare research. For us, these definitional challenges raise two issues. First, who does the child view as his/her sibling? Child welfare policy and practice with regard to sibling placement and contact need to be flexible enough to accommodate and support different types of sibling relationships. Which relationships in the child's life are meaningful, provide family continuity, and the potentially lifelong connections that child welfare policy is aiming to facilitate? In many counties, siblings are tracked via their relationship to the biological mother. This means that child welfare workers may often not be aware of the existence of other siblings. Second, family relationships are complex. Parents separate, divorce, and create families with new partners. This creates an extended network of family relationships and caregiving responsibilities, which can become a source of conflict and stress (e.g., Caldwell, Antonucci & Jackson, 1998) as well as coping and support (e.g., Mowbray, Bybee, Hollingsworth, Goodkind, & Oyserman, 2005). It is important to note that the complexity of family relationships is not specific to families involved with the child welfare system, as the number of nontraditional families has been steadily growing during the past decades across all social groups in U.S. society (Child Trends Databank, n.d.). However, our study illustrates how this complexity can become a hindrance in the development and maintenance of sibling relationships. To facilitate lifelong connections for foster children, child welfare caseworkers need to consider children's views of meaningful relationships. While these relationships frequently involve biological ties, such relationships may also develop outside of the parameters of family relationships.

The Role of the Caregiver

Findings from this study suggest that caregivers can play a significant role in 'gatekeeping' the relationship between siblings. Given current child welfare policy, which places increasing emphasis on the sibling relationship, we expected active involvement by caseworkers in facilitating sibling contact. This was not the case in our sample. Caseworkers appeared to consider siblings in initial placement and permanency planning decisions, but did not play a role in the maintenance of sibling contact. This was left to the judgment and initiative of caregivers. Smith's study (1996) previously pointed to the crucial role of foster caregivers in this process. Our study further illuminated the reasons why foster caregivers facilitate or limit contact with siblings and the tremendous efforts involved in maintaining contact between siblings. Such efforts are likely only going to be sustained if the caregiver truly believes in the importance of the sibling relationship to the child's well-being and has the resources to maintain such efforts. More interesting perhaps were the very personal reasons that deterred caregivers, in particular relative caregivers, from making such efforts. These included personal beliefs about the meaning of family, painful past experiences with the caregivers' own family of origin, and perceptions of the siblings' biological family. In several cases, caregivers felt they were protecting the child by keeping him/her away from the family with whom a sibling lived. Not maintaining contact was also a way for caregivers to set boundaries with their own families of origin, which were frequently part of the child's kinship network as well. In those instances, setting boundaries by limiting or controlling contact meant keeping family dysfunction, abuse, and painful experiences away from their own life. The 'gatekeeping' function of caregivers is an interesting dynamic that deserves further investigation. Child welfare workers could play

an important role in assessing caregivers' feelings and perceptions about the child's biological family, educating caregivers' about the benefits of building sibling connections, and actively supporting caregivers' efforts to reach out to siblings.

The Nature of Sibling Relationships

Finally, our small sample provided a glimpse into the varied nature of sibling relationships among foster children. As in non-foster families, some children had close relationships with their siblings, while other relationships were nonexistent or conflictual (Hetherington, Reiss & Plomin, 1994). The developmental literature has demonstrated that siblings can have a profound influence on development and shape experiences within the family (Brody, 1998). However, little is known about how certain types of sibling relationships form and about the specific processes by which siblings influence one another. This is particularly relevant to siblings in foster care given their disrupted family connections, their high risk status, and their high rates of behavior problems. What influence do siblings in foster care have on each other? Research with non-clinical sibling population has generally taken one of two approaches in describing the contribution of sibling relationships to outcomes. The social learning perspective emphasizes the ability of children to actively and shape and reinforce their siblings' behaviors, including undesirable behavior (Patterson, Dishion & Bank, 1984). A second approach focuses on the balance of power in the sibling relationship, which is often determined by birth order. Within this perspective, sibling influence is viewed as greatest when he or she holds more power within the relationship (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). A recent longitudinal study of non-clinical Latino and African American families showed that qualities of the sibling relationship, such as high older sister power, low warmth/closeness, and low conflict served as mediators between young sibling characteristics as well as family risk factors and subsequent high risk behaviors (East & Khoo, 2006). The study reported stronger mediating effects for sister-sister pairs than for sister-brother pairs. Previous literature has shown, and our study suggested, that siblings can be role models; they can have a stabilizing, adaptive, and buffering effect and fulfill a need for relationship and connectedness. However, negative sibling dynamics can also contribute to poor outcomes (East & Khoo, 2006). This implies that not all sibling relationships are going to be beneficial and that policies concerning siblings in foster care need to be applied judiciously, considering the unique circumstances and needs of a particular child and sibling situation.

Finally, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) may provide a useful integrating framework for the varying influences on sibling relationship and contact in foster care. Within this framework, proximal influences are believed to have greater impact than distal influences on individual level outcomes (Baldwin, Baldwin & Cole, 1990). Our study suggests that the implementation of policy related to sibling relationships in foster care is affected by multiple factors in the child's ecology. Foremost among these factors appear to be the caregivers whose own views of and experiences with family can impact whether they encourage or limit contact with siblings. This would need to be considered in the implementation of policies related to sibling placement. We, therefore, recommend future research with larger samples and different and/or multiple data sources to test the individual and combined effects of the factors identified in this study on sibling contact. We particularly encourage inquiry into the relationship of behavior problems and sibling contact. Special attention should also be paid to differences in sibling contact between children who have been adopted versus those who are in temporary or long-term out-of-home care placements.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by NIMH Grant K08 MH 64816. We thank Joyce Hightower for her transcription services, Brenda Bantados, Betty Cabrera, Shellane Calma, and Sally Mathiesen for their help with coding the data, and Inger Davis for her valuable insights and editorial assistance. In addition, we thank the children and caregivers involved in the study for sharing their experiences with us.

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Table 1

Coding Categories Related to Siblings

"PARENT NODES"	"CHILD NODES"	CODING CATEGORIES
I		Identifying information on siblings – any information on number of, names, ages, type of relationship (full, half, step sibling), etc.
II		Whereabouts of siblings
III		Sibling placement history
	A	Currently placed together (at least partially)
	B	Initially placed together, then separated
	C	Never placed together
IV		Factors involved in placement of siblings (Reasons for not placing siblings together or separating them)
	A	Complicated/complex family relationships
	B	Willingness/ability of caregiver
	C	Adoption prior to birth of siblings
	D	Age differential between sibling groups
	E	Sibling conflict
V		Contact with siblings: Frequency, type/form of contact
VI		Reasons for limited or no contact
	A	Siblings placement history (also see IIIA)
	B	Caregivers – Gatekeepers? (Caregiver thoughts/feelings about sibling and about maintaining sibling contact)
	C	Sibling relationship (Child's thoughts/feelings about sibling and about maintaining contact with sibling)

In NVIVO, "nodes" or categories are catalogued in a hierarchical structure, moving from general categories at the top ("parent nodes") to more specific categories ("child nodes")

Table 2**Characteristics of Children by Placement Pattern**

	Currently Placed (Partially) Together N=5	Initially Placed Together, Then Separated N=4	Never Placed Together N=5
Gender			
Male	4	3	3
Female	1	1	2
Age	9.4 (2.7)	11.8 (2.1)	9.2 (2.6)
Type of Current Placement			
Kincare,	1	3	
Nonrelative Foster Care	2		
Legal Guardianship	1	1	2
Adoption	1		3
Years with Current Caregiver	3.4 (4.2)	5.3 (6.1)	8.0 (2.0)
Prior Placement/Living Situation History			
Multiple "Placements"	2	2	1
1–2 "Placements"		1	2
No Prior "Placements"	3	1	2
Reason for Placement into OOH			
Abuse and neglect	1		1
Severe physical abuse	1		2
Sibling Killed by Parent	2		
Voluntary Relinquishment	1		2
Domestic Violence			
Abandonment		1	
Mother in Prison		2	
Drug Use		1	
Contact with Bio Parent			
No contact	1	3	3
Sporadic Contact	2	1	1
Reunification Efforts	2		
Not Enough Info			1
Whereabouts of Siblings			
With Parent/yes	1	1	1
With Other Kin/yes			1
In Out-of-Home Care/yes	1	2	1
Adults, Living Ind/yes.	1		1
On the Street/yes		1	
Placed with Index Child	2		
Unknown			1
Current Contact with Siblings			
Not Living with Same Caregiver			
No Contact	1	2	
Limited Contact		1	3
Regular Contact	2	1	2