

Is Our Family Focus Wide Enough to Include Siblings?

Kathy Barbell

In the United States today, there are more adults searching for their siblings than searching for their biological parents. Former children of the child welfare system are suing agencies to release information that will aid their search, and they are winning. Perhaps in the not-too-distant future these legal actions and the courts' response will force agencies to adopt policies that keep siblings together. But is this how we want child welfare policy to be made?

The Alabama Department of Human Resources is operating under a consent decree mandating that brothers and sisters must be placed together in all but the most extraordinary circumstances. In 2000, Colorado passed a law directing that efforts must be made to place sibling groups together, and California enacted legislation requiring that consideration be given to sibling relationships in all placement decisions.

A Relationship That Lasts - for Some

In recent years, well-deserved attention has been focused on the importance of the parent-child relationship and the loss children experience when they are placed in out-of-home care. At the same time, very little attention has been paid to sibling relationships, even though we know that the bonds among brothers and sisters are unique – the longest lasting relationships most people have. The sibling relationship lasts longer than the relationship of parent and child and often longer than that of husband and wife.

When stress – economic, social, environmental, or psychological – makes parents unable to meet their children's needs, the usually strong ties between siblings may become stronger, perhaps even stronger than those between parents and children. Children in these families learn to depend on each other to cope with their common life experiences. If intervention intended to help the children results in their separation from each other, they suffer additional loss and grief.

The majority of children in out-of-home care have siblings-between 87% and 98%, according to some studies. Yet it may be that agencies succeed in keeping siblings together as little as 25% of the time, as Timberlake and Hamlin reported in 1982.

If we are to realize a new vision of family-focused foster care, we must nurture, support, and preserve the vitally important sibling relationships in families along with the parent-child relationships.

So How Are We Doing?

Basic questions, such as what percentage of placements keep siblings together and how separation from siblings affects children, have received little attention from scholars. A few studies have examined factors that influence placement patterns. Hegar (1986] found that siblings were most likely to be separated when they "were older, from large sibling groups, had developmental disabilities, were placed in residential institutions or schools, or came into custody at different times." Aldridge and Cautley's 1976 comparison of children placed separately and together found a strong sex difference – 66% of the girls but only 38% of the boys were placed with siblings; a correlation with the number of previous

placements – 25% of the separated sibling groups had four or more placements, but none of the intact sibling groups had this many; and several significant correlations with measures of learning disability and emotional disturbance. Overall, the healthiest children were most likely to be placed together, while children who most needed the support of siblings were least likely to receive it.

Why Agencies Separate Sibling Groups

Agencies offer a variety of reasons for separating siblings in family foster care. Although these reasons may have merit, studies indicate that the practice often delivers negative messages and results in problems for children in the long run. There is almost always an alternative.

"It's hard to find families who will accept a sibling group. Separating the children gives them a better chance of finding a permanent family, should adoption become the plan, because most families adopt just one child at a time."

First, child welfare workers need to thoroughly explore the kinship care options for all children entering care. Research shows that kinship families are usually more likely than unrelated foster families to care for sibling groups.

Even among unrelated foster families, most are already fostering more than one child. Foster families with a full house cannot be expected to take two, three, or more siblings all coming into care at the same time. But many communities are recruiting and training foster families specifically for sibling groups. It can be done.

"These kids come from troubled backgrounds. Their combined problems may be too much for one set of parents. "

Workers hope that if they place children separately, each will receive a generous share of attention and nurturing from one foster family, and this will develop the child's highest potential. But even a needy child does not necessarily benefit from being the only child in a family.

"Some siblings just can't get along with each other. Why put everyone through all that?"

Sibling rivalry and jealousy remain major causes for separation in family foster care and adoption. But siblings in functioning families aren't separated permanently just because they fight. Siblings who remain together learn how to resolve their differences and develop durable relationships.

"The children are so unhappy about being removed from their biological family that they would probably band together to sabotage any placement. "

This kind of teamwork on the part of the children may call for equally strong teamwork among foster parents, biological parents, social workers, and other helpers. It's a challenge, but not an insurmountable one.

"The older sibling has become the caregiver for the other children. If we separate the children, the caregiving child can relax and they younger ones can learn to trust adults. "

Relationships of this kind can be a source of great strength for children. Foster parents can use them constructively to help siblings develop new roles and expectations.

"Sometimes siblings come into care at different points in time. If we can't place the other siblings in the same foster home as the first one, we place them in different homes to preserve the first placement."

This is a dilemma. Nevertheless, if we value the lifelong relationships of the family of origin, we will thoroughly assess the pros and cons of placing the siblings together.

Most children who are placed in out-of-home care eventually return to their biological families. Even when we need to find new parents for children, we need not and should not destroy the connections among siblings.

What Agencies and Foster Care Administrators Must Do Now

Family foster care must both ensure children's safety and support family and community ties, so the trauma of separation is minimized. If our practice is to be family focused, community based, and culturally responsive, administrators must make kinship foster families their first choice for sibling groups. Failing this, they will choose nonrelative foster families from the children's own racial background and community. Agencies will:

- Recognize the right of siblings to be placed together. The single most important factor in getting children back with their biological families is regular and frequent visits, and it's easier for the biological parents to visit one family foster home than several.
- Implement policies and procedures that support this right, and examine all existing policies in light of maintaining sibling relationships.
- Collect data on sibling placements. Find out how many sibling groups are placed each month, each quarter, and each year. What is the typical size of the sibling groups? How many foster families are available for them? Are there foster families in the communities where the children and their biological families live? Are there enough vacancies for new sibling groups coming into care to meet the need projected from the previous year's trend data?
- Use the data to develop policies for recruiting sibling group foster parents. Some agencies feature sibling groups in all their recruitment materials. They tell prospective foster parents from the very beginning that most children coming into family foster care have siblings, and they will be placed with the same foster family.
- License or certify some qualified families for sibling groups only. If policy prevents the use of these foster families for nonrelated children, they will be available when sibling groups come into care.
- Establish assessment procedures that help agency staff learn as much as possible about a family before children are placed, including the nature of the siblings' relationships and the developmental needs of each child.
- Train social workers and foster parents on the importance of sibling relationships, how to work with caregiver children, and issues such as rivalry and collusion.
- Put supports in place for families who foster sibling groups, including a buddy system and respite care. When foster families are located in the children's own community, support may come from the children's extended families and from other informal community helpers.

- Develop supports for siblings nearing adulthood, who may become able to parent young brothers and sisters if the child welfare system backs them up. For example, foster parents could remain involved with the children and the parenting sibling in a quasi-grandparent role that includes guidance and occasional respite.
- Ensure that siblings who have already been separated from each other have opportunities to maintain their relationship – frequent visits, including overnights; regular telephone contact; and the chance to celebrate important events together – no matter what the emotional and behavioral aftermath. Working on the emotional reactions to visits and contacts between siblings promotes the healthy growth and development of children.

Once agency administrators, supervisors, and caseworkers see brothers and sisters supporting each other day in and day out during their foster care experience, siblings will be placed together. Policies, procedures, and supports will be put in place to make it happen.

References

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