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Children and Youth Services Review
27 (2005) 793–819

Children and
Youth Services
Review

www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth

Separation from siblings: Associations with placement adaptation and outcomes among adolescents in long-term foster care

Sonya J. Leathers*

*University of Illinois at Chicago, Jane Addams College of Social Work, 1040 W. Harrison Ave.,
Chicago, IL 60607, United States*

Available online 20 January 2005

Abstract

Although practice guidelines support the placement of siblings in the same foster home whenever possible, sibling groups are frequently separated. Little empirical knowledge is available to understand why siblings are separated or how different sibling placement patterns are related to children's placement adaptation and permanency outcomes. These questions were investigated using data from a study involving telephone interviews with the caseworkers and foster parents of a cross-sectional sample of 197 randomly selected young adolescents in long-term, traditional family foster care. Placement outcomes, including placement disruption, reunification, and adoption, were followed prospectively for five years. Results of multivariate analyses indicate that adolescents who were placed alone after a history of joint sibling placements were at greater risk for placement disruption than those who were placed with a consistent number of siblings while in foster care. This association was mediated by a weaker sense of integration and belonging in the foster home among youth placed alone with a history of sibling placements. Unexpectedly, youth placed alone, either throughout their stay in foster care or after a history of sibling placements, were less likely to exit to adoption or subsidized guardianship than youth with consistent joint sibling placements.

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Keywords: Foster children; Siblings; Child welfare; Behavior problems; Adoption; Attachment

* Tel./fax: +1 312 996 8512.

E-mail address: SonyaL@uic.edu.

1. Introduction

Siblings often enter foster care together, but until recently, there has been little focus on the importance of their relationships (Drapeau, Simard, Beaudry, & Charbonneau, 2000; Shlonsky, Webster, & Needell, 2003). Research has rarely investigated why siblings are separated or the potential consequences of separation. Given the life-long support that is potentially provided by sibling relationships (Hegar, 1988a; Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2001), it is important to understand these issues. In the past two decades, sibling relationships have been increasingly recognized as playing a role in children's development (Boer & Dunn, 1992; Hegar, 1988a; Tucker et al., 2001). Concurrently, child welfare practice guidelines, legislation, and litigation have recognized the potential benefits of sibling relationships by supporting the placement of siblings in the same home whenever joint placements are not detrimental to individual children. In actual practice, however, siblings are often still separated. Estimates of the percentage of children placed without any siblings range from 23% to 75% (Staff & Fein, 1992). Children in traditional foster care are at particularly high risk for separation from all of their siblings, with rates about double those for children placed in kin care (Needell et al., 2004; Shlonsky et al., 2003). In Illinois, over 50% of all children in traditional family foster care in 1998 were placed without any siblings in the same home (Leathers, 2000), although the majority of these children also had siblings in care. In California, 42% of children in traditional family foster care who had siblings also in care were placed without siblings in 2003 (Needell et al., 2004).

Given the high incidence of sibling separation, particularly in traditional family foster care, understanding the dynamics of sibling separation is essential. The present study investigated two related questions in a sample of adolescents placed in long-term, non-relative family foster care. The first question addressed why siblings are separated while in care. The second question explored how different patterns of sibling separation and placement are related to permanency outcomes and placement adaptation in traditional family foster care.

1.1. *Why siblings are separated*

Several related reasons for separating siblings are described in the child welfare literature. Caseworkers and advocates have frequently cited difficulty in finding and maintaining placements for sibling groups as a reason for separation (Hegar, 1988a; Ward, 1984). This explanation points to inadequate placement resources, which is supported by Hegar's (1988a) finding that two-thirds of the caseworkers in a public agency were highly pessimistic about finding joint placements for sibling groups. Relatives, who might have a greater commitment to related children than traditional foster parents, are more likely to provide joint placements than traditional unrelated foster care providers (Needell et al., 2004; Shlonsky et al., 2003). Differences in the needs of children might also contribute to the decision to split sibling groups. Previous research indicates that siblings are more likely to be placed in different homes or be separated after joint placement if there is a greater gap in their ages or if a child is developmentally disabled (Drapeau et al., 2000; Hegar, 1993; Shlonsky et al., 2003). The degree of difficulty in caring for the sibling group

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