



## Foster children placed with or separated from siblings: Outcomes based on a national sample<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines a range of outcomes for children in foster care who have siblings, using a large, national U.S. database. Three types of sibling placements are defined: split (child has no siblings in the home), splintered (at least one sibling in the home), and together (all siblings in the home). The study analyzes records ( $n = 1701$ ) from the National Study of Child and Adolescent Wellbeing, including Child Protective Services (CPS) and Long-term Foster Care (LTFC) samples. It contributes to the literature in its inclusive definition of siblings, use of three categories for sibling placement status, and use of outcome measures that include the perceptions of foster children. The study reports limited significant findings. Neither foster parents' nor youths' reports of behavioral problems differ by sibling placement status. As rated by teachers, academic performance in the group placed together exceeds that in both of the other groups. For children in kinship homes, teachers also reported less problematic internalizing and externalizing behavior for the splintered and together groups than for the split group. Children in the splintered group also responded more favorably than those in the split group to questions of closeness to the primary caregiver and liking the people in the foster family.

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### 1. Introduction

After decades of neglect or very limited acknowledgement in the child welfare literature, issues surrounding sibling placements in foster care have achieved a new level of visibility during the past ten years. Examples of this attention include professional meetings and conferences, such as the 2002 National Leadership Conference on Siblings in Out-of-home Care, sponsored by Casey Family Programs and held in Daytona, Florida (Casey Family Programs, 2002) and the 2008 Canadian Practice and Research Together (PART) Sibling Relationship Learning Event for child welfare staff throughout Ontario (PART, 2008). Growing attention to sibling ties also is evidenced by the special 2005 issue of *Children and Youth Services Review* edited by Shlonsky, Bellamy, Elkins, and Ashare (2005) and by the inclusion of chapters about sibling issues in some recent child welfare texts (e.g.

Hegar, 2005a,b). Finally, growing legislative attention has resulted in U.S. state laws addressing the interests and claims of siblings in state custody (Christian, 2002; Shlonsky, Webster, & Needell, 2003; Shlonsky et al., 2005). Debates about fundamental rights of siblings also appear in the legal literature and have been argued in federal court (adoption of Hugo, 1998; Dillard, 2002; Jones, 1993; Patton & Latz, 1994).

Research interest in siblings in child placement began to grow during the 1980s and 1990s, when researchers published many of the first formal studies. During the past decade, the research literature addressing outcomes for siblings in foster care has burgeoned, often offering findings based on large samples and sophisticated statistical methods. The overview of relevant literature in Section 2 focuses on three areas. The first issue is how siblings are defined and classified. The second addresses the groups with which siblings placed together in foster care are compared. Some studies contrast outcomes for siblings in joint placements with outcomes for separated siblings, while others report findings for children placed singly, whether or not they are part of sibling groups. The third issue addressed in the review of the literature is how outcomes for siblings have been measured in foster care and adoption research. In each of these areas, the present study makes a contribution to the existing body of research.

This study builds on prior work by the same authors (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009) to examine relationships between sibling placement and foster care outcomes, including youth behavior, school performance, and family relationships, using data from two samples of the

<sup>☆</sup> This article includes data from the National Survey on Child and Adolescent Well-Being, which was developed under contract with the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (ACYF/DHHS). The data have been provided by the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect. The information and opinions expressed herein reflect solely the position of the authors. Nothing herein should be construed to indicate the support or endorsement of its contents by ACYF/DHHS. Requests for reprints of this article or correspondence should be directed to Rebecca L. Hegar, Box 19129, University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, TX, USA, 76019–0129.

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National Study of Child and Adolescent Well-being. The Child Protective Services (CPS) sample includes 5501 children, and the Long Term Foster Care (LTFC) sample is comprised of 727 children representative of those who had been in out-of-home placement for approximately one year before the sample selection in late 1999 and early 2000 and who continued to be in out-of-home care when the sampling frame was produced. The combined sample for this paper is 1701 records (survey waves) representing 1113 children aged 6 and older who had siblings placed in foster care and who met other criteria for inclusion. The samples and the waves of longitudinal data used in this study are described in greater detail in Section 3 of the article.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Existing reviews of the literature

Several published reviews of the literature have summarized the state of professional knowledge about siblings in foster care or adoption. In one of the earliest, Hegar (1988b) drew together what British and U.S. studies revealed about siblings from the earliest days of child placement through the period of growing research in the 1980s. Soon thereafter, Festinger (1990) and Rosenthal (1993) reviewed the literature on adoption outcomes and reported conclusions about sibling placements. Hegar (2005a,b), Washington (2007), and McCormick (2010) each reviewed the research and cite a number of studies reporting some outcomes for joint placements of siblings that are better than outcomes for placements of separated siblings or individual children. Some recent studies with large sample sizes and complex statistical method report more mixed conclusions, due in part to findings of statistical interactions that are difficult to interpret (e.g. Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009; Smith et al., 2006; Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005). Because of the availability of detailed, recent reviews of the literature, this article targets its review to three methodological issues that have proved challenging in earlier research, as mentioned in Section 1 above: the definition of siblings in the foster care population, the appropriate comparison group for siblings placed together, and the range of outcome measures that have been employed in sibling studies.

### 2.2. Definitions of sibling groups

Nearly 20 years ago, Staff, Fein, and Johnson (1993) addressed the issue of how to define and identify siblings in foster care research. Authors who review the literature on sibling placement note the range of definitions for sibling groups that various researchers have employed (e.g. Hegar, 2005a,b). In several cases, researchers have classified as siblings children who share at least one biological parent, sometimes with the added requirement of having lived together or having been removed from a situation where they would have lived together (e.g. Kosonen, 1996; Maclean, 1991). In U.S. studies based on public foster care records, it is typical that researchers are able to identify only children sharing the same mother (full siblings or maternal half-siblings), often due to the way individuals are linked in state data bases (e.g., Shlonsky et al., 2003; Welty, Geiger, & Magruder, 1997).

Half-siblings are, of course, very common in the population of children in contact with public child welfare agencies, and there is little argument that they should be included in most sibling studies. There is also a good case to be made for even more inclusive definitions. In exploring the origins of the sibling bond, psychologists Bank and Kahn (1982) postulated that strong sibling ties arise out of access (frequent contact) and unusual need for each other due to diminished parental influence or other factors. This theoretical perspective would argue for including children with sibling-like ties, including adoptive, step, and perhaps even fictive siblings. This study

uses a broad definition of sibling status based on identification of siblings by the children themselves, a point to which we return in the Discussion, Section 5.1.

### 2.3. Comparisons involving sibling placements

A number of studies of sibling groups in care have been able to compare outcomes for children placed with at least some siblings with those for children separated in placement from all siblings (Staff & Fein, 1992; Shlonsky et al., 2003; Smith, 1998; Thorpe & Swart, 1992; Webster, Shlonsky, Shaw, & Brookhart, 2005; Wedge & Mantle, 1991; Wulczyn, Kogan, & Harden, 2003). Wedge and Mantle (1991) refine the concept of separation to include siblings placed together, split, or “splintered” (placed with some siblings but not others), and Webster et al. (2005) also distinguish among intact sibling groups, children placed with at least one sibling, and siblings placed singly. This is the approach we take in this study.

However, a number of other studies have contrasted outcomes for siblings placed together with those for children placed singly, whether or not they have siblings. In her review, Hegar (2005a,b) notes studies of foster care and adoption conducted in the Netherlands (Boer, Versluis-den Bierman, & Verhulst, 1994), the U.S. (Barth, Berry, Yoshikami, Goodfield, & Carson, 1988; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Holloway, 1997; Rosenthal, Schmidt, & Conner, 1988) and the United Kingdom (Holloway, 1997; Rushton, Dance, Quinton, & Mayes, 2001) that make this comparison. Although this seems to have been more common in studies conducted ten to twenty years ago, some more recent studies have continued the practice (e.g., Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009; Smith, Howard, Garnier, & Ryan, 2006). Some of the studies that compare outcomes for sibling groups with those of children placed separately were designed to study factors associated with adoption breakdown (e.g. Barth et al., 1988; Boer et al., 1994; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Rosenthal et al., 1988; Smith et al., 2006), and they appear in reviews of the sibling literature because adoption with siblings was found to be a relevant variable. Similar studies in the U.K. have tended to combine foster care and adoptive populations in studies of placement breakdown (Holloway, 1997; Rushton et al., 2001; Wedge & Mantle, 1991).

### 2.4. Outcome measures in sibling research

As introduced in Section 2.3 above, disruption of placements has been a frequent outcome measure used in sibling research. Other typical approaches to measuring outcomes include assessment of children using standardized measures of adjustment or problems and a range of non-standardized tools such as case reading protocols or surveys of caseworkers or foster parents. A less common and more recent approach has been to study children's subjective opinions or reported feelings.

#### 2.4.1. Placement outcomes

Placement disruption or unplanned placement change was the most common outcome measure in studies of sibling placement for many years (Barth et al., 1988; Boer & Spiering, 1991; Boer et al., 1994; Holloway, 1997; Rosenthal et al., 1988; Staff & Fein, 1992; Wedge & Mantle, 1991). As noted in Section 2.3 above, some of these are studies of adoptive placements, where disruption would be a clearly negative outcome, and others are based on long-term foster care programs. Disruption continues to be used as an outcome measure in more recent research; for example, Smith et al. (2006) report interactions between size of sibling group and adoption disruption, and Leathers (2005) found links between separation of adolescent siblings and disruption. The large New York study by Wulczyn et al. (2003) also uses a variation on the concept of disruption, reporting greater numbers of placement changes for siblings placed together in foster care, while Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005) report placement

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