



Evaluation of a multi-site program designed to strengthen relational bonds for siblings separated by foster care



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ABSTRACT

Sibling relationships in foster care settings have received increased attention in recent years. Despite growing evidence regarding the protective potential of sibling relationships for youth in care, some sibling groups continue to experience foster care related separation, and few programs exist to address the needs of these youth.

This study describes and evaluates Camp To Belong, a multi-site program designed to provide short-term reunification to separated sibling groups through a week-long summer camp experience. Using a pre-test post-test survey design, this paper examines changes in youth ratings of sibling conflict and sibling support across camps located in six geographically distinct regions of the United States. The effects of youth age, number of prior camp exposures, and camp location were tested using multilevel modeling procedures.

Findings suggest that participation in Camp To Belong may reduce sibling conflict, and improvements in sibling support are noted for youth who have had prior exposure to the camp's programming. Camp-level variance in the sibling support outcome highlight the complex nature of relationships for siblings separated by foster care, and suggest the need for additional research. Lessons learned from this multi-site evaluation and future directions are discussed.

1. Introduction

Placement into substitute care for maltreatment related concerns are known to disrupt family bonds and relational continuity (Perry, 2006). This problem is particularly salient for youth who, in addition to being removed from their caregivers, may also experience separation from their siblings (Waid, Kothari, Bank, & McBeath, 2016).

In recent years there has been a growing recognition of the importance of sibling relationships for youth in substitute care (James, Monn, Palinkas, & Leslie, 2008; McBeath et al., 2014; Shlonsky, Bellamy, Elkins, & Share, 2005). Researchers have identified the conditions under which sibling groups are placed together or separated (Shlonsky, Webster, & Needell, 2003; Staff & Fein, 1992; Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005), and have found sibling co-placement may be beneficial to a youth's placement stability (Albert & King, 2008; Waid et al., 2016), permanency (Akin, 2011; Leathers, 2005), and emotional well-being (Wojciak, McWey, & Helfrich, 2013; Linares, Min, Shrout, Brody, & Pettit, 2007; Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2005). Federal legislation requires child welfare agencies to prioritize family and sibling based foster care placements whenever possible (Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008), and

recently foster care specific intervention programs have been developed to strengthen the socio-emotional and relational needs of sibling groups, using community-based intervention strategies (Kothari et al., 2014; Linares et al., 2007, 2015).

Despite a growing body of evidence pointing to the protective potential of sibling bonds for youth in care, and federal initiatives driving practice to co-place siblings whenever possible, some sibling groups will continue to experience foster care related separation. Exact estimates on the number of sibling groups in care are difficult to determine, in part due to the timing of entry for members of sibling groups (Wulczyn, Korgan, & Harden, 2003), as well as limited capacity of federal and state agencies to systematically track the intactness among sibling groups over time. Despite these limitations, large-scale cross-sectional studies of sibling groups suggest at least one-third of youth placed in care will be separated from at least one or more of their siblings during their foster care stay (Shlonsky et al., 2003). These youth may be at greater risk for detrimental developmental and child welfare outcomes, and research on programs designed specifically to address the needs of separated sibling groups are absent from the empirical literature.

This study begins to fill an important gap in knowledge related to

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programming for siblings in foster care through an evaluation of Camp To Belong: a multi-site program designed to provide short-term reunification to separated sibling groups, through a week-long summer camp experience. In this paper, a description of the camp program is provided and followed by an evaluation of the program's impact on two dimensions of the sibling relationship; sibling conflict, and sibling support. This evaluation also examines whether the participating youth's age, number of prior camp program exposures, and location of the camp program influenced these relational outcomes. Following a report on the findings of the evaluation, a review of lessons learned and opportunities for future research is provided.

2. Literature review

Research on siblings in the developmental psychology and family literature underscore the important influence of sibling relationships on child development. Sibling relationships form long before intimate partner relationships, and often exist long after the death of primary caregivers (Feinberg, Solmeyer, & McHale, 2012; McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman; 2012). These relationships provide some of the earliest opportunities for social-emotional and cognitive development (Brody, 1998; Dunn, 1998; Howe, 1991), behavioral control (Stormshack, Bellanti, & Bierman, 1996), as well as socialization and peer relationships (Bank, Burraston, & Snyder, 2004; Stocker & Dunn, 1990). Siblings provide the context for a relationship where one can learn how to argue, negotiate and compromise (Merrill, 1995); and healthy sibling relationships serve as a source of psychological support throughout the lifespan (Cicerelli, 1982).

Longitudinal studies of siblings in the general population have highlighted the importance of the quality of sibling relationships in a number of socio-emotional domains, particularly in the areas of mental health, socialization, and peer relationships. Positive sibling relationships have been shown to improve self-esteem (Yeh & Lempers, 2004), reduce feelings of loneliness and depression (Kim, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2007), and moderate the effects of stressful life events (Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007). Conversely, sibling relationships characterized by high levels of conflict have been associated with antisocial behavior and peer difficulties (Bank et al., 2004; Snyder, Bank, & Burraston, 2005), increased depression (Kim et al., 2007), substance abuse (Whiteman, Jensen, & Maggs, 2013), and criminal behavior (Kendler, Morris Lonn, & Sundquist, 2014).

For youth in foster care, sibling separation may disrupt a number of important developmental processes. The experience of sibling separation may lead to grief and loss (Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Lundstrom & Sallnas, 2012), and is associated with increased psychological problems including internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009; Smith, 1998).

Sibling separation has been shown to influence foster care placement adaptation (Leathers, 2005), placement stability (Waid et al., 2016), and exits to permanency (Akin, 2011).

The exact mechanisms within the sibling relationship which influence foster care related outcomes is not well understood. Yet, co-placement and separation appear to assert a significant influence on both child permanency and well-being. Leathers (2005) examined the effects of sibling co-placement and separation on placement outcomes among 197 adolescents in long term foster care. Siblings placed together throughout their foster care stay were less likely to experience placement disruption compared to both those who had an inconsistent history of being placed with their sibling and those who had never being placed with their sibling during their foster care stay. In this sample, youth placed without their sibling were also reported to have a weaker sense of integration and belonging in their foster home compared to youth with completely intact sibling placements.

In a study examining the effects of family dynamics on foster care placement stability, Waid et al. (2016) utilized secondary data from a sample of 328 youth drawn from the Supporting Siblings in Foster Care

Study, and examined the odds of youth experiencing placement change over an 18-month period of time. Living composition categories were created to examine four possible forms of kinship and sibling placement and their relative influence on placement stability. Siblings who were co-placed together in kinship care were 77% less likely to experience placement change compared to youth who were living separately from their sibling in non-relative care. Co-placement in non-relative care was also protective, with youth in this group 48% less likely to experience a placement change than siblings living separately in non-relative foster care. While living separately from ones sibling in kinship care reduced the odds of experiencing placement change by 28%, the stabilizing effects of the care placement were most pronounced for co-placed siblings.

Regarding foster care permanency, Akin (2011) examined permanency exits among 3351 youth over a 30 to 42-month period of time. Reunification, guardianship, and adoptions permanency exits were investigated in relationship to four potential combinations of sibling living arrangement; completely together, partially intact, completely separated, and no siblings in care. In this study, continuous sibling co-placement over the course of the foster care stay led to a 46% increase in the likelihood of reunification relative to siblings who were completely separated from their siblings over the course of their stay. Exits to guardianship were 69% higher for completely intact sibling living arrangements, and 10% higher for partially intact sibling placements. The effects of sibling placement on adoption were most pronounced, with completely intact sibling placements having a 90% greater likelihood of adoption relative to youth who were completely separated siblings.

In situations where sibling separation is unavoidable, research points to the protective capacity of warm sibling relationships and the frequency of sibling contact. Wojciak et al. (2013) found that sibling warmth mediated the association between trauma symptoms and internalizing behaviors among a sample of 152 youth in the U.S., of which 73% had experienced foster care sibling separation. Lundstrom and Sallnas (2012) found that for a sample of 240 Swedish youth in out of home care, the less frequently separated siblings had contact, the more they desired sibling contact. Richardson and Yates (2014) found that for a sample of 170 youth who recently emancipated from the U.S. foster care system, those who spent more time with their sibling had better young adult adjustment outcomes than those who did not.

Research demonstrating the protective potential of the sibling family subsystem have led to the development of interventions designed specifically to strengthen relationships for siblings in foster care. In particular, two notable randomized controlled trials have been tested. The *Promoting Sibling Bonds* study (Linares et al., 2015) investigated a pilot intervention with sibling dyads ages 5–11 in New York City who were previously exposed to child neglect. This intervention employed an 8-session format with both child and caregiver components, and sought to strengthen positive sibling interactions and reduce sibling conflict and aggression. Linares et al. (2015) found that children in the intervention group demonstrated improvements in positive interaction quality, lower levels of conflict during low competition play, lower sibling aggression among older youth, and caregivers reported more mediation strategies for the sibling relationship than did children and caregivers in the control condition.

The *Supporting Siblings in Foster Care* study (Kothari et al., 2014) tested a relationship enhancement intervention with 164 middle-adolescent age sibling dyads in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. This study employed a 12-session, community based intervention design with sibling dyads who lived either together or apart in foster care settings. This intervention focused on strengthening sibling cooperation, providing support, managing feelings, and fostering self-advocacy. The intervention was composed of 8 skill building sessions and 4 community sessions which provided sibling dyads with the opportunity to practice new skills. Siblings were observed for an 18-month period of time, and significant improvements in sibling relation-

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