



# An intervention to improve sibling relationship quality among youth in foster care: Results of a randomized clinical trial

Brianne H. Kothari<sup>a,\*</sup>, Bowen McBeath<sup>b,c</sup>, Paul Sorenson<sup>b</sup>, Lew Bank<sup>b,c</sup>, Jeff Waid<sup>d</sup>, Sara Jade Webb<sup>b</sup>, Joel Steele<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Oregon State University, Cascades, United States

<sup>b</sup> Portland State University, United States

<sup>c</sup> Oregon Social Learning Center, United States

<sup>d</sup> University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 29 June 2016

Received in revised form 4 November 2016

Accepted 10 November 2016

### Keywords:

Siblings

Intervention

Prevention

Foster care

## ABSTRACT

Sibling programming is an important part of a prevention framework, particularly for youth in foster care. After children are removed from their families and placed into foster care in the aftermath of maltreatment, the sibling relationship is often the most viable ongoing relationship available to the child, and may be critical to a youth's sense of connection, emotional support, and continuity. The promise of dyadic sibling programming in particular rests on the ability of interventions to enhance the quality of sibling relationships; yet little research exists that suggests that sibling interventions can improve relationship quality among foster youth. The primary aim of the current study was to examine the effects of a specific dyadic sibling-focused intervention for older and younger siblings on sibling relationship quality. One hundred sixty four dyads (328 youth) participated in the study, with each dyad consisting of an older sibling between 11 and 15 years of age at baseline and a younger sibling separated in age by less than 4 years. Hierarchical linear models were applied to self-reported, observer-reported and observational data over the 18-month study period. Findings suggest that the sibling intervention holds promise for improving sibling relationship quality among youth in foster care. Implications and future directions for research are discussed.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Sibling relationships are universal, and can drive development in powerful ways (Feinberg, Solmeyer, & McHale, 2012). Sibling relationships are embedded in and connected to other social relationships within the family and among peers. During some life stages, people spend more time with their siblings than with their parents or peers (Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2008). Moreover, the quality of sibling relationships may positively affect adolescent identity, self-esteem, and peer relationships (Kramer & Bank, 2005), particularly during stressful life periods (Conger, Stocker, & McGuire, 2009). And the impacts of the sibling relationship may endure in later life: research has associated healthy sibling relationships in childhood with improved adult mental health (Waldinger, Valliant, & Orav, 2007).

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [Brianne.kothari@osucascades.edu](mailto:Brianne.kothari@osucascades.edu), [briannekothari@gmail.com](mailto:briannekothari@gmail.com) (B.H. Kothari).

Conversely, difficulties and conflict in sibling relationships are well-known family problems (Ingoldsby, Shaw, & Garcia, 2001). While some conflict between siblings may serve as opportunities for youth to develop appropriate problem-solving skills, high conflict levels can lead to antisocial behavior and relationship difficulties in family and external settings. Stormshak, Bellanti, and Bierman (1996) found that siblings with high levels of conflict are more likely to be rejected by peers and to be rated as less socially competent by teachers. Other studies have found that success or failure with peers may be uniquely linked to the quality of one's sibling relationships (Bank, Burraston & Snyder, 2004). Given that siblings can be so influential, Feinberg et al. (2012) characterized sibling relationships as the “third rail” of family systems.

### 1.1. Sibling relationships among foster youth

High quality sibling relationships may be particularly important for youth in foster care. Roughly two-thirds of foster youth have at least one sibling also in care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). In the aftermath of maltreatment, when children are removed from much that is familiar to them (biological parent(s), home, school, and peers), the sibling relationship is frequently the most viable ongoing relationship in their lives. Maintaining a positive sibling relationship may be critical to a foster youth's sense of connection, emotional support, and continuity. The sibling bond may also serve as a source of resilience when other familial resources are unavailable (Feinberg et al., 2013). Research has shown that for foster youth, the presence of a sibling is associated with positive outcomes, including better relationships with foster parents (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009), fewer placements (Akin, 2011), and fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression (Wojciak, McWey, & Helfrich, 2013).

Recognition of the importance of sibling relationships for foster youth has grown as a result of sibling-focused child welfare policies. Recent federal efforts and state initiatives have promoted sibling co-placement and visitation. For example, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110–351) requires that reasonable efforts be made to co-place siblings in foster residences. Furthermore, over half of state child welfare systems prioritize sibling co-placement as a means of maintaining sibling bonds (Gustavsson and MacEachron, 2010). Successful implementation of sibling co-placement and visitation policies may promote a sense of permanency for foster youth by maintaining continuity of the sibling relationship and strengthening sibling bonding (Akin, 2011). However, the reality is that foster youth are still frequently placed apart (i.e., in a placement separate from that of their sibling), and sibling visitation becomes particularly difficult for these children.

The promotion of prosocial sibling relationships is a topic of growing interest among child welfare interventionists and program developers alike. Siblings may provide a non-stigmatizing entry point into the family for prevention and intervention programming (Feinberg et al., 2013) and child welfare services. Evidence across normative and at-risk populations suggests that sibling relationships are malleable (Feinberg et al., 2013; Kennedy & Kramer, 2008; Linares et al., 2015). Investigations have documented the nature, characteristics, stability, and developmental course of sibling relationships (McHale, Kim, & Whiteman, 2006), and studies have examined moderating and mediating factors to better understand sibling relationships in the context of family processes (e.g., Kramer & Bank, 2005). These research studies have helped support the development and testing of sibling interventions.

### 1.2. Sibling-focused interventions

McBeath et al. (2014) reviewed the applicability and value of sibling-focused interventions for youth in foster care. They presented a prevention-oriented typology of sibling interventions, and found that improving sibling relationship quality, often measured by characteristics such as sibling warmth, sibling conflict, and/or positive sibling interaction, is often a primary aim of these models. Existing sibling interventions regularly take either an *individual* approach or a *dyadic* approach (see Author et al., unpublished manuscript, for additional details about existing sibling interventions). Dyadic sibling interventions target and provide information or treatment to both siblings (often teaching social and self-regulatory skills to older and younger siblings in an attempt to improve sibling relationship quality), whereas individual-focused sibling interventions focus on only one child within a sibling group.

While it is important for child welfare researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to understand how to promote healthy sibling relationships among foster youth, few sibling interventions have been tested under controlled conditions. The few dyadic sibling interventions that have been tested have demonstrated promising findings that include improved sibling relationship quality and reduced sibling conflict (Feinberg et al., 2013; Kennedy & Kramer, 2008; Kothari et al., under review). These interventions have been implemented almost exclusively in non-child welfare populations among both normative and at-risk groups and with children in early and middle childhood.

#### 1.2.1. Sibling intervention in child welfare.

Building from existing sibling-focused dyadic interventions, Linares et al. (2015) conducted a pilot randomized trial to test a dyadic sibling intervention, called Promoting Sibling Bonds (PSB), for 5–11 year-old siblings in foster care living together in the same placement. The PSB intervention also included a parent and joint family component. Siblings in the intervention group participated in an 8-week preventive intervention; post-intervention results indicated significant reductions in sibling conflict and sibling aggression compared to their peers in the control group. These findings comport with those from the aforementioned sibling intervention studies in suggesting that sibling interventions may hold promise for reducing conflict and improving overall sibling relationship quality among foster youth.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4936104>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4936104>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)