

What is known about the placement and outcomes of siblings in foster care?

An international literature review

Sarah Meakings, Judy Sebba and Nikki Luke



Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the comments received on an earlier draft from Paul Adams, Professor Robbie Gilligan, Dr Christine Jones, Dr Sara McLean, Vânia Pinto, Professor Ian Sinclair. We are also very grateful to the foster carers who offered their comments and support including Lynne Blencowe and Ellie Ott and to the care experienced people who provided feedback on being placed together or separated from their siblings. Thanks also to Andrea Diss and Sally Winiarski for proof reading and support on the publishing process.

Responsibility for the final text remains with the authors.

The Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education is supported by the Core Assets Group, an international children's services provider with a particular interest in fostering services in the UK and internationally, and other funders. The Centre's research agenda is developed in consultation with key stakeholders in the UK and internationally. These stakeholders include children and their foster carers, social workers, local authorities and managers across the public and independent sectors. The research undertaken and its publication is governed by the University ethics process, and conducted independently of any specific interest groups or funders.

Sarah Meakings, Judy Sebba and Nikki Luke

Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education
University of Oxford

February 2017

© 2017 Rees Centre. All rights reserved
ISBN: 978-0-9934738-8-3
eISBN: 978-0-9934738-9-0



Contents

• Executive summary **Page 4** • References **Page 15**

• Key Findings Page 4

• Recommendations for policy and practice Page 5

• Recommendations for further research Page 5

• Appendix **Page 16**

• Main Report **Page 6**

• Background to review Page 6

• Aims and scope Page 7

• Methodology Page 8

• Operational definitions Page 8

• Key Findings Page 9

• Limitations of the evidence base Page 12

• Conclusions Page 13

• Recommendations for policy and practice Page 13

• Recommendations for further research Page 14

Executive Summary

Key Findings

The Children and Young Persons Act (2008) places a duty on Local Authorities to accommodate siblings together in care, so far as is reasonably practicable and subject to welfare considerations. Existing reviews of the evidence support the co-placement of siblings in care, unless there is a justifiable, child-centred reason for separation. Five years ago, an Ofsted (2012) survey in England of more than 2000 looked after children found that nearly two thirds (63%) of the youngsters had at least one sibling also in care, yet 71% of these children were not in the same placement as all their brothers and/or sisters. More recently (Ofsted, 2015), the statistics for England show that not only has the percentage of those placed together increased, but the percentage assessed as needing to be placed separately has also increased.

This review of the international research examines what is known about the placement of siblings in foster care.

It synthesises the findings from studies that have examined factors associated with the decision to place children together with, or apart from siblings, and considers the evidence on a range of outcomes for joint or separate foster placements.

The over-arching review question is therefore:

What is known about the placement and outcomes of siblings in foster care?

The review focuses primarily on sibling groups in which at least two siblings are in non-kinship (stranger) foster care, although some studies do contain sub-samples of children in kinship foster or residential placements. Sibling groups in kinship care and those in residential care were excluded because their outcomes are known to differ from those in (stranger) foster care (e.g. Kiraly, 2015). In order to reduce the role these potential factors may have in any findings, this review focused on studies in which all or most of the population were in (stranger) foster care. Studies that examine specifically the placement of children in foster care, who have siblings that do not enter care, have been excluded.

Electronic databases and websites were used to identify 18 studies, 15 from the US, 2 from Australia and one from Canada. Comparisons across countries are subject to the limitations of different cultures and services. Studies identified for the review were published since 2000 and were written in English.

Most studies contained large samples. Five involved secondary data analysis of big administrative datasets mostly in excess of 10,000 young people, and four of these studies tracked young people over time. Other studies used questionnaire and interview material as the main source of evidence. The evidence base was more robust than has been the case in many of the previous reviews that we have undertaken.

A particular challenge in comparing the evidence from this review was around the way in which the term 'sibling' was defined. For example, the studies that utilised secondary data were constrained by pre-determined definitions set in the databases (usually a maternal blood tie). Other studies defined siblings as those that had the same mother and had lived in the same home environment. Some of the more recent reviews asked the young people themselves to consider who they considered to be their sibling(s). Not all studies identified how siblings were defined.

Despite the acknowledged policy and practice imperative to place siblings in foster care together, except in the few cases where contra-indicated, evidence on the outcomes for sibling placements remains relatively sparse. Taken together, the evidence from the studies in this review suggest that the outcomes for children placed with siblings in foster care are mostly better than for those placed apart from siblings. Some young people with very severe behavioural issues seem to benefit from being placed apart. The two intervention studies included in this review show promising early findings around the use of fostering programmes designed to support siblings in foster care.

Factors associated with the initial decision to place siblings together or apart

Overall, decisions to place children together with, or apart from siblings, were commonly linked to the timing of their entry into care relative to one another, age on entry into care, sibling group size and placement type.

- Siblings who enter care at the same time are more likely to be placed together and those that initially are placed together are more likely to remain together.
- Siblings who are younger, those closer in age and those of the same gender are more likely to be placed together.
- Larger sibling groups are less likely to be placed together than smaller groups, though more likely than smaller groups to be placed with at least one sibling.
- Sibling groups are more likely to be together in kinship care than in 'stranger' foster care.
- Behavioural difficulties and placement resources, including the availability and willingness of foster carers, are also important factors in placement decisions
- The reasons for placing siblings apart are not always known by children's case (social) workers.

Recommendations for policy and practice

Recommendations for further research

Outcomes for siblings placed together or apart

- In the main, sibling groups placed together experienced greater stability of placement, although not all the studies that considered stability demonstrated this.
- Older children separated from siblings, after having been in placement with them, were found to be at particular risk of placement disruption and a poor sense of belonging in the foster family.
- Siblings placed together were more likely to reunify with the birth family, particularly when they enter care at a similar time to one another. Reunification of those placed together was also quicker.
- Most of the evidence on emotional and behavioural outcomes for children showed either no relationship with joint or separate sibling placements, or an improvement in particular circumstances. For certain children in certain conditions, sibling placements together were associated with more favourable mental health outcomes. However, improved behavioural outcomes for children with high levels of behavioural difficulties on entry into care were seen in those young people separated from siblings in care.
- Only two of the 18 studies looked at educational outcomes and both reported a positive association between educational outcomes and being placed together.
- Taken together, the findings provided qualified support to the argument for promoting childhood mental health through the provision of sibling placements.

The findings from this review support the legislation that requires local authorities to place siblings in care together where possible, subject to welfare considerations of the children. Since in a significant minority of cases this is not happening in practice, further work is needed to address the barriers to fully implementing this requirement. In particular:

- Young people should be more involved in placement decisions. There is increasing evidence from interviews with young people that involving the young person in their placement decision leads to better outcomes (Ofsted, 2016) and this applies equally to sibling group placements.
- Fostering service managers need to recruit foster carers who are able and willing to foster sibling groups, such as those with greater housing capacity and those with more experience in caring for multiple children with a range of needs. It is important too that foster carers are committed to helping facilitate contact between siblings placed apart.
- Fostering providers need to identify incentives to foster carers to take sibling groups including considering financial benefits, training and adequate support.
- To help inform service planning, fostering providers need to consider the developing body of evidence around the impact of intervention programmes designed to support siblings in foster care. The intervention studies in this review show promising early findings, not just in relation to the greater frequency of sibling co-placements, but also with reference to the improved quality of the sibling relationship for children in foster care.

Five key messages for future research emerge from this review:

- The definition of sibling adopted in future research must be clearly defined and as far as possible, attempts should be made to standardise definitions internationally in order to enable comparisons to be drawn across studies. Studies that artificially curb the parameters of what is defined as a sibling relationship, will only be able to present a partial understanding of the sibling experience.
- While several studies in this review utilised longitudinal designs, further studies should be encouraged to do so since this enables patterns of placement which change between being placed apart or together to be taken into account and longer term outcomes to be assessed. Continuity of placements and permanence are important outcomes to consider in all such studies.
- Further studies are needed to strengthen the evidence base around the relationship between sibling placement status and well-being. The way in which well-being is defined and measured varies greatly, which contributes to the challenges in obtaining clear evidence.
- Given the proven relationship between education and subsequent employment, health, housing and crime, more studies are needed that consider the relationship with educational outcomes in the context of sibling placement status.
- There is an urgent need to develop and strengthen the evidence base regarding the effectiveness of intervention programmes aimed at supporting siblings in foster care.

Main Report

Background to review

The sibling relationship is one of the most enduring an individual may have over the course of their lifetime (Cicirelli, 1995). It tends to last longer than other key relationships, such as those with parents and partners and typically, children spend more time in interactions with siblings than with close others (Dunn, 2007). It has been estimated that up to 90% of the general population in the Western world have at least one brother or sister (Milevsky, 2011).

For better or worse, the significance of the sibling relationship in shaping children's development, adjustment and identity is well established (Dunn, 2002; Edward et al., 2006; Davies, 2015). The positive influences of sibling relationships on social, emotional and cognitive development have been demonstrated (see, for example, Azmitia and Hesser, 1993; Downey and Condran, 2004), as have the less desirable influences associated with enduring conflictual sibling interactions (Yu and Gamble, 2008; Gamble et al., 2011).

The importance of the sibling relationship over time has also been recognised (Rast and Rast, 2014). Even into old age, brothers and sisters can be a crucial source of mutual support and companionship (White, 2004). Although sibling relationships can be fraught and at times conflictual, brothers and sisters nevertheless tend to consider their ties to each other as ones that bind them together for life (Ross and Milgram, 1982). It has long been argued that children who grow up apart from siblings, and who lack contact or knowledge about them, may be deprived of support afforded by the sibling relationship in adult life (Kosonen, 1996; Herrick and Piccus, 2005).

The heightened significance of the sibling relationship in the context of children in care has been observed (Shlonsky et al., 2005) and identified as a source of protection and healing for children (McCormick, 2010). The presence of a sibling in out of home care, may help to provide a sense of emotional continuity and safety for children in an otherwise unfamiliar situation (Shlonsky et al., 2005). Although in the UK, the majority of children enter care with a known history of abuse and neglect (DfE, 2016; Welsh Government, 2016), knowledge about the significance

of the sibling relationship in the context of this maltreatment remains sparse (Katz and Hamama, 2016).

In the UK, the pioneering work by Rushton et al. (2001), paved the way for fresh thinking about the progress and associated complexities of placing siblings in care. The research team studied sibling relationships in a sample of 133 children in late permanent placements. They explored patterns of separation and reunion, and considered the outcomes for children when placed with and apart from siblings. The perceived success of placements were reliant on the quality of relationships within the families, including those between adults and children and between the children themselves. However, as the large majority of their sample (more than 80%) contained children in adoptive placements, their work falls outside the scope and purpose of this review.

The legislative context to the placement of siblings in foster care

The Children and Young Persons Act (2008) in England, places a duty on local authorities to accommodate siblings together in care, so far as is reasonably practicable and subject to welfare considerations. Other countries have similar policies. For example, most jurisdictions in Australia advocate sibling placements. The Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People (2012) in South Australia states that siblings should be placed together whenever possible, and where separated, their contact should be facilitated, though it remains unknown whether this actually happens. Wojciak (2016) notes that prior to the US federal policy introduced in 2008, there was no federal legislation covering sibling placement. This policy states that 'reasonable' efforts must be made for siblings to be placed in the same foster care unless contrary to their wellbeing and that for those not placed together, frequent contact should be arranged unless contrary to their wellbeing.

A recent survey in England of more than 2000 looked after children, found that nearly two thirds (63%) of the youngsters had at least one sibling also in care, yet 71% of these children were not in the same placement as all their brothers and/or sisters (Ofsted, 2012). The statistics for 2014-15 (Ofsted, 2015) show that most brothers and sisters were placed together, and most were placed in accordance with their assessment. In 2014-15, 12,250 children entered care who had brothers and sisters also entering care, of which 81% were assessed as needing to be placed together but 13% of these were placed separately. The 19% assessed as needing to be placed separately were so. Although these numbers may seem encouraging, they did not take account of the placement status of the many more siblings already in care during that time.

Existing reviews of the literature

In recent years, several published reviews have considered the evidence for the placement of siblings in foster care (see for example, Hegar, 2005; Washington, 2007; McCormick, 2010; Waid, 2014; Jones, 2016). However, given the variation in the scope and timing of each review, the studies that each has included have varied. Some reviews have combined foster care and adoption and most have included studies of kinship foster care. Drawing on the outcome data in her review of 17 studies, Hegar (2005) observed that children tend to fare at least as well, or better when placed in care with siblings. Two years later, Washington (2007) reviewed 11 studies. She reported strong evidence to support sibling group placements, unless there is compelling justification to place children apart. McCormick (2010) highlighted the failure of child welfare services in the USA to promote joint sibling placements, suggesting that the evidence supports the placement of siblings together in care whenever feasible.

Waid (2014) observed the particular benefits of sibling co-placement on stability and permanence, but noted that the evidence for sibling placement status on wellbeing was less clear-cut. More recently, Jones (2016) reviewed research on siblings in foster care and adoption. She concluded that the evidence supports the call for policy makers and practitioners to continue to develop and maintain sibling placements, when it is in the best interest of children. Finally, McBeath et al. (2014) considered the development of sibling relationships and sibling issues in child welfare and presented a typology of sibling related interventions for children in foster care. Taken as a collective body of evidence, the reviews support the co-placement of siblings in care, unless there is a justifiable, child-centred reason for separation.

Although the literature on the placement of siblings in care has been reviewed elsewhere both before and since the Children's and Young Person's Act (2008) became legislation, this review contributes to the knowledge base by collating contemporary evidence that focuses on the experiences and outcomes of siblings in foster-care. The recent review by Jones (2016), published after this review began, had a broader remit, in that it also included studies about sibling placements specifically in the context of adoption. Jones and Henderson at the University of Strathclyde are currently undertaking analysis of case files held by the Scottish Children's Reporters Administration in order to map the characteristics of sibling relationships of looked after children. The study seeks to influence the assessment and decision-making processes used by social work professionals and Children's Panel members regarding sibling placements and contact arrangements. As not yet completed, this study is not included in this review. Reviews that have considered the experiences and progress of siblings in both foster and adoptive placements (see also, for example Hegar, 2005; McCormick, 2010) have not always differentiated between the placements types when synthesising their findings.

Whilst an adoptive placement is always intended as a permanent arrangement, the same cannot be said for most foster care placements in England, where the preferred route to permanence is through reunification with the birth family (Boddy, 2013). It is not known if these differences affect social work decisions when placing siblings, whether sibling dynamics are influenced by the transient or permanent nature of placements, or indeed if and how the motivation and approach to supporting and strengthening sibling bonds differ between foster and adoptive families.

This review specifically sets out to provide clear evidence on what is known about the placement experiences and outcomes for siblings in foster care. It is essential to provide up-to-date evidence for those making decisions about the placement of siblings in care, so that the complexities and challenges facing fostering providers can be addressed from a strong evidence base.

This review of the international research examines what is known about the placement of siblings in foster care. More specifically, it draws together the knowledge on factors associated with joint or separate sibling foster care placements and considers the evidence on the outcomes for children, when placed together with, or apart from siblings.

The overarching review question is therefore: **What is known about the placement and outcomes of siblings in foster care?**

The review focuses primarily on siblings in non-kinship (stranger) foster care, although some studies do contain sub-samples of children in kinship foster or residential placements. Sibling groups in kinship care and those in residential care were excluded because their outcomes are known to differ from those in (stranger) foster care. For example, a recent synthesis of 16 studies of kinship care (Kiraly, 2015) noted that the kinship carers experience significantly poorer economic circumstances. Those in residential care have poorer educational outcomes (e.g. Sebba et al., 2015). In order to reduce the role these potential factors may have in any findings, this review focused on studies in which all or most of the population were in (stranger) foster care. Studies that specifically examine the placement of children in foster care, who have siblings that do not enter care, have also been excluded.



Methodology

The review synthesises findings from the international literature on siblings in foster care. A number of electronic databases were searched, including PsycInfo, SCOPUS, ASSIA, Social Policy and Practice, Social Services Abstracts and the Social Sciences Citation Index. Furthermore, the websites of key childhood research institutions including Coram/British Association for Adoption and Fostering, The Fostering Network, Social Care Institute for Excellence, Chapin Hall and Casey Family Programs were searched for relevant publications. The search terms comprised: ("foster care*" OR "foster parent*" OR "foster famil*" OR placement* OR "substitute famil*" OR "family foster home" OR "out-of-home care" OR "out of home care" OR "looked after" OR "looked-after" OR "alternative care") AND ("*sibling*" OR "*brother*" OR "*sister*" OR "twin*" OR "separation").

No restrictions were placed on particular methodological approaches. Titles and abstracts of the publications identified from the electronic searching were screened for relevance.

Status of the studies

The 18 research studies identified for inclusion in this review were selected from publications written in English since 2000. The studies originated from the following countries:

USA	15
Australia	2
Canada	1

Further details of the publications can be found in the Appendix.

Five studies, with varying sample sizes (range 602 - 106,563), drew on administrative databases to conduct secondary data analysis (Shlonsky et al., 2003; Webster et al., 2005; Wulczyn and Zimmerman, 2005; Albert and King, 2008; Akin, 2011). Secondary data analysis was also carried out by Hegar and Rosenthal (2011), who used the database from a national study of child and adolescent well-being in the US. Other studies used questionnaires, interviews and surveys, with respondents comprising the young people themselves (Linares et al., 2007; Barth et al., 2007; Richardson and Yates, 2014; McDowall, 2015; Wojciak, 2016), foster carers, (Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell, 2005; Leathers, 2005; Barth et al., 2007; James et al., 2008), birth parents (Linares et al., 2007) and caseworkers (Drapeau et al., 2000; Leathers, 2005; McDowall, 2015). Several studies made use of standardised measures, usually the Child Behavioural Checklist (Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell, 2005; Barth et al., 2007; Wojciak et al., 2013).

Most studies used either a longitudinal research design to track placement changes over time, or a cross-sectional design to capture a snapshot of the circumstances surrounding sibling placement status and related experiences. Two intervention studies were included in the review. Rast and Rast (2014) conducted a case controlled study of a specialist fostering programme that prepares siblings for permanence. Linares et al. (2015) carried out a pilot randomised trial to evaluate the outcomes of an intervention for siblings living together in foster care. The programme aimed to increase positive interaction, reduce conflict and promote conflict mediation strategies.

All but two of the studies presented at least some of their data quantitatively. In their qualitative study, James et al. (2008) considered the placement experiences of siblings in care, with material generated from in-depth interviews with care leavers. The paper by Wojciak (2016) contained a thematic analysis of what it meant for young people in foster care to have a brother or sister.

Operational definitions

A key methodical challenge associated with any study of siblings in foster care relates to the way in which siblings are defined and how sibling placements are characterised. A comparison of the studies under review was complicated by the varied and sometimes nuanced ways in which these variables were conceptualised. When comparing findings, it is important to remain mindful of the different operational definitions used in the studies.

Siblingship

The definition of a sibling in the reviewed literature varied considerably. The term was not always defined (Akin, 2001; Shlonsky et al., 2003; Barth et al., 2007; Wojciak, 2013; Rast and Rast, 2014; Wojciak, 2016), or was briefly outlined (Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell, 2005). For those studies that used administrative databases, sibling identification was reliant on the pre-determined categories set out in the records. Wulczyn and Zimmerman (2005) acknowledged the limitation to the identification of siblingship in their study, which used a database that linked siblings only through a maternal blood tie. Another study identified children to be siblings only when they shared a parent (or other caregiver) and had lived together (Leathers, 2005). The twofold criterion of sharing a mother and having the same home environment to identify siblingship, was used elsewhere (Drapeau et al., 2000; Linares et al., 2007; Linares et al., 2015). Albert and King (2008) identified siblings in their database by linking those children who shared the same address. In contrast, Hegar and Rosenthal (2011) used a database that included a record of who the children themselves considered siblings. Other more recent studies have embraced a similarly broad definition, by asking participants themselves to identify their siblings (Richardson and Yates, 2014). In these studies, full, half, step and adoptive siblings were identified by the young people. McDowall, (2015) asked the young people to identify their siblings, with the proviso that they originate from the birth family. In their small-scale qualitative study, James et al. (2008) noted variation in the way in which siblings were conceptualised by children's caregivers, including biological, step, half

Key Findings

and de-facto siblings (i.e. siblings acquired through placement in out of home care).

Sibling placements

The studies under review also revealed marked variation in the way in which sibling placements were conceptualised. Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005) identified two types of sibling placement: 1] living with one or more sibling/s and 2] all siblings residing elsewhere. Shlonsky et al. (2003) and Rast and Rast (2014) also used two groups: 1] placed with at least one sibling 2] placed with all siblings. However, by definition, these two categories are not mutually exclusive. Drapeau et al. (2000) set out two types of sibling placement, linking them with the living arrangements the children had prior to entering care. She identified an 'intact' placement as one that contained the same set of siblings who were living together immediately before their foster care placement. A 'split' placement was defined as one in which at least one child who had been living with sibling/s immediately before entering care, had been placed apart from them. Barth et al. (2007) also used two categories: 1] placed with sibling/s and 2] not placed with siblings (or placed alone). However, the 'placed alone' category combined children placed separately from their siblings with those children placed alone in care because they did not have siblings. For the purpose of informing this review, the findings that do not differentiate between children separated from siblings in care and children in care without siblings, must be considered in the context of this limitation.

Several studies used three categories to distinguish between a placement with all siblings and those with some siblings. The categories comprised: 1] living together with all siblings 2] living apart from all siblings and 3] living with at least one, but not all siblings (Webster et al., 2005; Albert and King, 2008; Wulczyn and Zimmerman, 2008; Akin, 2011; Hegar and Rosenthal, 2011; McDowall, 2015).

Given the high frequency of placement moves that many children in care experience (e.g. Sebba et al., 2015), there are clearly limitations in categorising children according to the placement they have at a particular point in time. Some researchers have attempted to adopt more sophisticated category systems in order to address this. For example, Leathers (2005) developed a strategy for coding placement patterns that reflected both the current and historical situation. She argued that the examination of the sibling placement status at a fixed point in time, would fail to capture the potential effects of placement types that children had previously encountered. Her sibling placement categories comprised: 1) placed alone (and has always been placed alone), 2) placed alone (with a history of sibling placement) 3) placed with sibling/s (with a history of inconsistency) 4) placed with sibling (and has always been placed with siblings). Linares (2007) also described the placement status of children in the context of change, with categories comprising: 1) siblings, always placed together, 2) siblings always placed apart and 3) siblings, initially placed together, now placed apart.

Factors associated with the initial decision to place siblings together or apart

Several studies in the review examined factors that seemed to have contributed to the placement status of siblings in foster care. A number of variables repeatedly were shown to be considered in the decision of whether to place children together with, or apart from siblings. Most often these related to the timing of entry into care, age on entry into care, sibling group size and placement type.

Timing of children's entry into care

A relationship has been established between sibling placement status and the timing of children's entry into care in relation to that of their brothers and/or sisters. The evidence suggests that children who enter care at the same time as their sibling/s (or within a month of each other) are more likely to be placed together, than those who enter care more than one month apart (Shlonsky et al., 2003; Wulczyn and Zimmerman, 2005; Webster et al., 2005; Albert and King, 2008). For example, Shlonsky et al., (2003) showed that siblings who enter foster care within 30 days of one another, are almost four times as likely to all be placed together, than those who enter care a month or more apart. They highlighted some logistical challenges associated with the co-placement of siblings when entry to care is sequential, citing the example of a child being placed in a foster home that is full by the time their sibling enters care. Wulczyn and Zimmerman (2005) showed that just 10% of siblings who entered care on the same day were completely separated from all their siblings. They further found that the initial sibling placement status strongly determined the longitudinal placement pattern, in that siblings placed together at the outset were more likely to remain together over time, whilst siblings separated on entry into care, were more likely to remain apart.



The age of the child

A child's age has been identified as influential in determining sibling placement status – with younger children (e.g. mean age of 9 in Drapeau et al., 2000) in the main, more likely to be placed with siblings (Drapeau et al., 2000; Shlonsky et al., 2003; Wulczyn and Zimmerman, 2005). However, Shlonsky et al. (2003) also found that whilst teenagers were the least likely to be placed with siblings in care, when a decision was made to split a sibling group, the very youngest in the group were also more likely to be placed separately. The association between age at entry into care and sibling placement status was not borne out in the study by Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005).

The age differential between children is also an important factor associated with the placement status of siblings, with those closer in age more likely to be placed together (Drapeau et al., 2000; Shlonsky et al., 2003; Albert and King, 2008), even when other factors are controlled (Wulczyn and Zimmerman, 2005). Sibling groups with an age span of more than four years from oldest to youngest child have been shown to be half as likely to be placed together, as those sets of siblings where the age span between oldest and youngest is less than four years (Shlonsky et al., 2003). The likelihood of siblings with an age difference of less than 6 years being placed together from the outset, stands at 85%. This drops to 69% for siblings separated in age by more than six years (Wulczyn and Zimmerman, 2005).

Size of the sibling group

The size of the sibling group affects placement status, with smaller group sizes generally associated with joint sibling placements (Drapeau et al., 2000; Shlonsky et al., 2003; Wulczyn and Zimmerman, 2005; Albert and King, 2008). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Shlonsky et al., (2003) showed that although smaller sibling group sizes were associated with the sibling group being placed completely intact, as the size of the sibling group got larger, the likelihood of the children all being placed together diminished. They also found that as the size of the sibling group increased, so too did the likelihood of being placed with at least one sibling, when other factors were controlled (Wulczyn and Zimmerman, 2005). In their study, Albert and King (2008) observed that 82% of sibling groups containing two children were placed together. In contrast, only 37% of sibling groups containing four children were placed together. Shlonsky et al. (2003) found that sibling group sizes of five or more, are almost never placed together, even if they enter care at the same time.

Placement type

A strong association exists between placement type and the living arrangements of siblings in care. Children in kinship care are more likely than those in stranger care to be residing with at least one sibling (Shlonsky et al., 2003; Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell, 2005; Wulczyn and Zimmerman, 2005) and more likely to be in placement with all their siblings (Shlonsky et al., 2003).

Other factors

Sibling pairs of the same gender have been shown to be more likely to be placed together than mixed gender pairs (Shlonsky et al., 2003). Leathers (2005) asked caseworkers to state the key reason why 82% of the 197 children in her study had been previously separated from a sibling in foster care. A third of respondents cited concerns about children's behaviour and a fifth (19%) were separated due to a lack of placement resources. For nearly one in five children (19%), the reason for their separation from siblings was unknown by caseworkers. In their qualitative study, James et al. (2008) suggested that the decision to place siblings together and/or the ability to sustain joint sibling placements seemed to be influenced by several factors, including the extent of conflict shown between the children and the willingness and ability of foster carers to accommodate sibling groups. A non-relative carer in the study described the demands and challenges she faced in keeping a sibling group together:

"What would you do with them? You can't do that [not keep them]. I couldn't; I couldn't live with that ... My husband [said], 'this is more work than we bargained for.' ... I said, 'Well, yep, but when have we ever backed down from a challenge ...' and how can you look at them and say, "Oh sorry, we don't want you either..." Yeah, I mean, it's really hard. ... I'm kind of trapped at least for my own person, conscience perspective. And, like I said, not trapped in a negative way! Just there is no alternative. There was no way to undo it at that point."

(James et al., 2008, p.98)

McDowall (2015) asked case workers to rate their success in ensuring that the children in their care were placed with siblings. To this end, only 17% thought they had been either 'quite' or 'very' successful, whilst 30% said they had achieved 'little' or 'no' success. The activity identified by case workers to help place siblings together in care included recruiting, assessing and encouraging suitable carers and advocating on behalf of the sibling group to decision makers and stakeholders. Case workers also highlighted the importance of providing adequate support to carers who took on a sibling group placement.

Overall, the studies suggest that decisions to place children together with, or apart from siblings, were commonly linked to the timing of their entry into care relative to one another, with those entering at the same time being more likely to be placed together. Younger siblings are more likely to be placed together, as are smaller sibling groups, in particular those spanning a more limited age range.

Outcomes for siblings placed together or apart

Despite the policy and practice imperative to place siblings together in foster care whenever it is in their best interest, the body of evidence on the outcomes for children when placed together with or apart from siblings, remains somewhat limited. One particular methodological challenge in designing such a study lies in the control of confounding variables. So, for example, it may be that children with less trauma and fewer behavioural problems are more likely to be placed with a brother or sister, and thus have better outcomes, regardless of sibling placement status. There is not a consistent approach amongst the studies in this review, in controlling for the effects of potential confounding factors.

Furthermore, the direction of the relationship between variables cannot be inferred or assumed from all the studies in this review. Whilst it may be shown, for example, that children in placement with siblings have fewer emotional and behavioural difficulties than those separated from their siblings, it is not known whether higher levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties led to a greater likelihood of being placed separately, or whether being placed separately led to a decline in emotional and behavioural wellbeing.

With these limitations acknowledged, the findings on the outcomes for children when placed together or apart from siblings are presented under four themes: 1] placement stability and cohesion within the foster family; 2] permanence (including reunification); 3] health and wellbeing; and 4] educational progress.

1. Placement stability and cohesion

The relationship between sibling placement status and placement stability was considered in several studies. As a whole, the evidence suggests that sibling co-placements are generally more stable and certainly no less stable than placements in which siblings have been separated.

Drapeau et al. (2000) showed that children separated from one or more sibling(s) at the point of entry into care, experienced greater instability than those who remained living with the same set of siblings after entry into care. They also observed that children in the intact sibling group were perceived as having more harmonious relationships with their brothers and sisters than children in the split sibling groups. Similarly, McDowall (2015) showed greater placement stability for children who lived with some or all of their siblings. Leathers (2005) found that placement with a consistent number of siblings, was associated with fewer placement disruptions than for children placed alone, with a history of joint sibling placements. The continuity of the placement appeared to help promote a sense of belonging and integration for children, through the experience of stable sibling relationships. Older children separated from siblings, after having been in placement with siblings, were found to be at particular risk of disruption and a poor sense of belonging in the foster family. Hegar and Rosenthal (2011) found that those children living with part of their sibling group, expressed more positive feelings of closeness to carers and foster family members than those living apart from all siblings.

Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005) showed that children separated from all their siblings experienced similar placement stability to those placed with at least one sibling. Whilst not significant, they observed a trend for greater placement instability specifically amongst girls separated from all siblings. Albert and King (2008) suggested a relationship between placement stability and sibling placement status. Their findings showed that whilst 61% of children living with all their siblings had experienced a single placement, the same was true for only 36% of children living in a partially intact sibling group, and for 45% of children completely separated from siblings.

Rast and Rast (2014) compared the outcomes for children in receipt of a foster care programme that prepares sibling groups for permanency, with children and their siblings in receipt of traditional foster care. Not only were children in the intervention group more likely to be placed with siblings, they also experienced greater placement stability than those who received traditional foster care. In the randomised control trial by Linares and colleagues

(2015), the intervention group of siblings and their foster carers received an 8-week training programme, aimed at reducing conflict and promoting parental mediation in the sibling relationship. Findings showed better cohesion amongst siblings in the intervention group than in the comparison group, with higher interaction quality and lower sibling conflict during play. Foster carers in the intervention group reported more conflict mediation strategies and lower sibling physical aggression from the older toward the younger child, than those in the comparison group.

2. Permanence (including reunification)

There is evidence to suggest that joint sibling placements in foster care are associated with a greater chance of birth family reunification (Webster et al., 2005; Albert and King, 2008), as well as an increased likelihood of quicker reunification, especially for children who have always been placed together in care (Albert and King, 2008). Reunification has also shown to be more likely for siblings placed together in foster care at the outset, and when their entry into care is close in date (Webster et al., 2005). Notably, Webster et al., (2005) found that the size of the sibling group did not predict reunification.

In their study of foster care exit routes to permanence, Akin (2011) established a relationship between sibling placements and the increased likelihood of achieving reunification, guardianship or adoption. However, this did not hold true for partially intact sibling group placements. Routes to permanence were statistically higher only when all children in the sibling group were placed together in foster care. In contrast, Leathers (2005) found that sibling placement status was not associated with re-unification. Findings also showed that children living alone in foster care, after having previously lived with a sibling in care were less likely to leave their foster placement through guardianship or adoption. Rast and Rast (2014) found that children in their intervention group (foster care service that prepares sibling groups for permanence), did achieve permanence more quickly than those in traditional foster care placements.

3. Health and wellbeing

The studies that examined the emotional and behavioural wellbeing and adjustment of children in the context of sibling placement status provided conflicting evidence. Taken together, the findings provide limited support to the argument for promoting childhood mental health through the provision of sibling placements. For certain children, in particular conditions, sibling placements were associated with more favourable mental health outcomes.

Linares (2007) found that placement group type (always together, always apart, initially together then separated) was not associated with reported child behaviour problems when followed up at 14 months. However, a more refined analysis showed that those children in disrupted placements (initially together then separated), with high initial behaviour problems were rated as having fewer problems at follow-up, while siblings in disrupted placements with low initial behaviour problems, were rated as having more problems at follow-up. Hegar and Rosenthal (2011) also showed no overall association between sibling placement type and behavioural problems, as reported by parents, young people and teachers. However, for the sub-sample of children in non-kinship foster care, teacher reports of externalising problems were significantly greater in the splintered group (placed with at least one, but not all siblings), than in the split group (placed with no sibling/s).

In examining the evidence for an association between sibling placement type and mental health status, Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005) found gender to be an important factor. No significant differences were shown in the mental health of boys placed with a least one sibling, when compared to boys separated from all of their siblings. However, girls separated from all of their siblings had significantly poorer mental health and poorer peer relationships than girls residing with at least one sibling.

Richardson and Yates (2014) carried out a five minute speech sample with 170 recent care leavers, in which the young people were asked to talk uninterrupted about what it was like for them in foster care, and how the experience affected or influenced them. An association was found between sibling co-placement and a better coherence of their life narrative, especially for males. These researchers link this 'meaning making' reflected in the narrative with personal growth and well-being.

Wojciak et al. (2013) showed that amongst children not living with their sibling(s), those with greater contact reported more positive sibling relations. Positive sibling relationships, as perceived by the young people, significantly mediated the effect of trauma on internalising symptoms.

More recently, Wojciak (2016) asked young people to describe, since being in foster care, what it meant for them to have a brother or sister. It was important for children to know that they were connected to someone and were not alone, that they had someone to depend on and someone to love them, 'no matter what'. Children were saddened by the experience of separation from their siblings, and living apart had an impact on the intensity of their relationship. Being placed apart from siblings, then reunited, could create particular challenges:

“Um, I think it is harder to be separated then come back together because even though we are together we still tend to push each other away harder than sibs that live with each other, because we don’t want to be hurt.”

(Wojciak, 2016, p.5)

4. Educational progress

As a group, the educational attainment of care experienced children is poor (Flynn, Tessier and Coulombe, 2013). The educational progress of looked after children has been thoroughly investigated in relation to certain placement characteristics, such as placement type and placement stability (Sebba et al., 2015). However, to date, very little is known about the influence that sibling placement status has on children’s educational progress. Just two studies in the reviewed literature made any reference to educational outcomes for children in the context of living together with, or apart from siblings in care. The limited findings suggest that sibling co-placements are associated with more favourable educational outcomes than for siblings living separately. Using teacher ratings, Hegar and Rosenthal (2011) found that children placed with all their siblings performed better than those who were separated from some or all of their sibling group. In their study, Richardson and Yates (2014) showed an association between the length of time spent in foster care with at least one sibling and better educational competence (including attainment, conduct and values). The educational progress of looked after children, in the context of sibling placement status is an under-researched area worthy of further investigation.

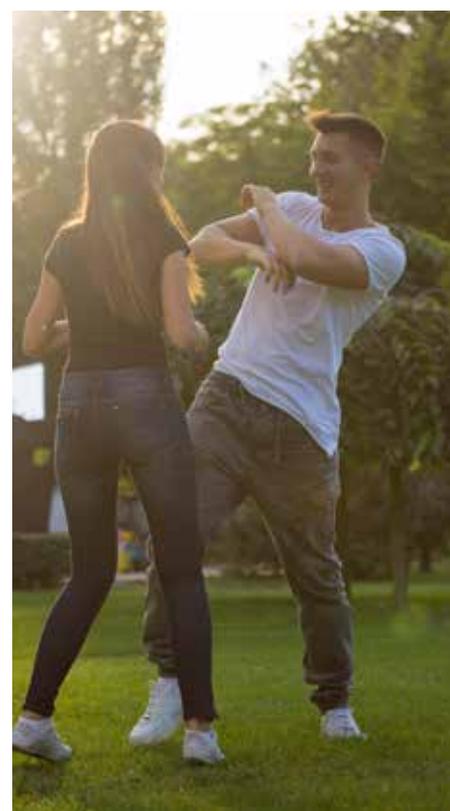
Limitations of the evidence base

In examining what is known about the placement of siblings in foster care, existing reviews of the literature have noted the methodological advances in the research undertaken (Washington, 2007; Jones, 2016). Whilst the findings from this review support this observation, they also highlight the complex design challenges inherent in studies that examine placement patterns and outcomes for siblings in foster care.

The identification of siblingship is a fundamental construct that should be addressed in any study about siblings. As well as existing through blood ties, siblingship can be formed legally through adoption, or by way of familial affinity. Siblings in this review were defined variously across the studies, sometimes they were not defined at all. Those studies that relied on pre-determined categories, set in administrative databases, were limited in their scope of determining what constituted a sibling. In the US, individuals are typically linked to state databases in such a way that only children who share the same mother can be identified as siblings (Hegar and Rosenthal, 2011). In effect, paternal half siblings and siblings who grow up together, but are not biologically related are not routinely afforded sibling status. In essence, a number of studies in this review considered only some of the children’s sibling networks. A rigidity and a lack of clarity in classifying the sibling relationship has implications for study replicability, as well as the use of findings to inform policy and practice.

In their commentary on the trends in the literature about siblings in foster care, Shlonsky et al. (2005) observed the importance of acknowledging who children themselves consider as brothers and sisters. They suggest that the failure to incorporate less traditional sibling bonds (such as those developed through affinity) may seriously compromise our understanding of siblings and their significance to children in care. Lery et al. (2005) noted that research on siblings can be bound by the lack of criteria used to define the nature of meaningful sibling relationships. This observation held true for most studies in this review.

The studies in this review that used a cross-sectional design, provided a snap shot of placement status and experiences at a point in time. However, for some children, their foster care history will have contained episodes of being both placed together and placed apart from siblings. The simple categorisation of a child’s placement status on a given day does allow for the consideration of previous placement arrangements. This is a particularly salient point given that Leathers (2005) showed placement continuity to be associated with more favourable outcomes. Furthermore, children with longer foster care episodes are more likely to feature in cross-sectional samples. This observation was also made by Shlonsky et al. (2003), who noted the longer than average episodes of foster care in cross-sectional studies, compared to studies that contain a cohort of children tracked from care entry to exit. Finally, most of the evidence comes from the USA. The different contextual systems in the countries should be acknowledged, which may limit the transferability of some of the findings.



Conclusions

Despite the acknowledged policy and practice imperative to place siblings together in foster care, evidence on the outcomes for sibling placements remains relatively sparse. Taken together, the evidence from the studies in this review suggests that the outcomes for children placed with siblings in foster care are mostly better than for those placed apart from siblings. Some young people with very severe behavioural issues seem to benefit from being placed separately from their sibling(s). The two intervention studies show promising early findings around the use of fostering programmes designed to support siblings in foster care.

Factors associated with the initial decision to place siblings together or apart

Overall, decisions to place children together with, or apart from siblings, were commonly linked to the timing of their entry into care relative to one another, age on entry into care, sibling group size and placement type.

- Siblings who enter care at the same time are more likely to be placed together and those that initially are placed together are more likely to remain together.
- Siblings who are younger, those closer in age and those of the same gender are more likely to be placed together.
- Larger sibling groups are less likely to be placed together than smaller groups, though more likely than smaller groups to be placed with at least one sibling.
- Sibling groups are more likely to be together in kinship care than in 'stranger' foster care.
- Behavioural difficulties and placement resources, including the availability and willingness of foster carers, are also important factors in placement decisions
- The reasons for placing siblings apart are not always known by children's case (social) workers.

Outcomes for siblings placed together or apart

- In the main, sibling groups placed together experienced greater stability of placement, although not all the studies that considered stability demonstrated this.
- Older children separated from siblings, after having been in placement with them, were found to be at particular risk of placement disruption and a poor sense of belonging in the foster family.
- Siblings placed together were more likely to reunify with the birth family, particularly when they enter care at a similar time to one another. Reunification of those placed together was also quicker.
- Most of the evidence on emotional and behavioural outcomes for children showed either no relationship with joint or separate sibling placements, or an improvement in particular circumstances. For certain children in certain conditions, sibling placements together were associated with more favourable mental health outcomes. However, improved behavioural outcomes for children with high levels of behavioural difficulties on entry into care were seen in those young people separated from siblings in care.
- Only two of the 18 studies looked at educational outcomes and both reported a positive association between educational outcomes and being placed together.
- Taken together, the findings provided qualified support to the argument for promoting childhood mental health through the provision of sibling placements.

Recommendations for policy and practice

It is important to acknowledge the variation in decision making processes across the four countries of the UK that may create different opportunities and barriers. The findings from this review support the legislation that requires local authorities to place siblings who enter care together where possible, subject to welfare considerations of the children. Since in a significant minority of cases this is not happening in practice, further work is needed to address the barriers to fully implementing this requirement. In particular:

- Young people should be more involved in placement decisions. There is increasing evidence from interviews with young people that involving the young person in their placement decision leads to better outcomes (Ofsted, 2016) and this applies equally to sibling group placements.
- Fostering service managers need to recruit foster carers who are able and willing to foster sibling groups, such as those with greater housing capacity, and those with more experience in caring for multiple children with a range of needs. It is important too that foster carers are committed to helping facilitate contact between siblings placed apart.
- Fostering providers need to identify incentives to foster carers to take sibling groups including considering financial benefits, training and adequate support.
- To help inform service planning, foster providers need to consider the developing body of evidence around the impact of intervention programmes designed to support siblings in foster care. The intervention studies in this review show promising early findings, not just in relation to the greater frequency of sibling co-placements, but also with reference to the improved quality of the sibling relationship for children in foster care.

Recommendations for further research

Five key messages for future research emerge from this review:

- The definition of sibling adopted in future research must be clearly defined and as far as possible, attempts should be made to standardise definitions internationally in order to enable comparisons to be drawn across studies. Studies that artificially curb the parameters of what is defined as a sibling relationship, will only be able to present a partial understanding of the sibling experience.
- While several studies in this review utilised longitudinal designs, further studies should be encouraged to do so since this enables patterns of placement which change between being placed apart or together to be taken into account and longer term outcomes to be assessed. Continuity of placements and permanence are important outcomes to consider in all such studies.
- Further studies are needed to strengthen the evidence base around the relationship between sibling placement status and well-being. The way in which well-being is defined and measured varies greatly, which contributes to the challenges in obtaining clear evidence.
- Given the proven relationship between education and subsequent employment, health, housing and crime, more studies are needed that examine the relationship between educational outcomes in the context of sibling placement status.
- There is an urgent need to develop and strengthen the evidence base regarding the effectiveness of intervention programmes aimed at supporting siblings in foster care.

The importance of the sibling relationship was reiterated in every study. As a caseworker in the research by McDowell (2015, p.54) observed:

“Siblings are the longest relationship most [children and young people] will have and we have a duty to assist in maintaining and sustaining those relationships. Siblings may be the most crucial support to each other post eighteen.”

(McDowell, 2015, p.54)

It is hoped that this review makes a contribution to developing our understanding of the experiences for siblings in foster care, to help inform placement decisions that ensure the best possible outcomes for our ‘looked after’ children.



References

- Akin, B. (2011) Predictors of foster care exits to permanency: A competing risk analysis of reunification, guardianship and adoption. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 999-1011.
- Albert, V. and King, W. (2008) Survival analysis of the dynamics of sibling experiences in foster care. *Families in Society*, 89(4), 533-541.
- Azmitia, M. and Hesser, J. (1993) Why siblings are important agents of cognitive development: A comparison of siblings and peers. *Child Development*, 64, 430-444.
- Barth, R., Lloyd, C., Green, R., James S., Leslie, L. and Landsverk, J. (2007) Predictors of placement moves among children with and without emotional and behavioral disorders. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 15(1), 46-55.
- Boddy, J. (2013) *Understanding Permanence for Looked After Children: A review of research for the Care Inquiry*. London: The Care Inquiry.
- Cicirelli, V. (1995) *Sibling relationships across the life-span*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Davies, K. (2015) Siblings, Stories and the Self: The Sociological Significance of Young People's Sibling Relationships. *Sociology*, 49(4), 679-695.
- Department for Education (2016) *Children looked after in England (including adoption): 2015-2016*. SFR41/2016. London: DfE.
- Downey, D. and Condron, D. (2004) Playing well together in kindergarten: The benefits of siblings at home. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66(2), 333-350.
- Drapeau, S., Simard, M., Beaudry, M. and Charbonneau, C. (2004) Siblings in family transitions. *Family Relations*, 49, 77-85.
- Dunn, J. (2002). Sibling relationships. In Smith, P. and Hart, C. (Eds.) *Blackwell handbook of childhood social development*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Dunn, J. (2007) Siblings and socialization. In Grusec, J. and Hastings, P. (eds) *Handbook of socialization*, New York: Guilford Press.
- Edwards, R., Hadfield, L., Lucey, H. and Mauthner, M. (2006) *Sibling Identity and Relationships: Sisters and Brothers*. London: Routledge.
- Flynn, R., Tessier, N. and Coulombe, D. (2013) Placement, protective and risk factors in the educational success of young people in care: cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses. *European Journal of Social Work*, 16(1), 70-87.
- Gamble, W., Yu, J. and Kuehn, E. (2011) Adolescent sibling relationship quality and adjustment: sibling trustworthiness and modeling as factors directly and indirectly influencing these associations. *Review of Social Development*, 20(3), 605-623.
- Hegar, R. (2005) Sibling placement in foster care and adoption: An overview of international research. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27, 717-739.
- Hegar, R. and Rosenthal, J. (2011) Foster children placed with or separated from siblings: Outcomes based on a national sample. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 1245-1253.
- Herrick, M. and Piccus, W. (2005) Sibling connections: The importance of nurturing sibling bonds in the foster care system. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27, 845-961.
- James, S., Monn, A., Palinkas, L. and Leslie, L. (2008) Maintaining sibling relationships for children in foster and adoptive placements. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 90-106.
- Jones, C. (2016) Sibling relationships in adoptive and fostering families: A review of the international research literature. *Children and Society*, 30, 324-334.
- Katz, C. and Hamama, L. (2016) The Sibling Relationship in the Context of Child Maltreatment: What Do We Know? What Are the Directions for the Future? Trauma, Violence and Abuse, doi:10.1177/1524838016659878.
- Kiraly, M. (2015) *A review of kinship carer surveys*. Melbourne: Australian Institute Family Studies.
- Kosonen, M. (1996) Maintaining sibling relationships - neglected dimension in child care practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 26, 809-822.
- Leathers, S. (2005) Separation from siblings: associations with placement adaptation and outcomes among adolescents in long-term foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27, 793-819.
- Lery, B., Shaw, T. and Magruder, J. (2005) Using administrative child welfare data to identify sibling groups. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27, 783-791.
- Linares, L., Li, M., Shrout, P., Brody, G. and Pettit, G. (2007) Placement shift, sibling relationship quality, and child outcomes in maltreated children placed in foster care: a controlled study. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 21, 736-743.
- Linares, L., Jimenez, J., Nesci, C., Pearson, E., Beller, S., Edwards, N. and Levin-Rector, A. (2015) Reducing sibling conflict in maltreated children placed in foster homes. *Prevention Science*, 39, 1-10.
- McBeath, B., Kothari, B., Blakeslee, J., Lamson-Siu, E., Linares, L., Sorenson, P., Jimenez, J., Pearson, E. and Shlonsky, A. (2014) Intervening to Improve Outcomes for Siblings in Foster Care: Conceptual, Substantive, and Methodological Dimensions of a Prevention Science Framework. *Child Youth Services Review*, 1(39), 1-10.
- McCormick, A. (2010) Siblings in foster care: An overview of research, policy and practice. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 4, 198-218.
- McDowall, J. (2015) *Sibling placement and contact in out-of-home care*. Sydney: CREATE Foundation.
- Milevsky, A. (2011) *Sibling relationships in childhood and adolescence*. New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press.
- Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People. (2012). *2011-12 annual report. Adelaide: Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People*. Available at: <http://www.gcyp.sa.gov.au/2012/11/annual-report-2011-12/>
- Ofsted (2012) *Children's Care Monitor 2011: Children on the State of Social Care in England*. Manchester: Ofsted.
- Ofsted (2015) *National Statistics, Fostering in England 2014-2015*. Manchester: Ofsted.
- Ofsted (2016) *Social care questionnaires 2016: what children and young people told Ofsted*. London: Ofsted. Available at: <http://www.slideshare.net/Ofstednews/scq2016whatcypoldus-69486300>
- Rast, J. and Rast, J.E. (2014) Neighbor to family: supporting sibling groups in foster care. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 95, 83-91.
- Richardson, S. and Yates, T. (2014) Siblings in foster care: A relational path to resilience for emancipated foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 47, 378-388.
- Ross, H. and Milgram, J. (1982) Important variables in adult sibling relationships: A qualitative study. In Lamb, M.E and Sutton-Smith, B. (1982) *Sibling relationships: Their nature and significance across the life-span*, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.
- Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., Thomas, S., Sinclair, I. and O'Higgins, A. (2015) *The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data*. Oxford/Bristol: Rees Centre/University of Bristol.
- Shlonsky, A., Webster, D. and Needell, B. (2003). The ties that bind: A cross-sectional analysis of siblings in foster care. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 29(3), 2752.
- Shlonsky, A., Bellamy, J., Elkins, J. and Ashare, C. (2005) The other kin: Setting the course for research, policy and practice with siblings in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27, 697-716.
- Tarren-Sweeney, M. and Hazel, P. (2005) The mental health and socialization of siblings in care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27(7), 821-843.
- Waid, J. (2014) Sibling Foster Care, Placement Stability, and Well-Being: A Theoretical and Conceptual Framework. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 17(3), 283-297.
- Washington, K. (2007) Research Review: Sibling placement in foster care: a review of the evidence. *Child and Family Social Work*, 12, 426-433.
- Webster, D., Shlonsky, A., Shaw, T. and Brookhart, M. (2005) The ties that bind II: reunification for siblings in out-of-home care using a statistical technique for examining non-independent observations. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27, 765-782.
- Welsh Government (2016) *Adoptions, outcomes and placements for children looked after by local authorities in Wales, 2015-16 - Revised*. Statistical First release SDR 132/2016R. Statistics for Wales.
- White, L. (2004) Sibling relationships over the life course: A panel analysis. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63(2), 555-568.
- Wojciak, A., McWey, L. and Helfrich, C. (2013) Sibling relationships and internalizing symptoms of youth in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35, 1071-1077.
- Wojciak, A. (2016) 'It's complicated': Exploring the meaning of sibling relationships of youth in foster care. *Child and Family Social Work*, doi:10.1111/cfs.12345.
- Wulczyn, F. and Zimmerman, E. (2005) Sibling placements in longitudinal perspective. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27, 741-763.
- Yu, J. and Gamble, W. (2008) Familial correlates of overt and relational aggression between young adolescent siblings. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 37, 655-673.

Appendix

Table of included studies

Study	Participants	Data source	Results
Akin (2011), USA	3351 children, tracked for 30-42 months	Administrative database	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children in completely intact sibling placements and children without siblings in placement at all more likely to reunify than those in completely separated placement. • Children in completely intact sibling placements more likely to exit care to guardianship than other placement types. • Children in completely intact sibling placements more likely to exit care via adoption than those in completely separated sibling placements.
Albert and King (2008), USA	602 children in foster care, with at least one sibling in care during study period. Tracked for 19 months	Administrative database	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size of sibling group, age differential between children, and timing of entry into care associated with placement status. • Siblings placed completely or partially together reunify at a faster rate than those placed completely apart. • Reunification substantially higher for siblings entering care in the same month than for those entering care more than one month apart. • Relationship suggested between placement stability and completely intact sibling placements.
Barth, Lloyd, Green, James, Leslie and Landsverk (2007), USA	725 children in care, with and without emotional and behavioural difficulties	Interviews with children and families. CBCL completed by substitute carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children living with siblings less likely have emotional and behavioural difficulties than those not living with siblings (or only children). • For children with emotional and behavioural difficulties (n=362) more placement moves were predicted for those not residing with siblings.
Drapeau, Simard, Beaudry and Charbonneau (2000), Canada	294 sibling groups (including 150 groups who entered foster care)	Questionnaire completed by children's case workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children split from siblings in foster care are more often older, have a greater age gap with siblings, and are of a larger sibling group size, than children living with siblings. • Children split from siblings experience more placement instability (more previous placements) than those in intact sibling groups. • Children living in sibling group perceived as having more harmonious relationships with their brothers and sisters than children in split sibling groups. • Children living in sibling group experience less change in sibling relationship than children split from siblings.
Hegar and Rosenthal (2011), USA	1114 children in foster care, with sibling/s also in care	Administrative database, which included child, foster carer and teacher reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster carer, child and teacher reports showed no overall difference in behavioural problems, by sibling placement status. • In non-kinship care, teachers reported more problematic externalizing behaviour for the partially intact (splintered) group, than for the completely separated (split) group. • As rated by teachers, academic performance in the completely intact sibling group exceeded that in both partially intact sibling group and split siblings group. • Children in the splintered sibling group responded more favourably than those in the split group to questions of closeness to the primary caregiver and liking the people in the foster family.

Study	Participants	Data source	Results
James, Monn, Palinkas and Leslie (2008), USA	14 fostered or adopted children	Semi structured interview with care givers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contact between children varied greatly in frequency and quality. Placement histories (a. never lived together, b. once lived together, now separated c. currently placed with siblings) were important determinant of contact maintenance.
Leathers (2005), USA	197 adolescents in long term foster care, with at least one sibling also in care. Tracked for five years.	Interviews with case workers and foster carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adolescents 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. The association was mediated by a weaker sense of integration and belonging in the foster home for those placed alone with a history of sibling placements. Those placed alone (either throughout their stay or with a history of sibling co-placement) were less likely to exit to adoption or guardianship than those with consistent joint sibling placements. Sibling placements not related to whether or not children returned home (reunification).
Linares, Li, Shrout (2007), USA	156 children in foster care, with a sibling who entered care at the same time. Followed up at 14 months.	Interviews with biological parents and children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Placement group type (always together, always apart, initially together now apart) did not affect child behaviour problems at follow-up. Compared to siblings in continuous placement (either together or apart), siblings in disrupted placement with high initial behaviour problems were rated as having fewer problems at follow-up, while siblings in disrupted placement with low initial behaviour problems were rated as having more problems at follow-up.
Linares, Jimenez, Nesci, Pearson, Beller, Edwards, Levin-Rector (2015), USA	22 sibling pairs, living together in foster care, randomised into intervention group (promoting sibling bonds programme) and comparison group	Observed sibling interaction quality and foster carer reports of mediation strategies and sibling aggression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intervention pairs showed higher positive and negative interaction quality and lower sibling conflict during play than comparison pairs. Foster carers in the intervention group reported more conflict mediation strategies than those in the comparison group. Foster carers in intervention group reported lower sibling physical aggression from the older toward the younger child than those in the comparison group.
McDowall, (2015), Australia	1160 children in out of home care, plus 116 case workers involved directly in dealing with 1022 children in out of home care.	Surveys completed by young people and case workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 29% of children reported living with all their brothers and sisters; 35% resided with some of their siblings and 36% did not live with any siblings. 78% of 8-9 year olds lived with at least one sibling in care, 47% of 15-17 year olds were split from all siblings in care. Greater placement stability evident for children who remained together with siblings. Case workers reported fewer children to be split or partially split from siblings in care. 17% of case workers believed they had been quite or very successful in ensuring that children in their care were placed with siblings, whilst 30% reported having achieved little or no success.

Appendix

Table of included studies cont....

Study	Participants	Data source	Results
Rast and Rast (2014), USA	834 children in foster care with siblings also in care. Half the sample (n=417) received a foster care programme that prepares siblings for permanency. Matched group of children (n=417) in receipt of traditional foster care services.	Children's services records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significant improvement in stability of placement, time to permanent placement, and cost of care for children receiving NTF services compared to children in receipt of traditional foster care services.
Richardson and Yates (2014), USA	170 recent care leavers.	Three-hour semi – structured interview (including computer survey)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Placement with sibling/s related to more coherent narrative of foster care influences and experiences, particularly for males. Direct relationship between the proportion of time spent with a sibling in foster placement and educational outcomes. No relationship between the proportion of time spent with a sibling in foster placement and occupational competence, housing quality, relational adjustment or civic engagement.
Shlonsky, Webster and Needell (2003), USA	11,718 children in foster care, with at least one sibling also in foster care.	Administrative database	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Siblings more likely to be placed all together when group size is smaller, does not contain teenagers, has an age span between oldest and youngest of less than 4 years, reside in kinship foster care, and when all enter care within 30 days of one another. Siblings more likely to be placed with at least one sibling when group size is larger, does not contain teenagers, has an age span between oldest and youngest of less than 4 years, reside in kinship foster care, and when all enter care within 30 days of one another. When children are separated, the very youngest are more often split from the sibling group. Sibling pairs of the same gender have 1.5 odds of being placed with sibling, then siblings of different gender.
Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005), Australia	347 children aged 4-11 living in foster (86%) or kinship (14%) care.	Base line survey, CBCL and ACC completed by carers. Case file records.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children separated from all their siblings experienced similar placement stability to those placed with at least one sibling. Girls separated from all their siblings had poorer mental health and socialisation than girls residing with at least one sibling. Age on entry into care was not associated with sibling placement status.
Webster, Shlonsky, Shaw and Brookhart (2005), USA	15,517 children with at least one sibling also in care. Tracked for one year	Administrative database	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Siblings initially placed together (completely or partially intact) more likely to reunify. Children who enter care within one month of sibling/s more likely to reunify. Size of sibling group does not affect likelihood of reunification.

Appendix

Study	Participants	Data source	Results
Wojciak, McWey and Helfrich (2013), USA	152 adolescents in foster care	Selected data from national survey. Trauma measure and sibling relationship data provided by children. CBCL completed by carers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Majority of sample (74%) currently separated from their sibling/s. Of those not living with a sibling, nearly three quarters saw their sibling monthly or less frequently, one third reported never having contact with their sibling. Three quarters children separated from siblings wanted more sibling contact. Positive sibling relationships as reported by the young people significantly mediated the effects of trauma on internalising symptoms.
Wojciak (2016), USA	173 children in foster care, staying for one week at a camp set up to enhance the sibling relationships of fostered youth	Survey completed by the young people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The importance of a brother or sister for young people in foster care centred around five themes. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Bond: knowing they are connected to someone and not alone. Dependable: Someone to depend on in the absence of feeling able to depend on others. Fulfilment: Someone to love them no matter what. Despair: Sadness experienced as a result of being separated. Separation: Impact on relationship with siblings.
Wulczyn and Zimmerman (2005), USA	106,563 children entering care with sibling/s also in care. Tracked for four years	Administrative database	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although siblings often enter care on the same day, they make up less than half the groups entering care. Children who follow their siblings into care are much less likely to be placed with a sibling compared to siblings entering foster care on the same day. Small sibling groups and entry into relative care, are more likely to be placed intact. More sibling groups intact at 6 months as a percentage of children still in care than at the time of placement. Separated siblings who remain in care are sometimes brought together over time, sibling group size and placement type affect the likelihood that siblings are brought together.

REES CENTRE
Research in Fostering and Education
University of Oxford Department of Education



<http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk>

The Rees Centre is supported by Core Assets, a global independent provider of children's services, and by other funders