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JOINT SIBLING PLACEMENT AT SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY
DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Cynthia Gonzalez
Diane Lynette Meza

June 2003


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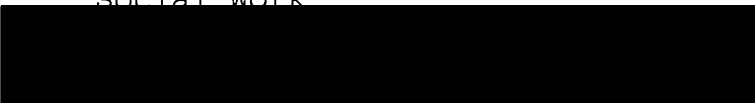
June 2003

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Services



Dr. Rosemary McCaslin,
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ABSTRACT

This study sought to discover the rate of joint sibling placement for children in long-term foster care under the supervision of San Bernardino County Department of Children's Services. Qualitative data on the reasons for separate sibling placement was included through a review of secondary data. The rate of joint sibling placement at 75 percent was found to be larger than the authors originally expected. Eight different reasons for separate placement were found. A child being placed separate from their sibling(s) because of special needs was the most common reason accounting for 40 percent of the separate placements in the 30 cases reviewed. This study contributes to the literature with a rate for joint sibling placement and compilation of reasons why siblings are placed separately.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors acknowledge The San Bernardino County Department of Children's Services for their contribution of secondary data to this study.

DEDICATION

Dedico este éxito a mis padres por todo lo que me han dado y por sus esfuerzos que me han hecho la persona que soy hoy. Soy muy rica por que tengo en mis papas un tesoro verdadero.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Within the foster care system, there exist a vast number of issues regarding the placement of foster children. One specific issue is that of sibling placement. Studies show that 87-98% of children in foster care have siblings, and 73-93% of foster children with siblings also have siblings in foster care (Staff & Fein, 1993). The fact that these children are in foster care means that they have been separated from their parents, and it may also mean that they have been separated from their siblings. Literature on joint placement stresses the idea that siblings provide a form of support for each other and can minimize feelings of abandonment and loss. Although some feel that when one sibling has assumed a caretaker role, or if the relationship includes overt hostility, it is in the best interests of the children's emotional development to be placed separately (Staff & Fein, 1992).

Hegar (1988) rejects this notion, stating that there is no support for choosing to separate sibling for these reasons, which may just be part of the sibling relationship much like normal sibling rivalry. In cases

where the sibling relationship includes a caretaker role or overt hostility, it is up to the individual caseworker to determine if joint placement is in the best interest of each child involved.

California Welfare and Institutions Code # 16002 provides a guideline for the joint placement of siblings to occur. The policy mandates that when siblings cannot be placed together, the social worker will explain why the siblings are not placed together. The policy applies to all Department of Children Services (DCS) agencies across the state of California. Social workers working directly under DCS must abide by this policy when deciding whether or not a sibling group needs to be separated.

Many factors affect the decision-making process of placing sibling groups. For example, children who are more similar than different may be easier to place together, as well as smaller sets of siblings. When siblings do not show attachment to one another, or when there is a large sibling set, it may be harder or detrimental to the children to place the siblings together (Staff & Fein, 1992). Although the intention of the earlier mentioned state code is to keep siblings housed together, the above statement clearly implies that this is not always the outcome. Therefore, it is important for current and future

social work practice to study sibling placement in foster care and the importance of sibling relationships.

Various types of relationships exist within the family, and the sibling relationship is one of the most important. The sibling relationship is not limited to individuals within foster care, but applies to all sibling groups. There is currently a gap in sibling attachment theories. Although different theoretical models have attempted to explain the bond which siblings share, no specific theory pertains to sibling relationships. For example, family system theorists focus on the makeup of the family while avoiding discussion of individual feeling, meaning that the forming and developing of a sibling relationship is overlooked (Bank & Kahn, 1982). From a sociological perspective, different areas of the sibling relationship have been studied, yet the information gathered pertains to general aspects in gender differences (Bank & Kahn, 1982).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore various reasons for separate sibling placement in foster care within San Bernardino Department of Children Services (SBDCS). It is the responsibility of each social worker to

document in the client case files the reasons for sibling separation. According to California Welfare and Institutions Code #16002 (2001), when a child is under the protection of the foster care system, he or she should be placed with their siblings, unless it has been determined that joint placement is not in the best interest of the child or the siblings. Therefore, caseworkers placing siblings in foster care are permitted to separate the siblings if they are able to justify their decision for separation. This study attempted to clarify the reasons for the separation of siblings within the foster care system.

SBDCS is a government agency that is responsible for the safety and security of children. Children are placed under the care of SBDCS when primary caretakers are not providing a safe and secure upbringing. The agency is responsible for placing foster children under the protection of licensed foster parents, or relative caretakers who are able to provide a safe environment for children. While children are under the protection of SBDCS, various types of services are offered.

The separation of siblings may be due to a lack of resources within the foster care system. For example, separation of siblings may relate to a sibling group

entering the protection of foster care at a later period than remaining siblings, in which it is difficult to place siblings in the same housing unit. If a social worker is not able to place a sibling group together, they are responsible for providing a justification for the separation of that group. This study recorded the reasons given for separate placement of siblings.

This study involved data extraction from existing records on SBDCS clients in long-term foster care. The sample included biological and half siblings that are placed with or without at least one of their siblings. Client case records provided documentation regarding the separation of foster siblings, since it is the responsibility of the social worker to record in the file the reasons as to why sibling(s) are either together or separate.

The research methods used in the project involved a collection of secondary data. Secondary data was obtained from case files, any included information that validated separate sibling placement was recorded.

Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

It is crucial to understand what factors affect placing siblings together or separate, and in what

circumstances siblings should be separated. Hence, this study has broadened existing knowledge of the importance of sibling relationship, and has created an awareness of the need for future research to be conducted on sibling relationship in foster care. In exploring various aspects of foster sibling placement, the social work profession will gain knowledge to better understand a wider usage of sibling visitation for foster children. Therefore, not only has the agency benefited, but also so have the children and their foster parents. Hegar cites a court case for maintaining sibling contact where the opinion notes stated, "in the final analyses when these children become adults, they will only have each other to depend on" (1988, p. 117). In addition to the benefits of mutual protection and the maintenance of family relationships, developmental psychologists have found that sibling relationships have a positive impact upon emotional, cognitive, and physical childhood and adult development.

Studying joint sibling placement may be of interest to caseworkers within SBDCS. Caseworkers may want to know if the clients served by their agency are being placed with their siblings whenever it is appropriate.

The research question used to guide this study was as follows: At what rate are foster siblings in SBDCS placed

together, and when they are not placed together, what are the reasons for the separate placement? The results of this study will possibly influence future research on sibling placement in foster care. Studies conducted on the importance of sibling relationship will create awareness in child welfare practice by stressing the impact of maintaining sibling access, which in turn will strengthen the sibling bond.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature review for this project contains articles about sibling relationships and foster placement as well as empirical research done on sibling relationships, foster placement, and joint sibling placement. This chapter represents a literature review on the topics of sibling relationships, foster care placement, and joint sibling placement.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Theories on Sibling Relationships

Bank and Kahn (1982) review family theories and explain the significance of the sibling relationship. They indicate that family systems theory, birth order research, and sociologists, have all failed to look at the sibling relationship as a separate entity. Bank and Kahn (1982) define a "bond" as a tie that unites, an obligation or an agreement, a connection or a system of connection. This bond or connection means that the siblings are influenced by each other, regardless of the quality of their relationship.

Few studies have been done to measure the level of influence that siblings can have. Bank and Kahn reference object-relation theory to explain how siblings can use each other as transitional objects when a parent is unavailable or unable to meet the child's needs. Bank and Kahn classify sibling identification into three separate patterns: close identification, partial identification, and distant identification. Closely-identified siblings feel the greatest level of similarity towards each other, while partially-identified siblings feel that they are similar, but with some level of differences as well. Distantly-identified siblings feel that they are much more different than they are similar to their siblings. Bank and Kahn (1982) explain sibling rivalry and physical fighting as a form of connection that can emotionally feed a child, when the parent is not providing the child with enough attention. So, even in conflict the children are using their sibling to replace their parent. This book explains how siblings influence each other, and incorporate their role as a sibling into their identity.

Regardless of the absence of a theory on sibling attachment, many benefits to sibling relationships have been found. In the Encyclopedia of Psychology, Cheek (2000) wrote a section that compiles what psychologists

have identified as the impact of sibling relationships on all aspects of development. The sibling relationship is the longest lasting relationship in most people's lives, and has been shown to have an impact on social, emotional, and physical development. In research on siblings, it has been observed that 2 and 3-year-old children were able to demonstrate socio-cognitive abilities with their younger siblings at a much earlier age than children without siblings. This is evidence that children with siblings use that relationship to learn how to successfully interact with their peers, much earlier than children without siblings. For younger siblings, it has been found that they reach the milestones of physical development earlier than children without an older sibling. A child in foster care who has been separated from their siblings will miss out on these social and physical advantages. Research indicates that siblings spend more time together than they do with their parents (Cheek, 2000). Time together allows for interactions in building a relationship, and sibling attachment to one another may be stronger than the bond they have to their parents. If this is the case, separation from a sibling is a greater loss for some foster children than separation from a parent. In adolescence and adulthood, close sibling relationships

have been positively correlated to physical and mental health. All of the research findings compiled by Cheek (2000) lend evidence to the benefits of close sibling relationships.

Theories on Siblings in Foster Care Placement

In an article identifying how sibling relationship and foster care placements, Timberlake and Hamlin (1982) consider the loss experienced by a child who is separated from a sibling. The sibling relationship is of a reciprocal nature, allowing for interactions that help one develop an understanding of self and others. A child who is separated from their sibling often feels that they have lost a part of themselves, and experience the same grief process over the loss of their sibling as they do with the loss of their parents. Timberlake and Hamlin felt that a sibling group could help each other cope with the separation from their parents and lessen the negative behaviors caused by that grief process. When siblings have to be separated, involvement of siblings in placement decisions is suggested to help the siblings deal with the anxiety and fear they are experiencing over being separated from their sibling.

In an article on the way that sibling relationships can affect child welfare practice, Begun (1998) discusses

how siblings can use each other to adjust to a foster home, and suggests how child welfare practitioners can increase the availability of joint placements for siblings. Although some argue that sibling relationships interfere with a child bonding to his foster parents, Begun argues that the presence of a sibling facilitates a sense of belonging for a child. This sense of belonging may make the children feel more comfortable in the home, and thereby facilitate engagement of the children with the foster family.

Another common practice is to separate siblings who are often in extreme conflict, or when one of them is acting as a parent towards the younger siblings. Begun disagrees with this practice, suggesting that separated siblings have no opportunity to restructure their roles or resolve the conflicts created in their original environment. Using the sibling subsystem as a therapeutic arena for resolving these issues is suggested. Begun also notes that siblings who have been separated and have not developed a meaningful relationship will be difficult to reunite. When a joint placement is not possible, frequent visits should occur to facilitate the maintenance of the sibling bond and working out existing conflicts. Social work advocacy for placement options, allowing for sibling

groups, is supported in this article, as well as development of new ways to create joint placements like new payment formulas for foster families who care for sibling groups.

Hegar (1988) explains the difference between social work views on sibling placement and the views of the legal community. Even in very early social work literature a preference for placing siblings in the same foster placement has been expressed (Hegar, 1988). This article reviews changing trends in the literature noting that in the 1950's a preference for joint placement is expressed, but in the 1960's and 1970's, the issue of sibling placement was largely ignored. The author states that the 1980's had brought a renewed interest in the issue. Juvenile courts have begun to place an emphasis on maintaining stable relationships in a child's life, bringing about legal concerns over sibling placement. According to Hegar (1988) the social work profession has based the issue of sibling placement on a needs paradigm. Siblings shall be placed together when it has been assessed to be in the best interests of the children involved. The legal viewpoint expressed in this article is based upon a rights paradigm. Siblings have the right to be placed together, regardless of professional

assessments. Hegar (1988) predicts that social work is going to shift toward rights-based services. This shift will mean that the legal viewpoint will have an increasing influence on joint sibling placement.

In an article on the effect of attachment disorder upon the sibling bond, Ryan (2002) provides guidelines for assessing the sibling bond in order to make appropriate foster placement decisions. This article discusses the possibility that a child who is entering the child welfare system has acquired an attachment disorder due to the abusive and neglectful aspects of the original environment. Attachment disorder causes many behaviors including intense and constant anger, as well as a need to have control over everything that make it impossible for the child to bond with a sibling or a foster parent without intense treatment. Ryan (2002) argues that a child with an attachment disorder is best placed separate from their siblings in order to avoid the disruption of that placement, and allow for the appropriate treatment of the disorder. In order to decide whether separate or joint placement is ideal, the court may order a sibling bonding assessment. Ryan (2002) states that most children entering the child welfare system will not manifest a complete

attachment disorder, and will be able to develop a healthy bond with their siblings and caregiver.

Empirical Research

Research on Sibling Relationships

In a study on sibling relationships and well-being in middle and old-age, Hilkevitch-Bedford (1998) found that a positive reappraisal of sibling troubles during childhood had a positive correlation with well being in middle and old age. This study was conducted by doing a secondary analysis of existing data drawn from a study of married middle-class parents in the Midwest with siblings within 3 years of their age. The researcher measured well being with a short version of a reliable instrument. Each participant was asked two open-ended questions on sibling troubles and the results were scored according to the number of benefits mentioned by the participant. Health of the participant was also rated on a previously used scale, as well as sibling solidarity and sibling conflict. The limitations of this study include a challenge of the reliability of the results due to the interpretation of the open-ended questions. A different researcher may reach different conclusions. The sample size of the study was small, and was restricted to middle-class Midwesterners,

meaning that the results may not be generalizeable to the broader population. The findings in this study indicate the benefits of sibling relationships when the individual is able to see past sibling troubles in a positive way.

Research on Foster Care Placement

Based on the sociological notion that children actively construct and interpret their own social lives, Hepinstall (2001) conducted a study comparing the perceptions of family life for foster children and other children who experienced family change. The researcher interviewed 63 children about who they perceived as important to them, and their experience of separation from parents or family change. The majority of the foster children rated their caretakers and biological parents as very important to them. Foster children, even those who had not met or seen their siblings for years, rated their siblings with some level of importance in their lives. Showing that their attachment to their siblings remained important, even when access to siblings was limited. While most children not in foster care said their parents were important for providing love and affection, foster children said that their caretakers were important to them because they took care of them, and their biological parents were important because they were related to them.

Non-fostered children also rated their siblings as important, even though frequent conflict existed between the siblings. A limitation of this study is the small number of participants, meaning that the findings probably cannot be generalized to a broader population. This study was conducted in England, and circumstances surrounding their own child welfare system, making it different from the United States, may also affect the generalizeability of these findings. This study has possibly illustrated the importance that foster children place on original family members.

In a study on foster care placement, Knapp, Baines, and, Bryson (1987) attempt to predict the probability of a placement type based on different characteristics, including age of the child, health, family-size, and previous foster care experience. This study reviewed the case records of 93 children that had been received into the care of one agency over a 3-month period. They found that the type of initial placement for a child, either a group home or foster family home, was highly associated with the different characteristics of the children. Children received into a foster home were more likely to be from a group of siblings, although social workers were often unable to find a foster home that could take a

complete sibling group. Children with siblings, who had already been in the foster system, were more likely to go into a group home. Girls were found more likely to be placed in a group home than boys, and children from a single-parent family were more likely to be placed in a foster home. The availability of foster and group home placements affect the validity of the results obtained in this study. Another limitation of the study is that departmental policy and developmental resources also influence the decisions of the caseworkers.

Research on Joint Sibling Placement

Smith (1996) conducted an exploratory survey on the different attitudes of caseworkers and foster mothers on joint sibling placement. Surveys were given to 38 foster mothers of preschool age children and their caseworkers on their attitudes about sibling placement. The author also interviewed each foster mother. More than half of the foster mothers and caseworkers were found to agree that sibling relationships were very important to the foster children. However, over half of the caseworkers sampled indicated that it is at least somewhat difficult to find foster parents willing to accept a sibling group. When it came to opinions on fostering sibling groups, foster mothers and caseworkers were found to have opposing views.

Foster mothers felt it was harder to integrate a child into the family when the siblings were placed together, but caseworkers disagreed that it was harder for children to integrate into a foster family when they are placed with their siblings. The findings of this study are limited by the small sample size, and the fact that the participants were self-selected by the author. These limitations lower the possibility of these findings being generalized to the broader population. For this particular sample population, this study has highlighted that although caseworkers and foster parents agree upon the importance of sibling relationships, they disagree on the level of difficulty involved in caring for a sibling group. These findings suggest that foster mothers and social workers need to educate each other on the nature of sibling groups, and caring for siblings in foster care.

In a study on the success of joint sibling placement in foster care, Boer and Spiering (1991) sent questionnaires to 15 foster family agencies on characteristics of the children and the placement. Within these 15 agencies, 59 joint placements of siblings were examined. Reasons for the joint placements included: preservation of the familial bond, wishes of the family, and an attempt to offer the children a future together.

One quarter of these placements were disrupted and all of these disruptions were connected to one or more of three factors: small interval between the age of the foster children and the foster parents own children, simultaneous placement of the siblings rather than placement at an interval of at least 2 months, and a high degree of involvement of the biological parents. The questionnaire used to conduct this study has not been previously tested, suggesting that the findings may not be completely reliable or valid. This study was also completed with a small sample size, suggesting that the results might not be generalizeable. This study aimed at discovering factors involved with failure and success of joint sibling placements.

Staff and Fein (1992) examined the effect of sibling placement on positive outcomes for foster children, using absence of placement disruption as an operational definition for positive outcome. This study examined one foster care agency that places children who are not eligible for reunification with their parents or adoption. The study was conducted over a 24-year period by examining case records. During the course of the study, 111 joint sibling placements were made by the agency. Two-thirds of the siblings placed together remained together, and 56

percent of the jointly placed siblings remained in their first placement. Only 38 percent of the siblings that were placed separately remained in their first placement. For this sample, joint sibling placement decreased the possibility of placement disruption. Fewer placement disruptions decrease the number of losses and difficult transitions the foster child experiences. Limitations of this study exist in the context of the study: the agency used generally has more resources available and a smaller caseload size, suggesting that the findings may not be generalized to the broader population. Staff and Fein (1992) concluded that joint sibling placement is a successful practice due to their finding that siblings placed together were more likely to remain in their first placement.

Summary

The literature important to the project was presented in Chapter Two. This literature review has covered the benefits that can be sustained from sibling relationships, the views and longstanding practice of the social work and legal professions that support joint sibling placements, as well as tentative evidence showing the success of sibling placements. The literature seems to agree that

sibling relationships are beneficial to children, and the use of joint placement for siblings in the foster system can lead to successful placement outcomes. Yet the authors were not able to find a study that has discovered the actual rate of joint sibling placement in the foster system, and the reasons given for not placing siblings together. This gap in the literature allows room for this project, which intends to discover the rate of joint sibling placement at SBDCS, and the reasons given whenever siblings are not placed together.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

Chapter Three outlines the purpose of the study and the methods that were followed to achieve that purpose during the data collection phase of this research project. This is a quantitative study that gathered data on sibling placement through computer program reports and case reviews. These computer program reports and case reviews were used to collect a nominal level of data that was analyzed in the form of frequency tables.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the incidence of joint sibling placement within San Bernardino County, and to compile the reasons for placing siblings separately. This purpose was best fulfilled through a quantitative study with a one-group post-test only design. The reasons for placing siblings separately are a qualitative type of data gathered in the second phase of data collection. The exploratory nature of this study is inherent in its purpose to recover information on the issue of sibling placement rather than assign causality or draw correlations. Although it would have been ideal to

recover information about each participant's entire history of joint or separate sibling placements, this was not feasible due to research design and time constraints. The authors extracted data from the case files of one-group of children in long-term foster care, after they had been placed in a home that is separate from their siblings.

The design of this study involved two data collection phases. First a report on the incidence of separate or joint sibling placement was obtained. Second a data extraction process was completed to recover the reasons why some of the participants had been placed separately from their siblings. A participant was considered to be in a joint placement if they were placed with at least one of their biological or half-siblings with which they resided in their home of origin. When a participant was not in a foster care placement with any of their biological or half-siblings from their home of origin, that placement was categorized as separate. The authors reviewed a sample of the case files of the separately placed siblings and recorded the reason given for the participant's separation from the last sibling they lived with. Due to the myriad of possible scenarios in foster care placement, the limitations to this study are complex. For example a joint

placement may mean placement with several siblings, or placement with one sibling. Some of the participants were placed jointly but yet still separated, and possibly from the sibling to whom they are most attached. The authors chose to simplify the categories for sibling placement in order to clarify the concept of placement and simplify the data (Staff & Fein, 1993).

Another limitation in this design lies in the possibility that a separately placed participant has been separated from more than one sibling at different times within their time in the foster care system. This study only recorded the reason for the last placement away from a sibling, and not the reasons for all the other placements. This is so that the reasons for separate placement do not outnumber the actual separate placements. When collecting this data the authors did not include in their sample of separately placed siblings any siblings who are both placed separately. This eliminates the possibility of a double recording of the reason for separation. For example, one participant may have been removed from placement with his only sibling due to that sibling's special needs, therefore the separate placement of each of those siblings would have been explained with the same reason though that reason really only constitutes

one actual separation. The authors eliminated siblings from the second phase of data collection in order to eliminate double recording of data.

The research questions that guided this study were:
At what rate are foster siblings in San Bernardino Department of Children's Services (SBDCS) placed together; and when they are not placed together what reasons are given for separate placement?

Sampling

The sample for this study included all children with siblings placed in long term foster care from January 1st, 2002 to January 1st, 2003 under the supervision of SBDCS for the first phase of data collection. This phase was conservatively estimated to involve 1000 cases, but actually involved over 2000. The second phase of data collection included 30 cases in which the children are placed separately. These cases were chosen through random availability sampling. The only selection criterion for the study was that the children remain under the supervision of SBDCS, and placed in long-term foster care. The authors chose to only select long term foster care cases because children in this classification of foster placement are spending a good portion of their childhood

in the foster care system. Other placement classifications may change quickly from foster care to placement with parents. Collecting data from long term foster care children means that their childhood access to their siblings is largely defined by their placement with SBDCS. The authors submitted a request for access to this sample to San Bernardino County towards the end of fall quarter, and approval was received before the quarters end.

Data Collection and Instruments

This study collected data on the rate of joint and separate sibling placement, and the reasons given for placing siblings separately. Due to the exploratory nature there is no independent or dependent variable involved in this study. The focus is simply to gather information. A child welfare system computer program report was requested on the incidence of joint and separate sibling placement for the first phase of data collection. For the second phase the authors extracted data from random sampled case files, on the reasons for separate sibling placement data. A data extraction form was utilized to collect the data. This form has been constructed by compiling likely reasons for sibling separation gathered from different articles used in the literature review portion of this proposal.

One limitation of this instrument is that it does not list all the possible reasons a child would be in a separate placement. To address this limitation the data extraction form contains a category called other, with a space to write in the actual reason for the separate placements. Any significant findings in the other category are described in the results section of the project.

Procedures

A number of steps must be taken in order to produce a thorough collection of data regarding joint sibling placement. In order to have access to client case files, a request form was submitted to Sally Richter Supervising Social Service Practitioner at the San Bernardino Department of Children Services (SBDCS) office located on Gifford Street in San Bernardino, California. After permission was given, researchers had access to all long-term foster care cases within San Bernardino County. First, the authors requested a child welfare computer system report on sibling placement from Cathy Sellers Supervising Social Service Practitioner with SBDCS. This report was used to discover the incidence of joint and separate sibling placement. Then the authors used random sampling to select cases to review. The authors made a

list of 90 cases that involved separate sibling placement and reviewed every third case on the list. The reason for separate placement was usually found in the court reports on the child welfare computer system. For some of the cases the court reports were not available in the computer system, in those instances the authors went to the next case on the list. The reasons for sibling separation were extracted from the case files. The proposal was presented for approval to Institutional Review Board (IRB) at California State University of San Bernardino (CSUSB). The proposal was also presented for review to SBDCS. SBDCS notified the authors of the proposals approval status. Notification of approval by the IRB, occurred in December 2002.

Protection of Human Subjects

Secondary data was extracted from client case files, in which information was accessible to authors only. Client names were not disclosed in research findings; neither were the names of the social workers that are responsible for joint sibling placement. Both social worker and client remained anonymous, and were not disclosed in any of the research. Any identifying information that is made available to the authors was not

recorded during the data extractions process. Direct observations on human subjects were not conducted in this study. Data was collected from case files, so informed consent and debriefing statements were neither necessary nor applicable.

Data Analysis

The purpose of data analysis was to summarize the information gathered in statistical format. This is an exploratory study that did not examine a relationship between variables. Descriptive univariate statistics were utilized to highlight the research findings.

For the first phase of data collection involving the rate of joint and separate sibling placement the total number of children was tallied and then divided into two categories: Separate placement and joint placement. The percentage rate for each group was then calculated, by comparing the amount of children in each group to the total number of children. Frequency tables were constructed for the second level of data collection involving demographic information and the reasons for separate sibling placement. A frequency table was constructed for each of the reasons for separate

placement. A univariate analysis is the best way to describe this nominal data.

Summary

The findings of this study contributed to the limited amount of information, regarding foster care sibling separation. The results of this study also presented a wider understanding of the prevalence of sibling separation within San Bernardino County. An insufficient amount of time, and the complexity of establishing distinct categories for short and long-term foster children, prohibits a further understanding of the unique needs of each group. The specific aim of this project was toward children in long-term foster care, the rate at which they are placed with their siblings, in addition to the reasons for their separation.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

Included in Chapter Four is a presentation of the results found in the course of this study. The authors were able to find the rate of separately placed siblings in long-term foster care, as well as 8 different reasons for the separation. The chapter will conclude with a summary of these findings.

Presentation of the Findings

The first part of this study's research question: what is the rate of joint sibling placement in SBDCS, was answered with quantitative data. In reviewing the report on sibling placement of all the children in long term foster care from January 1st, 2002 to January 1st, 2003. The authors found that a total of 2,165 children were in long term foster care under the supervision of SBDCS. This number excludes any children whom do not have siblings under the supervision of SBDCS. Of those 2165 children, 1,614 were found to be in the same placement as at least 1 of their sibling(s). The remaining 551 children were found to be in a placement without any of their sibling(s). The

rate of joint sibling placement came out to 75% with the rate of separate sibling placement being 25%.

For the second phase of data collection, demographic information was recorded on each of the 30 cases reviewed. A broad range of ages was found from 3 months old to 16 years old. Of these cases the majority were small children with 73.3% of the children being 8 and under (see Table 1). When it came to the sex of the children, two-thirds or 20 of the cases reviewed were for male children, leaving only one-third or 10 of the cases for females.

Table 1. Age

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
3mo's	1	3.3	3.3	3.3
11mo's	1	3.3	3.3	6.7
1	2	6.7	6.7	13.3
2	4	13.3	13.3	26.7
3	3	10.0	10.0	36.7
4	1	3.3	3.3	40.0
5	3	10.0	10.0	50.0
6	3	10.0	10.0	60.0
7	4	13.3	13.3	73.3
8	2	6.7	6.7	80.0
9	1	3.3	3.3	83.3
11	3	10.0	10.0	93.3
14	1	3.3	3.3	96.7
16	1	3.3	3.3	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 shows that for type of placement 56.7% or 17 of the cases reviewed contained children placed in foster care, while 30% or 9 of the cases were found to be with a relative caretaker. The least frequent type of placement was the residential setting category where only 13.3% of the participants were found to be placed.

Table 2. Type of Placement

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Relative Placement	9	30.0	30.0
Foster Family	17	56.7	56.7
Residential Setting	4	13.3	13.3
Total	30	100.0	100.0

For each case reviewed the date that the child entered the child welfare system, which means the date they were removed from the care of their parents, was recorded. That date was used to calculate the amount of time the child had spent in the system from the date of removal to January 1st, 2003. The shortest length of time spent in the system among these participants was found to be 2 months while the longest was 7 years 11 months. The authors calculated an average of the amount of time spent in the system for this group by converting total time spent in the system to months. This average came out to 41

months or 3 years and 5 months in the child welfare system.

The second part of the research question: what are the reasons for separate sibling placement was answered by gathering qualitative data. The authors used a data extraction form consisting of 4 possible reasons for sibling separation, along with an other category for cases whose reasons did not fit within the original 4 chosen by the authors. Tables 3-6 describe the occurrence of sibling separation due to reasons that already were listed on the data extraction form. Tables 7-10 involve reasons that were described in the other category by the authors during the data extraction process.

Table 3. Incidence of Sibling Abuse

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
1	3.3	3.3

Those 4 reasons: Incidence of sibling abuse, Foster home not large enough to accommodate all of the siblings, sibling or this child has special needs, and sibling relationship judged to be developmentally detrimental make up 73.3% of the findings. Table 3 had the smallest results of those 4 with only 1 of the children being separated

Table 4. Foster Home Not Large Enough

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
4	13.3	13.3

because of an incidence of sibling abuse. Tables 4 and 6 show that 4 children were separated from sibling(s) because the foster home was not large enough, and 4 were also separated because the sibling relationship was deemed to be developmentally detrimental to one of the children. The reason with the largest frequency is described in Table 5 and that is the instances where special needs of a sibling or that child was used to justify sibling separation. Special needs was used to describe behavior problems, developmental disabilities, or physical handicaps. In 12 or 40% of the 30 cases reviewed the child was placed separately from their sibling(s) for this reason.

Table 5. Sibling or This Child Has Special Needs

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
12	40.0	40.0

Table 6. Detrimental Sibling Relationship

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
4	13.3	13.3

The next 4 reasons found for separate placements are ones that were unanticipated by the authors, and were collected by filling in the "Other" category on the data extraction form. Table 7 shows that in 3 of the cases reviewed, the child had not formed a relationship with the sibling(s), and therefore joint placement was not attempted. In 1 case the sibling group was in a separate placement because the relative caretaker of that child was unrelated to the child's half-siblings (see Table 8). In 2 of the cases the children were removed from the home of their parents at separate times and this was why they were not in the same placement. In one instance the child was removed after the sibling group, and in the other instance the child was removed before (see Table 9). For 3 of the cases reviewed, it was found that an opportunity for a

Table 7. No Sibling Relationship

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
3	10.0	10.0

Table 8. Relative Caretaker Unrelated to Siblings

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
1	3.3	3.3

permanent placement was used to justify separation for siblings. Table 10 describes the results from the cases where the caretaker was adopting that child, and the siblings resided in a separate placement.

Table 9. Separate Removal Times

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
2	6.7	6.7

Table 10. Caretaker Adopting this Child

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
3	10.0	10.0

Summary

Chapter Four reviewed the results extracted from the project. The rate of sibling placement was found to be 75% placed with at least one sibling and 25% of the children placed without any. Considering the small size of the

participant group for the second phase of data collection the sample consisted of a wide range of ages, and all three different types of placement. The sample was two-thirds male and one-third female, and there also was a wide range for length of time spent in the system. The second part of the research question was answered with 8 different reasons for separate sibling placements four of which the authors were not expecting.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapter five discusses the results of this study that were presented in chapter 4. The demographic data collected represents various ages, types of placements, and length of time in the system. Some of the findings were contrary to what was originally expected by the authors. These findings including the rate of joint sibling placement, and the 8 different reasons for separate placement, are discussed in the following section.

Discussion

Through a review of all the placements of children with siblings in long term foster care under the supervision of SBDCS, the authors found that 25% of these children are placed without any of their siblings. Knowledge of the difficulty involved with foster care placements and experience with separately placed sibling's lead the authors to originally expect that the incidence of separate placement would be close to 50%. The authors were pleased to find that the actual rate of sibling placement was only half as large as they expected. While

25% is a sizeable proportion, it is far from the majority. This data tells us that in SBDCS 3 out of every 4 children in long-term foster care are placed with at least one of their siblings. Further research comparing the placement rates between different counties would be helpful in determining an acceptable rate.

Considering the small sample size of 30 cases for the second phase of data collection there was a good amount of variance in terms of age, type of placement, and time spent in the system. Children from the age of 3 months old to 16 years old were included in the sample, with over 70% being under 8 years old. Placement type was also varied with all three types of placements appearing in the sample. The most prevalent type was foster family, making up over half of the sample, and relative care was the second most prevalent with almost one-third of the sample. The authors suspect that having residential setting as the least occurring type of placement is representative of the entire population, because group home placement is usually only considered for children who have experienced disruptions in placement with families. For length of time spent in the system the shortest period was 2 months, while the longest was 7 years 11 months. A sample that has a good amount of variance in demographic data is more

likely to accurately represent the population. The authors feel that the wide range in ages, placement types, and length of time spent in the system strengthens the validity of the results.

Incidence of sibling abuse, one of the four possible reasons for separation of siblings expected by the authors, accounted for 1 of the cases reviewed. Conflicting opinions on the justification of separation because of sibling abuse were found. Staff and Fein (1992) argue that when a sibling relationship involves overt hostility it is harmful to the child's emotional development and separate placement is necessary. However Bank and Kahn (1982) explain sibling rivalry as a connection that can emotionally feed a child, when the parent is not providing enough attention. This argument supports the idea that separation from a sibling is more harmful to the children than the sibling abuse.

Depending upon the type and level of abuse that is occurring between siblings it is difficult to decide what would be best for the children under these circumstances. However, the first obligation of any children's services agency is that the children in their custody remain safe. It would not be logical to expect an agency to keep children in the same placement when any type of abuse is

being inflicted, outside of normal sibling rivalry. Based on the duty of SBDCS to provide a safe environment for these children, the authors conclude that an incidence of sibling abuse is a justified reason for the separation of siblings.

Inability to find a foster home that was large enough for the entire sibling group is our second reason for sibling separation. In four of the cases, sibling separation occurred due to lack of available living space for the children. When a foster home that is large enough or willing to take in the entire sibling group can not be found the social worker is forced to find separate placements, at least temporarily until a home becomes available. In the occurrence that separate placement is made temporarily the children may begin to become attached to their new caretakers. If this were the case, the social worker would need to assess the situation and decide if separation from the caretaker is less disruptive for the children than continued separation from their sibling(s). If it is decided that the children remain in their separate but stable placements, frequent sibling visits could be organized to decrease the loss of sibling interaction.

The third reason for sibling separation is special needs of one of the children, requiring a separate placement. This was the most frequent reason found for separation of sibling's. Twelve out of the thirty cases sampled in this study fell into this category. Special needs can include behavioral problems as well as physical or developmental delays that require additional care from the foster parents. In some cases behavioral problems are due to an attachment disorder that makes it impossible for a child to bond with a sibling or a foster parent (Ryan, 2002). It is crucial for a child who has special needs to receive adequate care, even if this means separation from his or her siblings. In circumstances when a foster child has special needs, it is the responsibility of SBDCS to provide the child with a sufficient level of care.

The fourth reason for sibling separation is when the sibling relationship is deemed to be developmentally detrimental. An example of this would be when one of the siblings has assumed a caretaker role for the other children. In these instances the parentified child does not allow for the foster parent to fulfill their role as caretaker and disciplinarian. Some professionals argue that parentified children need to be placed separately from their siblings, so that they can stop taking on

caretaking duties, and start having a childhood. Others argue that one sibling acting as the caretaker may be a normal part of the sibling relationship (Hegar, 1988). Begun (1998) also disagrees saying that separated siblings have no opportunity to restructure their roles. It seems that in this circumstance keeping the siblings together would require a commitment from a highly motivated foster parent to curb the caretaking habits of the parentified sibling. This foster parent may also need additional training and support from the agency to take on this task. Our study found that 4 of the children from our sample were placed separately for this reason.

The next four reasons for separate sibling placement found in this study were ones not originally expected by the authors. Relative caretaker unrelated to siblings was found as a reason for separation in one of the cases reviewed. In this case the child was placed with a paternal relative who was not related to the half siblings that were also in foster care. It is usually the preference of any children's service agency to place children with one of their relatives. However, if a sibling group exists of children with different fathers or mothers a relative placement may be possible for one child but not for the other(s). This is another circumstance

where the social worker or the agency has to decide what is in the best interests of the children, placement with a relative, or a placement that keeps the sibling group together. This decision should be based on an evaluation of the sibling relationship, the child's relationship with the relative caretaker, and the prospect for consistent sibling visits if separate placement does occur.

One additional reason for the separation of siblings is separate removal times. In two of the thirty cases reviewed sibling separation occurred due to entering the foster care system at different times. This may point to a lack of resources within the foster care system. For instance, when a child enters a foster home, the home may have a limited amount of space to accommodate the child. Thus, if a sibling were to come at a different time, there may not be sufficient space to house the child. Under these circumstances, temporary separation of siblings would be necessary until a home that could accommodate the entire sibling group becomes available.

One more reason for sibling separation is no sibling relationship. In 3 of the cases sampled it was documented that the child had never known their sibling(s) and therefore joint placement was not considered. When this is the case the siblings may not feel comfortable living in

the same home. Indeed, they may even have a difficult time communicating, and request to remain in separate homes. Staff and Fein (1992) provide justification for this decision by arguing that when siblings do not show attachment to one another it may be harder or even detrimental to place the siblings together.

The last reason for sibling separation is caretaker adoption. Three of the thirty cases fit into this category. A caretaker may be interested in adopting a child and not the remaining siblings. This frequently occurs when siblings do not reside in the same foster home, and the adopting parent does not have a relationship with the sibling group. This is another instance in which it is the job of the agency to decide whether it is better to ensure a permanent placement for the child, or try to develop a joint placement for the siblings that may not be permanent. In these 3 cases it was decided that it was better for the children to have a permanent home, rather than reside with their siblings. This decision should be based upon the quality of the sibling relationship and attachment, as well as the likelihood of the entire sibling group being adopted together.

Limitations

Due to the myriad of possible scenarios in foster care placement, the limitations to this study are complex. These limits exist in the second phase of data collection. The entire population under study consisted of 551 children, yet the authors only sampled 30 of these cases. This accounts for less than ten percent of the entire population, and is not likely to be representative. This affects the validity and reliability of the results obtained. Eight different reasons for separate placement were found in this study, but it is likely that another study consisting of more participants would find even more reasons for sibling separation. There is also the possibility that another study would not produce the same reasons for sibling separation at all. For example, a different sample of the population may not contain any cases where the children are separated from their sibling(s) due to sibling abuse.

Some of the other limitations involved in this study are inherent in its exploratory nature. The authors did not attempt to draw any correlations upon the data extracted. This means that this study cannot offer any explanation for sibling separation beyond the one that was listed in the case file for each participant. This study

was an attempt to generate more data in the subject of sibling placement. The data generated is representative only of the sample that was used, and can not be offered as evidence for any definite conclusions on the subject of sibling placement.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

This study has broadened existing knowledge of the subject of sibling placement, and has created awareness for the need for future research to be conducted on sibling relationships and placement in foster care. Some of the reasons for separate sibling placement found in this study involve decisions made by social workers that should be based upon different variables. For example, 3 of the children in our sample were separated from siblings because that child was being adopted. In these cases the social workers decided that it was better for these children to have a chance at permanency rather than remain in the same home with their siblings. As stated earlier this decision should be based on the sibling relationship, the child's attachment to the caretaker, and the likelihood of the siblings being adopted together. Some of the other reasons collected that would need to involve these types of evaluations are sibling relationship deemed

to be developmentally detrimental, and this child placed with a relative caretaker who is unrelated to the siblings. Since an attempt to maintain joint sibling placements has now been mandated by the state of California and research on sibling relationships has shown that they are beneficial to development and foster care outcomes a policy on the types of evaluations involved in placement decisions for siblings may be beneficial. This policy would guide social workers to consider the sibling relationship as well as other factors involved before deciding upon a separate placement. When separation of siblings is decided to be in the best interest of the child, the authors suggest that frequent and consistent sibling visits be arranged in order to maintain the sibling bond.

The existing research on sibling placement is limited, and further research on this issue is necessary. The authors suggest a study comparing the rate of joint placement between agencies to possibly discover an acceptable rate for separate sibling placements within an agency. Also further research revealing the different reasons for sibling separation would serve to create a comprehensive explanation of sibling separation within the foster care system.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that within SBDCS the majority of children in long term foster care are residing with one or more of their siblings. It was also demonstrated that the reasons for sibling separation, are justifiable depending upon sibling relationship, placement opportunities, and agency resources. The authors did not originally expect such a high rate of joint sibling placement, or that the majority of the reasons found for sibling separation would be justified. Research shows that the sibling relationship has an impact on social, emotional, and physical development (Cheek, 2000). The results of this study lead to suggestions on policy development and research. The social work profession must continue to develop policies and conduct research on sibling placement, to ensure that foster children do not miss out on the benefits of knowing their siblings.

APPENDIX A
DATA EXTRACTION FORM

Demographics

Age: _____

Sex: ____M ____F

Date Entered the System: _____

Type of Placement:

Relative Placement ____ Foster Family ____ Residential
Setting ____

Check the reason for being placed separate from siblings

Incidence of sibling abuse ____

Foster home could not accommodate all of the siblings ____

Sibling or this child has special needs requiring a separate
placement ____

Sibling relationship judged to be developmentally
detrimental to the sibling or this child ____

Other _____

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES PAGE

This was a two-person project where authors collaborated throughout. However, for each phase of the project, certain authors took primary responsibility. These responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. Data Collection:

Team Effort: Diane Meza & Cynthia Gonzalez

2. Data Entry and Analysis:

Team Effort: Diane Meza & Cynthia Gonzalez

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:

- a. Introduction and Literature

Team Effort: Diane Meza & Cynthia Gonzalez

- b. Methods

Team Effort: Diane Meza & Cynthia Gonzalez

- c. Results

Assigned Leader: Diane Meza

Assisted By: Cynthia Gonzalez

- d. Discussion

Assigned Leader: Cynthia Gonzalez

Assisted By: Diane Meza