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Sibling placement in foster care and adoption: An overview of international research

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Abstract

This article reviews 17 studies from several countries which address definitions and descriptions of sibling groups in care, characteristics of children placed together or separately, and outcomes of sibling placements. Most studies examining outcomes suggest that joint sibling placements are as stable as, or more stable than, placements of single children or separated siblings and that children do as well or better when placed with siblings. Implications for policy, practice, and research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Since the decades when the orphan trains carried children westward, placement of siblings has been a child welfare issue (PBS, 1995). The earliest U.S. child welfare researchers acknowledged the problem of separation of siblings in an evaluation of such a “placing out” program (Theis & Goodrich, 1921), and some attention to the issue has persisted throughout the historical development of child welfare services, although never as a major theme (e.g., Aldridge & Cautley, 1976; Berg, 1957; Timberlake & Hamlin, 1982; Wood, 1968). British researchers also have considered the issues surrounding siblings in care, at least since the placement of evacuated and displaced children in World

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War II (Isaacs, 1941), and they paid more consistent attention to siblings in care during decades when little U.S. research appeared (e.g., Heinicke & Westheimer, 1965; Parker, 1966; Trasler, 1960). Publications of the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) regularly have dealt with practice, policy, and research surrounding sibling placement (e.g., Jones & Niblett, 1985; Maclean, 1991; Rushton, Dance, Quinton, & Mayes, 2001).

There is good reason for child welfare researchers and policy makers to give attention to sibling placement. The National Adoption Information Clearinghouse estimates that 65–85% of U.S. foster children come from sibling groups (cited in Corder, 1999), and studies of siblings in the child welfare system suggest that 60% (Welty, Geiger, & Magruder, 1997) to 73% (Staff & Fein, 1992) of U.S. foster children have siblings who also enter foster care. A recent British study reports that 80% of foster children studied had siblings living elsewhere, including at home and in care (Rushton et al., 2001). Current professional interest in siblings in child welfare is evident from events such as the National Leadership Symposium on Siblings in Out-of-Home Care sponsored by Casey Family Programs (2002) and the publication of this issue of *Children and Youth Services Review*. However, much of the professional literature long tended to be prescriptive in the matter of sibling placement, without being research-based (e.g., Berg, 1957; Hurvitz, 1950; Jones & Niblett, 1985; Wood, 1968). The recent trends in legislation concerning sibling placements, which are discussed later in this article, also heighten the need for research-based knowledge.

Although several thorough reviews addressed the issue of sibling placement in the social work and allied literature in the late 1980s and the mid-1990s, none of them involved extensive searches or combined both the foster care and adoption literature (Begun, 1995; Festinger, 1990; Hegar, 1988b; Rosenthal, 1993). The rationale for combining studies of foster care and adoption in this review of the literature has three bases: 1) the extensive use in the United States of dually licensed foster/adopt homes makes it logical to combine them because an adoptive home is quite likely a former foster placement, and a foster home may well become an adoptive family; 2) several studies use placement disruption as an outcome variable, and when adoptive placements break down, the children typically reenter foster care, further blurring the distinction between the two statuses; 3) some of the research (including most of the British studies) include children in both foster and adoptive placements, and it would be undesirable to exclude a significant number of studies and important English and Scots perspectives (e.g., Holloway, 1997; Kosonen, 1996; Maclean, 1991; Rushton et al., 2001; Wedge & Mantle, 1991).

Since the reviews of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a notable number of new research studies have been undertaken (e.g., Kosonen, 1996; Rushton et al., 2001; Shlonsky, Webster, & Needell, 2003; Smith, 1996; Welty et al., 1997). Many theoretical and clinical articles also have appeared (e.g., Grigsby, 1994; Hindle, 2000; Lewis, 1995; Whipple & Finton, 1995), as well as policy-focused pieces (e.g., Elstein, 1999; Jones, 1993; O'Leary & Scholfield, 1994; Patton & Latz, 1994). The primary purpose of this article is to review research studies of sibling groups in foster care and adoption published in English during the past 15 years, with major emphasis on the peer-reviewed social work and psychological literature. The beginning date of 1988 for the literature search was chosen

because the author published a review of the literature on sibling placement that year (Hegar, 1988b), and this article was designed to present studies that have appeared since that time. A secondary purpose of this article is to consider how these studies might inform child welfare policy, practice, and research.

The article first presents an overview of the recent literature concerning sibling relationships and notes its relevance for questions of sibling placement. The article then summarizes the methods used in the search of the foster care and adoption literature. Presentation of the results of the literature review begins with an overview of 17 relevant studies that have been conducted in three European and two North American countries. The review continues with definitions and descriptions of sibling groups in care, characteristics of siblings placed together or separately, and outcomes of sibling placements. The article concludes with a discussion of child welfare practice and policy concerning siblings and the implications of this review.

2. Background concerning sibling relationships

Hegar's (1988b) literature review of sibling relationships and separations and their implications for child placement concluded that the literature of all social science and professional disciplines had neglected sibling relationship, a view also supported by earlier authors (Irish, 1964; Perlman, 1967; Pfouts, 1976). This relative lack of emphasis on the sibling relationship appears to have begun to change in the past 15 years. Prior to the mid-1980s, a handful of substantive works had been published by social scientists concerning sibling relationship (e.g., Bank & Kahn, 1982; Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1982; Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970). Since that time, a host of books has dealt with general and specific aspects of the sibling relationship, including: juvenile siblings (Boer & Dunn, 1992); siblings across the life span (Cicirelli, 1995); sibling rivalry (Klagsbrun, 1992); sibling abuse (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998); sibling loss (Fanos, 1996); cross-cultural comparisons (Zukow, 1989); and other aspects of siblingship (e.g., Hetherington, Reiss, & Plomin, 1994). The journal literature has expanded similarly.

Although the literature concerning sibling relationships is relevant to the issue of sibling placements, a detailed review of this expanding body of scholarship is beyond the scope of this article (for more complete reviews, see Begun, 1995; Hegar, 1988b). In brief, there is evidence that the presence of a sibling can ease a child's adaptation in a number of stressful situations (e.g., Caya & Liem, 1998; Hunter, 1993; Lewis, 1991; Lewis, 1995) and that sibling relationships frequently remain important sources of support through late adolescence, adulthood, and old age (e.g., Bigby, 1997; Campbell, Connidis, & Davies, 1999; Dolgin & Lindsay, 1999; Miner & Uhlenberg, 1997; Stocker, Lanthier, & Furman, 1997; Shortt & Gottman, 1997; Tucker, Barber, & Eccles, 1997). Both points are germane to placement decisions and to the interests of children in state custody, since separation of siblings can deprive children of relationships that might be expected to be major supports in both childhood and adulthood. Issues of children's rights to associate with their siblings in foster care and adoption are revisited in a later section of this article.

3. Methods for literature review

Based on a detailed search of the social work and allied literature, this article identifies and summarizes foster care and adoption research dealing with sibling placement and separation. In order to increase the likelihood that relevant research would be identified, several databases and multiple search terms were employed. A search of Social Work Abstracts from 1988 through late 2003 used the following keyword terms as they might appear anywhere in the title or abstract of the texts: variations on the word “sibling” and any of the phrases “foster care,” “child placement,” “substitute care,” or “adoption.” In an effort to find articles that might use British terms, “care” and “looked after” (recent English usage) were included. This stage of the search yielded 46 abstracts, which the author reviewed for inclusion. To qualify for inclusion as an empirical or research study, the abstracts were examined for mention of a sample or population of subjects that included siblings in foster care or adoption, as well as for mention of research questions or findings concerning siblings. Six articles met these criteria (Barth, Berry, Yoshikami, Goodfield, & Carson, 1988; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Drapeau, Simard, Beaudry, & Charbonneau, 2000; Maclean, 1991; Shlonsky et al., 2003; Staff & Fein, 1992). A similar search of the psychological literature (as abstracted in PsychINFO) for 1988 through mid-2003 identified 124 abstracts from which six additional research studies of siblings in foster care or adoption were identified (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Boer, Versluisden Bierman, & Verhulst, 1994; Boer, Westenberg, & van Ooyen-Houben, 1995; Kosonen, 1996; Rosenthal, Schmidt, & Conner, 1988 [reporting separate samples in Colorado and Oklahoma]; Thorpe & Swart, 1992). One additional relevant study (Smith, 1998) surfaced from a title search of the Social Science Citation Index (for 1995 through the first 6 months of 2003, dates available on CD-ROM) for variations of the word “sibling” plus the terms noted above for foster care and adoption. Finally, research within the target years was sought among the references of the articles identified in the original search of databases and from other works known to the author, a process that added four studies appearing in books, reports, and the medical literature to the body of work reviewed here (Holloway, 1997; Rushton et al., 2001; Wedge & Mantle, 1991; Welty et al., 1997). Unpublished dissertations dealing with sibling relationships or placements were excluded (e.g., Flynn, 1995; Smith, 1994), unless their findings had been published and identified in the search (e.g., Smith, 1998). The table in Appendix A provides an overview of the 17 studies and their methods and findings (see Appendix A).

4. Research concerning siblings in foster care and adoption

4.1. Overview of the studies

An earlier, exploratory review of the sibling literature (Hegar, 1988b) noted that sibling placement in foster care had been studied by only a handful of researchers. Although sibling placement is still underemphasized and underinvestigated in the child welfare literature, there has been a dramatic growth in the number of relevant studies. The English-language literature now includes studies of siblings in the child welfare populations of

Canada (Drapeau et al., 2000; Thorpe & Swart, 1992), England (Holloway, 1997; Maclean, 1991; Rushton et al., 2001; Wedge & Mantle, 1991), The Netherlands (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Boer et al., 1994, 1995), Scotland (Kosonen, 1996), and the United States (Barth et al., 1988; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Rosenthal et al., 1988; Shlonsky et al., 2003; Staff & Fein, 1992; Smith, 1998; Welty et al., 1997).

As might be expected, the child populations in the 17 studies vary considerably. The various researchers report data concerning siblings placed by: public child welfare departments or local authorities (Barth et al., 1988; Drapeau et al., 2000; Holloway, 1997; Kosonen, 1996; Maclean, 1991; Rosenthal et al., 1988; Shlonsky et al., 2003; Smith, 1998; Welty et al., 1997); private foster care agencies (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Staff & Fein, 1992; Thorpe & Swart, 1992); combinations of the two types of auspices (Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Rosenthal et al., 1988; Rushton et al., 2001; Wedge & Mantle, 1991); and agencies working in international adoption (Boer et al., 1994).

4.2. Definitions and descriptions of sibling groups in care

4.2.1. Definitional issues

Comparisons among the identified studies are complicated by differences in legal jurisdiction and agency auspices, as well as by differences in operational definitions and study methods. For example, the issue of how to define “siblings” has been identified in the literature as a sticky research problem (Staff, Fein, & Johnson, 1993), and the studies reviewed here take varied approaches. A Quebec study included only full siblings (with the same mother and father) or maternal half-siblings who had lived together (Drapeau et al., 2000), and another Canadian study excluded children who entered care on different dates or who had different fathers in cases where fathers were involved with the children (Thorpe & Swart, 1992). Two British studies used identical definitions that included children who shared at least one parent and had lived in the same household, or who would have lived in the same household had they not been placed (Maclean, 1991; Kosonen, 1996). Another British study included biologically related children (Rushton et al., 2001). These definitions would include children placed serially by the same parent. Research based on U.S. child welfare records frequently can identify only maternal siblings or half-siblings, a constraint made explicit in the large California studies reviewed here (Shlonsky et al., 2003; Welty et al., 1997). Other studies are silent on the subject of definition, among them follow-up studies of adoptive placements in which children were classified as siblings based on the records made in previous years by many different placement agencies (e.g., Boer et al., 1994; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992).

4.2.2. Incidence of sibling placement and separation

This review of the literature concerning sibling placement finds that many researchers are grappling with basic questions such as how to identify siblings in the child welfare population, how to ascertain the number and proportion of siblings among children in care, and what characteristics are shared by siblings who are separated or placed together. The 17 identified studies reach a range of conclusions about the proportion of foster children who have siblings who also enter foster care. For example, two British studies of placements by single local authorities, one in Scotland (Kosonen, 1996) and one in

England (Maclean, 1991), used identical, fairly inclusive definitions of siblings, as discussed above. Kosonen (1996) reports that 82% of the foster care population studied was known to have siblings, many of whom remained at home. In that Scottish study, 40% of the children with siblings were placed with one or more of them, although a more typical approach is for researchers to consider separations only among siblings who enter care. In the English study, Maclean (1991) reports that, of 270 children in care as part of sibling groups, 37% were placed with all of their siblings and another 22% were placed with one or more siblings, although separated from others.

Another English study involving five voluntary agencies and one local authority (serving six counties in all) reports that only about 25% of children placed over a 4-year period came into care as part of sibling groups (Wedge & Mantle, 1991). Of this relatively low proportion, 88% was maintained in shared placements with all siblings. However, it is unclear whether children who entered care serially, or who were looked after by other agencies, would have been identified as siblings in this study. A final English study notes that, while 80% of children studied had one or more siblings living elsewhere, more than half of the sibling groups placed together included all siblings who were in care (Rushton et al., 2001). When considering the English studies, it is noteworthy that English law requires that, “so far as is reasonably practicable and consistent with (the child’s) welfare...where the Authority are also providing accommodations for a sibling of his, they are accommodated together” (Children Act, 1989 as cited in Maclean, 1991, p. 33).

The U.S. study most comparable to the British research just described reports on placements made by a network of private foster care agencies (Casey Family Services) over a 14-year period (Staff & Fein, 1992). Of the 262 children in the study, 90% had siblings, and 73% of those with siblings had one or more who also entered foster care. However, many of these brothers and sisters were not referred to Casey for placement, with the result that most children (53%) were separated from all siblings. Of the 134 children who had siblings referred to Casey, 83% were placed with at least one sibling at least some of the time. A study of a California public agency population reports that 60% of foster children have siblings in care and that about 40% of siblings are placed separately (Welty et al., 1997). Another large study of a population of California foster children found that about 46% were placed with all their siblings who were in care, while 66% were placed with at least one sibling (Shlonsky et al., 2003). The Quebec study, with rather different study methods, reports that of 150 families with siblings in foster care, 58% of the groups were split in care, meaning at least one child was placed separately (Drapeau et al., 2000). Studies focusing on adoption outcomes report that substantial majorities of children studied had been placed alone, with no information presented about separation from siblings (Barth et al., 1988; Boer et al., 1994; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Holloway, 1997).

4.3. Characteristics of siblings placed together or separately

4.3.1. Role of placement type

Several studies compare the characteristics and circumstances of sibling groups placed together with those placed separately. Drapeau et al. (2000) report on 150 families with sibling groups in care (and also concerning 144 families where divorce had affected custody of siblings). In the foster care group, siblings were significantly more likely to be

separated when the sibling group was larger, when children and their parents were older, when there was a greater age gap between siblings, and when placement changes had been more frequent and recent. The authors also found that separated siblings were more likely to live in a placement other than a foster family home (presumably group or institutional placements). Kosonen's (1996) Scottish study also addresses placement type and reports that siblings were most likely to be placed together in temporary or relative foster placements. Two large U.S. studies also found kinship placements to be associated with intact sibling groups (Shlonsky et al., 2003; Welty et al., 1997). Although no other studies in this review examined the issue of sibling placements in kinship care, findings by these researchers in the United States and Scotland confirm other reports of higher proportions of shared sibling placements in kinship foster care in the United States (Dubowitz, Feigelman, & Zuravin, 1993; Hegar, 1986; Testa & Rolock, 1991; Thornton, 1991).

4.3.2. Roles of serial entry into foster care and agency choice

When children had siblings in foster care, one key factor identified in both large-scale U.S. foster care studies as contributing to separation was having entered care at separate times (Shlonsky et al., 2003; Welty et al., 1997). Serial entry into care was also noted in two English studies as the second most prevalent factor in sibling separation (Maclean, 1991; Rushton et al., 2001). The most frequent reason for separation in Maclean's (1991) study is given as "a positive choice has been made to split siblings" (p. 34). Two of the reasons given for that choice relate to characteristics of the sibling groups that are also addressed in other studies: large age gaps, and needs for different types of placement. Similarly, Rushton et al. (2001) note the most common reason for separation as "specific needs that dictated separate placement" (p. 43).

4.3.3. Roles of characteristics of children and agencies

Several studies report primarily that characteristics of foster children and of child placing agencies are related to patterns of sibling placement. Thorpe and Swart (1992) found that older children and those from large families were separated significantly more often. Welty et al. (1997) report that sibling groups with wide age ranges were more likely to be separated in California, and Boer et al. (1995) found boys, older children, and children with behavior problems to be more often placed singly in The Netherlands.

One other U.S. study not previously discussed here included 38 preschool children with older siblings (Smith, 1998). Those separated from their siblings were significantly less likely to have lived with them in a previous placement. They were also younger when first placed, had been in their present placements longer, and were less likely to have histories of psychological problems prior to placement. This finding suggests that, if one child was very young and problem-free at placement, that sibling may have been placed separately in a home that remained stable.

Authors of the Casey Family Agency research in the United States note that sibling pairs of boys were more likely to be placed together, as were younger children, and children from minority ethnic backgrounds (black, Hispanic, and mixed-race children) (Staff & Fein, 1992). Although the five Casey agency sites studied did not differ in placement policy, they showed dramatic differences in rates of placing siblings together. The British study by Wedge and Mantle (1991), one of the most extensive pieces of

research on siblings being looked after by English child placing agencies, also reports interagency differences in rates of joint placement of siblings, with the statutory (public) agencies reporting more instances of separate placements.

4.3.4. A study of predictors of sibling placement

One foster care study by University of California researchers was specifically designed to identify predictors of patterns in sibling placement (Shlonsky et al., 2003). Using a large sample of 11,718 children from different sibling groups, each with siblings in foster care, the authors used multivariate models to determine odds ratios for the contribution various variables make to the likelihood of children being placed with their siblings. Two models were constructed: factors associated with being placed with all siblings; and factors associated with being placed with any sibling. Factors associated with placement with all siblings included entering care within 30 days of each other and current placement with guardians or in kinship or shelter care. Factors negatively associated with placement with all siblings were larger sibling groups and care in group homes. For sibling pairs, having opposite genders also contributed to separation. Findings concerning likelihood of placement with any sibling were very similar, except that larger sibling groups moved from being a negative factor to being a positive one. This suggests that, while all members of large siblings groups may be less likely to remain together, a child may be placed more often with at least one sibling when there are several children involved.

4.3.5. Conclusions about patterns of placement

It appears that certain limited conclusions can be drawn about factors related to separation of siblings in foster care. Large and diverse sibling groups (wide age range, both genders, some needing group or residential services) are most likely to experience separation from at least some siblings. Serial entry into foster care excluded children from definition as siblings in some studies (Drapeau et al., 2000; Thorpe & Swart, 1992) and contributed to separation of siblings in research that examined that question (Kosonen, 1996; Maclean, 1991; Rushton et al., 2001; Shlonsky et al., 2003). Placement type, particularly kinship care, appears in some U.S. research and one British study to be a major predictor of joint sibling placement (Kosonen, 1996; Shlonsky et al., 2003; Welty et al., 1997). This finding is consistent with those of several studies that were not part of this review because they focused on kinship care (Dubowitz et al., 1993; Testa & Rolock, 1991; Thornton, 1991) or fell outside the dates and other criteria for inclusion (Hegar, 1986).

4.4. Outcomes of sibling placements

4.4.1. Summary of earlier literature reviews

The ultimate question about joint placement or separation of siblings in foster care is: “Does it make a difference?” Previous reviews of the literature concerning siblings in adoption (Festinger, 1990; Rosenthal, 1993) or in foster care (Hegar, 1988b) reach varied conclusions about the outcomes of joint sibling placement versus sibling separation. Festinger (1990), who reviewed 10 studies of disrupted adoption, reports very mixed findings relating to siblings. Two studies reported no relationship between sibling placement and breakdown (Barth et al., 1988; Boyne, Denby, Kettenring, & Wheeler,

1984). Two studies reported that placements of single children were less stable (Festinger, 1986; Schmidt, 1986), while three studies found that joint placements of siblings disrupted more frequently (Benton, Kaye, & Tipton, 1985; Boneh, 1979; Kadushin & Seidl, 1971). Rosenthal's (1993) review of outcomes of adoption of children with special needs uncovered several of the same studies and also reported mixed findings relating to sibling placements. Conflicting findings in these and other studies may be due in part to small or biased samples and other problems with research design.

The earlier research reviewed by Hegar (1988b) that addressed outcomes of foster care placement reported less varied findings. Of the two studies using placement disruption as an outcome measure, one found placement with siblings to be associated with stability (Trasler, 1960), while the other reported no relationship between disruption and sibling placement (Parker, 1966). A study that gauged which children adapted well to war time evacuation and placement concluded that "The presence of the child's own brothers and sisters in the foster home is, therefore, clearly favorable to ease of adjustment in the new home. . ." (Isaacs, 1941, p. 61). Another study that used observation of preschoolers in group placement found less crying and aggressive behavior among those with a sibling present (Heinicke & Westheimer, 1965). One U.S. study reports poorer placement outcomes, based on caseworker assessments, in placements separating siblings (Aldridge & Cautley, 1976). Most of these studies, done at a time when research was less rigorous, did not attempt to control for differences between the groups of siblings placed together and placed separately. Uncontrolled differences, such as age, behavior problems, or number of prior placements, make conclusions based on these studies necessarily tentative.

4.4.2. *Methods of studies reviewed here*

The more recent literature reviewed here shows advances in research methods, although the problem of comparing very different studies remains. Methodological improvements include some larger sample sizes and more attempts to control for preexisting differences between groups of siblings placed together or separately, as well as use of statistical tests of significance. Three identified studies used multivariate models to examine the contribution that siblings make to placement outcome when other factors were controlled statistically (Barth et al., 1988; Rosenthal et al., 1988; Thorpe & Swart, 1992).

As with the earlier research, placement outcomes have been defined and measured in a number of ways. In one study (Smith, 1998), children were administered the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991), the Adaptive Social Behavior Inventory (ASBI; Hogan, Scott, & Bauer, 1992), and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test—Revised (Dunn & Dunn, 1981). This study of 38 preschoolers was also among the most thorough in seeking to experimentally control for between-group differences, although the small sample size makes it somewhat exploratory. Brodzinsky and Brodzinsky (1992) also employed several measures in their comparison of 130 adoptive children living in five different sibling constellations: the CBCL (Achenbach, 1991); the Adoption Adjustment Rating Scale (AAS; Brodzinsky, 1983); the Hahnemann Elementary School Behavior Rating Scale (HESB; Spivak & Swift, 1975); and the Adoption Belief Scale (ABS; Singer, Brodzinsky, & Braff, 1982).

Boer et al. (1994) also used the CBCL, as well as examining disruption rates, in their study of 399 internationally adopted children with siblings. A different study by Boer and

Spiering (1991) was based on foster care records and interviews with agency personnel. Drapeau et al. (2000) designed a questionnaire for their study of families whose children were separated through foster care or divorce. In the 150 foster care cases they studied, caseworkers for the children were administered the questions verbally. Rushton et al. (2001) also devised interviews and questionnaires for social workers, teachers, and adoptive parents, administered 3 and 12 months after placement. Thorpe and Swart (1992) designed a diagnostic checklist of child behaviors and family situations and gathered information from closed case records. The remaining studies reviewed in this section used disruption of the placement as a primary measure of outcome (Barth et al., 1988; Boer & Spiering, 1991; Holloway, 1997; Rosenthal et al., 1988; Staff & Fein, 1992; Wedge & Mantle, 1991). Other studies discussed elsewhere in this article do not address placement outcome (Boer et al., 1995; Kosonen, 1996; Maclean, 1991; Shlonsky et al., 2003; Welty et al., 1997).

4.4.3. Findings of studies using the CBCL

As might be expected, given the range of definitions of sibling groups, legal jurisdictions, agency auspices, and study designs, the findings from the studies reviewed here vary. Despite these differences, some general conclusions do emerge from the whole body of research. The studies using the CBCL to assess the functioning of children in existing placements will be examined first. In Smith's (1998) study of 38 preschoolers, the children placed with siblings had a higher rate of psychological problems prior to placement, but, despite this history, showed significantly fewer emotional and behavioral problems in placement than those separated from their siblings. They did not do as well as the separated children on a separate cognitive test of receptive vocabulary. Brodzinsky and Brodzinsky (1992), using the CBCL among other measures, found that children adopted with biological siblings did not differ significantly in adjustment from those placed singly. In the third study using the CBCL, Boer et al. (1994) followed up about 10 years after placement with 399 sibling groups that had been adopted internationally and compared them with children who had been placed singly (although not necessarily separated from their own siblings). In Boer's study, children from sibling groups in placement were somewhat older and physically healthier at the time of placement than children placed singly. At follow-up, the children placed in sibling groups had lower problem scores (a small but statistically significant difference), and there was no significant difference between the groups in the proportions of adoptions that had disrupted.

4.4.4. Findings of studies examining disruption in sibling placements

An earlier study by Boer and Spiering (1991), also conducted in The Netherlands, examined reasons for placement disruption in 59 joint sibling placements of 137 children in foster care. Disruption was defined as departure from the foster home earlier than originally intended and earlier than the agency considered appropriate. Over several years of placement, the overall rate of disruption was 31%. Reasons for disruption were found to be unrelated to characteristics of the siblings or to issues of sibship. They related primarily to individual child behavior problems or the influence of biological parents. Staff and Fein (1992), who compared rates of disrupted foster care placements involving siblings placed together and separately, report significantly greater stability in joint placements where "Sibling pairs placed together were more likely to remain in their first placement (56%)

than those placed separately (38%)” (p. 266). They report further that disruptions affecting one sibling were much less common when siblings were placed together (17%) than when they were placed separately (42%). As might be expected, placement disruption affecting both siblings was more common in joint placements, probably because staff frequently choose to move both children in order to keep them together. [Staff and Fein’s \(1992\)](#) study does not report reasons for disruption. British researchers [Wedge and Mantle \(1991\)](#) also use placement disruption as the major outcome measure. Of 133 children in care, the disruption rate for siblings placed together was 22% and for those split from all siblings or “splintered” from some of their siblings, the rate was 18%—a difference that was not statistically significant.

4.4.5. Findings of studies addressing disruption but not sibling separation

Four of the articles reviewed, which focus primarily on adoption outcome rather than sibling placements, are included in this review because they also report findings concerning sibling groups ([Barth et al., 1988](#); [Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992](#); [Holloway, 1997](#); [Rosenthal et al., 1988](#)). Probably because they were not intended to investigate sibling separation, these studies are similar in that they compare outcomes of adoptions of sibling groups with those of single children, whether or not the latter have siblings or are separated from them in placement. The same comparison is made in the sibling studies of international adoptees placed in The Netherlands ([Boer et al., 1994](#)) and of children in adoption and permanent foster care in England ([Rushton et al., 2001](#)), which have been mentioned previously. When interpreting the findings of these studies, it is important to bear in mind that they differ from the other studies reviewed here in that they compare children placed with siblings and singly, rather than children placed with siblings and separated from siblings.

Of these six studies, four use disruption of the adoption as a central outcome criterion. [Boer et al. \(1994\)](#) also used the Child Behavior Checklist ([Achenbach, 1991](#)), and another employed the CBCL and other measures of child functioning as the criteria for successful placement ([Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992](#)). [Rushton et al. \(2001\)](#) report on disruption and also assess placement outcome based on interviews and questionnaires by parents, teachers, and social workers.

The findings of these six studies of adoption (and permanent placement; [Rushton et al., 2001](#)) are similar to those of several studies focusing exclusively on siblings in foster care. In their study of 1155 adoptive placements in California, [Barth et al. \(1988\)](#) found sibling placements no more likely to disrupt than others, as did [Boer et al. \(1994\)](#) in The Netherlands and [Holloway \(1997\)](#) and [Rushton et al. \(2001\)](#) in England. [Rosenthal’s \(1988\)](#) research team, which reports data from two U.S. states, notes that sibling placements in Colorado were associated with reduced risk of disruption. In Oklahoma, there was a significant interaction of age with sibling placement; for children of 8 years or less, sibling placements were more likely to disrupt, while the opposite was true for older children. [Barth’s \(1988\)](#) California research group also reports an interaction with age, but their findings are in the opposite direction from the Oklahoma study: Although sibling placements generally were no more likely to disrupt than others, adoptions of siblings when the children were older than 15 years did show increased disruption rates. The adoption studies using measures of child functioning as the outcome report either lower

problem scores (Boer et al., 1994) or no significant differences (Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992) in sibling placements.

4.4.6. Findings of studies using other outcome measures

Three of the studies used assessments based on data from other sources, such as parent or staff interviews or foster care records, to evaluate placement outcome. Rushton et al. (2001) summarize that: “There was no evidence that sibling group placements were less stable or more problematic than the placement of single children. Indeed, where there were differences, these were generally to the benefit of sibling placements” (p. 83). The Quebec study by Drapeau et al. (2000) comments briefly about placement breakdown, noting that separated siblings experienced a greater number of placement changes in foster care. Their other reported findings have to do with the impact of split or joint placement on the sibling relationship. Those placed together were found to have significantly more contact with each other, more positive relationships, and less change in the nature of the relationship.

The final study reviewed reports findings that run counter to those of most other research. Thorpe and Swart (1992) reviewed records of 115 siblings from 48 families who entered care at the same time in Ontario, Canada. Although the circumstances of placement are not discussed in detail, the authors, both psychiatrists, consider their subjects to be seriously neglected and at high risk for mental illness. During their time in care, 22 family groups including 61 children were separated at least some of the time, and 26 family groups with 54 children always shared placement. One major difference between the groups was that those separated from siblings were significantly older (average age 7.31 years, compared with 4.41 years for those placed together). Thorpe and Swart (1992) report that:

Children who were separated from their siblings had more risk factors and placements while in care. However, they had fewer symptoms and better school performance while they were in foster care and fewer symptoms at discharge than the siblings who stayed together. (p. 616)

In discussing their findings, the authors conclude that the indicators of high risk they see in their study population have a bearing on the results: “This study indicated that there may be a subgroup of children who are at very great risk of developing problems who would do better if they were separated from their siblings” (Thorpe & Swart, 1992, p. 621). However, the authors do not address the possible effects of placement at a young age. The siblings placed together had an average age of less than 4 1/2 years and averaged 21.20 months in care. Those separated averaged more than 7 years of age and experienced 15.2 months in care. Having spent a much greater proportion of their lives in foster care also may help explain the poorer outcomes for the siblings placed together.

4.5. Summary of findings related to outcomes

This review of the literature published over the past 15 years concerning placement of siblings has revealed much greater attention to the issue than was found prior to 1988 (Hegar, 1988b). Of 17 studies of siblings in foster care and adoption identified in a review

of the social work and allied literature for the years 1988 through much of 2003, 12 address the question of placement outcome (refer to table in Appendix A). Of these, five report no significant differences in outcomes between children placed with siblings and those placed alone (although two report conflicting findings of interactions between age and placement outcome). It is important to note that in four of the five studies, the comparison is between children placed with siblings and those placed singly, with no discussion of whether the latter had siblings (Barth et al., 1988; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Holloway, 1997; Rosenthal et al., 1988 [Oklahoma sample only]). Two additional, similarly designed studies report no differences in disruption rate and better scores on the CBCL or on parental assessments for siblings placed together (Boer et al., 1994; Rushton et al., 2001).

Of six other studies that do compare outcomes for separated and jointly placed siblings, three report better outcomes for children placed with their siblings (Drapeau et al., 2000; Rosenthal et al., 1988 [Colorado data only]; Staff & Fein, 1992), one notes better emotional and poorer cognitive outcomes for children placed with their siblings (Smith, 1998), one found no differences between the groups (Wedge & Mantle, 1991), and one reports poorer outcomes for sibling placements (Thorpe & Swart, 1992). Of the six, four assessed outcome based on whether or not placement ended prematurely (Drapeau et al., 2000; Rosenthal et al., 1988 [Colorado data only]; Staff & Fein, 1992, Wedge & Mantle, 1991), while two employed agency records, interviews with adults, or evaluative tests to assess child functioning (Smith, 1998; Thorpe & Swart, 1992).

5. Implications for child welfare practice, policy, and research

5.1. State of child welfare practice as it affects sibling placement

In many jurisdictions in the United States, public agencies confront a growing sense of crisis, fueled by increased referrals and placements at a time of financial retrenchment, staff turnover, and the loss of many foster homes (Schorr, 2000). Similar crises have been reported in Great Britain (Randall, Cowley, & Tomlinson, 2000) and Australia (Scott & Farrow, 1993). This difficult set of circumstances coincides with increased expectations that child welfare agencies somehow do more with less. They are expected to prevent fatalities from child maltreatment, to keep families together whenever possible, to place children within their extended families as a first placement option, and, especially since passage of the *Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997* in the United States, to shorten the period of time children spend in out-of-home care. To these sometimes contradictory mandates, certain states and courts have added expectations concerning placements of siblings, as discussed further below.

The diverse situations of children in the public child welfare system make it very challenging to place children with their siblings (Hegar, *in press*). Many foster and adoptive children are siblings or half-siblings who may not have shared a home prior to removal by the state. They frequently come into care at different times, and they sometimes are placed by different agencies or jurisdictions, which may not have record of their relationship. Members of many sibling groups have individual needs that can require

different levels of care. Some are part of large sibling groups with wide age spans that pose a challenge to place in any single home or setting.

Decision making in child welfare practice is based on many factors besides the individual worker's understanding of what "best social work practice" might suggest. Decisions concerning placement of siblings may be based on agency policy, supervisory directives, and recommendations of interdisciplinary teams, as well as on available resources including time, homes, and funds. Despite the challenges they present, it is encouraging that sibling placements recently have become a focus of Child and Family Service Reviews in the United States.

5.2. Growing attention to siblings in policy and law

Like practitioners, researchers and theorists are paying increasing attention to sibling relationships, and this recognition is mirrored in the child welfare policy of some jurisdictions. English law has stated a preference for joint sibling placements since 1989 ([Children Act, 1989](#)). In the United States, where family law is primarily a state matter, the kinship ties of foster children nevertheless have been accorded recognition by the [Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997](#), which expresses a preference for placements with relatives. Although federal law does not extend that preference to include siblings, most U.S. states have taken steps in that direction. A majority of states now have statutes that address the sibling ties of foster children ([Christian, 2002](#)). While statutory approaches vary widely, many states declare a preference for joint sibling placements. In a few, such as Colorado and California, laws require state agencies to respect in very specific ways the rights of foster children from sibling groups ([Christian, 2002](#)).

Maryland provides an example of a state that takes a more general approach to the issue of siblings. There, state law directs public child welfare agencies developing permanent plans for a foster child to consider the child's "attachment and emotional ties to the child's natural parents and siblings" ([Maryland Family Law Article, Section 5–525 \[c\]](#)). At the other extreme, California's statutes concerning siblings are more detailed and specific. The California Welfare and Institutions Code, which emphasizes joint sibling placement, was amended in 1999 to bring the time frames for making permanent placement decisions (which are dependent on the child's age) into better alignment for sibling groups that include children both under and over 3 years of age. Other recent amendments to California law strengthen the state's obligation to provide siblings in foster care with information about and contact with each other ([California Welfare and Institutions Code, Section 16002 a and b; Christian, 2002; Shlonsky et al., 2003](#)).

Court decisions also have influenced child placement practice and policy in several jurisdictions. In New York City, the class action suit of *Jesse E. v. New York City Department of Social Services*, settled by consent in 1993, influenced the Child Welfare Administration to revise its foster care system to place more siblings together. In other jurisdictions child placement practice affecting siblings also has been challenged by class action suits (e.g., *Del A. v. Edwin Edwards*).

However, courts have yet to recognize a "right of association" of siblings, an idea probably first advocated by [Reddick \(1974\)](#) and periodically discussed in the legal and

social service literature (Dillard, 1999, 2002; Hegar, 1988a; Jones, 1993; O’Leary & Scholfield, 1994; Patton & Latz, 1994). For example, in 1998 the Massachusetts Supreme Court, hearing an appeal of an adoption decision made by the public child welfare agency, was urged by the agency to “recognize a general presumption in favor of maintaining a sibling relationship in custody cases” (*Adoption of Hugo*, 1998 p. 524). That court was not persuaded to “give presumptive weight to the sibling relationship” (p. 524), and the U.S. Supreme Court subsequently declined to review the decision (Dillard, 1999, 2002).

5.3. Implications of this review of the literature for practice

Policy makers and practitioners who look to the empirical literature of the past 15 years for information about sibling placement will find a body of research that is unusually consistent on some points. Although the 17 studies reviewed here vary widely in definition of sibling groups, legal jurisdiction, agency auspices, characteristics of the children studied, and study methods, their conclusions about factors associated with separation of siblings are similar and are consistent with earlier research. Although the studies vary in size and sophistication, the consistency of certain findings may provide some guidance for practice and policy. Siblings are more likely to experience separation in foster care when they are older, are further apart in age, come from larger sibling groups, enter foster care at different times, have special needs, or require placement other than kinship foster homes. More important, findings of the studies support the tentative conclusion that joint sibling placements are as stable as or more stable than placements of single children or separated siblings, and several studies suggest that children do as well or better when placed with their brothers and sisters.

In child welfare practice, case-by-case decision making is the norm, both because the work requires individual assessments and plans and because of the role of the courts in determining what will promote the best interests of each individual child. Therefore, it is always appropriate in practice situations to balance careful assessment of individual families with the weight of research-based knowledge. Decision making in child welfare benefits from multidisciplinary and multinational perspectives on important practice issues, such as sibling placement in foster care and adoption.

5.4. Implications of this review of the literature for research

Although this review of the empirical literature of the past 15 years can begin to inform child welfare policy and individual practice decisions, there is great need for additional, well-designed and executed research concerning siblings in placement. It is encouraging that some recent studies have used careful definitions of siblings and large sample sizes. Studies that further the development of appropriate measures of placement outcomes and that examine outcomes of sibling placements are especially needed. The field could also benefit from more extensive examination of the existing literature, including studies in other languages and formats that were not captured by this review.

Appendix A

Summary of studies of sibling placement in foster care and adoption

Study	Location	Subject	Selection	Sample size	Definition	Purpose	Data source	Separation	Joint placement outcome
(1) Barth et al., 1988	California, USA	Adoptees over age 3 years at placement	13-County public agency population	544 with siblings 611 placed alone	As defined by agencies at time of adoption	Find disruption rates and associated case characteristics	State adoption placement forms and agency survey	(No separation data)	Disruption rate no higher for sibling placements, except for children over 15 years
(2) Boer and Spiering, 1991	The Netherlands	Foster children in regular and therapeutic homes	15-Agency population	137 with sibs	As defined by agencies	Determine factors related to disruption	Questionnaires, interviews with agency staff	(All sibling groups placed together, no separation data)	Disruption rate (31% over years) unrelated to sibling issues
(3) Boer et al., 1994	The Netherlands	International adoptees, ages 10–15 years	National sample	399 with siblings 1749 placed alone	As defined by agencies at time of adoption	Compare sibs with single adoptees	Parental survey, including CBCL	(No separation data)	Lower CBCL problem score; no difference in disruption rate
(4) Boer et al., 1995	The Netherlands	Children age 0–11 years in first out-of-home placement lasting at least 2 weeks	95 Agencies and facilities in five court districts	28 Only child in family to be placed 50 placed jointly	As defined by agencies	Determine how individual and sibling placements differ	Agency records	Children placed singly are older, are boys, have behavior problems; jointly placed have parents in crisis	(No outcome data)
(5) Brod-zinsky and Brodzinsky, 1992	Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, USA	Adoptees	Respondents to advertisements and outreach to agencies	44 with sibs 86 placed alone or with adoptive sibs	As defined by agencies at time of adoption	Study impact of family structure on adjustment of adopted children	Mothers' CBCL and AAS; teachers' HESB; and children's ABS	(No separation data)	No significant differences in adjustment
(6) Drapeau et al., 2000	Quebec, Canada	Foster children and children of divorce	3-Region quota sample	134 Intact sib groups 201 split sib groups	Maternal sibs who had lived together 1+ years	Identify factors related to sibling separation	Questionnaires to agency staff	58% of groups split are: larger, older, greater age gaps, non-kin placement	Fewer placement changes

(7) Holloway, 1997	England, UK	Adopted children and foster children in long-term placements	One-local-authority population	65 Children placed with sibs 169 placed alone	Not defined	Study placement outcome for adoptees and long-term foster children	Agency records	(No separation data)	Disruption rate no higher for sibling groups
(8) Kosonen, 1996	Scotland, UK	Foster and adopted children	One local authority population	297 Children from sibling groups	Share one parent and lived together or would have without placement	Describe situations of sib groups in foster care	Questionnaires and interviews with agency staff	82% of FC have sibs; 60% split are: in non-kin placements, placed serially	(No outcome data)
(9) Maclean, 1991	Bradford, England, UK	Children in all types of substitute care	One-local-authority population	281 Children from sibling groups	Share one parent and lived together or would have without placement	Describe sib groups in care and compare to other research	Agency records	41% of FC split from sibs are: separated by agency choice; placed serially	(No outcome data)
(10) Rosenthal et al., 1988 ^a	Colorado, USA	Children, ages 3–12 years, whose adoptions had disrupted and matched pairs in intact placement	Selected from public child welfare agency to meet study criteria	27 Children from disrupted adoptions 27 matched from intact adoptions	As defined by agency at time of placement	Find predictors of disruption in special-needs adoption	Questionnaire to agencies; Louisville Behavior Checklist (LBC)	(No separation data)	Reduced risk of disruption for children placed with siblings
(11) Rosenthal et al., 1988 ^a	Oklahoma, USA	Children in adoptive and trial adoptive placements	Statewide public agency sample	124 Children placed in adoption with sib(s) 127 children placed singly	As defined by agency at time of placement	Find predictors of adoption disruption	Agency records	(No separation data)	Interaction of age and sibling placement (older children with sibs at less risk of disruption)
(12) Rushton et al., 2001	London and surrounding (home) counties	Children, at least one of whom was aged 5–11 years, in adoptive and other permanent placements	Referrals from local authorities (13) and voluntary agencies (3)	133 Children (101 from sibling groups) placed in 72 families	Two or more biologically related children	Study multiple aspects of placement experience after 1 year in permanent placement	Interviews with parents and social workers and questionnaires from teachers	Reasons for sibling separation were: children's needs; placement at different times	Attachment by parents after 1 year highest for sibling groups placed in families without other children; families report more difficulties with children placed singly; no difference in disruption rates

(continued on next page)

Appendix A (continued)

Study	Location	Subject	Selection	Sample size	Definition	Purpose	Data source	Separation	Joint placement outcome
(13) Shlonsky et al., 2003	California, metropolitan area, USA	Foster children who had been in care at least 90 days	Cross-sectional public agency population	11,698 Independent children from sibling groups in foster care	As defined by agency	Determine which children were more likely to be placed with sibs	California Children's Services Archive of agency records	Predictors of sib separation were: entering care >30 days apart; being 13 years or older; age span of >4 years; opposite sex pairs; and more	(No outcome data)
(14) Smith, 1998	New York State, USA	Preschool-age foster children	Selected to meet study criteria	25 Placed with 1 sib 13 separated	Not defined	Compare child functioning of sibs separated and placed together	Child Behavior Check List; Adaptive Social Behavior Inventory; Peabody	Those placed with siblings had more pre-placement psychological problems	Fewer emotional and behavioral problems; lower receptive vocabulary scores
(15) Staff and Fein, 1992	USA	Children in long-term foster care	Private agency population	262 Children	As defined by participating agencies	Describe sibling placements and explore placement disruption	Agency records	73% of FC have sibs in care; 53% split from sibs are older, female, non-minority	More likely to remain in first placement and less likely for one sib to disrupt

(16) Thorpe and Swart, 1992	Ontario, Canada	Foster children	Single agency population	115 Children from sibling groups	Maternal siblings entering care together	Explore reasons for and outcomes of sibling separation	Agency records	Separated siblings older	More problems and poorer school performance in care; more symptoms at discharge
(17) Wedge and Mantle, 1991	England, UK	Children referred for substitute care	Multiple agency populations	642 Children, including 160 siblings	As defined by agencies	Multifaceted review of sibs in care, including placement disruption	Agency records	25% of FC enter care with sibs; 88% placed with sibs; public agencies separate more	No difference in disruption rate for sibs placed together or separately
(18) Welty et al., 1997	California, USA	Foster children	State population	587 Sibling groups	Maternal siblings or half-siblings	Determine placement barriers and solutions	Agency records, questionnaires, interviews	60% of FC have sibs in care; ca. 40% of sibs are separated: wide age range and non-kin homes	(No outcome data)

^a These two study samples are presented in the same article.

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