Supporting Sibling Relationships of Children in Permanent Fostering and Adoptive Families

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Key findings

- Sibling networks of looked-after and accommodated children can be large, diverse in age and spread over multiple households and care types (kinship, foster, residential care and adoption). This creates challenges in terms of supporting sibling relationships.

- Three categories of biological sibling emerged from the analysis of case files: familiar, stranger and undocumented siblings. Seventy-six familiar siblings and 78 stranger siblings of the 50 children included in the study were identified. Numbers of undocumented siblings could not be estimated.

- Children who were accommodated and subsequently placed permanently away from their birth parents experienced a high degree of estrangement from siblings. Fifty-eight percent of these children had biological siblings who were 'stranger' siblings and 68% of children were living apart from at least one of their 'familiar' biological siblings.

- Children's contact arrangements with siblings and wishes in this regard were inadequately documented in case files. Where recorded, sibling contact tended to diminish over time.

- Patterns of referral and intervention differed by birth order with first-born children less likely than last-born children to be referred to the Hearing System or accommodated before they were one year old. They were also less likely to be the subject of compulsory measures at first referral to the Reporter. Last-born children were accommodated at an earlier age and were more likely to be adopted than their older siblings.

Background to the study

Around 95,000 children were in the care of local authorities in the UK in 2016[1], most often as a result of traumatic childhood experiences such as abuse and neglect. There is a presumption within the laws of the UK that looked-after and accommodated children will be placed with siblings whenever practicable and in the best interests of the child. In practice, however, separation from siblings is a common experience. Previous research has estimated that 70 - 80% of accommodated children have siblings also in care and around 70% of these experience separation[2,3]. Where children are placed separately from siblings, they typically express a strong desire to stay in contact with brothers and sisters[4]. Contact arrangements vary in type, frequency, quality and availability of support and sibling contact tends to become less frequent over time[5]. Outcome studies have indicated that separation of siblings is associated with increased placement disruption, poorer child wellbeing and reduced likelihood of permanence[6,7]. This study focused on looked-after and accommodated children who were placed permanently away from home and the siblings of these children.

Aims of the study

- To map patterns of sibling relationships, placements and contact of looked-after children who become placed permanently away from home.

- To explore the meaning of sibling relationships for children who move from public care into permanent placements.

- To identify ways in which UK welfare services and carers can better support these relationships.

Methodology

The study involved an analysis of administrative data and case files held by Scottish Children's Reporters Administration (SCRA). The sample was selected from a previously identified cohort of 200 children who were the subject of an earlier study of permanence-planning and decision-making for looked-after children in Scotland[8]. The larger cohort constituted children who were looked-after under compulsory measures and went on to have Permanence Orders or Adoption Orders made by Sheriff Courts between 1st April 2013 and 31st March 2014. From this cohort, 50 unrelated children, all of whom had at least one biological sibling, were selected for inclusion in the current study. These are referred to as 'index' children.

> The analysis includes 50 index children and their 154 biological siblings.

The task of defining and identifying a sibling relationship in the case of looked-after children can be complex[6]. For the purposes of this analysis the definition was restricted to biological sisters and brothers. Given that data would be collected from case files held by SCRA in geographically-dispersed offices, cluster sampling was used. The 50 'index' children were selected from seven local authority areas (two city councils, two rural and three mixed urban and rural areas) to ensure a range of contexts was captured. These files and the SCRA Case Management System were then used to identify the siblings of the 50 index children. Using this procedure, a total of 154 biological siblings were identified.

In-depth interviews are underway with 30 children, young people, permanent foster carers and adopters. This briefing reports findings from the analysis of administrative data and case files only.

Findings and discussion

Sibling networks of looked-after and accommodated children are large and diverse

The size of biological sibling groups ranged from 2 to 9 children and the mean sibling group size (including the index child) was just over 4. Numbers of maternal siblings were calculated to allow a comparison with birth rate data. This analysis found that 40% of index children had 3 or more maternal siblings. This compares to Eurostat figures[9] from 2013 that report that just 9.5% of babies born in UK had three or more older (maternal) siblings.

A typology of familiar, stranger and undocumented siblings was developed

From the analysis three categories of sibling were developed to capture the nature of sibling relationships reflected in case files: 'familiar', 'stranger' and 'undocumented' siblings. Siblings who were 'familiar' to the index child were those where reports indicated some level of relationship with the child regardless of their living circumstances, frequency of contact or the closeness of the relationship. 'Stranger' siblings were those mentioned in reports, but where it was clear that the index child had not had an opportunity to establish any kind of relationship with the sibling, had never had any form of contact with them and may not even have been aware of their existence. This category included full or half-siblings adopted or accommodated before the child was born, half-siblings where parents were estranged, and half or full-siblings born after the child was permanently placed and where no contact arrangements were in place. 'Undocumented' siblings were those absent from files. A total of 76 familiar siblings and 78 stranger siblings were identified. It was not possible to estimate the number of undocumented siblings, though research suggests that it is common

for siblings to exist but not be captured in administrative data systems and case files[10]. The methodological challenges of studying the experiences and outcomes of looked-after siblings are well documented in the literature[6,11,12].

Estrangement from siblings was a common experience for children

Well over half (58%) of index children had at least one stranger sibling. This figure appears to be higher than that reported by Rushton et al[13] who found that around two thirds of siblings were "known" to children though only 50% "well known". Around one in five index children had stranger siblings only, often as a result of adoption of siblings before or after the child was born or parental separation/re-partnering. Estrangement did not always equate with geographical distance. Several stranger siblings were living in the same local authority as an index child following permanent placement or a relationship breakdown (n=15).

It was also common for children to be living apart from at least one of their familiar biological siblings (68%). Around two fifths were living apart from all of their familiar biological siblings. Siblings are, therefore, growing up in multiple households and in a range of care settings including kinship, foster, residential care and adoption. This creates challenges in terms of supporting relationships. Previous research has indicated that placement decisions regarding sibling separation or co-location are often dictated by resources rather than children's needs or preferences[14].

> Two fifths of index children were living apart from all of their biological siblings.

Children's contact arrangements and wishes in this regard were frequently not recorded as part of the hearing process or recorded in piecemeal fashion throughout a child's file creating significant challenges with regard to extracting these data. There were varying experiences of, and plans for, contact including direct contact, indirect and no contact. Around four fifths of children had direct contact with at least one separated sibling while looked-after. The tendency was for contact to diminish over time. For around two fifths of children the plan was for no contact (direct or indirect) with any siblings when in their permanent placement.

> First-born siblings were less likely than last-born siblings to be accommodated before they were one year old.

The mismatch between supply and demand for sibling placements and support for contact requires urgent attention and innovative solutions in terms of housing stock and carer recruitment, support and training. While policy and practice aspirations are to retain sibling co-residence and contact wherever possible and appropriate, barriers to achieving this have persisted over time. Statutory guidance[15] promotes the maintenance of family relationships when a child becomes looked-after; however, sibling contact is not considered to the same extent as birth parent contact and decisions regarding sibling contact are often subsumed under parental arrangements. Research has identified that a key barrier to contact of siblings can be foster carer attitudes[16].

Patterns of referral and intervention by birth order

Data indicate that first-born children may be exposed to risk over a longer period of time. They were less likely than last-born siblings to be referred to the Hearing System or accommodated before they were one year old and less likely to be the subject of compulsory measures (either through a referral to a Children's Hearing or a CPO made by the Court) at first referral to the Reporter. Last-born children were accommodated at an earlier age and were more likely to be adopted than their older siblings. This extended exposure to harm is likely to have long-term consequences for children.

Implications for law, policy and practice

The following areas are highlighted as priorities for future action:

1. Developing specialist sibling group foster placements that are retained for such placements and where carers are trained in sibling assessment and intervention and provided with specialist support.

2. Targeted recruitment, training and support of adopters of sibling groups.

3. Clear and consistent recording of children's views regarding sibling placement and contact as part of the Children's Hearings process.

4. A review of statutory guidance to ensure it fully reflects the needs of looked-after siblings with regards to assessment, placement, contact arrangements and the promotion of wellbeing.

Acknowledgements

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