Siblings and adoption – Reflections on research and experience

Laura Mason – ATD Fourth World

Anna Gupta - Royal Holloway, University of London
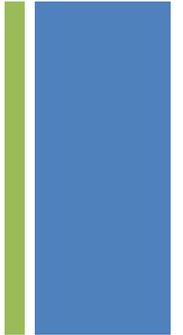
Listening to children and involving them in decisions (The Care Inquiry)

What we know children need and value:

- **Information** – honesty and clarity about what is happening

- **Choice** – to be involved in decisions e.g. from matching with a family or placement to decorating your bedroom

- **Belonging** – to be part of the whole foster/adoptive/kin family; all parents, carers, siblings and significant others

- **Identity** – important to have a coherent sense of self; life story work; positive contact with birth family; not to feel 'different' because in care/adopted; to feel 'normal'.

- **Support** – importance for children in all placements of continuity and trusting relationships with decision makers and supporters.
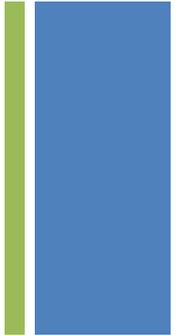
Relationships : 'the golden thread' – The Care Inquiry

- **Relationships** with people who care for and about children are the golden thread in children's lives, and the quality of the child's relationships is the lens through which we should view what we do and plan to do.

- We need a care system that places at its heart the quality and continuity of relationships, and that promotes and enhances the ability of those who are important to children –caregivers and others – to provide the care and support they need.
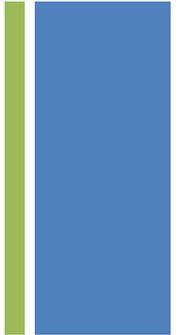
Sibling relationships

- Relationships with siblings are likely to be the longest in a person's lifetime.

- Sibling relationships can promote positive developmental outcomes:
  - It can provide a permanent unconditional relationship that is ascribed rather than an earned role – validate a child's worth as a human being because the love he/she receives does not have to be earned – throughout lifetime (Cicirelli, 1995)
  - Sibling relationships frequently remain important sources of support through late adolescence, adulthood and old age (Hegar, 2005)
  - During adverse circumstances, siblings can function as a buffer and provide each other with comfort (Caya & Liem, 1998; Campbell *et al.,* 1999)
  - Can provide a role and sense of responsibility (self-identity) as well as a role model (Kaplan *et al.*, 1993; Elgar & Head,1999)

Sibling relationships – children in care

- Can provide a sense of belonging, shared history and help identity development, self esteem and are able to offer each other a sense of permanency, belonging and socio-genealogical connectedness (Elgar & Head, 1999; Owusu-Bempah, 2010)

- Can provide support for each other when separated from family members - a source of continuity when all else is changing (Kosonen, 1994)

- Separation can create involve great sadness and their grief aggravated by worry and guilt about siblings (Harrison, 1999)

- Older siblings can provide a "quasi-parenting role" for younger brothers or sisters when they leave care, which, is being lost as a result of separation -should be a presumption for social workers to facilitate "meaningful" contact between siblings in care plans (CSJ, 2015)

- The studies involving an adult perspective leaves no doubt that the separation of siblings is not a minor issue and can inflict pain, sadness and feelings of injustice which may remain throughout life. (Mullender,1999)
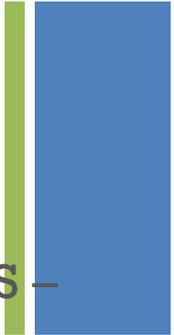
Sibling relationships

- However not all sibling relationships are supportive and nurturing:

  - In some cases, siblings develop unhealthy rivalrous or abusive relationships with each other (Bank, 1992; Drapeau *et al.,* 2000)

  - Some siblings may reinforce behavioural problems in each other – risk of placement instability increased (Howe *et al.*, 2000)

  - For some children, traumatic memories of past parental abuse can be surfaced by contact with siblings, causing the child additional trauma while in care (Bank, 1992)
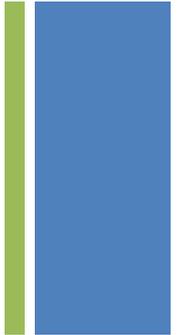
Siblings in care

- Generally under-researched area with most studies done in the US – some notable exceptions

- Statistics not kept – Dept of Education statistics do not mention sibling placements

- Number of children in care with siblings high - between 50 – 80% separated from some or all siblings

- The *Children's Care Monitor 2013/14* produced by the Children's Rights Director found that of the 1,417respondents:
  - 63% had siblings in care and of those 71% were separated from some of their siblings
  - 91% of those placed together thought this was the right decision and 45% who had been separated thought this the right decision.
  - Those that were more likely to be placed separately were disabled children and children living in children's homes

Placement of siblings

- Evidence from practice experience and research (e.g. Rushton *et al.* , 2001; Saunders & Selwyn, 2010) suggests that there are frequently dilemmas and conflicts of interests between siblings' needs/ rights.
- For example:
  - A large sibling group where it is likely that younger children will be able to be placed with adoptive parents, but unlikely for the older children to be placed for adoption and with the sibling group.
  - Siblings being placed with kinship carers that are unable to also look after the whole sibling group.
  - Children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, where they will be difficult to care for together or be destructive/ dysfunctional dynamics.

Experiences of Agencies and Adopters in Placing Sibling Groups for Adoption from Care
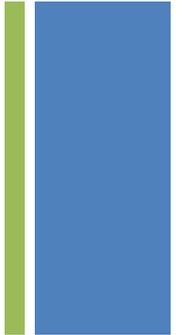
- Saunders & Selwyn (2010) found that whilst the benefits of keeping siblings together often accepted by professionals, in practice harder to achieve due to:
  - Shortage of adopters willing to take sibling groups
  - Limited financial resources to pay inter-agency fee
  - Relatives wanting to separate siblings
  - Concerns that adopters would be overwhelmed by the children's needs

This study also found that:

- Adoption support was much appreciated, but 'demand was higher than supply'.

- Professionals reported concerns that regular adoption allowances were reducing in frequency, which could deter potential applicants and restrict the adoption of sibling groups to those with significant financial resources.
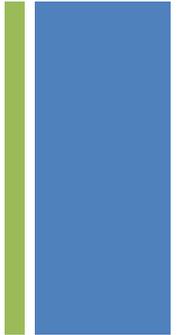
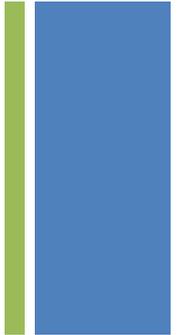# Systematic Review of the research on sibling placements (Hegar, 2005)

- Siblings are more likely to experience separation when they are:
  - Older
  - Further apart in age
  - Come form larger siblings groups
  - Enter foster care at different times

- Tentative conclusions that:
  - Joint sibling placements are as stable or more stable than placements of single children or separated siblings
  - Several studies suggest that children do as well or better when placed with their brother and sisters

Sibling contact

- If siblings have to be separated, contact is generally seen as crucial to maintain, but in reality loss of contact between siblings not uncommon (e.g. Mullender, 1999)

- In Neil's study of 168 adopted children, 70% of children were known to have one or more birth sibling and 95% of these had a sibling living outside of their adoptive family.

- Of this group, 44% had contact with all their siblings, 25% with some, and 31% with none of their siblings.

- Indirect contact (usually letters sent though an agency) was more common than face-to-face contact, this being predominantly with siblings who were also adopted or in care (Neil 1999).

Sibling contact

- Frequently the decision to stop direct sibling contact is made on the basis of:
  - the younger child's plan for adoption,
  - the perceived risks of birth family disruption
  - the lack of desire of adoptive parents for on-going contact
  - consequent limiting of placement choice
  - unwillingness to restrict decision-making of adoptive parents

- In some cases may well be the right decision, but often formulaic and tunnel vision – 'a truth', and with limited regard for the impact on the children (especially non-adopted sibling) or on the sibling relationship
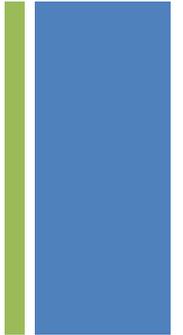
Making sense of siblings: connections and severances in post-adoption contact
(Cossar & Neil, 2012)

- Examines the experience of post-adoption direct sibling contact from the perspectives of adoptive parents and birth relatives, including adult siblings.

- Sibling contact meetings were mostly infrequent (four out of five happened only once or twice a year) with one-third (32%) of meetings being attended by a professional and just one-third (32%) involving a full exchange of names and addresses between relevant parties.

- Revealed the complex multiple family networks that exist between adoptive families and the families of the adopted child's birth siblings. These networks connect some siblings, but sever connections with others. With some children struggling to make sense of sibling placement and contact plans .

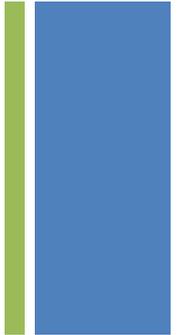# **Making sense of siblings: connections and severances in post-adoption contact** (Cossar & Neil, 2012)

- Older siblings whose younger siblings had been adopted were more likely to frame their narratives in terms of loss.
  - A grandmother caring for her grandson who had contact with his two adopted sisters spoke of his distress, 'he was ten years old when they were shoved apart, ten years old and he is 18 in July and he still cries after the visits'.

- Where direct contact occurs, infrequent meetings mean that regular, repeated interactions normally considered to constitute 'family practices' are absent, in some cases creating barriers to feelings of kinship.

- **Some implications for policy and practice:**
  - The need for contact support
  - Supporting children to make sense of their sibling connections
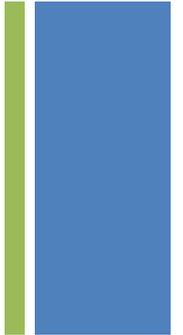 - Managing contact meetings

What about the non-adopted siblings?

- Very limited research evidence – neglected voices

- Research & practice agendas focusing on relationships with adults and adopted children

- Legal framework - decisions should depend on the individual needs of each child but also:

  - As between Child A and Child B, if their interests conflict, the court has to adopt a balancing exercise (*Birmingham City Council v H (No 2)* [1993] 1 FLR 833), weighing all relevant considerations and choosing the least detrimental outcome (*Re A (Conjoined Twins: Medical Treatment)* [2001] 1 FLR 1).

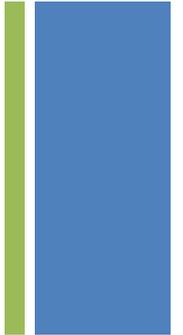- What are our moral and legal responsibilities to non-adopted children?

Laura's story

- Some themes:
  - Enduring Loss and abandonment
  - Attachment and trust
  - Impact on sibling network – changes in placement
  - Living with fear and the unknown
  - Lack of voice – not being heard
  - Letterbox contact
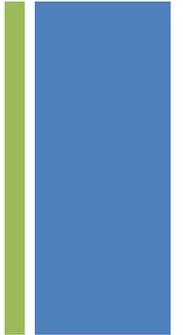 - Making sense of complex family relationships

Reflections on decision-making

- Promoting rights and well-being of all children – do we need to think differently about sibling relationships and contact?

- Some possible factors affecting decision-making:
  - Professional's personal values and emotional responses regarding importance of sibling relationships influences weight given to options
  - Dominant ideology / assumptions about closed adoption – primacy of adopted child's needs and adopter's views?
  - Power relationships and children – does this lead to a devaluing of children's voices and their relationships with other children (i.e. siblings)?
  - Resources and the role of the state in private family life – leading to less support being provided to adopters and therefore limiting opportunities for sibling groups to be placed together and contact maintained in adoptive/ SGO placements.
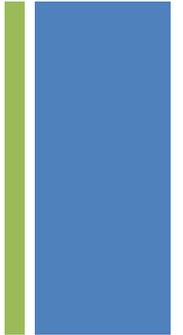
Some concluding thoughts

- There are no easy answers/ no room for 'one size fits all solutions'

- Children's and families lives are complex and unique

- They require and deserve social work practitioners who are able to critically reflect on and analyse each situation on its own merits

- Practitioners require managers and organisations who support and facilitate such work

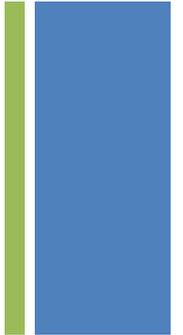- Decisions fundamental to children's rights – across a lifetime

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