

Think Siblings Project

Final Report



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Part One: Siblings

Introduction

Think Siblings, a programme led by Coram Cambridgeshire Adoption (CCA), aims to develop new ways of supporting the placement of children waiting for adoption in sibling groups. The programme runs until 31 March 2018 and is funded through the Department of Education's Adoption Practice and Improvement Fund.

It is hoped that as a result of this work more children looked after, who are part of a sibling group, will have a greater opportunity for positive and stable placements with loving families. In addition, we hope to improve outcomes for families by driving improvements in the way children in sibling groups have their needs assessed, and to increase the pool of adopters and carers who are able and willing to consider adopting children in sibling groups.

Our aim is to gain an understanding from the outset of the process of sibling placements which will assist us in other areas of enquiry for example planning for placements, sibling support needs and planning and preparation for sibling's transitions. The literature review undertaken as part of the project was intended to review the actual use, quality and appropriateness of the assessment tools currently used in the sector by social workers, court and clinical professionals to assess the needs of sibling groups. This includes tools and models that were identified during our literature review.

We concluded that despite the life-time impact of care planning for siblings, relatively little work to date has focused on ensuring that robust sibling assessments and were embedded in practice and were used to inform a child's pathway to permanence. We hoped that by extending our understanding of the use, quality and appropriateness of the assessment tools currently available, we would begin to develop a comprehensive range of resources to support the assessment process. We wanted to ensure that practice excellence was at the heart of the process and that by undertaking this work more children who have the opportunity for positive and enduring placements with support plans that would reflect their individual needs.

We considered it imperative that people and relationships remained at the heart of the work undertaken, and we realised that by offering further assessment resources alone we were unlikely to create good quality assessments, and the key for us was our engagement, and support of dedicated social workers and practitioners, who would use this as part of their assessment toolkits. We recognise the fact that relationships will be the vehicle in which new research and thinking about sibling groups will become realised in practice. Our attention to the multifaceted influences that surround the subject of siblings, and holding children, siblings, adopters and practitioners centrally is fundamental to our approach in developing practice excellence for siblings.

We swiftly recognised that social workers and in some local authorities clinicians are essential to this work, given that they are in the privileged position of working directly with siblings throughout their care journey, given that this work inherently offers

therapeutic opportunities. We believe that thinking this way is advantageous for both social workers and sibling groups.

It is acknowledged that the context in which this work is being undertaken is from a social work perspective, looking out as well as holding in mind the sibling perspectives of children, and young people looking in. This is fundamentally a social work practitioner perspective for social work practitioners.

Context

This literature review is being undertaken to support practice in local authority care planning when decisions are needed in relation to children and their siblings; whether they should be placed together or apart, and in response to the concern regarding how a lack of this knowledge may disadvantage many children (Sanders, 2004). As early as 1985, Jones and Niblett suggested that continuing to make decisions about whether to place siblings together or separately, often in the light of such little knowledge about sibling relationships, and the context of their abuse and neglect was unacceptable. We noted that there have been periods of renewed interest in siblings in the literature since this time. However much of the research was based on predominantly white, middle class, securely attached sibling samples and much less research has been specific to siblings who have been affected by abuse, neglect and trauma, or their relationships in the context of adoption and other forms of permanence.

In addition there are minimal longitudinal studies which focus on patterns of placements and which change between siblings being placed apart or together, and which also assess the longer term outcomes of siblings alongside continuity of placements and permanence. Similarly there are no studies which focus on the types of assessments completed by social workers in everyday practice, or what assessment models might most accurately predict outcomes for siblings placed together or apart. Therefore the core dilemmas surrounding *how* decisions should and are made in regards to siblings together or apart remains unclear, and have in our view contributed to highly variable practice across social workers in the field.

Research into the views of children and young people with experience of care has found that relationships with brothers and sisters are often what they value most in family life, sometimes more than any other family relationship (Selwyn, 2015). Holding in mind children's views regarding their sibling relationships; the importance of developing and maintaining sibling placements; and nurturing positive sibling relationships are essential considerations, where these are in the best interests of children. As the DfE (2012a) highlight, 'professional judgment' is key in this 'difficult and sensitive' area (p.4). Local authorities are responsible for deciding whether to place siblings together or apart, and it is in the main social workers that lead this decision-making process (Saunders & Selwyn, 2010).

The Children and Young Persons Act (2008) places a duty on Local Authorities to accommodate siblings together in care, so far as is reasonably practicable and subject to welfare considerations. The statutory guidance suggests that decisions regarding the placement of siblings must be based on assessment of relationships

within the sibling group, individual needs and the capacity of prospective adopters to meet these needs (DfE, 2012: p. 5).

Adoption Statutory Guidance (2013) 4.12 states; "...where an agency is making a placement decision on two or more children from the same family, it should be based on a comprehensive assessment of the quality of the children's relationship, their individual needs, and the likely capacity of the prospective adopter to meet the needs of all the siblings being placed together. Where it is not possible for the siblings to be placed together the agency should consider carefully the need for the children to remain in contact with each other and the need for adoption support." There is however no clear information is given regarding what measures might constitute a comprehensive assessment or methods are recommended in gaining a child or young person's wishes. There continues to be an absence of consistently adopted published policy guidelines regarding how this should be approached by social workers in practice (Beckett, S in Mullender, 1999).

Further, there appears to be little use of standardised measures for the comprehensive assessment of sibling relationships (Beckett et al, 1999; Rushton et al, 2001). For example, Beckett (1999) obtained 16 questionnaires from local authorities regarding planning and decision-making for siblings in care and found that ten had no existing policies or guidelines, and only one had an assessment format. It is however acknowledged that since this research was published, cultures around sibling assessment have evolved with the implementation of relevant policy. It would seem however that despite this, social workers are required to make their own judgment about what assessment tools or methods to employ when faced with these decisions. This may be particularly problematic in light of the complexity of this decision, and the weight of responsibility felt by social workers in getting it right, ensuring siblings who should stay together, do, and those who would benefit from individual placements have this opportunity.

A recent review of the available international literature conducted by the Rees Centre (2017) specific to siblings in foster care, found that decisions to place children together with, or apart from siblings, were commonly linked to a number of factors including the timing of their entry into care relative to one another, age on entry into care, sibling group size and placement type (Meakings, Sebba and Luke; 2017). It is stated that the findings from this review supported the legislation that requires local authorities to place siblings in care together where possible, subject to welfare considerations of the children (The Children and Young Persons Act, 2008).

Available research in the area of sibling placements is however only marginally favourable to sibling placement together. Although it is possible to identify research which strongly supports siblings placement together, it is also possible to identify research which points against sibling placements. The Rees Centre review (2017) found in the main, that sibling groups placed together experienced greater stability of placement, although not all the studies that considered stability demonstrated this. It was also noted that there is significant variability in what definitions are utilised by researchers to define siblingship and the impact on broader conclusions from research into siblings together or apart.

Further they found that older children separated from siblings, after having been in placement with them, were at particular risk of placement disruption and a poor sense of belonging in their foster family. Most of the evidence on emotional and behavioural outcomes for children showed either no relationship with joint or separate sibling placements or an improvement in particular circumstances (p.5). For certain children, in certain conditions, sibling placements together were associated with more favourable mental health outcome's, however, improved behavioural outcomes for children with high levels of behavioural difficulties on entry into care were seen in those young people most frequently separated from siblings in care.

In the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) review of research for its guidance on fostering in 2004, they report that they did not find conclusive evidence that placing siblings together improves their outcomes during or after placement, and state that there is insufficient evidence to suggest that placing siblings together *always* produces better outcomes for children, but that overall it does not appear to produce any worse outcomes. Although Hegar (2005) concluded that sibling placements are as stable as, or more stable than, placements of single children or separated siblings, they reported only marginal differences which pointed to sibling placement together. Further research completed by the same author in 2011 following a review of US database reported minimal significant findings in this regard.

The evidence from the updating review of the international research in relation to both adoption and fostering contexts conducted by Jones (2016) aligns to the Hegar (2005) review recommendations in concluding. The research noted some gender differences, for example girls separated from all of their siblings had significantly poorer mental health and peer relationships than girls living with at least one sibling. This was not the case for boys. Causality however, cannot be determined by one factor, in this case gender; as is the case in many of these research areas, i.e. whether poor mental health leads to separation of siblings or separation leads to poor mental health. Or indeed whether other factors, for example the nature of children's experiences leading to care, are associated with both poor mental health and the need for children to be placed separately.

It is therefore useful to acknowledge that although more recent reviews conclude that siblings being placed together was preferable and leads to improved "outcomes", the data utilised and pointing to this is subject to so many competing and contradictory factors and often shows only marginal differences. The matter of sibling relationships in this context is affected by so many variables, that could be attributed to pre-existing psychological difficulties, and could be due to separating siblings or indeed by keeping siblings together. This is without considering the wider systemic and relational influences on sibling relationships, which will change, dependant on the wider family context of that time.

For the assessing social worker there continues to be a great deal of ambiguity regarding these two polarities; siblings together or apart, and perhaps it is the type of thinking that takes place when stuck between two polarities such as these, that is experienced to be the most unhelpful. In our experience it was this stuck state that appeared to reduce practitioners capacity to act reflexively and thus meaningfully utilise the assessment processes available to them.

Considering the influence of these polarities on a wider level, there appears to be a commonly accepted position that placing siblings together was the right starting position. This can be seen across, policy, law, organisational boundaries, professional groups, and is inherent in practice norms for social workers. In our own family contexts, were you to ask whether siblings should be together or apart, the likely response would be that separation would be unthinkable and the majority would advocate strongly for siblings to remain together. Interestingly however, the available research doesn't strongly endorse this position, nor is there available research that has studied the influence of this position on outcomes and quality in decision making.

Starting from a position of siblings together and working away from this involves the social worker engaging in a process of identifying deficits and risks to justify separation. This is opposed to a model of enquiry, where positive and negative features may co-exist, and where the needs of individual children may be given equal weight to the presence or absence of risk in their sibling relationships. Having an awareness of the positions taken as a social worker within this polarity, can enable a difference enabling social workers to confidently obtain a full appreciation of the complex and contradictory relationships they are presented with, rather than "choose a side". This allows them to sit with them both positions and be in a different space and one from which they can weigh up those individual and combined needs unique to every sibling group.

In addition to these complex processes at play, it is the case that the population of children with plans for adoption has evolved over time and it is now highly likely that children for who adoption is being considered will have in the majority of cases experienced significant trauma, neglect and abuse. This means that the sibling groups we are now assessing present with levels of complexity in their shared relationships which differ from those siblings who may not have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in the same way.

It is therefore possible that both the starting position of siblings together, with an assumption that being together will protect them (and contribute to optimum outcomes) combined with the inherent complexity of relationships shared between siblings that we are currently assessing; is contributing to a crisis in confidence about how to make such decisions and leading to a huge variability in how these are undertaken. Similarly this may account for why, it is felt that the issue of variability should be addressed. That is not to say that placement together is not a realistic outcome for many siblings, however we invite the reader to be curious about the impact of a generalised polarised approach to sibling placements, either way.

In summary, privileging one aspect of research and continuing to "act into" the polarised discourse of siblings together or apart is in our view unhelpful and indeed hazardous. In trying to identify a pathway through the field of research and the vast range of variables that can impact upon outcomes for siblings whilst acknowledging that each sibling group is unique is deskilling for social workers and has in our view contributed to a paralysis and reluctance by social workers to undertake.

It is therefore the intention of this review to consider:

- What models and resources / tools are available to social workers to support the assessment of sibling relationships in the context of together or apart decisions
- What are the gaps in the literature and how might we respond to those areas

Literature Review

What models and resources/ tools are available to social workers to support the assessment of sibling relationships in the context of together or apart decisions

In the Lord & Borthwick, 2008 “Together or Apart Assessing Brothers and Sisters for Permanent Placement Guidance” the authors summarise some key criteria for separating siblings. In addition the ‘Sibling Relationship Checklist,’ (SRC) developed by The Bridge Consultancy is offered to assist social workers in assessing sibling relationships. The guidance stipulates that recommending separate placements usually involves a combination of factors, including extreme rivalry and jealousy; exploitation or scapegoating of one sibling by others; conflictual alliances between groups within the siblings; hierarchical positioning; highly sexualised behaviour between siblings; or extreme behaviours which amount to re-traumatising of each other. They recommend that ‘there should be specific written policies and procedures in relation to working with and planning for sibling groups’ (p.9). In practice, however, it is unclear as to whether this is the case for the majority of Local Authorities.

The SRC has not been piloted and evaluated since its publication however Sanders (2002) used the SRC in a key study of social work practice with siblings. He found that in some cases social workers reported that it provided information that they were aware of, but the parents were not, in others it was the other way round. In some cases, however the tool was not found to be useful (Sanders, 2004; p.212). In our own experience of using the SRC in practice, it can be less helpful when being utilised with younger children, for example some questions are developmentally focused and invite a “never” response which can negatively impact on scoring. This does not always give an accurate reflection of the quality of relationships. In addition the use of the checklist with larger groups of siblings can be complex with for example a sibling group of 5 requiring 10 separate checklists and increasing for larger sibling groups.

The validity of examining sibling pairs individually out of the context in which the sibling relationship is taking place (in terms of the wider intra-familial relationships) of the sibling group and whole family dynamic can be hazardous, if it is not utilised alongside other forms of assessment for validation. The guidance is very clear that the tool should be utilised amongst other measures and forms of direct work, however in reality it is possible that this may not always be the case. Alongside this is the likelihood of practitioners being able to realistically use the information gained from multiple sibling pairings for an assessment, and holding its meaning in the context of such vast cohort information.

Sanders (2004) offers concrete suggestions for assessing practitioners, and recommends the assessing practitioner considers the following;

- Family assessment of sibling relationships
- Assessing perceived experience of differential treatment
- Conjoint work with siblings, referencing assessment tools such as the genogram and family snake.

What is unique about this approach is that the model specifically places sibling relationships in the wider context of familial systems and the inter-relationship between them as depicted in the model “evaluating sibling relationships” (Figure A.2, Sanders, 2004: p221).

Observational methods appear to be most common in relation to sibling assessment practices. Whilst observation is used extensively in the pioneering studies of sibling relationships, including those by Judy Dunn and her colleagues (1982; 1983; 1988; 1990; 1993), it does not appear prominent in all social work assessment practices. In the main, observational tools were developed to assess conflict and hostility between siblings as well as the extent to which siblings cooperate, share, help, and play with one another.

Observational approaches are common particularly in early childhood because of the limited opportunity in collecting self-reports or direct work with such young children (e.g., Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; Volling, McElwain, & Miller, 2002), although observational assessments of sibling relationships are also common place in many of the studies examining sibling relationships in middle childhood and adolescence (e.g., Brody et al., 1992).

Attachment theory offers a further notable contribution to models of assessment for sibling groups. Kriss et al, (2013) present a sibling model based on attachment theory derived from research using the AAI (Adult Attachment Interview; George, Kaplan & Main, 1985) with parents and a modified version with children. It is noted however that its utility in the social work context is unknown.

Further Farnfield (2009) presents a modified Strange Situation Procedure for use in assessing sibling relationships and their attachment to carers. This offers suggested areas that can be referred to in supporting the practitioner to analyse on a number of dimensions considered crucial to understanding sibling relationships. The Strange Situation is the method of assessing attachment styles originally developed by Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al, 1969). The procedure is designed to be used in conjunction with other sources of information.

It is however noted that further research on the degree of correspondence with children’s behaviour in other settings is needed before it can be validated and this would require home and school observations as well as observations collated over time. In addition, this model is not developed in a social work setting and appears to be used in the context of specialist assessment outside the domain of Local Authority decision making. To date there has been no systematic validation study of this procedure in a social work setting.

The Family Futures assessment handbook published in 2007 considered four key elements in assessing the sibling relationships of fostered or adopted children. This includes;

- Parenting intensity
- The nature of the sibling relationship
- The compatibility of sibling's parenting needs
- The security of the sibling attachment relationship

The Family Futures handbook outlines an approach to analysing sibling relationships based on the work of Jaak Panksepp (Affective Neuroscience, 1998). From his extensive research on rats, he has determined that there are four main systems in the primitive brain which are essential for survival and are activated by attachment behaviour. These systems are: "Aggression, Fear, Comfort seeking and Play." This framework was applied to observations of children, particularly young children and children who have experienced early trauma. Rating a child as high, medium or low on each dimension in terms of the level of activation of each of these four systems can lead to an assessment of the security of the sibling attachment relationships. The extent to which this is universally available in the domain of local authority social workers, or whether this is exclusive to the developing agency is unclear from our own interviews with practitioners

Further, Hindle and Sherwin – White (2014) in their publication "Sibling Matters: A Psychoanalytic, Developmental and Systemic Approach" offer a comprehensive overview of relevant approaches to sibling relationships. In addition, the work includes an assessment framework "a psychotherapeutic model for siblings in care" (Hindle, 2014). This approach was influenced by a psychoanalytic approach to sibling assessment. The methodology draws information from a range of sources, including interviews with the involved professional network, questionnaires completed by the foster parents, and the use of the Narrative Story Stem Tool (Bretherton, Ridgeway and Cassidy (1990), and adapted by Hodges and Steele (2000).

The instruments utilised to support the assessment included the Child Behaviour Checklist (Achenbach and Edelbrock (1983), The Sibling Questionnaire designed by Furman (1990) and modified for the Maudsley Project. The questionnaire focused attention on the children's sibling relationships in regard to three dimensions, including relative status / power, warmth / closeness, and conflict. It is noted that the study was limited to six cases at the time of publication.

Wakelyn (2007) offers a psychodynamic assessment approach developed in the context of the Monroe Young Family Centre (MYFC). The MYFC approach relies on observation and detailed description of interaction. In the course of each three to four week assessment, the children are usually seen on their own three times, as well as in sibling groups, and with their parent or parents. Detailed observational notes are written, after each session. Children's overtly expressed wishes are thought about in the context of their play and interactions with each other, with their parents or carers, and with staff.

Observation and psychoanalytically informed interpretation of children's play and interactions are key tools in developing an overall picture of a child's internal and

external worlds, and contribute to planning for their future care. Assessment using this model are reported to be complementary to and sometimes supersede the overtly expressed wishes of the children. The chapter also highlights that the need for more research and follow-up studies in the area of sibling decisions and placement.

In the USA, there have been additional contributions made by Maschmeier (2001) . This was part of a large scale project in conjunction with the Northeast Ohio Adoption Services, USA. Through this project, the 'Sibling Decision Making Matrix' was developed. The Matrix draws attention to the importance of carefully examining the sibling relationship, as well as reflecting on the impact of either separating the siblings or keeping them together. Although this Matrix may be a potentially useful tool for social workers when making this type of decision, it does not appear to have been adopted more widely beyond the project for which it was designed. Its utility beyond the USA based project is unclear, and there appears to be no follow up evidence to suggest that its use would aid social workers in their decision-making, or that its use, would result in any positive outcomes for the sibling groups involved.

Whelan (2004) utilises attachment theory to develop a framework for determining if it is in the best interest of siblings to remain together or to be separated. Attachment theory is argued to assist the worker to look 'beyond the issue of protection' and to the emotional and developmental needs of the children in the sibling-set and allows speculation about how these needs may be met in alternative permanent family care. Whelan references the work of Stewart (1983) and Teti and Ablard (1989) who each conducted studies of siblings in the Strange Situation procedure. Whelan asserts that siblings can promote a secure caretaking environment and / or they can perpetuate an insecure caretaking environment. They also suggest that assessing the nature of these relationships becomes an important factor in understanding the family's functioning when determining placement needs of children going into foster care. The fundamental questions offered in this approach consist of;

- Will placing the siblings together contribute to a secure caregiving environment.
- Will placing the siblings together have a neutral effect on the security of the caregiving environment.
- Will placing the siblings together detract from a secure caregiving environment.

Whelan concludes that when using attachment theory the worker can be more positive and proactive in assessing the treatment needs of the child, and that the sibling placement is viewed in the context of the child's total needs.

Furman and Giverson (1995) offer five questions to utilise when considering the development of relationships between siblings as follows:

- The general nature of the parents relationships with their two children.
- Differences in the relationships that the children have with their parents.

- Techniques adopted by the parents for disciplining the children or responding to specific sibling interactions.
- The means adopted by the parents specifically to influence the sibling relationships in one way or another, for example by promoting positive interactions or discouraging negative ones.
- The quality of the relationship that the parents have with each other.

Ryan (2002) in a further US study offers a process of assessment consisting of researching the child's history and present functioning, and researching the following three areas including:

- The history of attachment and presence of attachment disorder.
- Whether the child has formed a healthy bond with the present caregiver.
- What the quality of attachment is between the siblings.

This includes a review of the history of the child, including interviews with foster carers, use of the "Randolph Attachment Disorder Questionnaire" (Randolph, 1997) and Interview with the child alongside observations of sibling pairs or groups.

Questionnaires about sibling relationships for carers and children have tended to focus on three dimensions of sibling interaction: warmth and affection, rivalry and hostility (Sanders, 2004). There are several different questionnaires available to assess sibling relationship quality, a full listing and description of which are beyond the goals of this review, however of note those that have arisen from the US include the Sibling Inventory of Behaviour (SIB) developed originally by Schaefer and Edgerton (1981), in relation to siblings where a child had a disability.

Further the Sibling Relationship Questionnaire (SRQ: Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), the Sibling Relationship Inventory (SRI: Stocker & McHale, 1992), and the Sibling Qualities Scale (SQS: Cole & Kearns, 2001) can be utilised in the context of primary aged children and during the period of adolescence. Parents have also completed the Sibling Relationships in Early Childhood Questionnaire (SREC: Volling and Elins, 1998), Parental Expectations and Perceptions of Children's Sibling Relationships questionnaire (PEPC-SRQ: Kramer & Baron, 1995).

However of these measures, the youngest age of the target group is five years and above. In the context of an assessment of sibling relationships in adoption, it is possible that many children are below this age and this is therefore a very limited measure not applicable to infants and children below the age of five. The Sibling Behaviours and Feelings Questionnaire (SBFQ: Mendelson, Aboud & Lanthier, 1994) can be utilised to assess very young children's sibling relationships for younger children in their toddler and preschool years.

Some of these questionnaires have been used more often than others in research, and therefore, have a more extensive data base on the reliability and validity of the instrument. I am however aware of these measures being utilised in a social work

setting, or specifically in the context of aiding together or apart decision making, and it is of note that the majority of the families involved in the development of the measures were white and middle-class and therefore do not address diversity with respect to ethnicity or examine children from different socioeconomic backgrounds and who have experienced trauma and abuse.

Although not specific to sibling assessment, or researched in the context of supporting sibling decisions, the use of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) in identifying individual needs of children and, in turn, combined needs of sibling groups has been referenced in research papers and is of additional note for the purposes of this review.

Conclusions and Further Project Recommendations

What are the gaps in the literature;

- There is an absence of any published formal measures or tools developed directly in the context of social work practice that have been validated. This is an area for further longitudinal research.
- The majority of tools available have been developed with samples which have been limited to a white, middle class family context, and not in the context of work with siblings who have suffered trauma or abuse.
- Equally there are few measures that can be utilised with younger children and infants under five, this being a key population of siblings in the context of adoption work.

The main resources / tools available to social workers lends themselves to a dyadic interpretation of sibling relationships, there is a perceivable gap in terms of assess larger sibling group dynamics and understand sibling relationships in the context of wider, influential family relationships.

Responses to Identified Dilemma's

We aim to develop a range of resources / tools to help assist social workers in conversations with families, and to support social workers reflection of the positions they take during the process of sibling assessment. We also note, the impact on their practice, how we notice what is noticed, and that this may offer opportunities for alternative possibilities for siblings. It is hoped that in doing so, this will offer a level of in depth assessment which is able to take into account all the possibilities for placement, and effectively weigh up those options that are in the best interests of the children. We envisage this starting with comprehensive training for social workers undertaking sibling assessments, and consultation with social workers considering how they might be best supported to developing further skills in this area.

We also hope to develop a reflective model to support social workers in supervision, meetings and otherwise, to appreciate the multiple contexts surrounding the

assessment and to locate how these influences may guide the assessment outcomes. Further, it is our intention to focus on offering a contribution to the assessment of larger sibling groups, as an identified gap in the literature and models available.

In addition we wanted to develop a range of resources / tool kit of approaches for social workers to assist in their assessment of sibling relationships, and a set of key principles to help guide them in navigating their recommendation and conclusions. Of course this decision sits within wider contexts, organisational and policy level, and as such we hope to consider systemically these influences in improving practice in this area.

It is hoped by holding our focus and ensuring we are getting it right in the very early stages of the sibling group's journey when social workers first become involved we can positively impact on practice further along the process, when placing and supporting siblings in their permanent families. We also wanted to understand the adopter dimension, their motivation for adopting and considering siblings in order to inform thinking about attracting and equipping adopters to consider sibling groups. Where it is not in a child's best interests to be placed together, we were mindful of the need to create a new culture where sibling contact is an expectation of adoption for the majority of cases, and where ongoing efforts between families to develop and promote sibling relationships is considered highly in the context of matching and placing children.

Part Two: Data Collection

Survey of Adopters – Summary

Coram Cambridgeshire Adoption worked closely with Coram's Impact and Evaluation team to create an online survey for adopters in January 2017. The survey link was sent to adopters via Coram First 4 Adoption, Adoption UK, and CVAA VAA network.. Four hundred and fourteen responses to the online survey were received. All English regions were represented in the survey along with respondents living in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The full report is available on the CCA website, and a summarised version has been utilised for the purposes of the Think Siblings project report.

Most adopters who completed the survey had their adopted child or children placed with them (61%) and three quarters of these (76%) were post Adoption Order. The majority of respondents were female (90%) and white British (90%). The largest proportion of respondents were aged 35 to 44 (38%) followed by the age group 45 to 54 (29%). Seventy-seven per cent were married or in a civil partnership.

Prospective Adopters Considering Siblings

Over half (57% or 80 out of 140) of the prospective adopters who responded to the survey and said that they were considering adopting children in a sibling group (58% of these had not yet started the adoption process). Three quarters of these prospective adopters who were considering siblings held the view that adopting children in a sibling group would be more challenging than adopting a single child. This suggests that these prospective adopters who were considering siblings had a realistic idea of the challenges ahead of them

All these prospective adopters believed that it was important for sibling groups to remain together and for 91% of these prospective adopters their decision to adopt children in a sibling group was influenced by their own experience of growing up with brothers and sisters. Prospective adopters wanted to see professional support and additional training in place to help them with the adoption of siblings.

Prospective Adopters Not Considering Siblings

Forty-three per cent (60) of prospective adopters said that they were not or were not sure if they were going to adopt siblings (75% of these had not yet started the adoption process). Most of these also held the view that adopting siblings would be more challenging, however, a smaller proportion than those planning to adopt siblings (60% vs. 73%). Factors that affected this cohort's decision not to adopt a sibling group were varied. Around half (53%) said that a lack of understanding about the specific needs of adopted children in sibling groups and concerns about the impact on other children in their household were important factors in their decision. These prospective adopters were the least influenced by the opinions of professionals (69% said this was not an important factor).

Adopters Who Had Adopted Siblings

Two hundred adopters who responded to the survey had adopted children in a sibling group. Survey responses indicated that 163 of these (82%) had adopted a sibling pair, 30 (15%) had adopted three children and seven had adopted four or more children.

Eighty-four per cent of adopters who had adopted siblings (120 out of 143) believed that adopting children in a sibling group was more challenging than adopting a single child. These adopters thought that siblings were more challenging because a) of the different behaviours and needs of the individual children b) it was physically more work to do in terms of preparing and managing and c) of the sibling dynamics and competition and conflict between siblings for their parents' attention.

Most adopters (71% or 102 out of 143) had decided they wanted to adopt children in a sibling group at the start of their adoption journey. Adopters who did change their mind about adopting siblings typically did so in Stage 2 or when they were waiting for a match. There were seven overarching reasons that adopters decided to adopt children in a sibling group:

- Adopters wanted more than one child.
- Adopters believed that siblings should remain together.
- Adopters did not want to go through the adoption process more than once.
- Adopters had personal experience of growing up with brothers and sisters.
- Adopters felt that children in sibling groups were harder to place and therefore wanted to help these children.
- Adopters felt they had the right personal qualities or circumstances to adopt children in a sibling group.
- Adopters felt if they said they would adopt children in a sibling group it would give them a better chance at successfully being matched and adopting.

Adopters found the support that they had received in their adoption journey helpful. Seventy-three per cent of adopters found preparation group training helpful in preparing for adopting siblings, 76% found therapeutic support helpful and 78% found additional parenting training helpful (although only 39 respondents had received additional training of this kind).

Adopters generally had a positive experience of the transition of their adopted children from foster care to their care – 76% reported that it was handled well. Comments from adopters revealed that transition tended to go smoothly when there

was good support and preparation in place from both the social worker and foster carer.

Adopters with siblings reported about the behaviour of 328 adopted children. Of the responses about the behaviour of adopted children, 141 adopters had two children, 32 had three children and seven had four children. Adopters reported that their "Adopted Child 1" was the most challenging in behaviour (74% said their behaviour was "very" or "quite challenging"). Sixty adopters reported that their second adopted child's behaviour was challenging, 62% said their third adopted child's behaviour was challenging (based on a smaller sample of 39).

The majority of adopters with siblings (86%) felt that their adoptive placement was stable and would last into the future.

One hundred and twenty-one adopters (85%) said that their adopted children in a sibling group had brothers or sisters that did not live with them. Half of these (49%) reported that their child had contact with some or all of these siblings. Forty-two per cent of adopters said that they found managing this contact "very easy" or "easy". Adopters felt that contact could be improved by having more support in place from, and more contact with, professionals in relation to contact. Adopters who made comments about what worked well with contact said that the type of contact they had in place was effective and practical arrangements, such as location and activities during contact, were important.

Adopters Who Did Not Adopt Siblings

There were a small number of responses from adopters who had not adopted children in a sibling group. Nineteen adopters who had not adopted siblings responded to the survey. Most of these (73%) agreed that it would be more challenging to adopt children in a sibling group. Six of these adopters said that they could have been persuaded to adopt children in a sibling group. Fourteen adopters said that their adopted child had siblings that did not live with them and nine of these said their adopted child had contact with some or all of these siblings.

Discussion

The survey revealed some useful findings for policy and practice and for the development of the CCA Think Siblings programme.

We learned from the survey that most prospective adopters were open to the idea of adopting children in a sibling group and that they seemed to be realistic about the challenges that this may present. It was also clear that those who were considering siblings have a strong value base about children waiting for adoption in sibling groups believing that they should remain together. Personal experience also seemed to play a part in this decision, with 91% of these prospective adopters stating that they grew up with brothers and sisters and felt this was important.

A smaller proportion of prospective adopters who were not considering adopting siblings thought that adopting siblings would be more challenging than adopting a single child. It may be the case that due to their decision these adopters have not

investigated any literature or information about siblings and are therefore less knowledgeable about these children.

The largest proportion of responses came from those adopters who had adopted siblings. Most of these held the view that adopting siblings was more challenging than adopting a single child due to the different needs and behaviours of siblings, the additional physical demands and the potential conflict between siblings. Most of these adopters made the decision to adopt siblings at the start of their adoption journey. Reasons for their decision included wanting more than one child, believing siblings should remain together and not wishing to go through the adoption process more than once.

Generally, adopters with siblings had a positive experience of the support they had received, the transition of their child from care to their care and managing contact. Many adopters were managing contact arrangements with siblings that did not live with them.

Most of the 19 adopters who had not adopted siblings agreed that it would be more challenging to adopt children in a sibling group. Six of these adopters said that they could have been persuaded to adopt children in a sibling group. These adopters were also managing contact - 14 said that their adopted child had siblings that did not live with them and nine of these said their adopted child had contact with some or all of these siblings.

Focus Groups

The Project wanted to draw on the experience of a cross section of prospective adopters, adopters, adopted young people and professionals involved in the child adoption journey including child care social workers, family finders, adoption social workers, CAFCASS children's guardians, independent review officers, panel members and agency decision makers. Where possible we tried to engage with professionals across the then Central East Regional Adoption Agency.

Qualitative information gained from focus groups undertaken was utilised to contribute to our understanding of how models of sibling assessment are used in every day practices with professionals involved with making decisions about sibling group placement.

The responses from our Adopter survey formed the development of our focus group questions across professional groups to ensure these were focused and responsive of what Adopters told us about their experience of Adopting Siblings.

Professionals

We conducted a total of ten focus groups with children's Local Authority Social Workers (across three Local Authorities), Adoption Social Workers, one group of Foster Carers, Independent Reviewing Officers and CAFCASS Children's Guardians. Due to the sample being comparatively small, this information is utilised anecdotally to help inform our thinking about siblings on a practice level. This will be

used alongside other forms of information within the scope of the project, and is centrally concerned with understanding ways in which decisions are made regarding siblings in practice reality.

From the focus groups with professionals as a whole, the most frequently referenced guidance and practical advice for social workers faced with making the decision of whether to place siblings together or apart in foster care or adoptive placements is the 'Sibling Relationship Checklist' (Department of Health, 1991). Professionals struggled to identify other forms of research and practical guidance they could draw upon when undertaking Sibling Assessments. With some groups the theoretical base of attachment theory was also referenced, however there appeared to be less confidence as to how this could be applied in a sibling context.

For local authority social workers and adoption social workers, there was a general trend for each group to take quite polarised positions when considering whether siblings should be placed together or apart. Children's social workers, generally came from a strong position for siblings needing to be placed together, against all odds, while adoption social workers tended to position themselves as in a more mobile position informed by a general awareness of the complexities and impact of sibling co-placement later down the line. They were more frequently seen to advocate siblings being placed individually as a position that could be in children's best interests.

For these professional groups, some of the main themes that emerged were their uncertainty about whether the decision was the right one, differences of opinion and conflict in agreeing care plans for sibling groups;

"... a sibling assessment was done on duty, early on, when it was looked at they said they should be separated but then it was changed...you don't have to have any experience - doing an observation and checklist basically. I then found a psychologist assessment that said they should be together, but we are all people and bring our own stuff into it – even the psychologist. The barrier for these children being matched, was the fact that it just sounds like they shouldn't be together, but it comes to a point when you take a judgement on it, and support the plan" Adoption Social Worker, 10 July 2017

Local authority children's social workers reported having low confidence in completing the sibling assessment and in knowing how to approach it, for example:

"I feel intimidated by them [the sibling assessment]. It is such an important decision I almost felt under qualified to do it. It wasn't covered at university and thought we would have some actual training, an example of a good one, how you go about gathering the information, but I haven't." Local Authority Children's Social Worker, 17 March 2017

"It filled me with fear having to read through the book to try and make sense of how to approach it." Local Authority Children's Social Worker, 17 March 2017

And referenced the emotional impact of completing the sibling assessment;

"..It's so hard and a horrible thing to have to do – separating children. The loss the children will never get over it is too much for people to swallow, you have to deal with that before you can be objective in emotive situations." Adoption Social Worker, 10 July 2017

“It is probably the only area where people start getting nasty with each other and the mud slings. It is very emotive. If there isn’t a shared view that the assessment is a good one even if you don’t agree, if you can get behind it and support it, when that isn’t reached it can be so difficult.” Adoption Social Worker, 15 September 2017

Practitioners identified that a greater level of space, time and training to complete good quality sibling assessments was essential in improving their practice, in addition to supporting tools such as a consistent template and a commonly agreed set of principles to base a decision on.

However there were occasions where despite a well evidenced report this did not always result in the recommended care plan being agreed;

“In one case the sibling assessment had been completed by the social worker and was praised for the analysis - the recommendation was apart, however on the day the judgement came it was decided that we would “have a go” at placing the siblings together...I just didn’t understand how one could come to that conclusion, given the assessment was very clear that separation was needed. What was clear was that there was a lack of understanding in “having a go” at sibling placement together - it isn’t a criticism, I had spoken to someone who had been misinformed. But it does have a massive impact, and has brought up loads of things.” Adoption Social Worker, 15 September 2017

In terms of the challenges of placing siblings together, practitioners highlighted their concern regarding adopter’s ability to meet competing needs of siblings in placement, concerns regarding the risk associated with placement disruption, as well as the potential for siblings to be re-traumatised by separation further down the line. Practitioners reported that the benefits of siblings being placed together are that siblings have the opportunity to have a shared identity, siblings sharing is considered to be the longest relationship in their lives, and the potential that co-placement could mitigate loss experienced from separation from the birth family.

When thinking about additional supports needed when placing siblings together, practitioners felt that seeking out expertise from both within and outside their organisations had been supportive in improving their practice and decision making. Practitioners felt that a greater emphasis on siblings in adoption preparation stages, and post placement was essential. In addition practitioners felt that specific ways of assessing adopters interested in siblings would enhance the current assessment resources / tools available to them. On an organisational level, practitioners shared that the resources available to adopters considering siblings, including financial packages and access to expertise were significant factors to be consider in encouraging more adopters to consider siblings;

“Adopters are very good at minimising what is needed – it would be really good if there was money available, having seen some difficulties, pressures there like limited income, those things shouldn’t be in the way but they can be.” Adoption Social Worker, 15 September 2017

When recommending adopters or matches for sibling groups, practitioners shared that they consider and assess levels of resilience for adopters, their support network and the view that this should be significant; the childhood histories of adopters; their relationships with their siblings; understanding of sibling dynamics and motivation as well as their ability to demonstrate significant experience of caring for siblings overnights, and observed them directly caring for siblings.

In considering what might help adopters consider siblings, practitioners reported that knowing that support by way of specific therapies, advice and guidance will be available for as long as needed would be a fundamental requirement. In addition to this they emphasised the importance of preparation of siblings for transitions and life story work to ensure children understand the decisions made about them. They also identified the need for a more “individualised” approach to planning for siblings, tailoring support to their individual needs to ensure that sibling’s individual and combined needs can be supported in placements.

In the foster carer focus group, they reported on their experience of being on the receiving end of professional’s decision making, and referred to experience of caring for siblings where there were prolonged periods of indecision regarding what should happen. In some instances they were managing very difficult discussions with children where decisions had changed, sometimes several times, during the time they had been caring for the children. Foster Carers reported their feeling of being caught “in-between” professionals different opinions and torn regarding their fundamental wish for siblings to be placed together against their own experience of parenting siblings and the intensity of this;

“...the social worker wanted to split the children however the guardian insisted that they should be together...it makes me emotional thinking about it, but it was with a heavy heart I agreed they should be separated. The truth was I was struggling with meeting those needs, due to their ages, it was just too much to ask for adopters. The catch up needs for three severely neglected children – it was just too much.” Foster carer, 22 September 2017

Foster carers reported the challenges for them in supporting siblings to stay together in the run up to transitions, and managing the transitions process was a particularly difficult period. Especially where this involved managing different care plans and contact arrangements between siblings and the complexities surrounding this;

“..adopters say they will keep in touch but half the time doesn’t happen, we have just had two youngest children and there were 4 others, the younger one was so worried about her sister and asked why can’t she see the others because they were going into long term care but because the plan was adoption there could be no contact. The younger children have no contact with their mother that’s why they don’t have sibling contact, it gets so complicated.”

Foster carers reported that the factors which may detract prospective adopters from considering siblings was the perception that with siblings there may be more challenging behaviour to contend with, the complexities of managing different contact plans, care plans, the idea that adopting one child must be easier than adopting more than one, and the practical demands of parenting multiple children.

The foster carers who participated in the group shared their own practice in supporting transitions and preparing prospective adopters for their siblings during the transitional period. This included opening up their homes and lives to prospective adopters in every sense, and having the opportunity to talk without professionals around. Their role in this work was considered invaluable whilst their role in this work was often under estimated by professionals.

To improve practice the foster carer group felt that making decisions in a more timely way would benefit siblings and offering prompt preparation work for siblings. In addition foster carers placed significant emphasis on the quality of communication

between professionals, and having the information they needed about siblings to support them to parent the children, enabling them to move forward therapeutically. This should include information about the siblings parenting history, as well as having appropriate training in how they might best support the sibling group in their placements.

In the focus groups held with CAFCASS Children's Guardians and Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO), there was a consistent view that sibling assessments were highly variable. The IRO's identified a lack of training as an issue in terms of practice quality;

"There has been a marked difference in interest about siblings. Social workers are being required to do assessments they have not previously done, now a heap of assessments that are being given to newly qualified workers. We are asking for more, but have we given them the tools and time and training to do it well?" Independent Reviewing Officer, 7 July 2017

"..There are so many different assessments requiring certain expertise and Social Workers are just expected to know, clearly sibling assessment is very different. They need to be provided with the tools to give you an impression of what you are supposed to give back." Independent Reviewing Officer, 7 July 2017

The emotional impact of sibling assessments on assessing social workers;

"I think the significant factor in the quality is the emotional discomfort in the assessment that has a significant legacy with that worker. I think it works best when all the conversations and decisions are shared - when there is more autonomous working its more frightening I think." Independent Reviewing Officer, 7 July 2017

As well as considering how decisions are made, they considered how they were received within a professional network;

"These type of decisions are normally decisions that not everyone agrees....which makes it hard for the Social Worker who feels it is their decision." Independent Reviewing Officer, 7 July 2017"

The IRO group identified issues around contact for siblings being a significant theme in Looked-After Children Statutory LAC Reviews, and felt that consideration for the importance of contact between siblings, particularly when separation is being considered, should be a high context for decision making. In addition the need for a concerted effort to improve sibling relationships and evidencing this before separating siblings;

"In Social Work I think we do have a deficit model and are often looking out for difficulties and when looking at it from that perspective rather than a strengths based approach this can be problematic. What would need to happen for this to work? Rather than making decisions when the going gets tough in placement or where they are abusive to each other what we need to do to help the relationships together rather than just separate them." Independent Reviewing Officer, 7 July 2017

In both the IRO and CAFCASS group responses to occasions where disruptions had occurred for siblings, these appeared to resonate very strongly with them. The influence of experience of disruptions appeared to carry greater weight, and greater impact than stories of success and positive placement of siblings;

“There are the ones where there is a big age gap, they take those two because they want a little one, if you take the little one you take the big one. But as the placement progresses very clearly there is more of a bond between the adopters and the little one. It’s like sometimes the decisions are focused so much on achieving adoption, so older children go with younger ones, but it is more likely to disrupt. I think we need to be considering the matching and making sure they are prepared for challenges of older ones.” Independent Reviewing Officer, 7 July 2017

“..where one had broken down for one sibling and not the other ...the intentions were right to place together, the best of intentions; but with hindsight that may not have been the right decision.” CAF/CASS, Children’s Guardian, 28 November 2017

The CAF/CASS children’s guardians identified that practice with sibling groups could be improved through earlier assessment being undertaken and conversations with adopters regarding siblings happening sooner;

“There is something about the quality of the sibling assessment and the timing of it; it needs to be before proceedings I think” CAF/CASS, Children’s Guardian, 28 November 2017

“There may be a conversation early in the process of assessing adopters about siblings and revisited” CAF/CASS, Children’s Guardian, 28 November 2017

The Importance of Time Limited Searches with Parallel Planning

“You should have time limited searches, whether you do that or not when we go away, it can be 6 months then the parallel plan comes in for siblings.” CAF/CASS, Children’s Guardian, 28 November 2017

“Yes and time, we have done the 26 weeks’ timescale however there may be a massive amount of time after that where children are waiting for a placement. Maintaining those links with siblings, it can be an awful long time.” CAF/CASS, Children’s Guardian 28 November 2017

When considering barriers for adopters considering siblings, both groups identified financial support, practical support, particularly when placing siblings where there may be a significant gap in age and subsequent developmental needs, and managing contact;

“I think finance, can be a factor, and dealing with birth family, I imagine most adopters...would come to adoption as a last resort perhaps due to not being able to conceive a child, and don’t necessarily want to care for traumatised children.” CAF/CASS, Children’s Guardian 28 November 2017

In addition all the groups identified expectations of adopters as a significant factor;

“Adopters anticipate that rush of feeling, but don’t always understand some of the functions of the behaviour between siblings and dynamics. By the time you explain that, even though they have done the attachment training, there is a real difference between reality and practice, you have technically more than good enough parents, you are placing with first time parents.” CAF/CASS, Children’s Guardian 28 November 2017

“It would be a massive challenge you don’t automatically love these children...it’s a process of getting to know each other, the things that are positive for siblings is that they have a pre-

existing relationship that could be quite hard if they are close knit family and if that poses a barrier to bonding with the adopters.” CAFCASS, Children’s Guardian 28 November 2017

The groups both identified timeliness of support and the ongoing commitment of support as needed in supporting sibling group placement;

“I wonder if there should be support over a longer term – you might adopt beautiful toddlers and babies but that time bomb is ticking difficulties can emerge in adolescence, if there is a sibling group dynamics were created in the birth family, anticipating that the difficulties in adoption can come at any point, rather than 6 months or a year, problems could emerge later and having access to support and help in the later years if behaviours come out is so important.” CAFCASS, Children’s Guardian 28 November 2017

“..on looking back on the case if the support had been there we might have been able to keep them together, in our role we do scrutinise them and challenge the support plans and really robustly reviewing those, sometimes you sign off on the plan and it just doesn’t happen thereafter.” CAFCASS, Children’s Guardian 28 November 2017

Adopted Siblings – The Adoptables

As part of the project we engaged with Coram’s Adoptables Project, a peer network of adopted young people funded by the Queen’s Trust. The Adoptables involves adopted young people aged between 13 and 25 in a range of workshops and public appearances. Young people with sibling experiences were invited to a focus group on the 2 December 2017. Of those invited, two young people attended the session.

Of those who attended, neither of the participants had been placed with all of their biological siblings, and one was placed with no biological siblings. The overarching view from the young people involved was that the reasons for this were understandable to them and they considered it to be the right decision for them. As such it was not the decision itself that had caused them any distress, but the lack of clear, factual and concrete information about the decision from supporting professionals had;

“In terms of the decision for me not to be placed with my sisters, there was some communication from my [adoptive] mum and dad, normally I’d say that children should be placed together because they have a shared history, genes narrative, but I’m really glad they didn’t place us together as I got the parents I got. As I understand it I was meant to be placed with the other two but for reasons that haven’t been explained to me, I wasn’t.” The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

“You have to think really carefully about splitting them up and there has to be a rationale and that has to be communicated. Otherwise a child, if there is a black hole of knowledge, a child makes up their own really warped and unhealthy narrative about it being their fault, this can result in an unhelpful narrative, it is just information share, information share, information share! It is how the decision is made and how that is managed as young adults” The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

“I think in my case if I was asked as a child I’d say I’d want to stay with them because it’s familiar, but ultimately adults know more than children and can make an educated decision from a place of knowledge and as long as that is communicated; however difficult it is, if it is the right decision or the least wrong decision then that’s easy to grapple with, while as not knowing -that is much more difficult.” The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

In addition they referred to the need for meaningful and regular life story work which starts early, is consistent, developmentally appropriate, clear and focused on the things that matter for the child;

"I think from age 4 you are old enough to need information, something...I had random pictures of people who were apparently my birth mummy and daddy, in the sense that they weren't my mummy and daddy; my mummy and daddy were the ones reading me the book, but it was saying my birth dad likes swimming, I was like well, marvellous! It is such an irrelevant piece of information – what I wanted to know was what was going on, not whether he liked swimming! There is a way of communicating information that doesn't traumatise someone; I wanted the basic facts, I didn't need to know about swimming, more information would be good." The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

Furthermore a sense that siblingship is more than biology, and the experience of living with a sibling figure, sharing experiences and spending time with them as being of most importance;

"... if people asked do you have any siblings I would say I have one, that's my brother. Perhaps the dictionary would say that being a sibling is about sharing genetics, which is interesting because with my brother I don't share any, but I have shared my whole life with him. Whilst as with these people, my sisters, they look like me which freaks me out, similar mannerisms, but they are not my siblings, they are bio siblings, not to be mean but there is some detachment." The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

"I agree with that point, to me my sister who I've known my whole life, she is my sister, but my other sisters they are more friends if that makes sense, we have lost that connection we had." The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

In discussing the type and quality of relationship shared with siblings who were not placed with them, and how relationships had been sustained / developed over time, the young people commented;

"Growing up I really hoped that cos we are biological sisters we would be similar and it would be like I lived with them all of my life, we would be close when we grew up but with my older sister she has had a completely different life, and while as I was safe and well cared for, she had a series of foster homes and then returned back to our bio family which was exceptionally abusive in every way possible so we didn't have any common ground apart from my nephew, that's where our connection is" The Adoptables, 12 December 2017

"The aim is to have really good friends to catch up with, I always wanted to just be siblings, I was very aware I didn't have that. It was a bereavement in a sense, but once I realised you can't make up the times that past you can make up the future but that made me feel okay I can't make up the time in the past." The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

It did however appear to be the case that it was the commitment of adopters and the young people themselves that contact between separated siblings took place, irrespective of professionals' intentions and plans.

"My adoptive parents originally got offered my younger sisters but couldn't have them and said no, but they wanted to keep in contact as thought it would be beneficial to us. They then kept in contact and the parents met up, first we went to the christening and then kind of always met up and we keep in contact like with phone calls texts, snapchats. There wasn't anything official as far as I'm aware though." The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

"It would be have been good if it had been followed through back in 1993 when the court wanted contact between us and I know because of the job that I do that if that had been a mother or a father then there would have been avenues that they could go down if that wasn't being adhered to cos I think that would have helped save me pain growing up and would've saved them pain as well – contact as soon as possible, I think if there are good reasons why it shouldn't then that's fine but it should start as early as possible so it's not scary." The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

"I didn't have contact till I was about 15, then I met my biological sister at 15, then the middle two sisters when I was 19, because I contacted their father and wrote him a letter." The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

"For the other two it was more difficult as I was 18 but they were 24 and 21 years and they didn't know they were adopted. So I could see them on face book, but I couldn't add them or speak to them. I didn't want to unsettle them because they didn't know they were adopted so I didn't want to unsettle them and be like "oh hey I'm your sister" that's not great it would be a massive shock. So I contacted the parents and they agreed a time when they thought it would be safe and appropriate for them to tell them they were adopted, and they did, and then one of my sisters contacted me on face book." The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

In addition the need for a sense of "normality" when it came to contact, valuing families meeting together to celebrate traditions, infrequent but meaningful spontaneous contact via social media or telephone, as opposed to formal methods such as post-box contact;

"We did have letterbox contact after that but was getting hacked off as it went through social services, so that took an extra month, all the information they didn't want you to hear they would tippex out and scan it in. If you have never met someone or only once you want something tangible, you want to be able to run your fingers over the words it and feel where they have written it, that's probably why they scan it so you can't pick the tippex off ! and that didn't do it for me, you knew that loads of people had probably read it and it came in an open envelope for my parents to read as well." The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

"My adoptive parents originally got offered my younger sisters but couldn't have them and said no, but they wanted to keep in contact as thought it would be beneficial to us. They then kept in contact and the parents met up, first we went to the christening and then kind of always met up and we keep in contact like with phone calls texts, snapchats. There wasn't anything official as far as I'm aware though." The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

The Adopted young people identified the importance of thinking creatively and holding the context of the sibling relationship as a key factor when matching and placing, as well as the importance of contact where placement together cannot be identified;

"..what I think went well, was that when my sister was taken away she was adopted, and then when I came along and was taken away my sisters adopted family were offered me they said oh yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, lets go for it! but then when another baby came along they said no we can't take three, but would love to keep in contact, so what they did was they found a person who wanted a baby but wanted to keep contact so that worked." The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

"I think the best thing was that they should try and keep families connected. They should be approaching families first before they are looking for other families if there are siblings... I

think they should keep siblings together and by that I don't mean living together but definitely staying in contact." The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

The issue of contact and social media facilitating sibling contact for those separated in care was a major theme, and the positive and negative impact of this were discussed;

"You can easily google a birth relative you have no contact with without the proper support or professional lives it can go pear shaped particularly if you do it on your phone, you parents don't know anything and you are left dealing with this on your own. You get in trouble, or you need help but you can't ask, in that respect I hate face book, for adoption; it is not a good equation." The Adoptables, 12 December 2017.

Agency Decision Maker (ADM) and Adoption Panel Members Survey

Coram's Impact and Evaluation team created an online survey and was circulated by to Agency Decision Makers and panel members across seven local authorities. There were 20 responses in total. The majority of responses were from panel members (16).

The key points from this survey were:

- 6% of respondents thought social work sibling assessments were sufficiently rigorous ("mostly" or "all" rigorous) compared with 50% who thought assessments by other professionals were sufficiently rigorous.
- 59% thought that adopters who are matched with siblings are well prepared for the specific needs of the children.
- 73% disagreed that professional assessment of the children's needs for sibling groups are of a consistent quality across the agency.
- 77% thought that children in sibling groups are well prepared and supported in their transition from care to adopter.
- 76% agreed that practitioners in their organisation did not assume siblings should be placed together.

Discussion

- Social workers and professionals involved in the child's journey generally have limited awareness of the range of resources / tools available to them to support their practice in sibling assessments or how to use attachment ideas in the context of sibling relationships.
- Social workers do not appear confident in their skills of assessing siblings and there does not appear to be a universal professional language that practitioners from different teams and agencies can share when discussing sibling relationships. This seems to result in high incidences of conflict between professional groups and periods of uncertainty and / both

disagreement between professionals about what should happen with the sibling group, resulting in delay for children awaiting permanent placements.

- Social workers want to undertake good assessments but in order to achieve this they need a greater level of space, time and training to complete them, as well as a consistent template and commonly agreed set of principles to base a decision on.
- Factors social workers are likely to hold in mind as important and utilise to persuade others of the need for placement together, are the fact that siblings have the opportunity to have a shared identity, siblings share the longest relationship in their lives, and the potential that co-placement could mitigate loss experienced from separation from the Birth Family.
- Factors that would deter social workers from considering placement together of siblings would be concern regarding how adopters might meet competing needs of siblings in placement, concerns regarding the risk associated with placement disruption, as well as the potential for siblings to be re-traumatised by separation further down the line and wishing to avoid this.
- Social workers considered a greater emphasis on sibling relationships in adoption preparation stages, and post placement was essential. In addition practitioners felt that specific ways of assessing Adopters interested in siblings would enhance the current assessment tools available to them.
- For Foster Carers there was a wish for timelier and more comprehensive decision making, in which they are involved but where it is not solely the information they have shared that leads to the decision.
- Foster carers reported that in order to improve practice, the quality of communication between professionals, and having the information they needed about siblings to support them to parent the children, and moving them forward therapeutically was essential. This included information about the siblings parenting history as well as having appropriate training in how they might best support siblings and their relationships in placement.
- In addition foster carers emphasised the importance of preparation for siblings being placed together or separately, ensuring there is a common language shared between professionals, and that foster carers are equipped and supported to assist siblings to understand decisions about their future in placement.
- The focus on contact for siblings separated in adoption was a pervasive and enduring theme across the professional groups, and there was a clear sense that there must be better ways of ensuring this can be managed in adoption for the benefit of sibling groups.
- Professionals identified the need for earlier assessment of siblings at the first possible opportunity, and for this to be regularly revisited as sibling relationships change and evolve over time.

- Professionals identified the importance of a clear parallel plan and that there should always be a “Plan B” for siblings and time limited searches to avoid significant delay for them awaiting permanent placement.
- Professionals identified that financial, practical and therapeutic support packages for siblings should be considered and that offers of support should extend beyond initial placement and be available whenever this may be needed throughout children’s adoption journey. This might look like networks of adopted families where there is a split sibling group, and promoting family – hubs of adopters working together to support their sibling group and one another.
- Adopted young people emphasised the need for quality life story work and information sharing. They want social workers to be unafraid of delivering the facts, concretely to them, at a young age, and developing this story as they progress through developmental milestones.
- Echoing the findings from the Kosonen research in 1999, the adopted young people defined siblingship as being much more than biology, and the experience of living with a sibling figure, sharing experiences and spending time with them as being of most importance. Social Workers and professionals may need to place greater emphasis on meaningful relationships from a child point of view and hold in mind sibling relationships where they may be no biological connection.
- Adoptive families may benefit from a greater commitment of agencies in terms of managing contact between siblings and across adoptive families, although holding in mind the fact that adopted young people felt a sense of “normality” when it came to contact had worked best. This included valuing families informally meeting together to celebrate traditions, infrequent but meaningful spontaneous contact via social media or telephone, as being preferable to formal methods such as post-box contact.
- Agencies having a greater awareness of geography where possible in matching families who may be caring for a split sibling group might be advantageous, as well as a clear commitment to promoting contact post placement at different stages.

Case Reviews

During the course of the project major changes took place in regards to the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) structure which was unforeseen when the project was proposed. In addition one of the Local Authorities hadn’t reported full information so had to be excluded. Therefore access to the records of the 7 involved regional partners was negatively impacted. As such a much smaller sample was conducted as had been anticipated initially, with 2 of the involved regional partners. The parameters set for identifying the sibling groups were within a two year period and taken directly from the Adoption Leadership Board data. The cases were selected randomly from a selection of cases where BME was a feature, children with

disabilities, differing size of siblings groups, those that had been waiting longest; those with swifter journeys and those with a change of plan.

There were clear themes from the reviews undertaken, and of note for this project identifying practice themes, and cultures of practice with siblings. However it is important to note however that the applicability of these themes nationally is unknown.

In 4 of the 7 sibling groups reviewed, more than one category of abuse was highlighted. The sample consisted of two sibling groups of 5, two sibling groups of 4, and three sibling groups of 3 children. Five sibling groups were of White British ethnicity, one sibling group of Black Ghanaian ethnicity, and one group of White Other / Irish background. The sample included one set of male / female twins.

Care Planning on Becoming Looked After

In all the sibling groups reviewed, practice around initial placement appeared to have been solely influenced by available resources, and there was no discernible evidence of sibling assessments or consideration of the sibling relationship prior to the children's accommodation. Nor was there explicit consideration as to the quality of sibling's relationship when organising placement formations at point of placement.

Care Planning During Proceedings

Where the position of the lead workers was for the children to remain together early on, this seemed to significantly impact on and acknowledgement of the necessity or benefit of sibling assessment being undertaken. This was sometimes in the face of evidence to the contrary, and to the exclusion of others who held a different perspective.

Interestingly, where decision making regarding children being together was made early, the dynamic of this being unchallenged appears to have a knock on effect in all layers of the organisation, and the court and together plans in all cases were agreed with very little challenge or scrutiny from other professionals.

In one family an additional sibling was born post placement, as there seemed to be a clear perspective that the siblings should be together. It was decided that the best outcome would be for this sibling to join the adoptive family, with their three elder siblings, three months post placement. This was without any formal assessment being undertaken of the sibling relationships within their relatively new adoptive placement. This decision appeared to be based primarily upon personal values of the responsible social worker and the adopters willingness to adopt a further sibling.

Where decisions were made regarding separation of siblings, these were rarely straight forward, and often had a knock on effect in terms of instability in all aspects of the system surrounding the sibling group. In one case the decision to separate siblings was initiated by a breakdown in care for one of the siblings, which orientated professionals to consider placement apart. Although the decision was eventually made to separate the children, this decision did not take place till 11 months later and following a further change of lead worker it was changed again and a further recommended was made that the children be reunified. As a result the placement

plan negatively affected the care plan for adoption as no adoptive carers could be identified.

In both cases where there was a change in perspective regarding sibling placement formation midway and post proceedings, which directly impacted on the care planning and identification of adopters for the sibling groups. In each case this caused a significant delay for children. Of these, one group was separated and the other resulted in a change of care plan to long term fostering.

Explicit work in improving sibling relationships was not evident in the sibling groups involved in this review, however there were some good examples of preparation work with children where they were to be joined by an additional sibling born post placement. However there was little evidence regarding preparation for siblings who were separated, or strategies to address concerns regarding sibling relationships.

Sibling Assessment

For those sibling groups where sibling assessments were undertaken, this involved the use of informal observations and anecdotal information from the Foster Carers. In one assessment the 'Sibling Relationship Checklist' and the Lord and Borthwick, 2001 "Together or Apart Assessing Brothers and Sisters for Permanent Placement" guidance was utilised to support decision making.

All of the assessments seen included the children's views to a greater or lesser extent. Where children expressed clear views regarding placement preference this appeared to carry significant weight as to the overall decision making. In addition the voice of Foster Carers appeared to be a dominant context in all of the assessments undertaken by social workers.

Across the Local Authorities reviewed differing templates were being utilised by social workers for the assessments and there was significant variability in factors included, as well as the headings used to support analysis.

Generally evidence based decision making lacked a research base to support recommendations and in all cases an understanding of the children's attachment, or reference to attachment ideas. The main influences appeared to be personal opinion and values of the Social Worker undertaking the assessment with an absence of tangible risk component in the sibling interactions, and circumstance. In addition evidencing the components of a secure sibling relationship was consistently left wanting. It appeared that relationships were considered secure by default, i.e. not having certain features which should necessitate separation.

In one case an expert was instructed to assess the sibling relationship of a sibling group of five. The expert utilised a wide range of tools and methods to support the assessment, including a full assessment of the children's individual needs, for measuring IQ, cognitive development, health, a range of psychometric tests including the family relations test, and narrative story stem technique. The assessment also included the children's views, the sibling relationship dynamics foster carer and social workers views.

However in this case the experts were not supported when the final care plan was agreed and the social work team made the decision to place the children together, contrary to the evidence offered by the independent expert. The Judge agreed that the children should remain together despite the experts view and significant evidence to suggest this may not be in the children's interests.

In one Local Authority the decisions regarding sibling placement were made in the context of multi-agency meetings.

Discussion

In the case reviews undertaken, there was a concordance between the absence of any obvious difficulties in the sibling relationship and sibling assessment being undertaken. However it is of note that practice around sibling assessment has developed within the last three years and this timeframe may well have influenced practice seen within reviews undertaken.

In the cases reviewed it was consistently evident that where siblings were to remain together, there was no sibling assessment completed, or considered necessary by the professionals involved. This may suggest that the process of sibling assessment is perceived by professionals as something which is largely deficit driven, and its main purpose is to justify the separation of siblings, or why they should not be separated where there was a dominant view regarding separation, as opposed to a process which explores sibling relationships from a neutral position. It is also possible that this could reflect a lack of confidence by professionals their ability to quantify and evidence what a "good" sibling relationship looks like with decisions about "good" sibling relationships being largely informal decisions influenced by "soft" personal and professional experience, not be considered robust enough for court purposes.

Where the sibling relationships were considered to be "good," this generally resulted in an absence of curiosity about the relationships and a more fixed position about siblings staying together. The impact of this on practitioners sense of curiosity appeared to be reflected in these decisions being the least well evidenced in terms of reflective supervision, sibling assessment activity and recording decision undertaken. It also appeared to be associated with and increased optimism, and in turn "riskier" practices in terms of placement planning. This was illustrated in the case of the new born sibling joining a recently placed sibling group of three, with no sibling assessment of the impact of this on the relationships shared between the siblings. The adopters willingness to take a further child appeared to orientate the professionals differently and there was less curiosity as to whether this was in the children's individual interests, or if it was within the capacity of those adopters now and in the future.

The guidance available to social workers seems to be utilised in a way in which risk in the sibling relationships is assessed, the presence or absence of risk was used to justify together or apart decisions. This may feel comfortable for social workers, given that assessing the presence or absence of risk is a fundamental task in social work assessment activity. The difficulty with this kind of approach to sibling assessment is that other significant factors, such as children's individual needs, and

combined needs, as well as parenting intensity and skills of adopters, all of equal importance; are considered to a lesser degree, or at worst, not considered at all. This can potentially leave sibling groups with plans which can result in considerable delay as they wait for permanence.

Conclusions

Practitioners

Sibling relationships are extremely complex and variable relationships. A recurring theme during our data collection was that of practitioner's direct experience of sibling relationships appeared to be a powerful influence on how they viewed sibling relationships both personally and professionally. This seemed to negatively impact consistency and rigour in evidencing decision making regarding siblings. This personal and professional knowledge appeared to offer a guiding framework for the assessment, as opposed to other forms of knowledge. However this has the potential to result in a polarisation in the way sibling relationships are seen, with what appeared to be our own sibling stories influencing where we sit on this continuum, what features we privilege when sharing stories about our own experiences and in analysing sibling relationships in our professional roles.

Although it is the case that professionals generally appear to rely heavily on professional and personal contexts to guide decision making rather than a rigorous and evidenced approach to assessment, it is of no doubt that social workers wish to receive more guidance as to how they might better evidence their assessments and in turn, might better support siblings in adoption.

It is clear from our adopted young people that they want and deserve social workers to feel knowledgeable and confident in decisions about their lives and be able to share those decisions clearly and sensitively. A greater understanding of what constitutes both a positive and negative sibling relationship, and being able to evidence this in assessments appears to be fundamental to practice improvement.

In beginning to understand what methods, tools and approaches might best evidence sibling relationship quality, and how improved sibling assessment practices are embedded. The fact that sibling relationships are culturally constructed, variable, and influenced by, and constructed through how these are shared, and understood, personally and professionally means that to improve practice we need to consider the relationship that social workers have with the sibling assessment, as well as the sibling assessment itself.

Therefore, to improve practice, we believe that social workers need:

- Available guidance that increases awareness of the range of tools available to support social workers practice in sibling assessments and how to use attachment ideas in the context of siblings.
- To develop an ability to identify the personal and professional influences on their thinking and decision making.

- A universal language that professionals from different agencies can share about siblings and a clear universal understanding of what a “good” assessment looks like, what a positive sibling relationship may look like, and how to approach assessing siblings.
- Social Workers need training to assist them in how to complete robust and well evidenced sibling assessments, as well as a consistent template and commonly agreed set of principles to base a decision on.
- Social Workers need to use the time they have with siblings and families in the most practical, creative and helpful way to increase quality assessment information and to ensure the sibling lens is carried as early as possible in their work, so that assessment is an ongoing and continuous piece of work that starts at the very beginning of our involvement with sibling groups.

Adopters

From our survey of adopters over half (80 out of 140) of the prospective adopters reported that they were considering adopting children in a sibling group and were mostly in the early stages of the adoption journey (although the survey may have attracted responses from those adopters with an interest in siblings). It is interesting to reflect on how this willingness translates into sibling adoption, in terms of approval and placement, as it is known that siblings are a group of children that experience delays in being placed with adopters and are subsequently deemed “hard to place”. Furthermore, it is the view that this finding from the survey does not translate into numbers of adopters who have siblings placed with them on a local level either.

The factors that influence this trend are not known but are may be multi-faceted. It is therefore recommended that a “whole systems” approach is required in understanding the journey of adopters in relation to sibling placement to best find a way to create a shift in this area. This may include:

- Online resources for adopters to explore sibling adoption accessible to those at enquiry stages.
- Proactive recruitment in relation to siblings and this being in “the talk” around adoption from the very start.
- Key messages regarding siblings to be embedded in practice and throughout the process of assessment.
- This involves flexibility of thinking about what makes a good sibling adopter, and taking a critical stance towards practice norms where this may be discouraged, or risk adverse practices are embedded in cultures of working.
- Small changes in agency training offers for prospective adopters, such as case studies including sibling group examples, specific attention to sibling groups needs and the population of siblings waiting for adoption at stage 1 assessment stages.

- Specific stand-alone preparation training for prospective adopters considering siblings.
- Sibling champions within the organisation who can share specialist knowledge and inspire others.
- Consider the use of tools such as the MIM to support matching and early preparation.
- Observations of adopters with sibling groups as expectations as part of assessment process, including specific space within the assessment to guide this.

The survey identified that all adopters including those considering adopting siblings and those who were not, reported the benefits of training, and understanding the specific needs of adopted children in sibling groups (for example 79% of prospective adopters would welcome additional training on parenting children in sibling groups).

Adopters who had adopted siblings reported that sibling adoption was more challenging because of the different behaviours and needs of the individual children, the fact it was physically more work to do in terms of preparing and managing, and the sibling dynamic, competition and conflict between siblings for the parents' attention, was a major influence.

Therefore, a recommendation is the need for adopter preparation and ongoing training to include parenting siblings. This could be targeted at the areas of:

- Understanding specific needs of adopted children in sibling groups.
- Understanding the needs of the individual children and how behaviours interact.
- Understanding sibling conflict, dynamics and competition in placement.
- Practical advice and support in managing time and resources within the family.

It may be advantageous, when offering practical advice and support, to include adopters' experiences in specific training. Having the opportunity to hear from adopters of siblings may be as, or more, influential than information shared by professionals. This aligns with the finding that prospective adopters in the cohort that were not considering siblings felt they were least influenced by the opinions of professionals (69% reported that this as not an important factor in their decision).

There were seven overarching reasons that the adopters in the survey had decided to adopt children in a sibling group:

- Adopters felt that children in sibling groups were harder to place and therefore wanted to help them.

- They felt that they had the right personal qualities and circumstances to adopt children in a sibling group.
- They felt that if they would adopt children in a sibling group it would give them a better chance at successfully being matched and adopted.

It is recommended that key areas of motivation be used to inform policy addressed at recruiting adopters for siblings, and utilising websites and published information about adoption. It may also be beneficial to embed other positive messages from the survey about siblings in recruitment and training materials, for example:

- Referring to the benefits and rewards of adopting siblings that the adopters have reported, both for the children and the adopters.
- The fact that adopters generally had a positive experience of the transition of their adopted children from foster care to their care (76% reported that it was handled well).
- The majority of adopters with siblings (86%) considered their adoptive placement was stable and would last into the future.

Finally, there is so much more to learn from adopters who did not adopt siblings, and a recommendation for future research would be to seek further qualitative information from this group to inform the development of practice in this area. Unfortunately this was not within the scope of this project but would be of significant interest for future research studies.

Part Three: Evaluation, Conclusions and Recommendations

Evaluation: Think Siblings Training

Evaluation from the Think Sibling Training Pilots was sought following each session and enabled us to refine the programmes as we went along to ensure that content was paced and manageable for the mixed audiences.

The 2 day Social Work Practitioner Training was attended by a cross section of professionals including child care and court social workers, team managers, service managers, independent reviewing officers and adoption social workers including family finders. The diversity of the groups enabled shared learning and discussion from the differing perspectives identified as part of the training scenarios but in addition shared discussion of cases dilemma's that were current to practitioners.

Feedback from the 3 pilot sessions of Think Sibling 2 day Training for Practitioners identified the following;

- 100% of participants stated that they would recommend the training to colleagues.
- 97% (38) out of the 39 practitioners attending had been either satisfied or extremely satisfied with the training received.
- All the practitioners that attended identified that they had made them feel more equipped with knowledge about sibling assessments.
- Participants commented on how practical case examples helped them to apply the learning, brought the teaching to life and encouraged them to think about their own experiences.

As part of the project we identified a gap in adopter preparation and training. We developed a training session for prospective adopters to explore the realities of adopting siblings. The session was run by the therapeutic social worker, and an experienced sibling adopter. The sessions were oversubscribed and extremely well received. The session was aimed at Stage 2 or recently approved adopters and took place in an early evening or Saturday morning session

Feedback from the Prospective Adopters Sibling Preparation Session noted the following;

- 100% of adopters would recommend the training to other adopters
- 100% of adopters were satisfied or very satisfied with the training
- 100% of adopters felt that they now felt fairly confident to parent siblings.

- 77% of adopters said they felt more knowledgeable about parenting siblings following the session.
- 23%) indicated that their knowledge about siblings did not because they were already familiar with topics covered. However, they were all very satisfied with the session regardless.
- Adopters felt the presence of an experienced adopter brought the material to life. Adopters felt it was very useful to hear about the challenges as well as the successes of adopting siblings first hand.

“I found it excellent to hear first hand actual experiences with her children, it made it all feel very real”

- Adopters found it useful to explore theories that explained how sibling groups interact and to come up with solutions.

“Very useful to understand what behaviour to expect and how different combinations may affect sibling relationships”

Conclusions and Recommendations

So, how do we embed robust sibling assessments and their pathway through the care system to permanence in practice

Whilst guidance and resources / tools are important, we have found that they themselves have not proved sufficient to ensure consistent best practice.

With this in mind, rather than add another resource / tool to the tool box, we offer an approach that is relational, contextual, about communication, includes practitioners in the process and focuses on reflective skills of social workers; opening space for difference. This is an inherently systemic perspective in that we are interested in both the relationship between practitioners and sibling assessments and the sibling assessment itself.

Our view is that targeting one aspect of a complex system is unlikely to effectively embed a new practice cultures, and that in order to embed robust sibling assessments, this needs to come from all aspects of the system offering different layers of influence. What we seek to offer here is a range of ways of thinking to support practitioners own thinking about siblings, and our trust that social workers do possess the skills and competence to use them as deemed appropriate in the context of the children they are working with, and know well. Having a recipe, i.e. if you do this and that it makes this; it does not fit with the ambiguity and emotional cost required, nor does it acknowledge what social workers bring “through the door” when working with siblings, and what siblings bring to practitioners; this has to be carefully navigated.

Increasing practitioners awareness of how this dynamic interplays, and being able to reflect on its influence on us is what we seek to contribute to the range of helpful guidance already available in supporting social workers to think about sibling relationships. Acknowledging that some rigour and consistency is also needed, our approach is offering workers a very clear and solid place to stand to keep them organised, while they respond with flexibility to the inherent ambiguity and uncertainty in the relationships they observe.

In Summary

- There are no easy answers or one all-encompassing way of assessing sibling relationships.
- This is because children's and families lives are complex and unique.
- Siblings need social work practitioners who are able to critically reflect on and analyse each situation uniquely.
- Social work practitioners require managers and organisations who support and facilitate such work, and respect the commitment required to ensure robust decision making.
- These decisions are fundamental to children's rights – across a lifetime, we need to be able to understand and explain them, so that we can prepare children for transitions and their future.

What We Recommend in Response

- A reflective tool to support thinking about the social workers relationship with sibling assessments and reflection regarding the multiple layers of influence.
- A sibling assessment tiered resource / tool kit offering a sample template sibling assessment and a range of tools to draw upon flexibly according to the sibling groups particular needs and profile.
- A comprehensive training pathway for social workers pre and post qualifying.
- A suggested policy to consider at an organisational level.

Think Siblings Reflective Tool

This resource / tool originated from a sense of being completely overwhelmed by the various and competing contexts at play when completing a sibling assessment in practice. Adapted from Schuff and Asen (1996) figure the person within the network of systems, It is the recognition that each of the individual factors, and contexts, make an essential contribution to the construction of meaning within the sibling assessment. Of course, this is not an exhaustive list but is proposed to be a set of ideas that might support practitioners to reflect on a deeper level when drawing together the various sources of information, with the overall aim to support decision making as to whether siblings may be placed together or apart. As such the resource

tool is not aimed at providing explanatory theory regarding siblings, but at providing practical ideas that opens space for new ways of thinking, looking and knowing how to go on (Shotter, 2006).

Drawing on ideas of social constructionism, it is hoped that the map will call to attention the multiple levels of context at play that give meaning to what we do, and help us to recognise how we think when engaging in activity to assess siblings. As such, the map helps us to understand a little better our own relationship with this vital piece of work. By thinking in this way, we are extending beyond a first order approach of “doing” an assessment, but instead are creating space to think critically about *what we think*.

We consider this to be a vital part of improving practice with siblings, as understanding the tools we employ to assist us in assessing sibling groups can be applied meaningfully and most importantly, rigorously. The only way we can ensure its rigour is by placing ourselves in the system and supporting our own capacity to reflect on the influences these have on us, how we act and how we think in context.

If we then, consider contexts of family, culture, society, as well as our previous professional experience of undertaking assessments and their outcomes these interact and give meaning to the information we collate. Social workers bring to this relationship ideas and beliefs about the work which can have a significant influence on the meanings constructed throughout the process. A social constructionist communication theory, co-ordinated management of meaning (CMM) (Cronen and Pearce, 1985; Pearce, 1994) offers a way of making sense of people’s logic and meaning in action. CMM starts from the premise that we always act out of, and into, multiple levels of context (for example, speech act, episode, relationship, other stories of self, culture, profession etc.) Influenced by this thinking, our model allows Social Workers to explore how we co-ordinate our meanings and action is with each other. This is in terms of the stories and the moral orders that we draw from our multiple levels of context.

This is considered vital, as no one theory provides an all-encompassing description and explanation for sibling relationships that social workers can refer to in order to guide them. This may be why it continues to feel so difficult and such a level of variability across teams and authorities. Similarly, we do not propose that any one idea has emerged from research into siblings together or apart that is superior to another. Trying to deduce the massive field of research into simplistic concepts does not do justice to the subtleties contained within them.

It is also the case, that the most robust assessment drawing on a number of sources and measures. There is unlikely to be one “most” effective way of assessing all sibling relationships, given the absence of longitudinal research validated in the context of social worker assessments of sibling relationships.

Approaching our professions as one of our cultures, alongside those more readily identifiable ones, i.e. ethnicity, gender, age, religion and sexuality, and acknowledge that there is no single truth or universal theory necessarily acceptable or familiar to all cultures. Being able to select a theory or tool as a practical option (as opposed to a truthful option) for action, enhances our ability to be curious and hold multiple

options in mind during our decision making. Being sensitive to the stories of others as well as our own enables us to be more rigorous and reflexive with the process of decision making. This involves “becoming an observer of our own beliefs” (Fredman, 2008; p.24) and being able to identify how these might influence the position we take in relation to siblings and care planning for them.

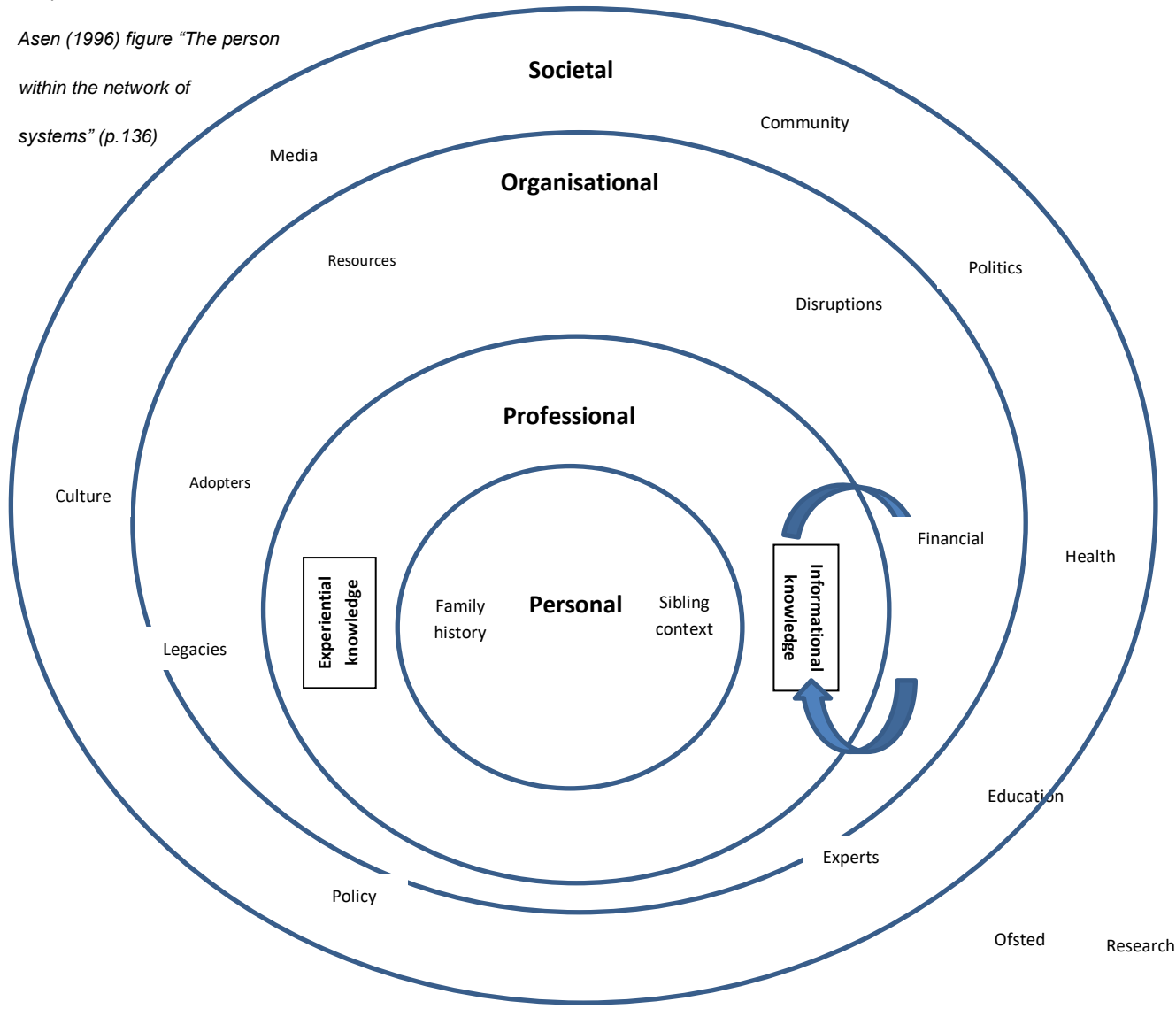
Cecchin, Lane and Ray (1992) sum this up by suggesting we adopt a position of “irreverence”, staying with doubt in the face of certainty, which makes it possible for the practitioner to juxtapose ideas which might seem contradictory. They point out that “excessive loyalty” to a specific idea pulls an individual away from taking personal responsibility for the moral consequences of their practice. In our work we often come across practitioners who have become rigid and fixed in their thinking, particularly where there is a belief that siblings should and will stay together at all costs. This can have the effect of creating a polarised and stuck professional network in the face of contradictory information.

When social workers reflect on their own presumptions and examine the pragmatic consequences of their own behaviour in constructing meaning, they take a position that is both ethical, therapeutic, and allows for uncertainty to sit more comfortably, and helpfully. Noticing those moments of certainty and loyalty to a particular idea, could be very helpful in seeking to consider alternative possibilities, and thus creating a more comprehensive assessment process. By utilising the map of contexts as a reflective tool during the course of an assessment, allows practitioners to play with different levels of beliefs, stories, knowledge as resources available to them. These contexts are depicted in the figure below “Sibling Assessment: Map of Contexts.”

Sibling Assessment: Map of Contexts

Adapted from Schuff &

Asen (1996) figure "The person within the network of systems" (p. 136)



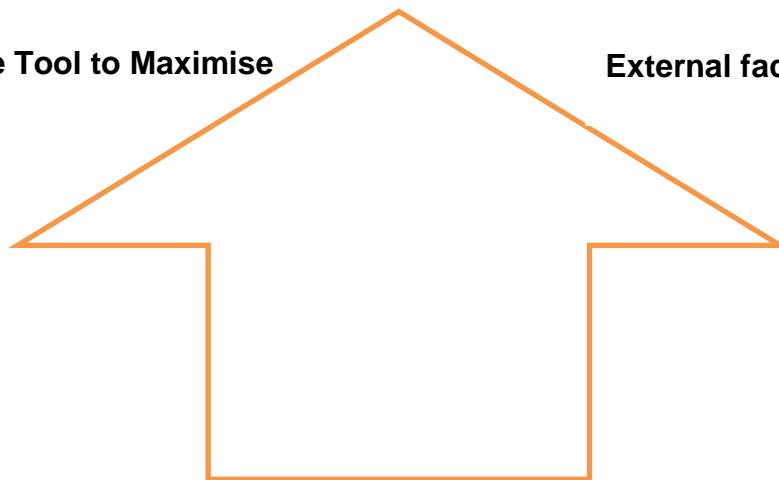
Time

Law

How to Use The Tool to Maximise

External factors

Reflection:



Some ways of helping reflect on your own position / supporting colleagues:

- Helping to see larger systems of which you / they are a part. Utilising the map of contexts in a supervision session may help contextualise certain viewpoints and help to notice which contexts / stories are unvoiced.
- We have included some prompts to support your reflections under the headings of the different domains as below.
- This can be particularly helpful in the context of professionals meetings where there may be multiple stories and understandings to consider.
- This includes helping them see themselves from the perspective of the other, and being able to locate the influences at play utilising the map.

Personal

In practice, a pervasive and enduring theme appears to be that of our own direct experience of sibling relationships as having a powerful influence on how we view siblings personally and professionally.

Themes that emerge from such sibling stories are stories of good or bad, quiet or boisterous, practical or creative, being close or distant, strong or fragile and so on. As such the overlaying complexities in sibling relationships are rarely found in these “thin” descriptions of the individual roles children may play in the sibling group (White & Epston, 2010). In short, there is a polarisation in the way sibling relationships are seen, and our own sibling stories may well influence where we sit on this continuum, what features we privilege when sharing stories about our own lives, our children’s lives and so on.

Consider here your own experience of having none, some or many siblings, parenting children without or with siblings, your own definition of what “makes” a sibling and how these may be hierarchically organised in terms of “most” and “least” important, alongside the impact of social differences, for example assumptions regarding gender such as boys together and girls together are more likely to get on well, or family stories such as “boys will be harder work” etc.

Consider these alongside the Social GRRRAACCEEESSS (Burnham, 1993) Gender, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Ethnicity, Education, Employment, Sexuality, Sexual orientation, Spirituality. Consider your relational stance, how we evaluate what we think, what we do and how this informs our relationships, and the positions we take when undertaking a sibling assessment.

Professional

Professional values are depicted in the domains of “experiential” knowledge and “information” knowledge.

Experiential knowledge is considered to be knowledge gained through your professional experience. This may include your experiences of placing sibling groups previously, and having had the opportunity to see “what happened next” and applying it to current decision making. This may take the form of risk adverse practices where disruptions may have occurred, or mobilising you strongly to keeping siblings together at all costs, where you may have made negative associations with separation and children’s experiences of loss. This may also be intersected by other areas of your personal experience as indicated on the map of contexts. You may draw on experiential knowledge where you may have witnessed significant distress of children when children were separated, or heard other professional stories about this which have influenced you strongly. You may continue to experience a level of trauma overflow when thinking about managing or talking to children about separation. You may also developed a knowledge base regarding other professional groups views regarding sibling placement, whether they are perceived as being pro-sibling placement or less so. Similarly you may have experienced a very challenging meetings or court hearings when care planning for sibling groups, or faced criticism when making together or apart decisions.

Your professional experience of managing relationships with birth families during the course of proceedings may mean that you are more likely to privilege the family’s own wishes for sibling placement. Similarly there may be a placement plan of direct context with a parent for one of the siblings, but not all. Your experience of how this can be managed effectively post –placement by adopters may influence the attention you are able to pay to contact in adoption as a realistic recommendation.

In summary, thinking about these contexts might help us to notice, and why we notice what we notice when undertaking a sibling assessment. Paying attention to this will help us to try and gasp why we are interested in what we are and how this is likely to mobilise us either way in making together or apart decisions.

Information knowledge is used here to refer to research, study and formal ways of acquiring information through teaching or attending training events for example. You may want to consider what the differences and shared territory might be between these two areas of knowledge, to help you reflect upon what knowledge you may be more likely to draw on when undertaking sibling assessment, so that you can make space for other forms of professional knowledge to make sure your decision is rigorous and well evidenced.

Organisational

Within this context you might consider what stories, meanings and ideas exist within your organisational context, for example is there a strong narrative within your organisation that sibling placements are of significant importance, and this is demonstrated in the investment in training and communicating key messages to you and your team

Is there a clear expectation that sibling assessments should be completed or is this an afterthought.

How is this Implemented in policy / practice norms.

How might this culture influence your approach to sibling placement.

You might wish to consider whether the organisation allows for uncertainty, and how this fits in with your approach to thinking about sibling relationships across contexts. Are there organisational legacies, for example where there has been a disruption that may mean risk adverse practices are promoted.

For example what is the organisational relationship with care plans where contact between siblings is recommended, or with birth parents, and how likely it is that resources will be made available to support individual plans like these.

Similarly you may wish to consider if there has been recent success where a large number of children were successfully placed what stories arising from this may be privileged / subjugated, and how this might inform your decision making?

Within the organisational context you will also need to pay attention to the financial climate and in turn available resources to support your formulations and whether one decision may increase or decrease the available placement options. This must also be considered in the context of time and implications for siblings waiting for placement and placement choice.

Societal

In this context there will be a multitude of influences on a societal level influencing practices on a macro and micro level in sibling assessment. This include incorporating other audiences in the decision making, the influence of recent media reporting on social work, serious case reviews, cultural norms regarding siblings, and “experts” whose voice may be privileged. This level may include political influence and change in policy or interest in adoption and the placement of siblings.

Time

A continuous and enduring influence across contexts will be that of time. This may be understood in the context that the relationships between siblings are not static, but are continually evolving and take on different meanings at different developmental stages. It is in the children’s interests that a decision is made regarding their future in a timely way, and that the context of an assessment is likely to be that a decision is required to enable them to move into permanency in a timely way. On balance it is the case that the children’s relationships are likely to evolve and change over time and that the assessment will not be able to represent a final and concluded set of ideas regarding the children, but instead could be utilised to inform ongoing assessment of the children and how they might best be supported to promote the positive aspects of the sibling relationships shared between them.

Time may also mean that the children have experienced transitions of placement, being exposed to different family norms, or transitional stages in their own development influencing what contexts may be privileged hierarchically as most important in influencing decision making.

Time could also mark a change in terms of the professional network surrounding the children, and differing perspectives of different involved professionals. This may be the case for an increasing knowledge base of the social worker and how this might influence how they approach making a recommendation for the assessment.

Time could be a significant organising principle in terms of timescales imposed and resources available to the social worker in what tools are available within the time available. External factors may be a significant influence on time constraints, for example the court instructions, or Agency Decision Maker directions.

Think Siblings: A Sibling Assessment Resources / Tool Kit

Following our review of the models and tools available to social workers in completing sibling assessments, it is the case that there is no one measure that, used on its own, would offer a comprehensive assessment of sibling relationships, because they are so complex and change over time. We therefore propose an assessment that is longitudinal and involves a variety of tools and measures that social workers can incorporate into their everyday work with children and families, starting from the very beginning of our involvement. We acknowledge we are unable to give social workers more time however we can offer ways of approaching the assessment which is creative and utilises best the time social workers do have available to them.

It is acknowledged that the tools we have included are by no means an exhaustive list, but are tools which can be utilised by social workers within local authority practice settings, and can be incorporated into their everyday work.

Think Siblings Structured Observational Tool

A contribution the Think Siblings Project wishes to make to the tools already available to social workers is the sibling structured observational model which is being piloted with social workers in local authority practice at the time of writing. We hope to report on our own experience of utilising the procedure in our practice in the near future to share with social work practitioners in the field, as well as share our analysis matrix following the piloting period of this tool.

Initial feedback from our training evaluation where the structured observational tool was introduced, was that it had been experienced by participants as the most interesting and useful aspect of the training. Social workers felt able to use it in their practice and found its application to be revealing, illuminating and had allowed them to see the dynamics shared between siblings first-hand. It also allowed them to identify attachment patterns more clearly and apply attachment ideas more easily.

The observation is based on the Farnfield (2009) Modified Strange Situation Procedure, which we have further developed with permission from the author for use

within local authority social work context. We have specifically developed an analysis matrix for use by social workers following a sibling strange situation observation to help support their thinking and formulations.

The procedure, which we refer to as a structured observation, offers an environment in which certain behaviours and dynamics between siblings are most likely to be displayed, as children are placed under controlled conditions designed to increase stress and in turn attachment behaviours. We have found this works particularly well in a local authority social work context as it does not require additional time or specific costly training to complete, and as such makes best use of the time social workers have available to them, utilises their pre-existing knowledge and offers a clear and understandable format which can be easily replicated in any practice setting. Social workers have told us that using the observation has increased their confidence and understanding of sibling relationships, and have felt able to share their knowledge with colleagues within their teams.

The structured observation is evidence based and originates from the method of assessing attachment styles by Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al, 1969) although has been used periodically by many other clinicians in different contexts, including in assessing relationships between siblings (Stewart, 1983). The structured observation is not in this context being used to clinically assess children's attachment, instead it, as Farnfield (2009) reports, helps the practitioner to gain as clear a picture as possible of the way in which each child has formed particular patterns of interacting, and offers insightful assessment information where decisions are being made regarding sibling groups in permanency. In our training programme where the observation is introduced, we avoid using diagnostic terminology, in favour of looking for common patterns of attachment behaviour to significant figures, which not only provides a precise and detailed picture of the children and their relationships, it also provides a universal language that can be shared between professionals. In addition it offers the assessing social worker an insight into the kind of parenting intensity likely required in placement, which is both meaningful and useful to assessing social workers, to current carers, family finders and prospective permanent carers. Where the procedure involves the child's social worker, their carers and family finder, the observation works particularly well.

The structured observation essentially provides a frame, in which relationship quality between siblings can be highlighted, observed and analysed, and is considered in our experience to offer greater rigor than solely relying on unstructured observation of siblings. This is based on the premise that one unstructured observation will only show a particular perspective, for example if it is a visit after school where the siblings are eating their dinner, the full range of dynamics and interactions are unlikely to be revealed in this situation. While as this structured way of observing siblings offers the social worker (within the same time commitment) some insight into the internal worlds of children, how they are likely to behave under stress, and how those behaviours interact in terms of the dynamics shared between them. This feels to us to be a much more robust way of supporting such significant decisions regarding children and their futures, and using the time available in the best possible way.

The advantages of our tool is that it can be used to observe attachment behaviours *within the sibling context*, outside of the dyadic based tools which are less evidence based when replicated across larger sibling groups.

It also provides insight into the areas which might require intervention and support to shift in preparing siblings for permanent placement. As such it is not simply a tool to aid decision making and assessment, but more importantly it is also a way of intervening with sibling relationships so that siblings who should be placed together, are, and those children who it is considered to be in their best interest to be placed individually are, and this being a confident, timely and well evidenced decision.

The structured observation is presented for Social Workers to utilise as part of other measures for a sibling assessment and does not need clinical oversight, although this may be advantageous.

In addition it would be best practice to have two or more involved professionals review the footage post observation to enable multiple perspectives and space for reflection. This might take place in a form of supervision, or a professional reflective meeting.

The observation can be utilised by Social Workers for structured observation of both smaller and larger groups of siblings and requires no additional time or resources for social workers except from a camera, and preferably a one way mirror.

The observation as we have utilised it is separated into 6 sections and takes place in the following manner

The children arrive at an unfamiliar venue and are shown the recording equipment and two way mirror:

- The children engage in free play in the room with their main carer(s) – 10 minutes.
- Stranger enters the room for 5 minutes, joining the carer(s) and children.
- Carer(s) leaves the room and the stranger and children are alone for 10 minutes.
- Carer(s) return and stranger leaves for 5 minutes.
- Carer(s) leaves the room and the siblings are alone for 10 minutes.
- Carer(s) return for 5 minutes (observe second reunification).

After the structured observation has taken place, the video is reviewed by the child's Social worker, and at least one other professional together. This normally takes place within 5 working days of the observation taking place. During this review, our matrix is utilised to assist social workers to analyse the interactions according to aspects of sibling relationship quality. This is completed for each section of the video (6 in total) and then offers comparable information to help contribute to formulations regarding dynamics between the siblings, alongside other measures utilised by the social worker as part of the sibling assessment activity.

Sample Sibling Assessment Headings With Prompts:

Sibling Assessment *Add Children's names and DOB*

Introduction

Outline the context in which the assessment is being completed, i.e. is it being completed as part of a single assessment, planning of legal options to consider placement options if care proceedings are being issued; is it being undertaken to consider placement configuration following emergency placement; has it been instructed by court to inform the care plan, or is it being undertaken as a review assessment following an unsuccessful time limited search for placement.

Sources of Information

Bullet point the work undertaken as part of the sibling assessment, be explicit who has been involved, dates in which the work was completed and name the children involved in the particular pieces of work.

Refer to any documentation reviewed to assist the assessment, for example any psychological, paediatric, or educational assessments undertaken by specialist agencies.

Background Context

Include information on the sibling's previous experiences with birth family or foster placement(s), safety, emotional warmth, stimulation, guidance and boundaries, stability and significant harm experienced. Be clear regarding impact to each child individually as this may vary dependent on time in the environment, age, gender or resiliency factors for example.

This section also includes the history of sibling relationship over time, past, present and future, to consider main transitional points and developmental milestones, for example did the siblings live together before being placed. Were there any periods apart. Include the wider family context, for example adult siblings in the sibling network who may not be being assessed within the main body of the assessment.

Consider the children's individual experience of parenting / abuse. What stories might this have offered the children in terms of what to expect from adults. How might this inter-relate with how they re-enact this in the sibling relationship context. What stories might the children hold about their position in the sibling group and how was this shared in the birth family. Consider what can we learn and reasonably anticipate from the children's background histories, their previous and current behaviour.

You might where possible meet with or hold discussions with previous carers where applicable, to consider change over time. You may ascertain what it is like to parent

the children, likes and dislikes, behaviour, social, emotional and academic development.

Individual Measures and Structured Assessment Information

Include the developmental, psychological and health context for each of the children, include views of the carers of the children, school and health. Include strengths (you might wish to bullet point these.)

When collating information from the children's current carers, you might explore this through the use of a family genogram, or a day in the life tool, for example do the children seek comfort appropriately and allow themselves to be parented? Consider eating and sleeping patterns, self-care skills. Can they play independently, need support and have imaginative play.

Report on the outcome of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (ensure it has been completed by more than one supporting person, i.e. carer, school and health. Summarise this and compare each of the children's individual results and future projections.

You might choose to utilise other individual measures instead of the SDQ, for example:

- The Child Behaviour Checklist (Achenbach and Edelbrock, 1983).
- Berri Checklist (Miriam Silver).

Sibling Measures and Structured Assessment Information

You may choose to use one or more of these resources / tools for this section:

Quantitative:

- The Sibling Relationship Questionnaire (Furman, 1990).
- Sibling Inventory of Behaviour (SIB) (Schaefer and Edgerton 1981).
- The Sibling Relationship Inventory (SRI: Stocker & McHale, 1992).
- Sibling Qualities Scale (SQS: Cole & Kearns, 2001).
- Sibling Relationships in Early Childhood questionnaire (SREC: Volling & Elins, 1998).
- The Sibling Behaviours and Feelings questionnaire (SBFQ: Mendelson, Aboud, & Lanthier, 1994).

Qualitative

- Structured video recorded observations, such as the adapted sibling strange situation procedure (Farnfield, 2009) or the sibling structured observational tool.
- Unstructured observations of children's interaction – this to be undertaken in placement and nursery (across contexts). Include games to observe taking turns, sharing, observation of conflict resolution, free play / non directive play.
- Structured/unstructured play sessions - This can occur in various settings such as home, school, and contact visits with birth family members. Where there is a large sibling group these sessions should also take place with various combinations of the children. It is also useful to view the children for brief periods where their primary attachment figure is not present. This will allow you to observe whether the children take on any parenting, domineering or authoritative roles.
- Observation of contacts, preferably more than one. Do the children seek comfort appropriately and allow themselves to be parented. Does one sibling try to dominate the parent(s) attention? Is there a child often on the periphery of the group. Are the children eager to please or uninterested in the parent(s).
- The Sibling Relationship Checklist (DoH, 1991) you might use this as a checklist for professionals / carers but also utilise it as a checklist to structure recording of an observation.
- Eco Maps, Social atoms, trauma / nurture timeline (chronology) - Various circles of different sizes are used to make a picture of the relevant people in a child's life. The child is placed in the middle and the distance from them to the placement of each other person is considered. The size of the circle representing each person is also considered.
- Narrative Story Stem based work (Hodges and Steele, 2000).
- Sculpt, Genograms and systemic perspectives (first order, second order and third order relationships (Sanders, 2004)

None of these tools would be used in isolation to draw conclusions on a child's parenting needs and their sibling relationships. Instead, they are used in combinations, alongside information gathering from foster carers, birth parents, teachers and social workers to complete a profile of the children, giving a comprehensive picture of their long term needs within a new family.

Dependant on which tools you choose to utilise, you might add subheadings "Summary of findings" and "Conclusions" to help structure what you include to ensure it is concise and relevant to the decision making process. Analyse from an attachment perspective where possible, note presence or absence of sibling issues within play and early formulations regarding the relationships.

Children's Views about Their Sibling Relationships

You may choose to use one or more of these tools for this section:

- A simple activity of asking the child to draw a picture of their family. Noticing who is absent, who is included and offering curiosity about this.
- Use of genograms, ecomaps life maps family portraits, family rituals and role playing.
- Conjoint work with siblings together, such as a road map to elicit discussion about their moves and to observe how the children manage this discussion together.
- Use of play, such as a dolls house with dolls, clay, farm animals, with questions about closeness or preference of another person could be posed indirectly, and could be based around who the child enjoys being with, has jokes and has fun with, sharing toys with, trusts with confidences, can count on for help when poorly, or in trouble, or afraid for example. The questions could be presented in the manner of a game, where the child offers the first person (or sibling) who comes to mind.
- Structured games to examine certain competences and difficulties, for example the games included in Theraplay (materials can be helpful in relation to the domains of structure, engagement, nurture and challenge).
- "Sculpt" activities are helpful where there is limited verbal capacity of a child – using non-specific figures, objects or using other people to demonstrate feelings about relationships, using circular questions about why figures or objects have been placed where they are, what other people may say if they were in the room, how similar or different might it be?

Analysis of Information

Utilise the below template to outline the realistic options arising from the information gathered in the assessment, and weigh up the factors in favour and the factors against each particular option. There may be more than one viable option, or there may be clear vulnerabilities with all of the options. You might use this to show your working and balancing out of the various factors.

You might also use the Coram Cambridgeshire Adoption Sibling Decision Making Reflective tool, Adapted from Schuff and Asen (1996) figure *the person within the network of systems* to support with this process of identifying the various contexts to consider in analysing the information available. Be sure to refer to each of the measures you have used in your assessment as this forms your evidence base.

Ensure that you provide yourself with adequate time to discuss your observations with your colleagues. This can be difficult, however is imperative if observing a larger sibling group.

First realistic option:	
Factors in favour	Factors against
[
Second realistic option:	
Factors in Favour	Factors against
Third realistic option:	
Factors in favour	Factors against

You need to consider each of these factors in making decisions regarding sibling placement:

Risk – this is important, but just because there is not risk doesn't mean the relationship is secure or that siblings will do better if placed together

Individual needs of the children – emotional, developmental, and physical

Combined needs – how possible is it going to be for adopters to meet the needs of the children together

Realistic Availability of Support and Skills of Adopters and Therapy

Recommendation

Recommendations are needed on all assessments, even if this is time limited. If further observation / exploration needs to be undertaken request time to do this.

- Outline the preferred placement option in more detail, referring to research where possible and your rationale as to why this is considered to be the first realistic option.
- Your starting point might be noting whether placing the siblings together will contribute to a secure caregiving environment or if placing the siblings

together may detract from a secure caregiving environment, as the highest context must be offering opportunity for each child to form a secure attachment to a primary carer(s).

Consider:

- Can the siblings' combined needs be met within one family now and in the future.
- What work could be offered to improve the sibling relationship How will we know it has improved.
- What impact will permanent separation have on each child and how can future contact address/mitigate for this?
- You may comment on the direct work to take place to share the outcome of the assessment with the children and planned preparation work to take place.
- Consider at least two realistic options so that there can be a clear parallel plan in place for the children.
- You might choose to include a view in regards to whether the first option should be time limited ie. following a 6 month search if this is unsuccessful whether it would be the case that the second realistic option would then become the preferred plan or if another care plan would be considered i.e. long term fostering.

Considerations for Adoption and Future Care

You might add the following subheadings around considerations for interventions for improving the sibling relationship, matching considerations, introductions and contact plans between the siblings.

Tiered Approach to Sibling Assessment

We are frequently asked questions by social workers about how much / how little should be included in the assessment and this seems to be guided predominantly by the stage in which the assessment is being undertaken. For example, if a sibling group are newly referred to the local authority and enter care on an emergency basis, there will be much less time and opportunity to complete a full and comprehensive assessment at this stage.

Birmingham City Council has available in the public domain an excellent document highlighting their three stage tiered approach to sibling assessment which we would encourage practitioners and organisations to consider;

http://www.proceduresonline.com/birmingham/cs/user_controlled_lcms_area/uploaded_files/Sibling%20Assessment%20Toolkit.pdf

Here they describe three ways of approaching a sibling assessment dependent on the nature of the reasons necessitating assessment. For example in an emergency situation, or upon initial referral to Children's Services, an "initial consideration of the sibling relationship" could be undertaken following referral where there are significant concerns. This may be the first point of contact that the family may have with social care, therefore the children could still be living within the birth family. This assessment could form part of the safeguarding / family assessment and could enable workers to gain further insight into the day to day functioning within the home and enhance the assessment activity already taking place.

They suggest that the "consideration of the sibling relationship" assessment is a short, time limited piece of work to consider the sibling relationship where an immediate decision is required for emergency placement planning or within 20 working days as part of a single assessment.

They suggest that a "brief sibling assessment" could be completed within 4 – 6 weeks and can be undertaken in Family Support & Protection / Family Centres when practitioners are considering care planning / alternative care for children. Practitioners may already have an established relationship with the family; therefore this assessment may inform long term care planning where it is considered that the child or young person is unable to remain in the full time care of their parents.

The "comprehensive sibling assessment" could be completed within 8 weeks and is suggested to be undertaken with children where the care plan is adoption and therefore should have a robust and comprehensive assessment which considers their sibling relationship. They suggest that this assessment should also look at the sibling dynamics and the impact of their individual needs on their day to day presentation.

A Comprehensive Training Pathway for Social Workers - Pre and Post Qualifying

In response to the identified areas needed to improve practice in sibling groups, and after consulting social workers, supporting professionals, adopters and adopted young people, we have developed and piloted a training pathway for professionals involved in sibling assessment practices, focused in our evaluation at social work practitioners post –qualifying and for prospective adopters considering siblings at stage 1 or 2 of the assessment process.

Based on our data collection activity and literature review, our social work practitioner training over two days included the following:

An overview of the cultural, historical, legal and policy context to sibling assessment and decision making includes an overview of the available literature in the areas of

sibling relationships in the general population, sibling relationships for children who are looked after, and research in the areas of sibling placed together or apart.

Our training aimed to interweave this with participants own experience of siblings throughout, and explores this by utilising systemic concepts to enable reflection and awareness of the multiple influences at play during the assessment within personal, professional, organisational and societal domains.

Further to explore the main theory that helps explain sibling relationships, including attachment and systemic family therapy theories. We then consider dynamics between siblings who have suffered trauma, neglect and abuse, theory which helps give language to this, and opportunity to be able to identify and evidence what a good sibling relationship may look like.

The second day is dedicated to practice and participants have the opportunity to learn more regarding what tools are available, to try them out to help them in decision making, to consider what a good assessment looks like and to apply this to the case study of siblings. This includes written and video recorded interactions of siblings.

Practitioners are encouraged to consider this in terms of case examples and resources from their own practice settings, and there is space for connections throughout the two days, and a week gap between day one and two for consolidation.

We propose that local authorities should be offering specific training for social workers and adopters in relation to best practice for siblings, and offer the above as a template for learning and development departments to structure and develop training for all social workers and adopters involved with siblings.

In embedding training across the workforce, we trialled a sibling champion model whereby key individuals who have attended training sessions regarding siblings are then supported to share their knowledge with colleagues. In embedding this we offered sibling surgeries in the involved local authority settings, however these were poorly attended. It was thought that this may be due to the availability of the project as and when needed to the involved local authorities and as such this meant that workers did not need to take specific time out for discussion with colleagues but could access this by picking up the telephone when needed. We would therefore still encourage local authorities investing in developing their work for siblings this model as a proposed way of disseminating learning across the workforce, but that space and commitment of the organisation to this kind of learning culture is necessary for it to work successfully.

We recognise that a whole systems approach would be most useful, and that training for social work students pre-qualifying, and for foster carers and other supporting professionals would be helpful. The project has written and delivered training for

social work students pre-qualifying and for foster carers however this was not included in this evaluation due to this being outside the scope of the project timescales.

Prospective Adopters

The prospective adopter preparation training is a one day training programme and covered the following:

To learn some of the main theory that helps explain the specific needs of adopted children in sibling groups and to understand the needs of individual children and how behaviours interact, considering sibling conflict and dynamics in placement.

To learn more about what it is like to adopt siblings from a sibling adopter who presented her own experience in the training and who offers practical advice and support in managing time and resources within participants own family contexts.

To consider this in terms of real life case examples of siblings waiting for permanence and make connections to participants own experience of siblings.

Finally the training aims to consider whether sibling adoption is something participants wish to consider further with their social worker.

Adopters - Post-Placement

A crucial outcome of the project was to develop a post adoption training programme that specifically focused on targeting issues faced by adopters of siblings. Currently there seems very few specific programmes available for those who have adopted siblings, instead most post adopter programmes seem to add in references to siblings in an ad hoc way. Given that there are many issues specific to adopting siblings, such as how to develop secure attachments between siblings, it seemed highly pertinent that this project was able to develop such a programme.

After exploring what post adopter training is currently offered to adopters across the UK, there seemed to be three main approaches that were most commonly offered. These approaches were either attachment, relational, or PACE focused (subject to the adoptive context). As each of these approaches has their merits we decided to develop a 2 session post sibling placement module programme, with each module designed to take 5 hours to run and the module to be conducted over the course of two weeks, to allow time for reflection and consolidation. We envisage that it would be run with adopters approximately 3 to 6 months into placement.

This is in line with the recommendations from the Rushton et al, 1999 study which looked at sibling relationships of children being placed permanently from care. This is a significant study because it focused on sibling interactions in long-term placements. They looked at 72 families where 133 children had been placed, some individually (32) and the rest in 40 sibling groups. Notably, parents in the study were

interviewed at three months and twelve months after placement, using a sibling relationship questionnaire. Parents reported high levels of conflict and rivalry among placed sibling groups, which improved somewhat over the year, and low levels of warmth between siblings. The severity of the sibling disputes was associated with high level so strain on the parents. This research suggested that training targeted at offering practice advice around management of rivalry, and the impact of this on the relationships in the family, as well as ways of increasing warmth in relationships may be useful.

For new sibling relationships (i.e. those relationships established as a result of the adoptive child joining the adopters family who may already have birth children or children placed) warmth was low, conflict was low, and rivalry was high. Whereas warmth improved over the year, rivalry remained high. For the parents' own children, there was a picture of adjustment difficulties (64 per cent at three months, 67 per cent at 12 months.) Holding in mind that even where single children are placed for adoption, where they may be joining other children the sibling relationship needs to be considered, and support offered to these adopters may also be pertinent and helpful. In light of this the research considers that the timing of any training to adopters to ensure it is useful, not overwhelming and responsive to the needs of the family, would be useful at the points of 3-6 months post placement, and a further offer at 12 months. Agencies may wish to consider refresher courses at 12 months in line with the three stage module as suggested.

The first module we have developed is specific to attachment and siblings, this considers attachment theory and offers adopters the opportunity to reflect on their own and the differing attachment styles of their sibling group. It also helps adopters consider strategies they can put in place to help strengthen secure attachments between the sibling group and with themselves as parents.

The second module which is still in development and uses the relational and PACE approach and is designed to complement Kim Golding's Foundations for Attachment Programme used by Coram Cambridgeshire Adoption. This module considers how to use the PACE approach with more than one child considering how to support with more challenging sibling behaviours, such as rivalry, conflict and competition and the high importance of adopter self-care.

We are strongly of the opinion that this package offers something new to the area of post adoption training and if prospective adopters were aware that such specific training was available to them post adoption then it may help encourage more prospective adopters to consider adopting siblings.

Suggested Policy Template to Consider at an Organisational Level

Adoption Planning for Sibling Groups:

Introduction

A high proportion of children who are looked after have brothers or sisters. The relationship that brothers and sisters have can be one of the longest in a person's life and the benefits of those relationships are well known. Children who are fostered or adopted also tend to have more complex and fragmented family relationships in comparison to other groups of children (Kosonen, 1999; Rushton et al, 2001).

For children coming into care, a placement with a brother or sister can ensure that family identity is preserved and that some sense of security and normality is maintained. Losses incurred when children come into care or are adopted are significant and remaining with siblings in some cases can mitigate against the effect of those losses.

Whilst being placed with a sibling can have many benefits for some children, it is also acknowledged that some children who have had particularly difficult family experiences may have significant individual needs that mean that they cannot be placed with a sibling. In some cases the placement of siblings together may detract from a secure caregiving environment.

In order for children to develop emotionally, socially, psychologically and physiologically it is essential that children have the opportunity to form a stable secure relationship with a safe and trusted adult. Where the sibling relationship dynamic's, or the individual needs of one child are such that any child is prevented from having the opportunity to form a stable relationship with an adult then it is necessary to consider separating the sibling group.

It is important therefore at the earliest possible opportunity that assessment takes place of the quality of sibling relationships in supporting care planning and decision making for sibling groups to ensure all children have the opportunity to thrive. Looked after children often have very complex family structures and it is important that these are fully considered, that the significance of relationships to the child are assessed and that permanence planning takes this into account.

Definition of Siblings

The Department accepts the following definition of siblings:

- Children who share at least one birth parent;

and/or

- Children who live or have lived for a significant period with other children in a family group.

Many children looked after have complex family structures with step siblings and half siblings, living with them or elsewhere. It is vital to establish who the siblings are.

The first question to ask is "who are the child's significant siblings" At this stage do not discount anyone, carefully record sibling relationships, where the siblings live and what kind of contact there has been. This should include step siblings, adult siblings, and paternal siblings. In addition different cultures may see "sibling" relatedness in different ways and this should be explored sensitively and checked out with members of the relevant cultural groups.

In addition asking children who they regard as their brothers or sisters and who they feel close to or estranged from, as well as the views of their parents and carers are an important part of assessment and decision making.

Legal Position

The main legal provision on the placement of siblings is contained in the Children Act 1989:

“Where a Local Authority provides accommodation for a child whom they are looking after, they shall... so far as is reasonably practicable and consistent with his welfare, secure that... Where the authority are also providing accommodation for a sibling of his, they are accommodated together” (Section 23(7)(B)).

The Statutory Adoption Guidance (2013) section 4(12) states that:

“Siblings should be adopted by the same prospective adopter unless there is good reason why they should not be. Where an agency is making a placement decision on two or more children from the same family, it should be based on a comprehensive assessment of the quality of the children’s relationship, their individual needs and the likely capacity of the prospective adopter to meet the needs of all the siblings being placed together. Where it is not possible for the siblings to be placed together the agency should consider carefully the need for the children to remain in contact with each other and the need for adoption support” (p.85)

Draft Adoption Statutory Guidance July 2014 Chapter 1 (3:15)

“There should be a clear decision making process which enables social workers to decide early whether it is in the best interests of each child to be placed together or separately, and the impact on each child of that decision. The decision making process should be set out clearly with the supporting information and evidence so that all the professionals who are involved in making decisions about each child’s future can see how and why the decision was reached. It will also be important in

future for the child, as an adult, to be able to see how and why a decision was reached. The decision should be based on a balanced assessment of the individual needs of each child in the group, and the likely or possible consequences of each option on each child. Agencies may wish to have a formal assessment process in place to assist with the analysis and decision making process.”

“There are many factors that may need to be considered in reaching a decision on whether to place siblings together or separately. These will include:

- The nature of the sibling group: for example, do the siblings know each other; how are they related
- Whether the children have formed an attachment, and if so the nature of that attachment (secure, insecure or otherwise).
- The health needs of each child.
- Each child’s view (noting that a child’s views and perceptions will change over time).

Other Relevant Factors

This means that the agency is better able to make robust, evidenced decisions on whether it is in the interests of each child to be placed separately or together.”

LAC (99) 29 “Care Plans and Care Proceedings under the Children Act 1989” states that:

“The Court will wish to scrutinise the care plans for each sibling child. It is important that the Court’s attention is drawn to any important differences between the respective plans reflecting the individual needs of the child”.

The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (2000) recognises that:

“The quality of relationships between siblings may also be of major significance to a child’s welfare”.

Policy

For Siblings who are looked after by XXX County Council, the decision to place brothers and sisters together or in separate placements will be made following a full and comprehensive sibling assessment.

This should commence at the earliest possible opportunity when children become known to the Local Authority, and a formal assessment completed where planning of

legal options is being considered, and reviewed frequently as relationships develop over time.

A Permanence Planning Meeting should be held to give consideration of the individual needs of children and ensure a multi-agency discussion takes place and current information regarding the sibling group can be discussed.

Assessing Children in Sibling Groups

There are no easy answers or one all-encompassing way of assessing sibling relationships, this is because children's and families lives are complex and unique. Therefore the most robust way of assessing sibling relationships is an assessment which utilises a mixture of methods, is longitudinal and is regularly reviewed.

In addition to this siblings need social work practitioners who are able to critically reflect on and analyse each situation uniquely, and this may best be achieved through regular and timely supervision as well as professionals meetings to consider multiple perspectives regarding the options available.

The assessment should include a full assessment of each individual child in a sibling group, as well as an assessment of their relationships with each other and the dynamics of the group. This assessment should be undertaken by the child's social worker.

Even if it seems clear that the siblings should remain together, a full assessment will provide essential information for a new family and will enable the agency to anticipate the extra help and support that may be necessary to prepare siblings for permanence.

The assessment should include more than one method or tool, and ideally, a variety of measures should be utilised to support the assessment.

These may include:

- Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).
- Sibling Relationship Checklist (Department of Health, 1991).
- Eco Maps, Social atoms, trauma / nurture timeline (chronology).
- Structured video recorded observations, such as the adapted sibling strange situation procedure (Farnfield, 2009) or the sibling structured observational tool (in publication, 2018).
- Unstructured observations of children's interaction –in placement and nursery (across contexts). Include games to observe taking turns, sharing, observation of conflict resolution, free play / non directive play.

- Structured/unstructured play sessions - This can occur in various settings such as home, school, and contact visits with birth family members. Where there is a large sibling group these sessions should also take place with various combinations of the children.
- Observation of contacts, preferably more than one.
- Day in the life diary (completion by current carer(s) and genograms).

Direct Work With the Children Together and Separately Across Contexts

A sibling assessment may follow the following process (adapted from Lord J and Borthwick S (2001) Assessing Brothers and Sisters for Permanent Placement, BAAF Publication):

Clarify Who the Siblings Are:

- Who should be considered for placement together.
- Are there brothers and sisters in other families.
- Who does the child view as their brothers and sisters.

Who Should be Involved:

Who can contribute to the assessment.

Birth parents, foster carers, previous social workers, contact supervisors, education, specialist staff “experts” etc.

Are the Children Placed in Separate Placement’s:

- Should efforts be made to reunite the children in the same placement.
- If this is not possible or appropriate, it is essential that brothers and sisters be given the opportunity to share contact regularly and opportunities to assess their relationships together.
- Arrangements for this should reflect the primary aim of giving the children a chance to build or rebuild relationships in the context of the family group. It is also important for those assessing their relationships that other children are not present, as this may influence the relationships between the siblings.

Assessing Each Child’s Individual Needs:

Each child should have an individual assessment which accurately reflects their current emotional, social, developmental and psychological needs.

This should include an overview of the children's health, development, emotional and psychological presentation. This includes the impact of trauma on each child:

Damage to the developing brain, impulse, stress and anger regulation.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) should be considered.

Each child should be supported and spoken with as an individual and as a sibling group and should have his or her own life story book.

Consider the Context in which the Relationship Between the Siblings has Developed as Follows:

- How does / did the relationship between the parents / carer(s) influence their individual relationships with the children, and in turn, the sibling's relationships with one another?
- Include information on the sibling's previous experiences with birth family or foster placement(s), safety, emotional warmth, stimulation, guidance and boundaries, stability and significant harm experienced. Be clear regarding impact to each child individually as this may vary dependent on time in the environment, age, gender or resiliency factors for example.
- What stories might the children hold about their position in the sibling group and how was this shared in the birth family? Consider what can we learn and reasonably anticipate from the children's background histories, their previous and current behaviour?

Assessing a Child's Attachment to and Relationship Dynamics Between the Siblings:

- Should be based on detailed observation of how the children behave with each other by key people across different contexts.
- This may be enhanced by a sibling strange situation based structured observation.
- An overview of any psychological assessment undertaken as part of care proceedings.
- Consider the children's individual experience of parenting / abuse. What stories might this have offered the children in terms of what to expect from adults? How might this inter-relate with how they re-enact this in the sibling relationship context?

- Are there any particular issues that need to be considered? (e.g. is one child excluded or scapegoated by the others, is an older sibling very controlling);
- If children are currently placed separately this will affect the dynamics of the whole group, as such it is important to observe the siblings together, as this is the context in which the relationship has developed.

What Work Could be Done to Improve Relationships Between Siblings

- Before a decision to separate siblings is made it is important to consider what work could be undertaken to make it possible to place together.
- Consider how long the siblings have been looked-after for (if looked –after) there may have been very little opportunity for change within the sibling relationship quality and as such the assessment may need to be reviewed following a prolonged period of stability in care.
- If children are placed in the same family, it may be impossible (within a reasonable timescale) to help them recover from dysfunctional and destructive patterns of interaction from their birth family with a clear schedule of support to seek to repair relationships and secure attachment formation.

Circumstances Which May Indicate That Siblings Should be Placed Separately

(This is not an exhaustive list), as each sibling group is unique and there are no “one size fits all” solutions. However some examples may be:

- Intensive rivalry, jealousy and hostility; with little emotional warmth at any time.
- Siblings who have developed a bond with one another that serves as a substitute for or even a barrier to parent – child attachment. For example “Parentified” behaviour whereby:
 - The caretaking child gives without getting.
 - The role and identity of the caretaker is rigid and locked in – there is little flexibility around who gives and who gets.
 - The warm interchange that characterises secure sibling relationships is lacking – this can have negative long lasting effects on both giver and receiver.
 - This is resistant to change and forms a barrier to secure attachment formation - unless placed separately from siblings.
- Exploitation of siblings (can be based on gender, age and experience of care) which is resistant to change.

- Chronic scapegoating / exclusion of one child in the sibling group, which impacts their ability to get their needs met.
- Maintenance of unhelpful alliances and birth family conflicts and this being re-enacted in the sibling relationships.
- Where siblings have a genuine but extremely problematic sibling relationship due to their experience of care and attachment to their caregiver (interactions involve re-enacting difficulties in their environment) such as highly sexualised behaviour with each other; or re-enacting violence from the birth family environment.
- Sibling relationships, which appear “flat” “ambivalent” – this is where children haven’t been offered the environment to form enough connection to an adult to be able to seek out other relationships. Holding in mind that the absence of risk doesn’t mean the relationships between siblings are secure, and where children’s individual needs are so great that they would benefit from individual placement, it may be considered to be in the sibling’s interests to be separated where one cannot evidence a meaningful and quality sibling relationship.

In addition the social worker must consider if the sibling relationship dynamics are forming a barrier to each child forming a secure attachment to carers and what impact this may have on their individual opportunities to thrive should one or more of the siblings be overlooked in co-placement with a sibling.

It must be stressed that efforts must be made to address any issues of difficulty in sibling relationships before the serious decision to place separately is made.

In completing the analysis and recommendations, the assessing social worker needs to consider each of these factors in making decisions regarding sibling placement:

- Risk – this is important, but just because there is not risk doesn’t mean the relationship is secure or that siblings will do better if placed together.
- The individual needs of the children – emotional, developmental, physical.
- The combined needs of the children – how possible is it going to be for adopters to meet the needs of the children together.
- Realistic availability of support and skills of adopters and therapy.

Ideally there will be at least two viable options to consider in terms of placement so that there can be a preferred placement plan and parallel placement plan to ensure minimal delay for the children.

Identifying Who Should be Placed with Whom if a Sibling Group Needs to be Split

Should not be purely based on who is together in foster care. This is likely to have been a resource-led decision.

What Information Has Been Gathered About Levels of Need of Individual Children, What Are Their Wishes and Feelings

Where there has been positive change in the sibling relationship since being placed and where this may continue to be worked upon to improve relationships in preparation for adoption.

Permanence Planning Meeting to be held to discuss the children's individual needs, sibling relationships and whether they should remain together or apart, as well as the permanence options for the children.

Recording

It is vital that reasons for decisions about the placement of brothers and sisters are well recorded and there is a clear balancing out of the advantages and limitations of placement together or separately so that the rationale is transparent. It is likely to be the case that every decision will be a balance of advantages and disadvantages as there are no simple solutions in coming to this complex decision.

Information should also be given to adopters and should be contained in the child's life storybook and later life letter.

When the children become adults, they may or may not agree that the right decision was made, but they should at least be assured that it was made with thought and care.

Contact Issues if Brothers and Sisters are Placed in Separate Adoptive Families

If brothers and sisters are unable to be placed together, it is essential that the department ensures that robust contact arrangements are in place, which can be sustained throughout childhood.

There may be circumstances where children have lived together in a care placement and a significant relationship has developed. Consideration should be given to whether on-going contact with these children would be of benefit to the child.

Adoptive parents of separated siblings will require information about how and why decisions have been made so that they can talk to their children in years to come. They also have specific needs in respect of contact, such as:

Opportunities to Meet the Adoptive Parents of the Siblings Prior to Child-to-Child Contact

Clear contracts which have been openly negotiated with all parties. Who will initiate arrangements, who, will travel, how often, how to handle changes to contact? It will be essential to acknowledge any differences in family income to ensure that potential venues are within all adopters' means;

- An understanding of any risks and how to minimise these.
- An understanding of the current and potential benefits of maintaining sibling relationships.
- The range of ways that links can be maintained, e.g. video, e-mail etc.
- Access to support (which may include financial support) and a means of reviewing contact.

Adoptive parents managing sibling contact may also have to cope with issues in the other families impacting on their children, e.g. placement disruption or an older child's reunion with members of their birth family. The capacity to tolerate periods of change and uncertainty need to be recognised and discussed during preparation and assessment and when discussing placements.

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