Children *and* Family Research Center

Conservation of Sibling Bonds

Public child welfare has long been concerned with guardianship of the person and the property of youth who have been removed from parental custody as a result of child protective intervention. Authorities are charged with the responsibility of promoting foster youths' development by securing their property in trust to insure that their assests are available to them when they become adults, by providing them with adequate educational opportunity and by training them for their transition into adulthood. Economists define these kinds of resources as human and financial capital because they can be conceived of as inputs to a young person's future social well-being and economic productivity.

Economists are now seeing that both the quantity and the quality of youths' social and community ties — what they call social capital — is as critical a determinant as other assets to future economic productivity and social well-being. As of now, however, policies and procedures for safeguarding social capital for foster youths are far less developed in most public child welfare systems than is the guardianship of their person and other concrete assets.

An important source of social capital derives from strong sibling attachments. Relationships with siblings are among the longest lasting and most dependable resources for social support over the life span. Research shows that sibling relationships play a major role in children's development and capacity to successfully interact positively with other people.[1] Sibling bonds, just as parent-child bonds, shape children's developing attachment to those around them.[2] Siblings provide a well-spring of emotional comfort during childhood, and in adulthood, siblings can also become a vital source of material and financial assistance.

Adult sibling relationships have received less attention than childhood sibling relationships. Until recently, both the extensiveness and significance of adult sibling connections were not widely studied.[3] Cicirelli finds that middle-aged and older adults maintain some kind of contact with their siblings over their lifetimes.[4] Moyer identified the following specific contexts of sibling relationship that might have importance for older adults: caregiving for parents, caregiving for each other, reconciliation of past differences and family histories, friendship, and support through changes in family structure and roles.[5]

Despite the significance of sibling relationships for childhood development and subsequent well-being in adulthood, the importance of conserving sibling ties has been ignored until recently in child welfare practice. Foster children are frequently kept apart from their brothers or sisters, and may even lack any contact or knowledge about their siblings. Consequently, foster children are too often deprived of a potentially important source of social capital both during their childhood and later adult lives.

Illinois statutes recognize sibling ties to be a factor in a best interest determination of where children should be placed once separated from their parents, but the courts have stopped short of recognizing a right of sibling association. Termination of parental rights and adoption may change biological siblings into legal strangers. Although some adoptive parents permit ongoing contact between biological siblings, there is no legal recourse for siblings who are denied such opportunity. A right of sibling association becomes especially pertinent when all siblings cannot be adopted into the same home.

The opportunities for sibling association before and after legal permanence are related to the type of care into which children are placed. Table 1 presents Illinois data on the proportions of siblings placed together, and shows that sibling group placements decline the more restrictive

Table 1.—Percentage of Siblings Placed Together by Size of Sibling Group, 1997 and 2001					
Year and Type of Care	**Sibling Group Size**				
	2	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6+**
Fiscal Year 1997					
Kinship Care	75.4%	59.9%	48.0%	36.7%	21.7%
Family Foster Care	62.3%	30.4%	13.2%	8.5%	5.0%
Specialized Foster Care	48.3%	21.6%	11.6%	7.2%	2.2%
Institution/Group Home	12.3%	3.9%	3.5%	—	—
Fiscal Year 2001					
Kinship Care	69.1%	51.9%	42.4%	26.0%	20.0%
Family Foster Care	57.1%	33.9%	16.0%	2.8%	1.2%
Specialized Foster Care	47.3%	25.3%	19.9%	19.2%	3.0%
Institution/Group Home	10.5%	11.7%	3.5%	—	—

Source: DCFS Integrated Database, March 31, 2002.

(less family like) the type of care. Sibling groups of all sizes are more likely to be placed together in kinship care and least likely in institutional and group care. Although this pattern holds for the most recent year available, among sibling groups of 3 or more the proportion placed together has declined for kinship care while improving slightly in more restrictive types of care.

The opportunities for placements of siblings groups with kin depend, of course, on the availability of extended kin willing and able to step in as substitute caregivers for the birth parents. But what if kin are not available; can public policies be crafted to attain similar levels of placement of sibling groups in unrelated foster homes as in related foster homes?

The Children and Family Research Center has conducted an evaluation of a professional foster care program, *Neighbor to Neighbor* sponsored by the Jane Addam's Hull House Association, which is designed to accommodate the needs of large sibling groups. *Neighbor to Neighbor* recruits and trains prospective foster parents from the local community, helps them become licensed, and finally hires them as employees of Hull House. The employee feature distinguishes *Neighbor to Neighbor* from traditional foster care programs that rely primarily on volunteer foster parents.

To assess how well *Neighbor to Neighbor* succeeds in acquiring placements for sibling groups, the Center drew a matched sample of sibling groups placed in unrelated foster care in Chicago. The attributes of the matched sample were constrained to emulate the *Neighbor to Neighbor* sample in sibling group size, race, gender, and previous time in care. On examination, it was found that only 33% of sibling groups were placed together in the matched, traditional care sample compared to 71 percent in the *Neighbor to Neighbor* program. The Hull House program proved substantially more successful in placing siblings together than the child protective system. While the study found no differences in rates of reunification between the two samples, there was a higher rate of adoption in the matched sample of children placed via traditional means during state fiscal years 1993-96. This difference may reflect the easier adoption of separated siblings or the challenges of converting professional foster homes into permanent adoptive or guardianship homes when reunification is not possible. Despite the challenges, disruption rates were lower in *Neighbor to Neighbor* than in the matched sample.

Research suggests that the conservation of sibling ties for foster youth is a potentially important investment in young people's future well-being. Data from Illinois shows that it is possible to keep siblings together when relatives are recruited as foster parents. Even when extended kin are unavailable, the evaluation of the *Neighbor to Neighbor* program in Chicago indicates that it is possible to attain similar levels of siblings placed together if unrelated foster parents are recruited, trained, and hired as professionals for the task. While professional foster homes make the most economic sense when reunification remains a viable permanency option, findings indicate that greater efforts should be expended in maintaining sibling groups together in adequately compensated homes when returning home is no longer possible.

Mark Testa, April Curtis, Hyun-ah Kang and Zakyia Kidd

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