The Influence of Adoption on Sibling Relationships: Experiences and Support Needs of Newly Formed Adoptive Families

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Abstract

For better or worse, the significance of the sibling relationship throughout the life course is widely acknowledged. This paper explores the ways in which sibling relationships, in their various forms, are affected by adoption. The case-file records of 374 children recently placed for adoption in Wales were reviewed. Questionnaires were completed by ninety-six adoptive parents, with whom a sample of these children were placed, and a sub-sample of forty adoptive parents were interviewed. Most children placed for adoption together with a sibling carried a shared history of maltreatment. Many had complex, often conflictual relationships. Nevertheless, birth siblings in the adoptive home also provided support and comfort for children. New sibling relationships, created by placing children into families with existing children, carried their own set of advantages and complications. Some children placed apart from birth siblings had plans for contact that had not yet materialised. Whilst adoptive parents were often determined to help strengthen sibling bonds created and affected by adoption, this commitment was not always championed through social work intervention. The implications for social work practice in adoption are considered and a family systems framework is proposed as a way of helping to understand sibling dynamics in adoptive families.

Keywords: Adoption, family systems, siblings, support

Introduction

Sibling relationships are amongst the most significant and potentially important bonds that individuals have in the course of their lifetime (Allan, 1979). Usually formed in childhood, they tend to last longer than other key relationships, such as those with parents and partners and, ordinarily, children will spend more time in interactions with siblings than with close others (Dunn, 2007). As well as existing through blood ties, siblingship can be formed in other ways, such as legally through adoption or through familial affinity, such as foster-care. This paper sheds new light on sibling relationship quality and experiences within families where a child or children have recently joined a family through adoption. It considers the fresh thinking that is required to support the sibling dynamic within adoptive families.

The positive influence of the sibling relationship on children's social, emotional and cognitive development has been evidenced (see e.g. Azmitia and Hesser, 1993; Downey and Condron, 2004), as have the enduring advantages afforded by the sibling bond. Even into old age, brothers and sisters have been shown to be an important source of mutual support and companionship (White, 2004). From a sociological perspective, the significance of the sibling relationship in identity formation has also been observed (Davies, 2014).

Despite its many advantages, the sibling relationship is not exclusively harmonious. A range of discordant elements can be attributed to the sibling bond, including rivalry, negativity, hostility and aggression (Sanders, 2004). Moderate levels of conflict in the sibling relationship (when tempered with co-existent warmth) can be advantageous to children, by helping to foster social skills such as negotiation and compromise, and by enhancing emotional regulation (Stormshak *et al.*, 1996). Even though sibling relationships can be fraught and characterised by periods of conflict, brothers and sisters often consider their ties to each other as ones that unite them for life (Ross and Milgram, 1982).

Sibling relationships have attracted limited research and practice interest in the child welfare arena, often overshadowed by a focus on the carer–child relationship (McCormick, 2010; Saunders and Selwyn, 2011). Whilst there is a body of evidence about sibling processes in so-called 'normal' or typical rearing environments, much less is known about the significance of the relationship in the context of adversity. In their review examining sibling relationships specifically in circumstances of childhood maltreatment, Katz and colleagues (2016) observed sparse evidence. The elevated importance of the sibling relationship in the context of childhood maltreatment and out-of-home care has been suggested (Shlonsky *et al.*, 2005). Intense sibling loyalties can exist when children are exposed to hostile, weak or absent parenting (Bank and Kahn,

1982). However, neglectful parenting practices can also undermine the quality of sibling relationships (Milevsky *et al.*, 2011).

Siblings and adoption

Adoption alters a child's kinship network, including those connections with siblings. Siblings placed together for adoption will need to renegotiate their relationship in the context of their new family. The dynamics that exist within the new adoptive family will influence, and be influenced by, those that exist between siblings. Children placed apart from brothers and sisters may have little, or possibly no, further direct contact with siblings. Unless placed together for adoption, children cease to have a legal relationship with the birth family. Therefore, any contact between an adopted child and a birth sibling living elsewhere is almost always reliant on an informal agreement between the involved parties (Cossar and Neil, 2013). A child placed for adoption in a family with existing children will have new sibling connections to explore and adjust to.

Several reviews have considered the evidence for the placement of siblings in adoptive and/or foster-care (see e.g. Hegar, 2005; McCormick, 2010; Jones, 2016). The general consensus supports the view that, unless there is a good reason for separation, most children will benefit from continuing to live with siblings. Hegar (2005) observed that children tend to fare at least as well, or better, when placed with siblings. Jones (2016) concluded that the evidence supports the call for policy makers and practitioners to continue developing and maintaining sibling placements, when it is in the best interest of children.

It is not within the scope of this paper to debate the complex task that social workers face in determining whether siblings should be put together in adoptive placements; current legislation supports the co-placement of siblings, unless their separation can be suitably justified. In deciding whether or not siblings should be placed together for adoption, statutory guidance calls for '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' (DfE, 2013).

Sibling relationships created through adoption

The presence of an existing child or children in the adoptive home can create added complexity to adoptive family life. For example, evidence suggests that adoption disruption rates are higher in families with existing birth children (Wedge and Mantel, 1991; McRoy, 1999). Difficulties may arise in families where parents feel closer to their birth child

([Loehlin *et al.*, 2010](#)) or when the adopted child perceives this to be the case ([Selwyn *et al.*, 2015](#)). Birth children themselves may experience difficulties in adjusting to their new family form. In a study of siblings in late permanent placement ([Rushton *et al.*, 2001](#)), two-thirds of birth children were experiencing some level of adjustment difficulty twelve months post placement. [Phillips (1999)](#) found that the reactions of birth children to their revised family form depended upon the child's developmental stage. For young birth children, a pattern of anxiety and a fear of abandonment prevailed, threatening the children's sense of self and security within the family. The age differential between an existing (birth) child and their adopted sibling is an important factor in determining placement stability, with outcomes poorer when the siblings are close in age or when the adopted child is not the youngest in the family ([Wedge and Mantel, 1991](#)).

Adoption and siblings living elsewhere

In England and Wales, the 2002 Adoption and Children Act obliges courts to consider contact arrangements between children placed for adoption and their birth families. In a systematic review, [Boyle (2017)](#) examined the impact of birth family contact on adopted children. The importance of maintaining contact with siblings was consistently identified by both adoptive parents and children. Furthermore, children wanted to have more sibling contact. In considering the experience of direct sibling contact after adoption, [Cossar and Neil (2013)](#) identified a range of complexities. Contact plans were often seen as inflexible, with formalised and infrequent meetings. Adopted children needed help to make sense of their sibling connections; adoptive parents needed support in thinking about their child's contact arrangements, while siblings living elsewhere (particularly those who remained in the birth family) needed support in adjusting to alterations in the sibling relationship.

Drawing on data generated from a national, all-Wales adoption study, this paper explores the impact of adoption on sibling relationships. It sets out what is known about the changes in the composition of sibling networks for children recently placed for adoption, examines the ways in which sibling relationships, in their various forms, evolve post placement and considers the support needed to strengthen sibling relationships in early adoptive family life. In doing so, the paper draws on systems theory as a useful framework for understanding the sibling relationship within a wider context. A system may be defined as a series of elements that are arranged in some consistent and enduring relationship with each other ([Miller, 1965](#)). The systems approach to child development considers how component parts within a system (such as the family) interact and relate to children's actions and reactions in the context of family

life. Family systems theory, specifically, conceptualises the family as a hierarchical structure in which subsystems exist, including the couple, parent–child and sibling relationships, which are themselves embedded in larger systems, such as the community (Cox and Paley, 1997). In order to maintain balance in the system, each member within the family responds to one another in ways determined by relationship agreements. However, these interactions cannot be fully understood in isolation from the interconnected and interdependent relationships between all members in the system. The systems conceptualisation of families provides an important metaphor for understanding child development as occurring within a context that includes a number of different relationship-based influences and interactions. The interplay between parent–child and sibling relationships may hold clues for understanding key aspects of adoptive family functioning, as well as short- and longer-term support needs.

Wales adoption study

This study used a mixed-methods approach to examine the characteristics and experiences of children recently placed for adoption in Wales during a thirteen-month period, to consider the early support needs and experiences of adoptive families into which a sample of these children were placed and to better understand what helps these families to flourish. The study did not explicitly focus on siblings; however, sibling relationships in early adoptive family life emerged as a salient sub-theme within a broader context of the support needed to help strengthen family relationships.

Study data were drawn from three sources:

1. *Review of Child Assessment Reports for Adoption (CARA) records (n = 374)*: The records of *all* children placed for adoption by every local authority (LA) in Wales between 1 July 2014 and 31 July 2015 were reviewed. These records provided information about the characteristics, needs and experiences of all children placed during the study window.

2. *Questionnaire to adoptive families (*n *= 96)*: Newly formed adoptive families completed a questionnaire four months into placement. The questionnaire gathered information on the background characteristics of the adoptive families, alongside support needs and views of how they thought the placement was faring, what was going well in family life, as well any concerns they had. If the family contained multiple children placed for adoption, parents were ask to respond to all specific child-related questions with reference to the oldest child in placement.

3. *In-depth interviews with adoptive parents (*n *= 40)*: Participants were drawn from families who had completed the questionnaire

and had agreed to be contacted for interview. The interviews typically took place nine months after the adoptive placement commenced. They were designed to help understand more about the early experiences and support needs of adoptive families.

Recruitment of families

LA adoption teams across Wales were asked to send out letters on behalf of the research team to every family with whom they had placed a child for adoption in the thirteen months from July 2014. Families wanting to participate in the study were invited to respond to the researchers directly. A strategy of rolling recruitment was used, with invitation letters timed to arrive with the families several weeks after the placement began. Of the 118 adoptive families eligible for study inclusion and who contacted the research team, ninety-six returned the questionnaire (81 per cent response rate). As some placements comprised siblings placed together for adoption, the families in our questionnaire sample actually contained 128 of the 374 children identified from the CARA reviews. This represents just over a third (34 per cent) of all the looked after children in Wales placed for adoption in the thirteen-month period. Table 1 sets out key characteristics in the CARA, questionnaire and interview samples.

The study received ethical approval via the University Ethics Committee. Approval from the Welsh government was obtained and permission to access LA data was granted by the heads of children's services. Informed consent was obtained from all participating adoptive families.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 20. The fully transcribed qualitative interviews were thematically analysed, using NVivo Version 10. Whilst some material was coded from concepts that had been identified at the outset of the fieldwork, others were generated from within the data-set.

Findings

Data retrieved from the adoption (CARA) files enabled us to detail what was known about children and their sibling connections within the birth families. Descriptive statistics, as they relate to siblings, in the questionnaire and interview sample are also presented below. In reporting on their experiences and support needs as newly formed adoptive families, parents shared many and varied observations about their child's sibling relationships and the perceived effects on family functioning. These findings, drawn from both the questionnaire and interview work,

Table 1 Key characteristics of the CARA, questionnaire and interview samples

	CARA sample (n=374)		Questionnaire sample (n=96)		Interview sample (n=40)	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Child gender						
Male	205	55	49	51	23	57.5
Female	169	45	47	49	17	42.5
Child's age (when placed for adoption)						
Under 12 months	94	25	24	25	9	22.5
12–47 months	196	52	42	44	18	45
48 months+	84	23	30	31	13	32.5
Child's ethnicity						
White British	353	94	91	95	38	95
Other	21	6	5	5	2	5
Adopter status						
Heterosexual couple	n/a*	n/a	79	82	31	77.5
Same sex couple	n/a	n/a	5	5	3	7.5
Single adopter	n/a	n/a	12	13	6	15

*CARA records do not contain information about the adoptive family.

are presented within the dimensions of (i) siblings placed together for adoption, (ii) siblings created through adoption and (iii) birth siblings living elsewhere.

The impact of adoption on sibling networks

Of the 374 children placed for adoption in the study period, 325 (87 per cent) were known to have at least one brother or sister (full or half sibling). A third of all children ($n = 122$, 33 per cent) were placed for adoption as part of a sibling group: fifty-five pairs and four groups of three. Seventy-one per cent of these children ($n = 86$) were placed with full siblings and 21 per cent ($n = 26$) with maternal half siblings. The remaining 8 per cent ($n = 10$) of children shared the same birth mother, but the paternity of at least one child in the sibling group was unknown or not revealed. It was therefore not possible to establish whether these children were maternal half siblings or full siblings. There were no recorded cases of paternal half siblings being placed together for adoption during the study period.

The CARA records showed an association between children placed for adoption as part of a sibling group and maltreatment ($\chi^2 = 62.37$, $p < 0.001$; 85 per cent of children placed as part of a sibling group had been abused or neglected, compared with 43 per cent of children placed individually), and exposure to domestic violence before entering care ($\chi^2 = 42.37$, $p < 0.001$; 60 per cent of children placed as part of a sibling group had been exposed to domestic violence compared with 25 per cent

Table 2 Sibling-related characteristics in the CARA, questionnaire and interview samples

	CARA sample (n=374)		Questionnaire sample (n=96)		Interview sample (n=40)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Sibling group placement	122	33	29	30	10	25
Birth siblings living elsewhere	294	79	81	84	36	90
Adoptive family contains existing children	n/a*	n/a*	28	29	13	32

*CARA records do not contain information about the adoptive family.

of children placed individually). Children placed as part of a sibling group were also older at placement than those who were not (placed without siblings mean age at placement = 1.57 years old, SD = 1.77; placed with siblings mean age at placement = 3.04, SD = 1.93, t = –7.05, p < 0.001).

Thirty per cent (n = 29) of children in the questionnaire sample (n = 96) had been placed for adoption as part of a sibling group. Eighty-four per cent of children (n = 81) were known to have at least one sibling living elsewhere. In moving into an adoptive home that contained existing children (birth and previously adopted), new sibling relationships were also created in twenty-eight (29 per cent) families. Two families contained both birth and previously adopted children. Of the forty families in the interview sample, a quarter of the children (25 per cent, n = 10) had been placed for adoption as part of a sibling group, thirty-six (90 per cent) had at least one birth sibling living elsewhere and a third (32 per cent, n = 13) had a new sibling relationship or relationships created through adoption (including two children placed into an adoptive family that had previously adopted a birth sibling). Table 2 sets out the sibling-related characteristics in each of the three samples.

Siblings placed together for adoption

Parents with siblings placed together for adoption often made unprompted observations about the sibling dynamic within the context of new adoptive family life. The sibling relationship was reported to comprise a range of positive elements, including companionship, reassurance and comfort. These characteristics were thought to be particularly important for children when faced with unfamiliar or anxiety-provoking situations. One mother observed how her son had taken cues from his younger sister in learning how to settle into adoptive family life. Children were also proud and protective of one another. Some were able to play together constructively, albeit often with a level of parental supervision. Occasionally, parents described how they had been encouraged by

very positive changes to the sibling relationship since living together as an adoptive family:

> He has made significant progress in his relationship with his brother. I have worked really hard on that. They didn't really used to interact, or talk to each other or even look at each other, whereas now they will play, properly play, not just even parallel play and that is really nice.

However, the ambivalent nature of the sibling bond was also observed by parents, with most speaking in some detail about the complexities evident in the relationship between their children. The unexpected level of sibling discord and the perceived harmful dynamics between the children were of particular concern to parents. Several sibling relationships were reportedly characterised by jealousy, often intensely so. Adopters described the fierce competition for parental attention shown between their children, some of whom were deeply troubled by the time commanded by a brother or sister: 'Oliver [older sibling] tried to move Jack [younger sibling] out when they came here. He was so jealous...he kept saying to me "I don't want Jack here".'

Parents also described children upset by the way in which they perceived their (usually younger) sibling to have settled more easily into adoptive family life, especially when the child was thought to have developed a stronger bond with their adoptive parent/s. There were instances of older children struggling to make sense of the fact that the care and attention shown to a younger sibling in the adoptive home had not been afforded to them at a similar age:

> Edward finds it really challenging seeing how okay Harry (younger birth sibling), our two year old is, because he knows that he didn't have that same life and the same opportunity and so he likes the fact that they are safe and well and thriving, but he is challenged by that too.

The physical aggression shown between the children was of particular concern to parents, with reports of siblings lashing out at one another. However, the violence was sometimes explained by parents in the context of describing emotionally dysregulated children, struggling with inter-personal relationships in general, who were also directing frustration and aggression at various others, including parents, peers and even pets. Concerns about children's need to control situations, particularly during sibling play, was a recurring theme, with children described as being unable to compromise and co-operate:

> Stacey is the boss and she expects to be able to be in control all the time...she needs to be in control, but they're both controlling, very controlling. And I think probably in the past, she's kept that control and Freddie [younger brother] has gone along with it, but now he's actually saying 'no'.

At interview, three sets of adopters made specific reference to the challenges they had faced as a newly formed family dealing with the parentified

behaviour of an older sibling. The concept of 'parentification' originates from theoretical orientations within structural family therapy (Minuchin *et al.*, 1967), in which children adopt behaviour considered inappropriate for their age and role within the family. Parents described their difficulties in establishing positions within the adoptive family, as children struggled to relinquish responsibility for the care of a younger sibling. Although aware that their child had taken responsibility for a younger sibling whilst living in previous neglectful circumstances, parents were not prepared for the way in which this dynamic would continue within the adoptive family:

> In terms of her relationship with Ryan [younger birth sibling], Casey kind of wanted to mother him at the start, so there was a bit of conflict between her and me as to who was going to be mum in the house...she was trying to just make sure her and Ryan were safe I guess, and you know she was very vigilant about the situation.

Even though the relationships between siblings placed together for adoption were on balance considered more conflictual than agreeable, parents nevertheless remarked on and appreciated the deep bond and affection evident between their children. There was a commonly held belief amongst parents that, despite complexities in the sibling dynamic, the opportunity for their children to strengthen a meaningful relationship by growing up together was extremely important.

Siblings created through adoption

For some parents, their motivation to adopt was prompted by a desire to provide an existing child with a sibling. In considering their own close relationship with a brother or sister, some parents said that they wanted their child to enjoy a similar sibling experience. To help create the 'best fit' with an existing child, adopters explained how they had thought carefully about the characteristics and experiences they were hoping for, or hoping to avoid, in any child placed with them for adoption. Consequently, expectations of the new sibling relationship in some adoptive families were high:

> We wanted a two year old. Because of the age gap [with birth child] we didn't want there to be a massive age gap...we decided very early on that we wanted a girl, because Sophie [birth child] wanted a sister...we had to have a child that was social, because Sophie has already got a social life and life can't stop ... a physically disabled child would have been a problem...the burden of care would obviously eventually go to Sophie.

In our questionnaire, four months post placement, parents were asked how existing children in the family were adjusting to having a new brother or sister. Of the twenty-one families with birth children living at

home, nearly half (48 per cent, $n = 10$) had reportedly experienced some difficulty. Difficulties were also identified for five of the nine previously adopted children. In the families, where newly formed sibling relationships were considered to be developing smoothly, parents spoke positively about the growing affection and intimacy evident between their children. Children were enjoying the companionship and choosing to spend time together: 'The sibling relationships seem to be forming well. They are seeking out each other and showing pleasure in each other's company.'

Set in the context of a broadly positive sibling dynamic, these parents also described bickering and rivalry between the children. However, adopters considered this typical sibling behaviour which, as parents, they were learning to deal with. Parents were generally more vocal when the new sibling relationship was considered to be precarious. In discussing their concerns and early support needs around efforts to harmonise sibling relationships created though adoption, parents described children who had become very unsettled by their changed family form. There were accounts of existing children feeling jealous, confused and displaced, as they struggled to adapt to family life with a new brother or sister. According to parents, very little support had been forthcoming in helping the family to address the complexities evident in the new and developing sibling relationship. Some were hoping that promises of support would materialise. Specific preparation and guidance in integrating children within the family had not been routinely provided, although several adopters suggested this would have helped. Occasionally, books had been recommended for parents to use with existing children, but the assessment process had not especially supported the preparation of existing children in the family:

> During our assessment process the social worker sat and talked to them, 'What would you do with a baby sister?' 'Kick it,' was the answer. 'Throw her down the stairs' the next answer, just two typical boys, 'beat her up'. So yeah, there was talk at the beginning about doing some one to one work them about introducing it, and exploring their feelings, but none of that happened.

For several families, challenges in supporting a positive sibling relationship emerged even before the adoptive placement had commenced. According to parents, the opportunity to effectively prepare an existing child for the arrival of a new brother or sister was compromised by the nature of the adoption process. Although linked (and sometimes even matched) with a child, the uncertainty surrounding when (and whether) the placement would happen meant that parents were reluctant to keep talking with their child about their potential new sibling, for fear that the placement might not materialise. Although parents had sometimes been advised that existing children would adapt in much the same way

as children do with the arrival of a birth sibling, parents pointed out that the uncertainty surrounding the adoptive placement made for a much less predictable experience than for families preparing for the arrival of a new-born:

> We were aware that providing our son with a new sibling would provide challenges for him. Social workers simply said he would adjust just like having a birth sibling, but we feel the situation is different because it's more of a sudden impact, so it's exaggerated. We are helping him through it and he is accepting his new sister more each day but I think it'll take a long time. This is what we needed support for.

Parents also suggested that the needs of existing children had sometimes been overlooked because of a preoccupation (by social workers and parents) with getting things 'just so' for the arrival of the adopted child. Introductions were identified as a particularly difficult time for existing children. Often parents were away from home for lengthy periods as they followed an intensive programme of carefully timed visits to their new child. Reflecting on that experience, some parents thought that children already living in the home had been side-lined during their new sibling's transition to the adoptive home. There was a feeling amongst some parents that, in settling into adoptive family life, they now wished they had better considered the needs of the family as a whole. This would have included maintaining a clearer focus on fostering positive early experiences between the children to help strengthen the new sibling relationship. One mother, whose birth son had struggled for months with the arrival of his adopted sister, reflected:

> We'd been very prepared on how to do the transition from foster carer to here for Kayla and we had to keep her routine the same…keep her nap time the same, dinner time the same. Zak (birth child) was excited and loud. 'Zak be quiet, Kayla is sleeping'. I think we made it too hard for him at first, but we just wanted it to be perfect for Kayla and as a consequence Zak had a raw deal really…very early on he said, 'It's boring having a baby, being told to be quiet all the time and I can't run around and shout'.

Concerns about the destabilisation of previously adopted children were also raised by parents, with fears that the placement of a sibling had the potential to unsettle children by triggering anxieties about their own identity and sense of belonging in the family. This was especially true in one instance, where the child placed for adoption was the half birth sibling of the existing adopted child.

Other factors that had contributed to existing children feeling displaced included their changed position in birth order within the adoptive family and the exclusive time parents had spent with their newly placed sibling: 'Tyler (birth child) doesn't like school—he had to go to school every day and I was at home with Harvey, that was an awful thought for him.'

Birth siblings living elsewhere

A quarter ($n = 23$, 24 per cent) of the eighty-one children in the questionnaire sample, with siblings living elsewhere, had adoption plans in place for face-to-face contact with at least one brother or sister. Letterbox contact with siblings had been proposed for a further third of the children ($n = 31$, 32 per cent). At interview, parents spoke passionately about the importance for their child to retain meaningful contact with birth siblings. Some ambitious and perhaps unrealistic ideas about how the contact might work were shared:

> I am up for face-to-face contact [with sibling and his family]. You know, informal, meet in the park once or maybe even twice a year . . . we would all become an extended family . . . I just could imagine us all coming together for a bit of a barbecue or a picnic somewhere.

Despite plans being in place, a few adopters did not want their child to retain contact with a birth sibling because of safeguarding concerns. Some older siblings living elsewhere were in direct contact with the birth family. All the adoptive families needed LA assistance to facilitate the planned face-to-face contact with siblings living elsewhere, most of whom were in long-term foster-care or had also been adopted. Several parents described repeatedly prompting social workers to liaise with the families with whom birth siblings lived, so that arrangements for contact could be made. Despite promises to do so, this had not routinely happened. At interview (typically nine months post placement), only five children had seen a brother or sister living elsewhere since moving into their adoptive home. According to parents, the visits had been arranged with minimal social work oversight or support in place. Whilst the adopters maintained that the contact had been important for their child, four were beset by complications, caused by poor planning and preparation. Parents identified a distinct lack of support for all involved:

> We don't feel Joe [sibling in foster-care] was prepared for the contact at all . . . Adam [adopted child] said to him, 'Joe I'm going to be called Adam [adoptive surname], I'm going to see the wise judge, my name is going to change'. Joe said 'Your name is Adam [birth surname] and don't you forget it'. I can't believe how unprepared Joe was in his understanding. He has the potential to do great damage to our son and we're not prepared to let that happen.

A couple of children who had previously lived with siblings but were now living alone in a family with no other children were thought to have struggled in adapting to family life as an only child. One mother described her daughter as 'desperately lonely'. Even though children were physically separated from birth siblings, some parents were aware of their psychological presence in the children's day-to-day lives:

> Megan [older sibling living elsewhere] is a very, very important figure in her life . . . when Jessica plays with dolls, she is not the mother, she is the older sister. And I have tried to say to her 'that's not how it is sweetheart, the older sister doesn't look after the younger sister, you have to be the mummy, the mummies look after the babies'. But of course, she's got a skewed vision of reality because she thinks that if you have an older sister, your older sister looks after you.

Discussion

The psychological, inter-personal and ethical implications associated with the decision, determined by the state to sustain, disrupt and/or create sibling bonds through adoption cannot be underestimated. The obligation and imperative to help ensure that adopted children thrive, as best they can, through fulfilling and meaningful sibling relationships should, arguably, underpin good social work practice in adoption. Yet, for those children recently placed for adoption from the UK care system, little is known about the support they need or receive in helping them to adjust and flourish in light of their reformed sibling connections. Our findings from this study make a novel contribution to addressing this gap in knowledge and understanding. It is evident that adoptive parents are well aware of the many complexities in their children's sibling relationships. It is also clear that parents are committed to maintaining, strengthening or helping to establish meaningful sibling relationships that have the potential to sustain children throughout their lives. Many though had not been aware of, or prepared for, the sibling challenges that would present themselves. Parents who participated in our study wanted help to strengthen sibling bonds created and/or affected by adoption, but often felt unsupported in their quest.

Difficulties in the existing and changing dynamic between siblings placed together for adoption were often of surprise and concern to parents. However, when considered in the broader adoption context, and with knowledge of their pre-adoption experiences, these difficulties perhaps could have been better anticipated as part of the adoption preparation and plans for supporting the whole family.

The aggression shown between children placed together for adoption may have arisen from their early adverse experiences and through living in an environment where pro-social modelling was diminished (Linares, 2006). The majority of siblings placed together for adoption in our study had been exposed to domestic violence in the birth family. Exposure to violence within the family home is a recognised risk factor for sibling aggression (Hetherington *et al.*, 1999). Of course, sibling violence is also a feature in many families where children do not have a history of adversity.

It should not be surprising that siblings with difficult shared early experiences may exhibit controlling and parentified behaviours. In an attempt to stay safe and feel more in command of their own care and protection, some maltreated children seek to prevent carers from being in control by themselves displaying controlling behaviour (Howe, 2009). There is an irony that some of the sibling challenges reported by parents in adoptive family life were the very dynamics that may have helped to reassure and possibly protect children whilst living in the birth family or foster-care placements.

Practitioners may find value in considering a family systems framework when seeking explanations for why some adoptive families struggle to manage aspects of sibling relationships post placement. The development of an adaptive, flexible family system may be compromised in the context of children whose roles in previous family structures were misaligned with their age, place in the family and psychological resources. Significant therapeutic effort might usefully be directed towards enabling, or else intervening to foster, healthy sibling relationships borne out of adoption. In the extreme, close attention should be paid to the needs of families where intractable sibling conflict and rivalry have been identified, which may pose a threat to placement stability.

Similarly, it should be unsurprising that existing children in a family will be affected by a new child arriving in their home, and that the establishment of new sibling relationships will not necessarily come naturally or easily. It seems odd, given the child-centred nature of adoption practice, that existing children are so overlooked in the preparation and ongoing support for new adoptions. Our study raises important questions about the way in which adequate preparation and early support for adoptive families may be best achieved. How can social workers help to foster good sibling relationships when existing children feel confused and displaced? Parents described an intense adoption process that focused almost exclusively on the adopted children, at the expense of other children in the family. It was beyond the scope of our study to include the perspectives of social workers. It may well be that they hold a different view of the support needed and/or provided to enhance sibling bonds in early adoptive placement. Nevertheless, more research around policy and professional practice is needed, so that closer alignment can be achieved with sibling-related support needs, as identified by newly formed adoptive families.

Adoption practice clearly acknowledges the importance of children maintaining contact with birth siblings, and adoption support arrangements often explicitly reference plans or wishes for contact with brothers and sisters not living with a child placed for adoption. Contact possibilities are always discussed as part of the preparation of potential adoptive parents, raising expectations of what might be possible. The realities of contact with birth siblings, certainly present in our study, are much more

mundane encounters, if indeed contact happens at all. When plans for face-to-face contact are agreed, there is an urgent need to ensure appropriate professional intervention is afforded to facilitating and supporting the necessary arrangements, including the proper preparation of children. It seems plausible that contact practices started early in the adoptive placement may help to cement the development of meaningful sibling bonds. It has long been recognised that children who grow up apart from their siblings, and who lack contact with or knowledge about them, risk being deprived of the support afforded by the sibling relationship in adult life (Kosonen, 1996).

This study considered the sibling-related support needs within newly formed adoptive families. However, a long-term commitment by social workers seems necessary to support the bond between adopted children and their birth siblings placed elsewhere. The chronosystem dimension of systems theory (e.g. Palacios, 2009) recognises the potential for change in an individual's need for sibling contact across the life course (commensurate with identity formation). This should be borne in mind by professionals. In recognising the dynamic nature of their psychological needs around sibling contact (Von Korff and Grotevant, 2011; Walkner and Rueter, 2014), adopted young people may need to be more actively supported as they enter adolescence and early adulthood.

Despite the many complexities evident in sibling relationships, it is important to draw attention to the positive sibling dynamics that also featured within the newly formed adoptive families. Not uncommonly, a sibling relationship was characterised by both positive and negative dimensions. In discussing the relationship between siblings placed together for adoption and between siblings created though adoption, parents spoke about the warmth and affection evident between their children. Birth siblings, in particular, were a source of reassurance and comfort to each other. Children were proud and protective of their siblings. They sought one another for company and play, even if interactions were not always entirely harmonious. Encouragingly, there were also accounts of the ways in which aspects of the birth sibling relationship had flourished in the context of adoptive family life.

The findings from our study speak to the need for fresh and innovative thinking in social work practice, not least by the way in which the fundamental significance of the sibling relationship might be better recognised and translated into meaningful support for adopted children and their families. The decision to keep together, separate or create sibling relationships through adoption should be viewed as the start of a process of family formation, reformation or consolidation, and one which requires ongoing support for all siblings and the adopted family.

Whilst the significance of the carer–child relationship is widely acknowledged and reflected in contemporary social work practice in the UK, to date, the importance of the sibling relationship has garnered

substantially less interest. Our findings highlight the need for more research to identify and understand what works in supporting adopted children to forge quality relationships with resident and non-resident siblings, as well as the need to better recognise the significance of such bonds for psychological well-being. This would help to ensure that adoption has further potential to change lives for the better.

Acknowledgements

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