

F F T A



Foster Family-based Treatment Association

## Annotations of Research in Treatment Foster Care

### Citation

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### Keywords

Reunification, foster care, siblings, alternative placements

### Research Questions

- What are the long-term patterns of reunification for siblings in placements (intact, partially intact, or separate) under select placement circumstances?
- What are the characteristics of reunification patterns between types of placement (intact, partially intact, or separate) when siblings are placed with kin, experience a single placement, or enter care during the same month.

The authors reviewed monthly data obtained from the Nevada Division for Child and Family Services to examine placement patterns of siblings and reunification rates. The authors used a longitudinal study of records obtained on children placed in a first-time foster care placement. Limitations of previous studies were addressed by using a longitudinal method and by obtaining data to establish a pattern of reunification for the first 19 months of care.

### Method

*Subjects:* This study used a sample of 602 children who had been placed in foster care. The children also had at least one sibling in long-term foster care during the study period. Children included in the study had no previous foster care history and were placed in an intact placement ( $n = 401$ ), a partially intact placement ( $n = 99$ ), or a separated placement ( $n = 102$ ). Children were from diverse ethnic backgrounds: Caucasian (57%), African American (25%), Hispanic (12%), and Other (5%). Characteristics of the sample included Race/Ethnicity, Size of Sibling Group, Kin Placement, Age Difference between siblings, number of placements, and whether or not the siblings entered into placement in the same month.

*Design:* The study is a longitudinal study. The study used a survival analysis to examine the risk of staying in foster care placement prior to reunification and to determine whether a difference exists between those siblings placed together and those placed separately.

*Materials/Measures:* Data were collected from the Nevada Division for Child and Family Services. These data are collected monthly and entered into a statewide payment database.

*Procedures:* The authors received cross-sectional data at the beginning of each month, which allowed the creation of historical records for each child placed in care. Data for each child were collected for up to 19 months (18 months after the initial month in which the child was placed into long-term foster care).

## **Results/Findings**

*Siblings Remaining in Care:* Findings suggest that if sibling units are to experience reunification, it is most likely to occur during the first year of foster care placement. Results suggest that reunification primarily occurs between months 2 and 8 of foster care. The least rapid rate of reunification occurred between months 12 and 19 of foster care. During months 2–8, 1.7% of siblings reunited each month while only 0.9% reunited during months 9–18.

*Placement Type and Remaining in Care:* Results suggest that children placed with siblings in either intact or partially intact placements were more likely to be reunified during the first 19 months of foster care. At 12 months, 80–83% of siblings placed in intact or partially intact placements remained in foster care. This percentage compared to the 90% of siblings that remained in foster care at 12 months when placed in separate placements. At 19 months, 79% of siblings who were placed in intact or partially intact placements remained in foster care, while 87% of siblings who were placed in separate placements remained in foster care.

*Placement Type and Placement with Kin:* Siblings who were placed together remained in foster care for a shorter time when compared to those who were placed separately. Fewer siblings who were placed in partially intact placements remained in care compared to those in the other two placements (intact or separate). Findings suggest that when all siblings are placed with kin in a foster care placement (intact placement), they are least likely to remain in foster care at 8 months (90%) compared with siblings who are in completely separate placements (95%). However, during the period of 8–12 months, those siblings who were placed separately returned to their homes at a faster rate than those placed together. Following month 12, those siblings placed together with kin returned home more quickly than those placed separately.

*Placement Type and Placement Stability:* The number of placements was linked to the placement of siblings in foster care. At 12 months, 86% of siblings placed separately in a single placement remained in care, while 87% of those placed in an intact single placement and 92% of those placed in a partially intact single placement remained in care. At 18 months, about 86% of siblings placed together in a single placement remained in care compared to 85% of those placed apart in a single placement. Those placed partially together in a single placement did not show much change, with 91% still in placement at 18 months.

*Placement Type and Time of Entry into Care:* Siblings who enter foster care at around the same time spend less time in foster care when compared to those siblings who enter foster care at different times. At month 18, 21% of those siblings who entered foster care at relatively the same time had reunified whereas only 11% of siblings who entered foster care at different times had experienced reunification.

## **Limitations**

This study did not have any serious limitations that may be of concern. However, the study of sibling placement and the concept of sibling units are in their infancy. More research needs to be

done in a longitudinal format to follow siblings for longer than 18 months after placement. In addition, research needs to be conducted in a location in which the emphasis on keeping siblings together is not as apparent. Nevada's child welfare system sees value in sibling placements, and this point of view may have led to a bias.

This study looks only at reunification rates based on placement type, and more research is needed on other variables that may impact reunification.

The sample size for the partially intact placements was significantly smaller than that of the other two groups.

### **Application to Practice**

Focused on minimizing time in which children are placed in foster care, this study strongly demonstrates that children who are placed with siblings spend less time in foster care and that reunification occurs at a more rapid pace. Given that more than half of foster care caseloads consist of siblings, the issue of siblings and placement is important to the child welfare system. This study supports the importance of considering children not only as individuals but also as sibling units. Sibling units provide each other with emotional support as well as a sense of normalcy for having gone through similar environmental situations.

It is important to spend a great deal of time understanding and making sense of reasons to keep siblings together or to separate them. This study supports the view that this decision should not be made quickly or without consideration for the sibling unit. If an intact placement is not possible, even a partially intact placement yields more positive outcomes when compared to a separate placement.

The foster care and welfare system needs to place a special emphasis on recruiting foster families who are willing to take in sibling units to prevent the separation of siblings. Practitioners need to emphasize placing sibling units in intact or partially intact placements whenever possible.

There is also a need for education, both for the welfare system and for foster families, about potential sibling issues and the positive outcomes that sibling support will provide.

### **Contact Information**

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