

SIBLING CONTACT AMONG CHILDREN PLACED

IN DIFFERENT FOSTER HOMES

Mainly A Literature Study

by Sigrun Hellwig

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"There are only children living with their parents, and there are only children in foster homes, but for the most part those who have brothers and sisters deeply value the relationship, and those who have not wish they had." Dyson (1947:54).

ABSTRACT

Sibling relationships, sibling separation and the implications thereof have received secondary consideration compared to parent/child relationships in social work practice.

This exploratory study examines sibling relationships and the separation of siblings in foster care. The researcher mainly made use of a literature survey and included a pilot study to evaluate the effectiveness of the 'Sibling Contact Day', a project run by Child Welfare Society, Cape Town. The researcher interviewed twenty siblings and their caregivers who participated in the project using a structured questionnaire.

The literature available proved that sibling ties are important and have positive influences on human development. Sibling loyalties take years to develop and are stronger when the parental system is weak and sibling accessibility is high. Being separated from brother(s) and/sister(s) requires that sibling relationships have to be re-negotiated. It frequently implies the loosening of sibling ties and the reduction of closeness, which can severely affect the child's identity formation. Results of the pilot study revealed that 55% of the children were separated when they entered into foster care. Only 20% keep in regular contact with each other and 40% did not have contact with their sibling(s) before the 'Sibling Contact Day'. Most children responded positively to meeting their sibling(s). Although only 5% of the children kept in contact as a result of the 'Sibling Contact Day', it seems to justify the continuation of the project on a yearly basis.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Sibling relationships, sibling separations and the implications thereof, have received secondary consideration compared to parent/child relationships in social work practice. However, some literature confirms that the majority of children in foster care, between 87% and 98% have siblings. (Aldridge and Cautley, 1976; Festinger, 1983; Zimmerman, 1982). Between 73% and 93% of foster children have brother(s) and/or sister(s) in care. (Festinger, 1983; Zimmerman, 1982). Information about siblings is hence crucial, because of the number of children in foster care and the importance of the sibling bond. (Bank and Kahn, 1982).

Surprisingly, there is insufficient social work research that has investigated various aspects of sibling relationships and separations. (Hegar, 1988). It seems that research in sibling separation has received less emphasis in the United States than in Britain. With regard to South Africa, foster care research has virtually been nonexistent with the exception of two studies, Cutler (1985) and de Bruyn, (1989).

Even the most comprehensive studies, the American national study of social services to children and their families conducted in 1978 by Shyne and Schroeder, the Columbia longitudinal study into

foster care by Fanshel and Shinn (1978), and Gruber's cross-sectional research into foster care in Massachusetts (1978), did not address matters related to siblings in care.

In 1984, the Eastern Counties group of adoption agencies in England organized a workshop on the placement of siblings with special reference to decisions that are made with regard to separate or not to separate siblings. A well known child psychiatrist, Dr Arnon Bentovin led the discussion in reviewing the practice of sibling groups with children. A search for available literature and studies conducted in the area was carried out by Dr Bentovin. His search confirmed the enormous gap in theoretical knowledge and research in terms of sibling relationships within biological families and sparse information on sibling placement in substitute families. Jones and Niblett (1985).

Research by other disciplines also tended to neglect sibling relationships. Alfred Adler (1928) was the first to investigate the power struggles among siblings in relation to birth order and was one of the first to investigate the importance of sibling relationships.

Much of the sociological and psychological literature on siblings has laid a major emphasis on age, sex, and birth order, neglecting the interactional patterns of sibling relationships.

It is only in recent years that sibling interaction in human development is considered with greater importance and interest rather than being seen purely in terms of rivalry and conflict. Lamb and Sutton-Smith (1982); Bank (1982); Boer and Dunn (1992). In fact siblings can serve important functions, such as how to show affection, protect each other and help to promote identity formation and differentiation. Rushton, Tresedor and Quinton (1989).

Despite the lack of knowledge, decisions with regard to placement of siblings have to be made on a daily basis by social workers working in the field of child care. Although practice wisdom generally dictates that siblings should be placed together in foster care, realities of space, foster parenting abilities, availability of foster homes and special needs of an individual child often result in separation of siblings. In other instances parents often abandon their children with different families. The result is that siblings grow up not knowing their brother(s) and/or sister(s).

Research by Jenkins and Sauber (1966), Meier (1962) and Zimmerman (1982) shows that a large number of foster children, between 56% and 87% have other siblings that were placed in alternative care. None of these authors mention sibling contact.

Biological parents, foster parents and welfare agencies tend to underestimate the importance of sibling contact.

In cases where parents are emotionally or physically absent, sibling bonds are often strong. A brother or sister, who assumes a parental role over his/her younger sibling might be devastated when separated from him/her. Separation from siblings may for some children be a greater stress than being separated from parents, especially when the parental system is inadequate. Sibling deprivation may be very traumatic and long remembered. A running theme through the accounts of children sent from England to Canada in the 19th and early 20th century by Dr Bernado's and other organisations is the loss of and yearning for brothers and sisters. Bagnell (1980), Harrison (1979). When siblings are separated from each other, their roles in relation to parents or caregivers and other siblings have to be readjusted. There is a loss of emotional support and the buffering of the sibling group in dealing with adults and other children. Absent children are often idealized.

This exploratory study intends to examine the issue of separation of siblings in foster care and the impact separation has on sibling relationships. A case is made either to prevent sibling separation or, where separation has taken place, to find ways of keeping the sibling bond alive. This is mainly addressed by means of a literature study and supported by a pilot study.

1. Statement of the Problem

As a foster care worker, the researcher became aware of the painful effects of separation. She found that many children lack a healthy identity as a result of being abandoned, rejected, and a lack of contact with the biological family.

In some instances siblings were separated due to insufficient resources or foster parents were unable or unwilling to care for a sibling group. Sometimes siblings played a major role in the children's lives. Because of the inadequacy of their biological parents, older brothers and sisters took over the parental functions. The pain of being separated was great, but the pain of having no contact with their brothers and/or sisters seemed even greater. In some instances siblings were abandoned by their parents with different families. They did not know that they had a brother or a sister. Some knew that they had a sibling, but did not know where he/she lived. Sometimes they vaguely knew the whereabouts of a brother or a sister, but had no contact.

When these children were asked whether they would wish to meet their brothers or sisters, they all replied that they would like to see or be reunited with their siblings again. The researcher started an investigation in tracing the whereabouts of siblings and organized

a Sibling Contact Day in October 1992 and April 1993. The success of these two days was remarkable. Siblings were rejoined and some met for the very first time. The researcher will never forget the tears of happiness, siblings clinging to each other and the way people were moved when they met.

These two experiences of the Sibling Contact Days, have been very significant to the researcher and made her appreciate her own brother and sister more, especially considering that they had the privilege of growing up together. It made her realize that sibling relationships are of great importance to foster children. Life seemed to become more meaningful as the children had somebody to hold on to, somebody who shared the same heritage, the same mother, sometimes the same parents, or the same father.

It sparked off the idea to further investigate and read about siblings. The researcher was interested to find out more about the nature of sibling relationships and contact between those children who grow up in different homes. Another question was to determine if contact between siblings has a positive effect on their sense of belonging and identity.

2. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to find out how sibling relationships have been researched in the past. The researcher's interest was specifically directed firstly, at brothers and sisters who were separated as a result of being removed from their natural parents and placed in foster care and secondly, where children grow up in different foster homes after being abandoned by their parents in different homes. The research questions that were of particular interest were:

What is the nature of the sibling contact among children placed in different foster homes?

Do children have sibling ties with their biological brother(s) and/or sister(s) when they grow up in different homes?

Can a sibling group of brothers and sisters maintain links with each other that distinguishes their specific system from other systems, when they are physically separated from each other?

How does the sibling system function in a foster home when they are separated from each other?

Can the sibling system survive in spite of physical separation?

Can a child have an equal sense of family bond with his/her own sibling system and the foster family system?

Does sibling contact help the child in developing his/her own identity?

In reviewing the literature about sibling relationships among brothers and sisters who grow up in different foster homes, the researcher was hoping to identify criteria that would enhance sibling ties, the effect these relationships have on the sibling sub-system and to possibly find out if those relationships would help siblings develop a better sense of identity.

If sibling ties are important to maintain, what role can welfare agencies play in enhancing these?

3. Design and Methodology

The research study was designed to be an exploratory study. According to Polansky (1975:47) exploratory research lays the basis for further research and is the best strategy for a beginning. Many different methods can be used in exploratory research, one of which is referred to as 'surveying the literature', as a way of building on the research of others. The study aims to investigate the impact of separation of siblings in foster care and the effect it has on sibling relationships. This is mainly addressed by means of a literature study and supported by a pilot study.

Methodological Steps:

The framework for discussion of this paper included the following steps: definition of terms, background information about sibling contact among children placed in different foster homes; exploring the literature by means of social science abstracts and on line searches on the computer library; exploring the feasibility of organizing a Sibling Contact Day; study population and sample, method of data collection; recording data, analysing and interpreting the data.

Definition of Terms:

Sibling: A sibling can fit into several categories: biological sibling (full and half), stepsiblings, adopted siblings, and foster siblings. The definitions of these types are fairly clear, but studies characteristically do not differentiate among sibling groups. It is generally assumed that siblings are full biological siblings. However, half, step and foster relationships can play an important role in a child's life. For purposes of this study, the researcher focused on full and half biological siblings that grow up in different foster homes. The sibling group investigated, includes siblings who share at least one biological parent. Some siblings have never lived together, other siblings were separated when

they entered into foster care. For the literature study, the researcher made use of literature studies from various categories, including step and foster siblings.

Contact: In literature the terms, 'access', 'contact', 'visits', 'links' are used interchangeably. This lack of consistency in precision allows, for example, the sending of a card to fall in the same category as a telephone call or a visit. For purposes of this study the researcher refers to the term 'contact', which includes telephone conversations and face-to-face meetings, excluding written communication.

Gathering Background Information:

Through her work as a social worker in foster care, the researcher became aware of the lack of contact between siblings who were growing up in different foster homes. The researcher gathered information through her own observations and contacts with foster children and their foster parents. Numerous informal discussions with colleagues, who also work in the field of foster care, followed on the subject of sibling relationships and separations in foster care. It triggered the idea to organize a sibling contact day for these children and their caregivers who were living in different foster homes and who had no contact with each other. It was only after the success of this project that the interest grew within the researcher to explore

what kind of research has been done in the area of sibling relationships with specific reference to children in care.

Exploring the Feasibility of the Study:

The literature on sibling relationships turned out to be rather limited and the researcher had to consult literature of related areas. The significance of sibling relationships in healthy and stressful home environments, the effect of divorce on children as well as looking into the concept of foster care and the effect it has on children, was used to develop a better understanding of the significance of sibling relationships. To evaluate the effectiveness of the Sibling Contact Day, the researcher decided to interview twenty children and their caregivers who participated in the project.

The researcher expected a few difficulties in interviewing children, in terms of the low reliability of information likely to be obtained. Some children were only six years old. The social worker is frequently seen as an authority figure who is not to be trusted and treated with respect. Respect is shown by telling the social worker what she wants to hear.

As a result of the regular contact the social workers of Child Welfare Society have with the children and foster parents in the Athlone area, the researcher was fortunate in that a good rapport had been established between foster parents and "the Welfare". The same could not be said for those who came from other areas. In some areas the social worker is regarded with suspicion mainly due to high caseloads and the inability to keep in touch with clients on a regular basis. However, the project seemed positively received by all involved which minimized distrust, fear and suspicion. It was also explained to the foster parents and children who were interviewed that the results could help in understanding the significance of sibling relationships and determine if and how contacts between siblings should be kept alive. The researcher was aware that questions to the children had to be administered with sensitivity in a flexible and indirect manner.

Study Population and Sample:

The study population was taken from the caseloads of two social workers who are working in the Athlone area of Cape Town. The choice of the study group was purely accidental. The researcher and her colleague, who are both working in Athlone, became aware of the lack of sibling contact among children who grew up in different foster homes.

Some children asked about their brother(s) and sister(s) and wanted to find out more about them. An effort was made to find the siblings of the children placed in foster care in the Athlone area and to whom Child Welfare Society was rendering foster care supervision services. It turned out that many siblings were living in the magisterial district of Cape Town, like Mitchells Plain, Grassy Park, Wynberg, Maitland, Kensington, Eerste River, Elsies River. They were either in foster care, living in a children's home or were staying with their biological parents. Siblings outside the Cape Town district were not included in the project. The children and their caregivers were contacted by letter and invited to meet with their siblings in Athlone for half a day. Transport was provided by Child Welfare Society for those who were unable to get to Athlone by themselves. Of the 32 and 46 children who came to the Sibling Contact Day in September 1992 and April 1993 respectively, twenty children and their caregivers were interviewed. The selection of subjects for the study was done by means of random sampling.

The sample of twenty children and their caregivers is relatively small. However, as mentioned by Yeakel and Ganter (1975:93) "...a study of a relatively small number of subjects can put an investigator in a position to make assertions about a much larger number, it is clearly uneconomical for him to put time, money, and effort into collecting data from all subjects in the total population." It

was felt by the researcher that a sample of twenty subjects would be representative enough to get an impression of the effectiveness of the project and to generalize the results.

Method of Data Collection:

Data was collected by means of a literature review making use of social science abstracts and on line searches from the computer library.

To evaluate the `Sibling Contact Day` project siblings and their caregivers were interviewed. Subjects were contacted by telephone and questioned during home visits. The advantage of the interview is that it allows for flexibility and for probes and exploration of sensitive issues. Respondents were questioned with the help of a structured questionnaire which explored how they experienced the Sibling Contact Day, if the children kept in contact with their brother(s) and/or sister(s) as a result of that day and whether it enhanced their sibling bond. The structured questionnaire was found useful in that all participants had the same possible choices and questions. The vocabulary was kept simple to cater for the young and unsophisticated respondents. The questions were short and closed ended and did not contain any jargon. The advantage of closed ended questions is that they are easy to translate into Afrikaans.

The interviews held were unstructured and responses were probed, the reason being that many children may not have clearly formulated opinions on, for example, the need for sibling contact. Besides gaining some factual information, the interview also focused on the subjective experiences of the respondents and helped to secure new ideas on the subject of sibling contact.

Recording Data:

The researcher requested the respondents permission to be interviewed and for the information to be used for study purposes. Recording was done in the respondents presence and the researcher tried to keep maximum eye contact during the interview.

Analysing Data:

The researcher gained information about sibling relationships and separations in relation to foster care from literature obtained from the interlibrary loan and the library of the University of Cape Town. The material was abstracted from the literature as found in the table of contents.

In terms of the questionnaire the researcher gained mainly numerical data. For purposes of this study, descriptive statistics were considered to be sufficient. Descriptive statistics were organized manually to determine the characteristics of the data at hand.

Univariate distributions were drawn in respect of the questions, indicating how many respondents were found in each category.

Answers to openended questions were classified into main categories which reflected similar responses.

4. Limitations of the Study

The mere fact that this study is mainly a literature review is a limitation in itself. The subject of sibling separation in foster care is inadequately researched. A great deal of the literature proved to be only available in the United States of America. Journal articles tended to date back to 1956 - 1965 of which a few were unavailable in South Africa. Instead related areas had to be explored like sibling relationships in general, sibling bonds in stressful home situations and separation as a result of divorce. This study does not give a full picture of the literature available in terms of sibling separation and growing up in different foster homes.

In terms of the pilot study, the sample of foster children were chosen from a specific area and hence focused on white/coloured children. The interviews held with some of the subjects who attended the Sibling Contact Day, were open to researcher bias who posed the questions as well as interpreting the answers that were given by the subjects. One has to bear in mind that many subjects were children where the researcher had to show some flexibility in making herself understood to the children as well as talking their language, Afrikaans or English, and taking their psycho-social background into consideration. Many subjects grow up in lower socio-economic family situations where the use of language is not as differentiated as among the middle socio-economic families. Another problem was to know whether the respondents were telling the truth. The children were mostly interviewed with their caregivers, as they were a more reliable source for the factual information that was gathered, especially with the young children. There is always concern about information reliability, because of possible insecurity and suspicion that is likely to exist. However, all subjects interviewed seemed co-operative.

5. Organisation of the Study

This study reviews various aspects of sibling relationships. Chapter one aims at giving the reader a short outline of the problem area to be investigated. This is followed by an overview of the historical perspective of foster care in chapter two with special

emphasis on the development of social welfare in South Africa, sibling separation in foster care and sibling separation as a result of racial segregation in South Africa. Chapter three outlines the theoretical concepts of the social systems approach with special reference to the family and the sibling subsystem. The nature of sibling relationships, functions of the sibling system, the concept of sibling rivalry, the nature and significance of adult sibling relationships, sibling relationships in stressed and disharmonious families and the development of intense sibling loyalties are explored. This broad overview allowed inferences about the nature of sibling bonds of foster children. The researcher continues in chapter four to focus on foster care and the effect on children, relating to foster care as a stressful event, the reasons for and effect of sibling separation on the sibling subsystem, which are illustrated by a few case examples. Chapter five gives a report on the Sibling Contact Day project by Child Welfare Society, Cape Town and discusses the findings of the interviews held with twenty respondents who attended the Sibling Contact Day. It tends to underline the importance of sibling contact which is confirmed in chapter six. This chapter concentrates on implications for social work practice. Ways in which sibling bonds can be kept alive and developed when children grow up in different families are outlined. It also gives some ideas to sibling contact and the role Welfare Agencies can play in enhancing that contact.

II. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF FOSTER CARE AND SIBLING SEPARATION

1. Foster Care in Historical Perspective

Being cared for by one's own parents, by one's own family is a fundamental and almost universal fact of life in most communities. For a child to be born without parents who are willing or able to take care of him/her can be one of the most traumatic experiences in a child's life.

Historically, formal foster care emerged when parents were unable to care for their own children, and family and friends were unavailable. Foster care was preceded by almshouses, then apprenticeship and indenturement. By the late 1800s, dependent children were raised in children's homes or family foster care homes. Bremner (1971). Throughout this time, society was concerned with " food, shelter, clothing and education for the orphaned, destitute, indigent children." Datta (1976:222). During the 1900s and 2000s the major change was that foster parents received board payments for looking after children. The children were mostly kept in the foster care setting until they reached adulthood.

Since the 1950s foster care has received a great deal of criticism. Wiltse and Gambrill (1974) claimed that children entered the system too easily, stayed too long and left infrequently, if at all.

Practice changed with the emphasis on preventing placement and assisting inadequate families to stay together by providing them with financial and social services. A second emphasis was placed on reuniting families rather than keeping them separated through foster care. The philosophy is that family units should be preserved and that foster care should only be a temporary solution.

2. The Separation of Siblings in Foster Care

Sibling separation has received less emphasis in foster care research in the United States than in Britain. With regard to South Africa foster care research has virtually been nonexistent with the exception of two studies, Cutler (1985) and de Bruyn (1989).

Very early social work literature tends to support the idea that brothers and sisters should be placed together. Theis and Goodrich (1921). After the 1950s social workers started to identify circumstances where it seemed desirable that siblings should be separated. Hurvitz and Kaplan (1950) refer to several cases where siblings were separated because of dislike between brothers and

sisters, serious environmental deprivation, and individual behaviour disturbances which may have a negative effect on a sibling, or circumstances where it was felt that individual needs could not be met in a joint placement. Both stress that siblings should be reunited after separation.

Berg (1957) supports sibling separation to prevent excessive interdependence, or competitiveness between siblings, or maternal behaviour on the part of one sibling and places no emphasis on reunification. Bell (1959) stresses the importance of continued contact between brothers and sisters, even after being adopted in separate homes. For some time after the 1950s sibling relationships in foster care received little attention. Hegar (1988) refers to two relevant articles by foster or adoptive parents during the late 1960s and 1970s. One, by a Canadian adoptive parent advocates joint placement of large sibling groups, while the other, by a United States' foster parent, has more reservations in placing sibling groups together. Appelberg (1977) and Kadushin (1980) place some emphasis on the importance of sibling relationships among foster children.

During the 1980s sibling placement has received renewed attention. Jones (1981), Timberlake and Hamlin (1982), Rushton, Treseder and Quinton (1987) and Rushton (1989) describe their successful experience in placing sibling groups together. Zimmerman's

retrospective study (1982) of former Louisiana foster children reports that 40% of her adult subjects would have liked to see their siblings more often while they were in foster care. Ward (1984) stresses the importance of sibling ties in foster care and adoption. Jones and Niblett (1985) criticise the lack of knowledge in social work with regard to decisions made about separating or maintaining sibling groups. Hegar (1986, 1988a, 1988b) discusses various legal and social work issues with regard to sibling relationships, separation and its implication for child placement. Recent literature tends to support that brothers and sisters should be placed together and that sibling bonds should be strengthened. Triseliotis (1991) emphasizes the value of maintaining links in adoption. Staff and Fein (1992) proclaim greater success rates in foster care when siblings are not separated.

Practice has changed with the emphasis on preventing the removal of a child from his or her parents, because it is considered to be in the child's best interest to grow up with its own family. However, sometimes the perseverance of keeping a family together may be disastrous for the child. Unfortunately, sometimes the decision has to be made, and it is in the child's best interests, to be placed in residential care, foster care or adoption.

Foster care is still regarded as the best alternative form of care of deprived, neglected, abused children along with adoption. Thorpe (1980).

3. The Development of Social Welfare in South Africa

In South Africa social welfare has largely developed as a result of colonization. Initially welfare needs were met by the family in South Africa. In the early years of colonization by European settlers families and kin provided support and help to those who were not coping. It was only in the late 19th and early 20th century that social welfare activities became institutionalized. Services to individuals and families were rendered by women's organisations during and after the Anglo-Boer War. Child Welfare or Child Protection Societies were established with the aim of providing health and welfare services to children and their families. In 1937 arising from the findings of the Carnegie Commission and the Social Welfare Congress, a State Department of Social Welfare was established.

Sound family life and the care of children within the family setting are still traditional values in South Africa. At the same time, it is recognized that parents are responsible for the wellbeing of their children. Children, youth and family have been regarded as part of a common system through which a single field of service has evolved, `child and family welfare`. The trend has certainly been to promote the quality of family life. However, due to lack of resources and inadequate services, family life has deteriorated. Poverty, child neglect and abuse have exacerbated. Foster care has increasingly become a

favoured alternative for children who are unable to remain in the care of their parents. According to McKendrick (1987a) "during 1984 the main areas of direct service concern of organisations affiliated to the SA National Council for Child and Family Welfare were foster care, where the daily average number of children under their auspices was 12,797 and where reconstruction services were concurrently being undertaken with the children's own families,..."

According to the Annual Report from the House of Representatives in 1993, 19411 children were placed in alternative care in 1991 and 21340 children were placed in 1992.

This means that a large number of children have entered the welfare system of which many were found in need of care and placed in foster care.

The period 1937 to 1950 marked a shift in the social security scheme and the way people related to each other in future. 'Apartheid' or separate development of race groups had a lasting effect on child care and child protection services. The question of race became a major issue when a child was born from a union between a Black and a White person. The child needed to be registered and placed with an 'appropriate' family when found in need of care.

4. Sibling Separation as a Result of Racial Segregation in South Africa

Since the early days of White settlement in South Africa people have, to a greater or lesser extent, been `race conscious`. McKendrick (1987b) outlines three crucial events that have shaped South Africa: race conflict, racial intermingling, and poverty. Racial conflict originated between the `Khoi` and the European settlers in the seventeenth century. However, being economically dependent on each other, as was the case in the early cattle trading of the Cape, intermingling soon occurred, resulting in the beginning formation of the mixed race group, now commonly known as the `Coloureds`. The group was later augmented by the offspring of unions between whites, slaves imported from West Africa and the East Indies, and members of the indigenous African tribes.

During the early years of the twentieth century the question of race was asked in connection with land tenure, admission to schools, voting rights, pensions, and other matters. Definitions of various racial groups were incorporated in a number of laws passed from 1910 onward.

The system of population classification in South Africa was referred to as race classification. The system divided South Africans broadly on the basis of colour and other physical features.

While classifications took place formally in terms of physical features, in practice informal classifications in terms of appearance, descent, acceptance, language, behaviour, and so on, were used to determine race groups. The Population Registration Act of 1950, as amended, laid down three basic definitions, Black, Coloured and White in Section (1).

A Black was defined as: "a person who is, or is generally accepted as, a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa."

Unable to define the Coloured person, the definition became part of a residual category:

"a person who is not a White person or a Black."

The White person was classified as follows:

" a person who (a) in appearance obviously is a White person, and who is not generally accepted as a Coloured person or (b) is generally accepted as a White person and is not in appearance obviously not a White person." The definition of a White person also went as far as to exclude any person, who "freely and voluntarily admits that he is by descent a Black or Coloured person, unless it is proved that the admission is not based on fact." West (1988).

According to West (1988) the Act was amended fifteen times during 1956 and 1986.

During 1954 and later, the South African National Council for Child Welfare was very much concerned about the registration of children who were born from mixed unions, that is between Black and White, Coloured and Black and Black and White. Under the Population Registration Act, the children of mixed unions, were classified according to the 'lower' classification group, that is, the group carrying fewer privileges. The children of White and Coloured parents would be classified as Coloured, and those of Coloured and African parents as Africans. Children from African and White parents were classified as Coloured and it was frequently regarded as necessary to arrange for the adoption of such children with Coloured foster parents.

The race classification system affected some families and children significantly. An example is Philip, who was born of a Coloured prostitute and a White policeman. Philip had obvious European features and blond hair. His younger brother, Percy, was fathered by a different man and seemed to have obvious Coloured features. The boys were abandoned by their mother and placed at St. Nicolas Children`s Home. While the lighter-skinned Philip adapted well to his new surroundings, his darker young brother Percy stuttered so severely that he could barely speak. A child psychologist who examined the boy regarded the speech defect as stemming from an inferiority complex and probable rejection on his mother's side.

Another boy by the name of Basil had parents who were both classified White. All his brothers and sisters were White, but Basil's skin was much darker. Basil was placed at St. Nicolas Home and the social worker suggested that he never see his family again, but be adopted by a reputable Coloured family. Many families were separated as a result of race classification. Prior to the 1950s lightest-coloured members of families "often" passed as Whites and went to live in separate homes. Even if it meant breaking with their families, there was every inducement for Coloured people to "pass" as Whites. Their darker relatives were referred to as `venster-kykers` because, in order not to embarrass those who "passed", they developed a habit of looking into shop windows so that greetings could be avoided when they happened to meet in the streets.

Many children were removed from their families due to physical appearance and placed in alternative care where they lost contact with their families and siblings and had to develop a new identity within their "own" racial group. It is only recently, since the apartheid laws in this country have been removed, that family members seem to feel free to try and trace their `Coloured` and/or `Black` brothers and sisters. Within this context, South Africa is in a unique situation where more children have possibly entered the Welfare System than in other countries. More families were disrupted due to racial laws and siblings have lost contact with each other.

CHAPTER III. THE NATURE OF SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

1. Social Systems Theory - A Conceptual Framework

A system can be understood as a whole consisting of interdependent and interacting parts. The interrelationships of the components creates a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts with some degree of continuity and boundary. Using the system as a conceptual framework, it is important to specify both a frame of reference and a boundary.

With regard to social systems theory the family can be regarded as a social system, in that members are components interacting with each other, and family norms constitute the systems boundary.

A boundary can be defined as a closed circle around selected variables, like family norms and values, where the exchange of information across the circle is less than within the circle.

Because of the openness of human systems which interrelate with other systems, such systems are never static. They are in constant movement and change towards a purposive goal. Human systems strive to achieve a balance between internal processes and external stimuli. At the same time the system is constantly in a state of change and must maintain a dynamic equilibrium.

This constant effort to balance between the need to protect sameness and the need to accommodate to change is expressed by the concept of homeostasis as the main adaptive mechanism. Compton and Galaway (1979).

Systems can be open or closed. According to Kantor and Lehr (1975) a closed family is highly structured, hierarchical, and rule-governed, the individual is in subordination to the group. The open system balances order with flexibility and the rights of the individual with those of the group.

Generally the nuclear family is regarded as semiclosed, because it has rather firm parental and sibling subsystem boundaries.

According to the Mc Master model of family therapy by Epstein, Bishop and Levin (1977), the family needs to fulfil three major tasks:

- a) instrumental: the family's basic task is to provide its members with food, shelter and protection;
- b) affective: the family needs to provide nurturance and support to individual members, such as security and basic trust;
- c) mixed affective and instrumental tasks: these tasks are divided into developmental tasks, social skills and hazardous tasks. Developmental tasks help the family and individual overcome developmental stages and are divided in terms of family and

individual tasks. Family tasks are those that are to be fulfilled in terms of life cycle stages, for example, getting married, having a baby. Individual tasks are those that can be assessed in terms of developmental models, such as the psychoanalytic model or Erikson's psychosocial model. Social skills are the way family members learn to interact with each other. Hazardous tasks are triggered when the family has to cope with stressful life events, like deaths, illnesses, financial difficulties. Failure to deal adequately with these family tasks can lead to emotional or physical problems.

As noted above, the family can be conceived as a dynamic interdependent system composed of smaller units, the parental and the sibling subsystem.

The sibling subsystem theoretically sustains both support and socialization mechanisms. Siblings bond to a greater or lesser degree during their childhood, which has an effect on their adjustment and relationship later in life.

Within the sibling subsystem, children develop organized ways of behaviour that are patterned and recognized by sibling members. Siblings have their own roles and norms which influence their interactions with each other and with those outside the group boundary.

During times of stress, for example, in cases where the parental subsystem is weak, family systems theory predicts that its members will strive for equilibrium within the family system. Members may attempt to form alliances and strengthen bonds. Siblings turn to each other for support and reassurance. Kaplan et al. (1993).

Generally the nature and history of sibling relationships are complicated. When biological families are examined, social workers try to take the child/sibling, child/peer as well as the parent/child sub-system into account. Translated into the field of foster care the situation becomes far more complex, because of the developmental impact on these systems of changing caretakers, changing environments and change in the sibling groupings. The foster family differs from the modern nuclear family in that the foster family is an open system, whereas the nuclear family is semiclosed.

The foster family is open to complete strangers including non-related children, sometimes natural parents and agency staff. Foster families, as open systems, often find it difficult to know how fully to integrate a child into the family system. Just as the child, they also have to deal with questions such as to whom the child really belongs, what the placement outcome will be, and how long the child will remain in the family.

Handel (1967) regards separateness and connectedness as the underlying conditions of a family's life. A basic family process is the effort to achieve a satisfactory pattern of separateness and connectedness. To achieve a balance between the two is particularly difficult in foster families as they struggle between not involving the child enough and involving the child too much. The result is that the child's potential leaving will be very difficult for the child and the family. The problem is that a foster child can never belong to them. It goes beyond being physically excluded or included into the foster family, more important is the psychological inclusion or exclusion of the child in relation to the family. Foster homes suffer from a lack of role clarity and clearly defined norms. The unclear boundary makes it difficult to differentiate the family from its environment. This sense of insecurity will have an effect on the child's identity development.

When siblings are divided, the sibling support system is threatened and may not be able to adjust to the new demands imposed on it. In systemic terms, a state of entropy may be achieved, that is, become disorganized and dysfunctional. They may not know what is expected of them with regard to their sibling role. A child may wonder if he or she is still part of the sibling group and which role to assume when they are together, the role of playmate, friend or something else.

Children may be biologically, but not functionally, siblings. When siblings grow up in different foster homes the quality of sibling interactions in the immediate and the remote future will be affected. Without enriching and nurturing contact, siblings may not be able to establish or maintain formative bonds that can allow them to experience sustainable interaction over their life time. (Kaplan et al., 1993).

Social system theory has proved to be a useful conceptual framework which allows to organize and structure a wide variety of information and knowledge. It has promoted the understanding of family dynamics in terms of its parental and sibling subsystem.

Inadequate task fulfilment within the family leads to new alliances in the family system in an effort to combat the disequilibrium in the system. Sibling bonds may be strengthened as a result of inadequate parental care. In the event of removal from home the sibling subsystem can form an important supportive network to help the child deal with loss and separation. Dividing siblings adds to the confusion and feelings of loss when children are removed. Being an open system foster families tend to lack role clarity and clearly defined norms affecting the development of a healthy identity of the foster child.

The literature seems to stress the importance of enriching and nurturing contact between siblings to develop sustainable and meaningful interactions over life time. Kaplan et al. (1993). Being able to identify with a sibling subsystem will have a positive effect on the development of a healthier identity and add to a sense of security by being able to distinguish from the foster family. The literature has not discussed sibling relationships where children grow up in different foster homes without having formed a bond with each other prior to being placed in a new home.

2. Functions of the Sibling System

According to Minuchin (1974:59) "the sibling subsystem is the first social laboratory in which children can experiment with peer relationships. Within this context, children support, isolate, scapegoat, and learn from each other. In the sibling world, children learn how to compete, negotiate, and cooperate. They learn how to make friends and allies, how to save face while submitting, and how to achieve recognition of their skills."

Einstein and Moss (1967:551) gathered material on seventeen cases and compiled a list of typical feelings, attitudes, and behavioural exchanges prevalent in sibling relationships. They found that feelings experienced in sibling relationships seemed to range from affection,

intimacy, and caring to hostility, aggression, and anger. In terms of intensity, the relationship ranged from a strong feeling to indifference.

Siblings seemed to differ in that some imitated and wished to be like the sibling, or strived for difference and set goals in opposite directions. Feelings of superiority and inferiority were experienced by siblings on the basis of external and internal criteria. Siblings tended to display varying degrees of dependence on or independence from each other. Clues to such needs, or lack of them, were found in the amount of time siblings spent together or were displayed in leadership qualities of one sibling over another. A sibling could also support, protect, appreciate, and teach another in dealing with frustrations, or criticize, complain about, and expose weaknesses in the other and undermine his/her sense of security. Sibling rivalry was found to be the result of when "the need to feel worthy is frustrated" and jealousy seemed to come about when "the need to love and be loved is frustrated." Feelings of jealousy tended to be directed towards younger siblings and feelings of rivalry were more likely to be directed toward an older sibling. Competition and envy were involved when a child attempted to have as much as, or to do as well as or better than, a sibling. Sharing involved a sense of pleasure in doing things together and learning to divide limited resources, based on understanding and accepting the needs of the other sibling. Sexual behaviour was observed between two brothers of nine and eleven years old and seemed to be the result of sexual experimentation and brought about

a release of sexual tensions. Einstein and Moss (1967) also mention the use of alliances against parents, peers, or other outsiders to protect or defend themselves against attack. Even between otherwise hostile siblings temporary alliances were formed against outside attacks.

Although Einstein and Moss (1967) made use of a small subject group they identified a number of attitudes, feelings and behaviour patterns in sibling relationships that were later confirmed by other researchers.

Bank and Kahn (1980) conceptualized four major functions of the sibling system as: identification and differentiation, mutual regulation, direct services, and dealing with parents.

Identification and Differentiation:

Siblings identify with each other. They see themselves in each other and experience life vicariously through the behaviour of the other. At the same time the siblings establish their own identity by differentiating from the other siblings. This process of identification and differentiation is important in that each sibling serves as a testing agent for the other of what he/she wants or does not want to be.

Mutual Regulation:

Siblings serve as sounding boards for each other where new behaviour and new roles can be tried out and experimented with, criticized and encouraged. Siblings can modify each other's behaviour, learn from each other and transfer this learning to interactions with others.

Direct Services:

Examples of direct services would be lending money, exchanging goods and clothes and babysitting younger siblings. Siblings also offer services such as moral support and defending each other against potential "enemies".

Dealing with Parents:

Siblings may form coalitions against the parents who are making unreasonable demands, for example, forming a conspiracy of silence and refusing to let parents in on their secret. On the other hand siblings are equally notorious for telling on each other.

Another function siblings serve is translating each other's behaviour to the outside world and to each other. A sibling may translate a younger brother's baby talk, or warn a family member of

a parent's bad mood, or explaining to parents why a brother did this or that.

Social Roles:

Social roles constitute another important aspect of relationship structure. Siblings can occupy different roles, like friend, competitor, caregiver/caregivee, teacher/learner, manager/managee, and so on, each one accompanied with different norms of behaviour. Similarly, peers can perform roles of playmate, best friend, competitor, confidant, romantic partner, sexual partner and so on. Any one relationship can comprise multiple roles depending on the situation.

From the above it is evident that the sibling subsystem serves as an important socializing agent for the child. The sibling subsystem fulfils a variety of functions for the child ranging from identification and differentiation, moral support, mutual regulation and others, the value of which cannot be underestimated.

Minuchin (1974) mentions that when children get into contact with the world of extra familial peers, they try to operate along the lines of the sibling world. When they learn new ways of relating, they bring these back to the sibling world. In cases where the boundaries between the family and the environment are very rigid, the child may have difficulty in entering other social systems. This difficulty to

adjust to a new social system is frequently illustrated among children who grow up with disturbed parental figures and where children only have limited opportunity to get in contact with the outside world.

To the researcher Minuchin fostered the understanding of the powerful effect the sibling subsystem may have on the individual especially when children grow up with disturbed biological parents. Serving as an important socializing agent children identify with that system. In practice the researcher has experienced the difficulty some children have in adjusting to a new environment after being placed in foster care.

Buhrmester and Furman (1986) investigated the roles peers and siblings play in need fulfilment. Consistent with their expectations, both siblings and peers were perceived as less frequent sources of affection than parents. Siblings, were, nonetheless, viewed as substantial providers of affection. Children with older siblings reported that their siblings provided levels of instrumental assistance that were close to those their parents fulfilled. Children with younger siblings, however, reported that their siblings provided little assistance. Older sisters were the most frequent sibling confidants, particularly older females, who were themselves interested in intimate exchanges. Buhrmester and Fuhrman's research (1986) seems to be supported by Brody, G.H., Stoneman, Z., Mac Kinnon, C.E., and Mac Kinnon, R.'s study (1985). Brody et al. (1985) studied pre-school and school-aged

sibling pairs. Older school-aged female siblings took on a teacher role more often than any other sibling and younger school-aged females took on a learner role more often than any other younger sibling.

This has relevance with regard to the foster care situation. If siblings are placed together in the same foster home, these roles can then be strengthened within a sibling system where older siblings tend to take over parental functions and provide each other with a sense of continuity and security. Where siblings are separated in foster care, the discontinuation of these functions within the siblings subsystem will contribute to a greater sense of loss and insecurity within the child as new roles and functions will have to be negotiated.

Every author mentioned above, Minuchin (1974), Einstein and Moss (1967), Bank and Kahn (1980), Brody et al. (1985), has studied siblings who share the same environment. Sibling functions tend to develop where children have regular, virtually daily contact with each other. If we consider that some siblings grow up in different foster homes without ever having lived with their natural brother(s) or sister(s), these functions can also be fulfilled by foster siblings.

Minuchin (1974:145) suggests that: "The sibling subsystem also needs a protective boundary so that it can exercise its functions of offering children the opportunity to learn cooperation, competition, ways of avoiding or surrendering, how to gain or lose an ally, and other skills of living with peers. Parents must respect this opportunity

for growing without their help or interference."

Translated into the alternative care situation where siblings are separated, it seems that siblings will have difficulty in maintaining a protective boundary where the above functions can be fulfilled unless they have regular access to each other.

As Minuchin (1974:59) reminds us: "the significance of the sibling subsystem is seen most clearly in its absence. Only children develop an early pattern of accommodation to the adult world, which may be manifested in precocious development. At the same time, they may manifest difficulty in the development of autonomy and the ability to share, cooperate, and compete with others."

It has been the researcher's experience that foster children often lack a sense of autonomy, the ability to share, cooperate and compete with others, while at the same time manifesting precocious behaviour patterns. However, rather than being a result of growing up alone, these behaviour patterns seem to be the result of inadequate parenting, where parental expectations often exceed the child's ability and siblings have to depend on each other for nurturance and guidance.

3. Sibling Rivalry

As stated above, siblings can play various roles and functions within its subsystem. An area that has received attention extensively is sibling rivalry.

Alfred Adler (1928) was one of the first to investigate this phenomenon. He concentrated on a series of studies of sibling rivalry and the jealousy of older siblings. In one study, such jealousy was present in 50% of the firstborn. Jealousy seemed to be more likely when parents disciplined their children inconsistently, the age gap between the siblings was between one and a half to three years and the mother was oversolicitous.

From Adler's research (1928) parallels can be drawn to children who enter the Welfare System. Children who are removed from their parents as a result of inadequate parenting are more likely to have been exposed to inconsistent disciplining than siblings who grow up in a harmonious home environment. The possibility of sibling rivalry seems greater. Aldridge and Cautley (1976) evidenced that 31%, of the 115 placements they described, showed more than the normal degree of sibling rivalry.

Bank and Kahn (1982) stated that `sibling rivalry` may actually mask dependency and a basic need for intense, stable object relations. In an environment where there is a lot of parental conflict, care is inadequate and inconsistent, siblings have to rely on each other for affection and love. It seems possible that children have not learned how to relate to each other in a positive way and express their need for closeness through rivalrous behaviour.

In a study by Ross and Milgram (1982) sibling rivalry was often perceived as initiated by adults which usually started in childhood. Most commonly, one or both parents were mentioned. Grandparents who lived in the same household seemed to contribute to the problem. Adult initiated rivalry often indicated that they preferred one sibling over another (or a group of siblings over another). The dynamics were based on overt comparison and/or covert comparison. Overt comparison, for example, would include a child being openly compared with his/her more sensible, hard working, responsible brother or sister, who would then be perceived as more worthy of love. Covert comparison would be based on an adult's preferential treatment of one child that was observed by the other child. Again the child perceives that greater value is placed on the comparison child by the adult. Sibling generated rivalry was mostly perceived as being initiated by a brother, less frequently by a sister, and least often by the self. This kind of rivalry is frequently recalled as having started in adolescence or adulthood. The rivalry seems to stem from a vying for

parents' attention, recognition and love as well as being a more general juggling for power and position among siblings.

The researcher can remember one case where a fourteen year old boy was placed alone in a new foster home. He had been separated from his younger twin brothers from a young age. A few weeks after meeting his brothers at the Sibling Contact Day in April 1993, he suddenly started to display antisocial behaviour tendencies. He played truant from school, started lying, came home late at night and was disrespectful towards his foster mother. It turned out that he had the impression that his foster mother liked his brothers more than she liked him, because she spent a great deal of time at the Sibling Contact Day speaking to them and invited them to her home. The jealousy he experienced towards his brothers was profound. The possibility of having to share his foster mother, even for one day, with his brothers devastated him. This kind of sibling rivalry was described by Redl and Wineman (1951) as "sibling paranoia". The mere fact that he/she has to share an adult with another child can lead to serious aggressiveness or regression.

According to Aldridge and Cautley (1976) sibling rivalry seems most likely to occur when children experience conflict of loyalties between foster family and biological family and where children show signs of a conduct problem. Where sibling attachment is stronger, conflict of loyalties between the foster family and the natural family

is less likely. Where sibling attachment is strong it is expected that children experience some good parenting which seems to reduce sibling rivalry.

Cutler (1985) criticizes the research on sibling rivalry which often seems to focus on personality traits associated with birth order and sex status. She feels that research tends to be influenced by a psychoanalytic frame of reference with emphasis on the child's competition for parental attention.

It is the researcher's experience that sibling rivalry and jealousy are normal features among siblings and often involves a vying for parental attention, especially where children can only depend on their parents for affection and care and extended family members are unavailable.

This was confirmed by Ervin-Tripp (1984) who states that sibling conflict tends to be greater in families where affect, power and goods come only from parents, than where parental functions are diffused over more adults and younger kin.

To place sibling rivalry in a positive light, Cutler (1985) referred to Perlman (1967) who mentions the sibling group as a safe place to discharge feelings. Symbolic interaction theory regards sibling rivalry as children practising social skills among peers. Minuchin (1974:59)

discusses "the sibling subsystem as the first social laboratory in which children can experiment with peer relationships. Within this context, children support, isolate, scapegoat, and learn from each other. In the sibling world, children learn how to negotiate, cooperate, and compete. They learn how to make friends and allies, how to save face while submitting, and how to achieve recognition of their skills."

Literature has interpreted sibling rivalry in various ways. Sibling rivalry was linked to parental care by Adler (1928), Ross and Milgram (1982), where sibling rivalry was regarded as a vying for parental attention as well as masking the need for stable object relationships. Others like Perlman (1967) and Minuchin (1974) have normalized the function of sibling rivalry regarding the sibling group as a safe place to discharge feelings as well as practising social skills.

With regard to foster care sibling rivalry can take on a different dimension as children tend to be exposed to unfavourable role models before entering care which tends to increase the occurrence of sibling rivalry.

4. The Nature and Significance of Sibling Relationships Across the Lifespan

Sibling bonds can play an important role in a person's life, especially when parental systems were weak during childhood.

Brothers and sisters can become major attachment figures to a sibling that lasts far beyond childhood.

Ross and Milgram (1982) explored three areas of adult sibling relationships: perceptions of closeness, sibling rivalry, critical incidents and their consequences to the relationships. Results showed that closeness amongst siblings rarely originated in adulthood. Some participants whose ages were disparate were able to build personal relationships when circumstances brought them geographically close in adulthood.

Leaving the parental home was regarded by most siblings as loosening ties and reducing closeness. Geographical distance developed into psychological distance. However, the family still provided a framework within which most relationships amongst siblings existed. When asked by the researchers why relationships between siblings were not discontinued, most were stunned as they assumed that sibling relationships were permanent. Researchers observed that when participants spoke about their family it sounded as if they described an invisible space that enveloped siblings, a space that protected and limited. This space was not impermeable as some people felt that their sibling's marriages enhanced sibling relationships, others felt that sibling relationships were detracted by marriages. Personal values and shared beliefs matched the religious affiliations, professional aspirations, interpersonal expectations, and

beliefs in family solidarity that appeared as family values in childhood. It seems that the family values that were instilled in childhood reappeared in adulthood as internalized personal values and its sharing maintained continuity and closeness among siblings.

Memories of events that originated closeness during childhood served as an important factor in maintaining sibling closeness. The older the people the more these memories were cherished. Family rituals, like birthdays, joint holidays, or regular reunions contributed to family closeness. These get-togethers allowed siblings to reminisce and keep traditions alive.

Geographical closeness, which increased the sharing of daily events, the joys and frustrations of raising children, maintaining marriage relationships, occupational pressures and adjustment to different life stages maintained closeness. Closeness was also maintained by some even though they lived far away from each other when one sibling was chosen as especially significant to the other. Siblings also maintained contact through sharing responsibility in terms of looking after their aging parents.

In old age, supporting each other seemed to be a major task for siblings. Physical, emotional, psychological, and if necessary financial support was provided.

Ross and Milgram (1982:233) concluded that "sibling relationships appear to be among the most stable of all interpersonal relationships... and since siblings function within the framework of common family values, interaction patterns, and perceptions of reality inherent in the family life space, they may be in a unique position to validate each others' perceptions of self and the world around them. Memories were at least as important in maintaining closeness as social network functions. Sharing recollections of happy childhood experiences and cooperative and rewarding interactions in adulthood appeared to be a major source of comfort and pride. Being able to do so seemed to confer a sense of integrity - one had lived one's life in harmony with the family and one's own values. Not being able to do so appeared to be a cause for discomfort, anguish and even despair."

This reminds the researcher of one of her clients, a middle aged foster mother, from Child Welfare Society, who was separated from her siblings during her childhood. She never had any contact with them until she was 50 years old, some of them she met for the very first time. Although there were no shared memories or experiences to draw from, the day she met her siblings was one of the most important days of her life and marked a significant change for her. Her siblings enriched her life and have become a major source of comfort and pride. One maybe needs to mention that her feelings towards her mother were very positive, who despite numerous efforts was not allowed to see her daughter. A report from another foster mother who

was also separated from her siblings at a young age said that although she saw her brothers and sisters from time to time over the years, there was nothing that joined them together. She experienced no feelings of closeness towards them and was rather disinterested in their lives. She also revealed deep feelings of pain and anger towards her mother who rejected her at an early age. It seems that the negative feelings towards the mother clouded her ability to develop positive relationships with her siblings.

From the above the following important conclusions can be drawn. Meaningful sibling relationships usually develop during childhood. They are maintained by joint memories of events and serve an important function in maintaining family links. Geographical closeness in adulthood seems to increase the sharing and closeness.

Transferred to the situation of sibling separation in foster care where siblings grow up in different homes, the children may share different family values that may separate them rather than join them, especially when siblings have never lived together. Joint memories of events are then shared with members of the foster family. Millham et al. (1985:14) "report on the psychological dimension of belongingness,... a bed to return to, a room remembered, or bits and pieces in familiar places." This kind of link is only possible when siblings have shared a common past and relationships are kept alive over time. However, of importance to the researcher is the fact that

the adult siblings in Milgram and Ross's study (1982) were able to build meaningful relationships, when circumstances brought them geographically close. This gives hope to siblings who have not shared a common past. Shared experiences can be created by spending time together. Triseliotis (1991) hypothesizes that links with members of the birth family can eradicate or at least minimize the sense of rejection frequently experienced by foster children.

5. Sibling Relationships in Disharmonious Homes

Sibling relationships seem to play a more important role in disharmonious homes than is often recognized by the social work profession.

Bank (1992:145) refers to two kinds of circumstances that tend to be linked with intense feelings about siblings. The first of these conditions he called 'high access'; the second he described as 'vacuum of parental care'. The co-occurrence of these conditions increases the opportunity for children to seek a variety of intense and disturbed relationships with each other, like master and slave, mutually dependent or protective, hostile and exploitative. In socially isolated families these disturbed relationships are more likely to occur. When parents are unavailable, frightening, or abandoning, siblings become very important players in the drama of family life, "they are the stars: the villains and the heroes who play a significant role in the

child's life-and-death struggles for attachment, separateness, and identity."

High access can occur because the children are close in age. Closeness in age promotes emotional intensity. Access can also emanate from peculiarities of the family's structure, economic needs and the relationships between the children. For example, two children may be separated in age by eight years. They may, however, have close access if the older child is forced to stabilize the family by caring for the younger sibling. Both children may feel ambivalent about and close to each other, because of the weakness in the adult caregivers.

Vera Fahlberg (1981) offers a useful analysis in understanding attachment. She describes how some children can become attached to an abusing parent. Fear of separation from a parent can be greater than an outside threat which may cause a child to seek parental closeness. Sibling relationships can have important parental elements. One can hence conclude that a dysfunctional sibling relationship does not necessarily preclude attachment.

Bank refers to research in human attachment by Bowlby, Spitz, Harlow, Winnicot, Kohut who support the idea that children will attach themselves to any available object that offers comfort, even if it is imaginary, hostile or frustrating. "Sibling bonding in the extreme, arid, angry, and terrifying climate of acutely dysfunctional families forces

an ambivalent and immature relationship into the vacant, dangerous space created by parental weakness." Bank (1992:147).

Siblings from dysfunctional backgrounds store emotional information about themselves and about intimate relationships. Bank (1992) called this information "secret inscription" which only becomes activated under certain circumstances and which leads to irrational behaviour until it is no longer a secret.

In fact, children from unhappy homes are much more likely to have overtly hostile relationships with one of their siblings than children from harmonious homes. The researcher referred to Aldridge and Cautley (1976) before, who found that 37% of their siblings in foster care evidenced more than the normal degree of sibling rivalry.

Bank and Kahn (1982) found, on the basis of interviews and observations carried out on people in psychotherapy, that siblings can form intense relationships with one another to compensate for deficiencies in other aspects of family interaction. For example, a mother who is depressed or distances herself from her first-born when she has another baby may influence the first child to turn to the second child for comfort, love and intimacy.

Jenkins (1992) investigated the frequency of positive and negative sibling relationships between children in stressful and non-stressful family circumstances. Marital disharmony was chosen as a stress factor because of the considerable evidence of a strong relationship between marital disharmony and children's disturbance. Results indicated that children living in disharmonious homes were more likely to develop hostile and aggressive relationships with their siblings than children living in intact homes. Evidence also showed that children who develop close and supportive relationships with their siblings were less likely to develop psychological disturbance under stress. There was, however, no evidence that children from disharmonious homes formed closer relationships with siblings than children from intact homes. Children from disharmonious homes may develop a poor internalized image of themselves as a result of inadequate parenting. However, a close relationship with a sibling may compensate for this deficiency by giving the child an experience of caring and love and an opportunity to feel competent by providing comfort to others.

Jenkins (1992) has shown how varied sibling relationships can be in disharmonious homes. Weakness in and unavailability of adult caregivers appears to be an important prerequisite to form close sibling ties as well as to increase high sibling accessibility. When parents are unavailable children develop links with each other that can be intense and disturbing at the same time. In terms of sibling

separation in foster care it stands to reason that where sibling bonds are damaging to the child's development, siblings should be allowed to grow up in different homes to enable the healing process. However, contact and access to each other should be maintained to enhance the development of a healthy self image.

6. Intense Sibling Loyalties

The potential importance of siblings to each other can be of value to foster children who grow up in separate families, especially if we consider that siblings can compensate for deficiencies in family life.

Bank and Kahn (1982) were interested in intense sibling loyalties between siblings that takes years to develop and affects the sibling's identity. The researchers recruited families for their project that were known to have experienced parental losses.

They believed that loyalty between siblings would be most likely to form where parental care and attention was inadequate. Bank and Kahn (1982) reviewed the literature over the past 40 years. It seemed to support the idea that parental unavailability can promote intense loyalties among children.

They selected three groups of siblings at different stages in their life cycle: four brothers in mid-life, aged 36-45 years, three of whom were married; two brothers, aged 20 and 22 years; a brother aged 6 years, and his 9 year old sister, living together in a foster home. In each of these families, parents had been weak, absent, hostile, or had died during the children's formative years. This placed the siblings in need of reorganisation, guidance, and protection. Because other support systems were unavailable, they clung together as the only steady and constant people in their lives. Their enormous accessibility to each other, mentioned before by Bank and Kahn (1982) made it possible to spend a great deal of time together, to know what the other was doing and where they were going.

The way the sibling loyalties were demonstrated included five qualities: a) actively trying to be with each other; negative reactions to being separated; b) cooperation, mutual helpfulness, and sympathy; c) a special language, not usually shared by outsiders; d) defending one another against outsiders; e) conflict resolution and rituals of forgiveness.

a) Loyalty Demonstrated by Actively Trying to be with Each other and Reacting Negatively to Separation:

Bank and Kahn referred to an example where a nine year old girl and her brother were with each other so frequently that the social worker became concerned that neither would learn to function without the other. The children shared the same worry that, if separated, the little boy might collapse or get into serious trouble. The sister had, since the age of three years, considered herself to be responsible for him and worried constantly about him, especially when she could not see him.

b) Cooperation, Sympathy, and Mutual Helpfulness:

All members of the study group maintained a positive and helpful attitude towards one another. This often included that the siblings had to sacrifice their own immediate interests on behalf of the other. The nine year old girl, for example, proudly told the researchers that she frequently left her classroom to go and speak to her brother's teacher asking her about his progress at school.

c) Sharing a Special Language not Always Understood by Outsiders:

Each of the sibling groups that were interviewed had a special "code" that bound them together in a privately shared world. To outsiders understanding their private communication was a key to understanding the sibling relationship. The researchers referred to an example where the little boy was quite nervous and hyperactive during the interview and nearly knocked over the lights. The interviewer tried unsuccessfully to stop him. His sister then squinted furiously at him. He stopped immediately and stayed angelically in his chair for the rest of the interview.

d) Defending One Another Against Outside Threats:

When threatened by the outside world loyal siblings will protect each other. For example, the college-age brothers spent their adolescent years with a foster mother who was manifestly disturbed and treated them sadistically. Each brother maintained a conspiracy of silence on behalf of the other when the foster mother would question the one for information about the other. As boys they would swap stories about her vicious attacks. This story swapping united them against their common enemy. They also refused to sleep in separate bedrooms, an attempt by

the foster parents to prevent constant contact between the boys. They chose to share a tiny attic, rather than live comfortably in separate bedrooms on the second floor.

e) Containing and Resolving Conflicts Openly and Rapidly:

The fifth quality seems to be an important mechanism in maintaining close relationships between siblings. In all three groups, siblings argued, disagreed, and fought. Striking, however, was the ability to forgive and forget any hurt or grievance. Differences were never magnified, nor ignored. Aggressive behaviour seemed to be understood and forgiven as a necessary part of a loyal sibling relationship. All three sibling groups recalled physical fights. Grudges could erupt into useful, cathartic and sometimes physical confrontations, that were followed by calmer discussions and better understanding.

Bank and Kahn have contributed significantly to the understanding of sibling ties. Sibling loyalties take years to develop, tend to occur where parental care is weak and sibling accessibility is high, which affects the sibling's identity. In the vacuum of parental love, siblings are forced to turn to each other for reflected appraisal, guidance, and control. It appears that children who grow up in different foster homes, without having shared the same environment, will find it difficult to develop close or even intense relationships with

their brother(s) or sister(s). However, where sibling loyalties have already been formed as a result of stressful home circumstances, it seems important that these ties be kept alive in foster care.

IV. FOSTER CARE AND THE EFFECT ON SIBLINGS

1. Foster Care as a Stressful Event

Although emphasis is generally placed on preventing removal from home, thousands of children are placed in alternative care every year. On the one hand foster care provides protection and care that was not available in the child's own home. On the other hand, foster care also means being separated from one's family and is a traumatic experience for all involved. The need to remove from abusive, neglectful, or otherwise inadequate parents does not prevent it from being stressful and upsetting.

In South Africa sound family life and the care of children within the family setting are highly valued. It is recognized that parents are responsible for the wellbeing of their children. The emphasis has certainly been on children, youth and family through which a single field of service has evolved, 'child and family welfare'. The trend has been to promote the quality of family life. However, due to lack of resources and inadequate services, family life has deteriorated. Poverty, child neglect and abuse have exacerbated. Foster care has increasingly become a favoured alternative for children who are unable to remain in the care of their parents. According to the Annual Report of the Department of Health Services and Welfare, House of Assembly (1993), 2690 (39,29%) children were found in need of care and

placed in foster care in 1992. Foster care grants were paid for 5639 white children. The Annual Report of the Department of Health Services and Welfare, House of Representative, (1993) reports that 21340 children were found in need of care and placed in alternative care in 1992.

This means that a large number of children have entered the welfare system of which many were found in need of care and placed in foster care.

Norman (1975) and Clarice Freud (1955) have looked at foster care from the parents' and the child's point of view. Norman (1975) identifies ten feelings experienced by parents separated from their children as: sad, angry, bitter, relieved, thankful, worried, nervous, guilty, ashamed, and empty. Clarice Freud (1955:13) stresses that "no matter how bad a child's home seems to us, it is something he/she knows and to which he/she has developed ways of adjusting to." Kadushin (1980:180) mentions that no home is completely bad. To the child, his/her parents are the only ones the child has known, despite abuse and neglect, and has developed some ties with them.

Given the stressful nature of removal into foster care social workers have tried to find ways to help children cope with this experience. Social support systems have been identified to facilitate one's coping with the crisis and adaptation to change.

Siblings have been regarded as a natural support group that can help one another cope with separation and loss inherent in foster care placement. Minuchin (1974) identifies siblings as sources for guidance, control, and decision when the parent is inadequate.

A survey of 147 families by the Canadian Welfare Council in 1954, (Kadushin, 1980:188) notes the positive relationships in the sibling subsystem that exist side by side with the overwhelmingly negative relationships in the parent-child subsystem. Thus the sibling relationship can be regarded as an important possible source of strength and support to the child, especially where the parental subsystem is weak.

2. Sibling Separation in Foster Care

In the limited research regarding siblings in foster care little attention is given to sibling relationships. Bank and Kahn (1982) and Irish (1964). According to Hegar (1988a) the research done on siblings tends to focus on various aspects of family constellation, with special focus on birth order. Comparatively few studies focus on the nature and depth of sibling relationships or investigate the effects on separation. Hegar (1986 and 1988b) is one of the researchers who has studied the effect of relationships and losses involving parents and their children.

Separation is generally thought to have significance for children only when a bond of attachment has been developed between the two parties. Hegar (1988b) cites a case by Meyendorf (1971) of a nineteen-month-old girl from an intact family. When she was separated from her siblings, she reacted with symptoms of severe depression and lethargy. Although such behaviour seems atypical it illustrates the importance that siblings can play in children's lives.

Although the system seems to be changing, Appelberg (1977) decries the profession's failure to help foster children retain or form meaningful relationships with their siblings. According to her, decisions to separate siblings are attributed to the misguided belief that sibling rivalry and severe parental deprivation warrant exclusive placement. She believes that children need the support and comfort of sibling relationships when parents are unavailable to combat present and future loneliness. Jones (1981), Timberlake (1982), and Rushton (1989), describe their successful experience in placing sibling groups together.

Sometimes, the placement of siblings in one foster home can be a dilemma for social workers. Hegar (1988a) investigated policies and practices as well as attitudes of placement workers. Placement decisions were often guided by resource availability, agency policy, and casework judgement.

Meier (1962) reported that over three-fourths of her sample of former foster children had siblings who were placed in foster care. Zimmerman (1982) found that at least 87% of former foster children had siblings of which 77% had brothers and sisters in alternative care. According to her report 40% of her adult subjects would have liked to have more frequent contact with their brothers and sisters while they were in foster care. Of those who were placed alone, 60% would have liked to see their siblings more often. In a report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Foster Care of Children in South Africa (1989) it was reported that 43 (9,8%) foster children had brothers and 56 (10,7%) had sisters who were in the care of their biological parents. A total of 48 (9,1%) foster children had brothers and 35 (6,6%) had sisters in care of other foster parents. 46 (8,8%) foster children had brothers and 35 (6,7%) had sisters in children's homes or school of industries. It appears that only 163 (31%) children saw their siblings during a calendar year, 58 (11%) had no contact and in 17 (3,2%) cases there were uncertainty about contact. The rest, 287 (54,7%), did not have brothers or sisters in other care. The report recommends that contact between siblings should be increased.

This information seems to confirm that the majority of children in care have siblings. Siblings who enter foster care are important to each other. They can help each other in placement. Siblings who are separated from each other tend to become estranged from one another. The maintenance of appropriate links among separated

siblings seems to be a neglected dimension in social work. It supports the need for siblings who grow up in different foster homes to keep in touch with each other.

In a study of 187 foster children by Timberlake and Hamlin (1982) 25% were placed together. Hegar (1986) found that siblings who were most likely to be separated came from larger sibling groups and tended to be older. They tended to suffer from developmental disabilities, were placed in residential institutions or schools, or came into alternative care at different times. Aldridge and Cautley (1976) found that 66% of the girls and 38% of the boys were placed with siblings. 25% of the separated siblings had four or more placements. This stood in contrast to the intact sibling groups who did not have that many placements. He also found that the least disturbed children were placed together. Contrary to Aldridge and Cautley (1976), Staff and Fein (1992) found that pairs of boys were placed together more often than pairs of girls.

Aldridge and Cautley (1976) asked foster parents and social workers to evaluate whether the presence of a sibling had a positive or negative effect on a child. Of the foster parents 27% and 49% of the social workers rated the presence of a sibling as positive. The sex was not congruent with the decision-making process of placing siblings together or separating them. Social workers regarded more frequent positive effects of siblings for younger children and those

with fewer behaviour problems at the time of placement.

This falls in line with Sandler's study (1980) that siblings have a protective influence on children under stress. Children from economically deprived backgrounds, who experienced a high level of negative life events had a lower level of emotional and behavioural problems when there was an older sibling at home.

Siblings who were placed together were more likely to stay in their first placement than pairs where the siblings were placed separately. Siblings who were placed together were also more likely to leave a disrupted placement together than those placed separately. This may be the result of the extraordinary efforts by social workers and foster parents to keep the siblings together. Workers and families seem hesitant to split siblings even when the placement breaks down. Staff and Fein (1992).

Palmer (1976) discovered that children were split when the foster parents found it impossible to care for the siblings. Hence separation seems dependent on the adequacy of the caregiver rather than the nature of the sibling relationship.

According to Parker (1966) there is a slight tendency that children do better when separated. This might be because sibling rivalry and alliances are avoided and integration into the family may be

easier when a child is alone than when he/she is placed with a sibling. However, although the placement might seem easier, the child now has to compete, without sibling support, with the new caregivers and their own children.

3. Reasons for Sibling Separation in Foster Care

There are a number of reasons why siblings are split in foster care. Some difficulties are related to finding the appropriate home, especially when fostergrants are inadequate. Home size, family income, or the widely different ages of the children involved play a role in the decision making process. When children have been separated because of the inability to find a suitable foster home or because foster parents were not prepared and/or unable to care for a sibling group, the delay in reuniting the children will result in weakened sibling ties.

Other reasons relate to the psychological needs of a child. It is felt that by placing children together the needs of only one child is met. Jewett (1978). Another reason is that a youngster's needs are so great that if placed together with his/her sibling(s), they might overwhelm the parents. In cases where one of the children is constantly being made the scapegoat, separation is regarded as a means to break the pattern.

The jealousy between siblings can be so violent that separation seems the answer to the problem. Jewett (1978) and Rowe (1966).

The question `to split or not split` is often a difficult question to answer. Jones and Niblett (1985) refer to the poverty of current social work knowledge and assessment skills in terms of separating or maintaining sibling groups which may pose unacceptable risks for children in foster care.

According to Ward (1984) many of the semi-psychological reasons are more the symptom of the worker's fears than the potential of the adoptive parents. There seems to be a need to develop a clearer understanding of the professional basis for placement decisions.

Forbes (1977:18) "suggests the following criteria for the separation of siblings:

1. A history of having been reared in separate foster homes or having received unequal nurturing in their natural homes.
2. Marked intellectual difference.
3. Marked personality differences.
4. Situations in which an older sibling parents a younger one.
5. Cases in which one sibling may be able to separate the parents by appealing to one more than to the other."

Forbes' suggestions seem to fall in line with the social work awareness at his time, and the circumstances that favoured sibling separation. More recent literature suggests that there is no reason to separate children because they are different, which would include intellectual and personality differences. There is also no evidence that siblings should be split because one child has taken over a care taking role towards the other. Like sibling rivalry, parenting roles are normal and can be particularly functional within the sibling relationship. However, if the relationship between siblings is stressful for both, the relationship could be one of extreme dependency, fear and unhealthy attachment, then the separation of siblings would be in the best interests of the child. Dunn (1984) refers to a case from Bank and Kahn, where the relationship between a brother and sister seemed damaging to their development. If one child is the consistent loser in competing with adult affection and approval, separate placements may help a child to develop self-esteem.

Triseliotis (1980:19) mentions three important aspects when children are placed apart:

1. That growing up in different homes does not mean that there should be no contact between siblings. Both adoptive and foster parents are often willing to encourage contact with a brother or sister in another family.
2. This should be discussed from the outset with the prospective family, so that it can become an integral part of their

understanding of the child's needs.

3. The placing agency needs to recognize the importance of maintaining links and provide practical help such as the payment of fares.

It must be re-emphasized that sibling relationships can be more important than relationships with parents. When brother(s) and sister(s) have had no contact for several years, memories of each other can be idealized. Idealized memories may keep them significant to each other. At least with sibling contact memories are based on reality. The importance of sibling contact is illustrated by Hegar (1988a). He reported on a New York case in 1977, where the court ordered a child-rearing agency to integrate a brother into the lives of his sisters, who were placed in a different home. The argument was that when these children become adults, they will only have each other to depend on.

4. Disruption of the Sibling System

A foster care placement, by its nature, disrupts the family system. Whether it creates or exacerbates problems, the system is disrupted and placed under a different kind of stress. If a disrupted system is to survive, it must adapt to the new situation. According to Berrien (1968:74) "adaptation refers to those behavioural and structural modifications within the life span of a system or across

generations which are survival-extending. Adaptation is accomplished by blocking, dissipating, or neutralizing harmful maintenance inputs."

If a sibling system is to survive, it must adapt by blocking, dissipating, or neutralizing influences which threaten the group's identity. Perhaps the greatest threat to a sibling group is separation from each other. Some children try and maintain the roles they played in the biological family when they enter into foster care to 'keep family bonds alive'. It must be difficult for siblings to maintain exchanges with each other that distinguish their specific system from other systems, when they are physically separated from each other.

Eastman (1979) discusses the dilemmas faced by the foster family. Questions arise such as to whom the child really belongs, what the placement outcome will be and how long the child will remain with the foster family. The same dilemmas exist with the birth family, sibling system and individual child. Sibling relationships take on a special meaning when children are removed from their own family and placed in foster care. Even when placed in the same home, new parent figures in a different home will affect the sibling relationship. When the children are separated from each other, the changes will be even more profound.

The foster child has a dual family status. He/she belongs, in part, to his/her foster family and to his/her biological family. The

"belonging" to the biological family may be purely formal and legalistic, but by name and kinship affiliation the child is still part of that family system.

These issues of group membership are one aspect of the system's boundaries. The child is left to struggle with the questions "Who am I? Where do I belong? Who is my family?" Foster children seem to be more at risk in terms of stability and continuity. The child may have no meaningful relationship with his/her biological family, no sense of legally belonging to the foster family, and not be certain about the future, especially when he/she has to leave the foster home.

Kadushin (1980) feels that if the child remains in foster care long enough and is accepted by his/her foster parents, the child is ultimately incorporated in the new status. The child will have a clear understanding about who he/she is, what is expected of him/her, and what he/she can expect of others. He/she makes an adjustment to the foster home and to him/herself as a foster child. Thorpe (1974) interviewed 122 foster children over the age of five years who had been in the same home for at least one year. She found that children with a good knowledge of their own background and good understanding of the foster care situation showed better adjustment on the Rutter Behaviour Scale. Knowledge and understanding were related to the age at which the child was placed in foster care. Older

children had more knowledge than younger ones. Contact with biological parents was positively related to the child's adjustment in foster care. Children were able to successfully identify with two sets of parents. Even where children had been in foster care for a long time and wanted to stay there, they expressed the wish to remain in contact with their biological family.

Anderson and Carter (1974) observe that physical separation does not necessarily stop the family from interacting with each other. They referred to a case of a boy in foster care where despite the separation, the family still remained close in their feelings toward each other.

Cutler (1985) investigated the functioning of children in foster care. Children between the ages of 6 and 12 years were evaluated in four areas: self concept, familial relationships, behaviour, and school performance. Children placed with a sibling were compared with children separated from their siblings. The results showed that there were no statistically significant differences between children placed with a sibling and children placed away from siblings on any of the above variables. However, in terms of self concept, Cutler (1985) was led to believe that the presence of a sibling reduced anxiety and heightened happiness, both in the initial days of placement and later on in long-term foster care. As far as family relationships were concerned the birth family was clearly preferred. The presence of a

sibling also seemed to facilitate acceptance of the foster parents. She further concluded that children separated from parents and siblings were at greater risk of emotional detachment, seldom called their foster parents "mom" and "dad", longed to return home and were most emotionally involved with "nobody".

Cutler (1985) also highlights the concept of loss. Loss precipitates a grief and mourning process that includes the withdrawal of emotional investment from the lost object. When the grief and mourning process is not properly identified and/or handled it precludes the emotional reinvestment in new relationships as well as an inability to come to terms with the past.

While reading Cutler (1985), the researcher felt that her own views in terms of siblings in foster care were confirmed. She strongly agreed with Cutler, (1985:100-101) who made the following recommendations: "Social workers who place children in foster care need to think of children as members of a sibling system and a family, rather than independent agents. The necessity of removing children from their parents should not be equated with the necessity of separating siblings... Even maladaptive interactions should not be grounds for disrupting sibling systems... It is recommended that agency policy favour placement of siblings together in foster care, and mandate visitation between siblings when separate placements exist." Cutler (1985:103) also believed "that siblings are very important to

the foster child. Since foster care itself is unlikely to be eliminated, yet a stressful event, the use of siblings to moderate the sense of loss seems indicated."

5. Remembering and Reinterpreting Sibling Bonds

It seems that sibling relationships are not only important during childhood, but often gain importance during adulthood. Bank (1992:139) made many observations of how people feel about their siblings, "how they remember the injuries, the moments of solace, the disappointments, and the terrors of their growing up". His experience as psychotherapist has taught him about the influence sibling connections can have in adult life. He referred to cases where the parents were emotionally unavailable. As a result of this disturbed nurturance the children came to need one another for contact. This contact can become sexual, physically abusive, verbally or emotionally humiliating, and even primitively comforting to the point of providing comfort and enmeshed dependency. Because the sibling relationship is developed before any language is fully established or any cognitive and emotional maturity is reached, the children develop intense, ambivalent emotions. These unconscious memories, when evoked by certain situations that remind them of the emotional situation they were in as children, can provoke irrational actions and reactions.

According to Bank (1992:143) "siblings are rarely viewed by psychologists as major actors on the stage of human development." It has been Bank's experience (1992) that younger children are particularly vulnerable to sibling bonding because the direction is from younger to older. Research projects by Koch (1960), Bigner (1974) and Bryant (1982) have reported that older children have more powerful effects on younger siblings than younger children have on their older brothers and sisters.

The researcher can relate to that from her own experience with two boys who were placed in different foster homes. The older of the two was four years old and his brother was one year old at the time of placement. Ten years later, the boys were rejoined in the same foster home. The extreme jealousy between the two boys, especially from the older brother's side, was very evident right from the beginning of the placement to the extent that splitting the brothers was considered. However, the younger boy referred to his older brother in numerous conversations. It is unlikely that he would talk about his brother if he was not important to him and his older brother would not waste his energy in jealous acts if he did not mean anything to him.

Two aspects are illustrated in this example: both boys seem to feel ambivalent and close to each other. Due to the weakness of their original adult caregivers, the older boy had a strong influence on his

younger brother who in turn was more vulnerable to the sibling bond. Secondly one needs to remember that even hate and sibling rivalry indicates that the person is important. Disinterest in and ignoring a sibling suggests that their ties may be weak.

Kahan (1979) illustrates the experiences of ten adult people who have been in care. Andrew, one of the characters, described his dilemma when a policeman told him that his biological mother was seriously ill in hospital. He had never seen his mother before and did not know what to do. He remembered picking up the phone and contacting his brother to discuss with him what they should do. It was the contact he had with his brother during his childhood that strengthened the sibling bond and enabled him to use him as a support system at a time where he did not know what to do.

Relationships with brothers and sisters were described as having become more difficult and complicated because of experiences whilst in care and because of siblings being split up. Andrew was separated from his younger brother. He recalled that he did not get on particularly well with him, because he never saw him. When he was in trouble Andrew went out of his way to help him and in the end lost contact with him. He felt that "possibly if we had all been together things... might have been different,..., I think possibly being a bit closer it could have turned out differently. There could perhaps have been more contact between us after we left the Home." Kahan (1979:26).

Anne and her brother were inseparable when they were young and were placed together in one foster home. Only later did it become clear that the foster parents took Anne because they wanted her brother. Eventually the foster home rejected them both, first Anne and later her brother. Both children had been through experiences of loss and disappointment in the foster home and their own relationship suffered. Anne recalls that: "In the end we were apart. We are very apart now, my brother and me. There's a sort of, I don't know, a very wide gap between us... It sounds an awful thing to say but I've given him up as a brother." (Kahan 1979:26-27). According to Kahan (1979) these people felt that it was important to safeguard in as many ways as possible the continuity and wholeness of the child`s life in care, not so much for their own sake, but for the sake of the family life they would later have themselves, with marriage partners and children of their own who would want to share their past as well as their present and future. It would have been important for Andrew to be able to tell his son about his grandparents and possibly his great-grandparents.

V. THE SIBLING CONTACT DAY - A PROJECT BY CHILD WELFARE SOCIETY, CAPE TOWN

Introduction

Working as a social worker in the foster care department the researcher quickly became aware that many children in foster care had brothers and/or sisters, who were still with their parents or also grew up in alternative care situations.

It seemed that many children lacked a healthy identity, that is many children do not quite know where they belong, to the foster family or the biological family, as a result of abandonment, rejection, and lack of contact with the biological family. Many children were separated due to insufficient resources, some were abandoned by their parents in different families. In other instances social workers felt that it was better to split siblings where there was intense sibling rivalry. Sometimes siblings played a major parenting role, because of the inadequacy of their biological parents. The pain of being separated was great, but the pain of having no contact with their brothers and/or sisters seemed even greater. In some instances the children and the foster parents were surprised to hear that there was another brother or sister. Some were aware that they had a sibling, but did not know their whereabouts. The apathy and disinterest among foster

parents and biological parents to keep sibling bonds alive was astounding. Yet when the children were told about their brother(s) and/or sister(s) they seemed interested to know more and meet their siblings.

As a result the researcher started an investigation in tracing the whereabouts of siblings and organized a "Sibling Contact Day" in September 1992 and April 1993.

1. The Sibling Contact Day

Aim

The aim of the Sibling Contact Day was to provide siblings who were growing up in different homes (foster homes, children's homes, or parental care) to meet, spend time together, get to know each other and to have fun. The project was aimed at enabling the children to enjoy themselves in a non-threatening environment, where they could realize that others were in the same position. At the same time, an opportunity was provided for the parents to learn about the importance of keeping family ties alive through group discussions and sharing own experiences.

Venue

The venue chosen for the Sibling Contact Days was the Calvinist church hall in Athlone. The reason for this was that Athlone is the service area of the researcher. The Calvinist church is well known in the community and easily accessible for the participants in Athlone.

Programme

All participants of the Sibling Contact Day were divided into four groups. An effort was made to place the siblings of a similar age group into one group with one group leader. One group consisted of children between the ages of 5 and 12 years. The second group included siblings between the ages of 11 and 16 years. The third group catered for all those children where the age gaps between the siblings were quite large. The ages in that group ranged between 4 and 18 years. The fourth group was made up of the foster parents and biological parents.

The programme for the Sibling Contact Day in September 1992, included ice breakers, group discussions and activities, like making a family collage and a coat of arms. One foster mother shared her own experiences of being separated from her brothers and sisters when she was a child. The youngest group of children spent their time

together playing games and drawing pictures for each other. The siblings were asked to exchange collages, drawings and addresses. Every child went home with a drawing of his/her sibling(s). The parents received a hand out on 'Sibling Contact' to take home. (see Appendix B.).

The Sibling Contact Day in April 1993, was run in a similar fashion with ice breakers, group discussions and activities. This time the parents were asked to make a collage of the child(ren) who were in their care and to give it to the parent of the sibling(s). The children were asked to produce a collage of themselves, introducing themselves to their sibling(s). Again siblings were asked to exchange their collages and addresses.

Outcome

Child Welfare Society invited sixty three children and their caregivers to the Sibling Contact Day in August 1992 and seventy one siblings in March 1993. The response to the invitations were encouraging and group attendance was surprisingly high on both occasions. In September 1992, 32 children and 15 foster mothers attended. One foster father and one biological mother came on that day. In April 1993, the response was even greater. The hall in Athlone was filled with 46 children, 28 foster parents and one biological mother.

Siblings rejoined and some met for the very first time. That the relationships meant a great deal was evidenced by the touching joy shown by many who rediscovered brothers and sisters after a period of separation or even when they met for the very first time. Their delight in having someone to belong to was apparent when brothers and sisters were inseparable for that day and by their obvious anxiousness to see each other again.

On both days, some children, five and four children respectively, did not meet their sibling(s). The reason for this was, for some, lack of transport and for others, lack of interest. The disappointment of those children was heart breaking. With all the other children around them who were able to meet with their sibling(s), they obviously felt left out.

Difficulties experienced

The greatest problem experienced by the organizers was lack of transport. In September 1992, Child Welfare did not have volunteers to help with transport, which meant that the organizers had to fetch those participants who lived far away, like Mitchells Plain, Grassy Park, Kensington and other areas. The task was enormous and took a few hours, which meant that a few participants waited for hours for the other participants to arrive. The programme started late and had to be rushed to finish in time. In April 1993, attendance

improved due to improved transport facilities. Two volunteer drivers helped with transport. Although this made it easier in getting participants to the venue, organizers still had to help. This meant that organizers did not have time to welcome many members, and were unavailable to introduce siblings to each other. Another difficulty experienced was that there were too many people. The groups were too large and difficult to manage.

Future Planning

As the project seemed well received by all members who attended the Sibling Contact Day, it was felt that it should become a yearly event. Due to the difficulties mentioned above, it was felt that it was important to transport as many families as possible to increase attendance. It would hence be essential to involve more drivers, so that staff would be freed from transporting group participants and be available to welcome the families arriving. Another suggestion was made to decrease the number of participants to the maximum of twenty children per event. The reason for that decision was to make transporting easier as well as allowing children and parents to spend more quality time together in smaller groups.

2. The Research Project - A Pilot Study

In an effort to validate the effectiveness of the project, the researcher decided to interview twenty children and their caregivers who participated in the project. All subjects were contacted by telephone and interviewed during home visits.

Respondents were questioned with the help of a structured questionnaire. The younger children, up to the age of 10 years were interviewed with their caregivers, because many did not remember, for example, how long they had been in foster care. The other subjects were interviewed alone. Except for one child, who was quite resistant to respond to some of the questions, the respondents seemed to have no difficulty with the questions and answered freely and openly.

The results of the questionnaire were organized manually. Univariate distributions were drawn in respect of the questions, indicating how many respondents were found in each category for descriptive and interpretative purposes. Probed responses were clustered around main themes for descriptive purposes.

Findings and Discussions

In the following chapter the findings of the questionnaires carried out amongst the foster children and their caregivers who participated in the Sibling Contact Day project of Child Welfare Society are presented.

The contents of this study include the findings from the respondents who completed the questionnaire while they were interviewed by the researcher. Results of the sample are presented statistically as they provide a good overview with regard to the questions asked and answers received from the subjects.

Table 1: Sex and age range of respondents

	Male	Female	Total
Sex:	7	13	20
Percentage:	35	65	100
Age Range:	7-15		6-19

Table 1 reflects the age and sex distribution of the respondents. Seven (30%) of the 20 children were male and thirteen (65%) of the 20 children were female.

The ages of the boys ranged between 7 and 15 years, whereas the age range of the girls was between 6 and 19 years. This was due to the fact that one of the girls was 19 years old.

This sample seems to indicate that more girls than boys are placed in foster care. Judging from the small sample and the limited area from which the sample was drawn this is a very subjective conclusion.

Table 2: Area distribution of the respondents

Area	Numbers	%
Athlone:	10	50
Mitchells Plain:	2	10
Hanover Park:	2	10
Maitland Garden Village:	3	15
Crawford:	2	10
Newfields:	1	5
Total:	20	100

Table 2 gives an indication of the areas the subjects came from. An overwhelming majority of the children, 50%, live in the Athlone district. This was to be expected because the researcher works in Athlone. Most of the subjects who were interviewed were taken from that area as it was easily accessible to the researcher.

Table 3: Number of Siblings

Number of siblings	Number	Percentage
One	6	30
Two	5	25
Three	4	20
More	5	25
Total	20	100
Brothers	12	36
Sisters	21	64
Total	33	100

Table 3 indicates the number of siblings the children have. Twenty subjects were interviewed who proved to have thirty three siblings. Note that 21 children (64%) are sisters and 12 children (36%) are brothers.

Six children (30%) have one sibling, five children (25%) have two siblings, four children (20%) have three siblings and five children (25%) have more than three siblings.

These figures become significant in relation to table 4 and table 5, which illustrate the number of siblings who are not living with the child and the care situation of the sibling(s).

Table 4: Number of siblings not staying with foster child

	None:	1	2	3	More	Total
Number:	13	3	5	1	-	22
Percentage:	39	9	15	3	-	66

Table 4 represents the number of siblings not staying with the foster child. Twenty two (66%) of the thirty three children are separated from their sibling(s). Thirteen (39%) of the children are not living with any of their biological siblings. In comparison, nine (27%) of the children are partly separated from their brother(s) and/or sister(s). Hence, 66% of the children placed in foster care face the risk of being alienated from their brother(s) and/or sister(s), unless they keep in contact with each other.

This is an alarming percentage and raises concern about the lack of importance attributed to placing sibling groups together in one foster home. In comparison with some literature from overseas, Jones (1981), Timberlake (1982), Rushton (1989), it seems that social work practice in South Africa is lagging behind in its efforts to keep sibling groups together. However, one needs to remember that South Africa only recently removed the Racial Classification Act in which it was sometimes the practice to separate siblings from each other because of their skin colour. West (1988).

Table 5: Care situation of siblings

Care situation of siblings	Number	%	S.A. 1989 ⁽¹⁾ %
Foster care:	21	64	15,7
With parents/mother/father:	4	12	20,5
Children's home:	3	9	15,5
Independent:	5	15	-
Total:	33	100	51,7

* (1) Figures of the report of the Committee of Enquiry into the foster care of children in South Africa, 1989.

Table 5 gives the reader an indication of the caregivers the siblings have. Of the thirty three siblings, twenty one (64%) are in foster care and four (12%) are living with their parents. Three of the total number of siblings (9%) are placed in Children's Homes. Five (15%) are living independent lives, which means that they are over the age of eighteen years and hence discharged from the Child Care Act.

In comparison with the results obtained by the Committee of Enquiry into the foster care of children in South Africa in 1989, the figures seem to vary a great deal. Only 15,7% were found to be in foster care in comparison to 64% of the researcher's findings. A larger number of children (20,5%) were found to be living with their parents, and 15,5% were placed in

children's homes. However, the results from this pilot study show that 12% of the children are staying with their natural parents and 9% are placed in children's homes. A possible explanation for the difference in figures between the pilot study and the report from the Committee of Enquiry is that the researcher concentrated largely on a specific area (Athlone) where services are mainly rendered by Child Welfare Society. The Committee of Enquiry took various Welfare organisations into consideration and researched the subject on a national level. One also has to bear in mind that the study by the Committee of Enquiry was done by the House of Assembly, which works almost exclusively with the White population. This study, however, included respondents who were classified as 'Coloured'.

Another explanation could be that the number of children placed in alternative care has increased over the past few years. The Annual Report from the House of Representatives in 1993, evidenced that the number of children placed in alternative care from 1991 to 1992 increased by 1929, from 19411 to 21340.

Table 6: Age of child when placed in foster care

	4mths-1yr	2-4yrs	5-6yrs	8-10yrs	11-13yr	Total
Age:	6	4	5	3	2	20
Percentage:	30	20	25	15	10	100

Table 6 looks at the time the children were placed in foster care. According to these findings 10 children (50%) were placed in foster care between the age of 4 months and 4 years. Five children (25%) were placed between the ages of 5 and 6 years. Three children (15%) entered into foster care when they were between 8 and 10 years old and an even smaller number, two children (10%) came into foster care during their pre-adolescence.

This table is significant in relation to the following table as the age of the child, when he/she was placed in foster care, indicates the chance the foster child has of having shared the same environment with one or more of his/her siblings. According to this table, the chance of a child knowing his/her brother(s) and/or sister(s) is 30%, if he/she was placed in foster care at the age of 4 months to 1 year. In comparison, 70% of the children might have had the opportunity to share the same home and develop close relationships with their siblings before they entered into foster care.

Table 7: Number of siblings who lived/did not live with their sibling(s) before being placed in foster care. Probed responses.

	No.	%	Responses
Foster children who lived with their sibling(s) before coming into foster care.	11	55	There were lots of fights at home, father beat mother, we were left alone and had to stay at home all day. I didn't like it, we didn't get proper food. Cannot remember, was too small. Only for a short while. I didn't like the beatings.
Foster children who did not live with their sibling(s) before coming into foster care.	9	45	No responses
TOTAL	20	100	

No. = number

Table 7 highlights the number of children who lived together before they were separated. According to the above findings, eleven children (55%) were split when they entered into alternative care. In comparison, nine children, (45%) did not live with their brother(s) and/or sister(s) before they were placed into foster care.

This means that 45% of the children placed in care possibly are not aware of their own family roots. From the above results it is evident that 55% of the siblings stayed together before they were removed from home and placed into foster care. In comparison with table 6, one could argue that many more siblings were potentially in the position to have shared some time together before being separated and placed into foster care. However, these results are inconclusive, because the respondents were not probed why they stayed or did not stay with their sibling(s). The reasons for this could be manifold. Children could have been abandoned with different caregivers, or the older child could have been placed with a foster family before the younger one was born, or a family agreed to care for only one child and not the other, before the matter came to the attention of a welfare agency.

This table highlights the realities of child placement even before a family comes to the attention of a welfare organisation. When parents are unable to care for their own children the importance of siblings staying together is often not realized by the parent(s).

Table 8: Time at which siblings came in contact with each other for the first time:

Time at which siblings came in contact with each other for the first time	No.	%	No.	%
Before the Sibling Contact Day:	12	60		
a) on a regular basis:(once per month)	4	20		
b) once:	5	25		
c) twice per year:	3	15		
At the Sibling Contact Day in September 1992:			5	25
At the Sibling Contact Day in April 1993:			3	15
Total	12	60	8	40

Table 8 gives the reader a picture of the number of siblings who met before Child Welfare Society organized the Sibling Contact Day in September 1992 and April 1993. It was pleasing for the researcher to notice that 60% of the children had met before, of which 20% had contact on a regular basis, 25% had met once and 15% had contact twice per year, usually on birthdays and/or Christmas.

However, 40% of the children had not met their sibling(s) before the Sibling Contact Day. This is a rather concerning percentage of children who might not have a sense of belonging because they do not know where their

roots are. The Committee of Enquiry into the foster care of children in South Africa in 1989 found that 31% of the siblings had contact with each other during one calendar year and 11% had no contact. Although these figures are difficult to compare with the present study for reasons mentioned before, they give an indication of the number of children who tend to become alienated from each other through lack of contact with each other.

Table 9: What did the child enjoy about meeting his/her sibling(s)? Probed responses.

Responses	No.
It was nice to see her again, she has grown a lot, looks like my mother.	1
I enjoyed the way my sister played, talked and ran.	1
It was nice being together, my brother has grown bigger, he has changed, he didn't seem very social, he was more withdrawn.	1
Because they are my brothers.	1
We stick together, because we seldom see each other.	1
We had fun together, we could go wild playing together.	1
I enjoyed seeing my brother(s) and sister(s).	9
I don't know.	1
I did not enjoy meeting them (child could give no reason).	1

From Table 9 it becomes evident that most children, except for one, enjoyed meeting their brother(s) and/or sister(s) again. Most responses were related to spending time together and physical changes that were observed by the siblings. Nine children said that they enjoyed seeing their brother(s) and/or sister(s) but could not give a specific reason. Some children, usually the younger ones had greater difficulties being specific than others. The researcher did not want to put words into their mouths by giving suggestions.

Table 10: What did the child like about his/her sibling(s)?

Responses	No.
I don't like her when she throws buckets around, when she is naughty and she does not listen to me, I like her when she is good, when she listens to me, when I play with her.	1
I enjoyed the way she plays, talks and runs.	1
Enjoyed the way she played.	2
I like him because he is my brother.	3
I like her as my sister.	1
I like her personality, behaviour.	1
I enjoyed her hair, it was well cut, she was friendly, she can talk a lot.	1
It's nice to have a little brother.	1
I liked her clothes, face, manners.	1
I enjoyed his laughs, he is not rough.	1
We don't fall out, we love each other a lot, I miss him a lot.	1
Because they (brothers) love us.	2
Because they are my brothers and sisters.	2
I don't know.	3

No. = number

Table 10 provides an overview of the responses that were received from the children who were interviewed. The comments range from looks to personality features and feelings about siblings. It was encouraging for the researcher to hear how children identified so many positive elements. Only one child expressed antagonistic feelings towards her sister. It is interesting to note that six children liked their siblings for the mere fact that they were their brother(s) and/or sister(s). It seems to underline the results of the study by Ross and Milgram (1982) where sibling relationships were taken for granted and assumed to be permanent.

Table 11: Has the foster child been in contact with his/her sibling(s) since the Sibling Contact Day?

Yes:	%	No:	%
8	40%	12	60%

Number of times the siblings saw each other since the Sibling Contact Day.

1	%	2	%	3	%	More
3	15%	5	25%	-	-	-

Table 11 illustrates the number of times that some of the children have seen their sibling(s) since the Sibling Contact Day. The reader will notice that a disappointing number of 12 children (60%) have had no contact with each other since the Sibling Contact Day in September 1992 or April 1993. Of the siblings who had contact with each other, three children (15%) saw each other once and five children (25%) had contact with each other twice after the Sibling Contact Day.

Millham et al. (1985) refer to the implicit barriers to contact and problems of access that are experienced by factors like the type of placement, distance, travelling difficulties, cost and insecurities about visiting.

Considering the areas the children live in, most siblings do not share the same residential area and some live quite a distance apart. Transport difficulties, distance, cost and insecurities could have indeed been a relevant problem, even though it was not mentioned by the respondents under table 13. Respondents were not probed in that regard and results are hence inconclusive.

Table 12: Did siblings meet as a result of the Sibling Contact Day?

Yes:	%	No:	%
1	5%	7	35%

Table 12 provides an interesting feature in relation to sibling contact. It seems that those children who saw each other again after the Sibling Contact Day, did not meet as a result of it. Only one child (5%) saw his/her sibling(s) as a result of the Sibling Contact Day. On the other hand, 7 children (35%) had contact with their siblings, regardless of the fact that they had met on that day.

The interview revealed that those children who were already in contact with each other before the Sibling Contact Day were the same who kept in contact after the Sibling Contact Day. Those children who met for the first time after being separated for a long time or who never had contact before, were the same who did not keep in touch with their brother(s) and/or sister(s) after the Sibling Contact Day.

Again the researcher would like to refer to the possible implicit barriers to contact mentioned by Millham et al. (1985).

Table 13: Would children like to see their siblings more often?

	Yes	%	Responses	No:	%
Responses	18	90		2	10
Could not give a reason why.	5	25	Because she is naughty	1	5
Because he is my brother.	2	10	No answer	1	5
I want to visit, but I don't get around to doing it.	1	5			
I want to visit, but I don't want to stay.	1	5			
It's nice to play with him.	1	5			
I want to visit, but I don't have his address or phone number, since he moved.	1	5			
Foster mother seems very protective of brother and does not want to let him go.	1	5			
Foster mother seems scared to loose my brother's affection.	1	5			
I am scared to ask because foster parents might say no.	1	5			
No answer	4	20			

Table 13 indicates that an overwhelming majority of eighteen children (90%) were interested in seeing their sibling(s) again. Two children (20%) did not seem interested to keep in touch with their brother(s) and/or sister(s). Many could not give a reason why they would like to see each other again and/or why they had not made contact with each other since they spent time together at the Sibling Contact Day.

From the responses in table 13, it seems that shyness from the child's part and lack of encouragement, initiative and support from the foster parents' side has prevented siblings from seeing each other again. Implicit barriers to contact and problems of access could also be experienced by factors like the type of placement, distance, travelling difficulties, cost and insecurities about visiting, which were not mentioned. Yet the quality of links between siblings is an important indicator for the development of a healthy sense of belongingness and identity.

Table 14: Child's relationship to biological and/or foster siblings:

Child feels closer to:	No.	%	Responses	No.	%
Biological sibling(s)	6	30	Because I miss him, I want to be with him.	1	5
			Because we are family.	1	5
			Because I love them.	1	5
			Because they are my brother(s) and sisters.	4	20
Foster sibling(s)	9	45	They spoil me.	1	5
			My brother isn't always here, he hasn't grown up with us.	1	5
			We see each other every day.	2	10
			We grew up together.	3	15
			There is more contact, we grew up together, live together.	1	5
Biological and foster sibling(s)	3	15	Because she is my sister and ...(foster brother) lives with me.	1	5
			Because I see my foster brothers and sisters every day and because my brother and sister are part of my family.	1	5
I don't know	2	10	No response		
Total	20	100	Total	20	10

No: = number

Table 14 reveals the emotional attachment of the children towards their biological and foster sibling(s). Contrary to some evidence by Cutler (1985) where children clearly preferred their birth family, the findings above give a different picture. Nine children (45%) felt closer to their foster siblings than to their biological brother(s) and/or sister(s) for obvious reasons, like daily contact and growing up together. These were the reasons given by six children (30%), which indicates that they already feel estranged from their biological sibling(s). It could also be that those children feel well incorporated in their foster family with a clear understanding of who they are which makes it easy for them to identify with the children of the foster family. Kadushin (1980).

However, six (30%) children felt closer to their natural sibling(s), of which five (25%) felt that way because they are family. This figure highlights the strength of family bonds, even though siblings live in separate homes. It confirms Anderson's and Carter's statement (1974) that physical separation does not necessarily stop feelings of closeness amongst family members.

Three children (15%) could not make up their minds whether they felt closer to their biological or foster sibling(s). It seems that this feeling stems from a sense of loyalty to both families as is evidenced in the responses. These children also tended to have more regular contact with their siblings than others. It could therefore be that children were able to identify with two sets of

families as a result of the contact with their biological sibling(s).

Thorpe (1974) confirms that contact with biological parents is positively related to the child's adjustment to foster care and that the child could successfully identify with two sets of parents.

Table 15. Does the child want all the siblings to stay together?

Responses	Yes	%	Responses	No	%
Total	16	80	Total	4	20
I want my brother(s) and/or sister(s) to stay with me, but I don't want to stay with them.	5	25	I don't know my sister, she hasn't grown up with us.	1	5
I want us to grow up together.	1	5	There would be too many children.	1	5
I want us all to live together.	2	10			
We must all live together with my mother.	2	10	I don't miss my brother	1	5
No answer	7	35	No answer	1	5

Table 15 clearly reflects the wish of many separated foster children to live together with their sibling(s). In this sample, 16 children (80%) expressed that wish. Only 4 children (20%) did not want the sibling(s) to stay together.

It is interesting to note, that even though 80% of the siblings want to stay together, seven children (35%) could not tell the researcher why they wanted them to live together. This could possibly stem from the fact that family relationships are assumed to be permanent and it is taken as accepted that siblings should stay together. It is understandable that many children (25%) would like their sibling(s) to stay with them, because they are familiar with their own home situation. They do not know the foster family of their brother(s) and/or sister(s), hence the resistance to stay with their sibling's foster family.

Conclusions

With regard to the Sibling Contact Day project and the results achieved from the pilot study, the researcher would like to highlight the following points.

It seems that 39% of the foster children who were separated from their siblings are living without a biological sibling and 27% are partly separated from their siblings. This could be due to the fact that a large number of children (30%) are placed in foster care before the age of one year. Practice wisdom has proven that it is usually easier to place children when they are alone and at a young age, than when they come in sibling groups and are older. Frequently children who are abandoned by their natural parents with different care givers or foster parents are unable to provide a

home for more than one or two children.

The results from the above study further indicate that 55% of the children lived with their siblings before they were placed in foster care. This is a concerning number of children who suffer an unnecessary amount of trauma, loss and separation. Not only do these children lose their parents, but they also lose the emotional support and buffering of the sibling group in dealing with adults and other children. Roles have to be redefined in relation to the new caregivers. Being separated from his/her brother(s) and/or sister(s) contributes to a greater sense of loss and the threat of losing one's identity.

On the positive side, it was encouraging to see the number of children who seem to have contact with each other of which 20% appear to keep in regular contact with each other. However, a more concerning number of children (40%) do not seem to be in contact with their sibling(s). This could imply that these children are possibly unfamiliar with their family roots, which could add to a greater sense of insecurity and lack of belongingness. Foster children are already at risk in developing a healthy identity due to the lack of role clarity and clearly defined norms in the foster family.

According to the pilot study, most children responded positively to meeting their sibling(s). The joy and tears of happiness that were observed by the researcher on those days speak for themselves. One can hence

conclude that foster children enjoy to have contact with their brother(s) and/or sister(s). Although contact was encouraged, most siblings (60%) did not see each other after that. Those children (40%) who had contact with their brother(s) and/or sister(s) seem to see each other on a regular basis anyway. However, 5% of the children kept in contact as a result of the Sibling Contact Day. The researcher strongly feels that this would be reason enough to justify a continuation of the project on a yearly basis. In addition the researcher would like to give those, who did not meet again after that day another chance to get to know each other better and to have fun together.

The above results also reflect that the children (50%) generally feel closer to their foster siblings than to their biological siblings. Unfortunately these figures are not clear enough to explain whether this is a result of being well integrated in the foster family or due to lack of contact with the biological siblings. Literature seems to prove that children develop a better sense of identity when they are able to keep in regular contact with their biological family.

In sum, the results seem to show that the Sibling Contact Day was a successful project that should continue on a regular basis so as to enable siblings to meet and to give them the opportunity to develop closer family ties that would help them develop a healthier identity. Kahan (1979) mentioned continuity among siblings should be safeguarded, not so much for

the children's own sake, but for the sake of the family life they might have later in life. It might be important for the child to be able to tell his/her child(ren) about his/her grandparents and possibly his/her great-grandparents.

VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Who are brothers and sisters?

Most definitions of siblings share a notion of close kin, most likely they live together while children, they are of the same generation and same lineage, often the same parentage. From the previous study, it is evident that some siblings live separately, which is often the result of being removed from their parents and placed in alternative care. Unlike friends, as family members, siblings are a given and are not optional. They remain siblings throughout life. Like peers, siblings share a generation, they may provide challenge and support. Like parents, older siblings may have authority, and may give guidance, nurturance and care.

Literature has proven that sibling ties are important and have positive influences on human development. Sibling loyalties take years to develop and are stronger when the parental system is weak and sibling accessibility is high. Leaving the parental home, being separated from brother(s) and/or sister(s), re-adjusting to a new home and re-negotiating sibling relationships frequently implies the loosening of sibling ties and reducing closeness, which can severely affect the child's identity formation. However, the biological family can still provide a framework within which most relationships among siblings continue to exist. Fostering sibling groups are expected to predict better progress. In those cases where it is not possible, progress can be

promoted by encouraging regular sibling contact.

When children grow up in different foster homes, the strength of the sibling ties will depend largely on the number and quality of contacts they have with each other. If they visit frequently, allowing for ample opportunity for interaction, the bond will obviously be closer than when contacts are brief and few. Children who see each other often in their different foster homes, or even go to the same school will have more opportunity to relate to each other in a normal way than those children who only meet sporadically.

If the foster homes differ radically from each other in terms of values and lifestyle children may grow apart despite frequent contacts. "Class and culture share a barrier to contact." Millham et al. (1985:14). It is hence preferable when children are placed in different foster homes that their homes be similar in social, educational and cultural backgrounds. The children can then relate to one another more easily when they have contact. Infrequent sibling contact "may result in idealization or frozen negativism in attitudes toward siblings." Ward (1984). Children need contact more frequently in relaxed situations to break the pattern of idealization or frozen negativism.

One needs to remember that strong sibling ties are not necessarily expressed in positive interaction only. Even hate and sibling rivalry indicates that the person is important. The researcher tends to agree with Dyson (1947:55) who states that "...even when there is so much quarrelling that the relationship appears to be of doubtful value close contact is still important, for it is likely that in later life the difficulties will to some extent disappear, and what is valuable remain."

Ward (1984) also suggests that children need each other's pictures and addresses. They need assurance that the absent sibling is still alive. The children's wishes with regard to the frequency and nature of contacts should be considered. Too often siblings are expected to show instant affection for each other even though they have not seen each other for a long time. Sporadic or occasional news may be all that is required to keep the sibling bond alive.

Glickman (1957:384) suggests that even when the sibling tie is weak due to early separation, or if it was hostile due to lack of parental care and love, "the curiosity of each sibling about the other should be satisfied as they grow up separately, if each desires it." When the child was separated at a very early age and was too young to remember his/her sibling and hence does not show any curiosity or have a tie toward the other sibling, visits between the siblings should be arranged automatically on occasion, so that the children do not grow up as total strangers to each other. "Even if

emotional significance is lacking in their relationship, their kinship will be a known fact to them to be shaped by whatever meaning appeals to them." Glickman (1957:384).

Visits between siblings who are separated by placement have been known to raise some questions as to their desirability, because it may result in confusion between his/her ties to the foster family and to his/her siblings. However, contact with the sibling does not have to detract from the child's feelings for his/her foster home, as the actual experience of a daily loving relationship counts more on a long-term basis than any contact between siblings. Confusion is diminished for the child rather than created by such contacts, because the child will know the reality of his/her family situation while knowing the reality of love and security from the foster home. Conflict of loyalties between the foster and the natural family are often the result of earlier ties to the biological family and can be helped by explaining to the child that he/she can love and be loved by more than one set of people at any one time.

Social workers should be more actively involved in encouraging those links. Suggestions made by Millham et al. (1985) and Timberlake and Hamlin (1982) are for social workers to try and understand the feelings of the children and their families generated by separation. These feelings could be feelings of guilt, anxiety, mourning and aggression, a sense of being punished, and/or being responsible for being placed in substitute care.

Children who are separated from their natural homes have to negotiate family links. Social workers are insufficiently aware of the implicit barriers to contact and problems of access that are experienced by factors like the type of placement, distance, travelling difficulties, cost and insecurities about visiting.

It is not sufficient for social welfare departments to leave decisions about sibling contact to individual social workers, there is a need to establish codes of good practice. The researcher strongly feels that these decisions should start at the time when children are removed from their parental home and placed into alternative care. If siblings are placed in different homes, the integration of the child(ren) into the life of his/her brother(s) and/or sister(s) should be part of the permanency planning. In fact, provision should be made in the Child Care Act which entitles siblings to have regular contact with each other.

Training foster parents in their role as temporary caregivers as well as drawing up access contracts between foster and biological families to keep family bonds alive should be a requirement when working in foster care.

In this way, possible bitterness over the possible loss of a sibling can be prevented. The child will also not be in the position to say that he/she does not know his/her brothers and sisters because of the agency's indifference or lack of interest. Because of the significance of the sibling

relationship it is the agency's responsibility to maintain contacts between siblings. One can never be sure that natural parents will not claim their child even when placed in permanent foster care when legal proceedings are lacking. If the family is then reunited, the siblings will not be total strangers to each other having visited one another.

The researcher feels that a good start has been made with the project by Child Welfare Society, Cape Town. The touching joy shown by many who rediscovered brothers and sisters after a period of separation or even when they met for the very first time has evidenced that the relationships mean a great deal to the children.

The same is stressed by Dyson (1947:54) who states "there are only children living with their parents, and there are only children in foster homes, but for the most part those who have brothers and sisters deeply value the relationship, and those who have not wish they had."

Welfare agencies can play an instrumental role in educating, encouraging and ensuring that sibling ties are kept alive. Sibling contact can provide the child with a greater sense of continuity and security as well as enhancing his/her sense of identity.

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APPENDIX I

QUESTIONNAIRE

SIBLING CONTACT DAY

NAME: AGE:

ADDRESS:

1. How many brother(s) and/or sister(s) do you have?

Probe Responses.

1 2 3 More

.....
.....
.....

2. How many brother(s) and/or sister(s) do not stay with you?

None 1 2 3 More

3. Where do(es) your brother(s) and/or sister(s) stay?

1. In foster care:

2. With parents/mother/father:

3. Children's Home:

4. Independent:

4. Since when are you staying with your foster parent(s)?

.....

.....

- 5. Did you live with your brother(s) and/or sister(s) before you came to stay with your foster parent(s)?

Probe Responses.

.....

.....

.....

- 6. When did you see your brother(s) and/or sister(s) before you came to live with your foster parent(s)?

- a. Before the Sibling Contact Day:

- on a regular basis:

- once/twice:

- other:

- b. At the Sibling Contact Day in September 1992:

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- c. At the Sibling Contact Day in April 1993:

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- 7. What did you enjoy about meeting your brother(s) and/or sister(s)?

Probe Responses.

.....

.....

.....

- 8. What do you like about your brother(s) and/or

sister(s)?

Probe Responses.

.....
.....
.....

9. Have you seen your brother(s) and/or sister(s) since the Sibling Contact Day?

Yes: No:

If yes, how many times have you seen him/her/them since then?

1. 2. 3. More

10. Did you see your brother(s) and/or sister(s) as a result of the Sibling Contact Day?

Yes: No:

11. Would you like to see them more often?

Probe responses.

.....
.....
.....

12. Do you feel closer to your brother(s) and/or sister(s) or to your foster brother(s) and/or sister(s)?

I feel closer to my brother(s)
and/or sister(s):

I feel closer to my foster
brother(s) and/or sister(s):

I feel close to my brother(s)
and/or sister(s) and to my
foster brother(s) and/sister(s):

Can you say why?

.....
.....
.....

13. Would you like to stay together with your brother(s)
and/or sister(s)?

Probe Responses.

.....
.....
.....

Sibling Contact Group.



TO OUR FOSTER PARENTS

The Importance of Sibling Contact for Foster Children

A great deal has been written about the parents and the importance of foster children staying in contact with their biological parents once they are removed from home and placed in foster care.

However, little has been written about the impact of sibling relationships on the development of the child. Children that have not been cared for adequately by their parents and were removed as a result of this, depend emotionally on their brothers and sisters for guidance and support.

Why are Brothers and Sisters Separated?

The decision to place brothers and sisters together in a foster home, or in separate foster homes, often depends on various reasons:

- sometimes the home where the child is placed is not large enough to cater for two or three children;
- sometimes a family may decide not to care for a brother or sister of a child they already care for, because they feel that they cannot afford it (we all know that the foster grant does not pay for all the needs of a child);
- sometimes the age gap between brothers and sisters is too great, for example, a two year old boy needs to be placed in foster care and only later the welfare finds out that this boy has a brother who is twelve years old and stays with his grandparents. In order not to overburden the grandparents the two year old boy is placed with a different family;
- sometimes grandparents are the foster parents of one or two children and a social worker asks them if they are prepared to care for another brother. Although they would like to also look after the brother, the grandparents may feel that they are not able to cope with another child and the brother is placed with another family;
- sometimes a brother is very jealous of his little sister and they fight all the time, because he always wants all the attention. If that happens it might be better for the two children to be separated;
- sometimes a mother leaves one child, Johnny, with one family and the second child, Peter, with another family and the social worker only finds out months or even years later that little Johnny has an older brother. Obviously the social worker is not going to remove Johnny and place him with the other family so that the two children can grow up together, it would be too painful for Johnny and the foster family, that has to say good-bye to him;

- sometimes only some of the children are not well cared for by their parents (often the older ones) but the youngest child is fine; so only some of the children are removed and placed in foster care and the youngest child stays at home.

The Importance of Siblings to Foster Children

Children who are placed in foster care feel that they have lost a part of themselves. When children are placed in different foster homes, they do not only lose their parents but also their natural support system, their brother(s) and/or sister(s).

Siblings often turn to each other for support, for example, when they are angry with their parents or foster parents they go to a brother or sister to complain. It helps them to know that they can go and talk to a brother or sister about it. Brothers and sisters help each other and protect each other.

Brothers and sisters are important in helping children to learn how to play with others or how to defend themselves. Usually an older brother or sister will tell a younger brother what to do when another child wants to fight with him, or he/she will show him how to tie his shoelaces etc..

Sometimes a child is removed from his parents at a very young age, which means that he does not even know his brothers or sisters. It might mean a great deal to him to find out who his brother or sister is.

The Value of Sibling Contact

Brothers and sisters, even when they grow up separately from each other, form a symbolic link with their past. We all know that "blood is thicker than water". Siblings have the same mother, sometimes the same father, grandparents, uncles, aunts. Children want to know about their past. We all want to know about our past. Children love to sit with their grandparents when they tell them about the "old" days. How much do we tell the foster children about his/her parents? What do we know about his/her parents? Sometimes we do not know much, but maybe an older brother or sister knows more about their parents and could tell the younger one about them. Having a brother or sister to talk to about the past often helps a child to come to terms with the past.

By having contact with an older brother or sister, children can re-establish a belongingness with something familiar. The bond between brothers and sisters can be especially strong when children were not well looked after by their parents, for example, when a child and his/her brother went hungry many times while they were with their parents, the child might feel especially protective over his/her brother and feel very hurt when he/she has to grow up in a different family than the brother.

Children often try not to think about something that hurt them badly. They do not tell their foster parents when they miss their brother or sister, because they do not want to hurt them. Sometimes the foster family does not like the family where the brother or sister is placed, so they do not see or talk to each other. The more the child does not talk about his pain of missing his/her brother or sister, the more he might withdraw and is scared to get close to another person, because he is afraid that he might lose that person as well. This child may behave in a way that causes others not to like him. The more the child withdraws and does things others do not like, the more difficult it becomes for that child to get close to another person and he becomes very unhappy.

Some foster children find it difficult to talk, are not spontaneous, or do not have friends. They do not come and ask for a hug like your own son or daughter might do. This might be because of something the foster child has not worked through from his past, maybe he is missing the contact with his family, parents, brothers and sisters.

It is important to know who one's brothers and sisters are, what they are like and where they live. Often when the child is grown, they would like to know who their brothers and sisters are, but do not know where to find them because they never had contact with them before. We do not want the foster child to grow up feeling alone because he/she does not know his/her brothers and sisters.

Now is the time to do something about it. We urge each foster parent to get the phonenumber and the address of their foster child's brother(s) and/or sister(s) and help them to keep in contact.

With lots of love,

Sigrun and Megan
(Social Workers)