

The Impact of Foster Care on Child Development: The Role of Sibling Separation

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Abstract:

This paper explores the impact of sibling relationships on children's development within the foster care system, focusing particularly on how sibling separation affects children of different ages emotionally, cognitively, and socially. To address this, the study synthesizes existing literature and theoretical models by combining the developmental stages of children with the role of siblings in child development. Findings reveal that sibling separation at different ages leads to distinct developmental challenges: infants experience severe disruptions in attachment and emotional regulation, middle childhood separations hinder cognitive and social skills development, and adolescent separations result in long-term relational and identity challenges. Previous research underscores the importance of maintaining sibling bonds in foster care, highlighting that these relationships can provide crucial emotional support and stability, mitigating the adverse effects of family disruptions. This study emphasizes the necessity for age-appropriate actions and support services in foster care to minimize the detrimental impacts of sibling separation and promote healthy development. Additionally, it calls for further longitudinal studies to track the developmental trajectories of children separated from their siblings and consider variables such as age differences between siblings and the dynamics of step-sibling relationships. This comprehensive understanding is essential for informing policies and practices that enhance the well-being of children in foster care.

Keywords: Foster care, sibling separation, age, developmental model, childhood adversity

1. Introduction

Child abuse and neglect remain a persistent problem all over the world to millions of children. More than 250,000 children are estimated being placed under foster care every year due to abuse and neglect in the United States (Mitchell, 2018). The term "foster care" refers to a "system in which a child is placed into a ward, group home, or in a private home" (Gupta & Gupta, 2014, p. 46). The foster care system serves as a crucial safety net for children who have experienced abuse, neglect, or other adverse and traumatic experiences. However, the removal from family and siblings, along with the issues impelling them in new family dynamics, can escalate their psychological distress. This paper aims to examine the effect of foster care on the development in children, with explicit emphasis on how sibling relationships intervene. The age at which children are separated from their siblings in the foster care system critically impacts their emotional, cognitive, and social development, with younger children experiencing more severe disruptions in attachment and emotional regulation, middle childhood separations hindering cognitive and so-

cial skills development, and adolescent separations leading to long-term relational and identity challenges.

The understanding of dynamics at play in foster care and its implications on child mental health can help mental health professionals, policymakers, and people in this area to enhance support systems, decrease the level of trauma-related distress, and foster well-being in vulnerable youths. Such understanding can also inform age-appropriate actions and support services that could minimize the toll that sibling separation takes on children and maximize healthy development over the course of their foster care experience.

2. Developmental Stages of Children

Stages of child development encompass several critical periods, each marked by distinct milestones and processes essential for emotional, cognitive, and social growth. There are five significant phases of human growth and development after birth: infancy (neonate up to one year), toddlerhood (one to five years), childhood (three to eleven years, further divided into early childhood from three to eight and middle childhood from nine to eleven), adoles-

cence (12 to 18 years), and adulthood (Balasundaram & Avulakunta, 2023).

During infancy, rapid physical and emotional development occurs, with a primary focus on forming secure attachments and establishing trust with caregivers. This stage is crucial for setting the foundation of emotional regulation and social interactions. Infants depend on their caregivers to meet their basic needs, and consistent care fosters a sense of security and attachment (Balasundaram & Avulakunta, 2023).

In early childhood, children develop motor skills, basic social interactions, language, and cognitive abilities. This period involves significant brain growth and the development of executive functions, such as attention, memory, and problem-solving skills. Early childhood is a time when children begin to assert their independence and engage in social play with peers (Kids Care Club, 2023).

Middle childhood is characterized by the refinement of cognitive and social skills, with children becoming more engaged in academic and extracurricular activities. This stage sees the development of self-concept and the ability to form more complex relationships. School-age children are capable of logical thinking and understanding the perspectives of others, which aids in social integration and teamwork (Kids Care Club, 2023). Erikson's theory of psychosocial development identifies the industry versus inferiority stage, where children's sense of competence and achievement in school and social settings becomes central to their development (Erikson, 1986).

Adolescence involves the pursuit of identity and independence, marked by significant cognitive and emotional maturation. This stage includes enhanced critical thinking, decision-making abilities, and emotional regulation. Adolescents strive for autonomy while navigating the challenges of peer relationships and societal expectations (Kids Care Club, 2023). According to Erikson, the key psychosocial task of adolescence is identity versus role confusion, where individuals explore different aspects of themselves to form a cohesive identity (Erikson, 1986).

Understanding these developmental stages is vital for assessing the impact of sibling separation in the foster care system, as the disruption can affect each stage differently, leading to various long-term consequences.

3. Role of Sibling in Child Development

Sibling relationships play a significant role in the development of a child. These relationships often endure as the longest-lasting ones in a person's life, providing opportunities for intimacy and a sense of identity. Research indicates that early sibling bonds can be highly beneficial,

laying the groundwork for future relationships (McCormick, 2010).

McCormick (2010) emphasized that in cases of neglectful or abusive families, siblings rely more on each other for support and compensate for inadequate parental caregiving. The siblings even take the role of primary attachment figures. The strengthening sibling relationships can mitigate the impact of parental problems and disharmonious home environments, emphasizing their potential to become primary sources of support and connection in the face of adversity. Study also suggests that "when siblings are placed together in divorced families, they are likely to exhibit fewer externalizing behaviors" since siblings play a crucial role in providing support and reciprocity when coping with parental conflict (McCormick, 2010, p. 201).

4. Sibling Separation in Foster Care

According to the child welfare advocacy organization Adopt Us Kids (n.d.), data shows that roughly 75 percent of children in foster care have at least one sibling that is also in care. Among these children, more than 65 percent will be separated at some point. It is described that children lived in almost daily fear of being moved to different homes again (Adopt Us Kids, n.d.).

The main reason for the separation is the limited resources, both limited child welfare workers and limited foster care families. Child welfare workers often face an overwhelming workload and lack resources to fully address the needs of the foster children they serve. Preserving sibling relationships is frequently not prioritized as highly as other more immediately pressing issues by workers and agencies (McCormick, 2010). Limited number of foster families who have the resources and capacity to care for large sibling groups is also a barrier to keeping siblings together. Research shows that the larger the sibling group, the less likely they are to be placed together in the same foster home (McCormick, 2010). Despite increases in adoptions from foster homes, the overall shortage of available foster homes nationwide remains a critical challenge for child welfare professionals.

5. Impact of Sibling Separation on Children in General

In the context of foster care, the placement of siblings either together or separately has significant implications for their emotional and psychological well-being. Researchers have compared how children behave under circumstances of co-placement and separation, the result highlighted the benefits of co-placement, where siblings are kept together in the same foster care setting (Seale, 2018).

Sibling co-placement in foster care often provides crucial

emotional support, enhancing children's sense of security and belonging. Siblings who remain together are reported to experience fewer severe trauma and stress outcomes compared to those who are separated (Seale, 2018). The presence of siblings can ease adaptation to foster care environments, offering familiarity amidst the significant changes these children face. Furthermore, siblings placed together are more likely to develop strong attachments to caregivers, which can facilitate a more stable and supportive environment. Especially among girls, research found that "co-resident girls had a lower presence of any mental disorder, as well as fewer "total problems" (mean 57.1 to 62.1) and "externalizing problems" (mean 56 to 60.7)" (McCormick, 2010, p. 212).

Conversely, the separation of siblings in foster care can exacerbate the instability and emotional turmoil already present in the lives of these children. "In the case of many foster youth, siblings are not only the final remaining family members to lean on for support and comfort, but also the only link to the past" (McCormick, 2010, p. 213). This sense of continuity with their previous life is crucial for children navigating the upheaval of entering foster care. Losing this connection can lead to a sense of isolation and identity confusion, as the child may feel disconnected from their own history and roots. These children often face internal struggles. "Many youths note that when they are separated from their siblings it feels as though they have lost a part of themselves. Siblings who are separated from one another may also maintain a sense of guilt and responsibility for the separation" (McCormick, 2010, p. 202). This guilt can exacerbate feelings of powerlessness and self-blame, complicating the child's emotional recovery and adjustment to new environments.

Mitchell (2018) proposed the concept of "non-death loss", where she draws attention to one of the overlooked aspects of the child and youth experience in foster care. Non-death losses refer to loss of family, friends, community, identity, and normalcy, profoundly affecting the psychological and emotional well-being of youth (Mitchell, 2018). These losses are ambiguous, making them challenging for youth to process and grieve. Unlike bereaved children who receive support and acknowledgment for their grief, youth in foster care often feel unseen and unheard in their grief. The separation from siblings and loved ones in foster care exacerbates the already profound impact of non-death losses on the psychological and emotional well-being of youth. In addition to "experiencing trauma from abuse and/or neglect, children may experience additional trauma when they are separated from parents, siblings, and friends" (Mitchell, 2018, p1).

6. Impact of Sibling Separation at Various Ages

Combining the developmental stages of children with the role of siblings in child development, we aim to create a framework for analyzing the impacts of sibling separation at different ages.

The attachment base is formed in children along with a sense of basic trust almost exclusively by interacting with caregivers and siblings during infancy. In most cases, siblings are the primary caretaker for an infant in foster care when the biological parent is absent or unable to provide proper care. In such cases, infant siblings may be a source of emotional support, nurture, and stability, which greatly contribute to the security and attachment of an infant. When siblings are separated from the infant, the disruption can be particularly profound. The infant may experience a significant loss of comfort and security, potentially leading to difficulties in establishing new attachment bonds and trusting new caregivers. The absence of a sibling who has previously fulfilled a caregiving role can exacerbate feelings of abandonment and distress, potentially impacting the infant's emotional and psychological development in the long term.

Early childhood is the phase where children develop their motor skills, social interaction, language, and cognitive skills further. The siblings themselves are playmates that foster social learning and cooperative playing. Separation from siblings at this stage might lose the security and stability of the child itself. The created emotional distress may appear as behavioral problems, either of aggression or withdrawal. Moreover, the absence of a sibling can limit exposure to peer interactions, which plays an important role in developing social skills and appropriate reactions to group dynamics. This isolation can hinder the child's ability to form and maintain friendships and engage effectively in play, potentially leading to increased social difficulties and challenges in adapting to new social settings. With the beginning of middle childhood, the child becomes more socially and cognitively mature and takes a deep interest in school and other after-school activities. This is the stage at which teamwork skills are developed and capabilities for complex socialization. Separation from siblings can impact social integration and teamwork skills, making it challenging for children to collaborate effectively with peers and participate in group activities. Additionally, separation has emotional consequences which equally impact performance and school activities. Children may experience difficulties in maintaining focus, motivation, and interest in school-related tasks, which can affect their overall academic success and involvement in extracurricular pursuits. The loss of a sibling can also lead

to feelings of loneliness and reduced social support, further exacerbating these challenges.

Adolescence is a very critical phase for the development of independence and identity. At that point in life, children are making up his or her own self in the context of complex social environments. The sibling relationships usually have a significant influence, providing support and feelings of belonging. The separation from siblings during adolescence often leads to long-term difficulties, such as problems with the establishment and maintenance of relations based on trust. Adolescents may struggle with issues related to social identity and group belonging, as the absence of a sibling can leave a void in their support system. This can impact their critical thinking and decision-making abilities, as well as their ability to navigate social challenges and maintain a sense of stability. The emotional impact of sibling separation during this period can have lasting effects on self-esteem, social confidence, and overall mental health.

7. Conclusion and Future Directions

The reviewed literature underscores the complex relationship between the mental well-being of children, sibling relationships, and foster care. Notably, it indicates the way sibling separation under the foster care system may be adding emotional tension to children who are already dealing with trauma from abuse or neglect. Researchers underscore how important it is to keep intact sibling relations, which could serve as one form of a source for stability and continuity.

While current studies on the impact of the age at which children are separated from their siblings are primarily based on theoretical models, for future research, it is essential to conduct case studies and longitudinal studies on children of different ages who are separated from their siblings. These studies should track the developmental trajectories of these children over time, providing a comprehensive view of the long-term effects of sibling separation. Specifically, longitudinal studies should follow up on the effects of sibling separation on mental development, adjustment in foster care, and other long-term outcomes. These studies should also explore the more far-reaching impacts on children's well-being and investigate whether children can recover from the initial instability of separation when placed in consistent, supportive foster care environments. By examining these longitudinal dynamics, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how sibling separation shapes the trajectories of children in care over time.

Further research should also take in consideration of other variables, such as the age difference between siblings and

the conditions of step-sibling relationships. It is also important to compare the behaviors of single children with those of children who have siblings. These comparisons will help to identify how these different contexts influence the emotional, cognitive, and social development of children in foster care. By examining these variables, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of the factors that impact the well-being and development of children in foster care.

In terms of policy implications, it is important to ensure that professionals of child welfare are trained and are aware of the importance related to sibling relations along with strategies that need to be adopted for keeping these bonds. In addition, more should be done in funding allocations to cover the resource constraints that lead to siblings' separation to recruit and support more families. Trauma-informed practices should be promoted within the foster care system, integrating training for caregivers and professionals to better understand and respond to the traumatic effects of separation. Lastly, policy efforts should prioritize supporting family reunification whenever feasible, recognizing the importance of maintaining connections with biological family members, including siblings.

Overall, addressing this issue requires not only enhancing child welfare programs and policies but also educating professionals about the traumatic impact of non-death loss and providing adequate support and acknowledgment for grieving youth within the foster care system. The aim of foster care is to protect children from the adversities and traumatizing experiences at their original homes. If the transition into foster care further intensifies the children's trauma, the intended protection would become counterproductive. Therefore, prioritizing efforts to preserve sibling bonds when necessary, offering consistent care within foster families, and ensuring trauma-informed practices throughout the system are essential steps toward creating a nurturing environment that fosters resilience and protects children from further experiencing trauma in care.

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