
Source: Ainsworth, F., & Maluccio, A. (2002). Siblings in out-of-home care: Time to rethink? *Children Australia*, 7(2), 4–8.

Aim	Method	Findings and recommendations	NCPC comment
The paper reviewed both UK and US research concerning the placement of siblings and discussed this from an Australian perspective, highlighting the need for a change in Australian practice.	Policy analysis.	<p>The authors indicated that placement of siblings together is encouraged at both the practice and legislation level in the UK and the US, whereas it has not yet been thoroughly addressed in Australian state and territory legislation. There is a lack of data in Australian state and territory child care and protection agency reports regarding information about whether a child has a sibling in care and whether they are placed together or separately. This may have contributed to limited attention being given to the importance of sibling placement.</p> <p>Overall, international researchers advocated for keeping siblings together, with evidence to suggest separation is potentially harmful, and findings indicating that placement together has a number of benefits: it confirms the child’s membership to the family; maintains sibling ties; is important for family connectedness and wellbeing; promotes social skills; and can provide a source of emotional and social support. The international research also identifies circumstances where siblings should be placed separately; for example, where sibling incest, violence and/or emotional abuse is present.</p> <p>Difficulties may arise in considering who is a sibling, with de facto relationships and remarriage resulting in blended families, and many children having differing surnames. Another identified difficulty for welfare agencies arises with the practical problem of placing large sibling groups of three or more. The authors indicated that it is time to rethink Australian out-of-home care for sibling groups and provide a new service structure to accommodate sibling placements.</p>	The paper provides important insight into the issue of sibling placement in Australia within a national and international context.

Source: Barber, J. G., Delfabbro, P. H., & Cooper, L. (2000). Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in out-of-home care. *Children Australia, 25*(3), 5–10.

Aim	Method	Findings and recommendations	NCPC comment
<p>To establish whether Aboriginal children in the alternative care system were more or less likely to be constrained by court orders, whether they had experienced shorter or longer periods in care, whether these factors were influenced by geographical location, and to examine the prevalence and frequency of parental visits that were built into the case plan.</p>	<p>This study is the first phase of a 3-year longitudinal study profiling Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children entering new out-of-home care placements over a 1-year period (May 1998 – April 1999) in South Australia. (Although this study is part of a longitudinal project, this particular study was cross-sectional in design.) The sample included 38 Aboriginal children ($M = 10$ years, $SD = 3.61$; 53% female; 58% lived in metropolitan areas) and 198 non-Aboriginal children ($M = 10.91$, $SD = 3.39$; 48% female; 76% lived in metropolitan areas). Children referred for respite from a pre-existing placement, children under 4 years of age, children on detention orders, or those with placements of less than two weeks' duration were excluded. Data were collected from central agency records and interviews with caseworkers. Data covered health and wellbeing of children plus demographics, placement history, type of legal order, reason for placement, physical or ongoing problems, nature and frequency of offending behaviour, and degree of family contact planned.</p>	<p>Aboriginal children from metropolitan areas and non-Aboriginal children from rural areas had the longest histories of alternative care. Aboriginal children in metropolitan areas were least likely to be referred into care for reasons of emotional abuse or neglect, and were also the unhealthiest; together with rural non-Aboriginal children, they were most likely to be under a court order at the time of placement. Results are consistent with the proposition that metropolitan Aboriginal children and rural non-Aboriginal children are the most reliant on the formal alternative care system. The authors recommended a greater focus on family reunification for these groups of children.</p>	<p>The limitations of this study include the unequal group sizes and small sample of Aboriginal children, and the cross-sectional design that over-represents children who have been in care for longer periods. The effect of the amount of time in care may not be independent of the groups' probability of selection. However, this was the only Australian study identified that used statistical techniques to investigate the relationship between ethnicity (specifically Aboriginal children) and placement characteristics. Given the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care, research of this nature continues to be a priority. There is little hard data on the extent to which child welfare professionals are doing everything in their power to expedite return of children to care of their birth families (which is the highest priority of the <i>South Australia Child Protection Act 1993</i>). In the US, the length of time in care has been one of the more consistently investigated racial differences. This has not been investigated in Australia to the same extent. However, the findings from this study indicate that this is an area for further attention.</p>

Source: Delfabbro, P. H., Barber, J. G., & Cooper, L. (2002). Children entering out-of-home-care in South Australia: Baseline analyses for a 3-year longitudinal study. *Children and Youth Services Review, 24*(12), 917–932.

Aim	Method	Findings and recommendations	NCPC comment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To examine the statistical validity of Farmer’s (1993, 1996) classification system using a sample of children placed into South Australian alternative care. To determine the extent to which children could be classified into distinct clusters based on baseline characteristics. To examine whether there is an association between child characteristics and type of placement offered and other case characteristics, including length of order applied. 	<p>Total sample: $n = 235$ (121 males, 114 females) South Australian foster children in OOHC during 1998–1999. Mean age = 10.8 years.</p> <p>Children were selected if they were referred for a new placement between May 1998 and April 1999.</p> <p>Excluded from the sample were children on detention orders, children placed into supported accommodation, those referred for family preservation services, or those with placements of less than 2 weeks duration.</p> <p>Data were collected from case files and interviews with caseworkers.</p> <p>Logistic regression analysis and cluster analysis was conducted using a cross-sectional design (baseline results of a 3-year longitudinal study).</p>	<p>The findings from the study were consistent with previous studies conducted in North America and the UK. Findings were consistent with Farmer’s distinction between “protected” and “disaffected” children. The study showed that children can be separated into two broad clusters:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> adolescents placed on longer-term orders with unstable placement histories and with a higher incidence of mental health and behavioural problems; and younger children placed on shorter-term orders as a result of parental incapacity, abuse or neglect. <p>Placement type, expected duration and type of legal order were significantly predicted by a number of child characteristics, including age, gender and the reason for referral.</p>	<p>The authors identified that a limitation of this study was the cross-sectional design, which could have resulted in sample bias that may have affected the study findings. Cross-sectional designs are limited, as not all children have an equal chance of being selected. In this case, children who have been in care longer have a higher probability of being selected and thus may lead to overestimates of the amount of time children typically spend in care. Also, there is a higher probability that only the most problematic cases will be included in sample. The authors suggested that further research is needed to track individuals over a period of time (that is, a longitudinal design).</p> <p>The strengths of the study included: a large sample, triangulation of information sources, and inclusion of baseline assessments.</p> <p>Not all caseworkers were able to provide details of school performance and psychological assessments, and the authors contend that this may have affected the accuracy of the results.</p> <p>The findings suggest that policies, services and interventions designed for foster children in general may need to differ across the two clusters. The authors suggest again the need for more placement options for adolescents in care. They argue for cost–benefit analyses that estimate the cost of additional services compared with the long-term costs of current models of care, claiming that it is pure speculation that other options are more expensive than the current cost of placement moves.</p>

Source: Delfabbro, P. H., Barber, J. G., & Cooper, L. (2003). Predictors of short-term reunification in South Australian substitute care. *Child Welfare*, 82(1), 27–51.

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<p>To examine the factors that contribute to short-term reunification (during the first four months) in South Australian foster care.</p>	<p>Total sample: $n = 235$ (121 males, 114 females) South Australian foster children entering care over a 12-month period (May 1998 – April 1999). Mean age = 10.8 years.</p> <p>Excluded from the sample were children on detention orders, and children placed in supported accommodation or referred for family preservation services. Also excluded were children who were referred for respite from a continuing placement and those with placements expected to last less than 2 weeks.</p> <p>A total of 49 children were reunified with their birth families at the end of the 4-month period. The period of 4 months was chosen by the authors “as it appears to be the critical period during which reunifications occur, and that the variables thought to predict reunification in this period differ from those that lead to reunification in general or reunification when children have been in care for longer periods” (p. 32). The study used proportional hazard analyses and profile analysis of reunified children.</p>	<p>The analyses revealed that non-Aboriginal children and those placed because of parental incapacity were significantly more likely to go home, whereas neglected and Aboriginal children were significantly less likely to go home. Profile analysis conducted by the authors revealed the specific case characteristics or changes thought to have contributed to reunification in each case.</p>	<p>The study is well designed and addresses many of the limitations of the data.</p> <p>The authors comment that the results have a number of important implications for policy and practice. Firstly, providing ongoing support services to birthparents is very important. Secondly, it is also important to acknowledge that not all substance abuse or mental health problems necessarily preclude parents from resuming their role, and many responded well to treatments and the provision of social supports. Finally, the study provides insight into particular problems associated with meeting the needs of Aboriginal children. The authors assert that workers needs to continue their practice of trying to place Aboriginal children with Aboriginal caregivers and try to ensure that larger sibling groups either remain in frequent contact or in the same placement.</p>

Source: Fernandez. E. (1996). *Significant harm: Unravelling child protection decisions and substitute care careers of children*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.

Aim	Method	Findings and recommendations	NCPC comment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To examine the long-term outcomes for children in alternative care in Sydney. To develop a knowledge base about which factors explain both decision-making at entry to care and the current patterns of children's tenure in care. To identify practice and policy efforts to effect change. 	<p>Interviews were conducted with 294 children entering care over a 5-year period (1980–1985) in Sydney. 115 parents were also interviewed.</p> <p>The study identified factors associated with the decision to remove children into care and then proceeded to analyse the children's placement careers and the outcomes for them of the alternate care experience. The authors also analysed the pre- and post-placement experiences of natural parents.</p>	<p>Based on interviews with parents, Fernandez argued that "authoritarianism on the part of child welfare workers is inappropriate given the extreme adversity experienced by many families and the potential of support services to relieve stress in the family and thereby lower the level of risk of harm for children" (p. xvii).</p> <p>Fernandez advocated for a more participatory empowerment-oriented practice to support and supplement parents in their parenting task. She proposed that this form of practice would reduce the number of children admitted to care, and that more children would be returned home. For the remaining few, she argued that permanent forms of shared care should be the norm.</p> <p>Fernandez commented on the increasing trend for children to remain in care indefinitely as a result of lack of careful and systematic planning. The author argued "that the quality of children's lives is best enhanced through a human services infrastructure that incorporates comprehensive economic, health, nutritional, educational and recreational services that support families" (p. 275).</p>	<p>There was limited empirical research conducted in Australia at the time of this study. This study was longitudinal in design, comprised a large sample and multiple data sources (workers and parents) but did not include the perspectives of children and young people. The study also included in-depth qualitative analyses of 6 cases over an 18-month period. The quality of the study's design and the completion of this study at a time when there was limited empirical data available make this study a stand-out example of Australian out-of-home care research.</p>

Source: MacKinnon, L. K. (1998). *Trust and betrayal in the treatment of child abuse*. New York: Guilford Press.

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<p>The aims of the study were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> to explore dominant discourses that inform and instruct therapists and child protection workers; and to provide direction to therapists working with families in which children are perceived as being at risk of abuse. 	<p>The project was completed in two stages, and used a grounded theory approach. In addition, the project comprised participant observation data for the 4-year period 1985–1991.</p> <p><i>Stage 1:</i> An exploration of how parents in NSW experience intervention.</p> <p><i>Stage 2:</i> Findings from stage 1 were applied to inform a therapeutic model for engaging parents. The model was then tried with family therapists.</p> <p><i>Sample:</i> The sample comprised $n = 44$ families (combination of mothers, fathers and children) in which children were perceived as being at risk of abuse and who had involvement with both child protection and a therapist; $n = 20$ therapists; and $n = 8$ child protection district officers.</p> <p>Some, but not all, of the children had been removed from the care of their parents due to abuse or neglect. Families were involved with child protection largely due to child physical or sexual (intra- and extra-familial) abuse, and (in a smaller proportion) child neglect.</p>	<p>Parents found involvement with child protection both threatening and confusing. These feelings were often transferred to the therapists if clients were ordered to therapy or only reluctantly accepted a referral.</p> <p>An engagement model for working with parents was found to contribute to enhanced therapeutic relationships. However, the author cautioned, “therapists who work with parents who have abused walk a fine line. If therapists lean too far to one side and thereby invoke judgment and social control, they risk alienating parents and losing the opportunity for therapeutic change. If therapists lean too far to the other side and do not invoke social control when necessary, therapy is potentially dangerous and risks colluding with physical and emotional damage to a child” (p. 5).</p>	<p>An extensive exploration into the issues associated with working with families, the experiences of parents who have (allegedly) abused their children, and the benefits to the whole family of engaging parents.</p> <p>The qualitative approach is methodologically rigorous and includes an appropriate discussion of the methodological strengths and weaknesses of the study.</p>

Source: O’Neill, C. (2005). Christmas without the kids: Losing children through the child protection system. *Children Australia*, 30, 11–18.

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The study explores the experiences of 10 parents who had children removed from them by the child protection system.	The paper describes the experiences of 10 birth parents (4 birth parents and 2 step-parents who formed part of the 3-year longitudinal study between 1995 and 1998, and 4 parents who took part in the second phase of the study from 2003 to 2006). All of the participants took part in semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis was conducted using Atlas-ti (a qualitative analysis software tool).	One of the main issues reflected in the interviews was the sense of loss and despair for the birth parents. Also reflected on was the loss of their role as being a parent. With the exception of one birth mother, all the parents reported that they had little idea why the children had been removed from their care. O’Neill commented that what these parents needed from professionals was “for their stories to be heard without blame; to be consulted about their children’s future; and to be offered the possibility of meeting up with parents who have similar experiences” (p. 17).	The study provides insight into the issues for birth parents and how they deal with the permanent removal of their children from their custody. O’Neill also provides recommendations for professionals working with birth parents who have had children removed by child protection services.

Source: Scott, T., & Honner, J. (2003). *The most enduring of relationships: Engaging families who have children in substitute care* (Monograph No. 26). Melbourne: MacKillop Family Services.

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To highlight the importance of engaging families and to develop guidelines for good practice in this area.	The methodology for this study included a literature review and report, interviews with children/young people and families, and interviews with practitioners.	Common themes arose from the interviews that reflect best practice in engaging and developing positive working relationships with families for better outcomes for children and young people. Three of the ten best practices examples included: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• workers and carers valuing the importance of natural families;• the importance of attitudes; and• the provision of regular feedback to parents concerning their child.	A limitation of this study is that this “bulletin” only offers a brief summary of the full report, therefore it lacks specific detail regarding the nature of the research, including sample characteristics and methodology. Therefore it does not provide enough information to assess the quality of the research study.
