
A Sisters' Journey Through the American Child Welfare System

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Abstract

Many children experience anxiety, guilt, grief, and a loss of identity when they enter the foster care system. Although practice guidelines support the placement of siblings in the same foster family whenever possible, sibling groups are frequently separated. Little empirical knowledge is available to understand why siblings are separated or how different sibling placement patterns are related to a child's placement and permanency outcomes. Sibling relationships help children reach developmental milestones as well as provide emotional support, companionship, and comfort during times of change. When siblings are separated research indicates that the individual child feels as though they have lost a part of themselves. Despite these consistent findings, there are significant obstacles to keeping siblings together once they enter the child welfare system. The most common reason is that a child or children in the sibling group may require one-on-one attention that may not be possible for one foster family to handle. Another significant obstacle is finding foster families willing to take sibling groups. Other obstacles include the siblings having different jurisdictions, siblings never sharing a home before placement, or the siblings not knowing they were related. While working in child welfare, I had two siblings on my caseload whose permanency case was particularly difficult. They were two sisters, Elsa and Anna. Elsa was five when they originally came into the system and Ana was three years of age. This case study is about their journey through the child welfare system and their separation from each other.

Keywords: Sister's welfare, American child welfare system, siblings

