



BECAUSE WE ARE SISTERS AND BROTHERS

Sibling relations in alternative care



SOS CHILDREN'S
VILLAGES
INTERNATIONAL

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EDITORIAL



Mario is a young man of 23 who grew up in an SOS Children’s Village. He recalls his arrival at the SOS Children’s Village as follows: “We found ourselves in a totally new situation. If I imagine being separated from my brothers and sisters, well, I would have had to face this new situation all alone. You should not do that to children.”

Mario’s statement represents the feelings of many others and shows how important sibling relationships are, particularly when children have to grow up in alternative care. Siblings play a key role in the development of each child. Sharing the same family, history and experiences makes the relationship unique. After all, for many of us it is our sibling relationships that last the longest. This is why SOS Children’s Villages is convinced that brothers and sisters should be able to stay together, unless it is not what is best for them. Keeping siblings together is a principle of our work.

But sibling relationships can also be ambiguous and quite complex. In an SOS family, sibling groups of different families often live together, making sibling relations even more complex but also providing the opportunity for an additional resource.

These are just some of the findings presented in this publication. “**Because we are sisters and brothers**” describes the most important outcomes of research activities and documentations about sibling relations in alternative care from five different countries. The SOS Children’s Villages associations in Germany, Austria, France, Italy and Spain worked on the topic, and together they developed the content for this publication.

The articles and recommendations are the result of studies done within SOS Children’s Villages in cooperation with external experts and universities. The purpose is to draw attention to the importance of sibling relations – a topic which too often has been underestimated. “**Because we are sisters and brothers**” can contribute knowledge and expertise to the relatively new field of research concerning siblings in alternative care. “**Because we are sisters and brothers**” is a milestone which will hopefully enhance the quality and support for these relationships!

I am convinced that the recommendations in particular will contribute to a better response to children and their needs in regard to their sibling relationships. We know how important it is to invest in the relationship between child and parents. The same is true for the relation between siblings. A good sibling relationship is a valuable resource for our whole life. We have to keep this in our minds and anchor the work with siblings into the concept of alternative care, putting it on par with the work we do with parents. Because it is in the best interest of the children and young people we care for.

Helmut Kutin
Honorary President of SOS Children’s Villages International



Maria Herczog, member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, explains what the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children say about the issue of siblings. She also stresses the importance of ensuring that sibling relationships are given all due consideration when reforming national care systems.

In recent years, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has paid increasing attention to the situation of children and young people without parental care. In particular, it promoted the development of the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, which were welcomed in November 2009 by the United Nations General Assembly.

Looking first at the UNCRC, it is clearly stated that the family is the “fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being

of all its members and particularly children”. Family is broadly defined, including not only parents but also extended family members, aunts, uncles, grandparents, step-parents, foster parents and legal guardians.

Children living in alternative care settings often have siblings. Despite the importance of these sibling relationships and the decisions that are made based on this notion, there is very limited European research available on sibling relationships and even less when we consider the issue of siblings in alternative care. In

most countries, official data exists only on the number, gender and age of siblings in families and their social status, but nothing about the other characteristics of the sibling relationship and the family situation. Often, the only information that can be found on the topic relates mostly to scandalous situations, custody cases, siblings abusing each other or committing crimes, forced separation of siblings, etc.

THE FRAMEWORK FOR A CHILD AND HIS OR HER SIBLINGS IN ALTERNATIVE CARE

The Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children represent an internationally recognised framework of authoritative child-rights based guidance for policy and practice.

At the core of the guidelines are two key principles:

- the principle of necessity, and
- the principle of appropriateness.

The guidelines are clear that any decision to remove children from their family should be a measure of last resort. Assuming that the decision to place a child in alternative care is absolutely necessary, the guidelines say that the setting chosen must suit the situation and needs of the particular child, or children, in the case of siblings. It is also evident that these decision-making processes, based on the best interests of the child, should follow case-by-case assessment analyses and should guarantee appropriate and specific responses to the care needs of any child and his or her siblings.

Separation of siblings can only be regarded as acceptable when there are compelling grounds to show that keeping them together would be against their best interest. The lack of capacity, in other words, a missing proper placement option in the care system, does not represent such compelling grounds for separation. The importance of the sibling relationship is paramount when considering the psychological impact of unnecessary separation.

The separation of children from parents and their biological family support networks increases their vulnerability, leaving them insecure, causing damage to self-esteem, emotional distress, and jeopardises their sense of belonging. Protecting relationships with siblings and other extended family members can decrease the trauma and help the recovery of the child who has been deprived family care.

When care placements are being planned, siblings and the relationships among them have to be considered. The decision made on the form of care should be based on a participatory process, where everyone involved is asked and informed about the different options. Thought should also be given – alongside the individual needs of the child – as to whether the placement would be short or long-term, keeping siblings together, and what options there are for reintegration if siblings are separated. All family members have to be given the opportunity to discuss and challenge the care and placement plan. This has to be a well prepared and managed opportunity for all parties involved, with special attention paid to the needed information that is provided. Often children siblings are separated based on their age, gender, family relations, disability, or behavioural problems without assessing provisions that could tackle these barriers.

In Europe de-institutionalisation has become one of the policy targets based on the research and practice evidence showing the negative effects of institutionalisation on children's development and well-being. The policies that aim to provide child-rights based placement opportunities for children in alternative care must include care options for siblings. As part of the de-institutionalisation strategy, due consideration should also be given to those leaving care, to ensure social inclusion for them and a smooth transition towards reunification with their biological family, being adopted, or independent living. Careful planning and preparation means the consideration of sibling relationships, enabling brothers and sisters to support each other.

In the current European circumstances of the financial crisis, increasing unemployment, and widespread cuts to essential services, many families are becoming impoverished, and children are at greater risk of deprivation. Alternative care should not be an option due to financial difficulties families are facing. Nor should it be a preventive measure for a familial crisis that could result from growing tension and difficulties. On the contrary, in these situations it is essential to keep families together. All families have their own resources and strengths. We have to build all support strategies on these and provide supplementary backup, using the available services in the best way. All efforts must be made to ensure that children can stay with their families and their needs are met. This is per-

haps not only better for the children but cost effective as well. Placing children in alternative care should be seen as a last resort. If the alternative placement is needed it has to be carefully assessed, planned, monitored – and this includes avoiding the separation of siblings against their best interest and desire.

Research on sibling relationships in general but particularly in the situation of living in alternative care is crucial to better understand the relevant issues and thus to be better able to influence policies and practices that have impact on the lives of children and their families.

I welcome very strongly the initiative of SOS Children's Villages to undertake studies on siblings and call on all stakeholders, policy and decision makers, and on practitioners to discuss and utilise the outcomes. I appreciate the association's activities to further explore important aspects of sibling relationships and their role in strengthening the resilience of children living in alternative care.

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is a sociologist whose main areas of research are child welfare and child protection. She is a reader at Eszterhazy Karoly College, the president of Eurochild, as well as a member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.



SIBLINGHOOD THROUGH HISTORY AND RESEARCH

Sibling relations nowadays are the longest lasting relationships within the family. Parents are usually no longer there by the end of the life course of brothers and sisters, and spouses or companions come along later and are likely to separate, as is increasingly the norm. Brothers and sisters, on the other hand, are together in principle for a long time, even though the age difference between an older and younger sibling can be significant. Various scientific approaches deal with the subject of siblinghood. The following article is a summary of historical, sociological and psychological research¹ carried out in France and Belgium for SOS Children's Villages France.

Siblinghood is universal. Myths, fairy tales, history and religions are rich in images and examples of brothers and sisters feuding and sticking together. Siblinghood has always existed, but as the example of France shows, the social experience of relations between brothers and sisters has varied widely throughout its long history.

A LOOK AT THE HISTORY OF SIBLINGHOOD

The demographic, social and institutional context of rural societies in the past was hardly conducive to proper experiences of communal living for siblings, nor for the development of strong social relationships. Child-bearing was at a high level, and there was a social and religious need to perpetuate the line, ensuring the family's survival and passing on the name, property and social position. Child and infant mortality was high, and until the 19th century, one in two children failed to reach adulthood. Children could lose one of their brothers and sisters in childhood, or see them leaving home from the age of 7 to work as a shepherd, agricultural worker or in domestic service. So the period of cohabitation was very short-lived, reducing the opportunities to develop closer relationships;

all the more so, as the institutional context which shaped social and family relations did not facilitate these relationships. The individual was less important than the group, which was bound together by the hierarchical representation of social positions, class and gender. Within this unequal hierarchical system, the oldest child was valued highly, and accorded rights and privileges that younger ones were denied.

In France, everything began to change during the Enlightenment, with the emergence of individual freedoms and as mortality rates began to decline. Gradually childhood became longer as life expectancy extended and schooling was introduced (made compulsory until the age of 13 by the Jules Ferry laws of 1881 and 1882). Families were then able to invest more in each of their children, and brothers and sisters could share real experiences of living together.

AN AREA OF RESEARCH EMERGES

These developments, then,

“raise relevant questions for research into this biological tie created at birth, and therefore not chosen. It is a tie which can be cultivated subsequently

through affinity or broken by choice, but you cannot divorce your brother or sister, as it is not a contract.”⁴

Even so, studies specifically on siblings are still few, and research on the Western family has been more interested in ties between generations and between spouses. This applies to sociologists and anthropologists as much as to historians and demographers.

SIBLING STUDIES ARE EDGING INTO THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

It has only recently⁵ emerged that sociologists of the family are realising the need to extend their investigations to the entire kinship network as the building block of family life. Siblings could now become an important topic of research.

A survey of social science literature reveals three main approaches:

→ **Siblings seen from the perspective of social mobility and family heritage:** this approach is a classical research perspective in sociology. The sibling group is seen as a social configuration, in which each person's position relates to that of others according to an inter-generational dimension. It focuses on the notion of complementarity in siblings' social position as well as on the conflicts of interest when it comes to inheriting family goods. One explicit example is the situation before the French Revolution (1789), when brothers did not have the same rights. Only the oldest one could inherit the property or business of the father, and the only option for the youngest was often a military career or holy orders. More recently, several studies have mentioned that an individual has more chances to reach a social position if his brother(s) already has/have this position.⁶

→ **The tie between siblings examined per se** by researchers who reflect on the way individuals perceive and construct their ties. The sibling relationship is thus seen as the place where different statuses are experienced and the sibling tie – by obligation or choice – becomes the basis for social bonding. It is the place where the individual is inscribed as both similar and different, and is subjected to the dialectic of equality and hierarchy, including sexual role differentiation. Siblinghood then becomes the crucible for building and negotiating one's identity.

→ **“Patchwork siblings”:** The first, and by far most obvious, entry point to this approach is to begin by asking what defines a sibling group in contemporary society, and what society's expectations and representations of brothers and sisters are. Without obscuring the complexity of situations and the importance of “elective affinity” between children, the studies show that in patchwork sibling groups, in order to build families, children put the greatest emphasis on the same criteria which apply to “classic” sibling groups: the home, childhood, living together, etc.

In short, siblinghood is seen as the locus of tension and contradiction between the different principles governing social bonds: between similarity and difference, determinism and freedom, obligation and affinity, equality and hierarchy, all of which leads some analysts to talk of the “sibling paradox”.

Psychology has taken ownership of this paradox, concerning itself not with “ordinary” sibling relations but rather with dysfunctions within them and their consequences for each individual.

PSYCHOLOGY FOCUSES ON THE UNIQUE NATURE OF THE SIBLING TIE

“Every sibling group is unique, differing from any other by the gender, number and age of children that make it up, the particular history of each individual, their common history, and the nature of the filial and sibling alliances and loyalties that structure and drive them.”⁷

Three main theoretical trends focus on the functions of the sibling tie and how it operates:

1. **Psychodynamic or developmental theories (especially attachment theory).**
2. **Theories emerging from psycho-social approaches (feminist, conflict, social learning and social constructivist theories).**
3. **Systemic and psychoanalytical theories of the family.**

1. Psychodynamic or developmental theories

The starting point for these theories is the idea that the child does not construct his or her identity alone, but in the context of the bonds the child forges with adults and peers. Through progressively complex ac-

CULTURAL DIVERSITY^{2,3}

There has been little systematic research into the influence of culture on sibling relations. It is well-known, however, that family cohesion and sibling relations are experienced with varying degrees of intensity in different parts of the world.

The ideals of the family and social interaction are changing as a result of the decline in child mortality and religious beliefs. Post-industrial societies in the north-western hemisphere now find themselves in a period of accelerated individualisation. Here large families bring a risk of poverty. A shift in values, changing gender roles and social systems that tend to restrict the family have all meant a drop in average birth rates to less than two children. Marriage rates are also falling, and divorce is on the increase. Single parents, only children and blended families are becoming more common.

Within the European cultural region, representations of the family and siblings differ on a north-south and east-west axis. In Latin countries like France, Italy and Spain, which are strongly influenced by the Catholic Church, the family has traditionally enjoyed a high reputation/status. People there have a reputation for being sociable, for having a distinct sense of shared identity, and for considering the interests of the group. In Germany, Austria and the Scandinavian countries, social cohesion tends by contrast to be looser and less pronounced; here the focus is more on the individual. Another reason for blending phenomena is migration. People import the culture of their country of origin. Children from migrant families often have to reconcile the values of two potentially very different value systems.

tivities involving rejection, breakdown, attachment and alliances formed among peers, the child

- builds his or her own identity from games with peers involving imitation, identification and differentiation ;
- curbs violence and aggression in him/her and others: affects such as hostility, friendship, imitation and domination are less sanctioned and less dangerous for children if they are aimed at one of their peers ;
- learns the rules of “living together” and becomes capable of establishing ties with peers: siblinghood makes it easier to learn diversified and evolving roles when faced with the reactions of the other person, whether brother or sister ;
- separates from his or her parents to form a generation with his/her peers: the brother or sister can play a transitional role between the parents and life outside the family ;
- builds an identity as a girl or boy through contact with brothers and sisters.

At a very early age babies have differentiated attachments to each of their brothers and sisters. The family notices this and helps to accentuate or cancel out these tendencies. In a desire to please, the baby may make positive affective expressions towards one of his or her siblings. In this way s/he forms them into “brother” or “sister” and also forms him-/herself as “brother” or “sister” within an interactive loop. In doing so s/he makes him/herself known to them, and gets to know them better, which allows him or her to predict their reactions and establish inter-subjective communication. This process, which permits the person to envisage the psyche of the other, is a prerequisite for the construction of the self. However, it must be accompanied by a process of differentiation so that the child can acquire a sense of his or her own identity, linked to and separated from that of the other person.

So it is clear that attachment processes are complicated, and the one that forms the bond between brothers and sisters can simultaneously mean feeling attached, supported and secure, while also being a “tie” in a more negative sense.

2. The psycho-social approach

It is important, then, to be able to differentiate between the sibling relationship tie and sibling interactions. The latter are the ones considered in psycho-social approaches. The interactions can be violent or aggressive without the tie necessarily being a “bad” one. The aim is no longer an analysis of the subject, but of the reactions of the group within which each member pursues his or her interests, and has resources, allies and enemies. Conflicts of interest arise from the experience of “group life” and from the resource sharing it implies. The family, and hence siblings, is the locus of an interplay of forces driven and fuelled by culture, the strengths and weaknesses of each child, and by the way the parents distribute their “assets” and position themselves.

3. Systemic and psychoanalytical theories of the family

Here, siblinghood is analysed like a microsystem, that is, a combination of interacting elements, which is itself contained within a wider system – the family. Within this microsystem there can be alliances, cohesive sub-groups which are consolidated or may change, especially when the children grow up or events punctuate their lives. Cohesion – expressed by some as “the power of the clan” – may have protective effects, or equally, alienating ones. The child may conform to what his/her parents or certain members of the sibling group want him/her to be (a violent or a weak person, for instance), running the risk of dis-identification.

When a change takes place in a sub-system, all of the other sub-systems are affected. Knowledge about the history, way of thinking, family habits, as well as what is left unsaid is passed on through the generations. Focusing on secrets kept to safeguard the group or some of its members, systemic or psychoanalytical family therapy relies on the family perspective for its bearings and for the treatment of individual and group malfunctions.

Clearly, the elective and evolutionary sibling tie is the product of a web of relationships in the context of a unique family group.

What about family situations that are both complex and dysfunctional: could the sibling tie be, or become, a valuable resource for every child? This is a question which the following articles will examine.



FINDINGS FROM DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY AND FAMILY PSYCHOLOGY STUDIES

Sibling relations affect feelings, cognition, perception, behaviour and attitudes. But what role do sibling relations play in families exposed to greater stress? The following observations which address this issue are based on an expert study by Sabine Walper, Carolin Thönnissen, Eva-Verena Wendt and Bettina Bergau, carried out at the University of Munich on behalf of SOS Children's Villages Germany.⁸

So far, research on sibling relations in family constellations at risk has mainly been carried out in the United States of America and in Great Britain. The majority of the findings refer to families with separated or divorced parents as well as to adoptive and stepfamilies. Studies in the context of alternative care have up to now mostly dealt with foster care. Results suggest that general characteristics of sibling relations intensify under unstable conditions and prolonged pressure.

THE ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF SIBLINGS

Siblings experience and express a wide range of feelings for each other that are connected to the children's respective functions. Brothers and sisters are first and foremost mutual interaction partners. They do not just play with each other, but are also rivals for their parents' attention, which is often a scarce commodity in challenging family constellations. At the same time, sibling relations are firm: conflicts can be worked through more easily than with peers, and even aggressive behaviour actually directed at parents can be displaced on siblings in relative safety.

What is more, self-control and behaviour modification can also be learned in sibling relations. Older brothers and sisters are often role models or instigators with whom younger siblings identify. Their position within the sibling hierarchy confers a pioneer function on them, and they often perform care and teaching functions as well. These might develop into parenting functions if parents are unable to fulfil their responsibilities. Finally, siblings can have a therapeutic function for each other: there is evidence that a positive relationship between siblings promotes the capacity for empathy and social understanding. Even beneficial influence on developmental disorders has been shown.

SIBLING RELATIONS AND ATTACHMENT

Siblings have an important function from the point of view of attachment theory as well. When parents are absent as caregiving attachment figures, older siblings can turn out to be essential. Empirical studies show that children as young as three to seven years old exhibit caregiving behaviour towards their younger siblings when they are separated from their mother.⁹



Secure attachment to a sibling can, to a certain extent, cushion an insecure bond with the parents. However, during their childhood years siblings are, of course, not able to completely replace parents as attachment figures. There is also a risk that children who assume the care of younger siblings due to inadequate parental care will suffer long-term deficits in their self-development. Years ago John Bowlby (1977) referred to a relationship pattern he called "compulsive caregiving".

NUMEROUS INFLUENCES ON SIBLING RELATIONS

In all sibling relations structural features like birth order and constellation play as important a role as the children's individual characteristics, the parent-child relationship, and the relationship between the parents. Time is also relevant, in terms of development stages, for instance. In the case of alternative care even more influences come into play, such as the interaction between child and youth welfare services and the family of origin. Given this complexity, sibling relations can hardly be described in global categories of

"positive" or "negative". Whoever attempts to understand the nature of these relationships must be aware of the fact that she or he is looking upon a tight web made up of many interacting factors.

Furman and Buhrmester (1985) identified four dimensions that are indicative of the relationship quality: warmth/proximity, rivalry, conflict, and power/status. "Warmth and proximity" seem to be the most important aspects of a sibling relationship, as they go hand in hand with favourable development processes. A moderate degree of rivalry can enhance the development of individuality, while it tends to cause harm in excess. Conflicts occur frequently between siblings who are close in age. But disputes between same-gender siblings of all ages are also common – unless the age difference is considerable. Although in principle siblings meet on an equal footing within the family system, asymmetrical relations between individual children exist as well. They are expressed in distinct roles related to power and status.

HOW STRAIN AFFECTS THE DYNAMICS BETWEEN SIBLINGS

Sibling relations are shaped by intense relationship experiences of the children within the family of origin. Two theories illustrate the way strain affects the dynamics between siblings:

The "parent-sibling continuity approach" starts from the assumption that the quality of relationships in different family sub-systems is similar. In fact, a series of studies suggests that positive experiences in the parent-child relationship make for successful sibling relations, while negative experiences lead to aggressive behaviour among siblings.

The "compensating siblings hypothesis" states that siblings develop a closer relationship when exposed to persistent familial strain. This emotional closeness allows them to compensate for lack of parental attention, for instance.

The two theories are complementary rather than being mutually exclusive: given constant problems with

parents, sibling relations can take on more intense features (compensating), and at the same time damaging ones (continuity approach). In particular, clinical studies show that negative dynamics persist while the siblings assume compensatory caring roles for each other. The time factor also has an effect: siblings might initially close ranks under conditions of emotional stress, but then engage in increasingly destructive behaviour in the course of time.

OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS FOR AND IN SIBLING RELATIONS

Walper, Thönnissen, Wendt and Bergau sum up the results of their international research review by saying that sibling relations have considerable potential to be a resilience factor.* Biological siblinghood is often experienced as the basis for lifelong stable relationships. In the light of repeated severe biographical disruptions, sibling relations are an important social resource for children and young people in alternative care. However, in parallel with the supportive aspects, relationships between siblings also include the potential for strain. The closer sibling relations are and the more functions they cover, the higher the conflict potential seems to be. Emotional closeness coupled with fixed role patterns increase the probability of trouble.

However, frequency of conflicts does not appear to be a reliable criterion when it comes to understanding the nature of a sibling relationship. A lack of warmth, support and cohesion has far more serious implications. Things do not get really bad, it seems, until siblings show a continuing attitude of hostility towards each other. A basically sound and supportive relationship most likely also provides resources to overcome conflicts.

The significance of brotherly or sisterly bonds for a sibling child must always be assessed on an individual basis. Moreover, researchers consider it vital to take the different views of each individual child into account when assessing a group of siblings. It is entirely possible that the supportive aspect might predominate for a younger child, while his or her older sibling could feel unable to cope with the burden of caring.

PLACING SIBLINGS IN ALTERNATIVE CARE

If sibling children cannot be raised in their family of origin, the relevant professionals have to decide

whether they are to be accommodated together or separately elsewhere. Empirical findings tend to favour joint placement of sibling children. A survey among German child and youth welfare offices has confirmed that a considerable number of professionals also give joint placement priority.¹⁰ Yet the child and youth services system is characterised by a lack of accommodation capacities for sibling groups. In certain circumstances a separate placement is also seen as appropriate for the development of the individual children: significant grounds for separation include serious aggression and violence, sexual abuse or traumatic experience.

A textbook “ideal” solution for joint or separate placement cannot be concluded from the research. When asked, a large number of children express the desire to stay together. If this is not possible, siblings want frequent visits and information about their brothers and sisters.

CHANGING SIBLING RELATIONS

Analyses show that a lack of educational sensitivity towards the individual needs of children can cause lasting damage in a sibling relationship. Conversely, skilled parenting can minimise conflicts and rivalries. So in this sense, even those bringing up children in alternative care systems stand a good chance of exerting a positive influence on the development of sibling relations.

Three aspects of parenting behaviour have proved significant: the educational interaction with the individual child, fairness towards all members of a sibling group and mediating conflicts among siblings. Experience also gives evidence on how important it is to resolve rigid role models. The parent-sibling continuity approach enlightens the fact that dysfunctional behaviour patterns can persist and also affect persons other than biological siblings. Children and young people need support to overcome such patterns. This is where the researchers see a need for intervention on the part of child and youth services professionals.

* Resilience means the ability to overcome crises through recourse to personal and social resources and to use them as an opportunity for self development. Thus, resilience could also be interpreted as the ability to prosper under the circumstances of high pressure.



LEGAL FRAME OF ALTERNATIVE CHILD-CARE AND YOUTH WELFARE SYSTEM

In all five countries participating in the research network on siblings in alternative care (Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Spain), laws state that parents have the right and the duty to care for and educate their children so that their children can grow up with them. Each national government is obliged to ensure the protection of the child and therefore runs local child and youth authorities to provide services appropriate to the needs of children, young people and their families. In case severe problems present themselves within the family, aid might start with family strengthening measures, such as support of the child or young person, counselling or parenting support within the family. If such measures prove ineffective or are rejected by the parents, then alternative care can be provided.

Each country offers a range of different forms of alternative care: foster families, family-based care like SOS Children's Villages or residential communities. The alternative care is either arranged as a voluntary measure in cooperation with the parents or is imposed by the court overruling the wishes of the parents. If the best interests of a child seem to be immediately endangered, parental care can be restricted or withdrawn by the court. Then a legal guardian of the child is installed. The reintegration of the child into his or her family of origin always has priority. If this however appears to be impossible, then long-term alternative care is arranged.

LAW ON CHILD PROTECTION

Austria

Bundesverfassungsgesetz, Allgemeines Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch, Jugendwohlfahrtsgesetz des Bundes (1989) and Ausführungsgesetze der Länder zum Jugendwohlfahrtsgesetz

The Youth Welfare Act of 1989 is currently being revised. The fundamental aims of the new Federal Child and Youth Welfare Act are to protect children and young people from violence, reintegrate them into their families and support parents in raising their children.

France

“Loi du 5 mars 2007 réformant la protection de l'enfance”, 2007

This law reforming the child protection system has three main objectives:

1. reinforce preventives measures and improve family and professional relationships
2. improve the reporting and investigating system
3. ensure the availability of a suitable range of alternative care options to provide flexible and better adapted responses to children and family needs

Germany

Kinder- und Jugendhilfegesetz KJHG (Achstes Buch Sozialgesetzbuch, SGB VIII), 1990; Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch (BGB), Amended 2002; Bundeskinderschutzgesetz (BKisSchG), 2011

The Child and Youth Services Act (KJHG) specifies children's rights and the rights and responsibilities of parents, as well as regulating the basis for assistance. The participation of children and their parents is one of the fundamental principles of the Child and Youth Services Act. A key instrument for participation is contained in paragraph 36, which describes the work of what is known as the “support plan”. The support process and all the decisions made by the youth welfare office must be recorded in the support plan, which is checked on a regular basis to determine whether the chosen form of care is still necessary and appropriate. Paragraph 36 stipulates cooperation between the specialist staff in the relevant authorities and the parties seeking help, in place of unilateral administrative orders of the youth welfare office. The Child and Youth Services Act states expressly that the ability of parents to exercise their parental responsibility must be further developed, so that in cases where children are in alternative care, they may be returned home at the earliest opportunity.

The new Federal Child Protection Act enshrines a system for early assistance in law for the first time. Support for parents should begin during pregnancy. To this end, binding network structures are being set up between the child and youth services facilities and services, the health service, the educational system, social services, family courts, employment services and the police and public order authorities, among others. Provision is made in the German Civil Code for a family court, instigated by the youth welfare office, to order the placement of a minor in a risk situation, even against the wishes of those with parental authority.



Italy

L. 328/2000 “Legge quadro per la realizzazione del sistema integrato di interventi e servizi sociali” and L. 149/2001 Modifiche alla legge 4 maggio 1983, n. 184, recante “Disciplina dell'adozione e dell'affidamento dei minori”

The Law 149 of 2001 explicitly ended all institutional placements. When the minor has to be taken from his or her family, priority for alternative placement is family-based care (foster care as first choice, then family-based care and only as a last choice, residential care). The law establishes that as for the length of these placements, there is a two-year limit; this limit can be extended by the juvenile courts, in case this is in the interest of the child.

Spain

Ley Orgánica 1/1996, 15 de enero, de Protección Jurídica del Menor, de modificación parcial del Código Civil y de la Ley de Enjuiciamiento Civil, 1996
Reviewed in 2007 and 2010 regarding international adoption and administrative competences

The final provision of the law, referring to Article 172 of the Civil Code, states the following:

“The interest of the minor shall always be sought, and the Administration shall try to achieve his reintegration into his own family, if not contrary to such interest, and to have siblings entrusted to the custody of the same institution or person.”

The current tendency of the child protection system in Spain is to promote the “Temporary Foster Family” which favours returning the child to his or her biological family.

YOUTH WELFARE SYSTEMS WITH REGARDS TO SIBLINGS

→ Austria

Siblings are seldom mentioned explicitly by Austrian legislators and are in most cases included in the general term “family members”. The legislative authority has not addressed the issue of alternative care of siblings. There are no relevant legal requirements which deal with the question of siblings growing up together or separately.

In a similar context – the location of siblings following parental separation – the guiding principle in custody decisions is that “siblings must not be separated if at all possible.” The ability of siblings to live together is part of the “right to family life” embodied in Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Since the European Convention on Human Rights has been passed with constitutional status in Austria, sibling relationships are protected as part of family life by the Austrian constitution. This applies to children and young people in families as well as to those in alternative care. However, there is insufficient capacity for the joint care of siblings in Austria.

→ France

Following a recommendation from the Children’s Parliament, a law was passed on 30 December 1996 which stipulates that “the child must not be separated from its brothers and sisters, unless this is not possible or the child’s interests demand a different solution.” This provision was later reiterated in the Child Protection Act of March 2007 which specifies that “the placement location must be sought in the interests (of the child) ... in order to facilitate maintaining the links with siblings, in line with article 371-5 of the Civil Code.” But after more than 15 years, there is no data available on the situation on siblings in alternative care. Very few facilities can accommodate sibling groups and offer a common daily life.

→ Germany

By far the majority of all children and young people in residential care do have siblings. According to reasonable estimates, just fewer than 20% of all children in alternative care are kept together with their siblings at the same time and in the same place. The priority of keeping a child in his or her family of origin and the

principle of considering each case individually results in children being removed from their families one by one and placed in different locations. The number of spots in facilities and foster families where siblings of different ages can live together is seriously inadequate. Although in principle Article No. 36 of the Child and Youth Services Act offers the possibility to consider the issue of siblings, it is rarely practised. Given the wide range of critical problems, sibling relations are usually relegated to the margins when it comes to attention.

Siblings and families affected have no explicit legal basis they can refer to in Germany. At best, reference might be made to legal statements about siblings when parents separate and divorce. The German legal system does not deal with the placement of siblings outside the home. There is no relevant lobby to represent the interests of siblings in alternative care.

→ Italy

In Italy there is not a specific law on sibling placement. The right of being placed together is deducible only indirectly in the laws L.176/1993 (ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), L.184/1983 and L.77/2003 (ratification of the Strasbourg Convention of 25 January 1996).

→ Spain

The non-separation of siblings is considered in all Spanish communities to be a right of the child, but it is the fourth criteria when making a decision to place children out of the home. The principle of the “child’s best interest” is based on a set of preference criteria:

1. Priority is given to preventive actions and the permanence of the minor with his or her biological family
2. Priority for foster care families (own extended family or not)
3. Priority for reintegration of the child in their family of origin or extended family
4. Preferential criteria for the non-separation of siblings

According to the Senate’s new guidelines (2010), no child between the age of zero and six is to be placed in residential care. In principle, the sibling variable is not considered, only the predominant criteria of age.

DATA ON CHILDREN IN ALTERNATIVE CARE

→ Austria

Austria has 11,088 children and youths in alternative care. Around 40% of these children and young people live in foster families and around 60% in family-based facilities, children’s homes or residential communities. SOS Children’s Villages Austria cares for approximately 9% of children and young people in alternative care (31.12.2010).

→ France

At the end of 2010*, there were 291,300 social youth welfare measures recorded for children and youth between 0 and 21 years (i.e. 17 measures per 1,000 French children and youth). Half of those measures consisted in alternative care and the other half in educational actions (supporting the child or youth in their family of origin). There were 146,200 children in the care of Aide Sociale à l’Enfance (ASE – equivalent youth welfare system): 53% in foster care, 39% in residential care (approximately 2% of whom are in SOS Children’s Villages) and 8% in other accommodations (independent flat, boarding school, etc.). At the end of 2010, SOS Children’s Villages France cared for approximately 640 of these children and youths. In the year 2011, the number increased to 680 (31.12.2011).

→ Germany

Around 110,000 of all children and young people up to age 18 currently living in Germany are looked after in alternative care. A little less than half live in foster care families, and slightly more than half live in other forms of residential care (31.12.2009). SOS Children’s Villages Germany cares for approximately 950 of these children and youths in alternative care (31.12.2011).

→ Italy

Italy has a total of 30,657 children in alternative care, with 15,203 children in foster care and 15,454 children in residential care. In the last 10 years, the total number of children in alternative care has grown: from around 25,000 in 1999 to around 30,000 in 2008. The number of children in foster care in particular has grown (from around 10,000 in 1999 to around 15,000 in 2008) while the number of children in residential care is quite stable (15,000). SOS Children’s Villages

Italy cares for 232 children and young people in alternative care (31.12.2011).

→ Spain

Official sources estimate that Spain recorded 22,328 cases of protective measures for children under the age of 18 in the year 2009. Of these: 9,014 are in residential care; 4,216 in foster care; 883 in adoption and 8,215 in other protective measures. This means that 449 out of 100,000 children are covered by some measure of alternative care. SOS Children’s Villages Spain cares for 480 children and youths** under 18 in alternative care, and 870 young people over 18 years, representing a total of 1,350 children and youth people (31.12.2009).



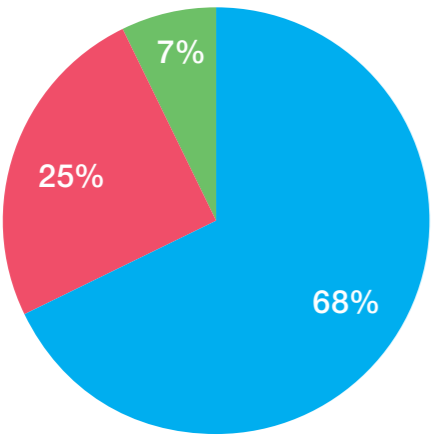
DATA ON SIBLINGS AND SIBLING GROUPS IN SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES

Until now there have been no standardised surveys in European countries and SOS Children's Villages associations about the placement of siblings. The following descriptions are based on the available data in each country. This means they can be compared only to a limited degree, but they do convey an impression of the situation in the countries that have provided the research results for this publication.

→ Austria

There are 429 children and young people living in the country's 11 SOS Children's Villages (01.01.2009). Of them, 93% are known to have at least one sibling and 7% are only children. A total of 123 sibling groups live in the SOS Children's Villages. While 69% of the children and young people live together with at least one sibling in the same SOS family, 24% have siblings living separately in different out-of-home care situations. Generally, the majority of the siblings are not cared for in the same SOS family: they grow up in the family of origin, are in alternative care in other facilities and foster families, or are already leading an independent life.

Size of sibling groups in SOS Children's Villages in Austria



Reference date: 1-1-2009

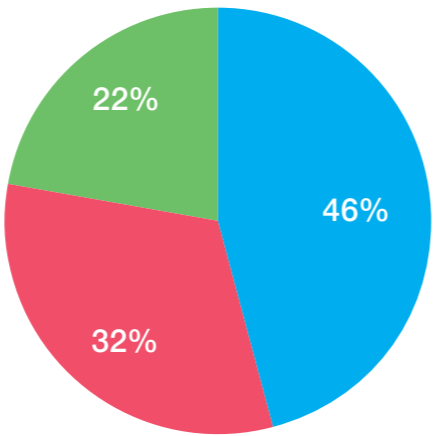
■ Group of 2 ■ Group of 3 ■ Group of 4 and more

→ France

From the beginning of SOS Children's Villages France (1956), the children villages accommodated only sibling groups and virtually all of the siblings live in the same SOS family***. It is a very important facet of its identity and a real specificity in the French child youth welfare field. As of 31 December 2010 one in three children lived in the Children's Village with at least three siblings, and only around 7% of children no longer have brothers or sisters in the SOS Children's Village (departures primarily due to coming of age or transitions).

Between January 2005 and December 2011, 208 sibling groups were admitted into SOS Children's Villages with a stable average size of three siblings per group. In 2011, 39% of children were admitted with at least three siblings. For more than half of those children, the admission into a children's village allows for sibling group reunification.

Size of sibling groups in SOS Children's Villages in France



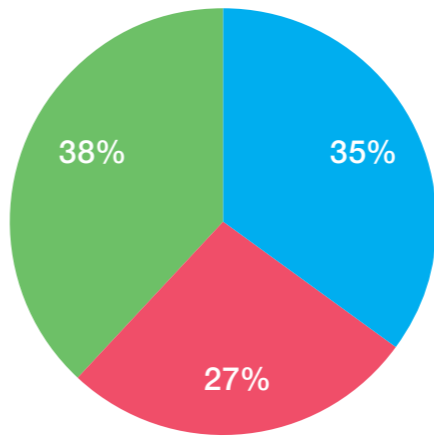
Reference date: 31-12-2010

→ Germany

Nearly 90% of all children and young people cared for in a German SOS Children's Village do have siblings. Around 80% of the admitted children and young people live together, at least for a time, with one or more siblings in the SOS Children's Village, though only approximately a third of them live with the whole sibling group. Of the children and young people admitted, 65% live with at least one sibling in the same SOS family.****

Of all children accommodated with siblings in German SOS Children's Villages, 35% live together with one sibling, 27% live with two siblings and 38% live with three or more siblings.

Size of sibling groups in SOS Children's Villages in Germany



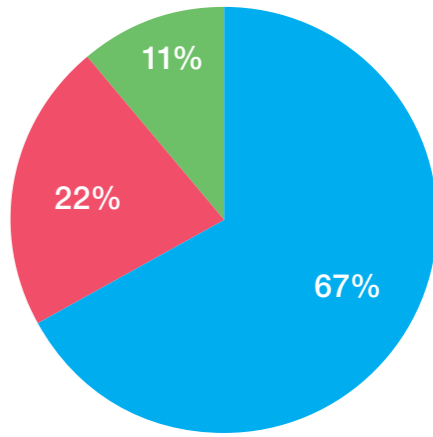
Reference date: 1-1-2008

* DREES Les bénéficiaires de l'aide sociale départementale en 2010, n°787, janvier 2012
** All children and youths in residential care of SOS Children's Villages in Spain
*** Data available in French SOS Children's Villages activity reports from 2005 to 2011
**** Internal data from the Sozialpädagogisches Institut des SOS-Kinderdorf e.V. (2008)
***** Children and youth in SOS Children's Villages only

→ Italy

In the year 2011, SOS Children's Villages Italy admitted 81 children and from them 41, more than the half, were siblings (50.6%). In total, SOS Children's Villages Italy admitted 18 groups of siblings, mainly groups consisting of 2 siblings (67%).

Size of sibling groups admitted in 2011 in SOS Children's Villages in Italy

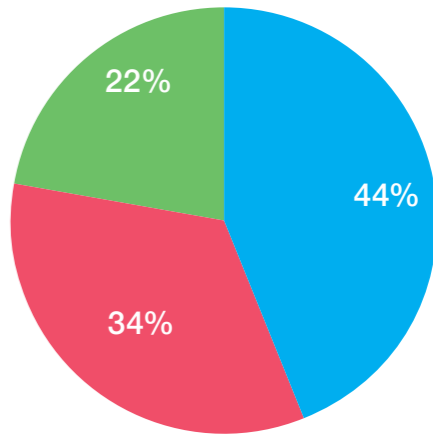


Reference date: 31-12-2011

→ Spain

As of 1 July 2011, SOS Children's Villages Spain took care of 353 children****, 105 of whom were single children and 248 children had siblings (87 groups of siblings). Sibling groups represent 70% of the total children in the care of SOS Children's Villages Spain.

Size of sibling groups in SOS Children's Villages in Spain



Reference date: 1.7.2011



UNDERSTANDING SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS IN ALTERNATIVE CARE

How can we reach a better understanding of sibling children who are placed in alternative care, and thus live in the context of both the family of origin and the welfare system? This was the key issue of a research project jointly carried out by the national SOS Children's Villages associations in Austria and Germany. The project was undertaken in conjunction with the University of Koblenz.^{10, 11}

At the start of a placement procedure, professional staff have to work out whether siblings should stay together or be separated. This leads to questions such as: How should relationships between siblings be supported? What do the children need? The aim of the research was to show how qualified staff can proceed systematically to find the answers.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE UNDERSTOOD
The project confirmed just how complex relationships between siblings and within the family can be. Simplistic tests do little to help if we want to understand the manifold interactions of individuals, which is affected

by social norms. Sibling relationships can only be understood in the context of their family history.

Family dynamics shape the relationship patterns of both individual children and the sibling group. The experiences of different siblings from the same family of origin may differ, but they always have an impact as a group on life in an SOS family. In a new living environment, sibling children may forcefully reproduce their family reference system when interacting with each other. For this reason it is important for educational workers in alternative care to find a way into a child's world and understand how the child has previously experienced relationships.

As a reconstructed life history, biography is central to the construction of personality. Why have I turned out the way I am? What do my experiences mean? These questions particularly plague children who are unable to grow up in their family of origin. It is often difficult for them to piece together their fragile life history. Help in inquiry and interpretation are valuable in terms of the children's identity formation. Educators support children in developing their "self". But without understanding how a child interprets the world, it is hard to be successful with this support in out-of-home parenting. Trained staff have to connect with the children's explanations of themselves. Which pedagogical approach fits in the individual case can best be found out by referring to the child's own wealth of experience. Knowing about the young people's experiences with youth welfare is equally revealing.

The relative importance we attach to sibling relationships is influenced by social norms. Not only is the children's interaction affected by those norms, also caregivers bring in such values to their educational work. They have to be aware of the complex nature of their own involvement. Reflecting on one's own history and siblinghood is a key part of the educational process.

UNLOCKING THE KEY TO SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

The researchers of the University of Koblenz looked for a method that would facilitate a holistic understanding. The purpose was to recognise the resources of the children and young people as much as their view of things. What the researchers did not want was



a clinically distanced approach, but instead a way of methodically tapping into the emotional side of the "diagnosticians", enabling them to experience an empathetic resonance. To achieve this goal, the scientific team decided on a system of collaborative case conferences.

By way of example, six case conferences were carried out under the direction of Christian Schrappner and Michaela Hinterwälder in the participating SOS Children's Villages of both countries. The staff in Germany then took part in a method workshop. The experiences they took from it enabled them to apply variations of the method independently in their everyday work in the SOS Children's Villages.

In Austria three building blocks – biographical work, family work and case understanding – were developed for pedagogical work with sibling groups. These building blocks were incorporated into further case consultations in the SOS Children's Villages.

MODEL CASE CONFERENCES

Each participating SOS Children's Village in Austria and Germany chose a case. The case history was prepared in detail for the work in the case conference. A genogram constructed the key life dates and family relationships, supplemented by resource and network cards. Missing information was acquired so that all the events in the family history could be entered into one chronological timeline. The care history was added separately. In the second stage, staff who had been involved in the case and other non-involved co-workers "un-folded" the case together. The responsible professionals de-

SUPPORTIVE TOOLS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

In 2009, SOS Children's Villages France launched a research project¹² to find out how to better support siblings and make them a real resource for the (re)construction of each child's identity. A team from the University of Toulouse II assisted the SOS Children's Villages' psychologists in testing eight psychological questionnaires¹³ in order to provide them with observation and evaluation tools.

These tools set various points of reference on forms of relationships between siblings: levels of cooperation and/or hostility, desire for power, control, existence of warmth and intimacy, dominance of empathy or rivalry, existence of conflicts and the ability to find solutions.

Fifteen psychologists assisted 167 children from SOS families in answering the questionnaire designed for their age group (three developmental periods: from 0 to 5 years old, from 6 to 12 years old and from 13 to 18 years old). Then the researchers collected the psychologists' results to assess how suitable the tool was to their needs.

Several tools turned out to be a valuable base for discussion with the child who answers the questionnaire alone and with his or her brother(s) and sister(s). Psychologists found that these tools can

help to address issues that were often neglected for fear of intrusion into a too intimate area. When difficulties were identified, the tools provided elements for understanding why the relationship between siblings was dysfunctional.

The main constraint of these questionnaires is that all of them concern dyads. They provide information on the relationships of a child with one sibling. To get a picture of all the relationships between several siblings, the child would have to answer to the questionnaire for every sibling he or she has. We can imagine how weary this could become for a child who has more than two siblings!

Where a systematic use of these tools is not appropriate, this questionnaire however provides useful information and can help to: supplement the limited information available in the admission process, define the interventions when signs of dysfunctions appear, monitor changes over time, and assess the effects of some accompanying measures.

These tools will be integrated into a "toolbox" along with other supports such as the genogram, the family drawing, etc. to enable the psychologists of the French SOS Children's Villages to strengthen and diversify their support.

scribed the case progress chronologically, marking all the events on a large wall, and asked their consultation questions. In view of the visible record of the case it was easy to identify repeated patterns.

The SOS mothers in particular were very positive about this unaccustomed way of talking about their children in a large forum. The professional staff who presented the case took the preparation as an opportunity to develop an unusually comprehensive overview of the family and care histories. All of them saw the chance to discuss their own case with colleagues from other teams, and sometimes with representatives of youth services, as very productive.

By getting an overview of all the cases, important in-

sights were also gained about the fundamental issues relating to the importance of sibling relationships in alternative care. Some of the insights from the case conferences have far-reaching consequences for future work.

As mentioned above, children bring their previous life history with them to the SOS Children's Village, and it has a lasting influence on them. The children's opportunity consists in looking at their biographies together with staff, which helps them to understand their past. But children need to trust the professional in order to set out on this path. Adults must make a genuine effort to understand the child's life history and to see, for example, a child's problem behaviour as a survival strategy

rather than a pathological disorder. In an ideal scenario, the staff then support the children in working through their experiences and getting the chance to gain new ones. The challenge for professionals is to find out what kind of support is appropriate.

HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND AND DEVELOP A CLEAR PICTURE?

If educators want to understand young people in their care, they have to balance out two different functions: a sympathetic, understanding approach and an analytical view using specialist evaluation. To gain an overview of complex sibling relations, first of all the field of vision must be extended. Once sufficient material has been gleaned, new insights can be gained from the plenitude of perceptions.

A professional “sibling diagnostic” follows a particular process, which starts with gathering facts and changing perspectives. Staff then must be willing to think hypothetically and to modify their theories when new discoveries are made. Last but not least, the precious time that staff make available to the children and their histories is a key resource.

CASE CONFERENCES AS DIAGNOSTIC SETTING IN PRACTICE

A few pointers for implementation are as follows: Professionals presenting the case must be able to formulate a “consultation issue”. Individuals to participate are those directly involved in care of the siblings, as well as people from the SOS Children’s Village and from Youth Services who do not work directly with the children. These different perspectives help to prevent stereotyped perceptions and interpretation.

Moderators should be sufficiently distant from the case and prepare the consultation. It takes two to three hours for the family and care histories of the sibling group to unfold and for hypotheses to be formulated. It is reasonable to assume another one or two hours for analysing specific aspects of the consultation issue.

As the facts, evaluations and emotions are to be unravelled, it is helpful to build a step-by-step approach with different methodological components and to visualise the complexity in images. Allowing for complexity also means tolerating ambivalence and diversity in those involved. It is also helpful to work with

ideas that emerge from initial irritation, for instance: Where is it that energy is always expended and incomprehensible behaviour is produced?

Case-work based on interchange and overlap of ideas helps professionals to feel more secure and less stressed in their work. Making space for existing complexity in a conscious and controlled way brings underlying issues to the surface, allowing them to be worked through.

RESEARCH FINDINGS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING SIBLINGS TOGETHER

The objective of a research project from the University of Bari’s Department of Psychology¹⁴ was to gain a better understanding of the management of groups of siblings in alternative care. At a later stage the project focused on the actual psychological state of these children and then compared it with that of other children who do not have siblings in the SOS Children’s Village.

One of the characteristics of SOS Children’s Villages that emerged is the attempt to reproduce, within each home, a serene and affectionate environment which is as similar as possible to that of a family environment. This happens not only through the permanent presence of the SOS mother, who is the main attachment figure for the children, but also through the maintenance of the pairs or groups of siblings. This is the real strength of the SOS Children’s Village and what differentiates it from other forms of care. The offered home constitutes a temporary parenthesis that includes not only a “before” and “during”, but above all an “after”. It is therefore important that future support for sibling relationships is also planned – even when the children return to their original homes.

It emerged from the analysis of the data that the presence of siblings and the option of maintaining those ties provide a strong protective factor against the occurrence of psychopathological symptoms, both of the cognitive and behavioural type, which are linked to depression. It was found that with the increase of the number of siblings in the SOS Children’s Village there is a decrease in the levels of depression, as well as internalising and externalising disorders. This finding is particularly significant, as it is confirmed both by questionnaires administered directly to the children and those administered to the educators.



In 2009 the United Nations welcomed guidelines for the alternative care of children and young people; international as well as European quality standards are now available. Both include statements on siblings. However, in practice the alternative care of siblings bears little resemblance to the guidelines in many respects. In actual fact, many sibling children are separated in the care systems throughout Europe, and too often they have no contact with each other. No country is officially tackling this issue. There are also no legally binding principles or influential children’s lobbies.

The findings of research by SOS Children's Villages expand and develop in depth the points made about sibling care in the quality standards. The articles in this publication describe the meaning of sibling relations and what is useful for understanding and dealing with them. The issue for child and youth welfare is now about translating the findings into practice.

The following recommendations are derived from the results of the research projects described in "Because we are sisters and brothers". They sum up what has to be achieved in order to support siblings in alternative care in developing their relationship.

"Siblings with existing bonds should in principle not be separated by placements in alternative care unless there is a clear risk of abuse or other justification in the best interests of the child. In any case, every effort should be made to enable siblings to maintain contact with each other, unless this is against their wishes or interests."

United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, Paragraph 17

"Siblings are cared for together

During the out-of-home care process, siblings are cared for together. Siblings are only placed separately if it serves their well-being. In this case, contact between them is ensured, unless this affects them negatively."

Quality4Children Standards for Out-of-Home Child Care in Europe, Standard 4

THE NEEDS AND DEMANDS OF SIBLINGS ARE CONSIDERED SYSTEMATICALLY

- Children and adolescents with siblings are able to understand the circumstances of their lives in alternative care. They all are informed about their rights and options especially regarding their situations as siblings.
- Public authorities and facilities involved in child protection are sensitive to the needs of siblings. Systematic attention is paid to the sibling perspective, from the moment when it comes to a decision on alternative care to the time when children or adolescents are leaving care. Careful scrutiny and priority are given to the possibility of joint placement in each individual case.
- Separated siblings also have the right to experience their siblinghood. They are in direct contact with each other and can, where appropriate, continue to foster and develop their relationship independently from their parents. Their contact is not exclusively linked to the parent-child contact.
- Siblings are important for handling life experiences and life issues. In order to experience themselves as siblings, children need time and space, also without adult caregivers.
- Sibling relationships are endorsed especially during biographical breaks and crises and during periods of transition, such as from the family of origin to alternative care, from alternative care back to the biological family or to independent living, and when changing placement arrangements.
- The opinions of all brothers and sisters are heard, respected and carefully considered.

EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT ENHANCES THE DEVELOPMENT OF SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

- Caregivers provide an "understanding approach" in order to deal with the complexity of sibling relationships and to assess the relevance of each relationship. They try to comprehend the history of the siblings and the associated biological family, and assist the children in doing the same. Sibling relations are seen within the contexts of biological family, youth welfare and alternative care.
- A participative attitude when working with siblings is fundamental. In order to tie in with the

needs and experiences of children, the participation of siblings is strengthened, especially in processes of changes, separation and reunification.

- Caregivers support siblings to cope with their experiences and to develop their relationships, taking into account the individual child and the sibling group as a whole.
- Children are supported in finding out what relationship they want to have with their siblings and to renegotiate his or her place in the sibling group.

SERVICE PROVIDERS OFFER STRUCTURES TO FOSTER SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

- Consideration is given to the needs of siblings in service planning. Support for siblings is firmly rooted in service concepts, educational guidelines and the care planning process.
- Assessing and supporting sibling relationships are anchored conceptually. Caregivers view and support siblings in a systematic manner.
- Alternative care staff is equipped with skills and competences to deal with sibling dynamics. The peer factor is taken into account, as is the systemic view; social group work is standard practice.
- The subject of sibling relations is covered in basic and advanced training for pedagogical staff. Appropriate knowledge is also passed on to other professions involved in making decisions about the placement.

CHILD AND YOUTH WELFARE PROVIDES AN APPROPRIATE FRAMEWORK

- The situation of siblings in alternative care is made visible, particularly the question of joint or separate accommodation. Sibling placement is an integral part of child and youth welfare statistics of every country.
- Framework conditions and resources are designed to facilitate the admission of siblings, the work with sibling relations and with their dynamics. Consequently this means the adequate provision of financial and human resources.
- Every country offers a range of alternative care services that cater for joint placement of siblings. There are sufficient and flexible provisions to allow siblings to be placed together.



The legal position of sibling children is strengthened by integrating the respective recommendations of the UN Guidelines into the national legislation, youth welfare and child protection context. Research and vivid expert discussion further advance the matters of siblings in alternative care.

RISKS AND RESOURCES OF SIBLING RELATIONS IN ALTERNATIVE CARE



Sibling relations are vital in the life of a child living in alternative care. And they are ambiguous: they can be a resource and a burden. Not necessarily either or, but even both at the same time.

What is the meaning of the sibling relation for children and young people in alternative care? This question was investigated by the SOS Children’s Villages associations of Germany, Austria and France through various research projects and a panel discussion.^{15, 16, 17} A summary of the results is given below.

Relationships between siblings in alternative care are not fundamentally different from other sibling relationships.

“However, the assumption can be made that the circumstances before and during the alternative care carry more pressures and developmental risks than is the case in other contexts.”
(Leitner, Loch and Sting, 2011, 15)

It is clear that, in the context of alternative care, the relationships between siblings are of enormous importance as a resource and source of resilience – both in joint and separate care. Siblings can give each other stability and support in critical circumstances and during the transition from the family of origin to new living conditions.

STABILITY AND SUPPORT IN A NEW ENVIRONMENT

The University of Siegen conducted a series of interviews with young people who grew up in foster care and other forms of alternative care. The interviews showed that relationships amongst siblings are often the only constants in biographies with frequent changes and breaks. They are therefore also a valuable resource for the time after alternative care.

For most children, the initial period in the SOS family, as in every other residential setting, is marked by grief and separation processes. At the same time, the children are faced with having to find their bearings in the new environment and becoming accustomed to new caregivers. It is no surprise that all of the children interviewed in the case study project conducted by Corinna Petri, Kristina Radix and Klaus Wolf stated that being cared for with their siblings helped them to feel less abandoned in this initial confusion. From the viewpoint of the children, young people and present-day adults who were separated from their family, joint care obviously provided the benefit of being able to carry on living with their siblings as at least part of the family and to cope more easily with the new situation.

This is confirmed by the findings of the study by Sylvia Leitner, Ulrike Loch and Stefan Sting: all the sibling groups included in this study displayed a greater closeness to biological siblings compared to social siblings*. This difference becomes particularly noticeable in critical situations such as the admission of a child into an SOS family.

“Michael was admitted to an SOS family in which his brother Patrik was already living. Michael recalls his arrival there as follows: ‘... I got a room straight away and everyone wanted to be in the room with me, but I decided I wanted Patrik ...’ Michael had the option of sharing with various SOS siblings, but as it happened he decided in favour of his brother Patrik.”
(Leitner, Loch and Sting, 2011, 166f)

* The term “social siblings” or “SOS siblings” refers to children who live in the same SOS family, but are not biological siblings.

Biological siblings provide each other with important emotional and social backing, as related by the same boy about his siblings who were not living in the SOS Children’s Village:

“Ever since my dad died my brothers and sisters have been coming, and since then I feel a lot better when my brothers and sisters come to visit me.”
(Leitner, Loch and Sting, 2011, 187)

Siblings are important “mutual supporters” and “compensate for the loss of parents in the alternative care setting.”
(Leitner, Loch and Sting, 2011, 188)

The relationships in several of the groups of siblings taking part in the study are characterised by close and intimate bonds of trust. Siblings are guarantors of continuity, partners in shared experiences within the family of origin and often the first contact person in the event of problems, emotional issues and questions on personal matters.

SHARED HISTORY

As already mentioned, the sibling relationship is an important resource for adults who have grown up in alternative care. A research project carried out by Annick Camille Dumaret on behalf of SOS Children’s Villages France highlighted this fact. The project is one of the rare research activities on the topic. The data was established by questionnaires and interviews with 123 persons who grew up in SOS Children’s Village Marseille and are between 23 and 50 years old. They have more relationships with those siblings who shared their life in the SOS Children’s Village with them. In fact, 70% were in contact weekly or at least monthly as compared to 48% when they did not share life in the SOS Children’s Village.

The company of siblings is a support which should not be underestimated for processing life’s events. Siblings have a shared history and the same, often existential experiences. They have frequently had to secure their survival in the family of origin by looking after each other because parental support was missing. During their placement in alternative care, children act out their story with other people, and with the help of experienced caregivers they succeed in re-staging their history.



Though children from the same sibling group have a common history, each child has his or her own experience of it, and not all of them have the same needs relating to individuality and the group at the same time. A range of options can ensure care for the child that is appropriate to the individual needs of the child and allows for adaptations. Going along to outside meetings, choosing activities and holidays, inviting friends over, the “little get-togethers to say something or nothing” are special moments to make each person feel recognised as an individual. Experimenting with being closer or more distant in sibling relations permits the child to make sense of the road ahead.

Many child or juvenile siblings appreciate close contacts because as peers they also have functions which adults cannot perform. For example, sisters and brothers often find it easier to talk to each other about experiences and feelings than would be possible in the unequal relationship to the adult caregivers. They sometimes prefer to learn from each other than taking instruction from adults. Seen in this way sibling relationships are connections amongst “equals”. All in all, the sibling group is an important practice ground for social development.¹⁸

WHERE DO I BELONG?

Human personality unfolds between the poles of social development and individual identity, between we and I. Siblings are therefore important for orientation in the process of developing identity. When faced with different modes of life and relationships, each child can take the opportunity to renegotiate his or her place in the sibling group. In an SOS family s/he maybe experiments with new strategies, and under the caring eye of the team s/he can discover new forms of self-esteem. That said, in a serious crisis or unforeseen event, the newly established relationships can be put to the test, and the children may be tempted to reestablish the original relationship mode. But even if the changes seem fragile for a long time, the children are equipped with another experience for coping.

The question “Where do I belong to?” is not easy to answer for those living in alternative care. In the confusing territory between the family of origin, maybe several foster families, other residential groups and an SOS family, siblings provide a desperately needed group identity.

The question of “where do I come from” is essential as well. Children may have difficulty in finding an



answer to this when communication with the parents is difficult or impossible. Due to their shared history, siblings may be the ones to provide information about the family of origin and events in the past. Sibling relationships can therefore contribute to finding the meaning of the past and processing it.

However, there is not always a shared history. If a group of siblings who knew each other little or not at all is brought together, they then have to get to know each other as brothers and sisters. Both when new siblings arrive and when individual siblings are returned, reflection on the situation is required with the siblings and SOS siblings living in the SOS Children's Village as well as with the brothers or sisters who have just arrived or are leaving. Those children and young people need to be included so that integration and separation process may have a better chance of success.

"Institutions with a culture of negotiation have valuable approaches at their disposal for picking up on the experiences and needs of the siblings as a group and jointly developing siblinghood in a participatory way."

(Leitner, Loch and Sting, 2011, 179)

CHANGING RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS

If parents fail in their responsibility to their children, then siblings often become the most important attachment persons for one another. A separation in the procedure of setting up alternative care may then exacerbate the crisis. In situations like these, children often expend a great deal of energy on trying to keep in touch with their siblings. If there is no opportunity for contact which allows the children to be involved in the life of their siblings, then worries increase. This strain though absorbs vital energy which is desperately needed for coping with other aspects of development.

An educator's frequent worry when siblings are cared for together is that learned patterns of inappropriate role behaviour will continue. Older siblings, for example, may have become so used to carrying out parental functions for their sisters and brothers that this determines their actions and shapes their personality. Their developmental options thus are restricted. The Siegen case study project has revealed that simply separating a group of siblings may not suffice to relieve these children of their sense of responsibility and the accompanying pressures. The initial situation may well be resolved, but the issue nevertheless not processed.

Being cared for together, in contrast, enables a gradual transformation of dysfunctional patterns of role behaviour. In a daily routine where adults take over the responsibility, older siblings may learn that the younger ones can be well looked after without them. This makes it easier for the older ones to focus on their own needs. Experience has shown that merely removing the responsibility from parentified children tends not to work. As care for the younger children has become a part of their personality, the older siblings have to grow out of this responsibility gradually. Caregivers require a great deal of sensitivity to be able to initiate and support this process. Where it is successful, stressful elements of the sibling relationship are reduced and positive aspects increased. From the child's perspective a change of this kind might be the first chance of a positive family life.

THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTS

Children living in alternative care find themselves basically positioned between the family of origin and the care system. The researchers of the University of



Siegen found out that the nature of contact between siblings living apart is often linked to parent-child contact. In case of a breakdown in contact between parents and the SOS Children's Village, siblings are most often affected. As children they are primarily dependent on the decisions of the adults, including whether they may have a relationship with their brothers and sisters living elsewhere.

Many siblings suffer from discriminating parenting styles. Favoritism may become striking when parents apply for the return of an individual child to the family. Parental behaviour of this kind can turn into an ordeal for siblings if they have to struggle with the question of why a brother or sister is wanted by the parents but they are not. At the same time they are affected by the fear of being separated from one another.

But not every sibling relationship is characterised by particular closeness and affection. Material hardship and aggressive controlling parental behaviour, for example, seem to promote competitive relationship patterns amongst siblings. But even relationships prone to conflict tend to be ambiguous: besides jealousy and envy, the siblings feel solidarity with and concern for one another at the same time.

Due to their setting, SOS Children's Villages provide an opportunity for dealing with such ambiguities and other major challenges in siblings relations. If siblings are accommodated in different SOS families in a village, they can have straightforward daily contact with brothers and sisters without having to share daily life at close quarters. This gives them the option of staying in touch without getting too close; they are able to control the intensity of contact themselves.

THE STEP TO INDEPENDENCE

The process of becoming independent usually has to be completed earlier for young people in alternative care than is the case for adolescents of a similar age living in their family of origin. Additionally, the general requirements of youth welfare agencies (e.g. 18 as the age of consent) prove to be inappropriate with regards to developments in society in areas such as education, work or housing. The separation process can also be more difficult when leaving the remaining siblings in the SOS family is experienced as a loss. A girl living in an SOS family reports that she experienced her older brother's departure as follows:

"I'm really worried that I'm losing my siblings as well, or any other person I'm close to."

(Leitner, Loch and Sting, 2011, 191)

The transition of a young person into independence requires targeted support from experienced professionals, who work through the separation with all the siblings, both those leaving and those remaining. Therefore, it is necessary to have

“institutional and legal measures ... which are appropriate for the consequences of social change and extension of the adolescent phase for alternative care.”

(Leitner, Loch and Sting, 2011, 191)

SOCIAL SIBLINGS: GROWING TOGETHER IN AN EXTENDED FAMILY

Placement decisions and the sibling life cycle can result in caring for two sibling groups in the same house. Sharing a similar care situation with the same adult reference person creates the basis for a new form of socialisation, opening the door to a wide range of relationships. In the nature of the bond that is to be established there are elements of building, creativity and chemistry (in the sense of complex reactions and changes). The unifying factor is being at home and feeling “rooted”.

The bond is initially established at the level of co-residence; “life in the SOS Children’s Village, under the same roof” is what determines the sense of belonging. The children feel at home, even when the SOS mother is not there. They lay claim to their territory: “it is our house, our garden ... my room, my toys”. They take part and get involved in “family” events like birthdays or Christmas.

The children incorporate the stability of places, adults and the group of children as well. Whether brothers and sisters or not, they do not change, staying the same for a long time. After they leave the SOS family, the older ones return, maintaining the ties.

However, this continuity is challenged when the oldest comes of age. Each family visit causes questions to be raised for the children regarding their placement. Time is needed to re-assure the children, re-establish the rules and re-form the group.



CARVING A PERSONAL PLACE AND BUILDING A COMMON HISTORY

Because of particular circumstances, the early cohabitation period can be difficult at the point where family histories meet, and feelings of jealousy and rivalry can be expressed in both the relationship to the SOS mother and the shared space.

When a new sibling group arrives, an “echo” effect can occur, relating to the situation and reactivation of buried emotions and resulting in the manifestation of defensive responses.

The composition created by two sibling groups sharing their daily life is never simple: cohabiting family histories that reflect each other too intensely or sibling groups that have experienced several placements can constitute a risk. Day-to-day management becomes difficult when two sibling groups present themselves in “duality”.

It is essential to prepare carefully for cohabitation, as the arrival of a new sibling group disrupts an established balance. The children will adapt far better to

COHABITATION AS LEARNING SUPPORT FOR CREATING SOCIAL LINKS

Every sibling group has its history, in its family or perhaps in an earlier placement. Another history begins during cohabitation with what it adds in terms of events, feelings, and emotions. Gradually the “mixing together” of children as they have fun and confide in each other leads to the development of a close relationship and “experiences of fraternal feelings”. The movements of arrival and departure mean that cohabitation is located within a dynamic process of building and developing relationships. Several cohabiting sibling groups bring a range of possible interactions, and when there is some form of “compatibility”, it is a powerful lever for development.

Relationships between children, intrinsically capable of providing support and recognition without recourse to adults, also paves the way to independence. Though some of these moments of shared daily life and created memories remain into adulthood, the possibility of future relationships secures, marshals and transmits the strength and “desire to live” into the present.

the idea if they have had enough time to absorb the information and have been involved in the preparation and sorting out of spaces; this allows the likely concessions to be worked through.

FINDING A NEW PLACE

The new configuration of the group provides the opportunity to redistribute the roles in the sibling group and the house. The first consequence is the shift in age-scale position and the girl-boy balance. A member of the other sibling group may become an alter ego, a “big brother” or a “little sister”, making it possible to experiment with one or more roles, new and/or unprecedented.

The organisation of space usage (“territories”) has to be renegotiated and lived out: What is each person’s own corner, and everyone’s territory? And when? In fact, people all have different rhythms, not just biological ones, but those in family relationships as well, for instance. There are shifts in boundaries and frictions on the borders. Cohabitation creates richer possibilities as well as potentially adding to problems.

Each child looks at him or herself, or knows that s/he is regarded by the others, from the perspective of two “homes”: the family of origin and a new composite “family” with brothers and sisters as well as other children and adults. The task of professionals, and crucially the SOS mother, is to be twice as attentive to each sibling group in its own right, and to each child in the process of constructing its own identity.

A SMALL RISK FOR A BIG OPPORTUNITY

The combination of a defined time and space, as well as a common adult reference person, sets in motion a socialisation process consisting of exchanges, negotiations, conflicts, and adjustments that also involves identity issues. Social ties are forged.

Work centred on individualisation has a structural impact on the sibling group itself, but the team must constantly assess the beneficial and detrimental aspects of “siblinghood” in order to re-balance situations that are constantly precarious. Working with sibling groups adds to complications while at the same time multiplying the resources available for individual development.

THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES OF CARING FOR SIBLINGS



Accommodating siblings together in alternative care creates both opportunities and risks for a child's development. Research projects carried out in Germany, Austria and France have demonstrated to what extent group dynamics and developmental processes of the individual siblings can be influenced by caregivers.^{15, 16, 18, 19} However, these studies also articulate the challenges which caregivers have to meet in everyday life.

In SOS Children's Villages, it is first and foremost the SOS mothers who influence the development of sibling relationships; additional support staff of course also has an impact on the children. There are no explicit SOS guidelines for the support of siblings, but many SOS mothers have their own more or less explicit "personal programmes" for this task, as evidenced by a case study project conducted by the University of Siegen. These individual concepts can differ substantially from one another. Care professionals, through their own past experiences, influence the children in any case, whether consciously or unconsciously. From the perspective of the children, it is desirable that they do so in a consciously encouraging manner.



ALLOWING FOR RELATIONSHIP COMPLEXITIES

A broad range of sibling constellations can be encountered in alternative care. Besides well-known biological siblings, there are often additional unknown biological siblings, half-brothers and sisters, siblings born after the family has split up, and SOS siblings who are sometimes seen as biological siblings and are introduced as such in public. All these constellations are accompanied by special educational challenges.

Irrespective of whether they live together or separately, biological brothers and sisters, like parents, are usually important attachment figures for children and young people in alternative care. Siblings also play an important role in the development of personality. In addition to working with the parents, educational work with siblings is therefore essential, according to researchers at the Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt, who interviewed the staff, children and adolescents about their sibling relationships. The educational work with siblings always aims to guide their relationship so that development is given the best encouragement possible.

PROVIDING TIME AND SPACE FOR SHARING

The research projects carried out by the Universities of Siegen and Klagenfurt showed that the stabilising function of sibling relationships is best encouraged if the children have time and space for each other as a group. Being together and sharing freely without adults and their educational intervention strengthens the identity of the sibling group. These were also the findings of a French research project²⁰.

Siblings are related as equals and they have similar biographical experiences. This makes it easier for children to admit their feelings and accept support from each other. Professionals therefore need to acknowledge the importance which siblings have for one another in relation to experiences of separation and loss. They ought to provide a framework which safeguards the continuity and intimacy of the sibling relationship.

SPECIAL ATTENTION FOR SIBLINGS LIVING APART

A feeling of fellowship between siblings is not based solely on biological ties. The study by the University of Siegen showed that siblings living apart are dependent on opportunities to meet each other and for having a positive experience of their relationship. SOS Children's Villages provides the option of accommodating brothers and sisters in different families within the same village if it is considered necessary or not possible to keep the siblings together in the same SOS family. Even though this means that child siblings may be spatially relatively close, their relationship requires conscious support from adults. For siblings living separated over long distances, professional coordination and support for the relationships are all the more important. As there are often organisational hurdles and other obstacles to be overcome, it cannot be left entirely to the children's own initiative to organise contact. Otherwise there is a risk that the relationships will disintegrate or the mutual sibling support will fail to develop. The development of sibling relationships should therefore be firmly established as part of care planning in order to prevent the above risks from arising.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FAMILY OF ORIGIN

"For siblings, life in an SOS family means a life in two families," (Leitner, Loch and Sting 2011, 161)

Through their biological siblings, children in an SOS family tend to be constantly aware of their family of origin. The dynamics in sibling relationships and their effects on the individual biographies of children and young people take place between the poles of the family of origin and the alternative care context. It is only in this field of frequently competing forces that they can be understood and offered professional guidance. Family history and family dynamics shape the experience of the individual children and the sibling group. It is therefore unavoidable that children are occupied by the relationship patterns prevailing in their family of origin. The Austrian research team adds:

"The family of origin remains important for siblings in alternative care even if no contact exists to the parents and/or biological siblings for years. In other words, despite a lack of visits, this does not diminish their importance for children and young people in alternative care [...]."
(Leitner, Loch and Sting 2011, 161)

Educators have to master this challenge.

MEETING DIFFERENT NEEDS

The University of Siegen study has established that siblings from the same family of origin can have differing views about their parents. For example, while the eldest daughter in a family may have experienced her mother as a reliable person, the youngest child may have experienced her mainly in situations where she had too much to cope with and could not establish a positive attachment. In cases like this, no standard decision about contact to the parents can be made for all siblings. What may well be good and right for one child may be stressful and unhelpful for his/her brother or sister.

When the desire for contact is different amongst siblings, this can lead to conflicts both amongst the siblings and between the family of origin and the SOS family. The educational challenge here is to develop a sense for the feelings and needs of each individual child and to respond to these in an appropriate way. Individual biographical experiences must be taken into account when trying to understand the children's

behaviour. It is important to be able to accept that the experience of the separation does not necessarily have the same quality for all the children in a family.

TRANSFORMING LEARNED ROLES

Children have often assumed particular roles and functions in their family of origin which have helped them and their siblings to survive. The associated habitual communication patterns do not change automatically with a change in the outer circumstances. If, for example, older siblings have assumed parental functions for many years, the associated behaviour patterns are firmly internalised. The caring role then forms the basis of those children's feeling of self-esteem; they have developed above-average competence in some areas and are used to taking on responsibility. At the same time, to continue like this would limit the children's possibilities for development in the long term.

Educational professionals need to keep both these factors in mind. The researchers from Siegen University have described how SOS mothers reduce the stressful elements for the care-giving child without destroying the basis of his/her self-esteem. A good starting point is to avoid removing all the caring tasks, but to agree on "task sharing" and leave the child some reasonable responsibilities to begin with. This easing of their burden and the experience that the younger siblings are doing all right allow the caring siblings to focus more on their own needs.

WHEN SIBLINGS BLOCK

To relocate the child in his/her child role and place as a sibling is one goal of the alternative care arrangement. But sometimes the placement triggers mechanisms of withdrawal in the sibling, a deployment of aggressiveness and mobilisation against adults.

After a "honeymoon" period observed at the beginning of placement, professionals must sometimes tolerate, for a time, that siblings function as a "clan". This reassures the siblings of their protective role and is necessary in order to gain the trust of children. This unstable period may be longer or shorter and in some cases never completed. Indeed, as noted by Regine Scelles¹⁸ in the research on SOS Children's Villages in France, when siblings have experienced very insecure attachments and have suffered a discontinui-

ty of psychic and physical care, their links with other persons tend to be marked by violence. It is difficult for these children to differentiate their self. They take refuge in the use of codes and in modes of speech which, ostensibly, reject the adults who are perceived as threatening. They are sometimes knitted together in an “anti-model” whose common denominator is violence. If a child dissociates him/herself from the siblings by adapting him/herself to the village, by becoming attached with the SOS mother, then he/she takes the risk of being rejected by the siblings and losing his/her place in the sibling group.

The educational challenge is twofold. On the one hand, it is important to ensure that each sibling is perceived as an individual person with his or her own identity, not too different or too similar, with whom it is possible to establish a link. This differentiation process is necessary to ensure that violence gives way to other forms of interaction: cooperating, competing etc. Meanwhile, it is necessary to accept and recognise the signs of belonging to the siblings and the family of origin, so that the child finally authorises him/herself to engage with the SOS mother and the placement.

PARTICIPATION

A participatory approach to the educational work with siblings is essential in order to better link into the children and young people’s needs and experiences. Separation or integration can be worked through better if siblings are involved in decision-making processes, such as the return of a sibling to parents, the departure of young people to live independently or the reception of additional siblings into the SOS family.

A participatory approach is also required in the work with siblings in order to take adequate account of family memories and the knowledge of the children and young people. It is the task of educational professionals to work through shorter and longer stories about family experiences, both with each child individually and with the sibling groups. In so doing, the children and the professionals can actively establish connections between the children’s previous life and family history and the current life in the SOS family and its family history. This has a liberating effect and creates a sense of identity. Professionals are thus better able to understand the dynamics in the family and between the biological siblings. Listening to alterna-

tive (family) stories, children are able to obtain new perspectives on their lives and for their future.

DIFFERENT SIBLING SYSTEMS IN ONE SOS FAMILY

Accommodating children from differing background systems places special demands on the educational professionals. Educators have the task of developing a stable community with the children in which all have the feeling of being accepted. At the same time all are confronted by the dynamics which the children bring from their families of origin.

The composition of an SOS family plays a significant role here. The children’s age, their stage of development and self-awareness can have a positive or negative effect on behaviour patterns and how they interact with others. The research team from the University of Siegen found examples of children who, within the shelter of the SOS family, are able to experience previous roles differently when they are not subject to excessive demands. Other children make use of the opportunity of trying out new roles within the constellation of the SOS family.

Bringing different groups of siblings together also involves risks, for example from transference phenomena between the sibling groups. If the effects of such constellations are not taken sufficiently into account this can cause shock to the children’s equilibrium. Memories and re-enactment of traumatising events may lead to severe insecurities. Children born in a rivaling and neglecting family may feel, for example: “The new SOS sister is taking my SOS mom away from me just like my younger sister robbed my mum-my years ago!” Potentially disrupting effects can be reduced by appropriate explanation and attention to the prior biographical experiences of the children.

Educational professionals need support in their demanding relationship development work. You can read more on this in the article “What professionals need”.





WHAT PROFESSIONALS NEED

Enabling siblings to grow up together is one of the key trademarks of SOS Children's Villages. The following article looks into the basic requirements for carers to support individual children in forming healthy sibling relationships.

An SOS family operates under the joint guidance of educational professionals and auxiliary staff. The SOS mother is a key person with regard to pedagogical matters. Choosing to work as an SOS mother means opting for a lifestyle where the professional life and the personal life are intertwined. To a certain extent, this holds true for other co-workers as well.

Given this setting, relationships play a pivotal role. As Klaus Wolf, Corinna Petri and Kristina Radix from the University of Siegen¹⁵ reveal in their case study on siblings, the reliable, safe and respectful environment that children experience in an SOS family leads to good results in their ability to accept the assistance that is offered. However, for professional carers dealing with everyday life represents an ongoing challenge. In their various roles, carers are looking for the best way to cooperate with children whose difficult biographical background may have led to problems. Everyone is supposed to do family life together, and moreover, the children's families of origin have to be involved.

The SOS family model features a professional framework with the SOS mother and her co-workers in-

egrated in supportive structures, such as constant team dialogue, professional counselling and external consultation options. The professional guidance of siblings in this framework requires profound awareness skills.

Biological siblings living together may be beneficial for children as well as for day-to-day educational routines. While ideally sisters and brothers support each other, there is frequently an adverse effect with several sibling groups acting out intense relationship dynamics which multiply when confronted in the SOS family. Here educators face the challenge of creating a balanced co-existence between biological and social siblings with all children involved in acute group dynamics. Working with emotions – such as jealousy, rivalry and hostility – is of utmost importance to establish a regular everyday life in the SOS family and to let siblings experience their relationship as a valuable resource.

According to the findings of a research project carried out by the University of Koblenz²⁰, working with sibling relationships from a pedagogical view requires an in-depth understanding, respect and constant awareness as much as adequate resources and flexible accommodation structures.

STRUCTURAL OPTIONS AND COMPOSITION OF SOS FAMILIES

The very process of matching the members of an SOS family is crucial to avoiding potentially difficult set-ups. Taking into account biographical issues and assessing relationship dynamics increases the probability of SOS family members being on good terms. This approach is particularly important for the process of filling vacancies¹⁷. It is vital that all family members have their say in the decision-making process prior to admitting new children into an existing SOS family. Furthermore there is a need for differentiated accommodation settings nearby such as residential groups or assisted living for elder siblings.

PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE

With regard to the professional requirements of pedagogical staff, sibling relationships should be part of the curricula, both in terms of qualification and further professional development. While cooperation with the families of origin has been integrated into the curricula for some time already, inter-sibling relationships still receive relatively little attention. Austrian educational scientist and psychoanalyst Margret Aull recommends anchoring the work with siblings into the concept of alternative care of siblings, putting it on par with working with families of origin.



In order to develop the full potential of sibling relationships, professional carers require sensitivity and knowledge about the various family histories forming part of the joint history of the SOS family. A research group at Klagenfurt University¹⁶ considers skills in socio-pedagogical diagnostics useful for facilitating case comprehension within the context of youth welfare services, care providers and families of origin. Researchers claim that this opens up new options for educational intervention.

It is advantageous to closely cooperate with the children in the process of (re-)shaping their sisterly or brotherly collective. Sibling participation is vital to elaborating the resources and potentials of the relationship.

AWARENESS AND ATTITUDE

A participatory approach is generally considered beneficial in the professional work with siblings. Just like in any other pedagogical intervention, close cooperation between professional educators and care recipients is essential in order to achieve a positive response. The researchers taking part in the Austrian study on sibling relationships in SOS families came to the conclusion that childcare settings with a negotiation-based approach show better results in assessing children's needs and backgrounds through a process of mutual consensus.

The image that individuals connect with siblings and the importance that is attributed to brothers and sisters is "embedded in the wider social structures of family and siblinghood" (Leitner/Loch/Sting 2011, 172).

MORE RESULTS FROM AN ITALIAN RESEARCH PROJECT

The results of a research project of the University of Bari's Department of Psychology¹⁴ brought to light important aspects to be considered in the care of siblings: SOS parents and co-workers (henceforth referred to as "caregivers") expressed the need for a framework of knowledge to refer to in caring for siblings in alternative care. They consider it important to have a qualified and trained person in each SOS Children's Village working with siblings, with particular skills in managing crisis situations. It would be also vital to have ongoing training for all caregivers on the topic.

In the admission process, caregivers initially assess the relationships through observation of the siblings and the way in which the children deal with the other children and with the caregivers in the family house. In order to better understand the situation and choose the best placement, the personal history of each child and of the whole biological family has to be known.

There are siblings who have initial difficulties in adapting to the new situation when they arrive in the SOS Children's Village because the daily contact with the brother or sister continually reminds the child of the previous life and the family of origin. Professionals have to consider this in their caring process.

Caregivers should work to not repeat negative situations that children have experienced in the relation with their parents (for example, showing favoritism); it is thus necessary for the caregiver to be aware of and articulate his or her feelings and emotions, resources and difficulties. It is also essential to work in teams and to have stable professional counselling and external consultation options.

To make the sibling relation a valuable resource for each child, it is necessary to work on the relationship, for example, by helping each sibling to find the right position and role.

Caregivers should ensure the participation of children in the development of his or her individual caring plan – not only as a single child but also as a sibling with specific needs and resources. For developing the resources and potentials of relationships not only during their stay in the SOS Children's Village but also in the leaving care process, siblings have to be involved and consulted. It is important to have their agreement or at least their understanding. Otherwise it is difficult for the new placement to be successful.

These concepts are being transported by personal biographies. Researchers at the Siegen University revealed that it is quite common for professional educators to approach the topic in an intuitive manner based on their personal sibling histories. Their actions are determined by their inner attitude. Thus self-reflection on the carers' own sibling images and siblinghood experience plays a significant role in the effective pedagogical guidance of siblings.

RESOURCES

To acknowledge the importance of sibling relationships commits professionals to exert influence on how children experience these relationships and on how they develop within these conditions.

Time is the most significant factor for putting into perspective the complex biographies and often very ambivalent relationships of siblings living in alternative care.

The potential of interdisciplinary teams is promising when an in-depth understanding of individuals and groups is needed. According to the findings of the University of Koblenz, a multi-perspective approach creates a significantly better understanding of child behaviour and the impact of counselling measures. Thus, the different vantage points of children, parents, youth welfare bodies, childcare facilities and other institutions involved are brought together. Interdisciplinary teams are particularly important when siblings are accommodated in different families within an SOS Children's Village or in various residential settings at several places. Contact to siblings living elsewhere also requires special coordination and guidance.

Assisting sibling relationships in such a way can result in a lifelong support network. These connections ought to be backed up through contact with the SOS family even after the young persons have left alternative care.

Continuous reflection on professional decision making and pedagogical actions with a focus on siblings should be considered a cross-functional task. Professional carers should receive support through dialogue, consultation and specific training. Adequate time and sufficient human resources must be made available in

order to carry out all the tasks involved. Thus, an organisation whose culture not only considers sibling relationships as a self-evident resource and resilience factor but also provides the appropriate funding is supportive of the overall work of its professional carers.

TEAMWORK IS CRUCIAL

Exchanging views on a daily basis is important, but in a crisis situation it becomes absolutely imperative for the staff and the institution.

In her work for SOS Children's Villages France, Régine Scelles¹⁹ has analysed crisis situations within sibling groups which force a change in care arrangements and a brief or longer term separation of brothers and sisters (changing house, adjusting to a different type of care, etc.). She describes the pain of the SOS mothers who are most directly involved with these children and experience these decisions regarding separation as a personal failure. In some cases the team and institution were able to prevent the SOS mothers from becoming demoralized.

But the research also highlights situations in which the crisis seems to spread from the siblings to the team. The staff become exhausted by the constant tension and violence they feel powerless to contain. Gradually they lose sight of the cause of the crisis, making them question themselves or doubt their colleagues. Instead of bonding the team, the crisis divides it and adds to the tensions and conflict.

In the context of the research and with perspective, the staff say that problems can result in positive solutions and a better way of acting and being. For this to happen the whole team needs the time and collective space to talk to each other, so that they can agree on the interpretation of events, and thus be able to translate their sense of failure into professional experience. Régine Scelles recommends that, whenever possible, the decisions should be discussed and taken together. In this way a decision regarding separation, based on consensus about the limits of the educational support, might not be seen as a breach of the institutional contract.



VOICES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

“Together because we are brothers and sisters” is the title of a project of SOS Children's Villages Spain which presents the opinions of children and young people regarding the non-separation of siblings in alternative care. The SOS Children's Villages associations in Austria, Germany and France have conducted interviews with children and young people as well, and all the results speak a clear language: they show the powerful resource of sibling relationships.

Within SOS Children’s Villages we promote child participation through different tools and spaces. One example of such a space is the Summer Meetings organised by SOS Children’s Villages Spain: Since the year 2005, the division of children, youth and families has been organising this summer activity for children and young people from SOS programmes in Spain. In each meeting they work on different issues – from the physical aspect of the village to topics such as “friends” or “the relationship with educators”. All findings are given to the SOS Children’s Villages directors and educational communities so that they may be taken into account.

Throughout 2011, the division of children, youth and families held meetings with groups of young people who had lived in SOS Children’s Villages. They gathered input on the previous summer’s meeting. The issue they were working on is: “Together because we are brothers and sisters.” The goal was to learn the opinions of children and young people on the non-separation of siblings and to draw conclusions about what children and young people think. These conclusions may then be considered by the organisation and reported to the administration for improving legislation.

In the following paragraphs you can find a summary of the results of this project, complemented by quotations taken from three other projects which were done in Austria, Germany and France.

STAYING TOGETHER

Most of the children and young people interviewed in Spain propose that siblings be kept together so that they can all live in the same place.

“When siblings have to leave their family home, they must never be separated. There is already enough suffering in going away from their parents. Besides, there are centres for this, for siblings to be together in a home, such as villages.”



“The fact of having grown up with brothers and sisters ... That’s a good thing... I saw the difference when I was at the crisis centre ... you are always worried about the brother or sister you don’t see ... you don’t know if they are doing well or not ...”²¹

EXPLAIN THE REASONS FOR PLACEMENT IN ALTERNATIVE CARE

The interviewees believe that adults have to explain to children the real reasons for the family separation in language appropriate to their age. They say that the truth can be hard but is necessary.

- “We would like to have been told the truth from the beginning.”
- “The family separation should not be done overnight but should be given advance notice.”
- “Police should not intervene at the moment of separation from the family. Police taking you makes you feel guilty.”
- “I did not understand why I was being separated from my family, but when they explained the reasons to me, I realized it was the best.”

LIVING TOGETHER

In daily life, biological siblings are of particular importance for the children.

“My sisters are people who ... I trust ... who I love. And I have fun ... a lot of fun with them. It’s more ... [than a best friend.] Yes, it’s more ... having brothers and sisters. They are the people ... who will always be with you ... and who help you a lot ... who you love and they love you. Whereas with friends you don’t spend whole days together.”¹⁸



“The bond that connects us now is actually so strong that nobody can break it. But that’s only because we spent so much time together. That connection, I wouldn’t want it to somehow break, I would really miss it.”¹⁵

APPRECIATING EACH OTHER

Almost all of the interviewees say they have appreciated what their siblings have done for them and they have felt appreciated too.

“Yes, we have valued each other. Their advice has helped me and given me strength to move forward.”

“My brothers and sisters are still important to me, even now. I know for sure that if I hadn’t had them back then, I wouldn’t be here now. Even though sometimes we don’t have any contact for quite a while, it’s still the same. They’re just as important to me, you know? Obviously, some more than others.”¹⁵



“When I fight with my brothers and sisters, what happens is that after half an hour I get on with them again just like nothing happened.”¹⁶

PROTECTING EACH OTHER

When siblings are separated from their parents, they feel they have to be united more than ever and protect each other, help each other. But they also say that it is the oldest ones being burdened with most responsibility..

- “Yes, it’s OK that siblings take care of each other because they support and motivate each other.”
- “On one hand, brothers and sisters must take care of each other. But on the other hand no, because the older sibling is given the responsibility for the younger. It happened to me many times.”

“Being together, giving advice ... being attentive. To always be there to listen, and even if you don’t agree, to say that you do ... (laughs). A lot of just being together... and [...] when you have brothers and sisters, you ... feel safe in a way. [...] It’s not like with friends because with them, you don’t know if they will always be there. Whereas with our brothers and sisters, [...] we always know ... that they will be there.”¹⁸



SUPPORT TO STRENGTHEN THEIR ROLE AS A SIBLING

In order to adapt into a new family constellation with biological and social siblings and to find their own role, children, also from their perspective, need educational support.

“You have to help us to become brothers and sisters.”



“That was the time when it got pretty rough between my brother and the rest of us siblings. I remember, I was six, and he hit me on the head with these wooden blocks. I got a gash in my head. [...] Well, I just couldn’t comprehend it.”¹⁵

“... somehow it was a little funny too. All of a sudden there were two more of me there.”¹⁶

THE FIRST DAY IN THE SOS CHILDREN’S VILLAGE

The overall impression was good. The interviewees remembered the welcome party, gifts, home, kindness, etc. Some of them did not like it because they wanted to be with their families.

“My best memory of the first day in the village is when I saw my sister. I thought when we were separated that I would never see her again, and suddenly I saw her at home. It was very exciting.”



“[...] And I think it’s really good that my brothers and sisters came with me, which doesn’t happen in every family. ... It somehow makes you feel better when your siblings are there.”¹⁶

“It was all beautiful, all new! It was paradise, there’s nothing more to say. In fact, it was: We will finally have our own room and finally have a family.”²²

NON-BIOLOGICAL TIES

With children who have shared the SOS home the interviewees say they are like sisters and brothers.

“I feel linked with children I share home with, as if they were my brothers and sisters.”

“We felt union, because it is not only blood that makes brothers it is also brothers when you have a very good relation with other children.”

“I get on really well with them now ... like they were my real brothers and sisters. After all, I’ve been living with them for eleven years now. I sleep in the same room as my SOS sister.”¹⁶

LEAVING THE SOS FAMILY IN ORDER TO BECOME INDEPENDENT

50% of the interviewed children and young people in Spain think it is good for them to go and live without their brothers and sisters. The other half want to stay with their siblings. They can acquire responsibilities for an independant living as adults, but they think it is helpful to be with people of the same age. In any case it is important to involve them in the decision.

“Yes, it is okay to be in the residence or apartments, because that gets you prepared for the future.”

“I do not think it is right that my brothers and sisters leave the village because we all want to be together.”

“We think it is appropriate that they go to the residence or apartments as long as we can see each other.”

“I think that something was simply missing. That he is really important to me, well I knew that before [...] but when the time finally came, it was terrible of course [...] I didn’t feel so great then [...].”¹⁶

LEAVING THE YOUNGER ONES BEHIND

When children become independent and leave the SOS Children’s Village, they say they feel safe knowing that their brothers and sisters are in the SOS Children’s Village where they will be well cared for.

“When I left I felt reassured that my brothers and sisters were in the village because they were in no danger.”

“I felt calm when I left the village and my brothers and sisters stayed there, but I was worried because they were alone. My concern was not that they were not well cared for (food, clothing, support, etc.) but was about my siblings’ behaviour, rebelliousness, etc.”

STAYING IN TOUCH

Most of the interviewed children and young people propose that siblings should be kept together to live in the same SOS family and should be able to visit their siblings living elsewhere (residence, youth programme, adoption).

“The important thing for keeping siblings together is to not break the links. That is to say, if a brother is leaving the village because he is old, let him visit the other siblings who are still staying there.”

“Then our mother said she made an application for the children to be returned. But we said ‘No, no, we’re not going to leave our little brothers and sisters behind.’ It felt terrible: ‘Where do I really belong now, you know?’ And now they are almost fighting about who I belong to. But I feel happy here and I actually don’t want to leave. But at the same time, I also want to be with my mum ...”¹⁵



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SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES

The first SOS Children's Village was founded in Austria in 1949. It set a new standard for the long-term alternative care of children, and the concept spread all over the world. Today, SOS Children's Villages is an international, non-governmental and non-denominational child-focused organisation. It is committed to a child's right to quality care and stands by the principles that every child grows best in a loving family environment, with consistent and caring parents or caregivers, living together with their siblings, in a home of their own, as part of a strong and supportive community.

SOS Children's Villages' interventions respond to the situation of children within our target group. These interventions focus on enabling children to develop to their full potential within a caring environment, whether in their family of origin or an SOS family or a residential community. SOS families care for children who cannot live in their families of origin, and who need a long-term placement. SOS families are headed by an SOS mother/parent who closely collaborates with other co-workers; they are organised and supported by the SOS Children's Village.

Our commitment is pursued with the active participation of the children and families we work with, and in the best interests of the child. As a responsible partner dedicated to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, we cooperate with government, NGO/ civil society partners and communities. We provide direct services such as care, education and health. Moreover, we build caregiving capacity and we advocate for changes in law, policy and practice to guarantee a child's right to quality care.

SOS Children's Villages is active in 133 countries and territories and runs more than 2,000 programmes. The variety of this international work is brought together by the umbrella organisation SOS Children's Villages International, which unites all of the autonomous national associations.

