“Siblings wish to be adopted”: An Exploratory Study of Descriptions of Sibling Relationship in State Photolistsings

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Abstract

Among the adoptable children in US foster care, some are listed as part of a sibling group and many more are listed as individuals, with recommendations for continued contact with biological siblings. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act mandates agencies to prepare and distribute sibling research and materials for adoptive parents, regardless of whether or not the child has a sibling. However, there are many barriers to accomplishing this goal including difficulties obtaining adoptive parents who are willing to adopt multiple children at the same time (Wad, 2014). No known research explores how sibling relationships and possible sibling relationships are presented in recruitment materials. The current qualitative study aims to address this gap by exploring the ways in which siblings and sibling relationships are discussed in state photolistsings of adoptable children in foster care. Analyses focus on the profiles of adoptable children listed across New York, Illinois, Florida, and Arizona, representing each of the four major regions of the United States (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Findings indicate that there is wide variation in how sibling relationships are portrayed and how adoptive families are encouraged to maintain sibling relationships (e.g. “Parents must be willing to maintain contact with child’s [sic]”), to post siblings together to illustrate something about the child’s personality or to demonstrate how the child interacts in a family. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

Introduction

There are 100,000 adoptable children in foster care in the US at any given time (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015), and of these, an estimated 23% are listed for adoption as a sibling group (McRae & Ayers-Lopez, 2014). Still, it is evident that even more sibling relationships exist among children who are not listed together, because as much as 65% of children in foster care have at least one other sibling in care (Hager, 2005). While keeping siblings together in adoptive placements is a goal, barrier to this goal persists, including adoptive parent’s reluctance to adopt multiple children at the same time (Wad, 2014). No known research has focused on how adoptive families are recruited for sibling groups or how different types of sibling relationships are coded for potential adopters. AdoptUsKids, an organization funded through the Children’s Bureau to support adoptees from foster care, created a guide for improving photolistsings of adoptable children (AdoptUsKids, n.d.). One emphasis of the guide was to encourage that the goal of photolistsings should be to “interest families and help them feel a connection to the child, so they move forward in learning more about adoption.” Further, this work encouraged social workers to write photolistsings that illustrate how a child’s siblings can be an important part of the child’s life. Adoptions are created, at least in part, based on photolistsings that illustrate how a sibling relationship can be an important part of the child’s life. Sibling-specific recommendations included representing how siblings relate to each other if they are listed in a sibling group and to some important family connections that should be maintained after adoption.

Research Questions

Little research has done to focus on the content of adoptive photolistsings. No known research has focused on the presentation of sibling relationships in photolistsings. The current study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are siblings and sibling relationships described in adoptive photolistsings? How is sibling contact described in photolistsings?

2. In what ways do descriptions of sibling relationships enhance or detract from the goals of photolistsings? How can descriptions of sibling relationships be employed in order to meet these goals?

Method

Participants

Data were collected from photolistsings (i.e. Massachusetts, New York, Illinois, Florida, and Arizona), including listings for 1214 children were analyzed. Among these 1060 listings, 959 individual children (90% of total) and 61 sibling groups (6% of total) descriptions of listings by state). These listings were collected from the internet during the month of February 2016. These five states were chosen because they (New York, Illinois, Florida, and Arizona) are part of the same region and each had at least 200 adoptable children from each of the four major regions of the United States (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Additionally, Massachusetts was included as a the five state to create a photolistsing services (Freundlich, Gerstein & Blau, n.d.). All available photolistsings in each state were included in the project.

Anecdotal data were collected using NVivo (QSR International, 2013). Data were coded by two independent coders and disagreements were resolved through discussion. Descriptions that illustrate the sibling relationship were coded to address the following research questions:

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sibling Group</th>
<th>Total Sample (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Listings</td>
<td>1268 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single listings</td>
<td>1012 (79.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling groups</td>
<td>256 (20.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Child Reasons to Maintain Contact

For some listings (n=185), sibling contact recommendations were presented as based on the child’s desire or needs of the child. In these instances, the photolistsings state that the relationship is important to them. For example, “[Child] and his brother is very important to him and will need to be maintained.” For others, there was no specific reason that sibling contact was recommended. In these instances, maintaining the relationship would be beneficial. For instance, “[Child] and her sister have been through quite a bit together since birth. It is important that this relationship be maintained.” Others stated that “[Child] needs to keep her contact with her siblings and extended family.”

These descriptions were present in single listings and sibling group listings, but were most frequently included in sibling group listings. When describing sibling relationships, these descriptions gave no indication of the type of sibling relationship shared by the group. This may make it difficult for a prospective adoptive family to imagine how the children would be as members of a family.

Prospective Sibling Recommendations

Interestingly, many photolistsings (n=283) make suggestions about how the childishes interaction with family members and maintain relationships in the future. Many photolistsings recommended that “[Child] needs to keep his contact with his siblings and extended family.” These recommendations were often intended to inform the adoptive family about the child’s interpersonal style or behavior, allowing the posting to represent more about the child. Still, other listings suggested that this factor was less salient. For example, “[Child] does not enjoy his contact with his siblings and extended family.”

Conclusion

While many photolistsings of single children do mention siblings in their life, a majority of the listings use these relationships to enhance the description of the listed child in a way that helps a potential adoptive to view them as a member of a family. Further, sibling group listings often missed the opportunity to elaborate on sibling relationship characteristics in ways that could motivate adopters to keep siblings together. From the perspective of photolistsings that did use these tactics, it is clear that siblings were not always an important part of the child’s life. One reason for this may be that the photolistsings were created in ways that emphasize the importance of keeping siblings together in adoption.

References


McRae, R., & Ayers-Lopez, S. (2014). All at once: Characteristics analyses of children and youth photolisted with a sibling on the AdoptUsKids website and prospective adoptive family interest on the AdoptUsKids and open to adopting two or more children. The University of Texas at Austin, Center for Social Work Research.


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