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

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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 a protocol for listing adoptable siblings together, whenever possible; however, there are many barriers to accomplishing this goal including placing willing adoptive parents who are willing to adopt multiple children at the same time (Wadl, 2014). No known research explores how siblings relationships and possible sibling groups are described in parent 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 photolistings of adoptable children in foster care. Analyses focused on the profiles of adoptable children listed in the photolistings from: 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 described in these profiles, indicating an imperative for ongoing research to maintain visitation (e.g. “Parents must be willing to maintain contact with child’s [sic]”), especially when such descriptions of sibling relationships 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 single children (McIlroy & Ayers-Lopez, 2014). Still, it is evident that even more sibling relationships exist among children who are not listed together, because an estimated 41% of children in foster care have at least one other sibling in care (Hagar, 2005). While keeping siblings together in adoptive placements is a goal, barriers to this goal persist, including adoptive parent’s reluctance to adopt multiple children at the same time (Wadl, 2014). No known research has focused on how adoptable families are recruited for sibling groups or how different types of sibling relationships are described in adoptive family contexts. AdoptionWorks, an organization funded through the Children’s Bureau to support adoptions from foster care, created a guide for improving photolistings of adoptable children (AdoptionWorks, 2010). This guide emphasized that the goal of photolistings should be to “interest families and help them find a connection to the child,” so they move forward in learning more about adoption. Furthermore, this work encouraged social workers to write photolistings that are descriptive and illustrate how children relate to each other to show the unique family they are a part of. Finally, this work emphasized that photolistings are the most public part of a recruitment campaign and should not contain any sensitive information about the child or their family members. Sibling-specific recommendations included representing how siblings relate to each other if they are listed in a sibling group and to report important family connections if those should be maintained after adoption.

Research Questions

Little research to date has focused on the contents of adoptive photolistings. No known research has focused on the presentation of sibling relationships in photolistings. The current study addresses the following research questions:

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

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

Method

Participants

Data included siblings in foster care listings (i.e. Massachusetts, New York, Illinois, and Arizona), including listings for 1214 children were analyzed. Among these 1080 listings, 959 individual listings and 251 siblings in sibling listings were included. A total of 1232 siblings included within the photolistings of single children and siblings. 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) have photolistings that are available from each of the four major regions of the United States (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Additionally, Massachusetts was included as it was the state to create a photolisting service (Freundlich, Gernreitt & Blau, n.d.). All available advertisements in each state within the internet were included in the project.

Sibling Contact Recommendations

One common way siblings were mentioned (n=297) was as recommendations for ongoing contact or visitation that parents would need to fulfill, often in addition to other requirements in the adoption (e.g. ongoing contact with other family, maintaining support services, ongoing school). In this instance, mention of the child’s or child’s preferences were made and listings contained no references to the importance of biological/and or sibling relationships in the life of the child. For example, “[Child] has a brother who he will need to maintain contact with after adoption.”

In these instances, sibling relationships serve as another demand or task faced by prospective adoptive parents, with no perceived benefit. Further, in these instances it is evident that adopters are not interested in any type of sibling relationships or conversations about their families. These children have to imagine the role they would play in the child’s life.

For some sibling group listings, this type of description of the group made up the majority of the listing, with little or no discussion of the children as individuals. Interestingly, there was a sibling of photolistings that did not mention any type of sibling relationships between the siblings and focused only on describing them as individuals. Interestingly, many of these types of sibling group descriptions give no indication of the type of sibling relationship shared by the group. This may make it difficult for a potential adoptive family to imagine how the children would be as members of their family.

Sibling Relationship Content

In addition to mentioning contact planning for the future, some listings (n=144) described elaborated descriptions of the relationships between siblings. Descriptions of sibling relationships occurred both in single listings (n=94) and in sibling group listings (n=50). How these descriptions were in used context varied considerably, with different types of relationship content shared.

Visitation Descriptions

Sibling relationships were often elaborated on when describing the child’s current visitations. But when siblings and sibling group listings, siblings have some regularly scheduled visitation with a sibling, this was mentioned. Often, this visitation was noted to be important to the child. For example, “[Child] currently has weekly visits with her sister who is in a separate placement.”

Still, when those siblings are not listed together, some postings elaborated on the reason for the visitation, or any other available visitation. While detailed scheduling of sibling visitations were noted, often, this visitation was noted to be important to the child. For example, “[Child] is open to any type of family as long as he can stay in touch with his sister!”

In these types of postings, the recommendations for ongoing contact are coupled with descriptions of how the child interacts with family members and maintains relationships. While these singles and group listings do present requirements for after the adoption, they also provide ideas about the benefits of such an adoption. In these, more elaborate postings sometimes linked the contact recommendations to other information about child’s interpersonal style or ability, allowing the posting to represent more about the child.

Conclusion

While many photolistings 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 adopter 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 multitude of photolistings that did use these tactics, it is clear that siblings mentioned in the context of relationships are an important way to illustrate their ability to make and maintain close relationships. Further, sibling relationship content should be elaborated on in ways that emphasize the importance of keeping siblings together in adoption.

References


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