“Siblings Wish to Be Adopted Together”: An Exploratory Study of Descriptions of Sibling Relationship in State Photolistings

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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. Adoption publications (McRoy & Ayers-Spence, 2014) still, it is evident that even more sibling relationships exist among children who are not listed together, because an estimated 47% of children in foster care have at least one other sibling in care (Hegar, 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 (Wald, 2014). No known research has focused on how adoptive families are recruited for sibling groups or how different types of sibling relationships are described in adoptive family listings (Hegar, 2005).

AdoptionUSA, an organization funded through the Children’s Bureau to support adoptive parents from foster care, created a guide for improving photographs of adoptable children (AdoptionUSA, 2015). This guide emphasized that the goal of photolistings should be to “interest families and help them feel a connection to the child, so they move forward in learning more about adopt.” Further, this work encouraged social workers to write photolistings that demonstrated how siblings can interact. This study was designed to help diagnosticians who work with adoptable children to aid the idea that siblings wish to be adopted together: “Siblings wish to be adopted together”: An Exploratory Study of Descriptions of Sibling Relationship in State Photolistings

Research Questions

Little research to date has focused on the content 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 were collected from five states (i.e. Massachusetts, New York, Illinois, Florida, and Arizona), including listings for 1214 children were analyzed. Among these 1060 listings, 959 individual listings included descriptions of siblings (i.e. “two siblings” or “siblings described by lines of by state”). These listings were collected from the internet during the month of February 2016. The five states were chosen because they (New York, Illinois, Florida and Arizona) had sibling groupings 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 first state to create a photolisting service (Friedmann, Germaine & Blais, n.d.). All available photolistings in each state were included in the project.

Sibling Contact Recommendations

One common way siblings were mentioned (n=263) was as recommendations for ongoing contact. In some listings, 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 schooling). In this instance, mention of the child or the child’s preferences were made and listings contained references to the importance of maintaining contact with the child. For example, “[child] has a brother who 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 promised benefit. Further, in these instances it is implied that the prospective adoptive parents have a choice about how they will be included in the child’s life.

Results

Among adoption photolistings, sibling relationships and sibling-related content appeared in several ways. Broadly, sibling relationships were described in terms of siblings’ relationships with each other, in relation to plans for ongoing contact between siblings and when describing recommendations from future adoptive siblings. Here we describe the specific ways that siblings and sibling relationships are described, with special attention to the role of sibling relationships in different types of photolistings.

Among singleton and sibling-group listings, some patterns of discussing sibling relationships were noted. Some listings described sibling relationships in relation to contact recommendations, in the context of a family search. In these listings, other instances of these sibling relationships were coded including recommendations for possible other children in an adoptive home. The type of description of sibling relationship in the photolisting study was used to distinguish between adoptive family reasoning to imagine how the children would be as members of their family.

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 minority of photolistings that did use these tactics, it is clear that siblings’ characteristics were described in ways that could help illustrate their ability to make and maintain close relationships. Further, sibling relationship characteristics were often described in ways that emphasize the importance of keeping siblings together in adoption.

References


McRoy, R., & Ayers-Spence, S. (2014). An ad hoc report: Characteristics analyses of children and youth photolithed with siblings on the AdoptionUSA website and prospective adoptive families interested in the AdoptionUSA and open to adopting two or more children. The University of Texas at Austin, Center for Social Work Research.


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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 subset of sibling group listings that did not mention these relationships between the siblings and focused only on describing them as individuals. Interestingly, no sibling group photolisting description 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 their family.