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

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<td>Frost, Reihonna L.; Goldberg, Abbie E.</td>
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“Siblings wish to be adopted together”: An Exploratory Study of Descriptions of Sibling Relationship in State Photolists

Reinhonna L. Fros & Hebe F. Goldberg

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 Foster Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act mandates agencies to try to match siblings together whenever possible; however, there are many barriers to accomplishing this goal including finding prospective adoptive parents who are willing to adopt multiple children at the same time (Wald, 2014). No known research explores how sibling relationships and possible siblings posted are represented 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 photolists of adoptable children in foster care. Analyzes focus on the profiles of adoptable children listed on the photolists: 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 discussed and outlines some important factors to maintain visibility (e.g., “Parents must be willing to maintain contact with child’s other sibling”). To positive posts about sibling relationships to encourage something about the child’s personality or to demonstrate how the child interacts in a familial context. 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 25% are listed for adoption as a sibling group (McRoy & Ayres-Lopez, 2014). Still, it is evident that even more sibling relationships exist among children who are not listed together because 45% of children in foster care have at least one other sibling in care (Heger, 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 adoptable families are recruited for sibling groups or how different types of sibling relationships can or should be described for potential adoptive families.

AdoptUSKids, an organization funded through the Children’s Bureau to support adoptions from foster care, created a guide for improving photolists of adoptable children (AdoptUSKids, 2011). It emphasized that the goal of photolists 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 photolists that accurately reflect the children. In our context, this means that photolists of sibling pairs or groups should illustrate what a child is in a way that allows families to imagine the child in their lives. Finally, this work emphasized that photolists are the most public part of a recruitment campaign and should not contain any sensitive information about the child or other family members. Sibling-specific recommendations included representing how siblings relate to each other if they are listed in a sibling group and to important family connections if those should be maintained after adoption.

Research Questions

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

1. How are siblings and sibling relationships described in adoptive photos?
   - How is sibling contact described in photolists?
2. In what ways do descriptions of sibling relationships enhance or detract from the goals of photolists? How can descriptions of siblings be employed in order to meet those goals?

Method

Participants

Data were collected from photolists (i.e., Massachusetts, New York, Illinois, Florida, and Arizona), including listings for 1214 children were analyzed. Among these 1080 listings, 959 individual children (88% of the total sample) and 225 sibling groups of children (22% of the total sample) were analyzed (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 some of the states that have a high number of children 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 (Freundlich, Germain & Blain, n.d.). All available listings in each state were included in the project.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
<th>Total Listings</th>
<th>Total Children</th>
<th>Total Sibling Group Listings</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mass.</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>1214</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Child Reasons to Maintain Contact

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 the relationships between the siblings and focused only on describing them as individuals. These sibling group descriptions give no indication of the type of sibling relationship shared by the group. This may make it difficult for a prospective family to imagine how the children would be as members of their family.

Prospective Sibling Recommendations

Interestingly, many photolists (32%) make suggestions about the preferred family configurations for adoption, including any siblings. Many listings focused on the behaviors that siblings should share with one another (e.g., “the siblings will do their best to always be there for each other”). Finally, many listings highlighted the potential benefits of specific sibling relationships. For example, these benefits are highlighted in the photolist of the siblings who were described as “very close to each other” and “are very close to each other”.

Conclusion

While many photolists of single children do mention siblings in their life, a minority 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 minority of photolists that did use these tactics, it is clear that sibling relationships provide important information about the child that can be used to illustrate their ability to make and maintain close relationships. Further, sibling relationships can be highlighted in ways that emphasize the importance of keeping siblings together in adoption.

References


McRoy, R., & Ayres-Lopez, S. (2014). 4th hot topic: 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 adopt two or more children. The University of Texas at Austin, Center for Social Work Research.


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