

Foster children's sibling relationships in middle childhood

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August 2001

Abstract

This thesis explores children's sibling relationships in middle childhood, particularly in relation to looked after children, with the aim of obtaining an 'insider view' from the children's perspective. Foster children's current relationship qualities and processes were considered in the context of their past family experiences and environments, their sibling relationship history, and their expectations of their siblings in the future. The aim was to extend our current understanding of the nature and quality of sibling relationships. The findings are intended to assist social workers and others with a responsibility for assessing children's needs and making decisions about their welfare.

The research strategy included two consecutive studies. The *Community Study* involved a questionnaire survey of the perceptions of a sample of 64 school children (aged 9 to 12) of their siblings. The findings provided a baseline for understanding foster children's sibling relationships. The main *Foster Care Study* combined quantitative and qualitative methods, incorporating a questionnaire, Family Relations Test (Bene and Anthony, 1985) and interviews with the children, social worker interviews, and questionnaires completed by foster carers. The sample was 21 Scottish children (aged 8 to 12) living apart from their parents in short-term foster care.

Foster children's perceptions of their sibling relationships had two separate but intertwined threads running through: a relationship dimension focusing on the *quality of the current sibling relationship*, and a family and kinship dimension focusing on *siblings as life-long key family and kin*. In comparison with the community sample, foster children's sibling relationships were more extreme, reflecting children's disrupted close relationships and adverse family experiences. Relationship aspects, referring to power and status, and sibling attachment relationships, were most salient for foster children. Siblings retained an importance to the foster children, at the level of family and kinship, regardless of the quality of their relationships. They expected their siblings to be part of their lives in adulthood. Because of foster children's smaller networks of other supportive relationships, than was the case for the children in the community, their siblings were even more important to them. For some foster children, particularly where contact with parents was terminated; their siblings were their only family. Based on the findings, a framework was developed for understanding sibling relationships in the context of foster children's adverse family experiences and disrupted close relationships.

Maintaining looked after children's relationships with their siblings, except in circumstances where this would cause them significant harm, is enshrined in the child care legislation. This thesis argues that, when making any decisions about children's welfare, which can potentially lead to the severance of sibling ties, social workers should consider children's right to siblings in the long term as 'key family and kin'. Decisions, which are based solely on the quality of the current relationship between siblings, may lead to separation of siblings when relationships are poor, and deprive individuals of the potential sibling support in adulthood and old age. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the implications for research, policy and practice development.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my thanks to those people, who in various ways have enabled this study to be completed. First and most importantly, my warmest appreciations go to the children who shared their feelings and experiences with me. Without them this study could not have been possible. I am grateful to the social workers and foster carers, who shared their views with me. My thanks also go to the teachers who facilitated my contact with the children living in the community. I would like to acknowledge the support given to this study by the former Tayside Regional Council, and Angus Council, who as my employers have supported the research. I am particularly indebted to Professor Malcolm Hill, who as my supervisor, provided inspiration and gave his support, guidance, and constructive advice so generously throughout the research process. The interest from other researchers, colleagues and friends, too numerous to mention, who have shared their views on sibling relationships, has given me ongoing inspiration. Finally, I am grateful to my family, Adrian, Oliver and Isla for their support at home, their tolerance of my pre-occupation with the study, and their endless patience with 'sibling matters'.

August 2001

I declare that this thesis is all my own work throughout.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1. 1 Introduction

The majority of people share experiences of siblinghood. Most adults are connected to others through siblinghood, either by being a sibling and consequently having a sibling or siblings, or having more than one child thus bringing up siblings. It would be unusual for a person to reach adulthood, without being affected in some way by their own, or others' relationships with their sisters and brothers. Even people, who have no intimate experience of sibling relationships, cannot escape the drama of siblinghood. This is continuously played out in the media. The relationship between the infamous Mitchell brothers in East Enders and the exploits of the Gallagher brothers of the Oasis are followed by television viewers and readers of popular press. The front pages of the broadsheets contain stories of which of the Murdoch siblings will succeed their father in due course (The Guardian, 22.4.1998:1 and 3; The Independent, 11.5.2001: 1) and disagreements by the Snow bothers about the care of their mother (The Guardian, 4.6.1998:1-2).

Siblings are also part of children's everyday life, it is estimated that at least 80 per cent of children in Britain and United States grow up with siblings (Dunn, 1983), although there are no official statistics of the numbers of siblings children have at any one time. Those without siblings may have cousins who are siblings, or they may have come to know their friends' siblings. Equally, they may have developed a 'sibling-like' relationship with other children (Horrocks and Milner, 1999). Only children (Laybourn, 1994), and adults who have grown up without sisters and brothers (Pitkeathley and Emerson, 1994), have views about having siblings or not, thus no one is unaffected by the sibling relationship.

Sibling relationships, along with other kin relationships, are 'givens' in life. Their irrevocable nature renders relationships between siblings different from children's relationships with other children. There is no choice in the relationship unlike in relationships with friends and peers. It has been imposed on the child by their circumstance of being born to, or living in a particular family. The child has no choice of their position in relation to their siblings in the family, the number and gender of siblings, or whether to have siblings at all. Individuals remain members of siblingship for life. One can have an ex-partner, or an ex-friend, but not an ex-

sibling. Although siblinghood is a universal experience both for children in general, and for those in foster care, it has received surprisingly little attention.

This chapter provides an introduction to this thesis. It discusses the background and motivation for undertaking this study. The study is based on a notion that it is important to understand something about a general phenomenon (children's sibling relationships in general) in order to investigate the relationships of an exceptional group of children, those living in foster care. This is particularly important, as all previous research on children's sibling relationships in middle childhood has been conducted outside the UK. Although siblinghood is a common human experience, relationships between siblings are not always easy to understand. Siblinghood is a multifaceted concept, having a variety of biological, social, psychological and legal meanings attributed to it. This introductory chapter explores the nature of siblinghood; the conceptual complexities involved in defining siblings for practice and research purposes; and siblingship in the context of family change. The chapter ends with an outline for the format of the thesis. The chapter is structured under the following:

- the motivation for the study
- defining siblings – biological, social, psychological and legal meanings
- who is a sibling – conceptual categories
- siblingship in the context of family change, and
- an outline for the thesis.

1. 2 Motivation for this study

My interest in the nature and quality of foster children's sibling relationships arose as a direct result of my professional experiences as a social work practitioner and a manager responsible for the placement of children in substitute care. The policy objective was to settle children, who were unable to return to the care of their parents, in permanent family placements without undue delay. The objective was to meet the needs of *individual* children for permanency. While trying to achieve the best possible outcome for each individual child, I became aware of the potentially detrimental impact that a move to a permanent family could have on children's relationships with their siblings. Permanent *family* was generally perceived as substitute *parents*. It did not necessarily include the child's *siblings*, even in situations when siblings were also in the care of the local authority. Consequently,

and despite efforts by many practitioners to maintain siblings together, siblings were being separated from one another, often leading to loss of contact with and knowledge of their siblings. The significance of siblings for children throughout their childhood and beyond, and in particular for those who have experienced separation and loss, was generally not acknowledged. *The notion of siblings as primary kin relations, and as a potential source of permanency, rarely featured in the planning and decision-making processes.*

In the early 1990's researchers were beginning to explore sibling placement issues in relation to children in permanent substitute care. Less attention, however, was paid to children and their siblings living in short-term care, yet proportionally more children are cared for in short-term care each year than in permanent care. Furthermore, separation from siblings often occurs *before* children are placed in permanent care (Rushton et al., 2001). Therefore, I became aware of a need to explore children's sibling relationships early in their stay in care before permanency decisions are made. While recognising the importance of maintaining sibling relationships, I was aware that decisions to place children with or without their siblings were often made without adequate theoretical and empirical knowledge. For instance, poor sibling relationships in middle childhood were often cited as a reason for not placing siblings together, or separating siblings in a joint placement. However, a poor sibling *relationship* commonly referred to conflict in siblings' *interaction* with one another. There was a dearth of empirical information about the *nature and quality of children's sibling relationships* to assist decision-making. Although assessment of parent-child relationships was well established in social work practice (Adcock and White, 1985; Department of Health, 1988), the assessment of the nature and quality of sibling relationships did not form part of the framework. Furthermore, practitioners, policy makers and researchers had rarely sought children's own perceptions of their relationships with their sisters and brothers.

An opportunity arose to research foster care practices in 1992-93. I undertook a study of all foster and adoptive placements in a local authority social work department in Scotland (Kosonen, 1993). The numbers, characteristics and care experiences of a sample of 337 children were examined. The study found that for the majority of children placement in foster care led to separation from siblings. The children were most vulnerable for separation at points of *entry* and *leaving care*. Few children had plans that included reunification with their siblings. Children were

found to have siblings living in a variety of situations, both in and outside the care system. Social workers lacked full information about the children's family composition, including the number of siblings and their whereabouts (Kosonen, 1996a). The findings of this study acted as the main motivating force for this thesis.

The exploratory study that is the subject of this thesis was proposed with an overall aim to extend current understanding of the nature and quality of sibling relationships for a sample of Scottish children (aged eight to 12) who are accommodated in short-term foster care. The study aims to assist social workers and others with a responsibility for assessing children's needs and making decisions about their welfare. The study will explore children's perceptions of their sibling relationships from their point of view.

1. 3 Defining siblings – biological, social, psychological and legal connections

The English language contains a number of sibling terms e.g. sister, brother, sibling, siblinghood, siblingship, sisterhood and brotherhood. These have biological, social and psychological meanings, and legal significance attributed to them. Dictionary definitions of sibling terms refer primarily to biological relatedness. The Oxford English Reference Dictionary defines a sibling as '*each of two or more children having one or both parents in common*' (Pearsall and Trumble, 1996). Siblings share a large part of their genetic inheritance with each other. Identical twins are genetically exactly the same, fraternal twins and full siblings share about 50 per cent of their genes, although this may vary between 35 and 65 per cent (Scarr and Grajek, 1982). Paternal half-siblings, who share the same father, and maternal half-siblings, who share the same mother, share one quarter of their genes. A parent and a child share one half their genes.

The term 'sibling' also refers to social and emotional relatedness between individuals. The social meaning of the term 'sibling' refers to a family role. An individual is a sister or brother only in relation to other children in the nuclear family (La Fontaine, 1986). In some societies the terms sister and brother may also be used to refer to other kin, such as cousins, nephews, nieces, aunts and uncles. Expectations about the way sibling roles should be performed, e.g. being an older sister or brother, or a younger sister or brother, are not always clear. Role ascription, particularly on the basis of gender, plays a less significant part than formerly in

white western societies, although it is accepted that gender influences family, parental and child behaviour (Aldous, 1996). In contrast, expectations placed on sibling roles, particularly responsibilities placed on older siblings in relation to their younger sisters and brothers; continue to be present among many black families (Prevatt Goldstein, 1999).

'Sisterhood' and 'brotherhood' can have specific importance in black communities with African/African-Caribbean/African-American roots. There is a long 'black sibling tradition' in some cultures, where family origins remain important throughout life. In some languages, for instance in Urdu and Hindi, there are more than one word used to refer to a sister and brother, and siblings are addressed by the relationship term rather than their name (Prevatt Goldstein, 1999). In Britain, 'sister' and 'brother' are sometimes used to refer to a close emotional tie between friends, e.g. 'she's like a sister to me', or to a sense of loyalty between friends e.g. 'he's like a brother to me'. Sibling terms are in common usage in Christian religious language and some political, ideological and social organisations and movements have also used them. The term 'sister' has been used to refer to a female nurse in charge of a hospital ward. Sibling terms refer to a range of attributes present in both kin and non-kin relationships (The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, 1979).

The longevity of sibling bonds has been explained by the biological, social and psychological meanings attributed to kin relationships (Ainsworth, 1991). Along with parents and own children, siblings are individual's primary kin relations (Allan, 1979). It is through siblinghood that a network of kin is acquired. Most adults remain in ongoing contact with their kin; it is rare for siblings to completely lose touch with one another. Sibling relationships, along with relationships with parents are the most enduring of all (Cicirelli, 1982).

In addition to their durability, kin relationships are 'special' in terms of a sense of duty, obligations, loyalty and solidarity generally felt towards one's kin. Relations with kin also have other qualitative dimensions, such as a sense of identity and emotional roots. 'Blood' relations are usually seen as having a stronger claim on each other than are kin relations acquired through marriage (Firth et al., 1970). You *can* fall back on them regardless whether active contact with kin is maintained or not. *'Quite simply relatives are people whom you treat differently'* (Finch, 1989: 233). Many British kinship studies focus on the exchange of help and maintenance of contact with siblings. Siblings provide and receive from each other a range of

provisions and services. These can take the form of financial support, gifts of food and clothing and help with finding employment (Allatt and Yeandle, 1986, and McKee, 1987, op. cit. Finch, 1989; McGlone et al., 1998). There is some evidence that close kinship ties are a more predominant feature of working class life, and in particular in stable communities (Willmott, 1986; McGlone et al., 1998), however, McGlone et al. note that this could be partly due to geographical proximity. Thus the individual experiences of siblinghood are influenced by the social context in the particular time and in the given society.

Legal significance of siblings

The legal significance of siblingship is most apparent in the context of children's relationships with their parents. Children of the same parents are entitled to inheritance in the event of a parent's death. In other aspects of their lives, children appear to have few legal rights in relation to their siblings. The position of a child in relation to their siblings is not defined in legislation. Part I of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, and the Children Act 1989, which deal with parental responsibilities and rights in Scotland, and England and Wales respectively, make no direct reference to siblings. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is an international law governing the rights of the child, also does not make direct reference to siblings.

The private law provision places general duties on the parents and the courts. These include the duty of parents, in terms of Section 6 of the 1995 Act, to have regard, so far, as is practicable, to the views of a child, before reaching any major decisions. Decisions about parental separation, divorce, and where the child will live, can impact on children's sibling relationships, and may lead to a severance of sibling ties. It could be argued that a parent has a duty to have regard to a child's views on their relationship with siblings, prior to making such decisions. The courts also have a duty to seek and have regard to the views of a child, so far, as is practicable, when making decisions regarding parental rights and responsibilities and contact with parents. Legislation does not deal directly with contact between separated siblings. It could be argued, however, that in most cases the maintenance of contact between siblings would safeguard and promote the child's development and welfare, and therefore, be the responsibility of a parent under Sec.1 (1) (a) of the 1995 Act. Children can, at the age of 16, apply for an order relating to parental responsibilities, and for a residence order in respect of a sibling, under Section 11 of the 1995 Act. This may also allow the child to apply for a

contact order in respect of their siblings. However, to apply for any order under Section 11 of the Act the child would need to have capacity in terms of Section 2(1) of the Age of Legal Capacity (Scotland) Act 1991. A child with capacity can instruct a solicitor to act on his or her behalf in any such proceedings. Section 8 orders, within the terms of Children Act 1989 (these deal with contact and residence among other provisions in England and Wales), are based on a similar notion. The child has to have sufficient understanding to make an application, and the onus is on the child to demonstrate this. Information is lacking about the use of courts by children and young people to gain contact or co-residence with their siblings (Dobson, 1996; Roche, 1996). This area has received surprisingly little attention, taking account of the degree of family disruption in contemporary society.

1. 4 Siblings in the context of family change

Children's sibling relationships are intrinsically linked to their membership of a family; therefore, changes affecting families are likely to affect children's sibling relationships. While researchers have shifted their focus from 'families with children' to 'children in families', using the child as a unit of analysis (Qvortrup, 1991), statistical information on children remains embedded within family statistics. These are collected from the perspective of adults rather than children (Church and Summerfield, 1994; Pullinger and Summerfield, 1997). Consequently, no national statistics exist in the UK regarding the numbers and types of siblings that children have. No direct information is available on children's living arrangements at birth or changes in these following a birth outside marriage or marriage breakdown (Clarke, 1996). Children and their siblings appear to be hidden in families at the expense of their parents. There is a dearth of information on siblings for children in general, and those looked after (refer to chapter 4).

It is known from the statistics collected on families that the demographic changes occurring as a result of an increase in divorce, births outside marriage, cohabitation and remarriage in Britain have all led to increased disruption in children's family circumstances (Clarke, 1996). Family disruption can, in turn, lead to children experiencing more than one family during childhood. Simpson (1994), in his discussion of the complex restructuring of kinship arrangements, which can occur following divorce and remarriage, refers to such restructured families as 'unclear families'. The real impact of changes in family structure on children's sibling relationships is not well understood. There is little empirical information about

children's experiences of maintaining family and kin relations following divorce and remarriage (La Fontaine, 1985). However, some writers suggest that these changes may have a negative impact on children, at the expense of greater freedom and choice experienced by adults (Halsey, 1993; Clarke, 1996).

As the result of a decrease in the average number of dependent children in families, children are now likely to have fewer siblings. However, *due to the increase in family disruption, children's kinship arrangements with their siblings are likely to be more complex*. Despite demographic change, most children (four-fifths of dependent children) are still brought up in a family with two parents and with other children. Almost four-fifths of dependent children lived with at least one other dependent child in 1995-96 (Pullinger and Summerfield, 1997). Some researchers suggest that the decrease in the number of siblings can be a mixed blessing, leading to reduced opportunities for companionship but an increased share of parental resources (Hernandez, 1993). However, there is little empirical information on the impact of demographic change on children's sibling relationships, and in particular how children perceive the impact of family change. Looked after children's families are particularly prone to disrupt, therefore this study considers children's sibling relationships in the context of their changing families.

1. 5 Types of sibling relationships

Considering the biological, emotional and social connections between siblings, child's and siblings' legal status, and their residential arrangements, there is potentially a range of different types of sibling arrangements. Siblings can be classified for research, policy and practice purposes in a number of ways depending on the definition of a '*sibling*'. The four most obvious categories include biological siblings (full and half-), step-siblings, and adopted and foster siblings. Although these categories are discrete, studies of looked after children do not generally define sibling types.

The difficulties in finding common definitions have been highlighted by Treffers et al., (1990:745). In order to accommodate various forms of non-traditional family structures, they chose a method of describing the family structure in terms of *the relation between the child and each adult and child present*. They used the terms 'biological', 'adoptive', 'foster' and 'step' to describe parents and their partners living in the family home. Where a child resided outside the family home (for instance with a relative or a residential unit), information was collected about the nature and

degree of responsibility assumed by the parent figure in that context. They identified 26 possibilities where the sibling can be in relation to the child, when collecting patient data for child and adolescent psychiatry.

Siblings can also be defined according to the existence of a relationship between siblings, i.e. whether the siblings have ever lived together and share common history, family values and culture. A large age gap between siblings may mean that they have never lived together. Alternatively, siblings, who are close in age, may never have lived together, if the younger sibling was born after the older one was removed from the family. Siblings may also share common legal status.

Elgar and Head (1999:21) have developed a child-centered framework for classifying children's sibling relationships, based on a degree of sharing that exists between siblings.

They categorised types of sibling relationships based on the degree of sharing of:

- common genes
- common history, family values and culture; and
- common legal status.

Table 1 outlines conceptual categories for defining children's sibling relationships.

Table 1. A framework for defining sibling relationships*

Sibling relationship	Common genes	Common history, family values and culture	Common legal status
Full siblings brought up together	√	√	√
Full siblings brought up apart/separated during childhood	√	Some	√
Full siblings, one placed away from another at birth	√	No	√ (unless adopted)
Half-siblings, brought up together	Some	√	No
Half-siblings, brought up apart/separated during childhood	Some	Some	No
Half-siblings – brought up by one parent – never lived with half-siblings	Some	No	No
Adopted siblings	No	Some	√
Step-siblings	No	Some	No
Foster siblings (non-related children)	No	Some	No

Elgar and Head (1999)*

The above classification illustrates the enormous diversity of siblingship, yet it succeeds in clarifying children's complex sibling arrangements, at least for adults. There is a dearth of information about what sense children make of their diverse sibling arrangements, which related children count as a sibling, and how children perceive their biological, emotional and social connections with their sisters and brothers. This thesis aims to explore children's perceptions of siblingship and contribute to a fuller understanding of children's perspectives on siblings in the context of looked after children's families.

1. 6 Outline for the rest of this thesis

The following provides an outline for this thesis.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the way theories about families; family processes and relationships have addressed sibling relationships. The review will outline the key theoretical concepts and ideas, which have influenced this thesis.

Chapter 3 provides a review of literature relating to sibling relationships for children in the general population. This draws both from the limited British literature and studies conducted outside the UK. The review considers the development and maintenance of sibling relationships across the life span, with a particular focus on the relationship qualities and processes in middle childhood. Studies investigating the impact of family structure, and those exploring the influence of family environment and processes, on the quality of children's relationships with their siblings will be discussed.

Chapter 4 discusses the statutory and policy context for working with looked after children and their siblings, social work practice and siblings, and looked after children's sibling relationships. The review includes mainly British studies of children in care or accommodation, however reference is also made to relevant studies from outside the UK.

Chapter 5 discusses the developmental and methodological issues considered in the planning and execution of this study. The research strategy includes two consecutive studies: Study 1 – The Community Study and Study 2 – The Foster Care Study. The Community Study involves a questionnaire survey of the perceptions of a sample of 64 school children (aged 9 to 12) of their siblings. The findings provide a baseline for understanding children's sibling relationships in the local socio-cultural context. The research strategy for the Foster Care Study combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches, with an aim of obtaining an insider view of foster children's sibling relationships. The sample consisted of 21 children from 11 families. They had 57 siblings who met the sample criteria. The strategy incorporated a mixture of quantitative and qualitative measures, multiple methods, data sources and perspectives. Discussion on children's rights and ethical considerations, and reflections on the methodology complete the chapter.

Chapter 6 presents the findings of the Community Study (Study 1). The chapter begins with findings on children's understanding of their family, who they regard as their siblings, and their experiences of family disruption and separation. The significance of siblings compared to children's other relationships, their experiences of sibling caretaking, their perceptions of the most salient sibling qualities, and their views on their sibling position form the main findings reported in this chapter.

Chapter 7 and the following five chapters present the findings relating to the Foster Care Study (Study 2). Foster children's understanding of their family, who they regard as their siblings, and their experiences of family disruption, separation and loss form some of the main findings in this chapter. The findings relating to the significance of siblings compared to children's other relationships complete the chapter.

Chapter 8 and the following three chapters present findings derived mainly from the children's interviews, relating to sibling relationship processes and qualities. This chapter begins with the findings relating to social workers' perceptions of the quality of the children's family environments and experiences. Children's recollections of their sibling memories and their shared childhood experiences form the main findings in this chapter.

Chapter 9 presents the findings relating to children's experiences of looking after and being looked after by their siblings. The findings relating to children's perceptions of their siblings as a source of support and stress form the main findings in this chapter.

Chapter 10 reports on children's emotional involvement with their siblings, as measured by the Family Relations Test, and on the quality of children's attachments to their siblings.

Chapter 11 reports on children's identification with their siblings, and the processes that help to develop and maintain sibling identification. Both the children's own contribution and parental contribution, in the form of differential parental treatment, to the development of sibling identity form the main findings presented in this chapter.

Chapter 12 reports on children's views on maintaining relationships with their siblings. Children's preferences on placement with their siblings, views on contact with separated siblings, and expectations of their sibling relationships in adulthood form the main findings in this chapter.

Chapter 13 summarises and discusses the main findings presented in this thesis. These are presented under the main aims of the study. The discussion focuses on the findings of the main study of children in foster care. Some reference is made to the findings of the community study. A framework for understanding sibling relationship qualities emerged from the findings. This is discussed in the light of the background theory and previous research.

Chapter 14 outlines the perceived strengths and limitations of the study. Implications for research, policy and practice development conclude the chapter.

1.7 Summary

This study was designed to explore the nature and quality of foster children's sibling relationships in middle childhood, with an aim of assisting practitioners in assessing and making decisions, which are likely to affect children's relationships with their sisters and brothers. The introduction to the thesis has discussed the complex nature of siblingship in the context of family disruption. The chapter concludes with an outline for the format adopted in the thesis. The following chapter explores the way theories about families; family processes and relationships have addressed children's sibling relationships. It will identify the theoretical ideas and concepts, which will influence the course of this study.

Chapter 2 Theoretical perspectives on siblings

2. 1 Introduction

Relationships between sisters and brothers are open to interpretation through a variety of theoretical lenses. However, no single theory can explain the diverse and complex nature of siblingship. Sibling relationships are intrinsically linked to children's membership of, position in, and relationships within a family. This chapter reviews the way theories about families; family processes and relationships have addressed sibling relationships. The review will make reference to theoretical concepts, which can assist in the understanding of foster children's sibling relationships. Linkages between several theoretical perspectives will be highlighted. In conclusion, the theoretical ideas, which have influenced this thesis, will be outlined.

2. 2 Family theories

A family theory may take a developmental perspective over life span; consider development and relationships in their social and environmental contexts; as part of a wider network of family and other relationships, or focus on family structure and dynamics. Family theories have some limitations. Many use the family group, as opposed to a relationship or an individual, as the unit of analysis (Klein and White, 1996). Many theories are also too general and adult-centred, rendering them less useful to the study of children's relationships (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). They do, however, introduce some relevant concepts for understanding children's sibling relationships. The following describes four relevant family theories.

Family development perspectives consider sibling relationships over a lifetime, undergoing changes in frequency of contact and intensity, at various stages during their 'sibling career' (Aldous, 1996). Individual's experience of being a sister or a brother is affected by their position in relation to their siblings, norms or rules applying to sibling interaction and behaviour, and expectations placed on their role as a sister or brother (Klein and White, 1996).

The ecological perspectives suggest that sibling relationships, along with children's other relationships, develop in the context of a joint interaction between

the individual and their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1992). A basic notion of this approach is adaptation to environment. Siblings are part of an 'ecosystem' (a family system in interaction with its environment), where they occupy a 'niche', (a role or a position). Others may allocate a particular 'niche' to a child, or they may seek a 'niche' themselves (Scarr and Grajek, 1982). The concept of 'niche' has proved to be salient in explaining some of the processes involved in making siblings different from each other (Sulloway, 1996).

Social network perspective considers that children interact, and develop their relationships with their siblings, within wider social networks, which vary in structure, size and function. A network may include kin, of whom siblings are core members, and non-kin members, and be a source of both support and stress for the individual. Social network approach tends to focus on supportive functions of individual's personal networks (Bryant, 1982; 1992; 1994; Cochran et al., 1993; Antonucci and Akiyama, 1994; Nestmann and Hurrelmann, 1994).

Family systems perspective considers sibling relationships in the context of the family structure, which is conceptualised as an 'organised whole', with interrelated sub-systems in a hierarchical order, with the parental system above the children. Siblings form an autonomous sub-system. In large families there may be more than one sibling sub-system, these are usually formed in groups of two or three.

The work of Minuchin et al. (1967) and Minuchin (1974) on small samples of multi-problem families in North America drew attention to the supportive role, which siblings can play for each other. Their concept, '*parental child*', this refers to an older child who assumes parental responsibilities (e.g. for childcare, food preparation, household tasks, worry about money), has remained alive, albeit under different guises (burdened child, hurried child, adult-child, overachiever, underachiever) until the present time (Chase, 1999).

Later writers have focused on family therapy interventions with very young siblings (Norris-Shortle et al., 1995), with older and adolescent siblings (Gustafsson et al., 1995), and with adult siblings (Bank and Kahn, 1975; Kahn and Bank, 1981). These have explored family connectedness, boundaries between parents and children, and consequences of parentification. Family systems perspective has had some influence on the course of sibling research. Understanding the circular nature of

family interaction, and in particular dynamics within the sibling group is helpful, when applied in the context of other theoretical models.

Theoretical approaches, which deal with family relationships and processes e.g. psychodynamic theories, attachment framework, and transactional theories, have proved most useful for sibling research.

2. 3 Psychodynamic approaches

Siblings received little attention in the early psychoanalytic theory. A lack of recognition by Freud and his followers, of the significance of siblings, has been considered to be a major theoretical omission (Mitchell, 2000). The role of siblings in child development was regarded as marginal, yet fundamentally negative. The psychoanalytic construction of a negative sibling relationship has left a lasting legacy on research, clinical practice and popular culture. It is only recently that a greater diversity in the nature of relationships has been recognised. The key concepts, referring to relationship qualities, introduced to sibling literature are *'rivalry'*, *'intense sibling bond'* and *'ambivalence'*.

'Rivalry'

The early psychoanalytical theory regarded 'rivalry' as the core concept in the development of children's social relationships. Rivalry was thought to manifest itself in children's relationships with other children, e. g. friends, peers and siblings, and with adults, e.g. parents and teachers (Isaacs, 1933; 1948). Similarly, 'jealousy' became an important theme in child development literature (Chesser, 1928). Sibling rivalry was perceived to result from a phenomenon of 'dethronement', which the first-born child was thought to experience following the birth of a sibling (Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956). Later writers refer to a phenomenon of 'enthronement', which the last-born children experience as the baby of the family (Adams, 1972, op. cit. Bedford, 1989a). Although there is little empirical evidence to support the phenomenon of 'dethronement', parenting guides, published over a period of sixty years, address sibling rivalry as an important aspect of childrearing (The Home and School Council of Great Britain, 1935; Ziman, 1949; Spock, 1958; Faber and Mazlish, 1988; Ames, 1988; Woolfson, 1995). The psychoanalytic framework assumes that the negative aspects of the relationship e.g. conflict, jealousy, competition, rivalry and hostility, which are established firmly in childhood are re-lived throughout the siblings' lives. The emphasis is on the inevitability of lifelong rivalry between siblings (Freud, 1973), which is likely to be more pronounced

between brothers than sisters, and diminishes in intensity, as siblings grow older. However, there is some evidence that rivalry between siblings can lay dormant to be re-activated in adulthood, when siblings need to co-operate to care for their parents, deal with parents' death and issues of inheritance (Cicirelli, 1982).

'Intense sibling bond'

Two of the most influential writers from the psychodynamic perspective, both are clinicians; Bank and Kahn (1982a) suggest that the relationship between sisters and brothers can have, at the emotional level, a particularly intense and binding quality for some individuals. They describe the intensity of some sibling relationships as *'the sibling bond'*.

They posit that sibling bonds formed early in life will become especially intense when, as children or adolescents, siblings have had high access and contact, *and* have been deprived of sufficient parental care and attention. The intensity can manifest in strong negativity, *or* in emotional closeness, both of which can be experienced as binding. Such bonds develop under extremely adverse circumstances; they are reciprocal in nature and can affect the siblings' identity over lifetime (Bank and Kahn, 1982b). It is important to note that it is the *intensity of the emotion in the relationship* that is related to parental dysfunction.

Although the writers did not initially refer explicitly to the attachment theory, Bank later called the sibling bond as 'a theory of sibling attachment'. He suggests that siblings from dysfunctional families store emotional information about their siblings in a form of a *'secret inscription'*, a *'frozen image'*, or a *'template'* (Bank, 1992:147), thus placing his theory in the context of the attachment framework.

There has been some criticism of this theory because the focus is mainly on pathological outcomes (Shulman, 1987). The theory has been tested empirically by Boer (1990) with a community sample of children aged 6 to 12. The sample of two-child families did not contain enough families who neglected their children; therefore he was unable to provide evidence to support this theory.

'Ambivalence'

A re-appraisal of the psychodynamic perspective on sibling relationships (Holden, 1986; Shulman, 1987) suggests that both positive and negative relationship aspects are an intrinsic part of sibling relationships. Their concept of a multi-dimensional

sibling relationship, marked by ambivalence, is experienced as unique by siblings. Unlike previous psychodynamically oriented studies, based primarily on clinical populations, Holden and Shulman developed their theoretical ideas based on qualitative studies on populations of young adults.

Key features of the re-appraised sibling relationship are summarised as follows:

- It is emotionally intense and inescapable, due to siblings' capacity to understand intimately the interests, frustrations and motivations of each other.
- It is fraught with ambivalence; siblings *simultaneously* love and hate, worship and disdain, rejoice in and resent the other.
- Siblings experience it differently; each sibling creates a different environment for the other.
- It can be either development promoting or problematic and it is likely to be at the *same time* progressive and regressive.
- It impacts on other relationships, past (in a sense that they are re-worked), present and future.
- It has lasting effects on the personality and the behaviour of the individuals involved, (Holden, 1986: 48-9).

The notion of the sibling relationship as multifaceted and paradoxical is useful. Literature on ambivalence, perceived to be one of the key dimensions of children's sibling relationships in middle childhood, will be explored later.

2. 4 The attachment framework

A basic tenet of attachment theory is that the qualities of individual's attachment relationship formed in infancy with the primary attachment figure, usually the mother, has an influence on the quality of their relationships with others. The theory emerged from the observed ill effects of maternal deprivation in early childhood on personality development (Bowlby, 1965; 1988). Since then, attachment framework has been broadened to consider the multiplicity of parent-child interactions, and styles of parenting. Maternal *responsiveness* and the ability to *attune* to her child are now regarded as key features in determining the quality of attachment bonds (Holmes, 1993: 85).

Key concepts

Holmes (1993) summarises the main components of the attachment theory in the following terms:

'Attachment' is an overall term referring to the state and quality of individual's attachments. These are divided into secure and insecure attachments. Insecure attachments manifest as avoidant, ambivalent and disorganised. The primary attachment figure provides a *'secure base'* for the child to explore, and to whom the child turns to for comfort and security, and who is missed by the child when absent. Relationship patterns set in early life are likely to influence the individual's felt security in the future relationships.

'Attachment behaviour' refers to individual seeking close proximity to their primary attachment figure, or in absence to another preferred person. Attachment behaviour is triggered by separation, threat of separation from the attachment figure, or any other threat to individual's feelings of safety.

'Internal working model' is a mental representational model, based on early attachment experiences. It acts as a template for relationships with parents, siblings, friends and others. A securely attached child will have a template of a loving, nurturing and reliable caregiver, and of self as that of worthy of love. In contrast, an insecurely attached child will store a picture of an unsafe, unreliable and dangerous world, where people cannot be trusted, and self as undeserving of love.

'Attachment relationship' has been defined as incorporating three key behavioural features: *'proximity seeking'*, a *'secure base'*, and if separated from attachment figure, young children exhibit *'separation protest'*. Attachment relationships are long lasting, and can survive in the face of severe maltreatment. Consequently, attachment is a significant theoretical concept for understanding foster children's family relationships.

Writers following Bowlby have suggested that the concept of internal working model may be more complex than originally thought (Sroufe and Fleeson, 1988), particularly for individuals who have experienced severe adversities (Crittenden, 1992), and that individuals may be able to re-appraise it in later secure relationships (Goldberg, 2000). Others suggest that the concept could be used in general terms to explain *'an internal organisation of needs, attitudes, beliefs, and styles of coping*

that amounts to an overall coherence of personality functioning' (Rutter, 1988:336). This offers a wider interpretation.

The application of the attachment framework

During the past two decades the scope of the attachment framework has been extended beyond young children's primary attachment relationships in a number of ways. It has been used to explain the quality of other close relationships, e.g. between children and fathers (Grossman and Grossman, 1991), young siblings (Stewart, 1983; Ainsworth, 1991), siblings in adulthood and old age (Cicirelli, 1982; Ross and Milgram, 1982), and marital partners and close friends (Steele and Steele, 1994; Feeney and Noller, 1996; Heard and Lake, 1997). Studies exploring the long-term impact of adversity on mental wellbeing in adulthood (Parkes, 1991; Harris and Bifulco, 1991), and adolescents' relationships and behaviour (Allen et al., 1998) have further extended the scope of the attachment framework.

Attachment theory has recently been rediscovered in social work literature (Howe, 1995; Howe, 1996; Daniel et al., 1999), applied to placement of children in substitute care (Falberg, 1981; 1994; Downes, 1992), adoption (James, 1994; Howe and Fearnley, 1999; Hughes, 1999), caring for 'looked after' children in middle childhood (Farnfield, 1998), child protection (Brandon, 1996; Howe et al., 2000), and legal practice (Schofield, 1998). No references could be found relating to the application of attachment framework to understanding 'looked after' children's sibling relationships.

Attachment and siblings

It has been suggested that the enduring nature of sibling relationships have an attachment quality. Siblings rarely lose touch with one another. The importance of siblings to individuals increases in old age (Argyle and Henderson, 1986). Siblings, who have been separated through circumstances of adoption (Mullender and Kearn, 1997), war or other life events (Humphreys, 1996), seek to establish contact with one another. Strong sibling attachments in old age are perceived to originate from close sibling bonds in childhood (Cicirelli, 1982).

Sibling attachments, which develop at an early age, may be mediated through two main routes, via sibling caregiving and through the existence of a close age gap between siblings. The evidence to support the first route comes from studies of

sibling caretaking reported by Weisner and Gallimore (1977) and Weisner (1987). In many developing countries older siblings are the main caretakers of infants and toddlers (Whiting, 1963; Ritchie and Ritchie, 1979). They may thus become supplementary attachment figures for them (Ainsworth, 1982; 1991). The second route is based on a notion that close attachments between young siblings can develop where siblings are close in age. Young siblings, even those aged one and four, may form strong bonds, which are characterised by mutually co-operative, reciprocal and trusting relationships. Such sibling relationships imply the presence of a secure attachment component to the relationship (Ainsworth, 1991; Dunn, 1993). The notion of the 'intense sibling bond', discussed earlier, combines the effects of close age gap, and quality of parental care on sibling attachment relationships (Bank and Kahn, 1982b; Bank, 1992).

The nature and quality of attachments between siblings can vary. Goldberg (2000), based on a review of the very limited research suggests that there is *some* evidence to support the notion that sibling relationships are influenced by children's attachments to their mothers. Both older siblings' care of younger siblings and infants' attachments to older siblings may reflect the older siblings' quality of attachments to their mothers. A review of literature on sibling conflict by Vandell and Bailey (1992) found that children's attachment status has a bearing on the level of negativity and conflict displayed by young siblings towards each other. Children who had been insecurely attached to both mother and father displayed most frequent and intense sibling conflict (Bosso, 1985, Teti and Ablard, 1989, and Volling, 1990, *op. cit.* Vandell and Bailey, 1992). However, Dunn (1993) cautions against making generalisations from the few studies, as research in this area is still limited.

Attachment and adversity

It is now recognised that different types of adverse circumstances have differential impact on children's development and relationships. Social disadvantage alone is considered to have little effect, other risk factors, e.g. maternal depression, abuse and neglect, early separation from mother, multiple caregivers, and institutional care, all contribute to children developing insecure attachments. These risk factors may not be present alone, for instance, depressed mothers have been found to experience other adversities, e.g. marital discord, high stress and low social support (Goldberg, 2000). The combination of a number of adverse circumstances can have a cumulative effect on attachment.

Early maltreatment can have long lasting effect on attachment relationships (Crittenden, 1992; Styron and Janoff-Bulman, 1997; Morton and Browne, 1998). Children, whose first attachments have developed under extremely adverse circumstances, present more unusual and complex attachment patterns. *Disorganised attachment* describes a confused and complex pattern found among abused children; it develops when the caregiver cannot alleviate fear because he or she has become the source of fear (Goldberg, 2000). Crittenden (1992) identified ten patterns of child attachment to mother, and that children expressed different behaviours in their interactions with their mothers and siblings. While abused children were submissive with their mothers, they were aggressive with their siblings when their mothers were not present. Referring to older siblings' aggressive behaviours towards their younger siblings she suggests that:

'...children's behaviour could be explained to be a function of their understanding (i.e. internal representational models) of how one gets what one wants (e.g. coercion) and when one dares to be coercive (e.g. when one is more powerful than one's opponent)' (Crittenden, 1992:339).

Crittenden's work would suggest that children act out their adverse early experiences differently in different relationships and contexts, indicating a more differentiated view of relationships, than previously acknowledged by attachment theorists. Theoretical ideas arising from studies of abused and neglected children are particularly relevant to this thesis. No standardised classification scheme exists for understanding the quality of attachment relationships in middle childhood (aged 7-11). Similarly, there is a dearth of longitudinal data on the impact of early attachments on sibling relationships in middle childhood.

Attachment and family systems perspective

Some writers have made linkages between attachment and family systems perspectives. The notion of 'the family as a whole' providing a reliable network of care that gives its members a sense of security to explore and develop, in effect a 'secure base', is introduced by Byng-Hall (1991). A hypothesis put forward by Donley (1993) suggests that the nature of attachment extends to the family, including siblings, as an emotional unit and that it is mediated through a relationship with the primary attachment figure. Little is known, however, empirically about the

ways in which individual attachments interact in the context of the family system (Akister, 1998).

Attachment and social support

Theoretical linkages have been made between the attachment framework and other relationship aspects, such as the provision of social and emotional support. The term support refers here to giving or exchanging of something, be it aid, affect or affirmation (Antonucci and Akiyama, 1994). The support can be tangible (lending money) or intangible (love, affection). The following linkages were identified.

Firstly, social and emotional support is considered to enhance individual's feelings of competence, self-worth, self-esteem, or self-efficacy in a similar way that a secure attachment relationship provides a secure base for an individual to explore and cope in stressful situations. These linkages have emerged from similar outcomes both have for individuals' wellbeing (Antonucci and Akiyama, 1994). Goldberg (2000) goes further by suggesting that an attachment relationship, as such, is a form of family-based emotional support, and that secure attachment is a more effective stress buffer than insecure attachment.

Secondly, the link between the quality of parent-child attachment and the quality of sibling relationships is most likely to be found in the areas of sibling support and care (Goldberg, 2000). Children who have received warm and consistent care from their parents should be able to provide similar care to their younger siblings. Securely attached child would be less likely to perceive a new sibling as threat to them, than an insecurely attached child. Furthermore, a securely attached child would be more confident and able to offer a secure base to a younger child in distress.

Thirdly, it is proposed that there is a link between attachment status and children's perceptions of close relationships as supportive in middle childhood. Booth et al., (1998) found that children who were securely attached to their mothers in their pre-school period, were more likely, than insecurely attached children, to view their siblings and mothers as a source of emotional support in middle childhood. These three theoretical linkages are important for consideration in this thesis.

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2. 5 Transactional theories

Transactional theories integrate a range of approaches, including 'within the child' genetic factors, environmental influences, parental responses, and children's own contribution to their development and relationships (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). Influences within a family are considered to be multifaceted (Scarr and Grajek, 1982; Sulloway, 1996), whereby both children and parents influence one another and contribute to the development of family relationships (Dunn, 1988a, 1988b; Rutter and Rutter, 1993). Relationships influence relationships e.g. the quality of sibling relationship may influence parent-child relationship, and parent-sibling relationships may influence sibling-sibling relationships (Hinde and Stevenson-Hinde, 1988a; Hinde, 1992; Dunn, 1988b; Dunn, 1993). The transactional approaches are useful for examining both the contemporaneous relationship processes e.g. how siblings interact with one another, interpret each other's intentions, needs and behaviour, and respond emotionally to one another; and the development of relationships in the long-term. These theories have both arisen from, and influenced the most recent phase of sibling research. This has focused on the differences that exist between children brought up in the same family (Dunn and Plomin, 1990; 1991; Dunn and McGuire, 1992; Deal et al., 1994; Hetherington et al., 1994; McGuire et al., 1994; Reiss et al., 1994). These differences have been investigated from a number of perspectives by using samples of identical and fraternal twins, full siblings, half-siblings and genetically unrelated siblings, leading to new theoretical insights to children's development and relationships. Several approaches to understanding sibling relationships have been considered together.

Behavioural geneticists have argued that the way children interact with their environments, experience their social worlds and negotiate their close relationships are influenced by genetic differences between siblings (Plomin and Daniels, 1987; Hoffman, 1991; Plomin et al., 1994). The influences of the child's temperament and personality, their style of interaction, how they think and feel about other people, and how others respond to them all have a shaping influence on both parent-child (Rutter and Rutter, 1993) and sibling relationships (Brody and Stoneman, 1987; 1994; Brody et al., 1987; 1992; Stocker et al., 1989; Boer, 1990).

Individual differences in children's sibling relationships have also been attributed to non-shared environmental influences (Dunn and Plomin, 1991; Dunn and McGuire, 1992; Deal et al., 1994; Hetherington et al., 1994). Although siblings experience a

shared upbringing, their shared experiences can affect them differently. Dunn and McGuire (1994:123) suggest that:

'...within the same family two children will usually experience differing degrees of stress... and that these events (refer to life events) can often have a cumulative effect, in which one sibling suffers increasingly from a series of events, becoming apparently more and more vulnerable'.

Similarly another sibling may cope relatively well. For some individuals negative life experiences continue to have a cumulative effect long-term (Quinton and Rutter, 1988). For others bad start in life does not necessarily lead to vulnerability in adulthood (Flint et al., 1996; Werner, 1989; 1993). An answer to some children's ability to cope with adversity may lie in their *'resilience'*. This refers to a child's ability to draw on the support of others to survive their adverse family circumstances. Resilience has been defined as *'normal development under difficult circumstances'* (Fonagy et al., 1994), and *'the phenomenon of overcoming stress or adversity'* (Rutter, 1999). Literature on resiliency emphasises the importance of both the child's characteristics and external supportive factors in fostering resiliency (Garmezy and Rutter, 1983; Luthar and Zigler, 1991; Fonagy et al., 1994; Wolin and Wolin, 1994; Walsh, 1996; Anderson, 1997; Gilligan, 1997; 1999; Daniel et al., 1999; Heller et al., 1999).

Children are now considered to be active participants in their own development and influence the course of their relationships with others. They interact with their parents and siblings in a way that enhance their ability to survive (Henry, 1999). For example, a child may attempt to protect themselves or their sibling against sexual abuse, by sharing a bed with a sibling (Anderson, 1997). Rutter (1999) refers to a child's ability to see beyond their immediate situation and plan for themselves, as *'planful competence'*. Children's own contribution to their relationships is apparent in the way they respond to their position in relation to their siblings. Siblings can adopt strategies to deal with the potential disadvantages inherent in their position. Siblings in different birth order positions create differing roles for themselves in the family, leading to different ways of seeking parental attention. Sulloway (1996) refers to this phenomenon as *'niche-picking'*. His proposition builds on the work of behavioural geneticists, who searched for explanations for differences between siblings brought up together. As the siblings get older, and the longer they live together, the differences between siblings appear to become wider. Scarr and Grajek (1982)

explain this phenomenon by a theory of 'niche-building' by older siblings. While older children seek out environmental influences that foster their particular talents, they evoke responses from their parents and others, which respond to the particular niche they have selected for themselves. While Scarr and Grajek focus on the older siblings as '*niche-builders*', Sulloway (1996) proposes that it is the younger siblings who have to diversify away from the niche already picked by the oldest sibling. Diversification is considered to minimise direct competition between siblings. The process is similar to the process of de-identification (Schachter and Stone, 1987). These processes, initiated by children, are considered to have positive consequences for sibling relationships in that children consciously choose different 'niches' within the family and develop their individual identities, interests and talents.

The continuum of attachment theory, the notions of support and resilience would suggest that the extent to which siblings act as a source of care and support, are able to form allegiances and negotiate their relationships with one another, might be one clue to their resilience.

2. 6 Summary

This chapter has discussed the way family theories have addressed sibling relationships, and the theoretical ideas, which have influenced this thesis. Attachment theory forms the main theoretical model influencing this thesis. It provides a framework for understanding qualitative aspects of foster children's sibling relationships in the context of their disrupted family relationships and adverse childhood experiences. The more recent theoretical insights, arising from studies of abused and neglected children, are particularly relevant to this thesis. The notion of siblings as important attachment figures and potential sources of support and care, in effect a 'secure base', for separated children form part of the theoretical position. The theoretical linkages made to the notion of social support suggest that sibling attachments can manifest in close understanding of siblings' needs and perspectives, emotional support and care and sharing during the middle childhood. A theoretical link has also been made between the attachment theory and the notion of socio-genealogical connectness i.e. knowledge of, and belief in, one's biological and social roots (Owusu-Bempah and Howitt, 1997), including knowledge of siblings. Information about individual's roots is considered to be important for their sense of identity and psychological wellbeing.

Linkages to other theoretical frameworks e.g. family and network theories in relation to siblings as key kin relationships, psychodynamic approaches, which illustrate the intense emotional qualities of some sibling relationships, and transactional theories incorporating both genetic and environmental influences all have a place in sibling research. Children's own contribution to their development and relationships forms an important part of the theoretical thinking for this thesis (Rutter and Rutter, 1993; Hill and Tisdall, 1997; Rutter, 1999). Children influence the course of their relationships with siblings and others by using a range of strategies. Some children's ability to survive their adverse circumstances may reflect their '*resilience*'. The individual differences found to exist between siblings brought up in the same family reflect the myriad of theoretical approaches applied in sibling research. Finally, '*relationships approaches*' by Hinde (1988) and Hinde (1992) provide a descriptive framework for analysing sibling relationships, placing relationships within increasing levels of social complexity. This will be discussed in the context of the research design and methodology, in chapter five. The next chapter provides a review of literature on children's sibling relationships, with a focus on relationship qualities and processes in middle childhood. The literature review will explore the extent to which research findings support the theoretical ideas discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 3 Understanding sibling relationships

3. 1 Introduction

Academic interest in children's relationships with their sisters and brothers is a fairly recent development. There have been four phases in the study of siblings and their relationships. These have focused on:

- (i) psychoanalytic study of the child.
- (ii) impact of family structure variables on children's development
- (iii) sibling relationship qualities in early and middle childhood, and
- (iv) mutual influence of family relationships, exploration of 'within family' differences between siblings, and children's perceptions of sibling relationship qualities.

Interest in sibling relationships emerged initially within the psychoanalytic theory and it was located in clinical practice. Academic interest in siblings did not emerge until in the 1960's and 70's. Researchers focused mainly on the effects of family structure variables on children's development and achievements (Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg, 1970; Bigner, 1974; Fogelman, 1975; 1983; Marjoribanks, 1979). This early research was concerned with children's developing personalities and abilities. The focus of interest was on *siblings* as individuals rather than on the sibling *relationship*. During the last two decades, siblings have been recognised as important in their own right. In 1980's there was a shift in focus from the individual to the relationship (Lamb and Sutton-Smith, 1982; Dunn and Kendrick, 1982; Dunn, 1983; Furman and Buhrmester, 1985a; 1985b; Buhrmester and Furman, 1990; Boer, 1990; Boer and Dunn, 1992). Along with these studies of children in the general population, researchers focused on particular groups of children and on the impact which family relationships and other early experiences can have on children's sibling relationships. The most recent research in North America (Dunn and Plomin, 1991; Dunn and McGuire 1994; Hetherington, et al., 1994) has explored within family sibling similarities and differences, and the impact of the non-shared environment on relationships between brothers and sisters. Little attention has been paid to children's own perceptions of their relationships with sisters and brothers. There are few qualitative studies available, where children's views, as part of the research strategy, have been sought (Stillwell, 1984; Hetherington, 1988; Radke-Yarrow et al., 1988; Halperin, 1981,1983; McHale and Gamble, 1987; Murphy, 1992). Much of the research has been located within developmental

psychology. Reviews of anthropological literature on siblings by Weisner and Gallimore (1977) and Weisner (1987) cite studies on sibling caretaking in the developing countries. Sociological literature has not concerned itself with the meaning of sibling experience, although during this decade there has been a growth of studies, in the UK and Scandinavia, within the 'sociology of childhood' paradigm concerning children's perceptions of their families (Hallden, 1994; Allatt, 1996; Clarke, 1996; Moore et al., 1996; O'Brien et al., 1996; Morrow, 1998). This chapter presents a literature review of children's relationships with their sisters and brothers, with a focus on middle childhood. The review is presented under three themes:

- the development of sibling relationships over time
- the impact of family structure, and
- family environment and processes on children's sibling relationships.

3. 2 Development of sibling relationships across life span

Sibling relationships are established early in life, although they continue to develop and change throughout siblings' lifetime. For the second and later born children one or more siblings have always been present. They have no memories of childhood as an only child, unlike the firstborns whose siblings were born later. This section of the review will focus mainly on middle childhood. Brief reference will be made to periods preceding and following this.

Early childhood

Infants are generally able to distinguish between their parents and other people at the age of two to three months (Rutter and Rutter, 1993). Their relationship develops from the realisation of the older sibling's existence, usually before the age of six months. Older sibling's relationship with a new sibling begins before they are born. This will take the form of expectations of their sister or brother, for instance, what they will be like, what they will do together. Relationships between twins, particularly identical twins, are established in the womb (Woodward, 1998; Wright, 1997). From the time when an infant starts to respond to the sibling's behaviour, their relationship develops rapidly. Observational studies suggest that children are capable of understanding and responding to their sibling's behaviour and emotions during their second year (Dunn and Kendrick, 1982; Dunn, 1986; 1988c; 1993). Even very young children have a capacity to be empathetic to the feelings of their

sisters and brothers. Similarly, they are capable of understanding what would annoy or upset the sibling. Children begin to use their social understanding to compete with and fight with one another. Sibling quarrels are reported to be one of the most common problems by parents of young children (Newson and Newson, 1976; 1978). There are, however, wide individual differences between siblings in terms of their responsiveness to each other (Garner et al., 1994), degree of pretend play with each other (Howe et al., 1998) and 'connectedness' of their communication (Dunn, 1993). Some sibling pairs play and talk to each other in a coherent way, reflecting that they are on the same wavelength, while other two siblings rarely converse or play jointly at all. Expressions of shared humour and fantasy play are also frequent among very young siblings (Dunn, 1993). Siblings spend more time with one another, especially where they are close in age, than in later childhood. Bank and Kahn (1975) suggest that 4-6 year olds spend over twice as much time in each other's company as with their parents. However, this may not apply to children who spend time in out-of-home daycare.

Children can develop attachments to their siblings at an early age, and use them as a 'secure base' (Ainsworth, 1982; 1991). Observations of children placed in a residential nursery suggest that the distress of separation from their attachment figure was alleviated by the presence of a sibling (Heinicke and Westheimer, 1965). Stewart's (1983) study of siblings in the 'Strange Situation' found that half of his sample of 4-year-olds provided comfort to their younger siblings (aged 10-20 months), when their mothers left them alone. Most of the younger siblings used their siblings as a 'secure base', when a stranger entered a room. Similarly, Dunn and Kendrick (1982) found that by the age of 14 months younger siblings used their older siblings for reassurance when distressed, and missed them in their absence. Children's helping behaviour is functional and task orientated (Cooper and St. Johns, 1990). Siblings can act as teachers and mentors to their younger siblings even at this young age (Gozali et al., 1994). Siblings offer unsolicited help to each other; however, the offers of help are not always wanted nor accepted by the siblings (Dunn, 1993). Children are particularly sensitive to interactions between the mother and other siblings. They begin to compare themselves to their siblings, join in family interactions, and become affected by the nature of these exchanges (Dunn, 1986). In early childhood relationships between siblings are at their most asymmetrical in terms of status. An age gap of only two years between siblings gives the older sibling a remarkable advantage in terms of linguistic, social, cognitive and motor skills. Consequently, relationships between siblings are likely to

be least peer like, compared to later on when the same age gap is likely to have less impact on their interaction. Few gender differences have been found in the way pre-school siblings interacted with each other in studies of English (Dunn and Kendrick, 1982) and Canadian children (Abramovitch et al., 1982). Individual differences in the quality of sibling relationships have been shown stability during pre-school years (Stillwell and Dunn, 1985).

Middle childhood

By the time children start school their social worlds have expanded to include adults and children outside the family. Although siblings are a significant source of companionship, children develop friendships with other children, and spend less time with their siblings. Some siblings continue to be close to one another, and play together. Follow-up studies of siblings from early childhood to early adolescence found that some, even at the ages of 10 and 13, enjoyed joint fantasy play, having joint dens and gangs, and writing stories about their fantasy lives (Dunn, 1993). Research on sibling relationships in middle childhood has focused on qualitative relationship dimensions, and processes, focusing on specific areas of interaction. Most of the North American studies reviewed here have been conducted with samples of white, middle class children from intact families, by using two-siblings with a defined age gap research strategies. Therefore, although influential, the findings may not be generalised to children living in more diverse socio-demographic contexts.

Sibling relationship qualities in middle childhood

Following the period of family constellation research in 1960-1970's, researchers aimed to develop a framework for describing and assessing sibling relationship qualities. In line with Weiss' (1974) theory that children seek different social provisions from different individuals, Furman and Buhrmester (1985a) compared ten qualities of children's relationships with mothers, fathers, siblings, grandparents, friends and teachers. They found sibling relationships to be paradoxical in nature. While the children perceived their siblings to be an important source of companionship, instrumental aid and intimacy, they were less satisfied with their relationships with siblings than anyone else, except their teachers. Children reported conflict to be present most often in sibling relationships. Following this, an interview study of children of same age (aged 11-13) identified 15 salient positive

and negative relationship qualities. These were formulated into a self-report questionnaire, and used to assess children's perceptions of their sibling relationships. The researchers identified four relationship dimensions. These were warmth/closeness, relative status/power, conflict and rivalry (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985b). A further study of a wider age range of children (average ages from 8.4 to 17.5 years) found that sibling relationships become more egalitarian and less symmetrical, and less intense with age; and encompass experiences that are partially determined by the child's position within the family constellation, the most influential of these being birth order (Buhrmester and Furman, 1990). These studies stress the *ambivalent nature of sibling relationships*, indicating that a high level of conflict can co-exist with an equally high level of warmth. Both positive (warmth/closeness) and negative (conflict/quarrelling) aspects of sibling relationships were regarded as two separate relationship dimensions, rather than two extremes of one dimension. This re-affirmed the psychodynamic theoretical position, which regards hostility and ambivalence as inevitable in sibling relationships. While ambivalence was found to exist in sibling relationships of a sample of Dutch children, Boer questions the notion of this being a blend of two independent dimensions, suggesting that:

'it may depend on the way these dimensions are operationalised and the way the data about them are collected whether or not they will appear separate or become blurred into a general "positive versus negative dimension"' (Boer, 1990: 157).

More recent longitudinal research has considered the *intensity of emotional tone* of sibling relationships, and how both positive and negative aspects are intertwined in children's everyday experiences. McGuire et al. (1996) found four patterns of relationships among a sample of 10 to 11 year old children with younger siblings aged between 6 and 10. These are:

- affect-intense (high hostility and high level of warmth)
- hostile (high hostility and low warmth)
- harmonious (low hostility and high level of warmth)
- uninvolved (low hostility and low warmth).

This study takes forward previous research in that it examined the stability of relationships in three points of time over a period of a year. It also considered the quality of sibling relationships in the context of the quality of parent-child and

parental relationships. Sibling relationships high in warmth and hostility (i.e. 'affect-intense') were rated more positive by the children, than those characterised by high level of hostility, but low warmth. Children in 'hostile' sibling relationships rated their parent-child relationships more negatively, and their parents rated their marriages more negatively, indicating that negative parental and parent-child relationships are reflected in the quality of sibling relationships. However, hostility between siblings may be experienced less negatively, where the emotional tone of family relationships is generally positive. McGuire et al. (1996) conclude that:

'Although, in some cases, sibling conflict may constitute a "training ground" for childhood aggression, our results suggest that the potential negative correlates of sibling hostility may be mitigated by equally high levels of warmth.' (McGuire et al., 1996:238)

This would suggest that hostility is not an inevitable component of all sibling relationships for children in the general population, as was proposed by the psychodynamic framework. It is important to consider *what goes on between siblings*, e.g. relationship processes, in order to obtain a fuller understanding of the nature and quality of sibling relationships in middle childhood.

Sibling relationship processes in middle childhood

The dynamic nature of sibling relationships is reflected in research on how siblings interact with one another, how they get on, and what they do together. The following summarises research findings relating to sibling support and caretaking; comparison, competition, and rivalry; conflict, and sibling abuse. Children's strategies for dealing with potentially negative processes will be referred to.

Sibling support and caretaking

By middle childhood siblings can provide considerable emotional and practical support to one another. Emotional support can manifest in siblings talking with and listening to one another when they are sad, angry or worried, and unable to turn to their parents (Bryant, 1992). They may offer support by sharing and keeping confidences, and not telling on each other's behaviour. Older siblings can now translate parents' behaviour and external world, and stretch family rules and parental boundaries, making life easier for the younger siblings to follow (Bank and Kahn, 1975). To what extent and in what circumstances do siblings provide effective

emotional support to one another depends on a range of factors, including their style of interaction with their siblings. Bryant (1992) found that supportive mothers and siblings shared similar styles of response to children, namely accepting the child's feelings without criticising their behaviour. However, siblings' and parents' strategies for offering support differ in that parental responses to children are more complex than those offered by siblings. Practical support is offered in the form siblings helping with homework and household tasks (Cooper and St. John, 1990). Older siblings can teach their younger siblings new skills and help with academic work (Azmitia and Hesse, 1993), particularly in families where siblings' academic competence surpasses that of the parents (Bryant and Litman, 1987). Children learn to bargain and negotiate with their siblings, who can provide considerable resources for one another by exchanging goods and services.

Older siblings can also look after their younger ones in their parents' absence. The extent to which siblings look after one another in developed countries is yet little explored. Some information about children's responsibilities towards their siblings can be gleaned from a British study of domestic labour by Morrow (1994). She found 30 per cent of the boys and 50 per cent of the girls in a sample of 11-16 old children undertaking some domestic tasks, including caring for their siblings. The latter included collecting siblings from school and looking after them during school holidays, after school and in the evenings. Research into the experiences of children with ill or disabled parents (Aldridge and Becker, 1993; 1995; Segal and Simkins, 1993) and parents who misuse alcohol (Laybourn et al., 1996) has discovered that children in one parent families in particular may end up taking on the sole responsibility for the household, including caring for their siblings. Children with disabled siblings (Powell and Gallagher, 1993) and with siblings who have emotional and behavioural difficulties (Kendall, 1999) have also found to carry increased responsibilities for their siblings. Responsibilities placed on children for their siblings vary across cultures. In Scandinavian countries some children from the age of seven upwards are left on their own or with their siblings before or after school while their parents are at work. Solberg (1990) gives an account of 10-12 year old Norwegian children managing their daily lives competently and independent of direct parental supervision. North American studies of self and sibling care by Cain and Hofferth (1989) and Padilla and Landreth (1989) suggest that the phenomenon is surprisingly common and that the numbers of children left alone or in the care of a sibling after school are increasing. Children as young as aged 5 to 6 have reported caring for their younger siblings (Koch, 1960). In many developing

countries, female children in particular, play an important role in looking after their younger siblings (Whiting, 1963; Weisner and Gallimore, 1977). In shared-caretaking communities siblings are viewed as important caregivers and are accorded power appropriate to their role (Weisner, 1987). Research findings in developed countries, however, often have contradictory conclusions. Sibling caretaking has been found to have both positive and negative consequences. Support and caretaking by an older sibling can act as a protective factor for children under stress (Sandler, 1980). Similarly, taking responsibility for younger siblings may enhance older sibling's self-esteem and promote resilience (Werner, 1993), and promote interactive and prosocial behaviour between siblings (Bryant, 1992). Sibling caretaking is, however, qualitatively different from parental caretaking and it cannot entirely replace parental care (Bryant, 1992). When children are inadequately supervised, sibling caretaking can have entirely negative consequences, leading to the abuse of, and by siblings (Margolin and Craft, 1990; Wiehe, 1990; Whipple and Finton, 1995).

Sibling comparison, competition and rivalry

Social comparison processes operating in middle childhood affect children's relationships in a fundamental way (Bryant, 1982; Garbarino and Stott, 1992). Children become increasingly aware of their own talents and abilities, in relation to their sibling's performance. They begin to compete not only for their parents' attention, affection and love, but also directly with each other. Sibling competition, generally confused with sibling rivalry, is commonly perceived to be problematic in middle childhood. Sibling rivalry lacks a common definition; researchers rarely define the term. Dictionary definitions treat rivalry and competition, and jealousy and envy as almost synonymous (The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, 1979). However, sibling rivalry is not a one-dimensional concept. Boer (1990:20-1) suggests that it is multifaceted involving two dimensions: action versus emotion, and dyadic versus triadic. Sib-rivalry and sib-competition refer to *actions*, while sib-jealousy and sib-envy refer to *emotions*. The action in sib-rivalry concerns *somebody outside the sibling relationship*, while in sib-competition it is *within the relationship*, using the other as a reference point. The emotion of sib-jealousy concerns *somebody outside the relationship*, while in sib-envy it concerns the *partner*, and there is a negative feeling about something the partner possesses.

Some siblings deal with competition and rivalry by pursuing different interests and excelling in different domains from those of their siblings. Although the

consequences of this strategy are generally considered to be positive, it may also have negative long-term consequences. One of the siblings may lose out, for instance, by not pursuing academic interests because their older sibling has already chosen this domain (Cooper and St. John, 1990).

Sibling conflict

Parents and professionals generally regard sibling conflict as inevitable. It is considered to follow normative patterns during childhood and adolescence (Vandell and Bailey, 1992). Research studies rarely define the specific behaviours included within the term conflict; however, verbal squabbles and arguments, and physical aggression and fighting are commonly cited (Newson and Newson, 1976). The perception of sibling conflict as 'normative' may have helped to legitimise children's negative behaviours towards their siblings. Browne and Herbert (1997) suggest that although the use of physical aggression to settle sibling disputes is common, parents do not tend to view such behaviour as abusive. There is some evidence to suggest that children's patterns of aggression and friendliness towards their siblings remain consistent over time (Stillwell and Dunn, 1985). Consequently, negative patterns of sibling behaviour can become repetitive and have a cumulative effect over a period of time.

Researchers tend to perceive conflict to occur because siblings compete for parental attention, and suggest a strategy of parental non-intervention in conflicts between very young siblings (Kendrick and Dunn, 1983), and siblings in middle childhood (Brody and Stoneman (1987). Conflict has been found to be more common among brothers and most common between an older brother and younger sister (Vandell and Bailey, 1992). Sibling conflict, and the most effective parental strategies to manage it, may be perceived differently by children (Prochaska and Prochaska, 1985; Herzberger and Hall, 1993). A study of children's views on sibling fighting, designed and administered by children themselves found that on average children reported co-operating and having fun with a sibling nearly twice as often a day as they fought. Reasons for fighting included bad mood, to get even and protecting own room and belongings, followed by boredom and to get parents' attention. Fighting for parents' attention was perceived as the reason only one third as often as fighting because of boredom. No significant gender differences were found in the perceived causes of conflict, however, brothers and sisters offered different solutions to stop fighting. Boys regarded the separation of siblings as the most effective parental

intervention, while girls suggested 'giving each child the exact same thing' as effective. Reward for 'being good', keeping children busy, and being disciplined ranked the overall first intervention choices for both girls and boys. The young researchers concluded that children get over their fights quickly. They wondered why parents' fights lasted much longer (Prochaska and Prochaska, 1985). The study suggests that the children perceived sibling fighting to be a relatively harmless activity.

It is important to recognise that the above studies were conducted with children in the general population. Different processes in negotiating conflict may be in place in families living in adverse circumstances. Vandell and Bailey (1992) suggest that it is important to distinguish between 'constructive' and 'destructive' conflicts. Constructive conflicts, as referred to in the sibling fights study above, are easily resolved through negotiation, and are less likely to be experienced as abusive by siblings.

'Destructive conflicts are characterised by high negative affect; they spread beyond the initial issue to other issues, and they escalate to intrusive and insistent coercion' (Vandell and Bailey, 1992:244).

Destructive conflicts are likely to be experienced as abusive, usually by the younger sibling involved.

Sibling abuse

North American studies of adults' recollections of their sibling experiences in childhood point to the existence of systematic sibling abuse within families, which is often hidden from parents (Bank and Kahn, 1982a; Wiehe, 1990). Such abuse covers a range of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, often occurring in interaction with each other. Based on an exploratory study of 150 adults, who as children had been abused by their siblings, Wiehe (1990) categorised the following forms of emotional abuse: name calling, ridicule, degradation, exacerbating fear, destroying personal possessions, and torture or destruction of a pet. He referred to 'name calling, ridicule, and degradation' collectively as *teasing*. This is commonly regarded as harmless, yet these adults' recollections indicate that these behaviours can have long-term consequences. There is a dearth of contemporaneous information about the prevalence of sibling abuse in middle childhood and what children perceive to be abusive sibling behaviour. 'Psychological maltreatment'

between siblings is considered to be one of the most common, yet unrecognised forms of child abuse (Whipple and Finton, 1995). It is estimated that nearly a third of the total child population in the USA, engage in abusive acts against their siblings (Strauss et al., 1980, op. cit. Corby, 1993). Girls are thought more likely to settle their sibling quarrels verbally than boys, who are more likely to use physical force. As children get older physical aggression between siblings is thought to decrease. There has been increased interest in young male perpetrators of abuse (Vizard et al., 1995; Buist and Fuller, 1997). Sexual abuse by siblings is thought to be much more common than currently recognised (De Young, 1981; De Jong, 1989; Margolin and Craft, 1990; Laviola, 1992; Adler and Schutz, 1995; Browne and Herbert, 1997). A large-scale survey of young people in Britain found that one in ten, mostly girls, had suffered sexual abuse before the age of 16. Proportionally more sexual abuse of children was perpetrated by a brother or a step-brother (43%), than by a step-father (19%) or a father (14%) (Cawson et al., 2000). The above studies show that sibling abuse is perpetrated mainly by brothers against sisters. The feminist paradigm of family violence posits that violence in the family is primarily directed against women and it reflects men's domination and control over women (Dobash and Dobash, 1980; 1992). Boys, who witness men's abuse of women in a family, may use their sibling relationships as a training ground to learn how to control, coerce and dominate their sisters. However, little empirical information is available on the processes that lead to brothers' abuse of their sisters. Similarly, the potential connection between abuse perpetrated by non-related children and adults, and sibling abuse has received little attention. Browne and Herbert (1997) draw attention to a link between bullying at school and at home, suggesting that children, who are aggressive at school, also tend to be aggressive at home.

Adolescence

As children move into adolescence, the nature of their relationships with their siblings change, although qualitative aspects (both positive and negative) of relationships with individual siblings tend to persist (Dunn et al., 1994). Older children invest more in friendship and peer relationships, although attachments between siblings remain relatively strong throughout adolescence (Buhrmester and Furman, 1990). Although siblings now spend less time in joint activities, their relationships with siblings appear to be more similar to peer relationships, siblings acting as confidantes and friends (Cooper and St, John, 1990). Siblings may now support each other, by uniting against parents, for instance by bargaining jointly and

backing each other up. Relationships between siblings become more egalitarian, less asymmetrical and less intense (Buhrmester and Furman, 1990). In later adolescence siblings are less likely to compare themselves with their siblings, reducing potential for rivalry (Cooper and St. John, 1990). Siblings often experience the departure of their older sibling from the family home in adolescence. This will have an impact on all of the siblings; however, the effect is likely to be greatest on the sibling closest in age. They may feel the loss of emotional support, particularly in a small family (Mason, 1998). The remaining sibling may be left in a "naked" position in respect of the parents. Relationship with parents may become 'overloaded' for the remaining sibling (Bank and Kahn, 1975).

Adulthood and old age

Argyle and Henderson (1986) suggest that contact between siblings follows a U-shape, being high in childhood and teenage years, falling off in middle of adult life and then picking up again as the siblings move into old age. After sharing their growing up years when siblings reach adulthood, they usually go their separate ways. Contact becomes entirely voluntary after siblings leave the parental home. The most sociable relationships between siblings are found between those of the same gender and those closest in birth order (Allan, 1979). Compatibility and liking for one another are important to siblings in adulthood (Finch, 1989). Sisters play an important role in maintaining family ties (Cicirelli, 1982), they are more likely to be in close contact with one another (Hunt, 1978; McGlone et al., 1998) and care for each other's children (Hill, 1987). Sibling relationships in adulthood normally operate on the basis of 'balanced reciprocity' - optional rather than obligatory exchange of supports (Avioli, 1989), where siblings expect each other to reciprocate in some way the support given. Even where contact with siblings is infrequent, they can express general solidarity to each other and remain close during adulthood (Bedford, 1989b).

Siblings become increasingly important to one another in old age. Siblings share with each other memories of childhood, their family and the past. Relationships, where there is at least one sister, have been found to be the most satisfying (Gold, 1989). Some sisters may care for their siblings in old age (Wilson et al., 1994). Small proportions of older people, particularly those, who have never married, continue to live with their siblings. There is a considerable body of evidence from North American sources, which supports the notion that difficult relationships

between siblings can mellow, and that positive relationships between siblings become increasingly important in old age (Avioli, 1989; Bedford, 1989a; 1989b; Cicirelli, 1982; Connidis, 1989; Gold, 1989; Matthews et al., 1989; Moss and Moss, 1989; Ross and Milgram, 1982; Seltzer, 1989; Suggs, 1989). Loss of a sibling is probably the bereavement most frequently experienced by people over the age of 65. The emotional impact of sibling death can be a real blow to an older person's identity, particularly for the last surviving sibling. On the positive side, a death of a sibling can enhance closeness to remaining siblings. However, it has been suggested that the relationship between siblings can continue in spite of separation and death (Moss and Moss, 1989).

3. 3 Family structure and sibling relationships

The family structure (constellation) research assumes that parents and siblings provide differential environmental experiences for children in different birth-order positions, and for children in families of different sizes. These differential family experiences are associated with the children's developmental (Fogelman, 1975; 1983; Marjoribanks, 1979; Blake, 1989; Van Eijck and De Graaf, 1995) and relationship outcomes (Buhler, 1940; Neisser, 1957; Koch, 1960; Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg, 1970; Bigner, 1974; Bryant, 1982; Furman and Buhrmester, 1985a; 1985b; Boer, 1990; Buhrmester and Furman, 1990).

Therefore, the main family structure variables:

- siblingship size
- age of the child
- age difference between siblings
- birth order (child's position in relation to his or her siblings), and
- gender of the child and siblings (both in absolute terms i.e. male or female, and in relative terms, same- or opposite gender), are all considered to have an impact on all children in the family.

Sibling relationships are affected largely by sibling constellation. Some writers have expressed criticism about a lack of theory to guide research on family structure effects (Scarr and Grajek, 1982). There have, however, been some advances in this area more recently. It has been posited that family constellation is more likely to

influence complementary than reciprocal aspects of relationships. Relationships between siblings with a large age gap are normally characterised by complementary (Dunn, 1983) or asymmetric (Boer, 1990) relationship aspects, (e.g. caretaking, protection, support and teaching). These relate to differences in power and status, and share some similarities with parent-child relationships. Sibling relationships for more closely spaced siblings are more likely to resemble peer relationships; these are reciprocal (Dunn, 1983) or symmetric (Boer, 1990) in nature. The complementary relationship aspects are considered to be developmentally more significant (Dunn, 1983).

The following summarises some of the research findings related to the impact of family structure on development and sibling relationships.

Growing up in a large versus small family

The findings of the National Child Development study indicate that children from large families are disadvantaged in their educational attainment, social adjustment and height, compared to children from smaller families, after allowance had been made for social class, region and gender (Fogelman, 1975; 1983). Fogelman advanced a '*shared resources*' hypothesis, which suggests that these disadvantages result because both parental time and material resources are spread more thinly than in smaller families. Also referred to as a '*resource dilution*' theory, it is supported by North American (Blake, 1989) and Hungarian research (Van Eijk and De Graaf, 1995). Sibling relationships can be more complex for children in large families than in small families due to a greater number of dyadic relationships each child will have. Other family structure variables e.g. gender, age spacing and birth order also impact children's interactions with one another. Older siblings in large families have been perceived as more nurturing by their younger siblings than in small families. They are more likely to be relied by parents to look after their younger siblings (Buhrmester and Furman, 1990). Siblings in large families are likely to spend more time with each other than with their parents. There may also be differences in the way large families, with children occupying a greater age span, function compared to small families. Some differences may be due to parental expectations, which may vary by birth order and gender. Research on children growing up in large families is extremely limited. This is not surprising considering the complexity of the problem.

Age difference between siblings

The advantages and disadvantages of the size of the age difference between siblings vary depending on which perspective this is considered. Parents may prefer to have their children in close succession so that they would grow up together. Closely spaced siblings spend more time with each other, leading to more emotionally intense relationships and increased sibling conflict to develop between them (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985b). Siblings of the same gender who are also closely spaced, experience more intense feelings of ambivalence in their relationship (Bryant, 1982). Such siblings are referred to as 'high access' siblings. Sibling relationships are likely to be particularly intense, where siblings are 'high access' and parents are frequently unavailable, (Bank, 1992). A wider difference in age is considered to lead to warmer and more caring relationships to develop between siblings (Buhrmester and Furman, 1990).

Being the oldest, the youngest or in the middle

The impact of birth order on development and relationships features commonly in fiction and folklore. Neisser (1957) suggests that the following three themes appear in the myths and customs across cultures:

- the oldest show resentment of the second born children
- the oldest are expected to take responsibility for younger siblings, and
- they are treated in some degree 'special'.

There are cross-cultural variations, as well as between individuals, in any given group. For instance, the Lapps are said to favour their youngest children (Neisser, 1957), and the oldest siblings among the Rajputs of Khalapur in India do not express resentment towards their younger siblings (Minturn and Hitchcock, 1963). These themes also appear in the earlier academic writing. Psychoanalytic writers acknowledged the special position of the oldest sibling (Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956). Child's position is also influenced by other family structure variables e.g. sibblingship size, age difference, and gender.

Children's own perceptions show that they are highly sensitive about their place in relation to their siblings. Even twins and triplets are aware of the significance of their birth order regardless how small the time difference between their births (Koch,

1966; Woodward, 1998). Power balance between siblings is normally, although not always, determined by birth order. Buhler (1940) found that in none of the six sibling pairs studied, both siblings had equal rights and privileges. Power balance can be influenced by the way older and younger siblings perceive and behave towards one another. Older siblings are considered to have a more significant influence on the younger siblings than vice versa (Koch, 1960; Bigner, 1974; Bryant, 1992; Boer, 1990). Younger siblings often admire older ones (Buhrmester and Furman, 1990), whereas older siblings seem more oriented towards parents (Boer, 1990). Children generally perceive relationships with their younger siblings as less harmonious and warm than relationships with their older siblings (Buhrmester and Furman, 1990). Younger siblings may perceive their older brothers to be more powerful, because they use physical expressions of power (e.g. hitting, wrestling, and chasing). Furthermore, older brothers may use their power to 'interfere', whereas older sisters are perceived to use their power in a more 'facilitating manner' (Bryant, 1982). They are also more likely to show caretaking behaviour, particularly older sisters. Having an older sister is considered to be a protective factor for children under stress (Sandler, 1980; Jenkins, 1992). For many children an older sibling can also be a source of conflict, stress and abuse (Whipple and Finton, 1995).

Parents may contribute to the power balance by assigning greater responsibilities and privileges to the older siblings. The parents practice their parenting skills on their firstborn, who becomes a kind of yardstick against which the younger siblings can be measured. In their turn the oldest influence their parents and siblings, especially interaction between siblings (Barnes and Austin, 1995). Although parents are more experienced in parenting, the later born siblings may feel they are worse off as they must compete with their older siblings for parental resources. Similarly, the firstborn child or the earlier-born children may feel disadvantaged for having to share resources with their younger siblings.

Impact of changes in family structure

Research studies generally assume that ordinal position is a fixed variable. However, changes in sibling position occur as additional children are born. The oldest will remain in that position, and similarly the youngest child, once the family is complete. Siblings occupy various positions, for varying periods of time, in relation to each other, depending on the age differences between siblings and the number

of siblings at any one time. These changes are part of the natural development of the family.

As a consequence of parental separation, divorce, cohabitation and remarriage siblings may lose their shared living arrangements, and/or acquire new step-siblings (Kaplan et. al., 1993; Monahan et al., 1993; Cockett and Tripp, 1994). A child's position in relation to their siblings in a re-ordered family may change from being the youngest, or the oldest, to becoming one of the middle children. Similarly, a child may find themselves as the youngest or the oldest in their re-ordered family. Changes in family constellation impact on siblings' relationships with one another. An analysis of children's calls to ChildLine found that many children in re-ordered families struggled with their sibling relationships. Some children in step-families found it difficult to adapt to their new family structures, and felt unsure about their place in it. Relationships with step-siblings were marked by competitiveness, jealousy and mistrust. Children felt hurt when they thought that their parent favoured a step-sister or brother over them. For some, the arrival of new baby step-sibling was difficult to accept. The researchers concluded that '*set in the context of loss, these feelings can be a heady mix*' (Keep and Pegram, 1998:53). There is some evidence to suggest that adaptation to new family structures may be easier for children at an early age, as younger children in step-families have fared better than older ones (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). In lone parent families, following the departure of a parent, the oldest sibling may need to assume some responsibilities for the siblings and the household. This was found to be the case, particularly for boys living in families parented by lone fathers (Keep and Pegram, 1998). However, in comparison with children growing up in step-families, older children in lone parent families have fared better in their family relationships. Children who have experienced multiple changes of family structure may face additional stress on their sibling relationships through the repeated additions and/or losses of step-siblings (Cockett and Tripp, 1994; Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). These findings are particularly salient for children in foster care, who have experienced considerable family disruption.

3. 4 Family environment and processes

The theoretical frameworks discussed in chapter two suggest that the social and environmental contexts of the family, and the internal family relationships and processes, all have a bearing on children's sibling relationships. Despite growing up

in the same family children experience each dyadic relationship, a parent-child and sibling-sibling relationship, as unique. Experiences outside the family introduce children to other influences, which are also unique to each child, these all contribute to the nature and quality of their relationships with siblings (Dunn and Plomin, 1991; Hetherington et al., 1994). Changes in children's environment caused by life events, both normative, e. g. a child or sibling entering primary school, moving to secondary school or leaving home, and non-normative, e.g. parental separation, divorce, illness or death, all have an influence on sibling relationships. The impact of stressful changes in the child's life, such as separations from parents and siblings, house moves, or increased parental alcohol use (Laybourn et al., 1996) may have a different impact on each child. Growing up in a particular family creates a unique microenvironment for each sibling (Hetherington, 1988; Scarr and Grajek, 1982). Dunn and Plomin (1991) suggest that the non-shared influences, in other words, *children's micro-environments*, are particularly important for the development of sibling relationships, as they are likely to make siblings different from each other. The most recent research identifies particular family processes and environments, which are salient for this thesis. Several of these indicate that children with difficult or interrupted relationships with parents are more likely to have problematic relationships with their brothers and sisters (Kosonen, 1994). These factors are not likely to exist in isolation; they may co-exist and have a cumulative effect on children's development and relationships.

These factors include:

- parent-child attachment relationships (discussed in chapter two)
- parental relationships and family atmosphere
- parental unavailability and neglect
- impact of violence and abuse
- style and quality of parenting
- differential treatment and favouritism, and
- experiences of sibling separation and loss.

The significance of these factors is now considered in more detail.

Parental relationships and family atmosphere

Family atmosphere is by and large, although not entirely, determined by adults. The emotional climate of the family, including parents' psychological state, has been

found to influence the quality of sibling relationships (Brody and Stoneman, 1987). Parents' behaviour towards each other, and the quality of their relationship, plays a role in shaping sibling relationships (Dunn, 1988a). A number of studies have found an association between parental disharmony, conflict, differential parental treatment (Deal, 1996) and poor sibling relationships (Jenkins, 1992; McGuire et al., 1996), the effect of the parental relationship being more marked in 'chaotic' families (Radke-Yarrow, et al., 1988). Conflict between parents can spread to parent-child and sibling relationships (Christensen and Margolin, 1988). Most serious physical abuse between siblings has been found to occur in chaotic and disorganised families (Bolton and Bolton, 1987). Studies of divorced families indicate that, after divorce, boys have more problematic sibling relationships than girls do, particularly if boys have younger siblings (Hetherington, 1988; MacKinnon, 1989). When there has been conflict between parents before, during and after separation, sibling relationships are particularly poor. It has been suggested, however, that some gender differences may be due to the fact that girls and boys may express their distress in different ways (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). However, it is important to note that children have different relationships with different siblings, therefore children, who have a hostile relationship with one sibling, may have a closer relationship with other sibling(s).

Parental unavailability and neglect

Parents can be physically absent from the family home, and/or emotionally unavailable for reasons of depression, alcohol or drug misuse, or by being occupied by other concerns. The impact of parental unavailability may have both positive and negative consequences for children's sibling relationships, depending on the children's family circumstances. In community samples of children drawn from normal populations, the consequences have been mainly positive, in that siblings have provided support to, and drawn support from, one another (Dunn and Kendrick, 1982; Stewart, 1983; Bryant and Litman, 1987; Bryant, 1992). In some families, however, older siblings may become overburdened by their responsibilities for their younger siblings and come to resent them (Chase, 1999). Where siblings share the responsibilities, and these do not exceed the children's abilities, consequences need not be negative (Minuchin et al., 1967). Based on the recollections of adults in therapy, Bank and Kahn (1982a) suggest that in families where parents are consistently unavailable, and neglect their children's physical and emotional needs, sibling relationships are likely to be most negative. The impact of

neglect varies, depending on the sibling's position, age and stage of development, gender and past family experiences. When children are left without adult supervision, in some families this may lead to abuse of and by siblings (Green, 1984; Margolin and Craft, 1990; Wiehe, 1990; Whipple and Finton, 1995).

It is particularly important to consider parental unavailability in the context of siblings' past relational experiences. In circumstances, where there are preceding compensatory factors present, siblings can develop an intensely loyal relationship. Bank and Kahn (1982b: 264) suggests that such intense sibling loyalty occurs in circumstances where:

- the children had had at least one nurturing parent who set an early example of caring for others
- the parents had not played one sibling against the other, and the siblings had developed relatively harmonious relationships in their early lives
- siblings had been brought up together, rather than separated
- the siblings were close in age, and were able to identify with each other's concerns.

These studies illustrate the combined effect of various factors on the quality of sibling relationships.

Impact of violence and abuse

Growing up in an abusive family environment provides children with a negative context for learning how to deal with conflict and negotiate their relationships with others (Bolton and Bolton, 1987). Abuse can manifest in direct physical, sexual and emotional abuse of children and abuse of their mothers. It is now widely acknowledged that both mothers and children are often abused in the same family (Morley and Mullender, 1994; Department of Health, 1995; McGee, 2000). Less attention has been paid to the contemporaneous effects of domestic violence on children's relationships with their siblings and other children. Children are emotionally affected by living with, and witnessing men's violence against women. Children may be encouraged or forced to join in verbal or physical abuse of their mothers (Mullender and Morley, 1994a; Hester and Radford, 1996; McGee, 2000). Children who have witnessed domestic violence were found to display angry and aggressive behaviour; boys slightly more often towards their mothers and other

children, sometimes specifically towards girls, whereas girls aggression was directed more at boys and men (McGee, 2000). Little is known about the effects of domestic violence on the quality of children's sibling relationships, and in particular how older brothers treat their younger siblings in abusive families.

Recent theoretical insights from the attachment perspective suggest that abused children's representational models are based on notions of power and coercion, and that children act out these models in their sibling relationships (Crittenden, 1992). There is some evidence to suggest that abusive childhood experiences have long-term consequences on parent-child relationships and close relationships in general (Haapasalo and Aaltonen, 1999). Emotional abuse taking place in the context of parent-child relationships can have a negative impact on sibling relationships (Doyle, 1997; Glaser and Prior, 1997). Styron and Janoff-Bulman (1997:1021) suggest that:

'...disrespect, emotional insults, and physical violence are powerfully experienced by abused children, and directly affect the way they live their lives interpersonally'.

Children in abusing families have been found to perceive each other more negatively or ambivalently than those in the control families (Halperin, 1983). Both abused and non-abused children can be negatively affected, however, abused children may feel more hostility towards their siblings than vice versa. Boys can be hostile towards their brothers, particularly, if they are compared with them (Pfouts, 1976, op. cit. Halperin, 1983). Parental differential treatment, manifesting as a policy of 'divide and rule' can cause deep rivalries between siblings in abused families (Doyle, 1997). The amount of aggression displayed between siblings can increase with the increase in family size. This may be particularly so with the older siblings who are able to use more sophisticated strategies (Crittenden, 1992). These findings suggest that parental abuse may have a cumulative effect on sibling interactions in large families.

Parenting style

The way parents respond to their children's needs and manage their behaviour on a day-to-day basis has an impact on children's social behaviour and relationships. Researchers have identified parenting styles that are likely to support positive relationships, and those likely to lead to more negative outcomes. The optimum

development is considered to occur when parents adopt an *authoritative style*, e.g. they are warm, loving, responsive and supportive, and able to set appropriate limits to the child's behaviour without exerting unnecessary restrictions. In contrast *authoritarian* parents are highly controlling and lacking in warmth. *Permissive* parents are caring but unable to control their children (Baumrind, 1988, op. cit. Eisenberg and Mussen, 1989). Authoritative parenting is considered to produce competent, socially responsible, co-operative and friendly children, all qualities likely to foster positive relationships with sisters and brothers. By definition the children who are the subject of this study are unlikely to have experienced authoritative parenting.

Parental negativity towards and rejection of boys in middle childhood, has been observed to be associated with boys' aggressive behaviour towards their siblings (MacKinnon-Lewis et al., 1997). Where parents are consistently and entirely negative towards their children, e.g. the family environment is *low on warmth and high on criticism*, the long-term outcomes for children are considered to be most damaging. Children growing up in such families may be subject to harsher punishment, physical neglect, and occasionally sexual abuse (Department of Health, 1995). Sibling abuse is more likely to occur in a home, where child-rearing practices are cold; where children are subject to parental abuse; where there is discord and violence in the home; and when parents fail to set clear rules about discipline, or monitor children's aggressive behaviour (Browne and Herbert, 1997).

Apart from their parenting style, parents can adopt specific strategies to foster positive sibling relationships and reduce potential conflict between siblings. These include treating all children equally; allowing children to settle their disputes without intervention; and setting clear rules and expectations for siblings' behaviour towards each other (Brody and Stoneman, 1987). Boer (1990) identified parents' child-centeredness and involvement with their children, as the key characteristics in families with the most positive sibling relationships.

Differential treatment and favouritism

The extent that parents respond to their children differently, by providing differential parenting experiences, and what impact such experiences have on children's development and sibling relationships, has only recently been explored. Studies of *differential parental treatment* (parental behaviours and actions which can be

observed and measured by outsiders), and *favouritism* (child's subjective feelings about differential treatment) (Boer et al., 1992) have considered children's perceptions, quality of sibling relationships, and long-term impact of extreme favouritism.

Parental favouritism is a remarkably common perception among siblings (Zervas and Sherman (1994), however, it may be a more complex phenomenon than previously thought. In some families only one parent may favour a child, and in others both parents may favour the same child, or different children. Children have reported parental favouritism towards themselves and their sibling simultaneously (Boer, 1990). Children are sensitive from a very early age to the way parents treat them compared to their siblings (Dunn and Kendrick, 1982). However, by middle childhood they are able to rationalise parents' responses in terms of differences in siblings' ages, personal attributes, family alliances, or own and sibling's behaviour towards parents (Kowal and Kramer, 1997), and their disabled sibling's additional needs (McHale and Gamble, 1987). Where children were able to rationalise the parental differential treatment, their relationships with their siblings were more positive.

Parents can also treat siblings differently for varying reasons and in different ways depending on the context, for instance, when alone with the child (Bryant, 1982). Children have perceived their parents to favour siblings because of their intellect, behaviour, birth order (both younger and older siblings were perceived equally favoured) and talents (Zervas and Sherman (1994). Other studies suggest that parents favour younger siblings (Brody and Stoneman, 1994; Bryant and Crockenberg, 1980; Stocker et al., 1989) who receive more affection from, and less control by their mothers (Dunn et al., 1990b; McHale et al., 1995). There is some evidence that parental differential treatment remains constant over time (McGuire et al., 1995), however, studies are limited in that most of them refer to mothers only. There is a dearth of information about the combined effects of mothers' and fathers' differential treatment (Volling and Belsky, 1992).

Differential parental treatment is considered to have an effect on the qualitative aspects of sibling relationships (Dunn, 1993; Boer, 1990; Stocker et al., 1989; Brody and Stoneman, 1987) and behaviour, increasing sibling conflict (Dunn, 1993; McHale et al., 1995; Vandell and Bailey, 1992; Zervas and Sherman, 1994), and abuse (Green, 1984). It is considered to have a negative effect on both the favoured

and non-favoured sibling (Bryant, 1982). The more one sibling is favoured, the more negative behaviour the siblings are likely to demonstrate (Vandell and Bailey, 1992). Dunn and McGuire (1992) posit that the link between differential maternal treatment and sibling conflict may be especially strong in families living under stress. Therefore, these findings are particularly important for this thesis.

The long-term negative impact of extreme parental favouritism, leading to severe sibling rivalry, has been confirmed by studies of sibling relationships in old age (Ross and Milgram, 1982) and adults in psychotherapy (Bank, 1987; Bank and Kahn, 1982a), referred to earlier. Similarly, some adults have reported on their own lack of affection, as parents, towards one of their children, while enjoying a 'magical chemistry' with the child's sibling (Bank, 1987). Based on clinical practice, Bank (1987) suggests, that such extreme favouritism requires at least one or more of the following factors to be present:

- at least one parent has experienced emotional trauma in childhood
- the child's conception or birth was unusual or stressful
- the child's physical, gender-related, intellectual or behavioural characteristics are invested with 'good' or 'bad' meanings, and
- there is severe marital conflict, and
- the parents are unable to change the 'good/bad' identities assigned to the children.

It is important to note that some of the above studies are based on samples of adults seeking therapeutic help with their sibling relationships and that these findings have not been confirmed in community samples (Boer, 1990). However, these findings are important for the reason that they focus on extreme forms of parental behaviour and adverse family environments, similar to foster children's family circumstances.

Experiences of sibling separation and loss

As part of family life, siblings may spend short periods of time away from each other, for instance, because of hospitalisation, activity camps and visiting relatives. For some children separations from siblings can be prolonged due to parental separation, divorce and re-marriage. Kaplan et al., (1993) in a review of literature suggest that separating siblings following divorce can be potentially harmful to children's sibling relationships in that:

- the stress placed on sibling bonds in their formative years can have negative after effects
- siblings will be deprived of their natural support system at a stressful time
- separation of siblings affects long-established reciprocal roles, affecting children's social integration and wellbeing, and
- redefinition of family and kin relationships may lead to closed or ambiguous family boundaries
- without ongoing interaction with one another siblings may not be able to sustain their relationships in the long-term.

Furthermore, the separation of siblings exposes them to different environmental influences, making them more different from one another, than siblings who remain together (Monahan et al., 1993). Subsequently, the maintenance of strong sibling bonds can become increasingly difficult over time.

A study of children's calls to ChildLine, referred to earlier, found that one of the issues for children in separated and divorced families was a loss of contact with siblings. Some children worried about their sibling's wellbeing and safety. Those who maintained contact with their adult siblings derived a great benefit from this. Adult siblings provided refuge from their troubled family situations (Keep and Pegram, 1998). Studies of retrospective accounts by adults who grew up in substitute care, or were adopted, provide information about the long-term impact of separations on sibling relationships. These studies will be reviewed in the next chapter. No information could be obtained about the extent of, and reasons for, sibling separations relating to children in the general population. The impact of sibling separations on children's wellbeing and relationships is yet to be fully explored.

Loss of a sibling through death at any stage of life has an impact on the surviving siblings (Bank and Kahn, 1975). Twin studies have reported some adults or older people experiencing an unexplained yearning or a sense of loss in their lives. In their later life they have discovered that they had a twin, who either died in the womb, or in infancy. The discovery of this fact helped them to place their feelings in context and mourn for the loss (Woodward, 1998; Russell, 1996). A loss of a sibling in childhood can have an impact on the remaining siblings' positions within the family. A child born after the death of the firstborn child is in a particularly difficult

position. Unlike the real oldest, the 'pseudo-oldest' is not the original prototype for the parents (Neisser, 1957). The death of a younger sibling will also impact on the remaining siblings. How the parents treat their remaining children will have an effect on the sibling's adjustment to their changed position within the family.

3. 5 Summary

A number of common themes emerged from the research studies reviewed in this chapter.

Longevity of sibling relationships

Siblings, as core kin and attachment relationships, have an importance throughout individuals' lives. Sibling relationships are the most enduring of all close relationships, often lasting into old age. Personal liking for particular sibling(s) is important in determining the level of contact in adulthood, however siblings rarely lose contact with one another.

Diversity of relationships across the life span

Sibling relationships are characterised by their enormous diversity. The diversity may concern differences between relationships, differences within one relationship over time, differences between the siblings in the relationship, and differences in the perception of the relationship by the siblings (Boer, 1990). The diversity in the quality of sibling relationship presents early in life, it can last throughout the childhood, adulthood and into old age, ranging from close attachments and high involvement, to disappointment and detachment.

The importance of sibling constellation

The way siblings interact and negotiate their relationships depend on a number of factors, including family constellation. Family constellation factors are more likely to influence complementary (attachment, sibling caretaking, teaching) than reciprocal (playing, joint activities) aspects of relationships. Birth order and the age difference between siblings are considered to determine the power balance between siblings, with the oldest siblings holding more power over others.

Sibling interactions - relationship processes in middle childhood

Research studies on sibling interaction and behaviour have identified some relationship processes that are particularly salient for children in middle childhood.

These are: sibling support and care; comparison, competition and rivalry between siblings; and sibling conflict and abuse. Siblings can provide considerable emotional and practical support to one another. They develop strategies to deal with competition and potential rivalry. Sibling conflict manifests in verbal squabbles and arguments, physical aggression and fighting. Sibling abuse was identified as a hidden problem within families.

From rivalry and ambivalence to intensity - relationship qualities in middle childhood

Researchers have attempted to identify key relationship qualities, which characterise children's sibling relationships in middle childhood. Early studies, undertaken on community samples, suggest that both positive and negative relationship aspects exist in the same relationship, leading to ambivalence (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985b). This reaffirms the psychodynamic theoretical position, which regards both ambivalence and hostility to be inevitable in all sibling relationships. More recent research supports a model that defines relationships between siblings by the intensity of the emotional tone. This is affected by the quality of children's family relationships and atmosphere (McGuire et al., 1996). This model accords broadly with the attachment framework. Therefore, literature does not support the notion that hostility is normative in all sibling relationships.

Family environment and processes

The outcome of this review supports broadly the theoretical ideas discussed in chapter two. Research on the impact of childhood adversity on sibling relationships has followed two main lines of inquiry: the sibling compensation approach and the parent-sibling congruity approach (Conger and Conger, 1996). The *sibling compensation approach* suggests that positive sibling relationships can compensate for poor parenting and neglect. By contrast the *parent sibling-congruity approach* posits that the quality of sibling relationships reflects the quality of parental and parent-child relationships. The outcome of this review of literature supports the latter approach, suggesting that qualitatively, sibling relationships are likely to reflect their early relational experiences and quality of parenting. The quality of children's early attachment relationships, parental relationships and family atmosphere, parental unavailability and neglect, impact of violence and abuse, quality of parenting, parental differential treatment and favouritism, and children's experiences of separation and loss, all have a bearing on children's sibling relationships. These factors are not independent, they are likely to interact with one another (Glaser and Prior, 1997) and they may have a cumulative effect on children's development and

relationships (Dunn and McGuire, 1992). Children in foster care possess many of the background features, which characterise children with difficult sibling relationships (Rutter, 2000). Therefore, the findings of this review are particularly salient for this study.

Transactional theories, incorporating both parental responses and children's own contribution, would suggest a more complex and differentiated view of relationships. Adversity is not likely to impact on all of the siblings and their relationships with one another in the similar way. *Children's contribution to their relationships* is not generally reflected in the studies reviewed. Children, who have experienced a range of adversities during childhood, are not generally represented within the populations studied. Furthermore, few studies have sought children's own views and perspectives on growing up with their siblings in adverse family circumstances. Therefore, this study is a timely endeavour to address such children's perspectives on their sibling relationships.

Before moving onto the research strategy, the next chapter reports on a review of literature on looked after children's siblings. The nature and quality of looked after children's sibling relationships were the main focus of the study. The review will consider statutory provisions relating to siblings, social work practice and sibling placement issues. The very limited information on looked after children's relationships with their siblings will also be discussed. The review includes studies of children in temporary and permanent foster care, young people leaving care, children placed for adoption and retrospective views of adults, who had spent time in care or grew up adopted.

Chapter 4 Looked after children and their siblings

4. 1 Introduction

Academic interest in looked after children's *sibling relationships* has only emerged during the last decade.¹ One of the reasons for the paucity of research may be due to the predominant social work paradigm stressing the primary importance of parent-child relationships. Researchers studying looked after children's circumstances have included siblings as part of the overall research strategy, where siblings are included at all, rather than to study them on their own right. For the purpose of this review, information on foster children's siblings has been obtained from a number of sources. These include studies focusing on:

- the experiences of adults who were brought up in care or grew up adopted
- children in care or accommodation, reporting on their care experiences
- the experiences of children in foster or adoptive care
- sibling placement practices, and
- children's views on their experiences in substitute care.

Although only a proportion of the studies reviewed here focus directly on siblings, and even fewer consider sibling relationships, they enable the study children's relationships with their sisters and brothers to be considered in the statutory, policy and practice contexts. The literature is presented under three broad areas: statutory and policy provisions for siblings; social work practice in relation to siblings; and looked after children's relationships with their siblings. The term 'social work practice' includes both child care and foster care practices, unless reference is made to one only.

1*

When possible the terminology of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and Children Act 1989 has been used. For example, '*being in care*' and '*admitted to care*' become '*being looked after by the local authority*' and '*admitted to care or accommodation*'. However, when direct reference is made to the findings of pre-1995 Act and pre-1989 Act research, the earlier terminology will be used. In Scotland, the term 'looked after' refers to children being looked after voluntarily (by agreement with parents), on a supervision requirement imposed by a Children's Hearing, or a compulsory order made by a Court. Looked after children placed in substitute care in foster or other placements are referred to as accommodated children.

4. 2 Statutory and policy provisions for siblings

Local authorities and children's hearings' have duties and powers towards children in Scotland; these are contained in Parts II and III of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. In England and Wales similar duties and powers are contained within the Children Act 1989. Duties towards a child whom a local authority is looking after or proposing to look after include among them a duty to:

- safeguard and promote child's welfare and contact with family
- consider child's views before making decisions about the child, and
- place siblings in the same foster home (in England and Wales only).

In Scotland, children's hearings and courts have a duty to:

- consider the welfare of the child *throughout his or her childhood*, when making decisions about the child.

The duty to accommodate siblings in the same foster home (so far as is reasonably practicable and consistent with the child's welfare) is enshrined in the primary legislation which apply in England and Wales, whereas this requirement is expressed in the regulations attached to the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. These deal with among others, care planning and review, recording of information, and the placement of children in out-of-home care.

Introduction to this thesis referred to a lack of legal status afforded to siblings, whereby siblings have no rights and responsibilities towards one another. Children have, however, a right to have their wishes and feelings considered before any decisions, which may affect their relationships with their siblings, are made. Children, according to their understanding should be consulted about proposed placements, plans for placement with or separation from siblings and contact arrangements with their siblings living apart. Policy direction on the implementation of legislation is provided to local authorities in the form of national policy and practice guidance (Scottish Office, 1997; Department of Health, 1989). The guidance, which applies in Scotland, expands on the regulations by stating that:

'Local authorities should ensure that siblings are placed together except where this would not be in one or more of the children's best interests. Where this proves

impossible, they should, whenever possible, be placed near each other' (Scottish Office, 1997:5).

The guidance further advises local authorities:

- to ensure that they have adequate foster placements to accommodate sibling groups
- that frequent contact is maintained between separated siblings, and
- where siblings are placed separately, reunification is considered at the first and subsequent reviews.

When discussing contact the guidance refers to parents and other members of family, rather than specifying contact with siblings as a priority, and independent from contact with parents.

Information on how local authorities fulfil their statutory responsibilities for siblings, and implement national child care policies, is difficult to obtain. Statistics based on local authority returns and published by the Government make no reference to children's siblings (Department of Health, 1998a; Scottish Office, 1996, 1998; Scottish Executive, 2001). Local authorities have been criticised for lacking information on siblings and policy and practice guidelines on working with them Ellison (1999). Only a small minority of local authorities surveyed by Beckett (1999) were able to provide details of the numbers of siblings in their care, their ethnic origin and placements. Of the 31 authorities surveyed by Beckett (1999) and separately by Tomlinson (1999), only three had addressed sibling issues in a comprehensive manner in their policy and practice guidance. Little attention was paid to the needs of children in short-term care. A lack of importance placed on looked after children's sibling relationships is also apparent in national inspection and enquiry reports (Scottish Office, 1996; Department of Health, 1998b). The review of legislation, regulations and guidance relating to looked after children's sibling relationships suggests, that siblings are largely overlooked, at the expense of the children's relationships with their parents. Yet for many children who are separated from their parents, siblings may be their strongest link with their family, in fact be their family (Harrison, 1999). Criticism has been expressed about a lack of legal recognition of the wider kin relationships in general, e.g. other than parent-child relationships (Ryburn, 1998).

4. 3 Siblings and social work practice

Research interest in looked after children's siblings is a relatively recent development. Therefore, little is known about the way social workers work with children and their siblings, and to what extent local authorities fulfil their responsibilities towards siblings. Recently there has been a flurry of studies exploring policy and practice issues, mainly in the context of permanent fostering and adoption (Mullender, 1999a). Prior to that, siblings were generally considered as part of the overall research strategy, when children's care experiences were explored. This review brings together relevant research findings, from the UK and overseas. Information gained from large-scale studies of children's care experiences, qualitative studies of children's views about their care, and a small number of studies focusing on siblings will be discussed. First, information about siblings in care or accommodation will be discussed.

Information on siblings in care or accommodation

There were just over 11 300 children looked after by local authorities on 31 March 2000 in Scotland, of whom 3 058 (27 per cent) were accommodated in foster care. Fifty-six per cent of the children in the 5-11 age group were boys and 44 per cent were girls. No information was available on the looked after children's siblings (Scottish Executive, 2001). Therefore, information on siblings has been gleaned from research findings. Statistical information on siblings can be considered from four perspectives: the proportion of children in care or accommodation who have siblings; the size of the siblingship; the proportion of children admitted with siblings, and proportion of children placed with their siblings.

Proportion of children with siblings

A number of British studies show that 80-90 per cent of children in care have one or more siblings. The following proportions of children with siblings have been reported by researchers: 84 per cent of children in long-term foster care (Rowe et al., 1984); 89 per cent (Millham et al., 1986), 82 per cent (Wedge and Phelan, 1986, op. cit. Wedge and Mantle, 1991) and 86.5 per cent (Bilson and Barker, 1994) of children in all types of placements, and 82 per cent (Kosonen, 1996a) in a study of all foster and adoption placements in one local authority area in Scotland. There is evidence to suggest that social workers lack information about the total number of siblings and siblings' whereabouts. Taking into account the changing nature of looked after

children's families, the proportion of looked after children who have siblings may be even higher (Kosonen, 1996a). It is estimated that in North America a higher proportion (87 to 98 per cent) of foster children have one or more siblings (Staff and Fein, 1992).

Size of the siblingship

Even less is known about the *numbers of looked after children's siblings* (size of siblingship). Bebbington and Miles (1989), in their study of 2500 children admitted to care, found that children came from larger than average families. No national information is available about the size of looked after children's sibling groups.

Admission of siblings into care or accommodation

Greater variations have been found in the rates of *joint admissions* of sibling groups into care. Millham et al. (1986) found that 45 per cent of the children entered care with at least one sibling. Wedge and Phelan (1986) found a lower proportion of children admitted with siblings, 31 per cent with at least one sibling and 15 per cent with two or more siblings (op. cit. Wedge and Mantle, 1991:30). Berridge and Cleaver (1987) estimated that three-fifths of children under the age of 11 entered care with one or more siblings. The Department of Health overview report stated that between one-third and one-half of all admissions to care or accommodation involved sibling groups (Department of Health, 1991).

Placement of siblings in care or accommodation

The fourth set of statistics relates to the *placement of siblings together or separately*. This information is more difficult to compare due to sampling differences, varying definitions of 'sibling' or variations in placement type. A child may be placed with one or more of the siblings and have siblings living elsewhere, or placed with all of the siblings, or none of them. Maclean (1991) found that 37 per cent of the children in care were placed with all of their siblings, 22 per cent were placed with one or more of their siblings and 67 per cent were living apart from one or more of their siblings. A study by Bilson and Barker (1994) found that three quarters of children with siblings in care or accommodation were separated from some or all of them. A Scottish study (Kosonen, 1996a) found that 40 per cent of children who had siblings were placed with one or more of their siblings. Proportionally fewer children in long-term care are placed with their siblings. Rowe et al. (1984) found that only 25 per cent of children in long-term foster care were placed with one or more of their siblings. A more recent study by Fratter et al.

(1991) of children in permanent placements found that 29 per cent of the children were placed with one sibling and 11 per cent with two or more siblings. These British studies indicate that although over 80 per cent of children in care or accommodation have siblings, only between one quarter and one third of them are living with one or more of their siblings.

Children can become separated from their siblings at any point in the process of admission to, stay in, or discharge from care or accommodation. For children in care of one local authority, sibling separation was most likely to occur at the points of *entry to and on leaving care*. Once separated few children had plans, which included re-unification with siblings (Kosonen, 1996a). A study of children in long-term foster care found that siblings who were *initially placed together* were more likely to remain together *in their first placement* (Staff and Fein, 1992). The length of time children spent in care was found to be less influential in determining separation, than the number of placements experienced by them (Bilson and Barker, 1994). These findings suggest that entry into care or accommodation, simultaneously with a sibling, may offer increased stability in placement. However, Thorpe and Swart (1992) obtained conflicting results in their Canadian study; 53 per cent of children, who were initially placed with their siblings, became separated from them while in foster care.

What factors influence the likelihood of a child being placed with his or her siblings? Research findings relating to sibling placements are considered in relation to the child's age and gender, reasons for care and care experiences, and type of placement. These are now discussed in more detail.

Age and gender

There is considerable agreement that the likelihood of a child being accommodated jointly with their siblings diminishes with the child's age. Older young people are more likely to be admitted individually (Rowe et al., 1989). Proportionately fewer children aged 11 or over, have siblings in care than do younger children (Maclean, 1991). Similar results have been obtained in North America (Aldridge and Cautley, 1976; Staff and Fein, 1992; Thorpe and Swart, 1992) and the Netherlands (Boer et al., 1995). Other studies suggest that older children who are placed in residential or specialist foster care on their own, often have siblings in other placements (Rowe et al., 1989; Kosonen, 1996a).

A number of studies have found that boys are less likely to be placed with their siblings in foster care than girls are (Aldridge and Cautley, 1976; Boer et al., 1995; Farmer and Pollock, 1998). This is particularly so for boys, aged nine or over, in short-term foster care (Stone, 1995). This has been attributed to the higher use of residential care for boys (Bilson and Barker, 1994). Taking into account that proportionally more boys than girls are accommodated by local authorities (Department of Health, 1998a; Scottish Office, 1996, 1998; Scottish Executive, 2001), older boys must be cared for elsewhere, making it less likely for them to be placed with their siblings in foster care.

Reasons for care and care experiences

Children's previous experiences, reasons for their admission to care or accommodation, the number of previous placements and the level of their behavioural difficulties all influence the likelihood of being placed with siblings. Children and young people come into care for different reasons. Young people are more likely to come into care for behavioural reasons, including their abuse of others, and pre-adolescents for their own protection (Farmer and Parker, 1991; Rowe et al., 1989; Boer et al., 1995; Farmer and Pollock, 1998; Egan-Sage and Carpenter, 1999). Therefore, they may need different interventions and care provisions. Recent research suggests that children, who enter care for child protection concerns, are less likely to be placed with their siblings, than their peers (Ellison et al., 1998; Head and Elgar, 1999). Children, who have abused other children, experienced more severe adversities in the past, and exhibited new behavioural difficulties following placement in substitute care, were also less likely to be placed with siblings (Farmer and Pollock, 1998). Researchers in the Netherlands (Boer et al., 1995), and North America (Aldridge and Cautley, 1976; Thorpe and Swart, 1992; Staff and Fein, 1992) have reported similar findings. Conversely, the younger and least disturbed children are more likely to be placed with their siblings.

Type of placement

The question of what type of care setting is most successful in maintaining siblings together has been explored in a number of studies. Comparison is difficult, however, as foster and residential care provide for different populations. Children's homes have been found to be better at maintaining large sibling groups than foster care (Berridge, 1985). Where children under twelve were accommodated in residential care in Scotland, this was primarily for the purpose of keeping sibling groups together (Kendrick, 1995). Some researchers suggest that both foster and

residential care were equally poor at keeping sibling groups together, or reuniting siblings if they enter care separately (Parker, 1988; Rowe et al., 1989). The model of a residential unit preparing large sibling groups for permanency is reported to have been especially successful (Mapp, 1996). Sibling placement studies have found foster care to be considerably more likely to maintain siblings together than residential care (Maclean, 1991). Only 16 of the 252 children placed with some of their siblings in the North East study were placed with their siblings in residential care (Bilson and Barker, 1994).

There is some evidence from the UK (Kosonen, 1996a) and North America (Berrick and Barth, 1994) to suggest that relative foster care is more successful in keeping siblings together than non-relative foster care. Carers, who are related to the child, are also more likely to maintain contact with the child's family (Berrick and Barth, 1994). Children in short-term care (Kosonen, 1996a) and where the plan is for the children to return home are also more likely to be placed with their siblings (Ellison, 1999).

To split or not to split - making decisions about placements

Social workers' rationale for sibling placements are likely to vary, however, little is known about the actual reasons and the criteria for making decisions. Two sibling studies referred to earlier (Maclean, 1991; Kosonen, 1996a), asked social workers retrospectively about their reasons for sibling separations.

Child related reasons included:

- siblings were not in care
- children had been admitted to care serially
- positive choice made to split siblings (child's need for individual attention, large age gap, separation of a teenage abuser from younger siblings)
- joint placement had disrupted, and
- child's choice to be placed separately.

Only between four to ten per cent of children, who had siblings, were separated through a lack of an appropriate placement (Maclean, 1991; Kosonen, 1996a). By contrast, a lack of resources was cited as the most common reason for sibling separation in more recent research (Tomlinson, 1999). Ellison et al. (1998) found this to be the case in respect of 71 of the 96 children who were separated from their

siblings. Children's individual needs are commonly cited as a reason for sibling separation in permanent placements (Rushton et al., 2001), and in the placement of sexually abused and abusing children (Head and Elgar, 1999). While some social workers give a great deal of thought to keeping siblings together, Dance and Rushton (1999) could not identify any specific child characteristics that differentiated between the children who were separated and those who remained together. Decisions are not always clearly related to the quality of sibling relationships (Wedge and Mantle, 1991; Harrison, 1999). Information about siblings' interaction with one another, and the quality of their relationship is not always evident; it may be recorded in case files only if the relationships are disturbed (Thorpe and Swart, 1992).

Criteria for decision-making

Concern has been expressed about the current social work knowledge to accurately assess sibling bonds. Wedge and Mantle suggest that:

'...practise has been guided by 'hunch' and by theory transferred from other work with children rather than by research into the importance of sibling contact (Wedge and Mantle, 1991: 80).'

A framework for assessing sibling relationships was published in the UK a decade ago (Department of Health, 1991). There is little evidence, however, of social workers using this to aid decision-making (Wedge and Mantle, 1991; Harrison, 1999; Rushton et al., 2001). There is considerable agreement, however, that decisions about separating siblings should be informed not only by the quality of the current relationship between siblings, but also by *longer-term consequences* (Andersson, 1999b; Harrison, 1999; Hodgkins, 1999; Pavlovic and Mullender, 1999; Prynne, 1999). Siblings who grow up together develop a shared sense of history, relationships can improve in adolescence and adulthood, and even poor relationships can be worked on (Mullender, 1999b; Tomlinson, 1999). Hegar (1993) considers attachment, permanence and kinship as the key criteria; siblings can normally provide these elements of continuity for one another. Hegar (1988a) suggests that separation of siblings is not supported by literature in situations where:

- one sibling has a caretaking role for another (this has been confirmed by children's own views on the matter (Harrison, 1999))

- there is competition and conflict between siblings, and
- *not necessarily* where siblings are sexually involved with one another.

However, sibling separation may be advised:

- where the relationship between siblings is stressful for both
- if one is the consistent loser for adult affection and approval, and
- where a separate placement may help to develop the child's self-esteem.

When referring to siblings, who are sexually involved with each other, she suggests that:

'When separation is necessary for mutually attached, sexually enmeshed siblings who do not want to be separated, the children require the same kind of preparation and support needed for other kind of losses' (Hegar, 1988a: 462).

Close sibling bonds continue to affect children, whether they live together or are away from each other, therefore, working with siblings in foster care should be a key social work objective.

Decision making processes

There is a real lack of information about decision-making processes. A survey to discover whether local authorities had a 'defined process' for deciding whether or not siblings should be placed together, found that the majority of local authority 'defined processes' related solely to adoption planning (Beckett, 1999). Some information about decision-making can be gleaned from case studies of siblings (Morrison and Brown, 1986; Hindle, 1995; O'Leary and Schofield, 1995). Some writers propose a need for a structured assessment of sibling relationships to aid decision-making. Hindle (1995) suggests that structured assessments have the positive effects of:

- helping the foster carers and the social worker to think about each sibling's relationship with each other
- slow down a sense of 'urgency' of the situation, so that thinking could replace 'action', and

- allow the children space to express their feelings and wishes.

Morrison and Brown (1986) stress the importance of seeing children individually in order to obtain each child's perspective and wishes. Hindle (1995) advocates seeing the siblings both together and individually, and stress the need for attention to detail, and the length of time needed to complete a thorough assessment. While both Morrison and Brown and Hindle argue from a traditional social work perspective, focusing on the quality of sibling relationships, O'Leary and Schofield (1995) place their case study of in the context of children's rights. They argue that siblings should have a right to grow up together, concluding that:

'...one of the major issues involved in permanency planning centres around the rights of siblings to live together, irrespective of their diverse needs, personalities and situation.... This is a right that should not be denied children who are in public care and 'differences' between siblings should not be used as a convenient reason for splitting them up' (O'Leary and Schofield, 1995:42).

The rights perspective has been advocated by Hegar (1988b) who suggests that the principles applied in child custody decisions, undertaken within a legal framework, not to separate siblings unnecessarily should be applied more frequently in foster placement decisions. The legal approach follows a 'rights' based paradigm, where a child has an intrinsic right to family and kinship, and that the continuity of sibling relationship is a means of achieving these. The rights based approach leads into the consideration of children's involvement in the processes.

Children's involvement in the planning and decision-making processes

The statutory framework governing looked after children is based on the notion of children's right to participate and express their views in the decision-making processes. There is a dearth of information about how this is translated into practice in relation to siblings. A study of looked after children's participation in decision-making found that children in middle childhood wanted to be consulted about: 'where I go', 'what I do', 'contact with family', 'where I live', and 'contact with siblings' (Thomas, 1998). The children felt that:

'...they needed choice as to how, and how far, they participated in any decision-making process; and they needed to know what their options were' (Thomas, 1998:76).

The extent to which social workers routinely seek children's views about their siblings, and how, and to what extent, their views influence decisions affecting sibling relationships has not been considered so far. Indirect evidence obtained by Ellison, et al. (1998) suggests that both children and parents feel excluded from decision-making processes. Children placed on compulsory orders, and their parents were more likely to feel dissatisfied with separation of siblings and levels of contact between siblings, in contrast to their social workers, who were generally satisfied that separation from siblings was in the best interest of children (Ellison et al., 1998). Retrospective accounts suggest that many children and young people do not understand why different plans had been made for them and their siblings (Harrison, 1999). Although children's feelings and wishes must be explicitly sought in the adoption process, Selwyn (1999) found that many reports for adoption hearings gave no evidence that children's views had been sought and others had lumped siblings together as if they had identical wishes and feelings. Considering that children's views about their siblings are not systematically sought in the process of adoption, it is easy to conclude that they are less likely to be sought at the points of admission to accommodation, and stay in short-term care. The studies reviewed here have considered sibling separation in the context of long-term placements. Based on the limited information, it can be concluded that the reasons for sibling separations are various and in some cases complex.

Contact between separated siblings

Maintenance of contact with siblings is generally considered in the context of parental contact. In some circumstances, contact with parents, in particular with mothers, can help children to maintain contact with their siblings at home (Cleaver, 2000). Bilson and Barker (1998) analysed information about sibling contact separately from parental contact. Where siblings were not looked after contact with them was generally at the same level as with parents. However, contact between siblings living in local authority care was low, 40 per cent of the children had no contact, and another 23 per cent had irregular contact with siblings. Children, who have been removed from home as a result of an allegation of sexual abuse, leaving other siblings behind, find maintaining contact with siblings at home particularly problematic. Head and Elgar (1999) comment on the children's feelings of guilt and exclusion from home, and urge social workers to make arrangements for sibling

contact which will not be sabotaged by parents or others who are concerned about contact between the children and their parents.

Studies of children in, or those referred to, permanent foster placements have mixed results. Contact was most likely to take place with siblings who knew each other well, and with those close in age (Dance and Rushton, 1999), and less likely to occur with children living at home (Rushton et al., 2001). While social workers make efforts to preserve sibling relationships, contact with siblings is not always successful, nor planned at the point of placement (Rushton et al., 1989; Dance and Rushton, 1999; Rushton et al., 2001). Even where clear plans existed for sibling contact, these were not always followed through (Quinton et al., 1998). Contact rarely include non-direct forms of contact e.g. by telephone and letter (Rushton et al., 2001). For the vast majority of children their links with separated siblings are infrequent or tenuous (Wedge and Mantle, 1991). None of these studies had information about sibling contact for a period longer than one year. As contact with parents tends to tail off over a period of time (Department of Health and Social Security, 1985), it could be assumed that this may also be the case for sibling contact. Some children completely lose contact with their families, including siblings (Harrison, 1999; Head and Elgar, 1999).

Levels of contact between adopted children and their siblings are even lower, ranging from eight to twelve per cent of cases (Fratter et al., 1991; Ryburn, 1996). As open adoption is becoming more common, sibling contact is increasing; the more recent studies have reported contact taking place in twenty-seven per cent (Owen, 1999), forty-two per cent (Neil, 1999), and sixty-three per cent of cases (Thomas et al., 1999). In fact, children are more likely to see their siblings than any other birth family member following adoption (Owen, 1999; Thomas et al., 1999). Contact is more likely to take place with maternal siblings, and those living with maternal rather than paternal family (Owen, 1999). Paternal siblings were almost invariably 'lost' to the adopted children (Neil, 1999). Sibling contact arrangements following adoption are complex involving a range of individual arrangements (Owen, 1999; Thomas et al., 1999).

There can be a number of potential barriers to maintaining contact with siblings. Children's hearings and courts can regulate contact by placing specific restrictions on parental and sibling contact. Non-specific restrictions to contact such as distance, routines, and hostility were reported by Millham et al. (1986). Practical

obstacles (Beckett, 1999) and organisational and resource implications (Harrison, 1999; Jones, 1999; Thomas et. al. 1999) have all been cited as potential barriers to maintaining contact between separated siblings. The complexity of looked after children's family structures, and the rapidly changing nature of their families can make it difficult to social workers to keep track of all of the siblings (Department of Health and Social Security, 1985; Harrison, 1999). Studies have found that between 10 and 12 per cent of looked after children's siblings are adopted and permanently separated from them (Bilson and Barker, 1994; Kosonen, 1996a). Questions about sibling contact would need to be asked independently from parental contact. The continuity of sibling contact requires a proactive commitment to the maintenance of sibling relationships on behalf of the social workers and the agency. Management support and adequate resources are also required to maintain children's links with their siblings (Ellison et al., 1998).

Reunification of separated siblings

Planning for children in foster care rarely include *sibling continuity planning* (Ellison, 1999) and reunification of separated siblings within the care system (Kosonen, 1996a). A number of barriers to sibling reunification can be identified from the literature.

Firstly, the longer children stay in care or accommodation, the less likely they are to be returned home (Millham et al, 1986; Vernon and Fruin, 1986; Farmer and Parker, 1991; Fernandez, 1999). This reduces the likelihood of a child being reunited with siblings at home.

Secondly, for some children return home can lead to separation from siblings, if their siblings are unable to return with them. Bullock et al. (1993) found that there is a proportion of half-siblings who return home leaving their siblings in care. This is thought to reflect the changed circumstances of one parent who is able to take his or her child but is unwilling to take others.

Thirdly, children in long-term foster care are likely to remain separated, unless siblings are admitted into accommodation, before the child is placed in a permanent family. Even then, efforts would need to be made to reunite siblings in a joint placement. There is little evidence to suggest that this is happening (Rushton et al., 2001).

Fourthly, social workers may be more likely to consider reunification of full siblings than half-siblings while they are living separately in foster care (Dance and Rushton, 1999).

Finally, in the vacuum of policy and practice guidance, individual social workers' and managers' attitudes can be influential in determining sibling continuity (Beckett, 1999; Jones, 1999; Tomlinson, 1999). Similarly, foster carers' attitudes towards siblings may also have a bearing on sibling placements (Part, 1992; Smith, 1996; Dance and Rushton, 1999). Some social workers pursue imaginative options to try to reunite siblings in foster care. Such options include moving siblings to the same placement, but sequentially; leaving space in a foster home for a sibling who may need a placement at a later date, and paying retainers to reserve some foster homes for sibling placements only (Mullender, 1999b).

Although both the research evidence and statutory requirements governing child placement in Britain reinforce the need for siblings to be placed together, and if this is not possible, for the maintenance of sibling ties, many children in foster care continue to live apart from their siblings. It has been advocated by Beckett (1999) that sibling issues should be on the agenda from the beginning of a child being looked after. It can be safely assumed that the attitudes, values and beliefs of individual social workers, agency policies and resources available to keep siblings together, may have a bearing on the success of maintaining foster children's sibling relationships.

Placement of sexually abused and abusing siblings

Caring for, and living with, sexually abused and abusing siblings pose particular challenges for foster carers and adopters. They are likely to have an impact on all family members, including other children in the foster home. The carers may find it difficult to monitor and alter the siblings' patterns of sexualised behaviour (Macaskill, 1991), and the children may go on to abuse their siblings and/or other children (Farmer and Pollock, 1998). When siblings who have been sexually abused by the same perpetrator are placed jointly, the children may become sexually active together. The risk increases with the severity of abuse experienced by the child (Head and Elgar, 1999). Researchers urge that carers should be provided with full information about the abuse suffered by the children. There is a need for a high level of supervision in placement. Social workers made conscious decisions to separate siblings where the risk of sibling abuse was identified (Farmer and Pollock, 1998). Consequently, sexually abused and abusing children face particular

difficulties in maintaining relationships with their siblings, particularly with siblings who have remained at home.

Less is known about the quality of *relationships* between sexually abused and abusing children and their siblings. The studies reviewed infer that the dynamics in sexually abusing families have negative effects on children's relationships in general, and that the sibling dimension can increase difficulties experienced by individual children. Relationship dynamics may prevent children from recovering from their experiences of sexual abuse (because of constant reminders by siblings), and making healthy attachments to adults, who can offer a good experience of parenting (Head and Elgar, 1999). Abusive hierarchies may have been established between siblings; therefore there is a need to pay attention to the power balance between siblings, when making placement decisions (Farmer and Pollock, 1999). This aspect of looked after children's sibling relationships is surprisingly little researched. Much more needs to be known about the dynamics of sibling relationships, which are likely to lead to sibling abuse. Considerably larger body of literature exists on the *management* of sexually abused and abusive children in foster care, although this often refers to the care of lone children rather than siblings (Roberts, 1986; 1989; Batty, 1991; Kendrick, 1995; Fry, 1996, op. cit. Batty and Cullen, 1996). The placement of siblings in foster care, who have experienced any kind of abuse, deserves increased attention. Recent research suggests, that children from large families (children with two or more siblings) are more likely to be placed on a child protection register than children with fewer siblings (Egan-Sage and Carpenter, 1999). Whilst in foster care, abused children are considerably more likely to be abused again, than their peers living in the community (Hobbs et al., 1999).

4. 4 Foster children's relationships with their siblings

Information about the qualitative aspects of children's sibling relationships can be gleaned from the accounts of adults who have been separated from or lost their siblings in childhood. During the Second World War large numbers of children experienced family disruption, leading to separation from siblings (Macardle, 1949). Their experiences reveal the long-term meaning that siblings hold for one another (Isaacs, 1941; Gershon, 1989). Studies focusing on children's care experiences suggest that the continuity of sibling relationships benefit children in placement and assist in their return home. Studies exploring children's own views provide evidence

of the supportive role that siblings can play for children living away from home. The findings of these studies will be discussed next.

Invisible thread – life time importance of siblings

‘ “I don’t want to let you go any more”, Daisy said as she held on to her brother, who was four when they were put into separate orphanages in England. “Here I am”, said Albert. “I am your brother. I’ve been waiting a lifetime” (Courier and Advertiser: 30.12.1998:7).

“Yesterday Jean was in shock ...the news is very sad and I don’t think that William even knew that he had a twin sister.... it is ironic that he lived only a short distance where I completed my nursing training ” (Courier and Advertiser: 5.10.1998:9).

The paper reports on a reunion, after 80 years, between 84 year-old brother who was sent to Canada as part of the child migration programme (Humphreys, 1996) and her year older sister who remained in Britain. The other story describes an elderly sister’s reaction to the news that her twin brother, from whom she was separated at birth, had died before she found him. These stories illustrate the lifelong emotional yearning for separated siblings to connect with one another and the public’s interest in this most enduring of close relationships.

Studies exploring the experiences of adults and older people, who have spent periods of their childhood in foster or residential care, or grown up adopted (Ferguson, 1966; Meier, 1966; Triseliotis, 1980; Rest and Weston, 1984; Triseliotis and Russell, 1984; Dumaret et al., 1997; Mullender and Kearn, 1997; Pavlovic and Mullender, 1999) confirm the long-term importance of sibling relationships. The overriding themes arising from these studies relate to the issues of loss and identity. Adults interviewed often recalled their experiences of separations from siblings with deep sadness and a sense of loss. Those who were placed with their siblings relied on their siblings for comfort and support in placement. Mullender and Kearn (1997) found that birth siblings of all ages were seeking to make contact through the Adoption Contact Register for England and Wales with the adopted siblings. Many had never met their siblings, yet,

‘...they considered the adopted person as part of their family and part of themselves, and they were deeply grieved at the loss of that person in their lives’, (Mullender and Kearn, 1997:143).

Some felt that they had been deprived of an essential ingredient in their lives. Personal accounts of adopted adults (Wheeler, 1990; Independent, 22.3.1994) and the experiences gained from organisations searching and reuniting siblings in later life, add further weight to the lifelong significance of sibling ties (Humphreys, 1996; Hodgkins, 1999). The accounts of the sadness and pain expressed by adults searching for their siblings is compelling evidence of the emotional void left when siblings involuntarily lose contact with one another. Prynne (1999) suggests that sibling separation and loss can be damaging to individual's capacity to form relationships with their lost siblings on reunion in later life. Some siblings' reunion experiences were affected by their experiences of separation; they felt it was simply too late. Mullender (1999b) concludes that sibling separation:

'can involve the loss of: a lifetime's close and loving relationship; support in adversity; a sometimes parental degree of personal care; a shared history; a sense of kinship; of "flesh and blood"; for full and maternal siblings of a "bond" (coming from the same womb) which is understood by all the peoples of the world; of continuity and rootedness; a source of knowledge about the family, and a resource for the individual's own development of identity' (Mullender, 1999b:330-31).

For some looked after children and young people, sibling relationship can be more important than contact, direct or indirect, with a lost parent (Harrison, 1999).

Sibling relationships in placement

Studies exploring children's experiences in foster and adoptive care have included questions about siblings as one element of the research strategy. Although these studies do not examine sibling relationships directly, they provide information about the positive effects of placing children with their siblings. For the majority of foster children the presence of birth siblings in a foster home is considered to have positive consequences. There is a body of research that suggests that siblings can help with foster children's *psychological adjustment*, help them to adjust to the new environment and offer support in placement. Sisters and brothers can offer continuity and stability to one another, increasing their sense of wellbeing (Andersson, 1999b). By contrast, foster children, who are separated from their siblings, feel they have lost part of themselves, compounding their feelings of loss and depression (Timberlake and Hamlin, 1982). They are at a greater risk of emotional detachment; children who are placed with their siblings 'feel better'

(Cutler, 1984). Children in joint placements expressed greater curiosity about the world around them, enabling them to explore their new surroundings from the security of their relationship with siblings. However, for some children siblings might be of a limited use as a secure base, because they may not have had sufficient time together in a stable family to develop strong attachments (Flynn, 1994). Where children had limited or no contact with their parents, a placement with or contact with a sibling or siblings offered some compensation to the children in terms of their wellbeing and emotional adjustment (Weinstein, 1960; Thorpe, 1980; Johnson et al., 1995).

A number of studies have reinforced the importance of birth siblings in terms of *placement stability* and continuity. The presence of one or more of the child's own siblings has been found to increase the likelihood of placement success, (Trasler, 1960; Parker, 1966; George, 1970; Rowe et al., 1989) and reduce the likelihood of placement breakdown (Staff and Fein, 1992). Berridge and Cleaver (1987) found that in long-, short- and intermediate fostering alike, sibling separation was strongly linked with an unsettled care experience.

While birth siblings are considered to have a positive effect on placement stability, foster carers' own children have been considered a risk factor. The placements of children singly (without their siblings) into established permanent families were found to result in poorer outcomes (Quinton et al., 1998). Parental rejection increased the risk of poor outcome for singly placed children, but not for those placed with their siblings. When siblings had shared the experience of leaving the family home their sense of rejection may have been lessened (Rushton et al., 2001). Children are likely to experience additional stresses in adjusting to live with their new siblings, particularly, where the carers' children are either very young, or of a similar age to foster children (Trasler, 1960; Parker, 1966; George, 1970; Berridge and Cleaver, 1987; Boer and Spiering, 1991; Boer et al., 1995). The minimum of three-year age gap between the youngest birth child and the placed child has been used as a general guide (Department of Health, 1991). Little is known about the quality of relationships between the placed children and their new permanent family siblings, and how far they are able to view each other as siblings (Rushton et al., 2001). In teenage placements, the relationships between carers' own children, who were less than four years younger than the foster children, were characterised by ambiguity and ambivalence; their loyalties between their parents and the placed young people were being tested (Downes, 1987). When there is a large age gap, carers' young children have been reported to provide teenage foster

children positive childhood experiences they have missed out on (Kavanagh, 1987), with teenagers 'levelling down' to the children in the family, and girls in particular showing caregiving towards carers' very young children (Downes, 1987). The very limited research on the views of short-term foster carers' own children suggests that although children generally 'like' fostering, they also find it stressful (Part, 1993). They like the companionship and helping others, but find the fostered children's difficult behaviour, disruption to family life, lack of personal space and demands on their parents' attention difficult to cope with (Macaskill, 1991; Fox, 2001).

Child's *quality of relationships* with siblings and other children in the family is likely to influence placement success (Rushton et al., 2001). Studies of children in permanent placements have found considerable diversity in the quality of foster children's sibling relationships, ranging from rivalry to co-operation. Rushton et al. (1989) considered seventy per cent of the sample children to have 'distorted' sibling relationships at the beginning of the placement e.g. older siblings acting in a parental capacity, siblings with different sets of loyalties, and differences in the degree of attachments they were making. Sibling conflict, behavioural problems and rivalry for new parents' attention have been cited as common threats to placement stability. Jointly placed siblings have been found to present more conflict and less warmth in their interactions with one another in the early period of the placement, than the comparison sample of children. This was particularly so for children who had entered care at an older age, and for the older children in the sibling group (Rushton et al., 2001). However, there is evidence to suggest that severe sibling conflict reduces and sibling relationships improve in placement over time (Aldridge and Cautley, 1976; Rushton, et al., 1989). Parents can be proactive and work on improving sibling relationships. When parents regularly set aside special time for the adopted child, this led to lower rates of sibling conflict (Beckett et al., 1999). Some of the sibling factors determining placement success may be more complex than previously thought (Mullender, 1999b). The theory about closeness in age and sibling conflict may not apply in all circumstances (Beckett et al., 1999). Both positive and negative relationships between the placed child and new family children can develop irrespective of the age gap. Similarly, sibling caretaking does not necessarily signify a 'distorted' relationship, which is likely to lead to a negative outcome. Looking after younger siblings, and being looked after by older siblings, may be experienced as positive by both (Kosonen, 1996b), and be an expected part of children's growing up experiences (Prevatt Goldstein, 1999).

Children's own views of siblings

Looked after children want to be consulted about decisions affecting their lives, including those involving their relationships with siblings (Buchanan et al., 1993; Hill, 1997b; Thomas, 1998). Similarly, children who are adopted have views about their siblings, and decisions made by social workers and courts affecting their sibling relationships (Fratter, 1996; Owen, 1999; Thomas et al., 1999). Children have clear views on their preferences for maintaining their sibling relationships and are able to express these.

'When in care they wanted the option to be with their brothers and sisters', and 'most young people knew whether or not they wanted contact with their family and wanted their views respected...' (Buchanan et al., 1993:51).

Almost all young people, who were consulted in one local authority area in Scotland, thought that siblings should be kept together even if this resulted in young children being placed in children's homes (Freeman et al., 1996). These young people had touched on a conflict between two policy objectives: placing siblings together, and not using residential care for the placement of young children. Children who are placed with their siblings usually value living with their sisters and brothers, and having someone to talk about their birth family. Some children worried that their sibling fitted in the family better, and had anxieties about their the continuity of the placement (Rowe, et al., 1984). Living with siblings enable children to develop relationships based on reality. Children in a study by Whitaker et al. (1984) acknowledged quarrelling and other difficulties, and at the same time saw their siblings as a source of support and protection. Children in long-term foster care interviewed by McAuley (1996) continued to be preoccupied with their separated birth siblings by frequently thinking or dreaming about them. McAuley suggests that:

'...contact was very important to these children and seemed to compensate for lack of contact with parents at times by maintaining a sense of family identity. The sense from the children was that they had traveled through troubled times together' (McAuley (1996:158).

Similarly, contact with siblings reaffirmed adopted children's sense of physical likeness, and made them feel better about themselves (Owen, 1999). However, for some children in care contact with siblings living apart was difficult to maintain (Fletcher, 1993). Contact with siblings living at home was more problematic (Rowe,

et al., 1984) and had to be arranged independently from parental contact. Most children who saw their separated siblings wanted to see them more often (Thomas et al., 1999).

A significant number of children who were separated from their siblings:

'...struggled with feelings of loss, frustration and bewilderment, sometimes years after the separation took place' (Whitaker et al., 1984:14).

Young people leaving care who had lost contact with their families expressed:

'...varying degrees of ignorance, sadness, resentment and bitterness about lost or hardly known parents and siblings' (Stein and Carey, 1986:118).

Following adoption children missed their birth siblings, and the most commonly cited deficit in a lone parent adoptive family was the absence of siblings. Children had painful feelings about the loss of their own siblings, particularly older siblings who had fulfilled a parental role (Owen, 1999).

'When talking about contact, some of the children expressed feelings of sadness, loss and loneliness, and unveiled their need for knowledge about their birth families and their past' (Thomas et al., 1999:109).

The views expressed by children support the role of siblings in helping in children's psychological adjustment and emotional wellbeing, discussed above. Siblings can become even more important to young people at the point of leaving care, especially if their relationships with parents are less close. Young people often seek to re-establish contact with their separated siblings, where they can be found (Stein and Carey, 1986). Siblings can provide considerable emotional and practical support at the time of transition to living independently. In a study of care leavers, siblings were mentioned by care leavers as the second most important or influential member of their kin. Older sisters offered support to young women leaving care, often acting in the role of mother. Bonds created through shared experiences of adversity formed the basis of their re-established relationships (Marsh and Peel, 1999). The studies that have explored the views of children living in, and young

people leaving care, support the notion that siblings continue to retain an importance both short- and long-term for children separated from their families.

4.5 Summary

The statutory framework governing looked after children place responsibilities on local authorities towards children's siblings. Social workers should seek children's views on any decisions affecting their relationships with their siblings. Siblings should be placed together, or as close to one another as practicable, if they cannot be in the same foster home. Furthermore, contact should be maintained between siblings who are separated from one another. A review of research suggests that although over 80 per cent of looked after children have one or more siblings, only a small proportion of them live with their siblings. Reasons for sibling separations are varied, and not always clearly stated. Recent research suggests that social workers give a good deal of thought to placing siblings together in permanent placements, however, by then many children are already living apart from their siblings. Contact with separated siblings is generally considered under a broad term of the 'family'. Looked after children's families are fragmented, and all siblings rarely live with the child's parents, therefore, sibling contact should be considered independently from parental contact. Little reference was found in the literature to re-unification of separated siblings and sibling continuity planning taking place.

The predominant theoretical framework, although information on this is sparse, for making decisions about siblings appear to be a *'needs based' paradigm*. This is based on an assessment of sibling relationships in the context of the children's *individual* needs. There is little empirical evidence of the content and scope of assessments, or theoretical ideas that underline them. Less emphasis has been placed on the concept of 'kinship' in social work practice in the UK, although this is changing (Marsh and Crow, 1998). The notion of kinship has influenced practice in other cultures, in New Zealand (Ryburn, 1990; Marsh and Allen, 1993) and USA (Hegar, 1988b; Hegar, 1993; Berrick and Barth, 1994). Surprisingly, only few writers have addressed sibling relationships within the context of children's rights (O'Leary and Schofield, 1995; Beckett and Hershman; 2001). Looked after children have a right to develop meaningful and long lasting relationships with their siblings, this is yet to be reflected in childcare policy, practice and research.

The views of adults, who were adopted or brought up in substitute care, confirm the notion that siblings perform a useful function in terms of providing continuity, support and comfort for children separated from their parents. On the whole, placements with siblings appear to be more stable, than where siblings are in separate placements. Children often value being with their sisters and brothers. The studies undertaken from children's perspective stress the notion of siblings as a psychological support in placement, and reinforce the importance of a sense of identity, belonging and family roots, in other words socio-genealogical connectedness (Owusu-Bempah and Howitt, 1997). So far, research studies have concentrated on placement practices, such as sibling placement information in permanent placements. Less is known about siblings of children in short-term care. Qualitative aspects of foster children's sibling relationships have only recently received attention (Rushton et al., 2001). Most writers agree that it is important to take a long-term view on sibling relationships. In order to meet statutory obligations and policy objectives to safeguard and promote children's welfare, social work practice would need to be refocused to include siblings as a vital part of looked after children's long-term welfare. The next chapter will outline the research strategy adopted in this study, the methods used, and the process for analysing the findings.

Chapter 5 Design and methodology

5. 1 Introduction

Siblings can provide companionship, help and emotional support to one another in middle childhood. They can teach new skills and look after their younger siblings in their parents' absence. However, for some children their sisters and brothers can be a source of conflict, antagonism and ongoing stress. Children in general perceive their siblings positively, although relationships with siblings are characterised by a high degree of ambivalence. The theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in the preceding chapters suggest that the development and maintenance of sibling relationships is potentially more difficult for children who are accommodated in foster care than for children in the general population. This is due to their adverse early experiences and interrupted family relationships. While children are looked after they are likely to experience further disruption in their lives, thus reducing opportunities for developing strong supportive bonds with their siblings.

The exploratory study that is the subject of this thesis was proposed with an overall aim to extend current understanding of the nature and quality of sibling relationships for a sample of Scottish children (aged eight to 12) who are accommodated in short-term foster care. The study aims to assist social workers and others with a responsibility for assessing children's needs and making decisions about their welfare. The study will explore children's perceptions of their sibling relationships from their point of view. The research strategy outlined in this chapter is based on the notion that it is important to consider children's close relationships in their socio-cultural context. Therefore, a two-stage research design, incorporating a study of children in the community, and a more intensive study of children in foster care, was undertaken. This chapter outlines the research strategy, methods for data collection, the process for carrying out the study, and the analysis of the data. The research strategy will be set in the context of the relevant developmental and design considerations for researching children's sibling relationships in middle childhood. A relationships approach by Hinde (1988; 1992) and Stevenson-Hinde (1988a) provides the chosen framework for analysing and describing foster children's sibling relationships. Children's rights and ethical considerations, and reflections on the methodology conclude this chapter.

5. 2 Developmental considerations

Are there any special considerations to be taken account of in conducting research with children in middle childhood? The question about the extent to which children should be regarded as similar or different from adults, and how such similarities or differences influence the research process, has been debated in methodological literature (Morrow and Richards, 1996). The debate has become polarised into the apparent differences between the way children have been perceived by researchers within psychological and sociological research traditions.

Psychological tradition - children as developing individuals

The psychological research paradigm suggests that children's development influence their ability to understand relationships and provide information about them. Therefore, researchers should take account of developmental considerations in middle childhood. Developmental psychologists have conceptualised children's development to be primarily biologically driven and to occur in predictable, age graded stages. The main developmental stages applied to middle childhood are Freud's 'latency' stage of psychosexual development (6-11), Erikson's 'industry versus inferiority' stage of psychosocial development (6-11), and Piaget's 'concrete operations' stage of cognitive development (7-11). Middle childhood has often been presented as a calm and emotionally stable period when children make steady progress in their development. More recent research suggest that middle childhood is perceived in 1990's as somewhat different from the conventional image; both parents and children find it more complex and less trouble free (Borland et al., 1998).

During middle childhood children make advances in cognitive abilities; in areas of perception, memory and reasoning. They are now more able to view issues from different points of view and they become more aware of their own thought processes (Main, 1991). They are increasingly aware of what they know and what they do not know, when they understand something - a question or situation - and when they do not (Garbarino and Stott, 1992). They are better able to recall their memories. However, attachment theorists have suggested that children's *actual* ability to recall early memories of their family relationships vary considerably and that it reflects the quality of their attachment relationship with mother (Main et al., 1985; Main, 1991). Children learn to communicate both in oral and written form in a

variety of settings. However, children are likely to be most communicative when they are with people they know well, they are in a setting that is familiar to them, and when they have some control over the situation and the course of conversation. Carbarino and Stott (1992) suggest that children's sense of loyalty to family members, no matter how abusive and hurtful, is very strong and is likely to preclude children from saying things that would betray them.

Sociological tradition - from socialised to competent child

Within the traditional sociological paradigm, children's development is considered to take place through the process of socialisation within the family, school and wider community (Richards, 1974; Richards and Light, 1986). This paradigm has been criticised by the sociology of childhood proponents for defining children negatively in theoretical terms: not by what the child is, but instead of what they are not, and what they are subsequently going to be (Alanen, 1992). The sociology of childhood perspective views children as competent individuals on their own right, who are capable of independent action and thought. It assumes that children are capable of expressing their views coherently on issues that interest them (James and Prout, 1990; Mayall, 1994a; 1996; Qvortrup et al., 1994; Jenks, 1996; Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998).

A differentiated view of children's development

It is now acknowledged by many researchers that while there are some similarities between children of the same age, there are also marked differences (Christensen and James, 2000b). Many features of middle childhood are very specific to the particular child, family and neighbourhood (Borland et al., 1998). Children are not a homogeneous group, not even special groups, such as looked after children. A range of cultural and contextual factors, and children's internal emotional states may influence their ability and willingness to engage in the research process. For instance, some fostered children may feel anxious about separation from their parents and siblings, or be pre-occupied by other concerns.

Children's competence is another area for consideration. It should be taken into account throughout the research process, from the child's decision to participate to their competence to provide valid data. Children's competencies are different from those of the adults (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Differences also occur *between children* in their competencies, and even *within the same child* in the way they use

their social understanding and socio-cognitive capacities in different relationships (Dunn, 1993). Dunn suggests that:

'...we should move away from a simple notion of the "competent" or "incompetent" child and towards a differentiated view of relationships in early childhood' (Dunn, 1993:14).

Therefore, researchers should enable individual children to participate in research in ways, which is consistent with their understanding, interests, ways of communicating, and involving issues that are meaningful to them. The research methods and techniques, and the context and processes should acknowledge the apparent similarities and differences shared by children in middle childhood. These considerations were born in mind in the planning and execution of this study.

5. 3 Methodological considerations

Researching children's sibling relationships presents particular conceptual and methodological complexities. What is meant by a *relationship*, and how this should be operationalised was one of the first key questions. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the chosen framework for describing and analysing relationships before determining the most appropriate methods to measure the nature and quality of children's sibling relationships.

Describing and analysing relationships

There is a considerable body of literature describing close relationships between adults (Levinger and Raush, 1977; Kelley, 1983), and between adults (parents) and children. While many studies of parent-child relationships have focused on a single dimension, such as attachment (Bowlby, 1965; Ainsworth, 1982), it has been argued by Dunn and McGuire (1992) that studies describing children's relationships with other children: peers and friends and siblings, also tend to focus on relational aspects, for instance, interaction, sociability and conflict rather than *relationships*. Therefore, what is meant by a *relationship* and how it should be operationalised became crucial questions in the design stage. A *relationships approach*, developed by Hinde and Stevenson-Hinde (1988a) and Hinde (1988; 1992) identifies several different levels of social complexity to be taken into account in descriptions and

analysis of family relationships. The levels of social complexity are summarised by Dunn (1993:7) as:

- *level of the individual* and the characteristics they bring into the relationship (child's lively, outgoing, and emotional personality)
- *level of the interactions* between individuals in the relationship (jokes, arguments, and conversations)
- *level of the relationship* involving patterns of interaction between individuals over a long time span, shared expectations, and the balance of their relative contribution to the relationship
- *level of the social world* beyond the dyad – the impact of other family relationships, the norms and expectations concerning relationships in a particular cultural group, and the influence of social networks and social institutions on the relationships.

At the level of the relationship, the following areas were chosen for exploration:

- shared/separate history (memories of growing up with siblings)
- attachment and emotional involvement (extent and quality)
- closeness and intimacy (sharing of feelings, secrets between siblings)
- complementarity vs. reciprocity (one sibling is caretaking and supporting, the other sibling is a compliant and dependent, or both behave similarly)
- identification (the extent the child identifies with siblings), and
- commitment (does a child make an effort to continue the relationship, shared expectations in the long-term)

Information about properties at the level of the individual e.g. child characteristics, and those at the level of the child's social world e.g. family background and relationships, were identified as being important for the understanding of the children's relationships in a wider context.

Qualitative and quantitative approaches

In addition to having different levels of social complexity, relationships are considered to have different perspectives, an insider's view, existing in the minds of the participants, and an outsider's view, seen by an outside observer. An *insider* is defined as:

'a member of a relationship who is able to provide information on both his/her own feelings and behaviour, and his/her perceptions of the other member' (Olson 1977:118).

An *outsider* is any other observer of interaction, someone who is uninvolved in the relationship. This conceptualisation of relationships has been extended in studies of sibling relationships by adding a third perspective, the participant observer's view (Furman et al., 1989, op.cit. Boer, 1990). *Participant observer* is a person who is indirectly involved in the relationship, for instance, a parent or a foster carer observing siblings' relationship with one another (Furman, 1990b). An overlapping distinction can also be made between *subjective* and *objective* types of data concerning relationships (Olson, 1977). The former involves information that is obtained from research participants by self-report measures, whereas objective data is obtained mainly by behavioural methods. In methodological terms, subjective data is usually, although not always, associated with the qualitative research framework. This assumes, in the context of doing research with children, that:

'The nature of the child is subjective, not objectively knowable or measurable. The child has her/his own perspective, but is also socially determined and theories are inextricable from context and culture (Greig and Taylor, 1999:38).

Qualitative research attempts to capture the ways in which research participants make sense of the subject under investigation. It assumes that knowledge is symbolically and socially constructed. It accepts that there is diversity among children, their experiences and sibling relationships, and it accords with a differentiated view of children's development. Theory is considered to be central to qualitative research, both data analysis and interpretation are organised by theory (Gilgun, 1992). Objective data is associated with the quantitative research framework. This assumes that:

'The nature of the child is objective, knowable and determined. Child can be observed, controlled, measured and quantified' (Greig and Taylor, 1999:38).

Quantitative framework assumes that there are theories about children, which can be empirically tested and proven correct, or not. Both the research methodology

and process are highly structured and controlled. Much of the research into sibling relationships, reviewed in chapter three, has been undertaken by using the quantitative research framework. The outcome of such research has provided information about relational aspects, such as the quality of interaction between two siblings, rather than the quality of relationships. At the planning stage of the study methodological literature was weighted towards experimental design and quantitative analysis (Vasta, 1982). Although a number of texts were devoted to interviewing adults, only one dealt with interviewing children (Rich, 1968). Therefore, two other areas were explored for guidance, social work literature and studies of children's family and sibling relationships.

Social work techniques of working with looked after children offered a range of age-appropriate, verbal and non-verbal methods to aid the research process (Jewett, 1982; Redgrave, 1987; Aldgate and Simmonds, 1988). Researchers had begun borrowing such methods, including drawings, ecograms and household changes charts, lists of important people, photos and life-story books, word choice, sentence completion and happiness scales (Hill and Triseliotis, 1990). Such participatory methods have gained popularity in research with all kinds of children (McAuley, 1996; Moore et al., 1996; Hill et al., 1996; Hill, 1997a; Mauthner, 1997; Borland et al., 1998; Morrow, 1998; Thomas et al., 1999; Christensen and James, 2000a; 2000b). For the purpose of this study some such methods were included as a part of the sibling relationship questionnaire, and to aid the interview process.

Researchers in assessing children's sibling relationships have applied a wide range of methods. The potential benefits and disadvantages of these methods for this study were considered in the planning stage. Observation of siblings provides information about siblings' interaction with, and behavior towards one another. Observation can be undertaken in a naturalistic setting, i.e. at home (Buhler, 1940; Dunn and Kendrick, 1982; Murphy, 1992) or in the context of task performance in a controlled setting (Stewart, 1983; Boer, 1990). Observation, although useful for revealing something about the quality of sibling interaction, is less helpful for understanding the internal relationship dimensions. Dunn (1990) cautions, in her review of methodology to assess sibling relationships, that naturalistic observation of 30-minute duration or less is unsuitable for studying the negative relationship aspects. Observation of sibling interaction would therefore need to be carried out over a period of time. Observation was not considered to be practicable within the scope of this study. Projective measures, such as asking children to respond to a

set of pictures and stories of ambiguous scenes of family and child interaction have been used successfully with children (Radke-Yarrow, et al., 1988; Herzberger and Hall, 1993; O'Brien et al., 1996). Children bring into their interpretations their own feelings about relationships. Projective measures are considered to be useful in tapping into children's subjective worlds, even with relatively young children. Standardised measures and tests are commonly used in research with children, mainly for the purpose of assessing children's development. The most readily available test to measure sibling relationships, Family Relations Test (Bene and Anthony, 1985), had been used in a number of studies with foster children. This was chosen for this study and it will be explained later in this chapter.

Sibling researchers have used structured and semi-structured questionnaires on a fairly large scale (Furman, 1985a; 1985b; Buhrmester and Furman, 1990; Boer, 1990). Questionnaires can be limited in the depth of information obtained, but they are relatively quick and easy to administer, non-intrusive and therefore emotionally less threatening to the participants. Questionnaires can be made more engaging to children by involving children in the design (Prochaska and Prochaska, 1985). Questionnaires offer an appropriate method of obtaining background information on the family, child and sibling history. Questionnaires have also been used to obtain parent or carer reports on children's sibling relationships (Stillwell, 1984; Boer, 1990). While such reports can provide a useful external view of the quality of children's relationships with their siblings, there are some potential disadvantages, e.g. a danger of bias, depending on the parent's or carer's liking or attitude towards the children, and potential subjectivity due to their own experiences of siblinghood. Also, for the carer report to provide quality data, the carer would need to have a good understanding of the siblings, based on ongoing observation of the relationship.

Child interviews have been used in a number of studies (Weinstein, 1960; Stillwell, 1984; Murphy, 1992; Sloper, 2000). One-to-one interviews are generally considered the preferred method of obtaining children's views. In an interview situation children can use their own words to express their thoughts and feelings, enabling the researcher to gain access to their internal, subjective world. Some researchers have interviewed children as young as aged five and six about their siblings (Koch, 1960; Stillwell and Dunn, 1985; Halperin, 1981; 1983). Stillwell and Dunn (1985) found that such young children were able to give their views on their siblings, however, they found it easier to say what they do not like about their siblings than what they

like. Most researchers have chosen to use individual interviews with children aged eight or older. Group interviews were discounted as a potential method, due to difficulty in tape recording and transcribing a number of children talking with one another, similarly accurate contemporaneous note taking in a group can be difficult to achieve.

The review of the literature suggests that although qualitative methods are particularly suited to the study of sibling relationships, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods are needed to ensure that the *different perspectives to relationships*, and the *different levels of social complexity* can be addressed.

Measuring sibling attachments

The quality of children's attachments to, and their emotional involvement with their siblings, formed one dimension of the descriptive framework for this study. Family relations test (Bene and Anthony, 1985) is designed to assess children's emotional involvement with the family members, however, no measures were available for assessing the quality of children's attachment relationships in middle childhood. Attachment researchers have developed narrative methodologies to assess the quality of pre-school, older child and adult attachment relationships. These include semi-structured interviews with adults about their childhood experiences (adult attachment interview) (Main et al., 1985), the analysis of spoken and written language in investigations of older child attachment relationships (Main, 1991), and story completion tasks assessing pre-school children's attachment relationships (Greig and Taylor, 1999). Main's ideas were incorporated in the interview, whereby foster children were asked about their memories of their siblings. The children's recollections were interpreted by using Main's framework.

The chosen approach

The aim of this study is exploratory and discovery orientated, seeking to obtain a better understanding of the nature of foster children's sibling relationships; what siblings mean to children who have experienced a range of adversities and live apart from their parents, and how such children perceive qualitative aspects of their relationships with their sisters and brothers. In order to place the foster children's views on their sibling relationships, in the context of their shared and separate experiences of growing up, it was considered useful to quantify children's and their siblings' characteristics and experiences, and examine differences between them.

Therefore, a mixture of methods capable of generating both quantitative and qualitative data was chosen for this study. Sibling relationships are multifaceted and characterised by different levels of social complexity (individuals, interactions, relationships and the social world) and different perspectives. Quantitative data was obtained on the children's wider *social world* (e.g. family characteristics and change, social networks of support, and care experiences), and *relationships* with individual siblings (e.g. relationship history, shared experiences and expectations of the future), and *individual* children (e.g. characteristics, sibling constellation). Both quantitative and qualitative data was obtained on the main relationship qualities identified through the literature review. The use of different methods and types of data allowed a degree of triangulation, with the aim of improving the validity of the findings.

5. 4 The research strategy

The literature reviewed in chapters three and four had suggested a need for a study focusing on the children's perspectives on the nature and quality of their relationships with their siblings. Before outlining the research strategy, the aims of the study will be outlined.

Aims of the study

This exploratory study was proposed with an overall aim to extend current understanding of the nature and quality of relationships for a sample of Scottish children (aged eight to 12) living apart from their parents in short-term foster care, in order to assist social workers and others with a responsibility for assessing children's needs and making decisions about their welfare. The study aimed to explore children's relationships with their sisters and brothers before they were placed in permanent care. Table 2 outlines the specific aims and objectives of the study.

Table 2. The specific aims and objectives of the study

Aims	Objectives
<p>1. To explore children's perceptions of their siblings and the salient characteristics that sibling relationships hold for them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do children define their siblings? • How do children view their relationships with their siblings? • What are the salient characteristics of children's relationships with their siblings? • What are the particular characteristics of their relationships with their brothers and sisters, which distinguish sibling relationships from children's other relationships? • Are there any differences between foster children's perceptions of their sibling relationships compared to the children in the community sample?
<p>2. To explore the impact of family background and sibling history on the nature of foster children's relationships with their siblings.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the child's family background and 'sibling history' has a bearing on the nature and quality of their relationships with siblings? • What roles do adults e.g. parents, wider family, carers and social workers play in the development of sibling relationships?
<p>3. To consider the impact of separation on children's relationships with their siblings.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What functions do sibling relationships perform for children living separate from their parents? • How do children in foster care view living with siblings or living apart? What do the children think are the positive and negative consequences of living with siblings or living apart? • How do children in foster care maintain their relationships with their siblings?
<p>4. To examine children's expectations of their relationships with sisters and brothers in the long-term.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of expectations do children hold of their relationships with their brothers and sisters in the future? • Do children in foster care view their relationships with siblings as sustainable in the future? • Are there any differences in the expectations of children in foster care, and those in the community?

Two-stage research design

The literature review (chapter three) had identified a lack of empirical information about British children's sibling relationships in middle childhood. Therefore, it was considered useful to investigate how a sample of children in the general population perceive their siblings, prior to exploring foster children's relationships. The principle, that it is important to understand something of the general phenomena before considering the exceptional (Arber, 1993), guided the rationale behind this two-stage research design. The aim of the first part was to place the study firmly in the local socio-cultural context and to provide a baseline for understanding foster children's sibling relationships. The two-stage design incorporated two consecutive studies. These will be referred to as Study 1 - the Community Study, and Study 2 - the Foster Care Study. The following chart outlines the research strategy.

Table 3. Two-stage research design

Study	Sample	Methods and data sources
Study 1- Community study	64 children aged 9-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sibling Relationships Questionnaire (child)
Study 2- Foster care study	21 children aged 8-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sibling Relationships Questionnaire (child)• Family Relations Test (child)• Interview (child)• Interview (social worker)• Sibling relationships questionnaire (carer)

Study 1 - Community study

The following describes the sample selection, research instrument, pilot exercise, process for data collection, and the analysis of the findings for the first part of the study.

Sample selection

The sample was selected by choosing all children, aged 8 – 12, attending a single primary school class in three different schools. It was not intended to seek a fully representative sample from the population of 8-12 year old children in the city. All three schools were situated in housing estates in an area of high level of deprivation and social need, e.g. poor housing, high unemployment and high level of welfare benefit recipients. They provided a spread of communities across the city.

The sample characteristics

The sample consisted of 69 children, of whom 64 had one or more siblings. Five children defined themselves as only children. The sample details below refer solely to children with siblings. Table 4 shows the children's gender distribution.

Table 4. Community study - sample gender distribution

Girls		Boys		Total	
No	%	No	%	No	%
38	59	26	41	64	100

Altogether the children had 152 siblings, the average being 2.4 per child. Siblings' ages ranged from under 1 to 26, seventy per cent being in the age range of 5 to 15. Fifty-two children (81 per cent) described their family as comprising of both a mother and a father living at home. The children's family composition was similar to children in general in the UK (Pullinger and Summerfield, 1997).

Self-report questionnaire

A semi-standardised self-report questionnaire, with a mixture of open ended and closed questions, was used in both studies. This gave opportunities for the respondents to define their relationships with their siblings using their own words. Self-report questionnaires have been used widely in North America (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985a; 1985b; Prochaska and Prochaska, 1985; Buhrmester and Furman, 1990; Barnes and Austin, 1995; Hetherington et al., 1994; McGuire et al. 1996) and in the Netherlands (Boer, 1990) to study children's sibling relationships in middle childhood.

A *Sibling Relationship Questionnaire (SRQ)* was developed (Appendix 1). Part 1 of the questionnaire included a brief description of the study and an illustrated description of types of families and siblings found in contemporary Britain. The questionnaire contained a mixture of closed and open-ended questions about the child's family, friends and siblings in general. It was used to investigate the first specific research aim of this study.

Part 2 of the questionnaire was based on a questionnaire by Furman (1990a). This sought out children's perceptions in relation to their individual siblings in a structured format. Furman's questionnaire contained 48 questions measuring the following relationship dimensions:

- *warmth/closeness* (intimacy, prosocial behaviour, companionship, similarity, admiration by sibling, admiration of sibling, and affection)
- *relative status/power* (nurturance of siblings, dominance over siblings, nurturance by sibling and dominance by siblings)
- *conflict* (antagonism by siblings, antagonism against siblings, quarrelling by siblings, quarrelling towards siblings, and competition), and
- *rivalry* (maternal partiality and paternal partiality).

The rivalry dimension, including questions on maternal and paternal partiality, was omitted. Instead, children's perceptions of parental favouritism were included in the Part 1 of the questionnaire. Following the example of Boer (1990), who had adopted this questionnaire for use in the Netherlands, questions were converted into short statements (for example, 'annoys me' and 'I annoy him/her'). While recognising the two-sided nature of relationships (behaviour towards sibling and by sibling) and aiming to maintain the scales within the relationship dimensions intact, it became apparent that some scale items did not adapt easily. Some items were better framed in a way that indicated mutuality of perception, for instance 'we like the same things...'².

² This will not present problems in the analysis or interpretation, as the findings of this study will not be compared statistically with previous studies.

The questionnaire used in this study contained 60 statements for children to circle. These reflect three dimensions to be investigated: warmth/closeness; relative power/status; and conflict. An additional 20 questions sought information on separations from siblings, children's responses to such separations, and children's expectations of their sibling relationships in the long-term.

Following the example of a group of Canadian children who designed and administered a questionnaire on children's views on causes and 'cures' of sibling rivalry (Prochaska and Prochaska, 1985), a draft sibling relationships questionnaire was presented for discussion with a group of eight children. Separate comments were received from another young person. The children commented on the appropriateness of the open-ended questions, and their understanding of the wording of the scale items on Part 2 of the questionnaire was checked. When appropriate, the original wording was substituted by a word preferred by the Scottish children.

Only children

It was recognised that both having siblings and being an only child can be a sensitive issue for some children (Laybourn, 1994). Therefore, a separate *Family and Friends Questionnaire* was devised to be administered to only children. This enabled those only children, who wished to express their views on their family and friends, to do so. Due to the small number of only children involved the results are not presented in this thesis.

Pilot study

The questionnaire was piloted with 13 children of the appropriate age in a primary school in the same urban area, in January 1995. This confirmed that the children understood the questions and were able to answer these with relative ease. However, the children differed in their response to completing the questionnaire. Some asked for help with writing down the answers. This indicated that the questionnaire should be administered to children in small groups, allowing two researchers for up-to 12 children, to ensure a child-centred approach. Consequently, a social worker, who was well versed in the local dialect and had experience of this age group of children, was recruited to assist with the study. This was to enhance the validity of the findings. Some changes were made to the questionnaire following the pilot study.

Administration of the questionnaire

Research sessions took place in a school library or an empty classroom during the school hours, in February and March 1995. The questionnaire was given to groups of 8-12 children at the time. Each class contained same-age children with markedly diverse abilities. Most children completed the questionnaire within 40-60 minutes. The children were given the pens and erasers to keep. A thank you card and boxes of Easter eggs were sent to class teachers to be shared with the children. The children had not been told that they would be rewarded for their participation.

Data analysis

Part 1 of the questionnaire

Responses to closed questions were pre-coded allowing data to be entered directly into a computerised statistical package (SPSS). Questionnaires were photocopied and the responses to open-ended questions were cut into segments and sorted into themes. The responses were then coded and the data was entered into the same statistical package for analysis.

Children's responses to open-ended questions generally contained more than one variable, for example, in response to a question: What do you like most about your siblings? A child may respond by: *'they are funny, he is kind to me, and she helps me with my maths'*. Each one was coded as a separate variable. Results were presented in the number and the proportion of children with particular responses.

Part 2 of the questionnaire

The children completed part 2 of the questionnaire in respect of the individual siblings of their choice. The children completed 108 questionnaires, amounting to 71 per cent of their 152 siblings.

Children had a free choice regarding the number of statements, representing the scale items, they chose to circle in the questionnaire. Most scale items were treated as having two-sided qualities, i.e. behaviour *by* a sibling or *towards* a sibling. Scores for these scales have been calculated by averaging the three or four item scores designed to measure each scale. Three scales within the warmth and closeness dimension, 'intimacy', 'similarity' and 'companionship', and one scale in the conflict dimension, 'competition' were framed in terms of being mutual, i.e. *'we like the*

same things', rather than being two-sided in nature. Children were able to state a middle position (sometimes) in their answers to these scale items. The scores for these scales have been calculated by averaging the answers to 'often and sometimes' and 'very alike and alike'. Negative and missing answers have been excluded. For these scales (intimacy, similarity, companionship and competition) scale scores appear higher, as the answers include items, which apply often and sometimes. Data was analysed by using the same statistical package (SPSS). The results are presented in the frequency and percentage of children who responded to the scale items.

No statistical tests were undertaken. Unlike the previous studies referred to earlier, this study did not assess relationships between sibling dyads meeting pre-determined criteria (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985a; 1985b; Buhrmester and Furman, 1990; Boer, 1990). In this study children responded in respect of their chosen, but not necessarily all of their siblings; 29 per cent of the siblings were not represented in the children's responses. The number of children's siblings ranged from 1 to 7. Their siblings' ages ranged from under a year to aged 26. These variables, combined with the children's own and their siblings' gender and ordinal position created considerable diversity among the sample of 64 children. The research review suggested that sibling constellation factors i.e. age, number of siblings, ordinal position (both absolute and relative) and gender all have a bearing on the nature and quality of sibling relationships. Because of these complexities, the findings of part 2 of the questionnaire, relating to individual siblings, were used to provide additional information about the more global relationship dimensions, and to add to the information obtained about siblings in general.

Study 2- Foster care study

The literature reviews had highlighted some conceptual and methodological considerations relating to looked after children's siblings to be addressed as part of the research design. These will be discussed next.

Describing and analysing siblings

Looked after children's sibling relationships are particularly complex to understand. The children share varying degrees of biological, social and emotional connectedness, and legal status (Elgar and Head, 1999).

It has been suggested that '*at least one of the reasons for the paucity of research on siblings in foster care may be the complexity of the problem*' (Staff et al., 1993:35). Therefore, consideration was given to the following:

- defining who is a 'sibling'
- what would be the unit of study
- what would be the time frame for the data collection, and
- how to deal with separations from siblings over time.

The following outlines the approach taken in this study.

Definitions

Introduction to this thesis suggested that siblings could be classified in a number of ways depending on the definition of a '*sibling*'. Definition of a sibling should depend on the focus of the study (Staff et al., 1993). As the focus of this study was on the children's own perceptions of their relationships with their siblings, information was collected in respect of all other children, whom the subject child regarded as a sibling. Children's definitions of a sibling formed part of the findings. Social workers were also asked to give information about the children's siblings whether they lived with the child or elsewhere. Thus it was possible to compare information received from the children and their social workers.

Unit of study

Previous research has generally focused on '*individual children*' in sibling pairs, with a defined age-gap. Studies of looked children's siblings have also tended to focus on individual children; placement data has been collected in respect of their siblings. The unit of study could also be '*the relationship*' between a child and one or more siblings. This would mean that information would have to be collected from each sibling, as any relationship has two parties to it. Such a design would be time consuming to execute. It was decided that individual children would be the unit of study. No attempts were made to seek information about the relationships of a family group of siblings with one another, unless more than one child from the same family was selected as part of the sample.

The time frame

Relationships are dynamic and change over time. Therefore, consideration was given to what time frame should be used in the collection of data, i.e. should data be

collected at one point in time only, or retrospectively, or prospectively? If a particular point in time were chosen for data collection, what would be the most appropriate point in time? Transition periods may be especially revealing of family relationships and dynamics (Hinde and Stevenson-Hinde, 1988b; Dunn, 1988d). The admission of a child into foster care, leading to separation from parents and possibly from siblings, forms a transition for the child and the family. Similar transition points, e.g. divorce (Hetherington, 1988; MacKinnon, 1989) and the birth of a sibling (Dunn and Kendrick, 1982; Murphy, 1992) have been used in previous studies of sibling relationships. However, one point in time in the relationship may not be sufficient for understanding sibling relationships, as:

'Relationships are extended in time, and what happens today may be affected by what happened a day, a week, a month, or years previously. For that reason important insights may come from retrospective material about the past experiences of the individuals concerned' (Hinde and Stevenson-Hinde, 1988b: 371).

The approach taken in this study was to focus on the children's perceptions on their relationships with their siblings in one point in time. In addition, retrospective data was obtained both from the children and the social workers. Some researchers have expressed caution about the use of retrospective data, particularly, if obtained from children (Quinton and Rutter, 1988). Retrospective data can, however, be used as a guide to understanding current relationships (Main et al., 1985; Grossman et al., 1988). The aim was to find out about the child's ability to recall early memories, to consider the coherence of their recall, and the feelings associated with these memories, and not the factual accuracy of this information. Therefore, the inclusion of some retrospective data met the aims of this study well. Information about children's commitment to their siblings currently and in the long-term was also sought.

Separations from siblings over time

Information about separations from siblings and previous care experiences is difficult to obtain and analyse, due to complexities in defining separations and sibling placements. A child may be placed with all of their siblings or none of them, or placed with one or more of their siblings and separated from one or more of their siblings. A child can be classified either as placed with a sibling at some time during childhood or never placed with a sibling, or initially placed with siblings, but later separated. One way of overcoming this difficulty is to seek information on the

number and length of the child's separations from each sibling and then calculate the proportion of the subject child's childhood spent with each sibling. This method was chosen. However, as sibling relationships develop early in life (Dunn, 1983, 1993; Dunn and Kendrick, 1982), separations from siblings during the first years of life are likely have a greater impact than later separations. This was born in mind at the stage of analysis.

Multi-method design

The research strategy incorporated a mixture of quantitative and qualitative measures, multiple methods, data sources and perspectives. All three perspectives on relationships, referred to earlier in this chapter (Olson, 1977; Furman, 1985b; Boer, 1990) were represented in the research design. The insider is the subject child describing their relationship with siblings; the participant observer is the foster carer reporting their perceptions on the subject child's relationships with siblings, and the outsiders are the social workers and the researcher. Table 5 outlines the research strategy.

Table 5. Foster care study - the research strategy*

	Perspective		
Data type	Insider	Participant observer	Outsider
Data source	Child	Foster carer	Social worker
Method	Questionnaire	Questionnaire	Interview
	Family Relations Test		
	Interview		

*Adapted from Olson (1977)

As the main purpose of this study was to obtain children's own perceptions of the meanings that sibling relationships have for them (subjective reality), all identified relationship dimensions were explored from the study children's perspective. The participant observers (foster carers) and outsiders (social workers) provided data on some, but not on all relationship dimensions. Foster carers and social workers also provided additional data on children's family backgrounds and sibling history. The following explains the sample selection, the research measures, pilot exercise, the process for data collection, and the analysis of the findings for the main study of children in foster care.

Sample selection

The sample was drawn by using 'criterion sampling' i. e. picking all cases that meet the pre-determined criteria (Patton, 1990). The criteria were: the children living in short-term foster care who:

- were aged 8 and 12 years inclusive
- were known to have one or more siblings
- siblings were defined for sampling purposes: *'all children who share with the subject child at least one biological parent; who have lived together and know each other well; and where there is not a large age gap between the child and siblings (babies and adult siblings excluded)'*
- had been in foster care at least 3 months but no longer than 12 months, since the last reception into care
- did not have learning or communication disabilities, and
- were in care or accommodation of the selected local authority or its successor authorities.

All children who met the sample criteria in January 1996 were included in the sample. Additional children were included when they had been in care or accommodation for the minimum of period of three months. By May 1997, a total of 27 children were identified. Three children were withdrawn, because parental consent was refused in respect of two children, and one child declined to take part. Partial information was collected in respect of three children, of whom one moved into residential care, another declined to take part following an initial meeting and the third child was excluded, as his siblings were adults. During the 16-month period sufficient numbers of children had been identified to meet the aims of the study.

Sample characteristics

The sample was composed of 21 children from 11 families. There were 2 groups of 3 siblings, 6 groups of 2 (2 groups were not placed together), and 3 children with no siblings within the sample.

There were 7 girls and 14 boys in the sample. Although there are more boys than girls being looked after by local authorities, the sample contained proportionally more boys than the national average (Scottish Executive, 2001).

The average age of the children was 10.0 years, with a range from 8 years to 12 years 11 months. Table 6 shows the age distribution for both samples of children.

Table 6. Distribution of children's ages – a comparison with community study

Children in foster care			Children in community		
Age	No	%	Age	No	%
8	7	33	8		
9	5	24	9	21	33
10	2	10	10	22	34
11	4	19	11	19	30
12	3	14	12	2	3
Total	21	100	Total	64	100

The children's background was primarily Scottish. Seventeen children from nine families were described by the social workers as white/UK; a sibling pair were mixed race (Scottish/Philippino); the parents of one child were Scottish/Danish and his brother's Scottish/Greek. Appendix 2 provides a chart of the foster care sample.

Children's siblings

The children came from larger than average families, reflecting findings of previous research (Bebbington and Miles, 1989). The children had 57 siblings that met the sampling criteria. The majority of the siblings (29) were half-siblings. Twenty-eight siblings were full siblings, of who two were non-identical twins.

Problems leading to a child being placed in foster care

Most children's families were well known to the local authority before the current admission into care or accommodation. The immediate problems precipitating the children's admission into foster care fell under the following categories (although in some families more than one category applied):

- mother a single parent with mental health difficulties, lack of support
- neglect and emotional, physical and sexual abuse
- parents' alcohol and drug misuse and mental health difficulties
- family violence, frequent change of mother's partners and lack of stability, and
- difficult child behaviour.

The average length of time since the child's admission into care or accommodation was 6.8 months.

Statutory basis for social work intervention

- twelve children were in care / looked after on compulsory measures of supervision and care
- two children were looked after under emergency protection measures on 'Place of Safety'
- seven children were in 'voluntary care', an arrangement by which a child is looked after by parental request and agreement.

History of neglect and abuse

Eighty-one per cent of the children were known to have suffered from physical neglect, emotional, physical or sexual abuse. Some children had experienced more than one type of abuse. While children were in foster care information emerged to suggest that the remaining four children (19%) who had no known history of abuse may have been subject to emotional abuse and inappropriate sexual behaviour and/or sexual abuse. Concerns also emerged about the extent and nature of abuse, which the study children may have suffered.

Social work plan

Social work plan for over a half of the children was to return to the care of one of their birth parents. For nine children the plan was to place them in a permanent family placement. For one child the plan was to remain in foster care, although this did not include a permanency plan. Eight of the return-home group were expected to be returned to the care of their mother, two to the care of their father, and for one child no decision was made so far.

Data sources – social workers, children and foster carers

Data was gathered from three sources: social workers, children and foster carers. The following describes the research measures and the process for data collection. Firstly, the pilot study will be explained.

A pilot study

A pilot study, including three children who met the sampling criteria, was undertaken in December 1995. Data was collected in respect of seven siblings. A *'Family*

Background and Sibling Relationship History Questionnaire' (Appendix 3) was completed by two social workers. This led to a decision to interview the social workers based on this questionnaire. A chronological history (a record of changes of family, living situation and significant events in the child's life) was also added to increase the comprehensiveness of the data. Minor changes were made to the questionnaire as a result of this pilot. All research measures were tried out with the children. The pilot study uncovered a number of practical difficulties. A lack of quiet space, the presence of siblings and other children in the foster home, and the presence of the foster carer in the interview situation, made it difficult for children to focus on the tasks. These difficulties were overcome in the main study by scheduling the sessions when other children were out, and by not involving the foster carers unless the child specifically requested the carer to be present. The pilot study also enabled the three measures to be scheduled better. The 'sibling relationships questionnaire', used in study 1 was amended to reflect the foster children's family situations (appendix 4). The questionnaire and the test worked well and were not amended. The interview guide was revised following the pilot. Two foster carers completed the *'Foster Carer's Perception of Child's Relationships with Siblings'* questionnaire in respect of three children. Minor changes were made to the questionnaire.

Data gathering from social workers

Structured one-to-one interviews, based on the *'Family Background and Sibling Relationship History Questionnaire'*, were undertaken with social workers. These lasted approximately two hours and took place in social work offices. Social workers' responses were recorded on the questionnaire at the time of the interview. The following areas were covered in the social worker interviews:

- changes in family and living situations
- separations from siblings
- family relationships, emotional climate, parenting, differential parental treatment and any significant changes in the family
- social work intervention (assessment of sibling relationships, decision making, contact with birth family, future plans)
- social worker's views on sibling relationships, and on the significance of siblings in the long-term.

The social workers were interviewed between two and four weeks prior to the children. A 100 per cent response rate was obtained from social workers.

Data gathering from children

The Sibling Relationship Questionnaire

During the first session the children completed a '*Sibling Relationship Questionnaire*'. This has been discussed in connection with the Community Study. The researcher recorded any observations, and comments made by the child following the session. All 21 children completed part 1 of the questionnaire, and part 2 of the questionnaire in respect of their 56 individual siblings.

The Family Relations Test

Family Relations Test was used to assess the strength and quality of children's emotional involvement with their siblings (Bene and Anthony, 1985). The theoretical basis for this test lies within psychoanalytical theory, however, its use has not been restricted to clinical practice or any particular theoretical school of thinking. The test has been used in various relevant studies, including studies of children in adoptive, foster and residential care (Jaffe, 1977; Schwartz, 1970; Cutler, 1984; McAuley, 1996; Cleaver, 2000) and studies of child abuse (Mertin and Rooney, 1995). The test provided an indirect way of ascertaining the internal 'psychic reality' of children's sibling relationships, and therefore, it was less threatening to children than direct questioning. It is devised to give a concrete representation of the child's family. It consists of 20 cardboard figures representing people of various ages, shapes and sizes, and includes four women, four men, five girls, five boys, a toddler and a baby. Mr. Nobody is incorporated as an additional figure to accommodate those statements that the child feels do not apply to anyone in the family. Each figure is attached to a box, which has a slit in the top. There are 99 cards with printed statements that can be read to, or by, the child. These represent emotional attitudes emanating from the child towards, and those received by the child from the family members. Examples of statements include: '*this person in the family is very nice to play with*', and '*this person in the family can make me very angry*'. The child is asked to "post" each card into the box representing the person whom it fits best.

During the second session, the children were asked to create a representation of their family. If they wished, they could include members of the foster family under the category of 'others in the family'. The administration of the test took between 30

to 40 minutes. The children helped to put away the boxes. Following the test the children had a short break. All 21 children completed the Family Relations Test. They included 60 siblings in their families.

Children's interviews

Qualitative interviews have been advocated as the most effective method of obtaining the voice of the child and understanding their perspective (Greig and Taylor, 1999). Children's perceptions, thoughts and feelings about their relationships with their siblings can be explored in a child centred way. Although it has been assumed, often mistakenly, that individual interviews are inappropriate for younger children (Mauthner, 1997), some studies have included children as young as five (Koch, 1960; Weinstein, 1960; McAuley, 1996). Many sibling studies have used structured interviews (Halperin, 1981; 1983; Hetherington, 1988; Radke-Yarrow et al., 1988; Stocker, 1994; Bifulco et al., 1997; Slomkowski et al., 1997), as opposed to more informal conversational approaches generally used in qualitative research. Less structured and more participative methods have been adopted in studies of children's sibling relationships (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985b; Stillwell and Dunn, 1985; Murphy, 1992). Informal, conversational interviews have been applied in studies of school-aged children's (Moore et al., 1996) and adolescents' family relationships (Brannen, 1996), and children's views on adoption (Hill and Triseliotis, 1990).

The 'interview guide' approach (Patton, 1990), also called 'focused interview' (Fielding, 1993), was chosen as the most appropriate method. Although the beginning and the ending of the interview remain the same on each occasion, the order in which the topics are explored can vary. These allows the researcher to consider children's level of comfort by observing their non-verbal behaviour, and adjust the interview process accordingly. An *interview guide* (Appendix 5), and a set of *prompt cards* were developed (appendix 6). The guide outlines the main topics to be covered during the interview, with more detailed prompts to assist the interview process. The topics covered the four specific research aims, and included the following:

- my sisters and brothers
- earliest memories of siblings
- before coming into foster care
- views on placement with/without siblings

- family likeness and identification with siblings
- sources of support and help
- obligations/responsibilities for siblings
- response to separation from siblings
- keeping in touch with siblings, and
- expectations of sibling relationships in the long-term.

The children's interviews took place following the administration of the test. This meant that there had been time to develop rapport with the children. This is considered to be particularly important for undertaking qualitative interviews with child subjects (Greig and Taylor, 1999). The prompt cards were used with a few children to aid communication.

At the conclusion of the interview, the children were asked if there was anything worrying them that they wished to be passed on to their social worker or foster carer. The purpose of this was to close the interview by encouraging children to share any anxieties that the interview may have created for them. Some children took up this offer and their concerns about siblings, parents or the foster home were passed on to the people they were intended to. The interviews took between 40 and 75 minutes. They were audio recorded with the children's permission. The children were given a small gift to thank them for their participation in the study. There was a 100 per cent participation rate.

Data gathering from foster carers

Parents and carers can provide a participant observer perspective on sibling relationships through questionnaires and interviews (Stillwell and Dunn, 1985; Dunn et al., 1990a; Hetherington et al., 1994; Murphy, 1992; McGuire et al., 1996). Parental questionnaires have been used in studies of siblings in middle childhood and adolescence (Furman, 1990b; Boer, 1990). Parents' or carers' reports can provide information about siblings' behaviour towards one another, provided the parent or carer is non-biased towards the siblings, and that the carer knows the siblings well. A questionnaire was devised to obtain foster carers' views on children's sibling relationships (appendix 7). Likewise to the children's questionnaire, the carer questionnaire had two parts. Part 1 sought information about children's relationships with their siblings in general. It covered the following areas:

- child details, including information about siblings living with and apart from the child
- views on sibling placements in general
- foster family composition and child's relationships within
- contact with siblings
- assessment of child's sibling relationships
- views on child's placement with/separation from siblings, and
- views on the significance of child's siblings in the long-term.

Part 2 of the questionnaire was based on a carer version of the sibling relationship questionnaire discussed earlier (Revised (Parent) 3/90, Furman, 1990b). Some changes were made to the way the questions were framed. Furman had framed some questions to indicate mutuality of perception, for instance, 'how much do _____ and this sibling care about each other? In order to recognise that siblings may hold diverse views on one another, the question was expressed as: 'how much does Kelly care about this sibling? And 'how much does this sibling care about Kelly? This resulted in the questionnaire having 58 questions to be responded on a three-point likert scale (hardly at all, somewhat, very much).

The questionnaire was left with the carer, with instructions for completion, at the end of the first session. The researcher collected the completed questionnaire at the end of the second session with the child. Part 1 of the questionnaire was completed by 14 individual carers in respect of all 21 children. The carers completed part 2 of the questionnaire in respect of 29 individual siblings.

Data analysis

Social worker interviews

Data obtained from the children's social workers through structured interviews was analysed manually. A number of charts, containing data on each child, were prepared for questions, which produced quantitative answers. Responses to open-ended questions were labelled, then cut into strips, and sorted into themes. The data was collated and interpreted in respect of the whole sample, as well in respect of the individual children. The experience gained from the manual analysis of this data suggests that the use of a computer would have speeded up the process; however, the profiling of individual children may have been more difficult to achieve. A considerable amount of information was obtained about social worker attitudes

and social work practice in relation to siblings. This will not be reported in this thesis, as it does not relate directly to the study aims.

The Family Relations Test

The results of the family relations test were scored on individual scoring sheets. These show how much each kind of feeling (for instance, outgoing positive mild feelings) the child has assigned to each member of their family, including themselves and Mr. Nobody. The data was then summarised in the form of tables on an individual record form. The total number of statements attributed to any one person is taken to indicate the measure of the child's emotional involvement with that person. The relative strength and quality of feelings attributed by the child to the various family members provides a numerical picture of the child's close relationships. Bene and Anthony give no advice about how the collective importance of siblings in relation to other family members should be analysed. A method of calculating a sibling score was developed. A 'sibling score' for each child was obtained by calculating the average of individual sibling scores. The mean value for 'involvement with siblings' presented here is the average of the children's 'sibling scores'. This enabled the child's involvement with siblings to be compared relative to others in the family. The children's rated involvement with their siblings was considered from the following perspectives: the strength of involvement with all of their siblings (mean score), and the strength and quality of involvement (number of positive and negative incoming and outgoing feelings) with their individual siblings (appendix 8). The test results relating to the whole sample of children were collated into tables. The children's individual results were used as part of the profiling of the children's emotional involvement and sibling attachments.

Children's interviews

The analysis and interpretation of the children's interview data contained the largest proportion of material for this thesis. All 21 interviews were audio-recorded. They provided about 21 hours of taped material. The researcher transcribed this verbatim. All transcripts were typed up, providing some 350 pages of interview material. This method of transcribing proved extremely valuable as it allowed the researcher to become immersed in the data early on in the process (Gilgun, 1992; Greig and Taylor, 1999). Following this, a thematic analysis was carried out. Conceptual categories relating to children's perceptions of their sibling relationships, for example, 'support', 'shared adversity' and 'abuse', were identified in the data. Each transcript was then worked through and the categories marked. The

information from the individual children's transcripts was transferred onto a wall chart. The salient theoretical and empirical issues arising from literature reviews influenced the interpretation of the data. The theoretical framework for describing and understanding relationships (Hinde and Stevenson-Hinde, 1988b; Hinde, 1988; 1992) and the attachment framework (Main et al., 1985; Main, 1991), in particular, guided the interpretation of the data. A framework for understanding foster children's sibling relationships was developed based on the themes emerging from the data.

At the design stage of the study in 1993-94, consideration was given to using a computer software package to assist in the analysis of the interview data. However, a decision was made to proceed with manual analysis, this was at that time quite common practice. With hindsight, this decision should have been reviewed at the time that the data was being analysed. By 1996-97 software packages had become more user friendly, leading to their increased use. Although the manual transcription and analysis of the interview data was time consuming, it allowed the researcher to become immersed in the data early in the process, therefore providing added value in the research process.

The carers' responses contained both on part 1 and part 2 of the questionnaire were analysed by using the processes applied in the analysis of the sibling relationships questionnaire completed by children.

Addressing issues of validity and reliability

The issues of validity and reliability were considered in the design stage of the study. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest that reliability and validity of qualitative research can be increased by incorporating the following design features:

- data triangulation (use of a variety of data sources)
- investigator triangulation (use of more than one researcher or evaluator)
- theoretical triangulation (use of multiple theoretical perspectives to interpret data), and
- methodological triangulation (use of multiple methods).

Triangulation was built into the design of this study from the outset. Data was obtained from three separate sources; several theoretical perspectives informed the design, methodology, analysis and interpretation of the data; and multiple methods were used to study the research questions.

The research design, process and the manner in which the information is sought also contribute to the validity of the data. Greig and Taylor (1999) suggest that valid data can be obtained even from very young children by paying careful attention to all aspects of the research processes, including the research location, use of language and child-centred means of communication, and child-centred interpretation of data. In this study, children were involved in the questionnaire design process; information was collected from the children while they were in their own natural milieu, at school (community sample) and in the foster home (foster care sample). This allowed children to be seen in their own familiar ground, therefore enhancing the ecological validity of the study.

Improving the validity of information and the interpretation of the data can be enhanced by considering the developmental issues discussed earlier e.g. children's stage of development, their understanding and competence. Children's rights and ethical issues, such as power relationships between the researcher and the child, and child-centred approaches to the research process will be discussed next.

5. 5 Children's rights and ethical considerations

The Centre for the Study of the Child & Society '*Code of Practice for Research Involving Children*' contained the minimum ethical requirements to be observed. The study had to also comply with the local authority education and social work departments' requirements. In addition, consideration was given to ethical dilemmas, which might arise at any stage of the study (Alderson, 1993; 1995; 2000; Hill et al., 1996; Mahon et al., 1996; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Thomas and O'Kane, 1998). The main consideration related to children's rights, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, and the protection of the participants in the research process.

Children's rights

The UK government ratified in 1992 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989. This strengthened children's rights in all areas, including a right to express their views. There are potential barriers for children's participation in research. Hood et al. (1996) have identified a 'hierarchy of gatekeeping' running from the organisational level to the parents and finally to the children. Unfortunately, such a gatekeeping mechanism also operated in this study. One of the head teachers believed that the research questions might lead some children to disclose

experiences of abuse, leading to a negative reaction from parents. This created a dilemma, in that these children's participatory right would be denied should this school be withdrawn from the study. However, on balance, this was agreed on the grounds that the head teacher's attitude could undermine the research process. This school was replaced by another.

It has been advocated that involving children as researchers would provide a way of enhancing children's rights in the research process (Alderson, 1995; 2000). Children were not engaged as researchers in this study, however, children were involved in the design process. The children's comments on the relevance of the questions to their own experiences and knowledge, and the appropriateness of the language used were extremely useful. Children's participatory rights were considered by including all children in each primary class regardless of their sibling status or ability to complete the questionnaire (Roberts, 2000). The potential difficulties were overcome by devising a separate questionnaire for those without siblings, and offering help to children who experienced difficulties with reading or writing.

Informed consent

Parents were approached by letter and asked to reply only if they did not wish their child to take part. One child from the community sample, and two children from the foster care sample, were refused parental consent. Contact with the children was made only following parental agreement.

The children in the community study were asked for their consent verbally at the beginning of the research session. It may be difficult for a child to refuse their consent in a formal situation such as school (Morrow and Richards, 1996). However, it was made clear to the children that the questionnaires did not relate to their school work, and that their participation was entirely voluntary. It was acknowledged that some children may not feel comfortable with formally signing their agreement to participation, preferring to give a verbal consent (Alderson, 1995). This level of explanation and consent was considered sufficient taking into account of the nature of the information sought and the instrument used.

An approach to foster children was made by the social worker and following this through their foster carer. This allowed the children to indicate to people they knew well, if they did not wish to participate. At the first meeting with the child the

researcher explained the study, what was expected of the child, and how the information will be used. The child was asked for their consent verbally. One child refused their consent at this stage. Consent to obtain information (chronological history) from the child's case file was obtained from the social work department only.

Confidentiality and anonymity

The children were told that: *'What you say about your sisters and brothers is CONFIDENTIAL. That means that no one else will know what you say apart from me. I will not tell other people, such as your parents, sisters and brothers or teachers what you have said.'* It was acknowledged that it would be inappropriate to guarantee complete confidentiality. The children were advised that if any information came to light that they may have suffered or were at risk of suffering harm, this would be passed onto a third party, with the child's permission. In the course of the interviews one foster child disclosed physical and emotional abuse by a previous foster carer. The child was dissatisfied with the investigation into the matter and wished this to be re-addressed. In this case, with the child's permission, this concern was referred to the child's social worker.

The children were told that the findings of the research would be published. Anonymity would be ensured by a change of name in any publications. Some children wished that their own names should be used. This was not promised, as the anonymity of their siblings and parents could not be guaranteed.

Protection in the research process

Researchers have a responsibility to protect children in the research process. Roberts states that: *'...there is an onus on us to make participation in research, at whatever level, an experience which is at best fun, and at worst, does no harm, to young people.'* (Roberts (2000:238). Although, both children and adults can be vulnerable to exploitation, being misunderstood or misrepresented (Gallagher et al., 1995; Morrow and Richards, 1996), children can be especially vulnerable due to obvious physical and psychological differences between children and adult researchers, and structural inequalities that exist between children and adults (Landsdown, 1994). A power imbalance can also result if foster children confuse the researcher role with the social worker role. Daly (1992) suggests that researchers must be clear about research and therapy boundaries. Special care was taken to

ensure that the children understood that the researcher is not working as social worker, and thus she has no role in influencing any decisions about their lives. Foster children can also be particularly vulnerable due to anxieties and uncertainties that are inherent in their circumstances. A number of strategies were put in place to avoid causing additional anxiety and distress to them. These included seeing the children in the foster home where their carer was close to them. Children were encouraged to exert some control over the research situation, for instance, by operating the tape recorder, listening to their own and the researcher's voice, until they felt comfortable with the situation. The interviewer sat at the child's level, most often on the floor. The children were told that they did not have to answer any questions they did not wish to, and at any time they could ask for a break, or termination of the interview. Some children asked to interview the researcher and one devised a questionnaire for the researcher to complete. The sessions were taken at each child's pace, allowing breaks when children appeared to need them. Children were able to terminate the session at any time. Some did so by indicating this verbally or through their behavioural cues.

Conflicting ethical principles

It was recognised that ethical principles guiding the research process (Alderson, 1995) may conflict with one another. A *'pragmatic approach'* was applied in this study to address conflicting ethical principles (Gallagher et al., 1995). Priority was given to avoiding causing harm to children, their siblings and parents, over principles such as obtaining fully informed consent and access to case information. In order to minimise distress to parents while their children were in foster care they were given written information only. The researcher did not meet with the parents face-to-face to explain the study. Similar to other studies, parents were asked to reply only if they refused their consent (Hill et al., 1996).

Parental refusal to consent meant that the child's right to consider if they wanted to participate was jeopardised. This compromise was made to accommodate the requirements of the local authority. The children were not asked for a written consent. This made the research situation less formal and avoided any confusion between the research process and procedures undertaken by social workers. Children in this local authority were asked for a signature for care plans and placement agreements. Therefore, to avoid causing harm (anxiety and distress) to the participants remained the first priority in the application of the ethical principles discussed above.

5. 6 Reflections on methodology

Research strategy

At the design stage of this study, it was recognised that children's sibling relationships are multifaceted, and that this is particularly so for children growing up in adversity. The review of the relevant theoretical frameworks and concepts, discussed in chapter 2, suggested that no single theory alone could explain the diverse and complex nature of siblingship, and that the understanding of sibling relationships would be enhanced by the use of multiple perspectives and different levels of social complexity. These influenced the planning for the study, from the initial idea to the final research questions, the sampling and the methods applied to obtain the data.

In this study, the aim was to explore foster children's perspectives on their relationships with their sisters and brothers in the local socio-cultural context; thus the two-stage design of a community study and a foster care study. The community study aimed to obtain contextual, baseline information, about a sample of children of similar age, living with their families, in similar communities to those of the sample of foster children. This was considered to be particularly important, as all previous research studies had been undertaken outside this country. Comparable studies were also limited in scope, in that the samples were generally drawn from intact, white, middle class families, using a defined age gap two-sibling designs. The community study also provided some comparative data, against which foster children's characteristics, experiences and views on their sibling relationships could be considered. The aim of the main in-depth foster care study was to explore different levels of social complexity: the children, their family structure and history, and their social networks and care experiences, and how these impacted on foster children's sibling relationships. It was important to understand foster children's sibling relationships in the context of their social worlds, their disrupted family relationships and adverse childhood experiences. It was intended that the exploration should be carried out in as an open manner, as would be possible, within the limitations of this thesis. Furthermore, the findings should add to social workers' and foster carers' knowledge base, and be relatively easy to translate into practice. These considerations led to a possibly larger research strategy than necessary. This generated more data than was required to answer the research questions. There is no doubt that the study would have been easier to execute, had more narrow parameters been placed on the background theory, and the aims of

the study. This was not done, because there was already a considerable body of knowledge on some *aspects* of children's sibling *relationships*. Previous research, much of it undertaken on large samples, was located primarily within one discipline (developmental psychology), and therefore it was narrower in focus, in terms of the background theory and the research questions explored. On reflection, it is considered that the research strategy described in this chapter was justified, taking account of the exploratory nature of this study.

An alternative to this two-stage design would have been a longitudinal study of children in foster care. This could have explored any potential stability and/or change in the quality of looked after children's sibling relationship, while in foster care. This was considered, but discounted, as it was felt that there was a greater need to obtain baseline information about children in the community. Furthermore, longitudinal design would not have been practicable within the timescale of a Ph. D study, as this would have resulted in a small sample.

Methods

There are a variety of ways to engage with children in middle childhood in research settings. Many researchers advocate the use of less structured and participative methods, such as drawing, paper and pencil exercises etc. as opposed to individual interviews. At the design stage of this study, a range of methods, in addition to individual interviews were considered, such as the use of diaries, vignettes, and a range of paper and pencil exercises. These were, however, not used. The reason for this was, that there were no difficulties, during the pilot exercise, in engaging children in talking about their siblings. The subject appeared to be less threatening and anxiety provoking than talking about their parents might have been. The subject was particularly salient to the children, and they were keen to have their say. Some foster children were positively enthusiastic about talking about their sisters and brothers, reflecting the attitude of the children in the community study towards the research task. This may well be the result of general *lack of attention* paid by adults to children's sibling relationships, in contrast to their relationships with parents. The prompt cards, as an aid to the interview process, were used with those children, who were less at ease in the interview situation. All research measures, but in particular the questionnaire and the test were engaging in nature, making the research sessions into participative events for the children. On reflection, projective measures, such as asking children to respond to a set of pictures or stories of family scenes depicting sibling interaction, could well have proved useful in this

study. Such methods could have been used to obtain additional information about the quality of relationships (e.g. sibling attachments and the use of siblings as a secure base) and relationship processes (e.g. sibling conflict and how children deal with this).

The children engaged well with completing the questionnaires, although many needed some help. Part 2 of the Sibling Relationships Questionnaire worked particularly well. The Family Relations Test (Bene and Anthony, 1985) has much to recommend it. It provided an opportunity for children to sculpt their family in a physical sense, and a means of expressing their emotional connections to the individuals within their families. Once the card with a message was posted into its intended box (representing a family member), it was out of sight, and the content of the message was less likely to become a source of guilt or regret to the child. The test also provided a degree of privacy in that those children, who read the messages themselves, did not need to share these with the researcher. The use of three different means of exploring children's sibling relationships provided a more comprehensive picture than would have been possible by any one method.

The study did not use direct observation of children's interaction and behaviour with their siblings. This would have provided additional, objective information about the quality of children's sibling relationships, in that behaviour might not always match individual's verbal reports. Observation of sibling interaction was discounted as not being possible within this kind of study. Furthermore, a lack of objective data was not considered to be a great disadvantage, taking account of the main aims of the study.

Structured interviews with social workers, backed up by children's chronological histories, worked well. These provided detailed information. By contrast, foster carer questionnaires yielded less comprehensive data. The reasons for this were two-fold. Firstly, foster carers, who look after children on a short-term basis, do not always get to know the children's siblings, unless siblings are accommodated together. This made it difficult for some of them to complete part 2 of the questionnaire (it was completed in respect of 29 of the possible 57 siblings). Secondly, some carers found the questionnaire more difficult to complete than had been anticipated on the basis of the pilot exercise. This may reflect the relatively poor level of literacy among some carers. A way around this difficulty, had it been identified early enough

in the research process, would have been to complete the questionnaire as a structured interview. This in turn would have delayed the data collection further.

Data collection

The pilot exercise highlighted a need for careful planning of the data collection. The time spent on the planning to ensure that the research situation and conditions were child-friendly paid dividends. The planning consisted of a number of telephone discussions with social workers and foster carers to ensure that the timing and the general conditions for data collection would take account of the child's and the carer's individual priorities, and any unexpected events or circumstances. For instance, some children were seen in the evening, others on a Saturday or Sunday, or during a school holiday. An aid memoir, detailing the processes to be completed in respect of each child, was followed. The children were generally well prepared for meeting with the researcher and fully engaged with the research task. The interviews were made 'participative' in that the children were offered a degree of control over the interview situation. Similarly, foster carers were co-operative, once the arrangements for seeing the children were carefully planned to avoid causing them or the children undue anxiety and disturbance. It became apparent during the pilot exercise that a face-to-face interview with social workers would prove more fruitful than expecting the workers to complete questionnaires. On the whole, time spent with people face-to-face throughout the research process was invaluable.

Data analysis

The study generated a considerable amount of data. Data analysis was one area where, with hindsight, some improvements could have been made. At the design stage of the study in 1993-94, consideration was given to using a computer software package to assist in the analysis of the interview data. At that stage a decision was made to proceed with manual analysis. This decision was not reviewed in the light of the increased choice of software packages available later on. This is regrettable, as the use of such a package would have had considerable benefits.

The completed thesis does not contain all the data collated and analysed as part of this study. While this is by no means unusual in this kind of research, it warrants some explanation. The rationale for excluding data from the thesis was based primarily on whether it substantially contributed to the main aims of the study. All of the data obtained from the children has been reported in this thesis; the children

were the primary focus of this study. Some data, obtained from social workers and carers, particularly that relating to social work and foster care practices, has been omitted. While this data is interesting on its own merit, in that it would have told something about the impact that social work and foster care practices can have on children's sibling relationships, a decision was made to exclude this data in order to limit the size of the thesis. Foster carers' assessments of children's sibling relationships have not been reported. The reasons for this have been explained above.

5. 7 Summary

This chapter has discussed the research strategy and methodology for this exploratory study of foster children's sibling relationships. Special developmental and methodological considerations relating to children's sibling relationships in middle childhood were outlined. The research strategy combined quantitative and qualitative measures, multiple methods, data sources and perspectives. A two-stage research strategy was developed. Study 1- Community Study, was designed to seek information about a sample of primary school children's perceptions of their siblings. Study 2- Foster Care Study, investigated in depth how a sample of foster children perceive their relationships with their sisters and brothers. The processes involved in the analysis and interpretation of the data have been explained. Children's rights and ethical issues considered in the research process were also outlined. The chapter concluded with reflections on the chosen research strategy.

The next chapter presents the findings relating to the first part of the study, a questionnaire survey of the views of children in the community.

Chapter 6 Sibling relationships: perceptions of children in the community

6. 1 Introduction

The aim of the community study was to assist in the design of the main study and place the main study sample in wider context. No relevant British research findings were available at the beginning of this study. Therefore, this questionnaire study was designed to explore the views of a reasonably representative sample of Scottish children on their siblings, and to test out if the findings of research undertaken elsewhere also apply to children in Scotland. The community study provided primarily contextual, but also limited comparative information, on sibling relationships for children in the general population, thus serving as a benchmark to illuminate foster children's experiences. The findings of the community study helped to make sense of what the fostered children said about their siblings, and to consider how typical or unusual were their sibling relationships. It was not intended that the community study would be fully comparative. It was important to gather much more data from different sources on the smaller foster care sample. Comparative data, on a larger and more representative community sample, was obtained on a sub-set of questions relating to the first research aim. The research questions were formulated on the basis of previous research on sibling relationships in middle childhood. These were:

- Who are children's siblings in the context of their changing families?
- How do children perceive their relationships with their siblings compared to their family, friends and others?
- What are the most salient qualities of sibling relationships for the children?
- What role do siblings play in providing support and help to each other?
- What are the potential sources of stress inherent in sibling relationships?
- What role do children play in looking after their siblings and how do they experience sibling caretaking?
- How do children perceive their position in their family relative to their siblings?
- Do children think their parents treat them the same compared to their siblings?
- Would children prefer to have siblings or be an only child?
- What expectations do children hold on their relationships with siblings in the long-term?

The results presented here relate to a sample of nine to twelve year old children who had one or more siblings. Sixty-four children of the sample of 69 had one or more siblings. The sample comprised 38 (59.4%) girls and 26 (40.6 %) boys. The children were aged nine (33%), 10 (34%), 11 (30%) and 12 (3%). The mean age for the children was 10 years and 1 month.

Children's views on *siblings in general* were obtained through mainly open-ended questions (SRQ – Part 1). Their views on their *individual siblings* were sought through a separate questionnaire (SRQ-Part 2) in respect of each sibling. This sought information about siblings in a more structured way. The questionnaire explored the key dimensions of sibling relationships identified by Furman and Buhrmester (1985b). These dimensions are warmth/closeness; relative power/status; and conflict. In addition, Furman and Buhrmester had also identified a fourth dimension, 'rivalry'. This referred to differential parental behaviour towards the child. This area was explored separately. The key dimensions provide a descriptive system for categorising aspects of children's sibling relationships in middle childhood. The questionnaires were administered to children in small groups at school. The development and the administration of this questionnaire have been discussed in chapter five.

6. 2 Sibling relationships in the context of the family

Children's sibling relationships are intrinsically linked to their membership of a family, and their network of other close relationships (Dunn, 1993; Hinde and Stevenson-Hinde, 1988a; Hinde, 1992). In the 1990's there has been a growth of qualitative studies, undertaken within the 'sociology of childhood' paradigm, with an aim of obtaining children's perspectives on their families and daily lives (Solberg, 1990; Hallden, 1994; Allatt, 1996; Laybourn et al., 1996; Moore et al., 1996; O'Brien et al., 1996; Alanen, 1998; Borland et al., 1998; Morrow, 1998). These studies suggest that children construct 'the family' in a variety of ways and their family experiences and relationships are unique (Mayall, 1994). Both age and gender are important in children's interpretation of family relationships. Children's definitions of the family become more complex as they get older (O'Brien et al., 1996). Older children are more likely to consider the nature and quality of family relationships as being important (Morrow, 1998), similarly girls in Hallden's (1994) study perceived relationships as more important than did boys. The family holds considerable emotional significance for children in middle childhood.

Morrow (1998) found that children defined the concept of family in the following terms:

- roles or (functions) of family members (care, provision and nurturing)
- relationships (love and affection), and
- household structure ('mum and dad and children', or more commonly, 'a group of people who are related', or 'who live together').

Family identity was based on a sense of unity, where family members pulled together for the common good. Support inside the family was not a one-way process, children offered parents practical support; doing household tasks, making breakfast, and looking after their siblings. Some children also offered emotional support to their parents and their siblings at times of stress, sometimes at the cost of keeping their own worries to themselves (Moore et al., 1996). Similarly, unconditional care and concern (Allatt, 1996), being cared for physically and emotionally by being listened to, taken seriously and valued (Borland et al., 1998) were perceived by adolescents and children to be the core ingredients of happy family life.

Children's understanding of their family

Children's perceptions of their family composition and boundaries have only recently become the subject of research interest (O'Brien et al., 1996; Morrow, 1998). Children are generally treated as belonging to a family, and family composition is perceived from the adult perspective. Qvortrup (1991) refers to this phenomenon as *familialization* of childhood, where children are seen as dependent family members, rather than individuals in their own right. Children's own understanding of what they mean by their family and who belongs to it can differ from that of the adults. This may be so in particular, where there have been changes in the family composition during childhood, and where, as a result of these changes, family members have separate residential arrangements.

The children were asked: *'Who belongs to your family, including people and pets, and lives at home with you,'* and *'Are there any members of your immediate family such as mother, father, sister or brother not living at home?'* Thus the family composition was considered from the perspective of the study child's relationships with adults and other children in the family.

The findings suggest that all children had a clear understanding of the boundaries of their family. None of the children mentioned other unrelated adults, such as lodgers as part of their family. The children came from varied types of families, ranging from small, one parent and a child, to large families including up to seven children. Some children came from complex family backgrounds with different types of siblings living in a number of family situations.

Fifty-two children (81 per cent) described their family as consisting of both a mother and a father living at home. Two children among this group also mentioned a grandparent living with the family. Nine children (14 per cent) lived with a lone parent, seven with a mother and two with a father. Three children described their family as comprising a mother and mother's boy friend. No step-parents were mentioned by the children as members of their family living at home, although one child reported the presence of a step-brother in his family. This may be because the children may not have chosen to describe a parent as a step-parent. These findings are similar to national statistics, which suggest that four-fifths of dependent children are brought up in a household with two parents and with other children (Pullinger and Summerfield, 1997).

Forty-one children (66 per cent) mentioned one or more pets as being part of their families. Some children had a large number and a variety of pets, including dogs, cats, fish, birds, rabbits, hamsters, gerbils, guinea pigs, terrapins and stick insects.

Children's understanding of their siblings

Children were asked to list their sisters and brothers, including those, who were not living with the child. Some children declined to give information about their biological siblings living with another parent, while others included foster siblings living temporarily with the family. One child defined himself as an 'only' child, although he had half-siblings living outside the family home. Three children, who were 'only' children within their family home, and who had siblings living with another parent in another household, did not define themselves as 'only' children. Each child's description of their status in relation to their siblings, and their definition of a sibling was accepted at face value, regardless of an existence of a biological connection or a shared living arrangement between the child and a sibling.

The children reported having a total of 152 siblings. The children lived in the same household with 111 (73%) of their siblings; the remaining 41 (27%) siblings had separate residential arrangements. Table 7 shows the number of siblings the children reported.

Table 7. Community study - number of siblings

Siblings	Children	
	No	%
1	23	36
2	18	28
3	12	19
4 - 7	11	17
Total	64	100

There is a dearth of demographic information about children with which to compare this local sample. Statistics relating to children in families are usually presented as number of births per woman (Cooper and Jones, 1992; Cooper and Shaw, 1993) or number of dependent children in a family (Church and Summerfield, 1994; Pullinger and Summerfield, 1997). Neither of these methods gives information about the number of siblings children have. Also, no direct information is available on children's living arrangements at birth or changes in these following a birth outside marriage or marriage breakdown (Clarke, 1996).

Children's experiences of family disruption and separation

Eighteen children (28 per cent) mentioned one or more members of their family who lived away from home. When the siblings' living situation was considered in more detail, it was discovered that 41 (27 per cent) of the children's 152 siblings were living away from the child. This included 11 full siblings, 6 half-siblings and 24 step-siblings. The reasons for the siblings living away from the child's family home were not sought directly. However, it was apparent from the siblings' ages and their stated living situation that the majority were adults and living independently. Other reasons for separate living arrangements were: siblings lived with another parent; siblings were fostered or lived with other relatives; or the child had never lived with young half-siblings or their step-siblings. Some children also mentioned pets as members of their family, who lived in another household. Siblings' living situations for children in the general population have not been researched. The results

suggest that sibling separation during middle childhood is a relatively common experience for children in the general population.

6. 3 Siblings as part of a network of relationships

In middle childhood children's networks of important people include a range of other people outside the family (Moore et al., 1996; Borland et al., 1998; Morrow, 1998). In order to place sibling relationships in the context of other relationships, children were asked to think about their family, friends, pets and other people they know (like teachers and neighbours) and write down those who are most important to them. The children's answers were analysed in terms of the proportion of children who saw people and pets as important to them, rather than their 'relative' importance to the child.

The study found that siblings were regarded proportionally as almost equal in importance to the children as were their parents. Ninety-two per cent of the children mentioned mother, 86 per cent mentioned father and 83 per cent at least one sibling as important to them. Sisters were mentioned more often (66%) than brothers (56%). Nearly half of the children mentioned a grandmother (48%), a pet (45%), followed by a grandfather (42%), a friend (41%), aunt or uncle (30%), teacher (28%), neighbour or other adult (22%) and cousin (20). Children's pet animals scored particularly highly, confirming the findings of research on children's relationships in middle childhood (Bryant, 1982). Borland et al., in their Scottish study of children's wellbeing found that: *'Pets were clearly identified by children as family members, and as such played an important part in their emotional lives'* (Borland et al., 1998:96). Morrow (1998:38) in her study of children's understanding of their families found that pets were important to children, particularly to children living in the rural area, and that *'pets represent a source of emotional comfort for some children...'* (Morrow, 1998: 38). There may be a lack of acknowledgment by adults of the importance of pets in children's lives.

Only 11 children (17%) did not mention any of their siblings. The children, who did not mention their siblings, had the smallest networks of important relationships. However, most of these children mentioned their parents and some also mentioned their grandparents. Some children had few important relationships to call upon, and appeared isolated from supportive others. Four children did not mention either parent as most important to them. Two of these children did not mention their

sisters and brothers either. Their only important relationships were with a teacher, friend and a neighbour.

The children's networks of relationships with other people ranged in size from two to eleven. The majority of children (72%) mentioned five or more relationships that were important to them. Girls mentioned on average 5.8 relationships compared to the average of 5.6 mentioned by boys.

The role of siblings in support

The literature review (chapter 3) suggested that siblings could provide a valuable source of support and help to each other in middle childhood. The children's perceptions of their most likely sources of emotional support were elicited by asking them: *'When you are worried about something, who do you tell first?'* Their most likely sources of help were explored by asking the children: *'When you need help with something you cannot do, who do you ask?'* Children were presented with a list of likely sources of support and help, from which they could tick as many or as few people as they liked. The list was devised based on discussions with the children who assisted with the construction of the questionnaire and the pilot exercise. Table 8 shows the children's responses.

Table 8. Community study - children's sources of support and help

Source	Support		Help	
	No	%	No	%
Mother	45	70	42	66
Sibling(s)	36	56	40	63
Father	29	45	35	55
Friend(s)	25	39	28	44
Grandmother	14	22	10	16
Grandfather	10	16	6	9
Someone else (other adult)	4	6	3	5
Nobody	5	8	2	3

Percentages do not add up to 100% because of multiple responses.

Although both parents had been mentioned almost equally often by children as important to them, mothers were mentioned more often as confidantes than were fathers. Siblings were mentioned more often than fathers as a source of support

and help. These findings accord with previous research by O'Brian (1988) who found that siblings were sought by adolescents more frequently than fathers for emotional support (op. cit. Cooper and St. John, 1990). Children were most likely to turn to their older siblings, whereas younger siblings were rarely turned for support and help, as was also found by Boer (1990) and Sandler (1980).

When the size and range of children's support networks were considered, it was found that children who did not mention their siblings as important to them also had the smallest networks of other important relationships. Close relationships with siblings may well provide children with an advantage in terms of facilitating the development of relationships. The most isolated children with fewest supportive relationships were most likely to turn to their mothers or siblings. Nearly one third of the children who had no one else to turn to for support confided in their older siblings. A similar proportion of the isolated children mentioned their older siblings as their only source of help. It appears that older sisters and brothers are of particular importance to the most isolated children, who have few other supportive relationships available to them. These findings confirm previous research on the emotional significance of siblings. Children in Morrow's (1998) study described their siblings, including step-siblings, as important to them, and on the whole felt positive about them. Similarly, Scottish children in the study by Borland et al. (1998) found their siblings to be both an important source of support and solidarity, as well as a source of annoyance and irritation. Older siblings, who have left the family home can be particularly important for children in non-nuclear households; some children in a study by O'Brien et al. (1996) talked about their older sisters as potential refuge and support if their mother was ill.

Children's experiences of sibling caretaking

In order to find out more about the frequency of sibling caretaking, children were asked, whether any of their sisters or brothers looked after them sometimes in their parents' absence, and whether they liked being looked after by them. Questions also explored the older children's experiences of looking after their siblings.

Looking after siblings and being looked after by siblings appeared to be a common experience among the study population. Seventy percent of the children said that their siblings looked after them sometimes, whereas 30 per cent stated that siblings

never looked after them. Only 5 per cent of the children, who had older siblings, did not report being looked after by a sibling.

Sibling caretaking appeared to be a predominantly positive experience for the majority of study children. Both children who looked after and those who were looked after by their siblings, found being with their siblings without parental supervision enjoyable and fun. The key to successful sibling caretaking from the perspective of the caretaking child was their ability to gain the co-operation and control of their siblings and manage their behaviour. These aspirations do not appear to be dissimilar to those held by parents.

On the whole the study children reported getting on well with their siblings while their parents were unavailable. For a small proportion of children it was to be a negative experience. They were dominated, bullied and abused by their siblings, while their parents were unavailable. Some children who looked after their siblings found their caretaking experiences burdensome and difficult. Although sibling caretaking is qualitatively different from parental caretaking, and it cannot replace parental care (Bryant, 1992), it seems that children enjoy caring for, and being cared for by their siblings. For a fuller discussion of this part of the study, refer to Kosonen (1996b).

Children's friendships

Friends become increasingly important as children get older (Erwin, 1993). Girls prefer dyadic relationships with their friends, whom they regard as an important source of emotional support (Borland et al., 1998; Morrow, 1998), whereas boys are more likely to prefer extensive relationships with many peers (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985a). Information was sought about the children's friendship networks and to what extent these were shared with their siblings.

The children were asked to write down the names and ages of their friends and say whether they were a boy or a girl (there was space for ten friends). The whole sample mentioned a total of 499 friends (mean 7.8), of whom 68 per cent were of the same age, 19 per cent were older and 13 per cent were younger than they were.

The children's friendships were mainly with children of the same gender. Over half of the boys (54 per cent) mentioned no girls among their friends. About a quarter of girls mentioned no boys among their friends. Although girls were more likely to have friendships with both boys and girls, they still had more friendships with girls.

The size of the children's friendship networks ranged from three to ten. Over half of the children (58 per cent) mentioned ten friends.

Friendships shared with siblings

Some children share some of their friendships with their siblings. Older siblings in particular can serve a useful function in introducing younger siblings to other children outside the family, and thus expand their social networks (Bank and Kahn, 1975). The study children were asked whether their friends were also friends of their siblings. When the number of friendships shared with siblings were considered it was found that nearly two-thirds of the children shared some friends with one or more of their siblings. Almost a third (30%) shared 1-2 friends with their siblings, 22 per cent mentioned 3-5 joint friends, and eight children had at least six joint friends. The joint friendships were only maintained between siblings who were living together. Separation of siblings potentially reduces the child's friendship network making it difficult for a child to maintain friendships with their siblings' friends.

Comparing siblings and friends

By middle childhood children spend more time with other children outside their home, than with their siblings who may have been their main companions during the pre-school years. Children look for different social provisions from different relationships (Weiss, 1974), and interact differently in different relationships (Dunn and McGuire, 1992), however, some children also find some similarities in their relationships with siblings and friends. Children in this study were asked to describe how they perceived the differences between their siblings and friends.

The main differences reported were seeing siblings as part of their family, getting on better with their friends and having greater familiarity with their siblings. One third of the children expressed a clear concept of siblings being part of their family, whom they love and care. Children said: *'They are family and I love them,'* and *'They care about you because they are family.'* They expressed closer affectional ties to their siblings compared with friends in terms of: *'They love me and my friends like me'* and *'You can tell them things you cannot tell your friends'*, and in terms of resources

obtained: *'Your family gives you money and sweets and your friends only give sweets'*.

On the other hand, over a quarter of the children attributed differences between siblings and friends to getting on better with their friends, with whom they had less conflict. They found their friends more co-operative, helpful and supportive. This group of children also preferred to play with their friends. Children described this by saying: *'My friends are much nicer than my brother and sister,' ' My friends help me when I am hurt and my brothers and sisters don't,'* and *'Usually my friends don't shout at me'*.

The third group of children described the differences between siblings and friends in terms of having greater familiarity with their siblings as a result of living with them and growing up together. A girl described the difference by saying: *'I love my sister and see her every day and I like my friends and see them five days'*; another by saying *'You see more of your brothers and sisters'*, and *'I have known my brothers and sisters longest'*.

Some children found little in common with their siblings, who were disparate in age or had different interests and tastes. They had more in common with their friends.

6. 4 The most salient sibling qualities

One of the aims of the community study was to explore Scottish children's perceptions of their sibling qualities. The study children were asked to describe what they liked most and least about their sisters and brothers and what their ideal siblings would be like. The children used their own words to describe the most positive and negative sibling qualities. The children's statements were analysed and categorised into key themes.

Children had more positive than negative things to say about their siblings. They made 105 statements about the most liked qualities compared to 70 statements about the least liked qualities. Children's statements generally contained more than one sibling quality. These were attributed to different siblings as siblings were liked and disliked for different reasons.

What do children like most about their siblings?

The following themes emerged as the most positive aspects of the sibling experiences described by the study children:

- siblings are kind and they love you
- they are fun and play with you
- they help and support you, and
- they provide services and resources.

A small minority (15%) could not think of anything positive to say about their siblings, or framed their response in terms of a lack of negative interactions, e.g. *'When they don't hit me'*. The children's perceptions are explored in more detail below.

Siblings are kind and they love you

The study children valued sisters and brothers who were kind to their siblings. Thirty-nine per cent of the children mentioned kindness as the characteristic they valued most about their siblings. Most of the children perceived kindness in terms of their siblings giving them things, such as money and sweets. The siblings' generosity was appreciated by the children, who said: *'Kind - give me loads of stuff'*, *'Laura, she gives me things, Tom, he is cute'*, *'Give me money and spoils me'*. A boy made a distinction between sibling kindness and parental love by saying about his younger sister: *'She gives me money all the time and she is kind and my cat gives me scratches and my mum gives me food and love.'* Being loved by your sisters and brothers was mentioned by a further one-fifth of the children. Sibling love was described simply as: *'They love me, care for me'*, and *'They help me and love me'*.

Siblings are fun and play with you

Sisters and brothers were seen as an easily available source of fun and play by 41 per cent of the children. Some children were aware of a sibling meeting a need in them, as a response by a middle child illustrates: *'She plays with me if I need fun'*. Playing with siblings was seen as a fun thing to do, *'They like the same things I do, they are fun to play with'* and *'They're funny, they're thick, they're mental, they're dumb'*, said a youngest brother of his older siblings.

Siblings help and support you

The role of sisters and brothers as 'helpers' to the children was recognised by over a quarter of the study children (28%). Helping was described as taking a number of forms: helping with schoolwork, advice on relationships and emotional support. What these children liked most about their siblings was that: *'She always helps me on my maths if I have to take it home'*, *'If I am upset she always comes to my need'*, *'They help me about my boyfriend'*, and *'They sometimes help me when I am sad or hurt'*, *'They help me when I am getting bullied'*. Some children valued being able to share their thoughts with and being listened to by their siblings, as described by girl about her much older sister: *'I like Shelley because I could talk to her unlike my mum'*. Older siblings in particular were perceived as a significant source of emotional support and help.

Siblings provide services and resources

Siblings were valued as providers of a range of services and resources by a quarter of the study children. These included being allowed to borrow siblings' belongings, play with their toys, gain access to a computer and being taken by their siblings to places the children could not go by themselves. Borrowing and sharing the belongings of older siblings was common, although some oldest children also valued the exchange of resources by their younger siblings. The following responses describe the pleasure children obtained from such exchange of resources among the siblings: *'He lets me go on his computer'*, *'He lets me hold his hamster'*, *'My sister lets me have her earrings'*, *'I get to play with their toys'*, and *'She gives me a shot of her CDs and cassettes'*.

What do children like least about their siblings?

When asked to describe what the children liked least about their siblings, 10 children (16%) responded by saying there was nothing they disliked about their sisters and brothers or used a positive statement such as: *'My sister is nice to me'*, and *'My brother is good'*. Seven children who had the most positive view of their siblings, were middle or oldest children in their family.

The following themes reveal children's perceptions of the most negative aspects of the sibling experience:

- siblings are annoying
- siblings bully and abuse
- they fight
- siblings misuse their power, and
- lack of privacy.

Siblings are annoying

One third of the children described their sisters and brothers as *'annoying'*. Most children, however, did not describe what, in their view, constituted annoying behaviour. Others were more specific about what they found annoying about their siblings: *'My sister is so stubborn', 'Sometimes they are a pain'*. Moaning and shouting by siblings was found to be annoying, as illustrated by the following responses: *'Laura moans all the time',* and *'Sometimes moans for nothing at me'*.

Siblings bully and abuse

Some children were subject to a range of abusive behaviours from their sisters and brothers. Although the children did not use the words 'bullying' and 'abuse', they described actions, which if carried out by adults or other children, could be regarded as abusive. Fourteen children (22%) found sibling bullying and abuse the most disliked aspect of growing up with their siblings. The abuse described by the children ranged from verbal abuse such as calling names, to physical abuse by hitting, scratching, kicking and punching. Children's responses describe their experiences of physical abuse: *'She hits, punches and kicks me and it is sore', 'They call me names and hit me', 'He always pushes me', 'One of my sisters can batter me',* and *'She always scratches and nips me'*. The children who most commonly reported abuse were the youngest and middle children in the family.

Siblings fight

Siblings fighting with the study children were disliked by a relatively small proportion, by 9 (14%) of the 64 children. The children described their feelings by saying: *'When we fight I hate it', 'They argue with me and sometimes fight with me', 'When we fight he always wins',* and another child: *'They fight and leave me out'*. The children indicated that it is the outcome of fighting, when the child gets hurt or upset; or being left out, which is disliked more than the fighting itself.

Siblings misuse their power

Domination and power exercised by the siblings over the study children in terms of being able to get them in trouble, tell on them, preventing them from doing things or not letting them borrow things was mentioned by minority of children (12.5%). Children complained of such misuse of power regardless of their own position in the family. Both older and younger siblings were disliked for this reason. *'She takes the computer off me and does not let me hold her hamster', 'Never giving me a shot of new games', 'They always tell on me when I did not do a thing', 'She always takes my TV and gets me in trouble'*, describe the children's feelings on their siblings.

Lack of privacy

Some children found having sisters and brothers around intrusive and distracting. They felt that their private space was invaded and they disliked it. Although only a very small proportion of children described lack of privacy as the most disliked feature of their sibling experiences, their responses are powerful and give an insight into the complexity of children's relationships with their siblings. Children said about their siblings: *'I hate my sister when she distracts me from what I want to do', 'I least like my brother, when he comes into my room, when I do not want him in it', and 'They wake me up when I am sleeping'*.

The findings suggest that although children's perceptions of their siblings are primarily positive, their relationships with siblings are also characterised by a high degree of conflict and ambivalence, confirming previous research in North America (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985a, 1985b; Prochaska and Prochaska, 1985; Buhrmester and Furman, 1990; Bryant, 1992) and in the Netherlands (Boer, 1990).

Ideal sisters and brothers

The children were asked to imagine a world where their sisters and brothers would be perfect. What kinds of qualities did the children attribute to an ideal sister and brother?

Children's expectations of an ideal sibling can be categorised under the following themes:

- they are kind, caring and loving
- they do not annoy, abuse or dominate the child
- they play with you and provide company

- they are physically attractive and have a nice personality, and
- they are reliable and responsible - sisters only.

Children had more to say about an ideal sister than an ideal brother. Their expectations of brothers seemed to be less high than those of their sisters. The ideal sibling qualities are discussed in more detail below.

Kind, caring and loving

'Kind, caring and loving' were qualities most commonly attributed to both ideal sisters and brothers. Over half of the children (53%) attributed these qualities to sisters, compared to 33 per cent of the children who attributed these qualities to brothers.

Children perceived ideal sisters as *'good to them'*, who were *'helpful, gentle, kind, easy to get on with'* and *'who love and care for them'*. Some children's expectations were very high indeed, such as: *'I think sisters should be kind and helpful at all times'*, *'She is always kind, and gives you things and helps you'* and *'Very loving and gentle, who is very long-tempered and to tidy up'*. Some children simply said: *'Someone that cares about you'*, and *'That she is good to me'*.

'Kindness', when attributed to an ideal brother was perceived by the children in terms of being given resources by the brother, helping and sticking up for siblings. Children said about their ideal brother: *'They give you things and are kind'*, *'Kind, nice to you and he lets me play his computer'*, and *'I would like them to stick up for me'*, *'If I was getting bullied, he could sort them out'*, *'Someone who would look after me'*, *'Like dad, spoils me'*, and *'A mixture of things like being strict with you, but caring and kind'*.

Not annoy, abuse or dominate the child

Some children (19%) valued the absence of negative interactions, which they had previously said they least liked about their siblings, such as annoying and abusive behaviours; and misuse of power by siblings. Perfect sisters do not annoy, moan, nag or boss them about. Children said about a perfect sister: *'Someone who does not annoy you, who does not bully you'*, *'She never shouts or moans'*, *'I think she won't boss you about and would be nice to me more often'*, and *'They do not hit you'*.

Similar to their expectations of an ideal sister, children valued the absence of negative characteristics in a brother such as not annoying, calling names, fighting and physically abusing their siblings. Eleven children (18%) mentioned the lack of negative interactions as a key quality in an ideal brother. Children said about their ideal brother: *'I would love a perfect brother, because I don't think he would kick me', 'Someone, who does not bully you', 'Not wanting to fight with you', 'Not annoying', and 'It would be that they don't shout at you'*. Some children expect no more of their relationships with siblings than the cessation of negative interactions. We may well think that this is not too much to ask. However, the children's views suggest that parents and other adults may underestimate the degree of annoyance caused by negative sibling interactions.

6. 5 Relationship qualities as assessed by Part 2 of the questionnaire

The second part of the questionnaire sought children's perceptions of their individual siblings by measuring the core dimensions of sibling relationship qualities identified by previous research (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985b; Buhrmester and Furman, 1990). These dimensions are warmth/closeness; relative power/status; conflict; and rivalry (this was included in the first part of the questionnaire, and reported separately). Each dimension is made up of a number of scales.

The children completed 108 questionnaires in respect of their individual siblings. This accounts for 71 per cent of 152 siblings. Most children chose to complete a questionnaire in respect of the siblings they lived with. The children shared the same residential arrangements with 111 (73%) of their siblings. The number of children's siblings ranged from 1 to 7 (refer to table 8). All 64 children completed a questionnaire in respect of at least one of their siblings.

The children's responses related to 46 sisters, 41 brothers, five half-brothers, one half-sister, six step-sisters, six step-brothers, two foster-sisters and one foster-brother.

The siblings' ages ranged from one to 26, of whom 70 per cent were within the age range of five to 15. Sixty-five per cent of children had one or more older siblings and 53 per cent had one or more younger siblings. Table 9 shows the siblings' ages.

Table 9. Community study - siblings' ages

Sibling's age	No of siblings	% of siblings
Under 1 – 4	9	8.3
5 – 8	25	23.1
9 –12	21	19.4
13 –15	30	27.8
16 –18	10	9.3
19 –26	13	12.0
Total	108	100

Children were given a choice regarding which siblings they wished to include. They could also decide the number of statements they chose to circle. There was a considerable variation regarding the number of statements circled by children. For instance, one child chose only four of the available 50 statements to apply to her half-sister, whom she viewed negatively, whereas some other children chose up to 30 statements to apply to their siblings. The number of statements chosen by the children can be regarded as an indicator of the level of involvement with their siblings.

The scale scores relating to individual items under the main dimensions have been analysed, and the findings are reported here. This data adds to the information obtained by using open-ended questions. No statistical tests have been undertaken. The findings are presented in table 10 on the next page.

Table 10. Community study - relationship qualities as assessed by Part 2 of the SRQ

Relationship qualities	Number of relationships (No= 108)	Proportion of relationships
Warmth / closeness	No (refers to the average for scale items)	%
Prosocial behaviour by sibling	65.5	61
Prosocial behaviour towards sibling	68.5	63
Affection by sibling	61	56
Affection for sibling	70	65
Admiration by sibling	38	35
Admiration of sibling	57	53
Intimacy (often/sometimes)	64	59
Similarity (very alike/alike)	60	55
Companionship (often/sometimes)	84	78
Relative power / status		
Nurturance by sibling	51	47
Nurturance of sibling	51	47
Dominance by sibling	18	17
Dominance over sibling	11	10
Conflict		
Antagonism by sibling	34	31
Antagonism against sibling	23	21
Quarrelling by sibling	32	30
Quarrelling towards sibling	26	24
Competition (often/sometimes)	67.5	62

Percentages do not add up to 100 % because of multiple responses.

The results suggest that the children's perceptions of their individual siblings were characterised by warmth and closeness, reinforcing children's responses to questions about the most salient sibling qualities and their experiences of sibling support, help and caretaking. Companionship with siblings was most commonly

mentioned aspect of sibling relationships. The children perceived their own behaviour to be more positive towards their siblings than vice versa. Power and status were also important to children; however, these were most closely related to the relative ages of the child and sibling. Conflict was found to be a part of sibling relationships. Siblings were perceived to be more antagonistic and quarrelsome compared to the children themselves.

6. 6 Being the oldest, the youngest or in the middle

Children's views on the most salient sibling qualities, discussed above, indicate that there are tensions about children's position in relation to their siblings. Research findings reviewed in chapter three suggest that sibling position has an influence on development and relationships (Koch, 1960; Bigner, 1974; Sandler, 1980; Boer, 1990; Buhrmester and Furman, 1990; Bryant, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Azmitia and Hesser, 1993). To find out how the study children perceived their position in relation to their siblings, the children were asked to state their actual and preferred position in their family. The children were given three choices: the youngest, the oldest and the middle or one of the middle children in the family. Reasons for their preferred choice were explored. Table 11 gives details of the children's actual and preferred positions in their families.

Table 11. Community study – actual and preferred sibling position

Position	Actual position		Preferred position	
	No	%	No	%
Youngest	30	47	14	22
Middle	18	28	10	16
Oldest	16	25	40	62
Total	64	100	64	100

Two thirds (66%) of the children were dissatisfied with their position in the family. They would have wished to change places with one of their siblings. The youngest and middle children were least satisfied with their position in the family, while the oldest children expressed most satisfaction with their position. The perceived advantages of their preferred position in the family will be discussed next.

The advantages of being the oldest

Sixty-two per cent of the children preferred the position of the oldest. The perceived advantages associated with being the oldest are categorised under the following four themes:

- the oldest children have more privileges
- they can look after younger siblings
- there is no one to dominate the child, and
- the child can dominate younger siblings.

The imbalance of power between older and younger siblings was perceived both by the middle and youngest siblings to be one of the main reasons for their choice for being the oldest. Some wanted to be the oldest in order to ensure that there would be no one to misuse their power over them. Their reasons included: *'Because my sister won't boss me about'*, and *'I won't get hurt from my brother'*. Others so that they could dominate their siblings. This could take a number of forms: *'I could batter my brother'*, *'So I could pick on my sister'*, *'I could tell them what to do'*, and *'So I could boss them about'*. Although domination by the oldest was greatly resented by the middle and youngest children, they regarded it as a part of the oldest sibling's status in the family. Being the oldest sibling was seen to carry a licence to dominate younger siblings.

The advantages of being the youngest

Fourteen children (22 per cent), who preferred being the youngest, saw the following advantages in being the youngest in their family:

- parents treat you better
- the youngest have less responsibilities, and
- they do not get into trouble so much.

The perceived 'better' treatment included getting more attention, being well looked after and not getting picked on or ill-treated by the parents. Some middle children also perceived the youngest siblings as getting more attention and better treatment. The youngest siblings were also perceived as carrying fewer responsibilities. Parental expectations in terms of helping with household tasks and other responsibilities were seen as less high than those placed on the older siblings. The life of the youngest sibling was perceived as relatively easy and trouble free.

The middle children

Only ten children (16%) stated a preference to be a middle or one of the middle children. The middle position was preferred on the grounds of not wanting to be either the youngest or oldest and preferring to have both older and younger siblings. The findings confirm the views expressed by slightly younger children in Koch's (1960) study. Children interviewed by Koch wanted to swap places with their siblings for similar reasons.

6.7 What are older and younger siblings like? - Relationship qualities as assessed by Part 2 of the SRQ

Children completed part two of the questionnaire in respect of their individual siblings. The children's responses were analysed in respect of their relationships with their older and younger siblings. These give a broad indication of how children perceived their relationships with their older and younger siblings.

Warmth and closeness dimension

Prosocial behaviour Younger siblings were perceived as exhibiting more prosocial behaviours towards the children, than their older siblings. Children also perceived themselves as exhibiting more prosocial behaviours towards their younger siblings than their older siblings.

Affection Younger siblings were perceived as more affectionate towards the children than their older siblings, although older siblings were also seen as caring and loving. Children felt more affectionate towards their younger siblings than their older ones.

Admiration The children felt that their younger siblings were more admiring of them than their older siblings. Only one older sibling was perceived as admiring the subject child compared to 15 younger siblings. The children admired more older siblings, although some younger siblings were also admired.

Intimacy (confiding) The children scored relatively high on intimacy both in relation to their younger and older siblings.

Similarity Less than half of the children identified with their siblings' looks and personality, they were more likely to identify with their older than younger siblings.

Proportionally more children said they shared the same taste in things with their siblings.

Companionship Companionship emerged as one of the most often mentioned aspects of children's sibling relationships. Children were more likely to play and spend time with their younger than older siblings.

Relative power and status dimension

Nurturance Both older and younger siblings were perceived as nurturing towards the children. However, proportionally more children saw themselves as nurturing towards their younger siblings. Although none of the children said they stick up for their older siblings, they perceived themselves as helping, teaching and showing new things to their older siblings.

Dominance The score for dominance was relatively low, but more younger siblings than older siblings were seen as dominating. The lowest score was for dominance of siblings.

Conflict dimension

Antagonism Younger siblings were nearly three times more likely to be perceived as antagonistic towards the subject children than their older siblings. Similarly, children felt more antagonistic towards their younger siblings.

Quarrelling Although children themselves admitted quarrelling both with their younger and older siblings, younger siblings were perceived as more quarrelsome than older siblings.

Competition Children competed both with their older and younger siblings. Competition scale scored highest within the conflict dimension.

Although no statistical tests have been undertaken due to the sample containing a wide age range of siblings, the results of this questionnaire add further evidence to the findings reported earlier in this chapter.

6. 8 Children's perceptions on parental favouritism

Parents may treat their children differently in many ways, as was suggested by those study children who wished they were the youngest in their family. Parents may also treat children differently at different times and situations. This may be appropriate and meet the individual needs of the child. Parents may consider that they treat their children fairly, by responding to them according to their age and developmental stage and child's individual needs. Regardless of how fairly parents think they treat their children, what matters to the child is his or her perception of parental fairness in relation to the siblings.

Children's perceptions of how their parents treat them and their siblings is considered to have an effect on the quality of their relationships with their siblings (Bank and Kahn, 1982a; Brody et al., 1987; Stocker et al., 1989; Boer, 1990; Boer et al., 1992). It is considered to have a negative affect both on the favoured and non-favoured siblings (Vandell and Bailey, 1992). The findings of a Dutch study by Boer (1990) suggest that parental favouritism is by no means a one sided phenomenon. Children reported parental favouritism towards themselves and their sibling simultaneously.

In view of the previous research, the study children were asked about parental favouritism by giving them six choices. This included self, older sister, younger sister, older brother, younger brother and nobody. Nearly half the children (44%) reported that the parents favoured nobody in their family. Both sisters (25%) and brothers (26.5%) were perceived to be almost equally favoured; differences between older and younger siblings were marginal. Only 17 per cent of the children felt that they were favoured compared to their sisters and brothers.

6. 9 To have or not to have sisters and brothers?

Sibling relationships differ from the other child-child relationships such as peer and friendship relationships by the nature of there being no choice in the relationship. It has been imposed on the child by his or her circumstance of being born to or living in a particular family. The child has no choice on the number, gender or age of his or her siblings. Further more, children have no real choice about having siblings at all.

To find out the study children's views on their ideal choice on having siblings, the children were asked whether they would like to be an only child and reasons for their choice. Accepting that children feel ambivalence towards their siblings, children were given choices of yes, no and sometimes for their answers.

The majority of children (65.6%) expressed a preference for having siblings. Twelve children (18.8%) sometimes wished they were an only child. Only ten children (15.6%) expressed a definite wish to be an only child. Proportionally more boys and oldest children wanted to be only children.

A case for having siblings

When the children's reasons for their choice were sought, it was found that the children perceived the advantages of having brothers and sisters primarily in terms of companionship. Their reasons for not wishing to be an only child can be categorised under the following themes:

- I would be lonely
- I would get bored
- I would have no one to play with
- I would have no one to talk to, and
- I like/love my sisters and brothers.

The children said they liked the company of their siblings, without whom they would get lonely and bored. Sisters and brothers were seen to provide readily available playmates, when there was no one else to play with. They were not regarded as an alternative to having friends, merely as a replacement, when friends were not available, a kind of stand by resource. The children said about their siblings: *'When nobody's coming out to play, you've got them'*, and *'Because at nights or when I am not allowed out he can play with me'*. Children also valued having their sisters and brothers to talk to. The children said: *'Horrible - no one else to speak to than mum and dad'*, and *'There would be hardly anybody to speak with'*. For some children there was no choice; they said they loved their siblings. Their bonds with their siblings were strong enough for the choice to be simple. The long-term benefits of having siblings were recognised by a boy, who said: *'When I am older, I will have family'*.

A case for being an only child

Those children, who expressed a definite preference for wanting to be an only child, saw the advantages primarily in terms of getting more resources within the family. Such resources included money, belongings and a room to oneself. Four children said they wanted to be spoiled. The reasons of those children who only sometimes wanted to be an only child were more varied. A half of the 'ambivalent' group of children stated as the reason for their choice that their siblings have treated them badly. Bad treatment by siblings included a range of negative behaviours: annoying, being left out by siblings, hitting and battering. Some children thought that as an only child they would get more attention and increased resources within the family.

6. 10 Summary

This study has explored children's perceptions of their sibling relationships in the context of children's other important relationships with family, friends and others important to them. The children's families were representative of the children in the general population in that four-fifths of the children lived with two parents and one or more other children. The children had a clear concept of their family boundaries. Their families crossed over the boundaries of their households for the one-quarter of siblings, who lived apart from one or more members of their families.

Siblings were important to the children regardless of whether they lived with them, and separated siblings retained an importance in the children's lives. When the children explored the differences between their siblings and friends, they attributed emotional closeness, warmth and a sense of kinship to their relationships with siblings. Conflict with siblings was more common than with friends, who were perceived as more harmonious playmates. Siblings were perceived as almost as important as parents as a source of support and help. Sibling support was found to be particularly important to the most isolated children, who had fewer other supportive relationships available. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated children's capacity to provide emotional support and help and take care of their younger siblings in their parents' absence.

The main themes running through the children's descriptions of the most and least liked sibling qualities centre around warmth, kindness and love; companionship and fun; support and help; and provision of resources and services. These are counter balanced by a struggle for power, status, control and domination. The ongoing

struggle manifests itself in annoying and abusive behaviour, conflict and fighting. Ideal siblings were perceived as kind, caring and loving, who do not annoy, dominate or abuse the child. Some children's expectations were very low, they simply wished that their siblings would treat them better. The children's perceptions of their siblings confirm broadly to the core dimensions found in previous research; warmth/closeness; relative status/power; conflict and rivalry, though the latter was not a prominent feature of sibling relationships (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985b). So the majority of children preferred to have siblings rather than be an only child. Siblings were not perceived to be a substitute for friends, merely a good standby, when it is raining or there is nobody else to play with.

The most salient sibling qualities contained both 'complementary' and 'reciprocal' aspects of relationships (Dunn, 1983). Both are important in their own way, although Dunn (1983) suggests that the reciprocal aspects are developmentally more significant. Children's own descriptions of the salient qualities suggest that siblings enjoy reciprocal interactions (companionship, play, and fun), which are similar to interactions children have with their same-age peers. Reciprocity implies close understanding between children. Dunn further suggests that:

'This reciprocity - understanding the other so well and sharing his or her interests - means that siblings are also particularly well placed to tease, annoy and compete' (Dunn, 1983:793).

The study children's relationships were characterised by a high degree of ambivalence and some children were highly involved with their siblings. Table 12. describes children's perceptions of the most salient sibling qualities.

Table 12. Community study - most salient sibling qualities

Positive qualities	Negative qualities	Ideal qualities
Warmth, kindness, love	Annoying behaviour	Warmth, kindness, love
Companionship and fun	Abuse and bullying	Not annoy, dominate or abuse
Support and help	Fighting	Companionship and fun
Services and resources	Misuse of power	Physical and personality attributes
	Lack of privacy	Responsible and reliable (sisters only)

The child's position in the sibling group was an important issue for the children. Nearly two-thirds of the children were dissatisfied with their position in the family, and would have preferred another sibling position. Being the oldest was perceived to be the most favoured position due to the power and status attributed to the oldest child. Seeking power and status was common for both the oldest siblings, who were perceived by the younger children to possess it already; and the younger siblings, who wanted to dominate others and prevent siblings exercising power over them.

In conclusion, it is important to note that the children's descriptions of their relationships with their siblings paint a remarkably positive picture. Mayall (1994a: 10) suggests that:

'...telling the things the way children see them (though the telling may be imperfect) also results in rather more cheering and optimistic accounts in some cases'.

We must bear this in mind when interpreting the findings of this community study. For some children siblings were a source of considerable stress. The findings of this community study provide a context for understanding foster children's sibling relationships, and a limited basis for comparing some relationship aspects with those of children in foster care. The following chapter reports on the foster children's perceptions of their siblings in the context of their family and other important relationships.

Chapter 7 'Core' and 'kin' siblings – foster children's changing families

7.1 Introduction

The Community Study discussed in the previous chapter found that the sample of Scottish children perceived their siblings mainly in positive terms. The majority of children regarded their siblings as important family and kin relations and would rather have siblings than be an only child. They felt they could rely, at least on some of their siblings, for support, help and resources in the similar way that adults do (Finch, 1989). Siblings were important regardless of whether the children lived with them, and separated siblings retained an importance in the children's lives. Sibling support was particularly important to the children, who had few other supportive relationships available to them. For a minority of children their siblings were a source of stress and aggravation.

The findings of the Community Study set a context for considering the results relating the Foster Care Study. The results presented in this chapter are derived from the children's responses to the 'Sibling Relationship Questionnaire'; 'Child's Family Background and Sibling Relationship History Questionnaire' completed by the researcher in a face-to-face interview with the children's social workers, and a list of changes and significant events abstracted from case files. Some test results of the Family Relations Test (Bene and Anthony, 1985) are also included. The foster care sample contained 21 children aged eight to twelve (mean age ten years), who were in short-term foster care (3-12 months) in one local authority area in Scotland. There were seven girls and fourteen boys in the sample. The sample was drawn from eleven families and included two groups of three siblings, six groups of two siblings, and three singleton children. Although all were separated from their parents, only three children had no siblings living with them. Most of the children also had full, half- and step-siblings elsewhere.

7.2 Foster children's unclear families

The review of literature and the findings of the Community Study suggest that children's family relationships are complex. Children's family structures change over time, and children may live in more than one family during childhood. Simpson

(1994), in his discussion of the complex restructuring of kinship arrangements which can occur following divorce and remarriage, refers to such restructured families as '*unclear families*'. Looked after children's families are especially prone to change (Department of Health and Social Security, 1985; Department of Health, 1991). They are likely to come from lone parent, poor, and larger than average families (Bebbington and Miles, 1989). Between 80 to 90 per cent of children who are looked after have one or more siblings. Their families are fragmented, with different types of siblings living in a variety of situations (Kosonen, 1996a). Little is known about how looked after children define their family composition or whom they regard as their siblings. Findings relating to:

- the children's understanding of their families
- their understanding of their siblings
- their experiences of family disruption, separation and loss
- the significance of siblings compared to friends and other important people, and
- their views on their family position, will be reported next.

Children's understanding of their families will be compared with the social workers' descriptions. Comparisons are also made with the families of children in the community sample. A fragmented and complex picture emerged of the foster children's families.

Children's understanding of their family

Children's understanding of their families was considered by analysing information obtained through two research measures, the questionnaire and the Family Relations Test (full test results are provided in chapter 10).

Over a half (53%) of the foster children described, in response to the questionnaire, their family as being headed by a lone parent. For nine children their main parent was their mother, and for two children their father. Another nine children (43%) described their family as including a non-related male member; for six children this was mother's boyfriend and for three children their stepfather. Only one child described both his mother and father as belonging to his family. In addition, children were asked to list family members who did not live at the family home. Where parents had separated, children named the other parent and siblings living with the absent parent.

The children also created a representation of their family as part of a Family Relations Test. Bene and Anthony suggest that:

'the child may for intellectual or emotional reasons include or exclude from his family circle important individuals, and the family group he sets up does not necessarily have to coincide with his sociological family' (Bene and Anthony, 1985:5).

Some foster children had, indeed, included half-siblings into their family circle, with whom they have never lived. The same applied to the inclusion of fathers and step-fathers in the family circles. Some children described their family membership differently in the questionnaire and in the test situation, indicating that their family boundaries were unclear.

Social workers' understanding of the family

Differences emerged between the foster children's and their social workers' descriptions of the families. The main parent recorded by the social worker for 18 children was their mother, although not all of these children remained in contact with their mothers. For two siblings their main parent was their father, although only one of the siblings maintained contact with him. For the remaining child his main parents were his grandparents, with whom contact was not maintained. None of the children's birth parents lived together. Seven mothers and one father were said to be living with new partners.

Social workers were not always fully aware of the children's perceptions of their family composition. This may be a result of a tendency for social workers to consider looked after children's relationships with their parents from the legal perspective of *parental responsibility* for the child rather than from the perspective of *the child's social and emotional relationships to adults*. Consequently, some of the complexities inherent in the foster children's families may not always be apparent to the social workers.

Comparison with the community sample

When the children's family composition and living arrangements were considered, differences emerged between the foster children's families and those of the children in the community. Over 80 per cent of the children in the community sample said

their families included both mother and father, reflecting national statistics, whereas only one foster child did so. None of the foster children's biological parents lived together, according to the social worker. Fourteen per cent of the children in the community sample lived with a lone parent, compared to over a half (53%) of the children in the foster care sample. The presence of a mother's boyfriend in the family home was proportionally more common in the foster care sample. This is by no means surprising taking into account the rapidly changing nature of the foster children's families. Table 13 shows details of the family composition for both samples of children.

Table 13. Family composition – a comparison with community sample

Family composition	Community study		Foster care study	
	No	%	No	%
Mother and father	52	81	1	5
Mother	7	11	9	43
Father	2	3	2	10
Mother and boyfriend	3	5	6	28
Mother and step-father	0		3	14
Total	64	100	21	100

Foster children also had fewer pets than children did in the community. Twelve foster children (58%) had no pets; seven children had a cat and three children had a dog in their family home. The children reported no other pets, such as fish, birds, rabbits, hamsters etc. By contrast, two-thirds of the children in the community had pets and these were more varied. The findings highlight the complex and fragmented nature of foster children's families, and reflect the findings of previous studies of children who are looked after (Stone, 1995; Fisher et al., 1986; Millham et al., 1986; Packman et al., 1986; Bebbington and Miles, 1989).

Children's understanding of their siblings

As the aim of this study was to obtain an 'insider view' (Olson, 1977) of the children's sibling relationships, the children were asked to include in the questionnaire all children they regarded as their siblings. They also included their siblings in their representation of their family as part of the Family Relations Test. In the interview situation, the children elaborated on their relationships with their siblings. This allowed for the information on the children's siblings obtained by three

different measures to be compared. In addition, social workers were asked to give information about all siblings (whether full, half-, step- or adopted) living with or apart from the child. The children's perceptions of their siblings were compared with the social workers' understanding of the children's sibling relationships.

'Core' and 'kin' siblings

The foster children lived currently, or had done so in the past, with a total of 57 siblings. Only a few children made a distinction between full and half-siblings, although they were more likely to use the term step-sibling. The information obtained from the social workers indicated, however, that half of the children's siblings (28) were full siblings and another half (29) were half-siblings. These 57 siblings, who had shared joint living arrangements in the past and to varying degrees still shared their childhood with the study children, are called 'core siblings' in the context of this study.

In addition, the children gave information about 35 other related children whom they also regarded as their siblings (27 half- and eight step-siblings - this information was obtained from the questionnaire, test and interview data). They had not lived with these siblings in the past, although, with some, there had been ongoing contact. Some of these siblings were located at the fringes of their families, for instance living with a grandparent; others were living further away from them, and some were in another country. The children expressed a sense of kinship to these 'external' siblings and for this reason they are called 'kin siblings' in the context of this study. Altogether, foster children mentioned a total of 92 siblings, an average of 4.4 siblings per child. The average number of 'core siblings' was 2.7 per child. When the biological relationships between the foster children and all of their 'core' and 'kin' siblings were considered, it was discovered that the children shared both biological parents with less than one third (30%) of all siblings. They shared one birth parent with sixty-one per cent of their siblings, and neither birth parent with 9 per cent of their siblings.

A complex picture emerged when the details of siblings obtained through the questionnaire; the Family Relations Test and the interview were compared. The children included all their 'core siblings' in all the research measures used. Some children, however, included and excluded individual 'kin siblings', in different measures used, for instance by including in the test situation a 'kin sibling' they had not mentioned in the questionnaire. Although a kin sibling received a low test score,

indicating low emotional involvement, nevertheless the child regarded them as their sister or brother. Similarly, some children talked in the interview about the importance of their 'kin siblings', with whom they had only infrequent contact. Some of the 'kin siblings' floated in and out of the children's families and as the children talked about their siblings, they were making sense of these fragmented and complex sibling connections. The children's perceptions of their siblings were similar to those of a sample of 10-11 year old Swedish foster children interviewed by Andersson (1999a). They also regarded other children born to their mothers as their siblings, even though they may have only seen them a few times. Table 14 gives details of foster children's siblings.

Table 14. Foster care study – children's siblings

Type of siblings	Core siblings		Kin siblings		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Full siblings	28	49	0		28	30
Half-siblings	29	51	27	77	56	61
Step-siblings	0		8	23	8	9
Total	57	100	35	100	92	100

The question 'Who are the children's siblings?' was further complicated by some children within the same family (only three study children had no siblings in the sample) defining their family composition differently. They included different 'kin siblings' in their descriptions of their families, and indicated different degrees of emotional closeness to them. Details of individual children's siblings are provided in Appendix 2. Differences also emerged when the information given by the social workers was compared with that from the children themselves. The children's social workers were unaware of the existence of 29 'kin siblings' (nearly one-third of all siblings) mentioned by the children. In respect of one family group of children, neither the children nor the social worker were aware of additional 'kin siblings' living elsewhere, known to foster carer. In a study of care leavers', Marsh and Peel (1999) found that although social workers had a good knowledge of parent(s) and full siblings (82% and 100% respectively), their knowledge of other family members was limited. Social workers were aware of only about 40% of the family members described by the young people.

By contrast, the children in the community sample who had siblings had fewer siblings. They gave information about 152 siblings, averaging 2.4 siblings per child.

Forty-one (27 per cent) of the children's siblings lived away from the child's family home. It is acknowledged that information was obtained from the children in the community by a questionnaire only. The use of multiple methods and data sources enabled a fuller picture of the foster children's siblings to be obtained.

Children's views on their sibling position

As with the community sample the children were asked to state their position in relation to their siblings, their preferred position and the reason for their preference. The choices given to the children included the youngest, the middle or one of the middle children, and the oldest. Table 15 shows children's responses.

Table 15. Foster care study – actual and preferred sibling position

	Actual position		Preferred position	
	No	%	No	%
Youngest	8	38	6	29
Middle	9	43	4	19
Oldest	4	19	11	52
Total	21	100	21	100

The majority of children were middle children in the family group of their 'core' siblings; over a third were the youngest and four children were the oldest in their families. However, if the child's position was also considered in relation to their 'kin' siblings, the children who had siblings elsewhere, found their position in the context of their 'unclear' family altered. The children had not taken into account their 'kin' siblings, when determining their position in the sibling group. When the children's views on their preferred position were analysed, it was found that the foster children's views were broadly similar to the views expressed by children in the community. Being the oldest was preferred by a half of the children (62.5% in the community sample), although only a small minority were the oldest (25% in the community sample). Being a middle child was the least preferred position in the family for both groups of children.

Children are acutely aware of their position in relation to their siblings, however small a difference in age exists between them. The sample included a pair of eight-year-old non-identical twins. From the adult perspective the twins could be described as being the same age. The first born of the twins was quick to point out

a ten-minute difference in the time of their births. This small difference qualified (in her own eyes) the first born to describe herself as a 'middle' child, rendering the second born to be the 'youngest'.

The views of the foster children about the family position were broadly similar to the views of the children in the community. The advantages attributed to the position of the oldest child in a family included obtaining more privileges; being able to look after the younger ones; escape domination by older siblings, and being able to dominate the younger siblings. The advantages attributed to the position of the youngest child in the family were perceived as being better looked after and protected against abuse.

7. 3 Children's fragmented lives - separation and loss

The theoretical ideas influencing this thesis (chapter two) and the empirical literature (chapters three and four) suggest that family disruption can have an impact on the development of children's sibling relationships. Children who experience repeated separations from their primary attachment figure may lose a capacity to form close relationships in general. Disruption of sibling relationships makes it difficult for children to maintain the continuity of sibling bonds. Family disruption can also result in children in the same family experiencing different environmental influences. Research on the 'non-shared' influences (environmental influences not shared by siblings) on the qualitative aspects of sibling relationships for children in intact families is well documented (Dunn and Plomin, 1990; Hetherington et al., 1994). For these reasons it was considered useful to inquire into the changes the study children had experienced in the past and continued to experience while in foster care.

Information on the following changes affecting the child's relationships with siblings was analysed:

- current and previous separations from siblings
- separations from parents
- parental separations
- changes in the child's living situation
- disruption caused by admission and movement in care, and
- ongoing family change.

The following describes the key findings in relation to the children's experiences of family change and disruption.

Separations from siblings

Only five of the 21 children were living in foster care with all of their 'core' siblings, and even then, not with all of their 'kin' siblings. By the end of the study period, further separations from core siblings had occurred and only two siblings were still living together. The remainder of children lived apart from one or more of their 'core' siblings.

When the foster children's previous living arrangements in relation to their siblings was considered retrospectively, it was found that only two children had lived continuously with all of their 'core' siblings throughout their childhood. However, even they had an older half-brother who had grown up with their grandmother. Although they had not been separated from their 'core' siblings, they were thus living separately from a 'kin' sibling.

The length of separations from the individual 'core' siblings ranged from five weeks to three years (separations of less than two weeks were excluded). The average length of separation was 10 months. When the length of separations was considered in relation to the child's age, it was found that younger children were separated from their siblings for proportionally longer periods than their older siblings were. For younger children, a separation of three years represents over one-third of their lifetime. Also, the age and developmental stage of the child and their siblings is important, when considering the potential effects of such separations, taking into account young children's relatively rapid development. Although separation from siblings was relatively common for the children in the community, continuity of sibling relationships was considerably *more* difficult for the foster children to maintain.

Family disruption

The majority of children had experienced extended separations (over two weeks) from their parents and parental separations. For over a third of the children, separation from the mother had occurred before the age of two. A half of the children had experienced parental separation before the age of five and three-

quarters by the age of ten. Some children had experienced more than one parental separation, having lost their father and subsequently a step-father. Single mothers had brought up six children. Despite having no consistent father figure, their mothers had series of live-in partners moving in and out of the family home. Some parents continued the process of splitting up and getting back together over a number of years. The parents' relationships were marked by conflict and domestic violence. Children also were subject to shorter separations from their parents, due to a parent taking an overdose; parent's drunkenness; being abandoned, or because of other family crisis.

Few children had remained in the same community they lived in at birth. The number of known changes of children's living situation, including previous episodes of being looked after, ranged from 4 to 36 (mean 13.3). In addition, the children are likely to have experienced changes, which were not known to social workers. Table 16 shows the number of changes in the children's living situations.

Table 16. Number of changes of living situation

Children		Changes of living situation
No	%	No
8	38	4-10
8	38	11-19
3	14	20-29
2	10	36
Total	21	100

Few of the recorded changes of the children's living situation were pre-planned; most occurred as a result of crisis in their parents' lives. The changes had adverse effects on the children beyond their practical living arrangements. Changes of family home led to the loss of familiar people and places, changes of school, and often change of male figures in the household. Some children lost all or most of their pets, toys and personal belongings in unplanned family disruptions.

Continued family disruption

Changes in the foster children's birth families continued while the children were in foster care, despite the relatively short period of time the children had been away from home (an average of six months). Two-thirds of the children had experienced

changes in family composition and in parents' and siblings' living situations. Three siblings lost their grandmother who had played a major part in their upbringing. The changes resulted in children experiencing further losses: of family home; of personal possessions, toys, photographs and childhood mementos; and for some, contact with siblings, grandparents and other relatives. At the same time new people entered some children's families through cohabitation and marriage. For eight children from four families the change involved their mother entering a new relationship. The children had little opportunity to get to know their mothers' new partners. Social workers expressed concern about the impact on the children's wellbeing. A social worker said: *'Mother is talking about marrying him - children may not like him, Andrew's placement disruption occurred a day after learning of mother's plans to marry'*. Another mother planned to re-marry a month after children's planned return home, leaving little time for the children to adjust to the changed circumstances. The children's experiences of family change were mainly characterised by loss of contact with siblings, rather than the arrival of new siblings. The children who acquired new baby half-siblings welcomed their contact with them. The continuing family changes affecting the children made the planning for their future difficult. Children themselves were not able to be fully involved in the changes taking place in their families. The foster children's experiences of continued family disruption, while the children are looked after, reflected the findings of the previous research (Fisher et al., 1986; Millham et al., 1986; Packman et al., 1986; Farmer and Parker, 1991; Bullock et al., 1993; Stone, 1995).

Maintaining contact

Contact arrangements for the children mirrored the complex nature of the children's families. To some extent these arrangements also reflected the social work plan. Contact with family members involved a number of individual arrangements. Seven children maintained contact with their mother's, and in one case, their father's new partner. Some children treated mothers' partners as step-fathers, whereas other newly acquired partners were hardly known by the children.

For the children who were expected to return home, contact with family was more frequent. One child saw a parent and siblings at home daily; five children saw some of their siblings daily at school. Three of them saw their mothers weekly; two children had no contact with mother who was hospitalised, maintaining weekly telephone contact with father only. Two children saw parents separately at least

weekly; and two children saw their mother, her new partner and siblings at least weekly. One child saw parents fortnightly at alternate weekends, he refused to see his sister and grandparents with whom he had been brought up with, but looked forward to contact with his newly found half-sister.

For the children who were expected to move to a permanent family placement, contact with parents and siblings was less frequent. In respect of three siblings contact with parents had been terminated. The remaining six children maintained weekly contact at least with one parent and some, but not all of their siblings. Children's own wishes regarding contact meant that siblings living in the same placement maintained contact with a different parent.

Infrequent contact with the wider family such as: nieces and nephews; grandparents; aunts and uncles; and cousins occurred in the context of children's ongoing contact with one of their parents. Most of the children were placed close (within 5-10 miles) to their main parent enabling contact to be maintained relatively easily

Admissions and movement in care

Social workers were asked to provide information about the extent of the children's history of being looked after by the local authority. Two thirds of the children had experienced one or more previous admission into care. For only seven children this was their first admission. The average number of previous admissions was 2.8. Table 17 shows the number of children's previous admissions into care.

Table 17. Number of previous admissions into care

Children	Previous admissions
No	No
7	0
4	1
2	2
3	3
1	5
2	8
2	10
Total 21	Total 58

While the children were in foster care they had experienced a number of changes of placement. The average number of placements in care experienced by the children was 3.9. When the children were readmitted to care, only very rarely were they able to return to their previous carers.

Over half of the children had spent altogether less than a year in care. Four children had been in care for less than two years and four children less than three years. Two children, a sister and brother had spent over five years in care, mostly in the care of relative foster carers. This amounts to over a half of their childhood.

7. 4 Siblings in the context of a network of relationships

The children' sibling relationships were considered in the context of their family and environmental influences. Most of the children had experienced considerable disruption in their family and external environment. The question arose as to what role do siblings play in the context of the children's changing families and environments? Although the picture emerging from the questionnaire findings provides only a snapshot in time, it was felt worthwhile to compare their answers with those of the children in the community sample. The following aspects of the children's network of relationships were considered in this way:

- the importance of siblings in relation to other people
- the size of children's networks of relationships
- children's friendships, and
- friendships shared with siblings.

Children's networks of important people

The subjective importance of siblings to the children was considered by asking the children to think about their family, friends, pets and other people they knew (like teachers and neighbours) and write down those who were most important to them. The children's answers were analysed in terms of the proportion of children who saw people and pets as important to them, rather than their relative importance to the child. Table 18 gives details of a network of relationships for both samples of children.

Table 18. Children's important relationships – a comparison with community study

Important relationships	Community study (N=64)		Foster care study (N=20)*	
	No	%	No	%
Mother	59	92	16	80
Sibling(s)	53	83	15	75
Brother	36	56	15	75
Sister	42	66	12	60
Foster mother	-	-	11	55
Father	55	86	10	50
Foster father	-	-	8	40
Friend	26	41	6	30
Pet	29	45	6	30
Other adults (aunt, uncle, neighbour, mother's boyfriend)	33	52	6	30
Other children (cousin, niece, foster siblings)	13	20	5	25
Teacher	18	28	4	20
Grandmother	31	48	1	5
Grandfather	27	42	1	5

*One child has been excluded from the calculations.
Percentages do not add up to 100% because of multiple responses.

The foster children mentioned most often the mother and siblings as important people, followed by foster mother and father. Three quarters of foster children (75%) mentioned at least one of their siblings as important to them. In contrast, nearly one-third (6) of the foster children did not mention any of their siblings as

most important to them, although two of these children mentioned a foster brother. Two foster children were particularly isolated from their families; they did not mention any members of their birth families. Three children's contact with parents had been terminated.

The relative shortage of other important relationships beyond mothers and siblings, e.g. grandparents, fathers, friends, other adults and pets to children in foster care was notable. The almost total absence of grandparents, and the relative absence of fathers were not compensated by new relationships being formed with step-fathers or mothers' boyfriends. Foster mothers and fathers, providing only time-limited relationships, were mentioned as important by about half of the foster children.

Size of the network of important people

The foster children named a total of 101 important people and pets between them. The size of the children's networks of important relationships ranged from 1 to 16. The foster children had on average of 5 important relationships compared to the community sample, where children enjoyed on average 5.8 relationships. One fifth of the foster children's relationships (with the members of the foster family) were inevitably of a temporary nature. If these relationships are excluded, the children enjoyed on average 4 relationships with the members of their birth families and other people.

Comparison with the community sample

Proportionally fewer foster children mentioned at least one of their siblings (75%) as important to them, compared to the children in the community (83%). Foster children had a smaller and more limited range of important people, compared to children in the community. It is suggested that the foster children's lack of relationships with the wider family (particularly with grandparents, who were notably absent from their lives), made siblings even more important to them. While half of the children in the community regarded other adults, beyond their immediate family, as important to them, only 30 per cent of children mentioned another adult. Also fewer foster children mentioned friends. Fewer foster children had pets and these were of a limited range compared to the children in the community. It can be concluded, that in these circumstances, foster children's siblings are an important means of continuity in the midst of their changing lives.

Children's networks of friends

Children were asked to write down the names and ages of their friends, and to say whether they were a boy or a girl. Children's foster carers were also asked about the children's friends and whether siblings shared these. The children named a total of 120 friends. The size of the children's networks ranged from 2-10, the mean being 5.7. Girls in foster care enjoyed larger networks of friends, naming on average 7.8 friends compared to boys who named 4.6 friends. Boys' friendships were primarily with other boys (74%) whereas all girls named both girls (54.5%) and boys (45.5%) as their friends. Almost half of the boys in foster care mentioned no girls among their friends. When the relative ages of the children's friends were considered, it was found that 60 per cent were the same age, 26 per cent were younger, and 14 per cent were older than they were. Table 19 shows details of the children's friendship networks for both samples of children.

Table 19. Friendship networks - a comparison with community study

Friend's relative age	Community study		Foster care study	
	No	%	No	%
Same age	306	68	72	60
Younger	58	13	31	26
Older	85	19	17	14
Total	449	100	120	100
Mean	7.8		5.7	

When comparing the friendship networks of the children in foster care with the children in the community some differences emerged. Children in foster care named on average fewer friends (5.7) than children in the community (7.8). Differences appear to be due to the relatively small friendship networks of boys rather than girls in the foster care sample. In fact the girls enjoyed on average the same number of friendships as both boys and girls in the community sample, although this was slightly less than the girls in the community sample (8.0). Gender differences regarding children's friendship networks were relatively small among the children in the community sample. Due to the small sample sizes and an unequal gender balance in both samples, no firm conclusions can be drawn from these findings.

The findings suggest that the children in foster care sample enjoyed generally fewer friendships, and in particular with children of their own age or older, compared to the children in the community sample.

Friendships shared with siblings – a comparison with community study

In order to understand more about the potential overlap between friendship networks of siblings, children were asked how many of their friends were also friends of their sisters or brothers. Table 20 gives details about the children’s friendships shared with siblings for both samples of children.

Table 20. Shared friendships – a comparison with community study

No of shared friends	Community study		Foster care study	
	No	%	No	%
None	23	35	12	57
1 – 2	19	30	5	24
3 – 5	14	22	4	19
6 and over	8	13	0	0
Total	64	100	21	100

The findings of the community sample had suggested that the maintenance of shared friendships with siblings was difficult for children, who did not live with their siblings. Nearly two thirds of the children (65%) in the community sample said they shared one or more friendships with their sibling(s). Over half of the foster children (57%) named no joint friends with their siblings; nearly a quarter (24%) shared 1-2 friends with their siblings and nearly a fifth (19%) mentioned 3-4 joint friends. Children in the community also enjoyed proportionally more joint friends, than children in foster care. Foster carers named only four children (two pairs of siblings) who enjoyed shared friendships with each other. Both of these sibling pairs were closely spaced and they had experienced few separations from each other. Neither foster family had other children of the similar age at home. The relatively small proportion of shared friendships with siblings enjoyed by the foster children again reflects their fragmented living situations. These findings confirm the difficulties foster children face in maintaining relationships with other people, beyond their immediate family.

The role of siblings in the children's support network

The relative significance of siblings within the children's networks was explored further by asking them to say whom they turn to when worried or in need of help. This was to find out more about the children's actual support networks, regardless of the importance they had placed on these relationships, when asked about them earlier. The children were asked to indicate by choosing from a list their most likely sources of support and help. Table 21 gives details of children's sources of support and help for both samples of children.

Table 21. Sources of support and help –a comparison with community study

Source	Community study (N=64)				Foster care study (N=21)			
	Support		Help		Support		Help	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Foster mother					13	62	18	86
Sibling(s)	36	56	40	63	12	57	12	57
Mother	45	70	42	66	11	52	13	62
Friend	25	39	28	44	10	48	11	52
Foster father					6	29	9	43
Father	29	45	35	55	6	29	5	24
Grandmother	14	22	10	16	4	19	4	19
Grandfather	10	16	6	9	3	14	4	19
Other adults (teacher, social worker)	4	6	3	5	7	33	6	29
Other children (foster sister/brother, cousin)					3	14	4	19
Nobody	5	8	2	3	1	5		
Total	168		166		76		86	

Percentages do not add up to 100% because of multiple responses.

The foster children's networks of support included 76 people (mean 3.6). Their networks of help included 86 people (mean 4). The children included members of both their birth and foster families in their support networks. The immediate availability of the foster family makes it easier for the child to turn to them on a day-to-day basis, than would be the case with members of the birth family living away.

Therefore, it is understandable, that although the majority of foster children had rated their mothers as most important to them, they turned to their foster mothers most often for support and help. The children also turned to their siblings for support, followed by birth mothers, friends, other adults, foster fathers and fathers. For help, the children turned primarily to their foster mothers, birth mothers, siblings, friends, foster fathers and other adults. Nearly one fifth of the children also turned to their grandparents for support and help, although only a few children had mentioned them as 'most important' people.

Comparison with community study

Foster children's networks for support (mean 3.6) and help (mean 4) were larger in size than the networks of children in the community (2.5 per child for support and 2.5 for help). This may be due to the fact that children included members of both their birth families and the foster families. If the members of foster families are excluded from the calculations, the average number of people for support and help is similar to the children in the community sample (2.6 for support and 2.7 for help). Conversely, for three children their contact with parents had been terminated. They had no access to their birth family; their only sources of support and help were their foster carers.

In response to an earlier question, the foster children had reported a smaller, and more limited network of important relationships, than the children in the community. Regardless of having fewer other important relationships, beyond their mothers and siblings, proportionally more foster children reported these people as a source of support and help. This was particularly notable in relation to grandparents, friends, and other adults. Foster children were more likely to turn for support and help to people, whom they had not mentioned as 'important people' than were the children in the community.

The findings reinforce the continuing importance of parents and siblings to children in foster care, despite difficulties in accessing those members of birth families, who live apart from the child. The findings also mirror the results of a study of children in long-term foster care undertaken by McAuley (1996), which found children to be pre-occupied with their parents and separated siblings, despite being away from home for a period of two years. The importance of foster carers, other adults (social workers and teachers), and other children should also not be underestimated. For

separated children, who cannot access their birth parents for support on a day-to-day basis, other adults and children can still provide a level of support and help, even though the child may feel less close to them.

7.5 Summary

The foster children's families were fragmented and their family boundaries were unclear. Some siblings from the same family included different family members in their descriptions of their family. While nearly 80% of the children in the community sample included two parents in their family, only one foster child did so. None of the foster children had both of their parents living together. Some children had experienced 'serial parenting' by mother's partners or step-parents living in the family home. There were differences in the children's and their social workers' descriptions of the children's family composition. Social workers were unaware of one-third of the children's siblings.

The children had 57 siblings, with whom they lived currently or had done so in the past. These are termed 'core' siblings for the purpose of this study. In addition children gave information about 27 half-siblings and 8 step-siblings, of which only six had been mentioned by social workers. These are termed 'kin' siblings for the purpose of this study. The children shared both biological parents with less than one third of all of their 92 siblings, the majority of siblings were half-siblings. Children's views on their position and preferred position in the family were broadly similar to the views expressed by the children in the community.

Separation from siblings was common. Only five of the 21 children were living in foster care with all of their core siblings. Further separations occurred, and by the end of the study period, none of the children remained with all of their siblings. Three quarters of the foster children lived separately from one or more of their siblings, in contrast to a quarter of the children in the community. Only two siblings had lived continuously with all of their siblings in the past. Contact arrangements with children's families were complex and mirrored the fragmented nature of the children's families. Some siblings maintained contact with different parents. The children had experienced disrupted lives; changes of living situation; separations from their main parent, and one or more parental separations. Two thirds of the children's families were subject to changes of family composition and parents' and siblings' living situation while they were in foster care.

Foster children were found to have smaller networks of important relationships than did the children in the community. A lack of relationships with wider family, and in particular with grandparents, makes relationships with siblings proportionally more important to them. Children in foster care were also found to have smaller friendship networks than do children in the community. This may be due to the relatively small friendship networks of boys rather than girls in foster care. The small proportion of joint friendships with siblings enjoyed by the children reflects their fragmented living situation and the boys' small friendship networks. Regardless of having fewer other important relationships, beyond their mothers and siblings, proportionally more foster children reported these people as a source of support and help, than was the case with children in community. This was particularly notable in relation to grandparents, friends, and other adults. Foster children were more likely to turn for support and help to people, whom they had not mentioned as 'important people' than did the children in the community.

Siblings continued to provide an important source of support to children in foster care. They were rated as the second most important source of support and help for the foster children. Siblings remain important to children in foster care, whether they are living with them or not. Sisters and brothers appear to be one of the few constants in the foster children's rapidly changing families. The next chapter explores the children's shared and separate experiences of growing up with their siblings, as reported by their social workers and the children themselves.

Chapter 8 Sharing adversity

8. 1 Introduction

Foster children's understanding of their *family and sibling structures*, and friendship and support *networks* were compared, in the last chapter, with those of the children in the community. The aim was to locate foster children's sibling relationships in the context of their other important relationships, and provide a picture of the role siblings play in their relationship networks. Siblings occupied an important role for most children both in the community and in foster care. They were particularly important for foster children, who had fewer stable long-term relationships available to them. The next chapters will discuss in more detail *sibling relationship processes*, i.e. what goes on between sisters and brothers, how children remember their past, and describe their current relationships, and what hopes and expectations they hold of their siblings in the future. First, children's family experiences and environments, as assessed by their social workers, will be discussed.

8. 2 Growing up in adversity – social workers' views

In order to obtain an external view of the *family processes and environments* shaping foster children's relationships with their siblings, information was obtained from their social workers. Social workers were asked detailed questions about:

- problems leading to the child coming into foster care
- parental and family relationships
- parent-child relationships
- emotional climate in the family, stress and conflict
- style of parenting
- emotional and physical availability of parents
- how parents treated the study child in relation to their siblings, and
- changes or significant events, which might have impacted on sibling relationships.

Problems leading to care

The foster children's families had struggled with a range of problems for lengthy periods. Social work intervention in most families was long-standing, for some

children this amounted to most of their childhoods. For two-thirds of the children their current admission to care was their second or subsequent one. In order to know more about the children's family experiences and environments prior to this admission into care, the social workers were asked to state the main problems leading to child's admission into care. Table 22 outlines the *main problems* precipitating child's admission into foster care.

Table 22. Problems leading to admission into care

Stated problems leading to care	No of children
Mother a single parent with mental health difficulties	5
Neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse	5
Parents' alcohol misuse	5
Parents' alcohol and drug misuse	2
Parents' alcohol and drug misuse, and mental health difficulties	2
Difficult child behaviour	2
Total	21

For 19 children, the immediate precipitating problems leading to the child's admission into care were related to parental behaviour, and for two, the problems related to the child's behaviour. Nine children were admitted to foster care because of parents' substance misuse. Parents' mental health difficulties were a problem for nine children.

Parental relationships

Parental relationships were characterised by disruption and instability (chapter 7). Many parents had engaged in a series of transient relationships with partners; others had gone through a long period of splitting up and getting back together repeatedly. Children were often unprepared for the sudden changes in their parents' relationships. Following acrimonious parental separations, children were left with a sense of confusion about family relationships, and divided loyalties to parents and siblings.

Parent-child relationships

Parents' relationships with their children were described generally as lacking warmth, caring and consistency. For some children relationships with parents were described as mixed, where a strong bond existed between the child and a mother or a father. However, even where parents were described as loving and warm, the dispensing of love was undertaken at the parent's terms rather than to meet the needs of the child, for example, when sober the parent was caring and showed genuine affection towards her child. For some children, their relationships with parents became reversed, in that the children were expected to meet the parents' unfulfilled emotional needs. This was particularly difficult for children in split families, where both parents were making emotional demands on the children by questioning their love and sense of loyalty. Five children had experienced consistently negative relationships with their parents, characterised by lack of warmth, love and attention. This group of children had been most rejected by their parents and experienced a harsh regime of upbringing. For some children relationships with parents continued to cause them a great deal of anxiety. Increased anxiety surrounded planned contact with parents for some children. Parents could not be relied upon to keep contact arrangements with the child, leading to disappointments and further feelings of rejection.

Emotional climate in the family

For the majority of the children the emotional climate in the family was characterised by stress, negativity and violence. For two-thirds of the children the aggression and violence were also directed towards them as individuals. Most children were also recipients of verbal aggression and they lived in a family environment where disharmony and conflict was present between other family members. The extremely negative family atmosphere was perceived by the social workers to reflect in the children's relationships with their siblings. In some families stress, conflict and aggression spread from parents to children, leading to children imitating their parents' behaviour.

Social worker: 'When things go wrong, this leads to stress and alcohol abuse, father becomes violent, children become stressed, they copy their parents, join in fights and become aggressive towards each other' (Sam and Sarah).

In some families violence was perceived to influence the child's relationships with parents' new partners, leaving the child in the middle of acrimonious parental relationships.

Social worker: 'There was family violence between mum and dad; there is now conflict between mum, Eric and dad's new partner; and between Eric and mum's new partner.'

Eric continued to have difficult relationships with both of his parents, resulting in lack of contact with his maternal and paternal half-siblings. Where children in the community sample had extended family members to turn to, the children in foster care were largely bereft of such supports. Where extended families were involved with the children, this also tended to be a negative experience.

Emotional and physical unavailability

For all of the children their parents had been physically and/or emotionally unavailable for periods of time during childhood. Many parents had been physically absent from the children's lives for reasons of hospitalisation, imprisonment or move to live elsewhere. Over a third of the children had been separated from their mothers by the age of two, and another third by the age of six. The majority of the children had been physically abandoned by at least one of their parents during childhood. For example, Stuart's mother left him and his siblings when he was eight years old.

A social worker: 'Mother had nothing to do with the children for two years. Mother in effect rejected the children when a new partner came into her life. She married him when he was 16.'

The emotional unavailability of parents to their children was even more common. Two-thirds of parents were occupied by their own needs, due to their mental health and substance misuse problems. A few parents were able to provide a reasonable standard of physical care, however, they were emotionally unavailable to their children and insensitive to the children's needs. For some, parent(s) had further distanced themselves from the children, following their entry into foster care. Most children's experiences were characterised by inconsistent parental behaviour, whereby parents were sometimes physically absent, and at other times emotionally unavailable.

Experiences of abuse

Nearly all children had experienced some degree of abuse and/or neglect at home. Local authorities are required to maintain a register of children in their area, who are considered to be at risk of neglect and abuse. Ten children's names were at the time of the study on the Child Protection (CP) Register. Five children were registered as being at risk of 'physical neglect'; three at risk of 'emotional abuse' and further two for both 'physical neglect' and 'emotional abuse'. Eight of these children had also previously been registered on the CP Register, some under other categories such as 'physical abuse' and 'sexual abuse'. Seven children, whose names were not currently on the CP Register, had previous registrations, four for 'physical neglect' and three for 'physical abuse'. Four (19%) children's names had never been on the CP Register. However, while they were in foster care evidence emerged to lead social workers to believe that they had been subject to emotional abuse and possibly also sexual abuse.

Parenting

Many families were described by social workers as being '*chaotic*', '*disorganised*', and '*lacking boundaries*'. The quality of parenting experienced by the majority of children was described as 'poor to non-existent'. One child had been cared for extended periods by grandparents, and two children by an aunt and uncle. The care given by the extended family members was also poor, leading to children being admitted to foster care. For some children, caregiving was described as inconsistent, ranging from over indulgence to rejection. Parents lacked control in handling their children's behaviour. In some families parents and/or mother's partners, and members of extended families caring for the children, applied different approaches to behaviour management. Seventeen children were regarded by social workers as being treated differently by their parents than their siblings. Differential parental treatment included scapegoating; having unreasonable expectations placed on the child; being more rejected and/or abused than siblings; and favouritism. Social workers perceived inconsistent parenting, and differential treatment of their children, to have a negative influence on the children's relationships with their sisters and brothers. This theme will be expanded upon in chapter 11.

Impact of change on sibling relationships

Social workers perceived changes affecting children's sibling relationships to be negative in respect of the majority of children (16). Positive changes affecting sibling relationships of two family groups of children came about as a result of admission to foster care.

The social workers commented on the negative impact, which frequent family disruption, changes of accommodation and loss of people had on the children's relationships. Five children from two families had lost a beloved grandparent during the past few years. House fires, petrol bombing of a family home, and knifing of a mother by their father in front of the children, were all traumatic for the children concerned.

Some children's lives were subject to continuous turmoil and social workers could not identify any particular changes to be more significant than any others. For example, Stuart's social worker said:

'There has been so many changes in the child's life; it is difficult to work out what has effected what. When father was in prison and mother in hospital Stuart found it difficult. Only stable period was when the children visited father in prison regularly. Relationship with the father was then stable - he was where he was expected to be.'

Some parents had distanced themselves emotionally from their children, while they were in foster care. For example, Kelly's social worker said:

'Changes are all for the worse - father is now rejecting - does not keep his word about access - Kelly feels safer in care, she has a real fear of her father - she wanted to return to her mother's care, but mother said no.'

Social workers generally perceived the children's families and their growing up experiences in negative terms. They identified few positive aspects in the children's lives on which to build on for the future. This is in contrast to the children's own views. These are reported in the next two chapters.

Parenting in the light of the attachment framework

Information obtained from social workers about children's family experiences was considered in the light of the attachment framework (Howe, 1996; Ainsworth, 1978). Howe (1996) stresses the importance of parental actions or the omissions of actions by parents, i.e. physical and emotional availability; sensitivity; reliability; and the responsiveness of the parent, as determining the quality of child's attachment experience. Table 23 summarises children's experiences according to Howe's (1996) classification.

Table 23. Children's attachment experiences

Style of parenting	No of children
<p>Parenting experiences supporting the development of insecure, anxious and <i>ambivalent</i> attachments.</p> <p>The experiences of this group of children are characterised by inconsistent, unreliable and unpredictable parental care. The parents are not always unloving; they are unable to put themselves into child's shoes, and their care is erratic and insensitive. There is a lack of synchrony between parent and child. (Howe, 1996:10).</p>	5
<p>Parenting experiences supporting the development of insecure, anxious and <i>avoidant</i> attachments.</p> <p>The experiences of this group of children are characterised by parental indifference towards or rejection of their children. Parents show lack of interest in, or concern with their children's needs and emotional states. Parents are consistently negative towards the children, who experience a predictable regime that lacks warmth, love and attention (Howe, 1996:12).</p>	5
<p>Parenting experiences supporting the development of insecure, anxious and <i>disorganised</i> attachments.</p> <p>The experiences of this group of children are characterised by chaotic family life, where the emotional climate fluctuates constantly leaving children confused about their parents' behaviour. The parent is not necessarily consistently rejecting, but he or she might occasionally be very hostile or scary. Displays of love and affection may occasionally be dispersed amongst aggression and violence (Howe, 1996:13).</p>	11
<p>Total</p>	21

Parental responses to meeting children's needs for this sample of children support the development of ambivalent, avoidant and disorganised attachments. Based on the social workers assessments, it is concluded that the largest group of children shared family experiences, which support the development of disorganised attachments (Crittenden, 1992; Howe, 1995; 1996).

The interviews with the children's social workers and the perusal of the children's case histories suggest that by middle childhood children who are placed in foster care bring with them an enormous baggage of difficulties they have encountered in their short lives.

8. 3 Growing up in adversity - children's perceptions

This and the following three chapters present some of the findings relating to sibling relationship processes and qualities referred to in the literature review (see chapter 3). The findings emerged from interviews with the children, and their completion of a Family Relations Test (Bene and Anthony, 1985). Some information collated through the Sibling Relationship Questionnaire is incorporated with the interview data.

The consideration of how, and to what extent, are foster children's relationships with their siblings influenced by their adverse early circumstances, difficult attachment relationships, abuse and neglect, and separations from parents and siblings, forms the core of this thesis. The main themes, which emerged as the most salient aspects of the children's relationships with their sisters and brothers, form the basis for understanding sibling relationships for this sample of children. These are:

- coherence and content of early memories of siblings (this chapter)
- extent and nature of shared childhood experiences (this chapter)
- siblings as a source of care, support and help (chapter 9)
- siblings as a source of stress and abuse (chapter 9)
- emotional involvement and quality of sibling attachments (chapter 10)
- developing a sense of siblingship (chapter 11)
- continuity of sibling relationships (chapter 12).

The findings related to the first two themes will be discussed in this chapter. The findings are presented in two parts: children's recollections of their earliest sibling memories, and their recollections of their shared and separate experiences of adversity.

8. 4 Recollections of siblings when younger

By middle childhood children are increasingly able to recall memories of past events. Developmental psychologists think that children's recall memory is as complete as an adult's by the age of eleven or twelve (Garbarino and Stott, 1992). Although children have a capacity for spontaneous recall of memories, their actual ability to remember events, which happened during the pre-school years in particular, can vary a great deal. Attachment theorists (Main, 1991) suggest, that

the quality of the recall memory is related to the quality of the person's attachment relationships. Main (1991) in her follow-up study of 10 to 11 year old children's spoken autobiography, found 75% correspondence in the attachment classification at the age of one year and at the follow up at ten. Children classified at the age of one as having 'secure attachments' to their mothers, recalled at the age of ten and eleven consistently more coherent memories; had easier access to their memories especially of their pre-school years; and showed more self-awareness; and a greater ability to focus on their own thinking, a process which Main calls 'metacognitive monitoring'. The memories recalled by insecurely attached children in contrast were incoherent; they had a poor access to memories; no resolution of feelings of sadness; and poor self-awareness. Main (1991) used as a guide for determining the 'coherence' of the children's life stories the following four criteria:

- quality - truthful
- quantity – succinct, yet complete
- relation - relevant
- manner - clear and orderly.

Of these, the criterion of quality is regarded as the most important. This refers to the plausibility of the children's accounts. These four criteria have been used as a guide only in the analysis of the interview transcripts.

In this study children were asked about their first memories of their siblings allowing the child to choose where to start. They were then asked about their memories when they were small and living at home, and about the time before coming into the foster home. During the course of the interview the children also talked about their life at home, about their parents, important life events and the many crises faced by their families. The children's recollections of their growing up experiences have been analysed in terms of the degree and nature of their shared experiences within their families.

Content of sibling memories

The children recalled memories of the following:

- birth of a sibling or siblings
- the child taking care of sibling(s)
- older siblings taking care of the child
- playing and having/not having fun with sibling(s), and
- accidents/incidents involving the child and sibling(s).

There were qualitative differences in the way the children talked about their memories about their individual siblings. Three patterns emerged: detailed and coherent sibling memories, negative sibling memories, and a poor recall of memories. Table 24 gives details about children's memories.

Table 24. Children's sibling memories

Classification of memories	No of children
Children with detailed and coherent memories (of one or more siblings)	15
Children with negative memories (of one or more children)	5
Children with only negative memories	2
Children with a poor recall of memories	5
	27*

*Some children recalled both positive and negative memories.

Some children recalled coherent memories about their younger and older siblings, whereas others did so only in respect of particular sibling(s); their memories were more negative about other sibling(s). Two-thirds of the children recalled memories at least one of their siblings that could be classified as coherent. Two groups of children stood out as distinct from others, those five children who had a poor recall of memories of their siblings, and two children with intensely negative memories. It is recognised that children's recall of early memories of their siblings, and the content of those memories, is also likely to be influenced by the child's age, position in relation to sibling(s), and the age gap between the child and the siblings.

Children with coherent sibling memories

The arrival of a sister or brother

Children, who were able to recall detailed and coherent memories of the birth of their sibling(s), on the whole perceived their relationships with these siblings in a positive light. Simon, for example, recalled the birth of a sibling with warm and fond memories, whereas some others recalled the arrival of a sibling with ambivalence. These children recalled visiting the mother and baby at the hospital, holding their baby sister or brother, or had clear memories of the baby's arrival at home. They had a coherent story about how the new baby sibling became part of their lives.

Taking care of siblings

Peter's, Lea's and Cheryl's first memories were of them *looking after their younger siblings* in their parents' absence. They talked about this without a feeling of resentment or a sense of being overburdened by their caretaking responsibilities. In a large family, such as in Lea's and Cheryl's, siblings were important additional helpers. Older siblings remembered feeding their baby siblings, making up bottles and changing nappies during the day and at night. Some took their young siblings out to a park to give their mothers a rest. Some children developed an intimate knowledge of their young charges, knowing how to interpret their siblings' behaviour. Peter described his observations of his sister's behaviour in the following terms:

'she used to go (points with his finger to his backside and makes a noise) when I, no when she... mmm...when she had done it in her pants'.

Siblings' antics were remembered with amusement by Lea who recalled:

'my brother used to get the eggs and throw them out of the window',

and her sister Cheryl, who recalled a younger sister's birthday:

'when she had her second birthday she put her head in a birthday cake'.

These children's descriptions of looking after their siblings were positive, demonstrating warmth and caring towards their younger siblings.

Gina's first memory was of *being looked after* by her older brother. Gina remembered Stephen shouldering a great deal of responsibility for the care of his three younger siblings. Gina made little reference to her parents during the interview. She recalled that:

...he used to change my nappy. . . he used to give me my baby milk. . . and baby food'.

Gina's memories of her brother may have been influenced by what she had been told by others. She had also observed Stephen looking after their two younger

sisters. Such memories, whether based on actually remembered events or not, are no less important for Gina. They have helped to influence the nature of her relationship with Stephen, and as such are significant to her.

Some older sisters were remembered as providers of practical care and help. They introduced their younger siblings to the wider community outside the family home by taking them swimming, ice-skating and other places they might not otherwise have visited. Older siblings were also remembered as having a role in teaching their siblings new skills. Cheryl recalls her memories of the time the family lived at Women's Aid Refuge:

'we used to teach each other how to play on the bikes and that'.

Cheryl's sisters were instrumental in keeping the younger siblings occupied while the family lived at the refuge.

Playing and having fun

Some children recalled memories of playing with their sisters and brothers, remembering both pleasant and sad memories. Siblings had provided them with companionship and fun, as described by Kelly.

Kelly: 'Peter always helped me down with my dolls house. . . it was on the top of the shelf and I was too small to reach it. . . so Peter had to climb up on my bed and lift it because it was about this high, and it was really heavy and he went just like that, he got off the bed and put it down and played with me with the dolls, but he was always the men and I was always all the ladies'.

Some boys recalled playing football with their brothers, going to the park without adult supervision, and exploring the wider world beyond their family home.

Accidents

Some children's first memories were of an accident involving the child or one or more of the siblings. Alex recalled, what happened, when was taken out by his older sister:

'Well, I remember Nina taking me to the park when it was a dinner time, Nina went on and goes: "its dinner time" (shouts) and I go be quiet I am playing, because

some of my friends were there and I goes. . . I fell off from one of the high bars and I goes... I fell right on to the bouncy park and I was nearly unconscious'.

Some accidents involving siblings had serious consequences. Gina recalled details of her brother's accident:

'He... he got run over . . . he got skin off that leg (demonstrates) put on that leg. . . he got a big chunk out of his leg. . . yeah and he got his both arms broken'.

These accidents usually involved situations where the children were looking after or being looked after by their siblings. The child or a sibling was remembered as being instrumental in assisting and comforting in the aftermath of the accident. Children's recollections rarely included parents as an active source of help. In fact, parents or other adults rarely featured in such memories, unless they were in some way held responsible for the accident or events surrounding it, reflecting children's experiences of parental neglect.

Children with negative sibling memories

Five children recalled negative memories at least of one of their siblings, and two others did not recall any positive memories of their siblings. Michael, who had an intensely negative relationship with his older sister, described his first memory of her:

'We lived at that squary bit, you know the grassy bit, and we were playing a game and...and we were wee (small), and there was this thing going round with little holes, you pushed the thing up and there were little balls fall down and hit it, and my sister was banging it, and she took one and forced me to eat it, my gran came through and got me in trouble for trying to eat them'.

Michael's first memory of Lisa is coloured by the resentment he felt towards her. This theme was to be repeated in Michael's interview as he talked more about his relationship with his sister.

Fraser remembered their siblings as a burden from the earliest time. Fraser, when asked about his memories of his younger brother, said:

'Nothing, no I didn't have time to think about my little brother. . . I had to think about school work and all that, I had homework and it was about three months late..'cause

I was always speaking to Alex an' all that, and my sister wouldn't leave me alone, so I could get my home work in for three months, if I never had it in for the last week then I would have went to the headmaster and get sent to another school'.

Fraser thought he was five years old at the time, only at the beginning of his first year at school.

What was illuminating about these children's early memories was their inability to recall anything positive about their siblings as children with specific characteristics, likes and dislikes, interests, abilities and talents. Their relationships with sisters and brothers lacked a sense of companionship and fun. Their memories were negative and coloured by feelings of resentment and unhappiness.

Children with poor recall of sibling memories

Five children had difficulties in recalling memories of their early childhoods. Where memories were recalled these were fragmented, lacked detail and coherence. For example, when asked about his memories of sisters and brothers, Arron responded by:

'It was in the winter. . .mum, why does it get so dark so early, I says," because it is winter Arron" my mum said, it gets dark about six o'clock in the morning'.

Arron's response was not related to the question. He responded to a further probe into his memories about his four siblings by saying: *'I don't know'* and *'I forgot'*. He could not recall playing and having fun with his siblings, nor any sad times involving his sisters and brothers. Arron was occupied by thoughts of his mother throughout the interview.

Eric was also unable to recall memories of his childhood. When asked about memories of his sister, who was four years older than him, Eric said:

'I cannot remember anything (quiet voice) when I was small'.

He had no recollection of being looked after by his sister, although his social worker had said this had happened. He was asked about sharing a bedroom with his sister:

. . . pause. . .mmm...*I don't think so (sad)*'.

Although able to recall a memory of his younger half-brother's birth, Eric had no subsequent memories of his brother. He also had difficulties talking about his feelings about his family and significant transitions, such as starting school and moving house. He could not place himself or his two siblings, in time and place, in the context of the family history.

Sam recalled no memories of his older brother whom he perceived in a negative light. He assumed, however, that had he remembered anything, his memories would have been of abusive incidents. When asked about his early memories, he responded by:

Sam: '*Nothing. . .*'

Interviewer: '*did he (refers to older brother) look after you?*'

Sam: '*I think he'd hit us over the head with toys. . . I think he would*'.

It could be postulated, following Main's (1991) conclusions that the foster children's ability to recall memories of their pre-school years, and the coherence of their memories would be relatively poor. This was not so. There were individual differences in the children's ability to recall memories, and in the emotional content of their memories, particularly in memories related to their pre-school years. Differences also existed in the children's memories of their individual siblings. Some children's memories contained detailed descriptions of specific life events involving themselves, their siblings and/or their parents. Others offered coherent memories of the many happy and sad times they had with their siblings. The most distinct groups of children were those with *mainly negative memories*, and those who had *poor recall of their sibling memories*. For the majority of children the quality of their memories was mixed. The level of detail in the children's descriptions, the coherence and the emotional content of the children's memories, were regarded as one indicator of the quality of children's relationships with their siblings.

8. 5 Children's experiences of adversity

The extent to which children, who have been brought up in the same family, develop a *shared understanding of their childhood* is dependant largely upon their shared and separate experiences as they grow up. Children who are closely spaced in age are more likely to experience a similar, although not necessarily the same family

environment, as siblings who are disparate in age. Equally, even closely spaced siblings may experience their childhood as distinctly different from each other and have few shared memories in common. Discussion earlier in this thesis referred to the impact of non-shared environmental influences on siblings (see chapters 2 and 3). For children in foster care the rate of environmental change has been rapid. They have been subject to changes in their families, separations and loss, changes in living situations, schools and external environment. Some siblings had spent as long as one-third of their childhood apart from one or more siblings (refer to chapter 6) The children's social workers suggested that many of these changes have been for the worse rather than for the better. It could be postulated that developing sibling bonds is particularly difficult for children with past interrupted family relationships. When the extent of children's joint and separate experiences of their childhood were analysed, three patterns of response emerged: children with a strong sense of shared adversity, children who had shared their experiences of adversity with one or more siblings, and those who had experienced adversity alone. Table 25 shows children's patterns of responses.

Table 25. Children's experiences of adversity

Degree of shared experiences	No of children
Children with a strong sense of shared adversity	5
Children with mixed experiences	11
Children who had experienced adversity alone	5
Total	21

Over half of the children's experiences were mixed in that they had shared adversity with individual sibling(s), but they had not developed a strong understanding of a shared childhood with their siblings in general. A quarter of children expressed a strong sense of a shared childhood, and a shared understanding of their childhood difficulties. The remaining children had grown up with a sense of separateness from their siblings, or felt that their growing up experiences had been different in a negative sense, from their siblings.

Children with a strong sense of shared adversity

The five children, who had a strong sense of shared adversity with their siblings in general, and those who had expressed a sense of shared adversity at least with one of their siblings, had the following characteristics in common:

- they expressed a commitment to, and involvement with, sibling(s)
- there has been a continuity of relationship with sibling(s)
- their growing up experiences were shared with sibling(s)
- they shared a history of adversity with sibling(s); and
- their growing up experiences contained evidence of resilience.

Commitment and involvement

Children's descriptions of their individual siblings, and the way they spoke about them, indicated their strong commitment to, and involvement with them. The children, who consistently referred to 'we' and 'us' when describing their childhood experiences, demonstrated that they were a family group. They recalled events from the past, as they reflected not only on the individual children in the family, but also on the sibling group as a whole. The consequences of the mother's illness on the children, for instance, were explained as they impacted on the children as a family group rather than on the index child as an individual. For example, Lea, who was the third oldest of a family of seven siblings explained:

'We never used to get out because my mum was ill. . . we used to sit in and cleaning the house and staying in and never go out much'.

Although referring to her siblings as a unit, Lea demonstrated a detailed understanding of the individuality of her siblings, commenting on their personalities, likes and dislikes, interests, abilities and disabilities. Her younger sister gave equally detailed descriptions of her siblings, demonstrating not only an intimate knowledge of siblings, but also her personal involvement with them.

Continuity of relationships

These children's sibling relationships were also characterised by a continuity of relationships. The children had experienced few separations from their siblings. Where separations had occurred, these were of a short duration and contact between separated siblings was maintained. The children, who had traveled through the external changes together, remained a close-knit sibling group.

Shared experiences of adversity

The importance of the child experiencing family life and life events as 'shared' with siblings was most clearly highlighted when the children talked about the many adverse family circumstances: parental alcohol misuse; neglect and abuse; and

violence between parents. These children invariably included their siblings in their accounts of adversity. Siblings were described as having been involved, and playing a role, in the shared family circumstances. Some children were closely bound with their siblings through their shared history of adversity.

The children were able to talk about upsetting incidents they had shared with their siblings in a way that demonstrated their understanding and acceptance of their parents' shortcomings. Sarah recalled a family fight:

'My mum gave me a black eye when I was three. . . well, my mum and dad were fighting in the street and.. and I tried to stop them, and she just kicked me right in here (points to her eye) . . . Sam tried to grab me out, but she just kicked me and I fell on the ground. . . they were quite drunk.'

Sarah found her brother's attempts to help her supportive. Her own actions to stop her parents fighting demonstrated considerable resilience. The manner in which the children described their adverse circumstances suggested that they believed that their actions could make a difference to their own and their siblings' survival. The resilience shown by these children was evident in their accounts of their family life. It was this characteristic of resilience, which seemed to make a positive difference to their relationships with their siblings.

Children who experienced adversity alone

Some children talked about their childhoods without a sense of having shared their growing up experiences with their sisters and brothers. The following characterised these children's recollections of their childhood:

- commitment to and involvement with sibling(s) was minimal
- a lack of continuity of relationships with sibling(s)
- growing up experiences were not shared with sibling(s)
- adversity was experienced alone, and
- growing-up experiences lacked evidence of resilience.

The five boys, who did not feel a shared sense of childhood, interpreted their experiences in two ways, as *separate* from their siblings, and as *different* from their siblings. Eric and Arron described growing up as *separate* from their sisters and brothers, both in a practical and emotional sense. They made little reference to their

siblings, when talking about their family life and life events, despite having grown up together. They had little recollection of enjoying joint activities with their siblings or being involved in their siblings' daily lives and concerns. It is as if these children had grown up 'parallel' to their siblings. Arron perceived all of his four siblings in a negative way. He did not appear to have a niche among his sisters and brothers; he was pre-occupied with his mother alone. Similarly, Eric had little to say about either of his siblings. His social worker suggested, that Eric's mother had deliberately tried to keep him apart from his younger half-brother, as she perceived him to have a negative influence on his brother's behaviour.

By contrast, Michael, Fraser and Stuart, felt that their experiences of growing up had been markedly *different* from those of their siblings. Michael was acutely aware that his growing up experiences were different from his older sister's, and felt angry about it. He thought that she actively contributed to his misfortunes and that their grandparents favoured her. The following example illustrates how he perceived his experiences to differ from those of his sister's.

Michael: *'Yeah, and then I went back to gran and that's when all the trouble started, I was at Allan Street (children's home), and gran used to bring us sweets, and I was young and I didn't understand that she was trying to feed us back in to get money, because they are both unemployed, and they used to go to skips and that, and if they found a cooker they'd take it, call my dad up to fix it and... and sold it for £40, I used to go there all the time, and I got two nails on my foot once. . . they got me up, they pulled me up and put me on the skip, and told me to lift the cooker out, so I had to, it was a two-part cooker, it was like a microwave thing, and then I had the oven underneath, so I had to lift that up and then as soon as I'd done it the nail went right through my foot, they didn't even take me to hospital, there's probably rusty stuff inside my foot now. . .*

Interviewer: *How old were you then?*

Michael: *Eight, they used to make me do lots of things. . .*

Interviewer: *What about Lisa?*

Michael: *She just sat in the car and she used to go: "oh this skip is so dirty and everything", and she used to stick up for my gran, she always does it. . .I was always getting in trouble for things she did, she never gets found out when she gets in trouble, my grandad always gives her a cuddle and everything'.*

Similarly, Fraser felt that as the oldest, he shouldered the burden of responsibility for the younger siblings, and that they had in many ways an easier life. His social worker confirmed that Fraser was indeed most affected by his family processes in that as the oldest he had been living in the abusive home longer than the two younger siblings. Stuart talked about his siblings being different from him, focusing on their 'bad' behaviour, rather than recalling shared happy or sad experiences and life events.

These five children had experienced significant separations from their siblings. Eric, Michael and Stuart had no siblings in the care of the local authority; their families were able to take care of them. Following parental separation, Eric's older sister stayed with a grandparent, while his younger half-brother moved away with their mother and two new step-brothers. His father had remarried and now had a new family. He was rejected by both parents, and without a viable connection to his sister or any of his brothers and step-brothers. Stuart had also traveled through changes in his life without the support of his siblings. There had been a number of separations from his siblings resulting in the siblings living permanently apart. He had experienced some of the major changes in his life without the presence of his siblings. Some children harboured resentments and blamed their siblings for their unhappiness.

8. 6 Summary

Wide individual differences were found in the children's recollections of their childhoods, and the degree to which they perceived their childhood experiences to have been shared by their siblings. These differences were apparent in the children's recollections of their siblings in general, as well as within the eight family groups of children included in the sample. Some children in the same family recalled their childhoods in different terms.

Children with the most positive relationships with their siblings recalled detailed and coherent early memories, reflecting both happy and sad times with their siblings. They remembered their siblings as a source of company and fun, and with whom they had shared activities. They also had a strong sense of family identity and a clear understanding of their place within the sibling group. They had a sense of commitment to, and an involvement with, their siblings. They had experienced few separations from their siblings. These children had a shared understanding of their

childhoods and they were closely bound to their siblings through their history of adversity. The children with the most positive relationships with their siblings were also able to demonstrate a capacity for resilience in the face of their circumstances.

By contrast, children with detached relationships with their siblings had difficulties recalling memories of their childhoods, particularly of their pre-school years. Where memories were recalled these were fragmented and lacked detail and coherence.

Some children recalled intensely negative memories. Their memories were coloured by general unhappiness and resentment towards their siblings. These children also had minimal commitment to and involvement with their siblings; they had experienced significant separations from siblings; their experiences of adversity were not shared with their siblings; and they lacked evidence of personal resilience. Extended separations from siblings were more common for this group of children. Three of the most isolated children were the only ones in their family to have been placed in foster care, leading to separations from both parents and their siblings. Such children lacked a niche to which they belonged in the family group.

Social workers perceived the majority of children's families and their growing-up experiences in totally negative terms. They identified few positive aspects in the children's previous lives on which to build on for the future. None of the social workers described any attempts to work towards improving negative sibling relationships. This may be partly to do with the way the social workers conceptualised the children's families. They focused on the adults in the family, describing the adults' behaviour and interactions. Changes and events in the families were generally considered from the adults' point of view.

Social workers' views provided little sense of where the children were located in their families or what their contribution was to family life. Although the questions were framed in terms of the family as a whole, children's understanding and points of view on their family lives did not emerge from the social worker interviews. The social workers adopted an adult-centred, problem orientated approach to children's families. The sense of sibling loyalty and solidarity, as expressed by the foster children, a *shared sense of adversity*, was missing from the social workers descriptions of their families.

Chapter 9 Siblings as a source of support and stress

9.1 Introduction

Previous chapters have demonstrated the supportive role, which siblings often play for children both in the community and in foster care. Children's recollections of memories of their childhood, reported in chapter 8, confirmed the important role, which siblings play in caring for each other. Sibling support is particularly important for looked after children, considering their cumulative experiences of adversity, prior to their entry into foster care (refer to chapter 3). This chapter reports on the foster children's experiences of looking after, and being looked after by their siblings; emotional support and protection; provision of resources, services and practical help, and their experiences of siblings as a source of stress, bullying and abuse. The findings reported here were obtained from the children through questionnaires and interviews.

9.2 Experiences of sibling caretaking

Comparing foster children's experiences with community sample

In order to find out about the frequency of sibling caretaking for children in the general population, and children's views on this, the questionnaire sought information on children's experiences of being looked after by, and looking after their siblings. The aim was to provide some baseline information about sibling caretaking in the local community. The questionnaire data also provided some comparative information about the two samples. The children were asked whether any of their sisters and brothers looked after them sometimes and whether they liked being looked after by them. The questions were reversed to find out about the older children's experiences of looking after their younger siblings. Children's responses for both samples are presented in table 26.

Table 26. Frequency of sibling caretaking

	Community sample (64)		Foster care sample (21)	
	No	%	No	%
Sibling(s) look after child	45	70	17	81
Child looks after sibling(s)	35	55	17	81

Sibling caretaking was found to be remarkably common both for children in the community and children in foster care. Seventy per cent of the children in the community sample had experienced *being looked after by their siblings* and 55 per cent had *looked after their siblings* (Kosonen, 1996b). Even higher proportion of children in the foster care sample had experience of being looked after by (81%), and looking after (81%) their siblings. These results were in response to the first question. The proportion of children in the community, who had experienced sibling caretaking, is likely to be even higher, as an additional ten children responded to the follow-up question asking if they liked their experiences. Children's *preferences on sibling caretaking* are presented in table 27 below.

Table 27. Children's preferences on sibling caretaking

	Siblings look after child				Child looks after siblings			
	Community sample		Foster care sample		Community sample		Foster care sample	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Likes it	15	27	10	59	16	35	13	76
Sometimes likes it	25	46	4	23	17	38	3	18
Does not like it	15	27	3	18	12	27	1	6
Total	55 * 100		17 100		45* 100		17 100	

*The number of children, who in answer to the previous questions, reported siblings looking after the child, and the child looking after siblings, was 45 and 35 children respectively (table 26).

When children were asked if they liked being looked after, or looking after their siblings, a higher proportion of children in foster care, than in the community, found their experiences of sibling caretaking to be positive. Eighty-two per cent of the foster children, compared to 73 per cent of the children in the community, said they 'liked' or 'sometimes liked' being looked after by their siblings. Similarly, 94 per cent of the foster children, compared to 73 per cent of the children in the community,

'liked' or 'sometimes liked' looking after their siblings. The children expressed a preference for a particular sister or brother to look after them, rather than siblings as a whole. Some older brothers were disliked or feared because of bullying.

Sibling caretaking from the perspective of the looked after child

Children were asked an open-ended question to find out more about their experiences of *being looked after* by their siblings. They were asked to elaborate on why they 'liked', 'did not like', or 'sometimes liked' being looked after by their sibling(s). Their responses were categorised into positive, negative and ambivalent views on sibling caretaking. The common themes, relating to the perspectives of the looked after children, are presented in table 28.

Table 28. Sibling caretaking – from the perspective of the looked after child

Children's views	Community sample	Foster care sample
Positive	siblings are fun they are kind they give privileges	siblings give privileges they are fun they help me
Negative	siblings are annoying they boss me around they abuse me (or the child fears they may do so)	they make me feel bad (one child)
Ambivalent	siblings sometimes annoy they sometimes hit	they are not always available they sometimes play with me

For the *children in community*, spending time with sisters and brothers without parents' presence gave them opportunities to have fun, play games and enjoy the company of their sibling's friends. Children enjoyed interacting with their siblings unsupervised by adults. Some children got on well with their siblings and they appreciated the absence of negative interactions. Children mentioned a number of privileges that they obtained from their siblings. These included being able to stay up late, not having to do much in the house and being able to borrow their siblings' belongings.

Some of the children only 'sometimes' liked being looked after by their siblings. At times they found their siblings annoying, embarrassing and abusive. Despite their

negative experiences, these children indicated that they sometimes liked being looked after by their siblings.

Those who held negative views found their siblings annoying and bossy. Siblings' 'annoying behaviour' included plain annoying, embarrassment when siblings show off, mucking about and moaning. Being 'bossed around' by siblings included a range of behaviours intended to exert power over children looked after. Some children felt totally dominated by their siblings. The most serious consequence of being looked after by siblings was physical abuse or fear of abuse. A total of 13 children (20 per cent) said that their siblings bullied or abused them, or they feared that this might happen, when they were left at home with their siblings.

The *children in foster care* perceived the positive aspects of being looked after in terms of privileges obtained and the more relaxed style of caretaking. They also enjoyed the freedom from adult supervision, and being able to play games that might not have been tolerated by their parents. They liked playing on their sibling's computer, watching a video, and being taken along to town with their older siblings. Some children perceived their sibling(s) as a source of support and help, another compared the sibling favourably with a parent, by saying: *'Because he is better than mum'*. Some of the children simply appreciated the absence of negative sibling interactions, while they were being looked after by their sibling(s).

Those children, who only 'sometimes' liked being looked after by their siblings, felt more ambivalent about their siblings. They preferred a particular sibling to look after them, while disliking another sibling. One child doubted the usefulness of siblings by saying:

'Because sometimes they are there, when I don't need them, and sometimes not, when I need them'.

Three foster children did not like being looked after by their siblings, two declined to give any reasons for this, while the third child said: '

'Because they make me feel bad'

It is acknowledged that the number of children in the foster care sample was relatively small. Children's responses, from the perspective of the caretaking child will be discussed next.

Sibling caretaking from the perspective of the caretaking child

Children were asked an open-ended question to find out more about their experiences of *looking after their siblings*. They were asked to elaborate on why they 'liked', 'did not like', or 'sometimes liked' looking after their sibling(s). Their responses were categorised into positive, negative and ambivalent views on sibling caretaking. The common themes, relating to the perspectives of the caretaking children, are presented in table 29.

Table 29. Sibling caretaking - from the perspective of the caretaking child

Children's views	Community sample	Foster care sample
Positive	siblings are fun to be with the child cares about them they are easy to look after	protect them in case they get hurt they are easy to look after because they look after the child
Negative	they are difficult to look after they are annoying	they are annoying
Ambivalent	it is something to do I have to look after them	sometimes they are a pain sometimes they hit me

The views of the *children in the community*, who said that they looked after their sisters and brothers, were also mainly positive. The main positive reason for enjoying looking after siblings was that 'siblings are fun to be with'. Some said that they liked looking after their siblings, because they liked and cared about them, and because they found them easy to care for.

The children who only 'sometimes' liked looking after their siblings gave more neutral replies such as: 'I just do', 'because it is something to do', and 'because my mum and dad have to go out and I look after my brother'. Four children felt that they had to look after their siblings, because they might otherwise get into trouble with their parents.

Those children with negative views found their siblings difficult to look after, and their caretaking responsibilities onerous to cope with. They found it difficult to control their siblings' behaviour, deal with conflict between siblings, and provide care and nurturance to their younger siblings. The difficulties experienced by the children included annoying, moaning, carrying on, and messing things up. A few children found it a great burden to care for their siblings in their parents' absence.

The *children in foster care* liked looking after their siblings, because they wanted to protect their younger siblings from potential harm. They recognised that their siblings sometimes get hurt, and that they can play a useful role in preventing their siblings getting hurt. Some wanted to help their siblings, particularly, if they found them easy to look after. One child saw it as a reciprocal arrangement, where siblings look after one another.

Of the three children, who only 'sometimes' liked looking after siblings, one found the siblings 'a pain', and another did not like 'being hit', one child did not give a reason. Only one foster child said they did not like looking after their siblings.

The above *questionnaire findings* provided a primarily positive view of sibling caretaking for both samples of children, although there are some differences in the children's reasons for their views. Children in the community valued most the freedom to '*play and have fun*', when being looked after by siblings in their parents' absence. Children in foster care '*enjoyed the privileges*' they obtained from their older siblings, and being able to do things they might not otherwise be able to do. The caretaking children in the community enjoyed looking after their siblings, because they were '*fun to be with*', whereas children in foster care looked after their siblings primarily '*to protect them from harm*'.

Foster children's experiences of looking after their siblings were explored in more detail in the interview. This was to obtain information about the nature of caretaking tasks, how the children experienced caretaking, and what the consequences were for the children's relationships with their siblings. Children's experiences of looking after their siblings had both positive and negative consequences for their sibling relationships.

Positive consequences for children's sibling relationships

Many of the foster children had taken a 'parental' role in their family towards their siblings. They had provided physical care and nurturance to their younger siblings, some for considerable periods of time. Many had also undertaken a whole range of household tasks, normally undertaken by adults, such as cooking, cleaning and washing clothes. Some of the children accepted their responsibilities, for instance, because of their mother's illness. Others talked about their parents' inadequacies, and were critical of their shortcomings.

Physical care of young babies included making up bottles, feeding and changing nappies. Children talked about, and demonstrated, with considerable pride their methods of settling and winding their baby siblings. Daniel, for instance, recalled giving his baby brother a bottle of hot milk, which calmed him down, and '*...rocking him in little chair he used to sleep in...rock him back and forth...*'.

Some children talked about bathing their younger siblings; this was a common chore for older siblings. Bedtime routines included reading to their younger siblings and settling them to sleep. Physical care given included siblings, like Peter and Kelly, washing each other's hair. Peter said laughingly: '*...she washes my hair and I wash hers...*'.

The consequences of taking care of their younger siblings appeared to be entirely positive for some children's sibling relationships. These children developed an intimate knowledge of their siblings' needs and how to meet them. This made their relationships much closer and warmer, than might have otherwise been the case. The children also learnt some practical skills about looking after young children and the home. Some children saw themselves as more competent than their parents, and felt confident and proud of their capabilities, confirming previous research by Sandler (1980) and Werner (1989; 1993). The children with the most positive relationships with their siblings enjoyed caring for their younger siblings.

Negative consequences for children's sibling relationships

Some children felt that they had shouldered an unfair proportion of responsibilities in their family *compared to their siblings*. They felt hard done by and perceived their

siblings to have been favoured. They experienced the responsibilities for the care of their siblings and the family home to be burdensome.

This theme is illustrated by the experiences of a family of three siblings: Fraser, Nina and Alex. It is useful to consider this family at length. The children's perceptions of their family experiences illustrate their widely differing subjective realities. Sibling caretaking appeared to have negative consequences for each sibling. Fraser, the oldest in the family, explained what happened.

Fraser: *'Yeah, I looked after him (refers to younger brother) when my mum went out, I had to look after him and I was only six at the time...every week my mum and sister went down the High Street, I was left in the house baby-sitting. . . I never got paid for it, I should have, she was away from 9'o clock till about half five. . . but then I started to cook my own meals and that, toast, eggs, chocolate, and I used to make my little brother chocolate milk and stick it in his bottle and he used to drink it. . . uhuh, I was changing his nappies and all that...my mum said: "if I'm not home for half four then just cook something for your tea" and I goes "what like" she says "chips" and I goes "no way I am not cooking chips" and I just made omelet with some beans and carrots...if I'd done some chips, all that fat would have spurted, I could have burnt myself...I used to make custard for pudding for Alex with that chocolate. . .*

Interviewer: *Did you make anything for Nina or your mum?*

Fraser: *No, she always left me behind so why should I make her anything. . . my sister was getting spoilt rotten, when she came back at 5'o clock she had about five dollies and that'.*

Fraser felt isolated and unsupported by his mother and his sister. He had developed feelings of resentment towards Nina, who in turn felt unsupported by her two brothers. Nina remembered having the burden of responsibility for household chores and looking after her brothers placed on her rather than on Fraser. It may have been, that as Nina got older, the responsibility for the running of the household transferred from Fraser to Nina. Nina talked about her family responsibilities when she was eight years old.

Nina: *'I'd run the bath, she was in bed (refers to her mother) and when it was school time, she was in bed, I did all the work, I had to waken up gran: "time to get up", I had to run a bath for her, had to get bath for me, bath for Alex, bath for Fraser, get the breakfast done, had to clear up after her, had to wash after her, and you know, I had to do a lot of stuff, and I had to clean the bath after all of us'.* (Nina's social worker had disclosed that Nina had shared a bed with her grandmother, who had an incontinence problem. This explains the need for running a bath for her grandmother.)

Nina also felt unsupported by her siblings and overburdened by her responsibilities. Although she recalls her younger brother helping her, she has no memory of Fraser doing so. The effect on Nina was drastic, she said:

'...and then I got ill, I just got ill, for it was such hard work, I was sleeping in school and...'

Both Fraser and Nina remembered looking after their younger brother Alex when he was small. Their memories about their experiences are mixed. Both children remember Alex with fondness, regardless of how overburdened they may have felt.

Alex's recollections of his early childhood, on the contrary, do not include any positive memories of Fraser. He does not remember Fraser 'helping' him, although he remembers Nina doing so. He, in turn, did not see any reason to be helpful now towards Fraser.

Alex: *'Well, I don't help Fraser with anything because he doesn't help anyone else, I help Nina with some things'.*

The same sentiments echoed in Nina who felt resentful towards both of her brothers.

Nina: *'Yeah, I help them, but they don't help me when I am upset, so from now on I am just going to keep out of the way'.*

What seemed to be influential to the development of Fraser's and Nina's relationship was that they both felt overburdened by their responsibilities, yet alone and unsupported by each other. The two children were of different ages, and at

different developmental stages, at the time when they felt most stressed and in need of support. Also, Fraser's perception that their mother favoured Nina did not help his relationship with his sister.

The placement in foster care brought relief for Nina from her domestic responsibilities. She no longer has to neither look after her brothers nor worry about their welfare. When asked about her current responsibilities for her brothers, she was relieved that the responsibility for the siblings has now been placed firmly on the foster carers.

Nina: *'I do nothing, its Mary and Gus that does all the work, I know that I can get on with my own life at the moment and I don't need to worry about them because they are in the right care'*.

Similarly, Alex now has a number of other people to turn to and he is less dependent on Nina for help and support. Fraser seems to have fared the worst. Although fond of his little brother as a young child, Fraser had grown apart from his siblings. He wanted little to do with his siblings and perceived them as taking resources away from him rather than sharing them with him. He expressed a desire to be an only child saying:

Fraser: *'I am not trying to be selfish, just telling the truth'*.

This sibling group of three children had experienced an extremely harsh upbringing, and been rejected by their mother. Their experiences illustrate the potential negative consequences for children's sibling relationships, when children are overburdened by their caretaking responsibilities, and unsupported by adults.

9.3 Experiences of emotional support

The children were asked, in the interview, about whom they would turn to if worried, when needing a hug, or wishing to share a secret. Children mentioned a number of people: including foster carers, parents, siblings, foster carers' children, friends, and other adults.

Many children opted, as their first choice, to seek emotional support and comfort from adults, primarily from their foster carers, or else turned to no one. For some

children, though, siblings were their first port of call for comfort when upset. For example, for Sarah and Sam, their close bond with each other and their intimate knowledge of each other's worries and fears were of great support to both. Both mentioned the importance which being able to share a bedroom in the foster home held for them. Sarah *'helped Sam with his nightmares'* and comforted him when he was upset. Sam provided someone for Sarah to talk to late at night. These closely spaced siblings provided each other a 'secure base' while away from home.

Andrew took comfort from the fact that he understood his brother's fears and worries and that David shared some of his own fears.

Andrew: *'David gets a bus to my mum's house, he is scared to go on taxis. . . because there's loads of strangers in taxis. . . because he does not know if they are real taxi drivers or not. . . I am scared of taxis, I have always been scared since I was wee (small).'*

When worried the children would talk to their chosen, and most trusted sibling, rather than their siblings in general. For example, Lea and Cheryl demonstrated a high degree of sibling loyalty, and were able to confide their secrets to their siblings. They found each other a source of support when dealing with their relationships with the foster carer's daughter and other children in the foster home.

These examples illustrate how some siblings helped and reassured each other when life with a parent or parents was frightening. Andrew said, when asked if he would have wanted to be an only child:

'No, because it is better to have a family, because I won't want to stay just with my mum, its quite scary'.

9.4 Experiences of sibling protection

Foster children stated, in response to the questionnaire, as their main reason for looking after their siblings that they wanted to protect them *'in case they get hurt'*. This was in contrast to the children in the community, who liked looking after their siblings because they were *'fun to be with'*. Foster children elaborated in the interviews on their experiences of sibling protection.

Younger siblings in particular valued their siblings' protective intervention. Kelly and her older brother Peter, who talked about their experiences, illustrate this theme. Kelly described her brothers primarily as her protectors.

Kelly: 'Well, I like my brothers because they always take care of me, and when ever anyone comes up and bullies me, my big brother comes down and bullies them, he is in primary six and I am in primary four, and primary fours bully me, so he takes the primary fours up...Peter, and John is in Academy and I was in a swimming pool with my big brother and these big boys were bullying me and they nearly drowned me, but my big brother John came and told them "why don't you pick on someone of your own size".'

Peter confirmed in his interview, that he did act as Kelly's protector.

Peter: Sheryl (school friend) was hitting her so I went and hit her'.

Peter in his turn was offered protection against bullying by John, his older brother.

Peter: 'Like if someone was bullying me, he'd go up to them and bully them'.

The children perceived 'sticking up' for sisters and brothers, and protecting them from bullying and abuse particularly outside the family home, to be an intrinsic part of sibling obligations and duties, binding them together as a close family group.

9. 5 Provision of resources, services and practical help

Siblings provided resources, services and practical help for each other. Resources given included clothes, jewellery, books and other belongings, which were passed down to the younger siblings when no longer needed by the child. Some children expressed pleasure about giving jewellery and clothes to their younger siblings. The younger siblings were equally appreciative of the things they were given by their older sisters and brothers. These exchanges were negotiated without resentment or jealousy.

Older siblings also provided services, by taking their younger siblings to places beyond their immediate home environment. Some older siblings also expanded their younger siblings' friendship networks, by introducing their siblings to new friends.

Two brothers, David and Andrew, illustrate how the provision of resources and services between siblings works out in practice.

David: *'I give him stuff. . . like clothes that I don't need, that are small for me. . . and share sweets and that with him. . . and play computer, I teach him some of the stuff.'*

Andrew: *'He gets me friends. . . he plays with me. . . and he goes to places with me.'*

Similarly, Judy enjoyed trips out with her much older sister Jenni, who had developed a quasi-parental relationship with Judy and her brothers, and maintained this relationship after her own daughter was born.

Judy: *'Well, every time we go ice skating or swimming she treats me to something afterwards, she buys sweets, crisps, drinks, popcorn, buys me cakes – buys me all sorts of things.'*

For many children their siblings were their first port of call for help. Such help included tidying toys away at the end of the day; helping with homework, counting, writing, drawing, help with computer games; and sharing domestic tasks at home.

These children expressed similar sentiments to the children in the community about themselves, and their siblings, as a source of resources, services and practical help.

9. 6 Unsupported children

A small minority of children was totally without supportive sibling relationships. They had not felt protected, supported or taken care of, by their siblings within or outside their family home. Equally, they did not recall supporting their younger siblings. These were the most isolated and vulnerable children.

For Eric, Stuart and Arron, their sisters and brothers had been of little support and help as they faced the many difficulties in their lives. They had not felt protected by their siblings at home or outside their families where they had to fight their own battles to survive. However, they did not complain about their siblings, it was simply

that their siblings did not feature in their lives. Their recall of memories had been poor, and none of them could remember helping their siblings. For instance, in response to a question about what he would do if his younger brother were upset, Eric did not perceive himself to be of any help.

Eric: *I'd go and tell my mum. . .*

Interviewer: *What about if Sharon was upset?*

Eric: *She could just tell my mum herself'.*

These children had few other supportive relationships available to them and would turn to their foster carers, when needing help. They were cautious about sharing their feelings with their siblings or others; they felt that their siblings could not be trusted 'not to tell'. Where these children gave even limited help to their siblings this was primarily of practical nature, for instance helping with household tasks.

A few other children had made a conscious decision not to offer any help or support to their siblings. This decision had grown out of their past experiences of being let down by their siblings; their help and support not being reciprocated by their siblings; or like Fraser and Nina (referred to earlier), from a feeling of being overburdened by their previous caretaking responsibilities. Such experiences had led the children to harbour resentments about their individual siblings.

An example of this group of children is Michael. Michael believed that his older sister Lisa had acted against his interests by trying to get him in trouble; blaming him for things she had done; and not helping and supporting him when he most needed it. He felt scapegoated, and believed that he bore the brunt of his grandmother's bad temper. It was the lack of emotional support and comfort from his older sister, when he was frightened, which hurt him most. Michael talked about his feelings of being alone and afraid at night.

Michael: *'One time, when I got up in the night, I was worried to go down to the toilet and I did it in my bedroom, and my grandad found out about that I was scared to go down to the toilet and he got me in trouble for it, but since I came here (foster home) I can get up and go to toilet no bother, because I am not worrying, when I*

woke up at gran's house I was scared and nervous...when I woke up I was terrified to go downstairs to the toilet. . .

Interviewer: *Would you ask Lisa to help you?*

Michael: *No way no, she's not that sort of sister'.*

Michael went on to describe being physically abused by his father on an access visit, and how frightened he felt of his father's temper. Although his older sister was there at the time, Michael felt that she did not attempt to protect him, he felt alone in his situation.

9. 7 Sibling as a source of stress and abuse

The children with the most positive relationships with their sisters and brothers revealed no experiences of bullying or abuse by their siblings. Although accepting that their siblings can be annoying, and that some conflict and fighting is part of the nature of sibling relationship, these children did not volunteer information about sibling abuse. Some, although admitting occasionally being 'battered' by their siblings, did not necessarily perceive this as abusive. Children used the term 'battering' to describe both abusive and non-abusive interactions. It was apparent from the context in which it was used, and from children's non-verbal communication when 'battering' was not considered to be abusive. It is important to note that *not all* children reported incidents of bullying and abuse by their siblings. Siblings had protected many foster children from bullying and abuse, particularly outside the family home.

Bullying and abuse by siblings took many forms. Sibling behaviours, which were experienced as abusive by the children, ranged from 'battering', hitting, kicking, punching to teasing and tormenting, particularly of younger siblings in an ad hoc and more planned and pre-meditated ways. Many incidents of sibling abuse occurred when children were left unsupervised at home. David's and Judy's experiences of being abused by their older brother illustrate the kind of deliberate and pre-meditated acts of cruelty, that were perpetrated by some older brothers.

David: *'Rab, well he batters me...well when my mum goes to the dancing, the club, he always comes to my room when I am sleeping and he says: "David, here's a*

biscuit” (whispers) and he doesn’t give me a biscuit and he says “come through and you can get it, your biscuit”, and I go through to the living room and he batters me...and after he had battered me he gives me the biscuit and he batters me again, and he tells me to go to bed, and he does it again, and again, and he frightens me, and he punches you in the face’.

Judy: ‘He’s 17 and he batters you all the time...he does not hit me now – he’s moved out’.

Sibling abuse was related closely to the abuser’s gender and perceived by some sisters to be a pattern of behaviour, which was passed from father to son. The children had witnessed incidents of domestic violence, and in many instances they had tried to intervene to protect their mothers. The male role models available to the children were limited. The behaviour of some of the older brothers reminded younger siblings of their father’s violence, causing fear. Nina compared her older brother’s behaviour to that of her violent father. Her vivid memories of her father’s violence had continued to haunt her; she feared at times, that he might be in the garden of the foster home, and likely to attack her.

Nina: ‘Sometimes he (refers to older brother Fraser) used to hit me, punch me and kick me, he’s like my dad...my dad’ll just come in and fling plates on the dog and fling keys because he was drunk, he’s come in and beat up my mum, and beat me up, and turn on my two brothers. . . but I used to turn on his back and just try to strangle him, just leave my mum alone, but it never worked, I got flung out of the way and I hit on a thing and my gran landed on top of me, and my mum landed on top of me, and I had to go to hospital’.

Living with her aggressive older brother, in the foster home, acted as a continuous reminder of her father’s violence.

9. 8 Summary

In line with the other themes explored with the children, their views on siblings as caregivers, and as a source of support and/or stress were diverse. The majority of foster children enjoyed looking after, and being looked after, by their siblings in their parents’ absence. The questionnaire findings suggest that proportionally more foster children had experienced sibling caretaking, and even a higher proportion

had enjoyed these experiences, than was the case for children in the community. However, for some children in foster care, the responsibilities placed on them for their younger siblings, other family members, and for the running of the household can be considered to be far too great, and in some families, inappropriate for their age and stage of development. Some children felt that they had carried an unfair proportion of responsibilities in their families compared to their siblings.

Only a few children perceived all of their siblings to be a valuable source of support, a few found none of their siblings to be supportive, or they experienced their siblings as a source of stress and abuse. However, the majority of children perceived one or more of their siblings as a source of support and help.

The children with the most positive relationships with their siblings had enjoyed the following experiences: physical care of siblings, emotional support, protection of the child or siblings within and/or outside the home, provision of resources, services and practical help. By contrast the children with negative relationships with their siblings did not feel protected by their siblings within or outside their family. Their siblings were not found to be a source of support, help, resources or services to them. They perceived their siblings to be a source of stress and a burden rather than support. Some children harboured deep-seated resentments towards their siblings, as they could not count on them for support, protection and help. Most of the children, although by no means all, reported bullying or abuse by their siblings. The abusers were usually older brothers, who used bullying and abuse as a means of control of their younger siblings. Sibling abuse often occurred when the children were unsupervised by adults, and it reflected the behaviour of the children's fathers, step-fathers and other men who had abused their mothers. Some children continued, even in the safety of the foster placement, to fear their father's violence and their older brother's aggressive behaviour acted as a reminder of the past.

The availability of sibling support, help and care is also dependent on the child's position in the family, own and siblings' ages, gender, family circumstances and other factors. Some children from the same family held differing views on their siblings as a source of support and stress. Children's perceptions highlighted the impact of the very different micro-environments experienced by children in the same family. Children' subjective experiences of growing up in their families coloured their perceptions of their siblings.

Emotional support has been considered to indicate attachments between siblings in middle childhood. The next chapter explores the extent of children's involvement with, and the quality of attachments to their siblings.

Chapter 10 Emotional involvement and sibling attachments

10.1 Introduction

Research on the impact of family environment and processes, discussed in chapter 3, suggest that children growing up in adverse circumstances develop qualitatively more extreme relationships with their siblings than is the case for children in general. Bank and Kahn (1982) posit that children who have been neglected and attachments and deep loyalty, or in equally intensely hostile attachments. Their research emanates from clinical practice, and is based on samples of adults who lacked parental attention develop sibling bonds that can manifest in close have sought therapy for problematic sibling relationships. Bank (1992:145) in a more recent appraisal of his theory of 'sibling bond' suggests: *"that it is the intensity of emotion in the relationship that is related to parental dysfunction"*. Based on a study of children in middle childhood, McGuire et al. (1996) also identified emotional intensity as the key to understanding sibling relationships in the context of parental relationships. This chapter reports on the strength and quality of foster children's emotional involvement with siblings, as measured by the Family Relations Test (Bene and Anthony, 1985). The second part of the chapter reports on the qualitative aspects of sibling attachments as they emerged from the interviews with the children.

10.2 Emotional involvement as measured by the Family Relations Test

The Family Relations Test (Bene and Anthony, 1985) is designed to measure children's emotional involvement with members of their family. A description of the test and its use has been provided in chapter 5. Test results are presented here, followed by a more detailed consideration of the degree and quality of children's involvement with their siblings. The focus of this study is on sibling relationships in the context of children's family relationships and experiences. For this reason it is considered useful to also report test results relating to the children's involvement with their parents and others important to them.

Children's rated involvement with family members

The test enables two aspects of the children's involvement with their family members to be assessed. These are the *intensity* (strength) of involvement and the *quality* of involvement (positive, negative, ambivalent). The intensity of involvement with family members was measured by counting the total number of items assigned to each family member selected by the child to be part of their family. The items cover a range of outgoing and incoming positive (no=34) and negative (no=34) feelings. Each family member, including individual siblings, obtained a separate score for their intensity of involvement.

The test allows children to assign feelings to 'Mr. Nobody' and 'Self'. Nobody serves to accommodate feelings that child thinks do not apply to any one in the family. Self contains egocentric responses indicating pre-occupation with the self. The child can also assign the same feeling to more than one member of the family. The children's involvement with their family members will be described as intensity or quality of 'rated involvement' to mean involvement as rated by the Family Relations Test.

Table 30. Children's rated involvement with family (No=21 children)

	Mean values
Nobody	18.8
Mother	16.7
Father (for 12 children)	13.3
Siblings	12.9
Others (for 13 children)	7.7
Self	5.5

Bene and Anthony (1985) suggest that the expected distribution of mean values for family members would normally follow an order of the highest value assigned to mother, followed by father, siblings, others in the family and self. The foster children in this study assigned the highest mean value to nobody. Bene and Anthony (1985) advise that a high score for nobody may indicate emotional detachment or that the children have been particularly defensive. Many of the foster children may feel emotionally detached, as children in short-term foster care are inevitably in an emotional limbo. It is recognised, however, that some children may have been defensive in the test situation. It is by no means surprising that the normal pattern of involvement with members of the child's family was not found.

Nine children had assigned the greatest number of feelings to nobody. Although the children assigned proportionally more negative feelings to nobody, they also assigned positive feelings to nobody. When these children's rated involvement with other family members was considered, it was found that all but three of the children were also detached from, or marginally involved with their siblings, and when involved, their involvement with siblings was ambivalent or negative in quality. The two sisters (Cheryl and Lea) from a family of seven siblings, who also had the highest score for nobody, had distributed their positive feelings almost equally between their siblings and parents. In their case the denial of negative feelings towards, and emanating from, any family member may well indicate a degree of defensiveness. Their verbal reports about their siblings were positive.

All 21 children included a mother in their family, although in respect of two children, their primary carer had been father and grandparents respectively. For four children mothers had been assigned the highest number of feelings. Twelve children included a father as part of their family. Two of these children had assigned the highest number of feelings to their fathers. Both children were from 'split families' and they identified strongly with their fathers. It is important to note that the relatively high values assigned to fathers applied to only just over half of the children. Nine children had no rated involvement with their fathers.

Seven children, of whom four were girls, had assigned the greatest number of feelings to their siblings, including one child to a foster-sibling. The quality of involvement with their siblings was either positive or ambivalent. Only two of these children's rated involvement with siblings was mainly negative.

Nearly two-thirds (13) of the children included members of their extended families and foster families in their family. These were categorised under the general grouping of 'others'. The total of 24 people chosen as children's family members included grandparents, cousins, an aunt, cousin's son, nieces, step-fathers, foster carers and their children. One child, who had lost her grandmother during her stay in the foster home, included her deceased grandmother in her family. This same child also included a foster carer's son who was much older than her. Her degree of rated involvement was highest with her foster-brother followed by nobody. Eight children included no additional people in their families. Six of these children came from split families, where relationships between parents and extended family were less harmonious.

Children's rated involvement with their siblings

When the children's rated involvement with their siblings was considered, a more complex picture emerged. The children included a total of 60 siblings as part of their family. Three children included a half-sibling with whom they had never lived. Two of these siblings were only recently born or discovered. These physically distant siblings received generally low scores. The children's rated involvement with their siblings was considered from the following perspectives:

- the intensity of involvement with all siblings
- the intensity of involvement with individual siblings
- the quality of involvement with individual siblings, and
- the quality of involvement with all siblings.

Intensity of involvement with all siblings

When the intensity of involvement with all of the children's siblings (sibling score for each child) was considered, it was found that there was considerable variance in the intensity of children's involvement with siblings in general. Children's rated involvement with all of their siblings ranged from detachment to highly intense involvement (range 0.67-30). The children were divided into four groups, according to the intensity of their involvement with siblings (refer to table 31).

Table 31. The intensity of involvement with all siblings

All children (average sib score 12.9)		Detached (sib score 0.67-5)		Marginally involved (sib score 6-10)		Involved (sib score 11-14)		Very involved (sib score 15-30)	
No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
21	100	3	14	6	29	5	24	7	33

Three children (14 per cent) had a particularly low rated involvement with all of their siblings. In addition, six children (29 per cent) were detached from one of their siblings, although they were more involved, in some cases very involved, with some of their other siblings, their involvement with their siblings was described as marginal. Five children (24 per cent) were in the range of average involvement and seven children's (33 per cent) involvement can be described as very involved.

Intensity of involvement with individual siblings

When the intensity of children's involvement with their individual siblings (number of feelings assigned to each sibling) was considered, wide differences also emerged in the children's rated involvement (range 0 - 33). Differences in the intensity of involvement were found both between the sample children, as well as between siblings in the same family.

Quality of involvement with individual siblings

When the quality of children's involvement with their individual siblings (number of positive and negative incoming and outgoing feelings) was considered, three patterns of involvement were identified: positive, ambivalent and negative. Most children's rated involvement with their individual siblings was predominantly of either positive or negative in quality. Bene and Anthony (1985) advise that ambivalence is indicated if not more than twice as many positive as negative items or vice versa were assigned to a given family member. Table 32 presents the findings.

Table 32. The quality of involvement with individual siblings

Siblings		Positive		Ambivalent		Negative		Non-involved	
No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
60	100	27	45	12	20	19	32	2	3

There were marked differences between the sample children, as well as between children within the same family. Siblings did not necessarily reciprocate each other's feelings. For instance, Simon felt very positively about his younger brother Nicky, whereas Nicky was rated as being barely involved with Simon. Appendix 8 presents in a chart form the results relating to the children's rated involvement with their individual siblings.

Positive involvement

Three children were positively involved with all of their siblings. The relatively high proportion of positive involvement with individual siblings is partially due to the positively rated involvement by two sisters with their six siblings. It was suggested earlier that these sisters might well have been highly defensive in the test situation; both assigned a high proportion of their negative feelings to nobody. One other child was positively involved with all of their siblings. In addition, nine children were rated as positively involved with at least one of their siblings, although their relationships with other siblings were either ambivalent or negative.

Ambivalent involvement

Two children felt ambivalence towards all of their siblings, additionally one child, who was non-involved with his two siblings, was rated as ambivalent towards his remaining sibling. The rated involvement of ten children was ambivalent regarding at least one of their siblings.

Negative involvement

Two children felt negatively about all of their siblings, one about his four siblings, and another about his two siblings. Thirteen children were rated to be negatively involved with at least one of their siblings. Three siblings, whose contact with their parents had been terminated, assigned their positive feelings primarily to the members of their foster family and their negative feelings to their siblings.

Most involved with all siblings

When the intensity of the feelings of those children who were *most involved* with their siblings were considered, it emerged that two children were intensely ambivalently involved with all of their siblings, one was intensely positively involved with one sibling and negatively with another. Two children were intensely positively involved with all of their siblings.

Most involved with one or more siblings

When both the intensity and the quality of the children's involvement with their individual siblings was considered together, it emerged that in addition to the seven children who had the highest rated involvement with all of their siblings, a further seven children were rated very involved with at least one of their siblings. Four of these children were intensely negatively involved with five siblings, two were intensely positively involved with a sibling each, and one child was highly ambivalently involved with a sibling. In all, *two-thirds of the children were intensely involved with one or more of their siblings*. Although this sample is small, the results would suggest that these children's sibling relationships were characterised by intensity, as predicted by Bank and Kahn (1982) and McGuire et al., (1996).

Summary of the results of the Family Relations Test

1. Three children included in their family half-siblings, with whom they had never lived. Although low scores were assigned to these siblings they were, nevertheless, regarded by the children as their siblings. This provides further evidence about the unclear nature of the children's families.

2. The highest value for involvement was assigned to nobody, followed by mother, father (for 12 children only) and siblings. The test results are similar to the findings of previous research into foster children's relationships with their birth and foster families (Cutler, 1984; McAuley 1996; Cleaver, 2000). These studies have found foster children to be emotionally detached, at least to a degree, from their birth and foster families, while being cared for away from home.
3. The *intensity* of children's rated involvement with *all siblings* ranged from detached (0.67) to high involvement (30). One third of the children (7) were rated as very involved; 5 children were rated to be within the range of average involvement; 6 children rated as marginally involved and 3 children as detached from their siblings.
4. No marked differences were found regarding the intensity of children's involvement with siblings living with them, and those siblings from whom they were separated.
5. The *intensity* of children's rated involvement with their *individual siblings* also varied, ranging from detachment from some of the siblings to high involvement with others.
6. The *quality* of children's rated involvement with their *individual siblings* was rated as positive, ambivalent and negative. The high proportion of positive involvement with siblings may be due to two sisters' denial of negative feelings and their high positive involvement with their six siblings. These two sisters may have felt defensive in the test situation, and consequently the results may be skewed towards positive involvement.
7. When the quality of involvement with all siblings was considered, it emerged that two children were highly ambivalently involved with all of their siblings; one was intensely positively involved with one sibling and negatively with another. Three children were positively involved with all of their siblings.
8. The findings suggest that foster children's sibling relationships were highly individualised. Only three children felt totally positive about all of their siblings, another two felt intensely negative about all of their siblings. The remaining children's rated involvement with their individual siblings was more mixed.

9. The results of the Family Relations Test suggest that the majority of children were highly involved with one or more of their siblings. One third of the children were most involved with their siblings compared to their other family members. A further one third of the children were rated very involved with at least one of their siblings. In all, *two-thirds of the children were intensely involved with one or more of their siblings*. Although this sample is small, the results would suggest that these children's sibling relationships were characterised by intensity, as predicted by Bank and Kahn (1982) and McGuire et al. (1996).

10. 3 Quality of sibling attachments

The outcome of the Family Relations Test, reported above, gives an indication of the place of siblings in foster children's emotional world. It is not, however, designed to measure children's attachment relationships. Children's feelings towards their siblings were explored in the interview situation. The interview data provides some indication of the quality of children's attachments to their siblings. Information about children's feelings towards their siblings had also emerged from the questionnaire data.

The interview data presents the children's views in their own words, highlighting more subtle differences in the children's feelings towards their individual siblings. These are less easy to obtain through the use of psychological tests.

The following indicators of attachment relationships were considered

- expression of emotional closeness to, or detachment from sibling(s)
- the child missing his or her separated sibling(s), and
- the extent and nature of the child's concerns and worries about sibling(s).

The findings are presented under three main themes: children with positive close attachments to sibling(s), children with hostile attachments to sibling(s), and children with detached relationships with sibling(s). Changes over time in the children's perceptions of their sibling attachments are also discussed.

Children with close positive sibling attachments

Positive sibling attachments were characterised by:

- the child expressing feelings of emotional closeness to siblings;
- the child missing siblings a lot when separated from them; and
- the child being worried about sibling's wellbeing, happiness and behaviour.

For some children emotional closeness was evident in the way they described their siblings; their detailed and intimate knowledge of their sibling's feelings, likes and dislikes; their understanding of their sibling's behaviour; and empathy towards their sibling's motivations. The children could 'read' their sibling's behaviour and interpret this to others. Some children were proud of their siblings' talents and achievements. Andrew, for example, was very proud of his older brother's achievements.

Andrew: 'He's the best at hockey in twenty years...and he's quite good at tennis...and language and maths...and French, he's great at that ...and if he's stuck he's just too frightened to tell the teacher'.

Andrew had recently been separated from his brother, and he was upset that he was no longer in the same placement with him.

Closeness to siblings was particularly evident in the relationships of siblings brought up in a large family. Cheryl and Lea missed all of their siblings, and worried about the distances between the different foster and residential homes, where their five siblings were scattered about. They spoke about missing their siblings' kindness towards them and felt sad about being separated from their sisters and brothers at Christmas. Their anxiety about spending Christmas with people they did not know (foster carer's relations) would have been alleviated by the presence of their siblings.

The children's reasons for missing their siblings were varied. Some, like Peter missed them because 'I love them'. Kelly missed her older brother simply because he was her brother. Simon missed his brother's and sister's particular characteristics and personalities.

Simon: 'I miss John's funny jokes, and Louise I would miss her little smile'.

The children expressed a variety of concerns about their siblings, worrying particularly about their separated siblings. The nature of their worries ranged from concerns about safety and wellbeing to their happiness and their behaviour. Older

siblings worried about their younger siblings getting hurt at home, particularly when the child had in the past been responsible for looking after the younger siblings. Some younger siblings worried about their older siblings getting into trouble, about stealing and drinking, while away from home. For example, Lea thought that her older sisters' behaviour had become worse since they had come into foster care. She attributed their behaviour problems to being 'accommodated' away from home. She talked about her older sisters' stealing and drinking:

Lea: *'She's (Marie) only doing it now...she never used to do it before...'*

and about Jodie: *'She never used to get out a lot...in my house...so I think it was to do with the foster home'*.

The children also worried about their younger siblings and the fact that they did not see each other enough. They both looked forward to their weekly meetings when all siblings were brought together to spend time together.

Children with hostile sibling attachments

A few children had intensely negative or highly ambivalent relationships with their siblings. Their excessive negativity towards their siblings was also apparent in the children's responses to the questionnaire and in the results of the Family Relations Test. Some others felt negatively towards one or more of their siblings, although their feelings were less intense. The following features emerged as characteristic of these children's relationships with their siblings:

- child had a hostile or ambivalent attachment to sibling(s),
- there had been a change for the worse in the child's feelings towards sibling(s), or,
- child was emotionally isolated and/or regarded an adult outside the family as an attachment figure.

None of these children recalled disliking their sisters and brothers as babies. If anything, a number of foster children felt positive about their baby half-siblings, nieces and nephews, and babies living in the foster home. Children also remembered their younger siblings, as babies, with affection. However, some children's feelings towards their siblings changed over the years from being warm to hostile or ambivalent. They felt resentful towards their siblings for a variety of

reasons and some felt let down by them. For example, for Fraser, Nina and Alex sibling relationships had changed over the years, and for Fraser, become intensely hostile. At first, Fraser had enjoyed a close and affectionate bond to his baby brother. Fraser described the joy he experienced when looking after Alex as a baby.

Fraser: *'Get Alex's hands, clap them together and then he started going like that, then a couple of weeks later he started to crawl, then he started going like that because I was dancing to some music an...'*

Interviewer: *'So you were amusing him?'*

Fraser: *'He was amusing me. . . then I started to show him how to walk, and he was standing at the other end of the caravan. . . and I turned around and it was Alex walking, I was really shocked,. . I loved him when he was little, but now he's grown up, now he gets a real pain in the back side.'*

Nina was less emotionally involved with her siblings and her feelings towards them were ambivalent. Although still fond of her younger brother, she also felt that there had been a change for the worse in her relationship with both of her brothers. She said:

'When I was in trouble like, Fraser and Alex used to come and stick up for me, now they don't, I don't know what 's happened to them'.

Nina felt that her brothers disliked her and her confidence was undermined by their attitude towards her.

Michael, although intensely emotionally involved with his older sister Lisa, admitted having no positive feelings towards her. He felt that she had let him down by failing to protect and support him at home, a theme he repeatedly returned to throughout the interview. He also harboured a grudge against her for getting him into trouble and being punished and abused by their grandparents. When asked about what he would do if his siblings were upset Michael denied having any feelings for his older sister, despite his constant pre-occupation with her.

Michael: *'If it was Lisa, I don't really have any feelings towards her. . . no but if Kirsty (baby half-sister) was crying I would try to make her happy and that. .'*

Interviewer: *'Why do you think you feel like that about Lisa?'*

Michael: *'Because of the things she's done to me, when I was at gran's she didn't have any feelings for me, but now if I wanted to feel something for her I cannot.'*

Michael's ambivalence about his older sister is revealed when he was asked if he missed his siblings.

'Kirsty, yeah I miss Kirsty, I don't really feel for Lisa when I see her I see her ...'

Some children had generalised relationship difficulties with parents and others. They had few people to call upon for support and help. Some mentioned distant acquaintances of their parents', relatives living away, or a deceased grandmother, as in the case of Nina, as the people closest to them.

Children who were emotionally detached from their siblings

Not surprisingly, the emotionally detached children, such as Eric and Stuart, found it difficult to talk about their feelings. They tended not to acknowledge their own or other people's feelings or dismissed feelings as unimportant. Their concerns were related to the material world, financial and other advantages available to them rather than concerns about people. Eric missed his 'family' a bit, but expressed no particular worries about any of his siblings. Stuart could think of nothing else to miss about his sister, apart from her nagging. Although he did not miss his older brother, he worried about him getting into trouble.

When the children's views on missing their separated siblings and worries and concerns about siblings were considered, it was found that the majority of children (82%) had said *in response to the questionnaire*, that they missed their siblings 'a lot' or 'quite a lot', when separated from them. Children with hostile or detached relationships with their siblings did not, however, elaborate on this subject in the interview situation. Also these children, although expressing generalised worries about their siblings, were less concerned about their siblings' happiness and wellbeing.

10. 4 Summary

The results of the Family Relations Test, reported in the first part of this chapter, suggest that the majority of children were highly emotionally involved with one or more of their siblings. One third of the children were most involved with their siblings, compared to other members of their family. A further one third of the children were rated very involved with at least one of their siblings. In all, two-thirds of the children were *intensely involved* with one or more of their siblings. However, only three children felt totally positive about all of their siblings, another two felt intensely negative about all of their siblings. For the majority of children, their emotional involvement with their individual siblings was more mixed, indicating that foster children's relationships with their siblings were highly individualised.

The interview data provided further insight into the way children perceived the differences in their sibling attachment relationships. The following indicators of attachment relationships were considered: expression of emotional closeness, missing siblings, and worries and concerns about siblings. There were differences between individual children; between siblings in the same family; and between children's relationships with their individual siblings, in their emotional bonds to their siblings. In this respects correspondence was found to exist between the results of the Family Relations Test, and what the children said in the interview situation. Some children had developed close and warm emotional bonds to both their older and younger siblings. Children with positive and close bonds to their siblings demonstrated an intimate knowledge of their siblings' likes and dislikes, feelings, fears and worries. They had developed a close understanding of their siblings' emotional worlds. They could read their siblings' behaviour and motivations and interpret this to others.

By contrast, some children felt intensely hostile towards one or more of their siblings. For some older siblings, their feelings towards their siblings had changed for the worse over the years. These children, although hostile towards their siblings, were nevertheless intensely involved with them. Some came from split families, where family relationships were generally intense and polarised according to the parental split.

A few children were detached from all, or most of their siblings. They lacked a niche in their family having been rejected by their parents or being the only ones in foster

care. They had generalised relationship difficulties with parents and others and regarded distant relatives or acquaintances as the people closest to them.

Regardless of the children's feelings of emotional closeness or hostility towards their siblings, most children said that they missed their siblings when separated from them. This confirms the questionnaire data (SRQ-Part 2) on the children's views on their individual siblings. Most of the children also expressed concerns and were worried about their siblings when separated from them. Only few children, who were emotionally detached from their siblings, did not miss their siblings nor express worries about them.

In conclusion, the wide differences that were found to exist, between individual children, between children on the same family, and between children's relationships with their individual siblings, in the intensity and quality of their attachment relationships, reflect the wide differences found in the other aspects of their sibling relationships. The next chapter explores the extent the foster children identified with their siblings, and how the children and their parents contributed to the development of sibling identity.

Chapter 11 Developing a sense of sibling identity

11.1 Introduction

The introduction to this thesis referred to biological, emotional and social meanings attributed to siblingship. Siblings share a degree of physical likeness and resemble one another in other ways, such as in personality, cognitive abilities and behaviour. Shared family likeness and characteristics contribute to individual's sense of identity as to who they are. Children's social understanding of siblingship, e.g. how they perceive the biological connections between them and their siblings, is important for the fuller understanding of foster children's sibling relationships.

11.2 Developing a sense of sibling identity

Previous information about the development of a sense of sibling identity, and what this means to individuals comes mainly from recollections of adults who have grown apart from their birth family (refer to chapter 4). Such individuals have lacked opportunities to identify with their biological inheritance, e.g. physical characteristics and similarities in personality shared by family members. Two theories have been put forward regarding the processes involved in developing a sense of siblingship, and the extent that children, who grow up with their siblings identify with one another. '*Identification*' between siblings, is considered to be a useful phenomenon, in that it allows the child to see himself or herself in the sibling and to learn through the sibling's experiences and behaviour. '*Differentiation*', the other side of the coin, is another key sibling relationship process that allows the child to see what they would not like to be (Bank and Kahn, 1975).

The second theory takes the same idea further by suggesting that children deliberately develop different or contrasting identities as a conscious strategy to avoid excessive competition and rivalry (Schachter, 1982; Schachter and Stone, 1987). In practice this strategy manifests in siblings developing different personalities, talents, likes and dislikes, looks and taste in clothing. For children in 'normal' populations the strategy of sibling '*de-identification*' is regarded to be a healthy one, enabling siblings to get on better with each other. However, studies based on clinical populations suggest that de-identification, taken to an extreme, can have negative consequences and relationships between siblings are likely to

suffer (Schachter and Stone, 1987). In such families sibling de-identification is often accompanied by a phenomenon called *split-parent identification*, where siblings identify with a different parent. Many children in this study came from families, where parents had gone through acrimonious separations, some more than once, leaving children with divided loyalties. Therefore, these ideas are particularly relevant for this study.

11. 3 Children's contribution to sibling identity

The children's perceptions of their identification with siblings was explored, as part of the Sibling Relationship Questionnaire (Part 2), by asking children to consider whether they think they 'look alike', have the 'same personality' and 'like the same things'. Children responded to these questions in respect of their individual siblings. Both the children in the community, and in foster care, shared very similar perceptions of physical likeness to their siblings. Table 33 outlines the children's perceptions for both samples of children.

Table 33. Perceptions of physical likeness to siblings (we look alike)

	Community sample		Foster care sample	
	No	%	No	%
Very alike	17	16	8	14
Alike	28	27	18	33
Not alike	60	57	29	53
Total	105	100	55	100

The children in the community perceived themselves to be 'alike' or 'very alike' in terms of their looks with 43 per cent of their siblings. Children in foster care felt the same in respect of a slightly higher proportion (47 per cent) of their siblings. However, slightly more than a half of all foster children's 'core' siblings shared only one biological parent with them, whereas sharing both biological parents was more common for children in the community. Regardless, a higher proportion of foster children identified with their siblings' looks. Children were also asked their perceptions of similarity in their personalities (refer to table 34 below).

Table 34. Perceptions of similarity of personality (we have the same personality)

	Community sample		Foster care sample	
	No	%	No	%
Very alike	17	17	12	22
Alike	31	30	14	25
Not alike	54	53	29	53
Total	102	100	55	100

Forty-seven per cent of children in both samples perceived themselves to be 'very alike' or 'alike' to their siblings. Foster children identified with almost half of their siblings, despite not sharing both biological parentage with all of their siblings. The children were asked about sharing their taste with their siblings. Table 35 shows children's responses

Table 35. Perceptions of similarity in taste (we like the same things)

	Community sample		Foster care sample	
	No	%	No	%
Often	32	31	18	33
Sometimes	56	55	30	54
Never	14	14	7	13
Total	102	100	55	100

The children said they shared the same likes and dislikes with proportionally more of their siblings, than was the case with sharing their looks and personality.

The questionnaire findings suggest, that like children in the community, foster children also perceived themselves to be alike or very alike to nearly half of their siblings, and that children liked and disliked the same things, sometimes or often, with proportionally more of their siblings.

The children were also asked *in the interview* about their perceptions of family likeness and identification with siblings. The aim was to find out more about the meanings, which the children attributed to the similarities and differences they perceived to exist between themselves and their siblings. Similar to other findings

reported in chapters 8, 9, and 10, children's views expressed in the interview situation were less positive than those obtained through the questionnaire.

Children who identified with siblings

Children, who had expressed positive views about other relationship aspects, were more likely to identify with their siblings, than those who had perceived their siblings negatively. These children tended to:

- identify with sibling(s) in terms of physical likeness, personality and/or interests, and
- recognise positives in both themselves and their sibling.

It appeared more common for children to identify with their older siblings and with siblings of the same gender. Eight children identified with their older siblings, whereas only three children acknowledged similarities between themselves and their younger siblings. Children from large families (four or more siblings), i.e. Lea, Cheryl, Judy and Peter, identified with their older siblings in terms of their physical likeness. Children identified with the sibling's personal qualities they liked and admired, such as the kindness and friendliness of their older sisters and the sporting and other physical abilities of their older brothers. They expressed positive feelings towards and closer emotional bonds to them. However, although relationships were generally positive, siblings in the same family did not all identify with one another to the same degree.

Some closely spaced siblings, such as Lea, Sarah and Kelly were sometimes mistaken for being twins. Lea thought she looked similar to her immediately older sister. For Lea, identification with her older sister had come to denote emotional closeness. Sarah and Sam were also closely spaced, with less than 12 months difference between their ages. Sarah was fond of Sam, and identified with him.

Sarah: 'Well, I like him because he is nice and friendly to me, and he shares things with me, we play out together, and we are both nine, everybody thinks we're twins'.

She also shared her taste in sweets and other things with Sam. By contrast, Sam did not share these sentiments and did not identify with Sarah; instead he identified with his father. Sam described Sarah in less flattering terms.

Sam: *'She is ginger haired, she's a midget as well, I am bigger than her, I've got the same nose as my sister.'*

Although Lea and Sarah did not mind being mistaken as twins, others disliked this and wished to have the differences between them and their siblings acknowledged. Kelly talked about her brother Peter, who is close in age to her.

Kelly: *'Look, see that photo there, that's me and my brother, don't you think me and my brother look like twins?'*

Interviewer: *Aha, you look like a sister and brother.*

Kelly: *But everyone thinks that me and my brother look like twins. . . Gemma thinks that me and my brother look like twins.'*

Interviewer: *'What do you think?'*

Kelly: *'I hate it.'*

Children's identification with their siblings was individualised, in that children identified with a particular sibling(s), rather than with their siblings in general, and siblings in the same family did not share each other's sentiments.

Children with different or contrasting sibling identities

Wide individual differences were also found in children's perceptions of their different or contrasting identities from their siblings. Children who had detached relationships with their siblings (Arron, Eric and Stuart), and those with generally negative sibling relationships (Michael and Fraser), de-identified strongly with their siblings. Some children de-identified with a particular sibling, while perceiving to have some similarities with another sibling(s). These children denied similarities with siblings in terms of physical likeness, personality and/or interests; they perceived siblings in a negative light and disassociated themselves from the sibling's behaviour. The child was more likely to identify with a parent, another adult, or nobody.

Some children stated emphatically that they had nothing in common with their sibling(s) in terms of looks, personality or interests. For example, Peter felt negative about his older brother Mark.

Peter: *'Mark's just a plonker.'*

Interviewer: *'Tell me about him.'*

Peter: *'He has bushy hair...he is horrible.'*

Interviewer: *'In what way?'*

Peter: *'He hits little children, he cannot hit people of his own age.'*

Mark had returned to his birth family following an adoption breakdown. His re-integration into the family had been far from successful. Both Peter and Kelly disassociated themselves from him.

Arron, a middle child of five siblings, did not identify with any of his siblings. He felt negative about all of them. He described them in the following terms:

Arron: *'She's a madam, a pain in the neck, she has lots of temper tantrums, whatever they is... (about Judy); a bad, bad, boy, he is very, very, very,very, very bad boy, and he frightens me sometimes... (about David); Rab, he just behaves bad...; and Jennifer, she hates you...'*

Arron lacked a niche in his family. He was isolated from all of his siblings. In another family Stuart described the difference between himself and his sister, whom he described as 'greedy', and his brother by saying:

'I am a good boy and they are bad'.

Bank and Kahn (1975) suggest that by rejecting any similarity with a sibling and disassociating him or herself from the sibling's behaviour, the child is able to externalise any fears or anxieties about the fact that the siblings may indeed have a lot in common. Negative comments made by Peter, Arron and Stuart about their siblings' behaviour could be seen as examples of this strategy.

Some other children showed detachment rather than hostility. Nina, Alex, Nicky and Stephen declined to mention any of their siblings when talking about similarities with members of their birth families. For these children de-identification with their siblings corresponded with their general lack of involvement with, and greater emotional distance from their siblings. Nina found no similarities between herself and her two brothers. She identified closely with her grandmother, who had died during the past year. Nina's identification with her deceased grandmother could be seen as a response to a loss of a supportive adult in her life. Similarly, Alex's identification with foster carers, and Stephen's idealisation of a rejecting parent, could be seen to be part of their strategy to survive in their adverse circumstances.

Some children identified with one or more siblings, and de-identified with others. While Kelly identified least with her brother John, her brother Paul identified strongly with John. Judy adored her grown-up sister, at the same time de-identifying with her three brothers. This strategy was particularly apparent in split families, where siblings identified with separate parents. In families where parental relationships were acrimonious, as in Sam's and Sarah's family, sibling identification also reflected split-parent identification, as referred to by Schachter (1982). Sam identified strongly with his father, and Sarah with her mother. Similarly, Michael, who had an intensely hostile relationship with his older sister Lisa, identified with his long-lost mother and a baby half-sister who had recently re-appeared in his life, while de-identifying strongly with his father. The children with more mixed relationships with their siblings, where the relationship was positive with one or more siblings and negative with others, demonstrated these differences through their identification or de-identification with their individual parents.

It is recognised that opportunities for sibling identification also depend on the sibling constellation. Children in small families have fewer siblings, and a limited choice of sisters and brothers with whom to identify. Less than half of the children's siblings shared both biological parents with one another. Therefore, some children may have been aware of some differences in their own and their half-siblings' physical characteristics. Children did not, however, differentiate between full and half-siblings in other areas of their relationships.

11. 4 Parental contribution to the development of sibling identity

Parents can actively contribute to sibling de-identification by the way they treat children compared to their siblings. Children can perceive comparisons made by parents, particularly, where parents make value judgements about such differences, as the parent favouring one child over another. The good-bad dimension of sibling differences referred to by Schachter and Stone (1987), where the child perceived him or herself to be good, and a sibling or siblings to be bad, was present in many children's descriptions of their siblings. This may be partly explained by differential parental treatment.

Parental differential treatment is a complex phenomenon to explore as children can be favoured and non-favoured by different parents, and they may be inconsistently favoured or non-favoured at different times. Parents can also treat their children differently in a number of ways. Differential parental treatment can manifest in:

- the degree of rejection of the child compared to siblings
- the degree and type of abuse the child is subjected to
- the level of expectations placed on the child compared to siblings, and
- the way the child's behaviour is managed and disciplinary measures used by the parents compared to the siblings.

These issues were explored with the social workers.

Social workers' views on parental differential treatment

In order to obtain an external view, social workers' views were explored by asking them: *'Were there any differences in the way this child and his/her siblings were treated by parent(s)? If yes, what differences?'*

Table 36 outlines the social workers' views.

Table 36. Differential parental treatment - social workers' views

Parental treatment	No	%
No marked differences	4	19
Favoured	7	33
Non-favoured	10	48
Total	21	100

Seventeen children (81%) were regarded by social workers as being currently, or having been in the past, subject to differential parental treatment. Only four children were thought not to have been subject to differential treatment, although they had siblings who had experienced differential parental treatment. Nearly half of the foster children were perceived by the social workers as non-favoured by their parents. Six children were described as 'scapegoated' by their parents. The following are examples of social workers' views.

Social worker: *'David was seen as a catalyst for trouble, scapegoated by mother'*

Social worker: *'Eric was blamed for younger brother starting to soil.'*

Social worker: *'Sister very much the favoured child, who could do no wrong - she used this power to get Michael into trouble.'*

Another four children were perceived as having unrealistically high expectations placed on them by their parents. The following are examples of social workers' views.

Social worker: *'Nina and Fraser were made to take an adult role as opposed to the youngest brother being babied by mother,'* and in addition,

'Fraser was subject to a more abusive relationship with his mother and stepfather than his siblings.'

Social worker: *Daniel was made responsible for the younger brother's behaviour, he has had to take sole care of Andrew at times.'*

Social worker: *'Stephen is the most rejected of all the children due to mother's feelings about his father.'*

One third of the children were described by their social workers as being favoured by their parents. Social workers described parental favouritism in following terms.

Social worker: *'Any form of behaviour (by Alex), good or bad was rewarded - this had an extremely negative effect on Nina and Fraser.'*

Social worker: *'Sam had more emotional input from parents than his older siblings.'*

Social worker: *'Mother may have protected Andrew, she babied him.'*

Social worker: *'Gina - abuse was not so severe.'*

Some social workers commented on lack of consistency in parental treatment; children were favoured and not favoured inconsistently. Social workers' views supported children's own recollections of their growing-up experiences, reported in the previous chapters.

Children's perceptions of favouritism

The children were asked about their perceptions of favouritism in a questionnaire, and in the interview situation some children elaborated on the subject. Children's views were compared to those of the social workers and the children in the community. Some children indicated more than one choice. The children's views were in contrast to the social workers' views, since few children reported that they had been treated unfavourably. Over half of the children (12) in the foster care sample said that nobody in their family was favoured over others; nearly a third (6) said they were favoured. No differences were found on the basis of gender, but older siblings were perceived to be more often favoured than their younger siblings. Some children differentiated between being favoured by different parents i.e. father and stepfather.

In comparison, less than half (44%) of the children in the community sample had said that the parents favoured nobody in their family; 17 per cent had felt that they were the favoured children in the family. Both sisters and brothers were perceived

to be equally favoured, and no marked differences were found between older and younger siblings.

Foster children's own responses to the questionnaire suggest that there may be a degree of denial of parental favouritism by the foster children. A higher proportion of foster children perceived their older siblings as being favoured compared to the social workers' views, which indicated that the youngest siblings received preferential treatment. However, the questionnaire data may not be sophisticated enough to draw conclusions about the children's true feelings about the way their parents treat them. Children's views on other aspects of their experiences in their families, reported earlier suggest that some children were acutely aware of differential parental treatment. Social workers views accord more closely with the interview data reported in previous chapters.

11. 5 Summary

This chapter has explored foster children's perceptions of their identification with their siblings in terms of their physical likeness, personality and interests, and the development or absence of a sense of sibling identity. Considerable diversity was found to exist in the extent to which the children identified or de-identified with their individual siblings. The children with generally positive relationships with one or more of their siblings identified in particular with their older siblings' personal characteristics and talents they admired. Children were most likely to identify with a sibling of the same gender. Identification with a sibling was by no means a mutual perception, reflecting other aspects of the sibling relationship.

Some children de-identified with one or more of their siblings, perceiving their siblings primarily in negative terms. They were most likely to de-identify with their siblings' bad behaviour. For some children the de-identification took the form of attributing a good-bad dimension to the perceived sibling differences, perceiving self as 'good' and the sibling as 'bad'. Where the children's relationships with their siblings in general were mixed, this was also reflected in the extent of their identification or de-identification with their individual siblings. This was also affected by their relationships with their parents. Their identification with parents reflected the parental split. The most isolated and detached children felt that they had nothing in common with any of their siblings. They were most likely to identify with a parent, a distant or lost relative, or an acquaintance.

Differential parental treatment was a common phenomenon among the children's families, increasing the potential for sibling de-identification. Seventeen children were regarded by the social workers as being subject to differential parental treatment. This included scapegoating; having unreasonable expectations placed on the children; being more rejected and/or abused than siblings; and favouritism. The diversity in the extent of the children's identification and de-identification with their siblings reflected other aspects of the children's relationships with their siblings. Where a relationship with an individual sibling was generally positive, this was accompanied by increased identification with the particular sibling. De-identification with a sibling reflected generally negative or detached sibling relationships and for many children was accompanied by split-parent identification.

This chapter began from the premise that when siblings have grown-up apart or lost contact with one another, they have few opportunities for developing a positive and strong sibling identity. Continuity of sibling relationships is the basis for identification with siblings. The children in this study had experienced considerable disruption of their family relationships, including separations from siblings. The disruption continued while the children were looked after in foster care (refer to chapter 7). The next chapter considers the study children's views on maintaining continuity of their relationships with their sisters and brothers.

Chapter 12 Expectations of continuity of relationships with siblings

12. 1 Introduction

Retrospective studies of the experiences of adults, who as children were brought up in care or grew up adopted (Ferguson, 1966; Meier, 1966; Triseliotis, 1980; Triseliotis and Russell, 1984), have found that continuity of sibling relationships is important for children separated from their parents. A more recent study by Mullender and Kearn (1997) of birth relatives' views on contact with adopted adults, found that birth siblings of all ages were seeking to make contact through the Adoption Contact Register for England and Wales with their adopted sisters and brothers. Birth siblings of adopted people were searching for their sisters and brothers, some of whom had never had a physical presence for them, yet '*...they considered the adopted person as a part of their family and part of themselves, and they were deeply grieved at the loss of that person in their lives*' (Mullender and Kearn, 1997:143). Although we have retrospective data about adults' views on separation from their siblings, little is known about children's expectations of the continuity of their relationships with their siblings. Also, little is known about whether the quality of the sibling relationship has a bearing on children's views, and whether there are differences in children's expectations in the general population, and of those in foster care.

One of the aims of this study was to explore children's expectations of the continuity of relationships with their sisters and brothers. This was done by asking the children about their preferences regarding a placement with, or without siblings, and contact with separated siblings; and their expectations of the continuity of their relationship with their siblings in adulthood. Some of these areas were explored in the questionnaire and elaborated in the interviews; others were covered by one measure only.

12. 2 Placement in foster care - with or without siblings?

Despite, or perhaps because of, their complex sibling arrangements and fragmented lives, children who were in a joint placement with their siblings valued the presence of their sisters and brothers and some worried about separation from them. The few children who had remained together throughout their childhood, or

who had experienced only short separations from their siblings in the past, valued the continuity of these relationships. This reflects the findings of previous qualitative studies referred to earlier in this chapter.

Children's preferences on being placed with or without their siblings generally reflected qualitative aspects of their relationships with their siblings reported in the previous chapters. The children with generally positive relationships with their siblings, valued being with their siblings in the same foster home. For the children, who had experienced few extended separations from their siblings, a placement together was often their preferred option. Children like Kelly and Peter, who were close in age and had a close bond, were worried about being separated from each other. Kelly recalls telling her social worker her views.

Kelly: 'Me and Peter had to live together...because if me and Peter were split up we would never see each other again, and we don't want that'.

Others, like Sam and Sarah, who had been separated while in foster care, missed each other a lot. Some children were pre-occupied with thoughts of missing home, they disliked being in foster care, but while in care valued the presence of their siblings in the foster home. Children from the two families with five or more children, in particular, wanted to be placed with their siblings, and worried about their separated siblings. Placement in a separate foster home made it difficult for the siblings to keep up-to-date with each other's lives and the children felt they had lost control of their siblings' welfare.

For some children with negative relationships with their siblings, their placement preferences reflected their split family situation and their identification with a sibling and a parent. Others, such as Michael, expressed a wish to live with their siblings on leaving foster care, regardless of their current negative views on their siblings. Some children's views were ambivalent. They acknowledged their difficulties in living with their siblings, such as fighting and domination by the siblings, particularly where their relationships with siblings were intense. Many wanted to be close to their siblings, ideally living in a different foster home '*across the road*', '*next door*' or '*two doors away*'. For some, their views reflected their split family situation and they expressed clear preferences about being placed with a particular sibling or siblings and not with others.

Where children had hostile or detached relationships with their siblings, these were reflected to a degree in their views on placement. For the three children who did not have any of their siblings in foster care, the question of a placement with siblings did not arise.

Significantly, children's views did not, however, in all cases reflect their current placement situation. Some children were separated from their most preferred sibling(s), and others were placed with a sibling or siblings from whom they wanted to live apart. This is illustrated by the views of three siblings, eight-year-old twins, Judy and David, and their older brother Arron. When no suitable placement was found to take the three siblings, the assumption (albeit a common one) was made that the twins should be placed together, and Arron in a separate foster home. This arrangement did not accord with any of the children's wishes as expressed to the researcher. Both Judy and David found it too intense an experience to live together; there was a lot of conflict between them (although this could have been worked on), and David complained that Judy '*mothered*' him. Judy would have preferred to live with her older brother and David with neither sibling. He wanted to live *near*, but not in the same foster home. Arron wanted to live with both twins in a previous foster home, where he felt the three siblings had been happy. In this situation it appears that the placement decisions were made by using 'conventional wisdom' rather than based on an assessment of the sibling relationships and the consideration of the children's views. Where one of the siblings lacks a niche among the siblings, as was the case for Arron, separation from siblings can further isolate the child from them.

12. 3 Maintaining contact with siblings

Maintaining contact between the foster children and their siblings living apart involved a number of individual arrangements and considerable effort and resources by social workers and foster carers. The contact arrangements mirrored the unclear nature of the children's families. Some siblings maintained contact with different parents and step-parents, siblings and members of extended family. For others, contact between separated siblings had already been infrequent before the child's arrival in foster care. Social workers were generally aware of the need to maintain contact with the child's 'core' siblings, and some went to considerable effort to ensure that regular contact took place. However, maintenance of contact with 'kin' siblings was generally not taken into account by the social workers.

12. 4 Children's expectations of sibling relationships in adulthood

The children were asked about their expectations of their siblings when they were grown up. Their expectations were explored by asking them to consider:

- when they grew up how near to their sibling they would like to live
- how often they thought they would see them
- whether they would do a lot together
- have great fun together, and
- whether they would miss their sibling if they never saw them again.

These questions were asked about each individual sibling rather than about their siblings in general, therefore, the numbers in the tables refer to the number of siblings, rather than the number of children. These areas were further explored with the children during the interviews.

Children were asked to respond to a statement: *'I would like to live near to him/her when I am grown up'*. They were given three choices: 'very near', 'not so near' and 'far away'. Table 37 below shows children's responses for both samples of children.

Table 37. Closeness to siblings in adulthood

Closeness to siblings	Community sample		Foster care sample	
	No	%	No	%
Very near	54	51	44	78
Not so near	43	41	11	20
Far away	8	8	1	2
	105	100	56	100

Foster children expected to live 'very near' to proportionately more of their siblings (78 per cent) than was the case for children in the community sample (51 per cent). Only one foster child expressed a wish to live 'far away' from their sibling.

Children were asked to respond to a question: *'how often do you think you will see him/her'* in adulthood. They were given three choices. Children's responses are contained in table 38.

Table 38. Frequency of contact in adulthood

Frequency of contact	Community study		Foster care study	
	No	%	No	%
Often	83	79	38	68
Not often	18	17	18	32
Never	4	4	0	0
Total	105	100	56	100

Foster children expected to see over two-thirds of their siblings 'often' and one third of siblings 'not often'. None of the foster children expressed a wish 'never' to see their siblings in adulthood. Their expectations of joint activities were explored by asking children, if they expected to *'do a lot together when we are grown up, for example, go shopping, baby-sit for each other, go to football or help each other in other ways'*. Table 39 shows the children's responses.

Table 39. Joint activities in adulthood

Joint activities	Community study		Foster care study	
	No	%	No	%
Yes	48	46	39	70
Not sure	45	43	14	25
No	12	11	3	5
Total	105	100	56	100

Foster children also held higher expectations of engaging in joint activities with their siblings than was the case for the children in the community. Foster children expected to 'do a lot together' with over two-thirds (70 per cent) of their siblings, compared to the children in the community, who expected to engage in joint activities with fewer than half of their siblings (46 per cent). The children's expectations of enjoying their contact with their siblings in adulthood were explored by asking them, if they thought they *'will have great fun together.'* Table 40 shows the children's responses.

Table 40. Enjoyment of sibling contact in adulthood

Enjoyment of contact	Community study		Foster care study	
	No	%	No	%
Yes	49	47	41	73
Not sure	45	43	14	25
No	11	10	1	2
Total	105	100	56	100

Foster children (73 per cent) also expected to enjoy their contact with a higher proportion of their siblings than was the case for children in the community (47 per cent). To find out more about the role of siblings in their lives in adulthood, the children were asked to respond to a statement: *'I would miss him/her if I never saw hi/her again'*. Table 41 shows their responses.

Table 41. Missing separated siblings in adulthood

Missing siblings	Community study		Foster care study	
	No	%	No	%
Yes	89	85	49	87
Not sure	12	11	6	11
No	4	4	1	2
Total	105	100	56	100

The importance of siblings to the study children was further evident in their responses to the question about whether the child would miss their siblings, if she or he never saw them again. Both children in the community (85 per cent) and those in foster care (87 per cent) expected to miss a great majority of their siblings. Only one foster child did not expect to miss their sibling.

The questionnaire findings show that both children in the community sample and those in the foster care sample, perceived their siblings to hold a considerable importance in their lives in the longer term. The children expected to live relatively close to their siblings, to maintain contact with them, and to enjoy each other's company when they grew up. They expected to miss their siblings a lot if they never saw them again. Foster children's expectations were proportionately higher than those held by children in the community.

The interview data revealed a more detailed picture of foster children's expectations of their future relationships with their sisters and brothers. The children with positive relationships with their siblings expressed detailed expectations of the important part to be played by siblings in their adult lives. Some children expected to maintain close contact with all of their siblings in future. For example, Cheryl wanted live with all of her six siblings in Spain, and Andrew expected to have daily contact with his brother.

Andrew: 'We'll see each other quite a bit, every day or something ... him and I are going to be a mechanic and a football player'.

These children described their own and their siblings aspirations in a positive manner.

The quality of the current sibling relationship was not, however, a reliable indicator of all of the children's expectations of their siblings in future. For children with negative, detached or ambivalent relationships with their siblings, their expectations were more complex. Children in the same family did not share similar expectations of their future relationships. This is illustrated by the views expressed by three siblings, Alex, Nina and Fraser.

Alex, the youngest, expected that his life would take a different course from those of his siblings', and that the three siblings would pursue different interests in their adult lives.

Alex: 'When I am older I am going to leave Fraser and Nina and they probably leave each other as well, because I am going to a different country'.

Nina, the middle child, wanted to be relatively close to her brothers, however, she felt ambivalent, wanting to live near siblings, but not too close.

Nina: 'I'd like to be next door to them or may be a few miles up...'

Fraser, who felt negatively about both of his younger siblings, wanted nothing to do with them when he grows up. Fraser was the only child within the foster care sample who stated that he did not expect to maintain a relationship with his siblings in adulthood.

Michael, by contrast, perceived his sister Lisa to be part of his life in the future, despite his intensely hostile relationship with her. Similarly, Arron wanted his five siblings to live close by.

Arron: *'..live just about half a mile from each other..'*

For some, their expectations reflected their split family situation, their divided loyalties to their parents and their identification or de-identification with individual siblings, as illustrated by Kelly and Peter.

Kelly: *'I would really love to live with my mum and John, the whole family except from Allan'*.

Peter: *'When I grow up, I want to stay with John, well... I want to see him all my life'*.

Even the children with detached relationships with their siblings, nevertheless, perceived their siblings as important in the future. Eric and Stuart wanted their separated parents to come together as a family again. Despite their apparent detachment from their siblings, they perceived their sisters and brothers to be an intrinsic part of their lives in the long-term. Two children were unable to visualise their future and three others were occupied by their future relationships with their parents rather than their siblings.

12. 5 Summary

The children's views on the continuity of their relationships with their siblings reflected broadly their views on other aspects of their relationships, although for the children with the most negative or detached relationships with their siblings their views were more complex. Despite their past fragmented lives, the children in joint placements generally valued living with their siblings and some worried about separation from their siblings.

Some children's views were ambivalent. They acknowledged their difficulties in living with their siblings in foster care, particularly where their relationships were intense, and expressed a preference for living apart, but close to their siblings. For some, their views reflected their split family situation and their divided loyalties to

their parents. Where children had hostile or detached relationships with their siblings, these reflected to a degree their views on placement. Their views did not, however, in all cases reflect their placement situation. Some children were placed with siblings they would have rather been separated from, and apart from those they would have preferred to live with.

Children's expectations of their siblings in the long-term were positive, despite their current feelings about them. Children with negative or detached relationships perceived siblings as a means of continuity into the future. Only one child wished nothing to do with his siblings in adulthood. Both the questionnaire and the interview data suggest that despite their adverse circumstances and fragmented past lives, siblings are and continue to be perceived to be one of the few constants in the children's lives, retaining importance in the long-term.

Findings suggest that despite disrupted past sibling relationships, foster children's expectations of their siblings in the long-term were similar, and in many respects surpassed the expectations of the children in the community. The children's expectations of their siblings are likely to reflect their past family experiences and norms. The findings of a recent study of families and kinship (McGlone et al., 1998), suggest that the family continues to be perceived in the contemporary Britain as an important source of support in adulthood. Contact with adult siblings continues to be important, particularly for people with dependent children. Although social class differences were not found to be large, the researchers suggest: *'contact with relatives is a more prominent part of working class life than of middle class life'* (McGlone et al., 1998:29). Information was not obtained about the background of the children in the community sample, however, we know that two-thirds of these children lived in working class communities. Thus the differential expectations of the two groups of children cannot be attributed to the differences in social background .

Chapter 13 Summary and discussion

13. 1 Introduction

This chapter attempts to summarise the key findings and to discuss these in the light of the background theory and previous research. The discussion will focus primarily on the findings of the main study of children in foster care. Some reference will be made to the findings of the community study in order to compare some aspects of foster children's sibling relationships with those of the children in the community. The findings will be discussed under the following themes:

- the significance of siblings compared to children's family, kin and other important relationships
- parental contribution to the development of sibling relationships
- the quality of sibling relationships: compensation and/or reflection of adversity
- the salience of complementary and reciprocal aspects, and sibling attachments, and
- children's expectations of the continuity of sibling relationships currently and in the long-term.

The study found considerable diversity in children's sibling relationships, in all the areas explored. The sample contained children from 11 families, and included 2 groups of 3 siblings; 6 groups of 2 siblings (2 of these dyads were not placed together), and 3 single children. Due to the small number of families represented in this study, no reference is made to differences between families. Sibling relationships were considered from each individual child's perspective in respect of the whole sample. Eighteen children had one or two siblings in the study sample; while three children did not have any of their siblings in the sample. Siblings' perceptions of one another have been reported only to illustrate the apparent differences in the subjective experiences of children growing up in the same family. Children's subjective feelings about their siblings points to the uniqueness of the sibling experience for each child.

13. 2 The significance of siblings compared to children's family, kin and other relationships

The first aim of this study was to explore children's perceptions of their siblings and the salient characteristics that sibling relationships hold for them; how children define their siblings; and how they perceive their relationships with their siblings compared to their other important relationships. Furthermore, are there any differences between foster children's perceptions of their siblings compared to the children in the community?

Who is a sibling?

Based on children's own descriptions of their family relationships, this study found that siblingship encompassed a much wider range of relationships than has been previously recognised. This was so for both samples of children, however, foster children had considerably more complex sibling relationships. The foster children had a great number of sibling arrangements, depending on the type of siblingship, age and age spacing, gender, birth order, residential and contact arrangements. The children had 'core' siblings, who had shared joint living arrangements in the past and who, to varying degrees, still shared their childhood with them. The children also referred to additional half- and step-siblings; some of whom they had never met, or had only had limited contact ('kin' siblings). Those amounted to over half as many again as the 'core' siblings. The children shared both biological parents with less than one third of all siblings. Some children made a distinction between maternal and paternal half-siblings, particularly where a father had a new family elsewhere. The children expressed a sense of kinship to these siblings living elsewhere. Like children in the community, foster children regarded siblings as part of their families despite of a lack of contact and co-residence, confirming the findings of a recent Swedish study (Andersson, 1999a).

For some, their family boundaries were ambiguous and the concept of siblingship was fluid. Some children named different kin siblings in different research measures used. A few children from the same family defined their family structure differently, including different people as members of their family.

Social workers were unaware of one third of the children's siblings. Although the reasons for this were not sought, it was apparent that case records did not track

family change in a systematic way. While the records generally contained information about maternal full and half-siblings, information about any children born to the children's fathers, and step-fathers, prior to, or following their relationship with the mother, was not recorded. This reflects social workers' lack of knowledge about looked after children's families also found in studies of young people leaving care (Marsh and Peel, 1999) and following adoption (Neil, 1999).

The significance of siblings compared to other people

Both children in the community and those in foster care differentiated between their relationships with siblings and others important to them. Children attributed greater emotional closeness and a sense of kinship to their relationships with their siblings, compared to their friends whom they perceived as more harmonious playmates.

Older siblings served a useful function by expanding their younger siblings' social networks outside the family. They were particularly important to the most isolated children in the community who had few other supportive relationships available to them. However, children in foster care enjoyed generally fewer friends, in particular with children of their own age or older, compared to the children in community. Both groups of children shared some of their friendships with their siblings, although joint friendships were only maintained between siblings who lived together. Children in foster care enjoyed fewer joint friendships with their siblings. The maintenance of joint friendships was considerably more difficult due to separation of siblings and changes in their own and their siblings' living situations.

Both the children in the community, and those in foster care, considered their siblings to be important to them regardless of whether they lived with them or not. By far the majority of children preferred to have siblings rather than be an only child. Siblings were regarded proportionally as almost equal in importance to the children as were their parents. However, foster children enjoyed smaller networks of supportive other relationships, had fewer and a limited range of pets, and their grandparents, and fathers for nearly half of the children, were almost absent from their lives. Therefore, siblings can be considered to hold an even greater importance to foster children than they did to children in the community.

13. 3 Parental contribution to sibling relationships

The second aim of this study was to explore the impact of family background and sibling history on the nature and quality of foster children's relationships with their siblings. The third aim was to consider the impact of separation on children's relationships with their siblings. The study achieved these aims by exploring foster children's perceptions of how their relationships with their siblings had evolved in the context of their family experiences. Family background and historical information was also obtained from the children's social workers.

The theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in chapters two and three suggest that children's family background and relationship history influence the course of their relationships with their siblings and others. Consequently, the question of how, and to what extent, are foster children's relationships with their siblings influenced by their adverse early circumstances, difficult attachment relationships, abuse and neglect, and separations from parents and siblings, forms the core of this thesis. The foster children had experienced a range of adversities: abuse and neglect; violence directed against their mothers; disrupted parent-child, parental and sibling relationships; changes of physical environment; separation and loss. Parental contribution to children's relationships with their siblings was apparent in the impact that their *family environments and processes* had on the quality of sibling relationships. In order to obtain an external view, social workers were asked to describe how they perceived these to shape the quality of children's relationships with their siblings.

Social workers' views

Social workers described the children's family environments and processes as being mainly negative. The majority of children's families were described as being characterised by stress, general negativity, aggression and violence. Social workers commented on the spread of conflict from the parental relationships to sibling relationships in some families. Some children were observed to imitate the behaviour of adults. For many children the negative emotional climate in the family was considered to reflect adversely on the children's sibling relationships.

A lack of family cohesion, and the way that parents and other adults treated the children, compared to their siblings, were considered to contribute to the way

children got on with their siblings. The majority of children had been subject to differential treatment by parents and other adults. This included scapegoating, having unreasonably high expectations placed on the child, being more rejected and/or abused than siblings, and favouritism. The involvement of other adults e.g. step-parents, mother's partners, and some members of extended families in the children's lives in various points in time, was also perceived to have a mainly negative impact. Different adults favoured the child and/or their siblings at different times. Children's own responses suggest that there may be a degree of denial of parental favouritism.

Similarly, the quality of parenting was described by social workers as inconsistent, ranging from overindulgence to rejection of children and their siblings. In some families, the various adults involved with the children applied different approaches to behaviour management.

The children's experiences of parenting were considered in the light of the attachment framework. Parental responses to meeting the children's needs for this sample of children support the development of ambivalent, avoidant and disorganised attachments. Based on the social workers' assessments, it is apparent that the largest group of children shared family experiences, which support the development of disorganised attachments (Crittenden, 1992; Howe, 1995; 1996).

Social workers perceived these family processes as having a generally negative impact on foster children's sibling relationships. Where sibling relationships were particularly poor, and there was a lot of aggression and conflict between the child and the siblings, social workers had limited expectations of the outcomes. They identified few positive aspects on which to build on for the future. None of the social workers described any attempts to work towards improving negative sibling relationships. This may be partly to do with the adult-centred social work paradigm adopted by most of the social workers. They tended to consider children's families and family relationships from the perspective of the adults, mainly focusing on the problems the parents were experiencing. A sense of sibling loyalty and solidarity, as expressed by the foster children, a shared sense of adversity, were missing from the social workers' descriptions of their families.

Impact of family disruption and separations on sibling relationships

Parental contribution to the quality of sibling relationships reflected considerable disruption in the parents' own lives. Information obtained from the social workers suggested that the foster children had experienced disruption in the following areas of their lives:

- over half of the children had experienced parental separations (some more than one such separation) before the age of five
- over a third of the children had been separated from their mother before the age of two
- the majority of children had experienced extended separations from their parents
- only five of the 21 children were living in foster care with all of their 'core' siblings, and even then, not with all of their 'kin' siblings
- by the end of the study period only two children were living with any of their 'core' siblings
- only two children had lived continuously with their 'core' siblings throughout their childhood, even they had a half-brother living with a grandmother
- the length of separations from the individual 'core' siblings ranged from five weeks to three years (mean 10 months)
- the number of changes of their living situations ranged from 4 – 36 (mean 13.3)
- few children had remained in the same community they lived in at birth
- changes of family home led to the loss of familiar people and places and changes of school
- some children had lost all or most of their pets, toys and personal belongings in unplanned family disruptions
- two thirds of the children had experienced one or more previous admissions to care (mean 2.8)
- the children's total period spent in care, including all care episodes, ranged from 3 months to five years; over half of the children had spent altogether less than a year in care
- while in care, the average number of placements experienced by children was 3.9.

The level of disruption in foster children's families was considerably greater than that reported by children in the community. Disruption of parental relationships and living situations can lead to child-parent separation, and for some children, to sibling separation. Parental disruption can impact on the continuity and quality of children's relationships. Family disruption affected the *continuity and quality* of foster children's *relationships* with their siblings in the following ways.

Firstly, the children's lives took different paths from those of their siblings, becoming more diverse and exposing siblings to an increasing range of non-shared environmental influences. Some younger children were separated from their siblings for proportionally longer periods than their older siblings. A separation of three years represented over one-third of a younger child's lifetime. The effects of such separations on sibling relationships, taking into account young children's relatively rapid development, are likely to be greater than separations for older siblings.

Secondly, the loss of contact with siblings and knowledge of one another impedes the development of a positive sibling identity, and prevents siblings from resolving negative aspects of their relationships. Where siblings were separated as a result of parental disruption, negative sibling relationships tended to persist. This was particularly so for children when parental relationships were hostile.

Thirdly, for siblings who stay close to one another, there will be opportunities for the development of close and supportive relationships, and a potential to resolve any negative aspects of their relationships. Foster children's perceptions of their siblings were influenced by the continuity of their relationships with their sisters and brothers and the degree of their shared and separate sibling relationship histories.

Fourthly, for some children their siblings provided their main source of stability and continuity in the midst of family disruption. Social workers did not generally refer to the children's losses of pets, toys and other personal belongings; they were rarely recorded in children's chronological histories. Siblings, particularly older sisters and brothers, became the keepers of the family history.

Parents continue to influence children's sibling relationships even when they do not live with their children. Following entry to foster care, two-thirds of the children had experienced further changes in their family composition and in their parents' and siblings' living situation. Some children lost contact with siblings, grandparents and other relatives. For some, family change led to changes in their status and position

in relation to their siblings. These findings reflect previous research on returning children home, often to a changed family situation (Farmer and Parker, 1991; Bullock et al., 1993). However, the foster children's experiences were characterised primarily by loss of contact with siblings, rather than the arrival of new siblings, as was the case in a study by Bullock et al. (1993). The children, who acquired new baby half-siblings welcomed their contact with them.

The findings suggest that *because of* the children's fragmented family relationships, siblings continued to be important to children in foster care, whether they live with them or not. For many children their siblings are one of the few constants in the foster children's rapidly changing families and lives more generally. For these children their siblings provided continuity in their lives. This is particularly important, as social workers were generally unaware of many details of the children's biographies.

13. 4 The quality of sibling relationships

The quality of sibling relationships was investigated by asking both samples of children to describe, in a questionnaire, the qualities they liked most and least about their siblings. They were then asked to describe their ideal siblings. The children in the community *liked most* their siblings' warmth, kindness and love; support and help they received from, and the resources and services provided by their siblings. The positive relationship qualities were counter balanced by their siblings' and their own struggle for power, status and domination. The children *liked least* about their siblings their annoying behaviour, misuse of power and abuse. *Ideal* siblings were perceived as kind, caring and loving who do not annoy, dominate or abuse the child. Power and status was related to children's position in relation to their siblings. Children's sibling relationships were characterised by a high degree of ambivalence. The majority of children in the community felt positive about their siblings.

The salient sibling relationship qualities were explored in more depth with the foster children. The findings relating to sibling relationship qualities are based on the results of the questionnaire data (chapters 7 and 12), Family Relations Test (chapter 10) and interview data (chapters 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12). The data was analysed and presented according to a framework for describing close relationships by Hinde (1988; 1992) and Dunn, (1993), discussed in chapter five. This includes the consideration of the following relationship dimensions:

- shared/separate history (the coherence and content of sibling memories and the extent that the child shares family experiences, including adversity, with siblings)
- complementarity and reciprocity (the extent the child perceives siblings as a source of support, help and protection and/or as a source of stress, bullying and abuse)
- attachment and emotional involvement (extent and quality)
- identification (the extent the child identifies with siblings), and
- commitment to the relationship (continuity and expectations in the long-term).

The study found considerable diversity in foster children's relationships with their sisters and brothers in all the dimensions studied. The children's relationships with their individual siblings were grouped into three:

- children whose sibling relationships contained primarily positive features
- children whose sibling relationships were primarily detached in nature or contained negative features, and
- children whose relationships with their siblings were mixed.

Nearly half of the foster children (10 children) perceived their sibling relationships primarily in either positive (4) or negative (6) terms, suggesting that qualitatively sibling relationships may be more extreme for foster children, since most of the children's relationships in the community sample were either positive or ambivalent. The third group of children, whose relationships with their siblings were more mixed, included 11 children amounting to just over half of the sample.

Table 42 presents a framework for understanding the quality of children's sibling relationships. This framework was derived from the main themes presented in the preceding chapters.

Table 42. A framework for understanding foster children's sibling relationships

Primarily positive relationships	Mixed - positive, negative and ambivalent relationships	Primarily detached or negative relationships
Sibling memories		
early memories of siblings are recalled easily	memories of one or more siblings are easily recalled, poor recall of memories of other siblings	child has no spontaneous recall of sibling memories
memories are detailed and coherent, containing both positive and negative experiences	memories of one or more siblings are negative, of others more positive	where memories are recalled these are entirely negative
Shared experiences		
commitment to, and involvement with, siblings	committed to, and involvement with, one or more siblings	commitment to, and involvement with, siblings is minimal
continuity of relationships	separations from one or more siblings	extended separations from siblings
adversity shared with siblings	adversity shared with some, but not with all siblings	adversity experienced alone
evidence of resilience in the child	evidence of resilience in the child	lack of resilience in the child
Support, help and protection		
siblings protect child and vice versa	an older sibling may protect, others a source of stress	siblings are not a source of protection and vice versa
siblings provide resources and services	resources and services provided by some, but not all siblings	siblings are not a source of resources and services
siblings provide care and emotional support and vice versa	care and emotional support provided by some, but not all siblings	siblings are a burden rather than support and help
		child feels resentment by being let down by siblings
		child is isolated with few sources of support

Bullying and abuse		
less evidence of sibling bullying and abuse	one or more siblings bully and abuse – others do not	siblings – older brothers in particular bully and abuse
		child has a fear of siblings
Involvement with siblings and quality of attachments		
attached to siblings	emotionally close to one or more siblings – detached or ambivalent about others	emotionally detached from siblings and others – difficulty communicating feelings
emotionally close to both older and younger siblings	attachment relationships polarised and reflect split family situation	hostile or highly ambivalent attachment to one or more siblings
worries about siblings' wellbeing happiness and behaviour	worries about one or more siblings, but not others	worries about siblings' behaviour
misses separated siblings	misses one or more siblings, but not others	does not miss individual siblings - may miss 'family'
		relationships with siblings have changed for the worse - rejects siblings
Identification with siblings		
identifies with sibling(s) in terms of similarity of physical characteristics, personality and/or interests	identifies with one or more siblings, de-identifies with other siblings	de-identifies with siblings in terms of physical characteristics, personality and/or interests
more likely to identify with a sibling of same gender, and a much older sibling, than with a much younger sibling identifies in terms of looks with a sibling close in age	Identification and de-identification with siblings reflects split family situation	perceives siblings in a negative light, and disassociates him/herself from the siblings' behaviour
recognises own and siblings' positive characteristics		more likely to identify with a parent, another adult or nobody, than with a sibling

Continuity of relationships		
where placed with siblings values living with them	views mixed - wishes to be placed with all, some or one specific sibling	does not wish to be placed with any of the siblings, or
would like to be placed with separated siblings	child's views on placement reflect split family situation	despite of a negative relationship, would like to be placed with one specific sibling only
expects siblings to continue to be important in the long-term	expectations of individual siblings are more mixed, some siblings are perceived as important in the long-term, others less so	expectations of future relationships with siblings are more complex
expectations of future relationships with siblings are detailed and positive	expectations are characterised by ambivalence e.g. wish to live near siblings but not too close expectations of future relationships with siblings reflect split family situation	despite hostile or detached relationships, siblings are perceived to be part of the child's future

Only a small minority of foster children had developed positive relationships with all of their sisters and brothers. The most positive, compensatory sibling relationships were characterised by the child recalling coherent early memories of siblings, where both positive and negative experiences were integrated. There was evidence that the child's growing up experiences, including adversity, were shared with siblings, and siblings providing an alternative source of support, protection and care to one another, which 'counterbalanced' to some extent the impact of inadequate parental care. There was also evidence of the child having close attachments with older and younger siblings and identification with siblings. The children expected their relationships with their siblings to continue in placement and in the long-term. The children reported a degree of resilience and ability to cope with their difficulties jointly with their siblings.

For six children, their sibling relationships were intensely negative, or they felt detached from their siblings. The children with the most negative or detached sibling relationships had a poor recall of sibling memories, or their memories were intensely negative; they had experienced their childhood as distinctly separate, or different, from their siblings, and there was little sense of shared adversity. The

children perceived siblings to be a burden and/or a source of stress; they had experienced sibling bullying and abuse, and felt let down and resentful towards siblings. Some perceived their siblings to be favoured by parents. Their attachments to siblings were hostile, highly ambivalent or detached, and they de-identified strongly with their siblings. Some children appeared to lack personal resilience and external supports to cope with these relationships. Despite their negative or detached relationships, most children expected their siblings to be important to them in the future.

Just over half of the study children's relationships were diverse containing a mixture of positive, negative and ambivalent relationships with their siblings. These children had formed positive allegiances with one or more of their siblings, although their relationships with other siblings were more problematic. Children from split families where parental relationships were hostile identified with one parent and particular sibling(s). The children's loyalties were divided according to the parental/sibling split. For some children sibling domination and misuse of power reflected of their experiences of parental relationships.

The children's relationships were also subject to ongoing change, often for the worse. Some older siblings remembered their younger siblings as babies with affection; the intervening experiences in their families had altered their perceptions in a negative way. The longer these children had remained in adverse circumstances, the more affected their relationships with their siblings had become.

For this sample of children in foster care their relationships with their sisters and brothers were primarily mixed in quality, or detached or negative, reflecting their adverse early experiences. Only a small number of children perceived their relationships with all of their sisters and brothers to be positive, compensating for their adverse family experiences. Therefore, the findings support the outcome of the reviews of theoretical and empirical literatures, in chapters two and three, suggesting that qualitatively, sibling relationships more likely to reflect the quality of parental and parent-child relationships, than compensate for them.

13. 5 The salience of complementary and reciprocal relationship aspects and attachment relationships

Foster children's sibling relationships were primarily characterised by complementary relationship aspects. These relate to differences in power and status, and are similar to relationships between people with a large age gap, such as, parent-child relationships. These proved to be most salient, both in the positive and negative senses, for the foster children. These aspects also illustrate those areas of the relationship, which in some way compensate for adversity and others, which reflect children's adverse early experiences. Although complementary relationship aspects were salient to the children in the community, they also enjoyed the reciprocal aspects of their relationships.

Complementary aspects of sibling relationships

There are two areas where the significance of complementary relationship aspects was most apparent: sibling support, protection and care, and misuse of power bullying and abuse.

Support, protection and care

The findings suggest that siblings are capable of providing considerable support to one another. An even higher proportion of children in foster care reported caring for and being cared for by their siblings, than was the case with children in the community. A higher proportion of children in foster care also found their experiences of sibling caretaking to be positive. Looking after their siblings and taking care of the household had made some foster children feel more confident in their own abilities. Taking responsibility for younger siblings contributed to their self-esteem, promoting resilience. However, the interview data suggests that for many foster children the responsibilities placed on them can be considered to be inappropriate for their age and stage of development, and for them siblings became a source of stress and resentment.

The majority of children perceived at least one of their siblings as a source of support and help. Although qualitatively different from parent-child relationships, a supportive relationship with a sibling may provide the child with an alternative source of support, which 'counterbalances', 'makes up for' or 'offsets' to some

extent the impact of inadequate parental care. Some children valued highly the protection offered by their siblings outside the family home.

Misuse of power, bullying and abuse

Misuse of power has been one of the key themes running through this thesis. One fifth of the children in the community sample had experienced bullying and abuse by their siblings. By contrast, nearly all the foster children reported abusive incidents. The children recalled their siblings using verbal and physical aggression both inside and outside the family home. When aggression was applied to protect their younger siblings outside the home, this was perceived by the children to be supportive. However, aggression directed against the children within the home was experienced as frightening and was resented by the younger siblings. Many abusive incidents took place when the siblings were left without parental attention.

Children's experiences of sibling abuse reflected misuse of power and control by fathers and other men they had witnessed in the past. Some incidents of abuse were pre-meditated and reflected similar abuse by men against women in situations of 'domestic' violence (Dobash and Dobash, 1980; Kirkwood, 1993; McGee, 2000). Many children recalled trying to intervene in fights between parents, or mothers and their partners, to protect their mothers. Many incidents were related to gender, where younger sisters were frightened of their older brothers' aggressive outburst, as these reminded them of the behaviour of their fathers, or mothers' partners. Some of the boys reported incidents of abuse and bullying by their older brothers, however, none reported being abused by their older sisters. Social workers were usually ignorant about or ignored sibling abuse. They were able to give detailed information about men's violent behaviour towards the children's mothers, but rarely mentioned instances between the child and their siblings.

The children's accounts of their experiences of violence within the family and sibling abuse documented here suggest that the children need help and support to deal with all types of violence.

Although complementary relationship aspects were salient for both samples of children, these proved to be more salient both in a positive and a negative sense for the foster children.

Reciprocal aspects of sibling relationships

While the reciprocal relationship aspects, such as companionship and fun, were valued highly by almost all of the children in the community, only those foster children with the most positive relationships with their siblings could recall positive memories relating to reciprocal relationship aspects. Foster children's memories related mainly to complementary relationship aspects. Many children's memories were negative, or lacked detail of what it was like to live with their siblings. There was little sense of companionship and fun, and for some children it was as if their childhood was lost to them. Even children who were close in age to their siblings, and for whom reciprocal relationship aspects would normally be salient, recalled mainly memories and experiences relating to their history of adversity. Resilience is fostered by a number of factors, including opportunities for exercising creativity and humour, and playing and having fun. These aspects were missing in many foster children's relationships with their siblings.

Attachment relationships

For some children their siblings had provided a secure base, in the midst of disruption and family change. Some children, particularly those placed with their siblings, continued to benefit from a close sibling bond while in foster care. Their experiences of growing up, including adversities, had been *shared* with their siblings. However, only a few foster children experienced their attachments to all of their siblings as mainly positive. For the majority of children their sibling attachments included a range of ambivalent, hostile, and detached relationships. Two-thirds of the children were intensely emotionally involved with at least one of their siblings. Some had developed intensely hostile sibling attachments, characterised by high involvement and low warmth, supporting previous findings by McGuire et al. (1996). These children felt that their experiences of growing up had been *different* from those of their siblings, and they harboured resentments towards them. A small minority of children had developed detached sibling relationships. These children had experienced parental rejection; some had suffered multiple rejections. Their 'avoidant' attachments to their siblings support the predictions of the attachment framework. These children were the most isolated, they felt they had grown up *separate* from their sisters and brothers, and were now also bereft of other supportive relationships.

13. 6 Children's expectations of the continuity of sibling relationships currently and in the long-term

Based on many children's ambivalent, negative or detached relationships with their siblings, it might be assumed that they would not view their siblings as important in placement and in the long-term. This was not so. Foster children perceived both 'core' and some 'kin' siblings to hold an importance to them currently and in the long-term.

Placement in foster care – with or without siblings

Despite, or perhaps because of, their complex sibling arrangements and fragmented lives, children who were in a joint placement with their siblings valued the presence of their sisters and brothers and some worried about separation from them. Children's preferences on being placed with or without their siblings generally reflected the quality of their relationships. Children held different views on their individual siblings, wishing to be placed with a particular sibling or siblings, but not with others. Some children's views were ambivalent. They wanted to be close to their siblings, e.g. 'across the road' or 'next door', but not in the same foster home, particularly when relationships with siblings were intense. For some their views reflected their split family situation.

Significantly, however, children's views did not in all cases reflect their current placement situation. Some children were placed with siblings they would have rather been separated from, and apart from those they would have preferred to live with. Where it is not appropriate, or practicable to place siblings in the same foster home, the siblings should be accommodated in homes as near together as is appropriate and practicable. This would accord well with many study children's wishes.

Social workers make decisions affecting children's sibling relationships as part of the care planning processes. By law, social workers should seek children's views as part of these processes. The findings of this study suggest that some placement decisions were contrary to children's views expressed to the researcher.

Expectations of sibling relationships in adulthood

Foster children's expectations of their siblings in adulthood were similar to, and in many respects surpassed the expectations of the children in the community. Their

expectations were mainly positive, regardless of their current feelings towards their siblings, and the quality of their current relationships. Proportionally more foster children wished to live near their siblings, to maintain contact with them, and to enjoy each other's company when they grew up. Only one foster child wished to live far away from his siblings. None of the children wished to never see their siblings again, although one expressed a wish to have nothing to do with them. Both the questionnaire and the interview data suggest that despite their adverse circumstances and fragmented past lives, siblings are and continue to be perceived to be one of the few constants in the children's lives, retaining importance in the long-term. Children's expectations of maintaining relationships with their siblings reflected commonly held expectations and norms in contemporary Britain. While there is considerable information about the important role that family and kin relations occupy in adult life (Finch, 1989; McGlone et al., 1998), these findings add valuable insights from British children's perspective.

13. 7 Summary

This chapter has summarised the findings of this thesis into an integrated framework for understanding foster children's sibling relationships. The findings were discussed under the aims of the study.

The study found that siblingship encompassed a much wider range of relationships for the foster children than was acknowledged by the children's social workers. Because of the foster children's smaller networks of supportive others, relative absence of fathers, and an almost total absence of grandparents, siblings were more important to the foster children, compared to the children in the community.

Foster children's adverse family experiences and processes influenced the course of children's relationships with their siblings in a number of ways. Family disruption impacted on the continuity and quality of children's sibling relationships. Some siblings' lives became increasingly diverse making it difficult for separated siblings to develop a shared sense of positive sibling identity, and to form close and supportive allegiances with one another. For children who had remained with their siblings for most of their childhood, their siblings provided their main source of stability and continuity in the midst of family disruption.

The quality of children's relationships with their sisters and brothers varied between children, and with their individual siblings. The data suggests that qualitatively foster children's sibling relationships were more extreme, reflecting children's adverse family experiences, than the relationships of children in the community. However, for the majority of foster children, a supportive relationship with at least one of their siblings counter balanced to some extent inadequate parental care. Complementary relationship aspects, referring to power and status, and sibling attachment relationships, were the most salient for the foster children.

In conclusion, foster children's perceptions of their sibling relationships, discussed in this thesis, have two separate, but intertwined, threads running through: a relationship dimension focusing on the quality of the sibling relationship, and a family and kinship dimension focusing on siblings as key family and kin. Children's views have shown that siblings retain an importance at the level of *'family and kinship'*, regardless of the quality of their current relationships with siblings. Some children had detached or hostile relationships with some or all of their siblings, but still expected their future to include contact with their siblings.

Maintaining looked after children's relationships with their family and kin, except in circumstances where this would cause them significant harm, is enshrined in childcare legislation across the UK (Marsh, 1993; Hill and Tisdall, 1997). However, it could be argued that social work policy and practice continue to focus on the internal family dynamics and relationships within the immediate family. Less attention is paid to the significance of kinship in the current social work policy and practice (Ryburn, 1998). Consequently, it has been argued by Hegar (1988b) that the social work approach places greater emphasis on the *relationship between siblings*, and favours separation if the relationship is poor. It follows an expert-defined 'needs' based welfare model, where decisions are based on a professional assessment of individual child's needs. In contrast, legal perspective places more stress on *the concepts of kinship and family* in placement decisions. This follows a 'rights' based paradigm, where a child has an intrinsic right to family and kinship, and that the continuity of sibling relationship is a means of achieving this (Hegar, 1993).

The data from this thesis suggest that both the needs and rights based frameworks are important when making decisions affecting children's sibling relationships. It is important to understand children's own perspectives on the qualitative aspects of

their relationships. Where relationships are problematic, these can be worked on over time. The rights based paradigm ensures that children are not deprived of the potential sibling support in adulthood and old age. Continuity of sibling relationships will also ensure that individuals are able to connect through siblinghood to a wider network of kin. It is through siblinghood that aunts, uncles, nephews and nieces, and cousins are acquired. Contact with, or at least knowledge of, full and half-siblings living elsewhere, provides individuals with a sense of family identity and roots, in other words, socio-genealogical connectedness (Owusu-Bempah and Howitt, 1997). We know from the views of adults who, as children, were separated from their siblings, and lost contact with them, that a loss of siblings leaves an emotional void which cannot be filled by other people (Humphreys, 1996; Mullender and Kearn, 1997; Hodgkins, 1999; Prynne, 1999). This thesis has found that children do not wish to sever their relationships with their siblings, whether they get on with their siblings or not. Both the children in the community and the foster children expected siblings to be important to them in adulthood. Because of foster children's smaller networks of other supportive relationships, their siblings are particularly important to them.

Chapter 14 Conclusions

14. 1 Introduction

This final chapter of the thesis discusses the strengths and limitations of the study. Implications arising from the study for further research, policy and practice development will be outlined. The aim of this exploratory study was to extend current understanding of the nature and quality of sibling relationships, by gathering information and views from a sample of Scottish children (aged eight to 12), who were accommodated in short-term foster care. The study aimed to obtain an 'insider view' of children's sibling relationships (Olson, 1977). The focus was on the subjective aspects of the relationship, such as, children's experiences of growing up with their sisters and brothers, feelings about their siblings, memories of the past, and expectations of their siblings in the future. The study began from the premise that it is important to understand something about how children in the general population perceive their sibling relationships, before considering the relationships of a specific group of children. Therefore, sibling relationships were explored first with a sample of children living in the community. The study was placed in the statutory and policy context in which social workers and foster carers work with looked after children and their siblings. Children's rights remained as part of the equation as the study progressed.

14. 2 The strengths and the limitations of the study

The findings of this study and the conclusions drawn from them should be considered in the light of the perceived strengths and the boundaries of the study.

Strengths of the study

The following outline the main strengths of the study:

the subject was under researched

the age group was under researched

comparison with the community sample

focus on children's perspectives

consideration of siblings in the context of children's other relationships

consideration of the relationship history and family experiences
a long-term perspective
application of a number of theoretical perspectives, and
use of a number of data sources and methods.

One of the strengths of this study is that it has explored a subject, which has been previously under researched. This study is the first in the UK to investigate the quality of foster children's sibling relationships, in contrast to sibling placement practices. While some sibling studies have considered children in permanent care, this study focused on children in short-term care.

This study also explored children's perceptions on their sibling relationships for children in the community. While very young children's relationships with their siblings have been explored in the UK by studying community samples (Dunn and Kendrick, 1982), no empirical information was available relating to children's sibling relationships in middle childhood.

Looked after children's sibling relationships have rarely been compared with children in the general population. This study was designed to enable foster children's sibling relationships to be compared, although in a limited way, with the relationships of children living in the community.

The study focused on children's perspectives on their relationships seeking to understand the meanings that sisters and brothers hold to one another. Children's own definitions of a sibling became the starting point for the study. Unlike the majority of sibling studies, which focus on sibling pairs, this study explored children's perceptions of all of their siblings.

The significance of sibling relationships was explored in the wider context of children's other relationships with parents, friends and wider kin. Children's perceptions of the differences that exist between siblings and friends placed the salient sibling relationship qualities in the context of children's relationships with other children.

The study acknowledged the rapidly changing nature of children's families, both for the children in the community and those in foster care. It explored the impact of family disruption on the quality of children's sibling relationships, an area where

there is little empirical information available. It considered the impact of sibling relationship history and children's family experiences on the quality of relationships between siblings.

While there is considerable retrospective information, obtained from adults who had been separated from their siblings in childhood, about the long-term importance of siblings, little information was available about children's expectations of their sibling relationships in the long-term. This study asked both samples of children of their expectations and hopes for the future, placing sibling relationships in long-term perspective.

The study applied a combination of theoretical perspectives in the research process. This was in recognition of the fact that looked after children's sibling relationships are likely to be multifaceted and not easy to understand. The use of multiple theoretical perspectives enabled the study to bring together two separate, but intertwined areas for consideration: a relationship dimension focusing on the quality of the sibling relationship, and a family and kinship dimension focusing on siblings as key family and kin. Both were found to be theoretically important.

While the children were the main source of information, the study sought information about foster children's sibling relationships from multiple perspectives and data sources by using a range of methods. Combined with theoretical triangulation, data and methodological triangulation potentially increased the validity and the reliability of the findings.

The limitations of the study

The limitations of the study relate to some aspects of the samples, data sources and the methods applied in the research process. These will now be discussed under the following areas:

consequences of the sampling
consequences of the methodology, and
consequences of the data sources.

Consequences of the samples

The most obvious limitation of this study was the sample size and composition for both studies. Sixty-nine children, of whom 64 had one or more siblings, from three primary school classes were recruited for the community study. The pilot study had indicated a need for children to be seen in small groups. This meant that it would have taken longer than anticipated to obtain the planned sample of 90 children. Although the planned number of children was not obtained, the results indicate that the children's family structures reflected those of children in the general population (Pullinger and Summerfield, 1997). Therefore the community sample was appropriate for the study.

The foster care sample contained twenty-one children from eleven families. Although the foster children had a large number of siblings, the number of different families represented was relatively small. The sample represented all those who met the research criteria and were willing to participate within the time available.

It is unfortunate that the age and gender composition of the two samples did not match as closely as was desired. The community sample comprised children aged nine to twelve, of whom 59 per cent were girls and 41 per cent were boys. Their mean age was ten years and one month. In contrast, the foster care sample consisted of children aged eight to twelve, of whom 33 per cent were girls and 67 per cent were boys. Their mean age was ten.

The limited sample sizes were balanced by good response rates. A parent withdrew only one child in the community study. This meant that all other children attending school on that day were included. Of the 27 foster children, who met the sample criteria, six were withdrawn. The reasons for this have been explained.

The small sample sizes and the children's diverse sibling arrangements influenced the analysis of the findings. The children included all related children they regarded as their siblings at least in one of the measures used. This gave valuable information about the complex and diverse nature of siblingship. However, as there were great differences between the children, in the number and age of their siblings, and other characteristics, the samples were considered to be too small for statistical analysis.

Consequences of the research design

The research design focused on obtaining information about the 'insider' perspective of children's sibling relationships. The chosen methods e.g. children's self-report questionnaire, interview and the family relations test are designed to obtain subjective data about relationships. A participant observer perspective was obtained from foster carers, and an outsider perspective from social workers. Both of these provided subjective data, as no observational measures were used. Olson (1977) has stressed the need for both the insider and outsider perspectives on relationships, and for subjective and objective data. Behavioural methods would have provided objective data about what actually goes on between siblings, for instance, how siblings behave towards, and interact with one another in their daily lives. However, observation of children's interaction with their siblings was considered to be beyond the scope of this study. While the chosen methodology was appropriate for the purpose of this study, the findings must be understood in the context of the subjective nature of the data.

Information on children's relationship with each sibling was collected at one point in time. Although retrospective data was obtained about children's early sibling relationships, and their expectations of their future relationships was sought, the study did not attempt to chart the development of sibling relationships over time. A prospective study would have given valuable information about relationship processes and the impact of foster care interventions on the quality of sibling relationships over time.

Consequences of data sources

The data sources were the children, social workers and the foster carers. As the study focused on children in short-term care, some carers had a limited knowledge of the children's siblings, particularly of those who lived elsewhere. Therefore they found the questionnaire seeking information about children's relationships with their individual siblings difficult to complete. Where siblings were being cared for together, the information obtained from the carers was valuable. Consideration was given at the planning stage to obtaining data from the parents. This would have added another perspective. This was not pursued as it was considered to be potentially intrusive and distressing to the parents at that point in time.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the study discussed above, it is concluded that the study aims and objectives were met fully.

14. 3 Implications for research, policy and practice

A number of implications for research, policy and practice development arise from the findings of this study. These will be discussed with reference to the background theory and the statutory and policy framework reviewed earlier.

Researching children's sibling relationships

A need for normative information

This study has provided some limited information about what Scottish children, in a general population, think about their siblings in middle childhood. Due to the relatively small sample, drawn from three neighbourhoods in one city, the scope of the study is limited. There is a need for more information about how children and their parents define sibling relationships, and what they consider to be 'normal' sibling behaviour and interaction. For instance, it is commonly assumed that sibling rivalry, manifesting as frequent conflict between siblings, is inevitable, and an intrinsic part of relationships between sisters and brothers. This was not so for the children in the community sample. The majority of children had a supportive relationship with at least one of their siblings.

The sibling relationship questionnaire, adapted for this study from a questionnaire by Furman (1990), engaged children well in the research task. It provided information on all the main relationship dimensions. There is some merit for the use of this tool with larger representative samples, in different parts of the country. The findings would help to re-evaluate the commonly held one-dimensional view of the sibling relationship as being characterised primarily by sibling rivalry. Normative information would be helpful for parents and those who work with parents. It is also important to have information about sibling relationships for children in the general population, when the relationships of exceptional groups, such as looked after children, are being considered. Recent government guidelines on assessing children in need, suggest that the assessment should include sibling relationships. A schedule on child's developmental needs, incorporated within the guidelines, states when referring to family and social relationships: *'Includes a stable and affectionate relationship with caregivers, good relationships with siblings....'* (DoH, 2000:19). No further explanation is offered as to what constitutes a *'good sibling relationship'*. It could be argued that social workers share some degree of common

understanding, regarding what might be considered a good-enough parent-child relationship. However, due to lack of attention paid to siblings in research and practice, it cannot be assumed that the same applies to their understanding of sibling relationships.

Looked after children's problematic relationships

There is a need to know more about looked after children's problematic sibling relationships, and how these could be improved. A small proportion of foster children had intensely hostile or detached relationships with their sisters and brothers. These children are most at risk of becoming separated from, and lose contact with their siblings. Their sibling relationships are unlikely to improve without ongoing communication and interaction with siblings. Foster carers and their children, particularly older teenagers, can provide positive role models for children with relationship difficulties. Given training and support, they could work with children to improve relationships between siblings. The aim of this study was exploratory, the next step would be to find out more about social work and foster care interventions.

There is a need for longitudinal research, focusing on the impact of foster care and social work practices, on the quality of children's sibling relationships.

Policy direction and looked after children's siblings

The main theoretical approaches discussed in chapter two, considered siblings as children's primary kin relations and as important attachment figures in their own right. The findings of this study suggest that children regarded both 'core' and 'kin' siblings as important to them. They expressed a sense kinship also to those siblings, who lived elsewhere. Regardless of the level of contact with, and the quality of their relationships with their individual siblings, the children expressed a commitment to their sisters and brothers in the long-term. However, the review of literature on siblings in foster care (chapter four) suggested that there might be some ambiguity regarding the way looked after children's sibling relationships are addressed within the statutory and policy framework. This contains little explicit recognition of the notion of siblings as children's primary kin relations, and as attachment figures in their own right. The terminology used in social work guidance treats sisters and brothers as part of a homogeneous concept of a *'family'*, as *'significant others'*, or as *'others important to the child'* (Department of Health, 1989; Scottish Office, 1997). The use of such terminology indicates that the status of

siblings in relation to one another may be unclear, whereas the status of parents in relation to their children is more clearly expressed in legislation, regulations and guidance.

Since the above guidance was published, the Human Rights Act 1998 has been implemented in the UK. Cognisance should be taken of the provisions of Article 8 of the Act (Beckett and Hershman, 2001). This promotes a right to family life. The provisions of Article 8 have been tested in the European Court, which ruled in 1996 (Boughanemi v. France) that ties with siblings can qualify as a 'family life' relationship (Stamer with Byrne, 2001). National policy direction should recognise that children have an intrinsic right to family and kinship, and that siblings are a means of achieving this.

Conceptualising siblings

The findings of the study suggest that there is some ambiguity regarding how looked after children's siblings and sibling relationships are conceptualised. For example, there was a difference between the perceptions of the children and their social workers regarding *who count as looked after children's siblings?* Foster children's own descriptions of their sibling relationships included a much wider range of relationships, including other children born to their fathers and step-fathers, than was acknowledged by their social workers.

Some ambiguity was also apparent in the language used to refer to different types of sibling relationships. *Definitions of siblings* as full, half-, and step-siblings are based on a degree of biological relatedness between siblings, and on the nature of the relationship between their parents and their partners. The children in this study did not generally differentiate between full- and half-siblings. This is not surprising as from the child's point of view there may be no such thing as a 'half-sibling'. Even those children, who acknowledged that they and their siblings had different fathers, regarded their sisters and brothers simply as their siblings.

There is a lack of common understanding of which related children are regarded as siblings for statistical, research, and policy and practice purposes. Therefore, it is important when discussing 'siblings' to define what exactly is meant by this term.

Addressing adult-centred social work paradigm

Definitions of who count as siblings, and the words used to describe them; all reflect adult-focused perspectives on children's family relationships (O'Brien et al., 1996; Morrow, 1998). The way social workers perceive children's family relationships, and obtain information about them, are influenced by the prevalent social work paradigm, which places parents, most often mothers, at the centre of the child's social and emotional world. It could be argued that social workers focus on the maintenance and the quality of parent-child relationships at the expense of the child-sibling relationships. This approach results from a traditionally adult-focused perspective on children's capacity to understand their family relationships and provide information on them (Qvortrup, 1991; Brannen and O'Brien, 1996). It is customary for social workers to rely on parents, and other adults, e.g. previous carers and relatives, to provide information on the family structure, history and relationships. It is important to obtain information from adults; however, it should be recognised that they may perceive children's sibling relationships in a limited way, as was the case in this study.

Children as informants on their own relationships

Social workers should obtain information directly from children, encouraging them to describe what sense they make of their kin, family and sibling relationships, rather than taking at face value adults' definitions of the child's family relationships. Social workers are in an influential position when obtaining information on looked after children's families and family relationships. They should be mindful of the potential problems with power-relationships in adults obtaining and interpreting information from children (Mayall, 1994a; Morrow and Richards, 1996). A variety of means of engaging children will be needed to enable them to express their understanding on their complex sibling relationships. These may include drawing, paper and pencil exercises, talking, and story telling, playing and life story work.

Importance of recording change from children's perspective

Social workers lacked information about one-third of the children's siblings and their whereabouts. The practice implications include a need to collate information about changes in the child's family structure, including paternal side of the family, living situation and circumstances, while a child is living away from the family. Such information should be accurately recorded and kept up-to-date, to prevent a child losing touch with siblings in the future. It is recognised that the main parent may

not wish any contact to take place with such siblings. Where contact is not currently possible with 'kin' siblings, information about them, and the absent parent should be sought to help children develop a sense of knowledge, and belief in, their biological and social roots. This information should be regularly updated and include children's own views. Quality information about 'kin' siblings will enable sibling contact to be established and relationships to be developed in adulthood should they so wish.

There is also a need to collate and record accurate information about all 'core' siblings, who are not living with the child. Many foster children worried about their separated younger siblings' safety or their older siblings' behaviour. Sharing information about siblings' wellbeing and development with one another is important to alleviate worries and concerns felt by separated siblings.

Assessment of relationships

An assessment of child's sibling relationships, involving the child and as many of the siblings as possible, and parents and previous carers should be undertaken, to ensure that a full and meaningful picture is obtained. This should involve seeing the children together as well as separately, to obtain each sibling's perspective. The assessment should consider siblings both as primary 'kin' relationships as well as a source of attachment relationships. The potential positive and supportive relationship aspects likely to foster resilience should be recognised. Particular attention should be paid to power relationships and potential for abuse by siblings.

There are a number of assessment tools available. A sibling relationship checklist, which is incorporated in the Department of Health (1991) research summary: *'Patterns and outcomes in child placements'*, offers a useful guide for assisting in the assessment of sibling relationships for children in foster care. However, there is evidence, discussed in chapter four, to suggest that this has rarely been used by social workers. Recent government guidance for England and Wales, *Framework for assessment of children in need and their families'* (Department of Health, 2000), stress the importance of observing and assessing family relationships beyond parent/child relationships. This guidance stress the importance of obtaining information about children's relationships by a variety of means, including direct observation of behaviour and interaction. It also makes reference to a range practice tools, schedules, and other resources for communicating with children, now available to social workers. British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering have

published a good practice guidance '*Together or Apart? Assessing brothers and sisters for permanent placement*' (Lord and Borthwick, 2001). This provides guidance on the issues to be considered when thinking about potential separation of siblings.

In any assessment, it is important to obtain the child's view on who count as their siblings. In this study, the use of three different research measures enabled foster children to consider during the two sessions, which related children they regarded as their siblings. The use of more than one tool uncovered half-siblings not previously known to social workers. Most children found the sibling relationship questionnaire fun to complete. The second part of the questionnaire, adapted from a questionnaire by Furman (1990), was particularly useful. This gave an indication of the child's feelings for their individual siblings. The questionnaire covered all the main relationship dimensions. This questionnaire could easily be used to seek children's perspectives on their siblings, and form part of the social work assessment. The child's views should be sought at an early stage of the assessment, before parents and other adults have defined the child's previous history and relationships, and these have been recorded on file to be re-used as the basis of future assessments and reports.

The Family Relations Test (Bene and Anthony, 1985) provided a numerical picture of the child's emotional involvement with members of their family. Children found it easy to engage in 'playing a family game'. Surprisingly, even the older children (some were aged nearly 13) engaged well with this test; they did not find it too childish. Unfortunately, this test is only available to registered clinical psychologists; therefore its usefulness to social work is limited. However, where social workers are dealing with a particularly complex set of sibling relationships, there is merit in seeking the use of this test.

Relative importance of siblings compared to other relationships

Siblings were relatively more important to the foster children currently, and in the long-term, compared to their relationships with other people. Because of foster children's smaller networks of friends, an almost total absence of grandparents and absence of many fathers, siblings provided some continuity in their fragmented lives. Social workers and foster carers should view children in their care in the wider context of their families, friendships and community networks. For many foster

children links with their communities were frail or barely tenuous. For such children the knowledge of, and contact with, their separated siblings can act as an affirmation of family identity and sense of belonging. Relationships with siblings appeared to be particularly important to the most isolated children, who had the smallest network of supportive relationships. A few foster children were emotionally detached; were isolated from their family and friends, and they lacked external supports. Foster carers were involved with the children on a temporary basis. Their *siblings* were the *only people* with a legitimate interest in their lives. Maintenance of contact with siblings or a placement together, is particularly important for them.

Impact of family change and disruption

More needs to be known about the effect of family disruption on the children's family and sibling relationships. Disruption of family relationships potentially increases the range of influences on the qualitative aspects of children's sibling relationships and on their development of a sense of identity and kinship. However, changes in family structure, dynamics and processes, and the impact of these on sibling relationships, need to be viewed from the individual children's perspective. Family disruption can lead to resentments to develop between siblings whether they live together or apart. These can have a drastic impact on individuals' emotional wellbeing in adulthood. Each sibling will have their own understanding of the history of significant family changes, events and relationships. Therefore, treating family history as a common one, which applies to siblings as a 'group', is misleading.

Quality of relationships - a potential for change

While both the children in the community and in foster care valued *reciprocal* aspects of their relationships, e.g. positive joint activities and fun and play, foster children had missed out on these childhood experiences. *Complementary* relationship aspects, relating to power and status, proved to be salient, both in the positive and negative sense, to many of the foster children. These are generally, although not always, related to birth order and age difference between siblings.

Social workers and foster carers should pay particular attention to the complementary relationship aspects. These have the potential to bring both positive and negative consequences for children's sibling relationships. At their best, older siblings, particularly older sisters although not exclusively so, provided care,

emotional support, protection and practical help to their younger siblings. Therefore, contact with older siblings could be beneficial for children separated from them (Sandler, 1980). At their worst, older siblings, particularly older brothers, misused their superior physical strength by dominating their younger sisters and brothers. Sibling domination and conflict were an intrinsic part of the experience for the children. However, sibling conflict on its own should not be a reason for separating siblings or discontinuing contact with separated siblings. Social workers should pay particular attention to gender and power relationships among siblings. Some children may need protection from bullying and abuse by their siblings. Potential for sexual abuse by siblings should be recognised, and measures taken to protect younger siblings from sexual abuse and exploitation (Head and Elgar, 1999; Farmer and Pollock, 1999).

Children's attachments to their individual siblings varied in quality and intensity, from detachment to relationships characterised by high involvement and low warmth (McGuire et al., 1996). Both the detached sibling relationships, when the child feels rejected or excluded by sibling(s), and the intensely hostile sibling relationships can remain problematic until adulthood (Bank, 1992) and old age (Ross and Milgram, 1982), unless siblings have opportunities to resolve them. Working with brothers on their abusive relationships with their sisters is important, if we are to avoid boys becoming 'invisible' in a similar way that men have been treated in child protection work (Stanley, 1997).

Relationships between siblings can change for better or worse over time, depending on the influences bearing on the child, their siblings and external circumstances. It is important to acknowledge the potential for change, and find imaginative and supportive ways of working with children and their siblings. These may include working with siblings outside the emotional influence of their parents, particularly where children have been caught up in the relationship dynamics of their parents. The role of foster carers in working with children and their siblings is particularly important. Interventions aimed at supporting positive outcomes and preventing negative outcomes for children's sibling relationships could be designed, taking account of the 'insider view' of sibling relationships. There is a need for increased understanding by social workers and substitute carers of what goes on in the 'sibling world', much of which is hidden from the adult view.

There is scope for therapeutic skills-based work to foster positive sibling relationships, and to help children to improve their negative sibling relationships. Such work could involve individual children, sibling pairs and groups. The focus of work could be to:

- modify siblings' negative patterns of interaction
- teach children how to channel anger
- resolve sibling conflicts
- set limits on children's behaviour
- teach siblings how to enjoy playing together and have fun
- encourage caring and nurturing behaviours
- foster a sense of shared history, and
- a sense of family cohesion and connectedness (Rosenberg, 1980; Lewis, 1986; Waters, 1987; Frey-Angel, 1989; Regan and Young, 1990; Hunter, 1993; Norris-Shortle et al., 1995). By building on children's strengths and coping strategies the therapist will enhance the children's resilience (Wolin and Wolin, 1994).

Placement practice

Legislation and policy framework, reviewed in chapter four, places a duty on local authorities to seek children's views about placement in foster care, placement with or apart from sibling(s), and the frequency and manner of contact with sibling(s). Any decisions regarding looked after children taken in the context of assessment, care planning, and review procedures, should consider the potential impact of these decisions on the child's relationships with their siblings in the short, medium, and long-term. Even short-term decisions can have implications for sibling relationships that persist over lifetime.

Where placement decisions are made by using *conventional wisdom* (close age, same gender, or siblings who get on placed together), or they are based on the *available resources*, siblings can become 'inadvertently' separated from one another, as was the case for some children in this study. Such separations on entry to short-term care can lead to a loss of contact and lack of information about siblings in later life.

Some of the study children did not wish to live in the same foster home, although they wanted to be close to their siblings, in another foster home 'across the road'. These wishes accord well with the statutory requirements. 'The Arrangements to

Look After Children (Scotland) Regulations 1996' require local authorities, when making arrangements for two or more children from the same family to be accommodated, to ensure that: '*...the children are fostered in the same home or, if that is not appropriate or practicable, in homes as near together as is appropriate or practicable*' (regulation 5 (4)). In order to achieve placements, which meet both the statutory requirements, and children's expressed wishes, foster care recruitment strategies would need to be targeted specially to this aim in mind. Placements of siblings in families living in the same neighbourhood would allow them to have easy access to one another at school and in their leisure time.

Separation

Sibling relationships are based on interactions between siblings and they develop over time. They are largely based on sharing of childhood experiences and memories (Mullender, 1999b). Where the siblings do not live together, they are unable to interact with each other on a daily basis. They have few opportunities to share experiences with one another, thus preventing them from developing a shared sense of their childhood. Therefore, siblings should be helped to remain together throughout their childhood to enable them to develop a shared sense of kinship, family identity and history, and to maximise opportunities for close and supportive relationships to develop between them. Children with the most positive relationships with their sisters and brothers had experienced few separations. They had developed a sense of shared adversity, where both positive and negative experiences were integrated into a coherent story. When siblings live apart from one another, they may be unable to resolve their differences. Resentments, jealousies and misunderstandings can continue to fester unchecked. Therefore, social workers should be mindful that sibling separations could have a fundamental impact on the way children feel about their sisters and brothers over lifetime.

Contact between separated siblings

Where siblings are separated, contact between them should normally be maintained unless there is serious abuse by siblings. This should not always involve parents, especially where parental relationships are hostile. Children should be enabled to maintain sibling contact without the emotional influence of their parents, unless for a good reason this is against the child's best interests. Contact should take a variety of forms and be as natural as possible. Siblings should be offered positive joint activities, encouraging fun and play, and special occasions, such as birthdays

should be celebrated. These will enable siblings to develop the reciprocal aspects of their relationships with their sisters and brothers, rather than complementary aspects, which proved to be problematic to many of the foster children. Perhaps space could be made available in the foster home, where children could receive visitors and play host, if the child's own room does not accommodate visitors.

Taking into account the siblings' complex living situations, maintaining contact between separated siblings is likely to demand goodwill and co-operation between social workers, parents and alternative carers, and demand practical and financial resources and social worker time (Jones, 1999). The maintenance of contact between separated siblings should be considered as part of the review and other planning fora, so that practical and other potential obstacles to maintaining contact can be identified and attempts made to overcome them. Clear agency policies on siblings, and commitment at the senior management level, is needed to ensure that resource issues do not prevent contact being maintained (Beckett, 1999; Tomlinson, 1999).

Return home

Nearly 90% children who are looked after eventually return to their families through various routes (Bullock et al. 1993). Although the majority of children return home after being looked after for a relatively short period, many going through this process more than once, some young people return as 'care leavers' after reaching the upper statutory age of being looked after. The return process can be equally difficult for children as the original separation from home (Farmer and Parker, 1991; Bullock et al., 1993). Siblings can act as a bridge by assisting in the return process, particularly as children often return to a changed family situation. Siblings may be one of the few 'constants' in the looked after children's rapidly changing families. Therefore, maintenance of sibling contact, and provision of accurate information about separated siblings, is important to assist all of the siblings to adjust to their new relationships and changed circumstances during and after the return process.

Children in need

The findings of this study suggest that, while it is not too late to pay attention to sibling issues for children in short-term care, more could be done to promote positive relationships and prevent negative relationships developing between children growing up in families under stress. Parents of 'children in need' are often in contact with voluntary, social work and health care agencies before children are

in contact with voluntary, social work and health care agencies before children are accommodated (Litzelfelner, 1995). It is important to pay attention to children's sibling relationships before children enter public care, and to find ways of intervening with families, where sibling relationships are likely to suffer. Based on the children's views, such families include those subject to men's violence against mothers. Organisations working with women and children in Women's Aid Refuges (Debonnaire, 1994; Higgins, 1994; Loosey, 1994; Saunders, 1994) and in the community with women and children who have experienced domestic violence have began working specifically with children. Children's workers focus on children's strengths and coping strategies in a safe environment. The promotion of non-violent atmosphere within the refuges teaches children not to hit their siblings or other children (Mullender et al., 1998). These projects are in a prime position to undertake proactive work with children and their siblings. They can also identify and refer siblings for further therapeutic help, before negative sibling relationships become more entrenched. Public support to these voluntary agencies is important to ensure that such work continues.

Long-term perspective

Social workers have a key role in maintaining continuity of sibling relationships. They have considerable authority in respect of making decisions about children's lives. Placement decisions made at the point of entry into care can have long-term consequences, as there are rarely plans to re-unite separated siblings in care (Kosonen, 1996a). Because of children's experiences of separation and loss, contact with siblings can be one element of family continuity for looked after children. It is important to take a lifetime perspective on sibling relationships, and consider means and ways of reducing a potential for total severance of links with siblings.

The long-term importance of siblings to children was demonstrated by the children's expectations of the future. They envisaged their siblings to play an important role in their lives in the future. Facilitating ongoing contact between children in foster care and their siblings, if a joint placement is not possible, is vitally important for the sake of the children's long-term welfare. Siblings provide our longest lasting relationships, often extending throughout lifetime. Children growing up apart from their brothers and sisters, lacking contact or knowledge about their siblings may be deprived of

family support in adult life. Much more should be done to foster sibling relationships for children who are separated from their families

Appendices

- Appendix 1 Sibling relationships questionnaire (SRQ) - community study
- Appendix 2 Foster care study sample
- Appendix 3 Child's family background and sibling relationship history questionnaire
- Appendix 4 Sibling relationship questionnaire (SRQ) – foster care study
- Appendix 5 Interview guide
- Appendix 6 Prompt cards
- Appendix 7 Foster carer's perceptions of child's relationships with siblings
- Appendix 8 Children's involvement with siblings as rated by the family relations test

**SIBLING RELATIONSHIP QUESTIONNAIRE –
COMMUNITY STUDY**

**WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT
YOUR SISTERS AND BROTHERS?**

I am interested in children's opinions about their sisters and brothers. For example, what do you think is good about having sisters and brothers, what is not so good, and what is OK, or simply bearable about having sisters and brothers?

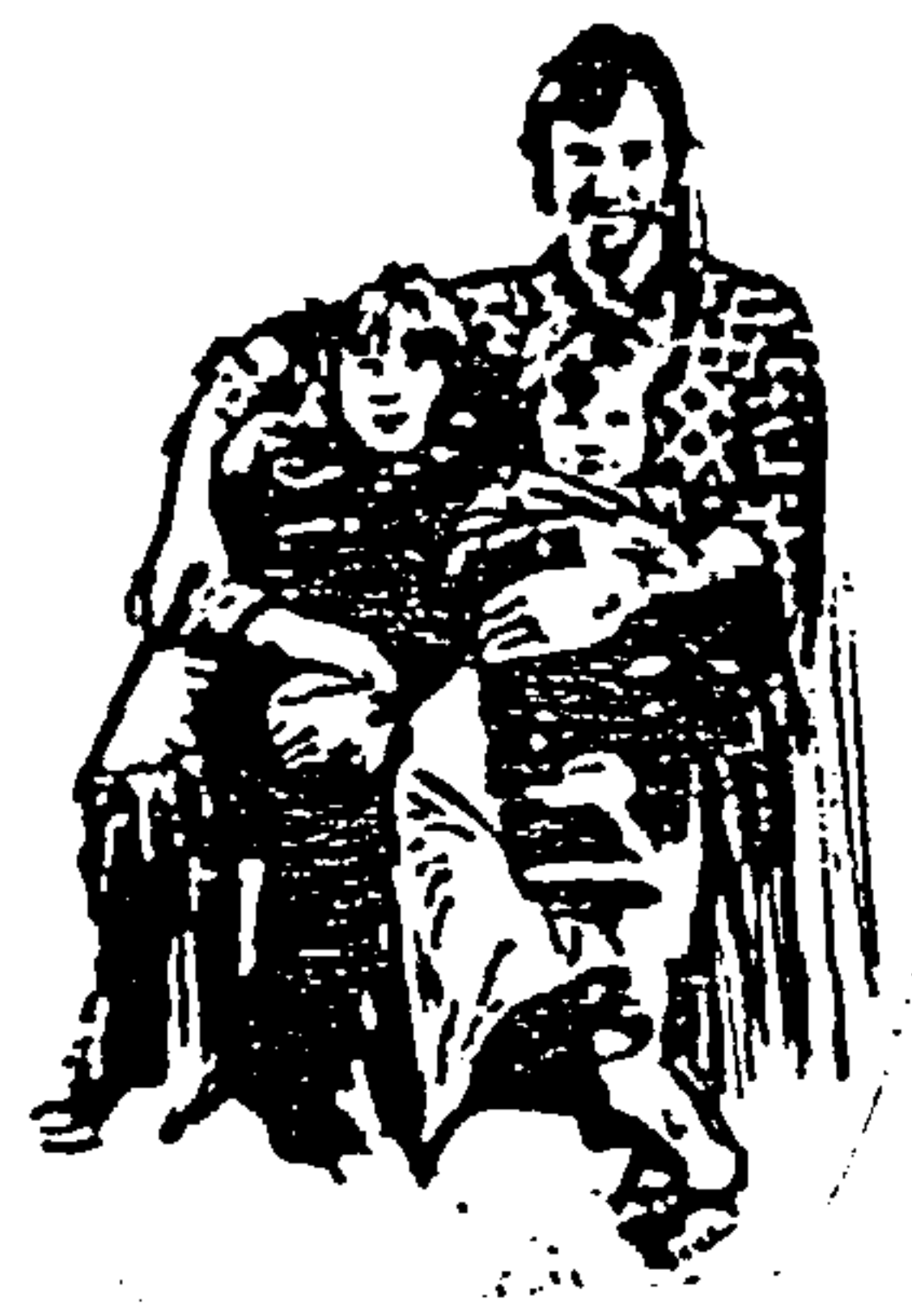
I would like to know what you think about your own sisters and brothers, and how you get on with each one of them. You may feel quite differently about each one of your sisters and brothers, and that is quite normal.

What you say about your sisters and brothers is CONFIDENTIAL. That means no one else will know what you say apart from me. I will not tell other people, such as parents or your sisters and brothers what you have said.

Hope you enjoy completing this questionnaire.

FIRST A FEW POINTS ABOUT FAMILIES

Families come in many shapes and sizes.
Some are small,



Some are large,

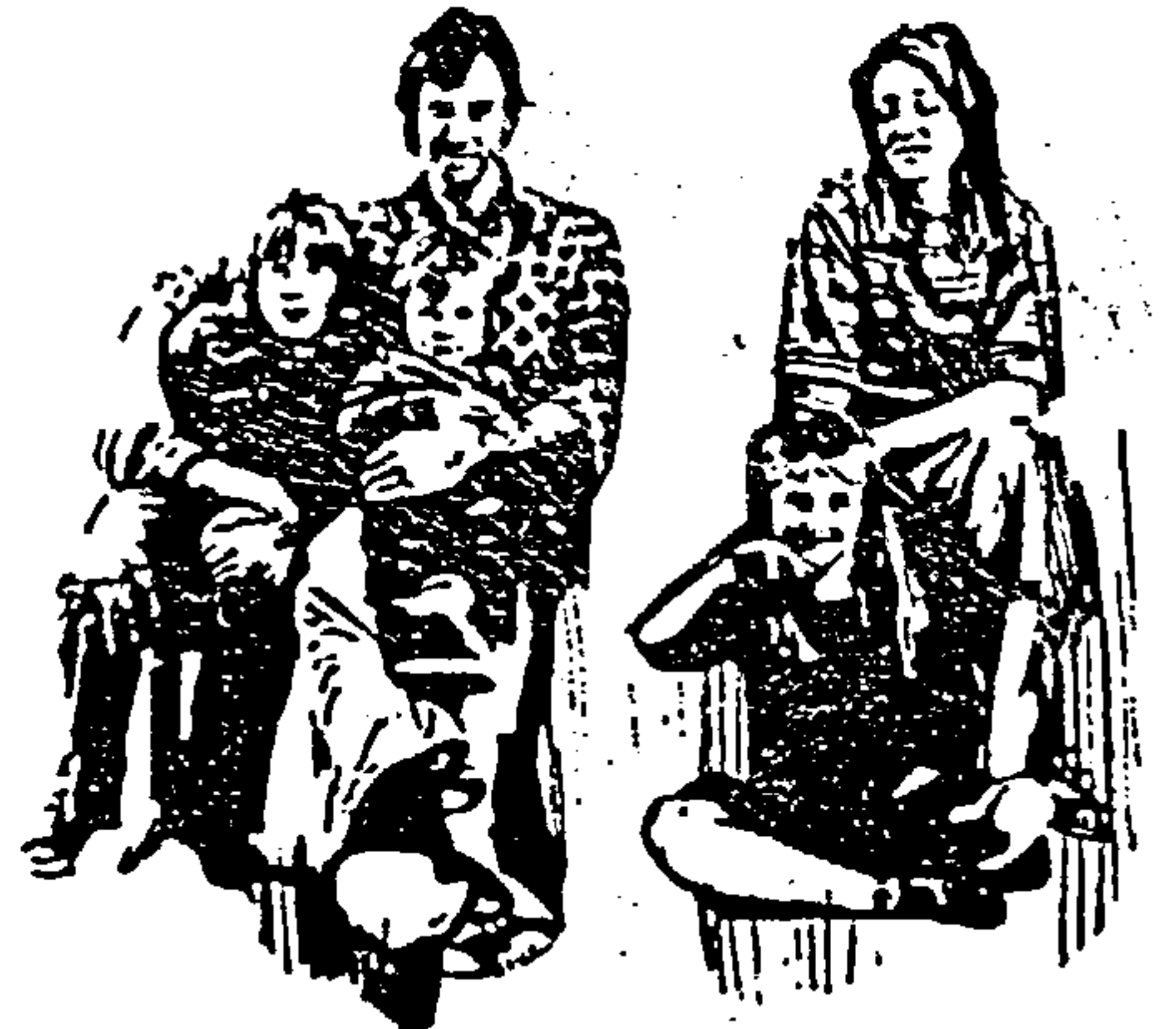


some families live with a
mum and a dad,



others with one parent, a mum or a dad.

There are also different kinds of sisters and brothers, some who were born to the same mum and dad, others may have the same mum but have a different dad, or may have the same dad but a different mum. They are often called half-sisters and brothers.



There are also step-sisters and brothers. They have come to live in the same family after one of their parents has set up a home with a new partner or got married for a second time.

The new partner may have children, they are called **step-sisters and step-brothers**.

I want to know whom you think of as **your family**, and I will ask you to answer a few questions about them.

SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS QUESTIONNAIRE – COMMUNITY STUDY

Child's Code No

1. I am aged (please tick)

8	
9	
10	
11	
12	

2. I am (please tick)

a girl	
a boy	

3. Who lives in your home? Write down everyone including people and pets.

Relationship to you

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

4. Who belongs to your family and lives at home? Write down everyone, include people and pets, and their relationship to you, i.e. mum, dad, stepmother or father, sister, brother etc.

Please make clear if anyone is a step parent/sister/brother or half sister/brother.

	Relationship to you	Sister's/brother's age
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

5. Are there any members of your immediate family such as father, sister, brother etc not living at home? (please tick)

Yes	
No	

If so, who are they?	Relationship to you	Sister's/brother's age
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

6. **What about friends?** Write down the names and ages of your best friends and say whether they are a boy or a girl. You can write as few or as many as you like.

Name	Please Circle	Age	Name	Please Circle	Age
	Boy/Girl			Boy/Girl	
	Boy/Girl			Boy/Girl	
	Boy/Girl			Boy/Girl	
	Boy/Girl			Boy/Girl	
	Boy/Girl			Boy/Girl	

7. **How many of these are also friends of any of your sisters/brothers**

8. **How many sisters and brothers do you have?**
(include half-sisters/brothers, stepsisters/brothers and foster sisters/brothers)

9. **How many of them live with you?**

10. **What is your position in the family?**
Please tick

- I am the youngest
- I am the oldest
- I am the middle child/one of the middle children

11. **Think about your own family, friends, pets and other people you know (like teachers and neighbours) and write down the most important to you. Put the most important ones first, then second most important ones etc. You may have more than one on the same line.**

Their relationship to you

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

12. **The things I like most about my sister(s) and brother(s) are:**

.....

.....

.....

.....

13. **The things I like least about my sister(s) and brother(s) are:**

.....

.....

.....

.....

14. What is different about your sisters and brothers (apart from the fact that they may live with you) compared to your friends?

15. When you are worried about something who do you tell first?
 (please tick – you can tick more than one)

- older sister
- older brother
- younger sister
- younger brother
- mother
- father
- grandmother
- grandfather
- friend
- someone else
- nobody

Say who?

16. When you need help with something you cannot do, who do you ask?
 (please tick – you can tick more than one)

- older sister
- older brother
- younger sister
- younger brother
- Mother
- father
- grandmother
- grandfather
- friend
- someone else
- nobody

Say who?

17. Does/do your sister(s)/brother(s) look after you sometimes?

Yes No

18. Do you like being looked after by your sister(s)/brother(s)?

Yes No Sometimes

19. Why

20. Do you look after your sister(s) and brother(s) sometimes?

Yes No

21. If so, do you like looking after your sister(s) and brother(s)?

Yes No Sometimes

22. Why

23. I wish I were
(please tick)

the youngest in my family
the oldest in my family
the middle child/one of the middle children

24. Why

25. Sometimes children think that parents treat sisters and brothers differently. Who is the favourite child in your family?
(please tick)

me
my older sister
my younger sister

my older brother
my younger brother
nobody

26. What do you think a perfect sister is like? Please describe her.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

27. What do you think a perfect brother is like? Please describe him.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

28. Would you rather be an only child?

Yes No Sometimes

29. Why.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

I would now like to ask some questions about **your brothers and sisters.**

I expect you feel different about **each sister and brother.**

Child's Code No

SISTER'S/BROTHER'S NAME

She/he is aged

sister
brother
half sister

step sister
step brother
half brother

CIRCLE ALL THE WORDS AND PHRASES WHICH DESCRIBE HIM/HER AND HOW YOU GET ON WITH HIM/HER.

nice to me

shares things with me

cares about me

loves me

is proud of me

helps me

sticks up for me

tells me what to do

calls me names

teases me

argues with me

gets angry with me

gets on with me

fights with me

misses me if we are not together

is fun to be with

shows me how to do things

looks up to me

makes me do things

teaches me new things

annoys me

bosses me around

bullies me

gets me in trouble

thinks a lot of me

I am nice to him/her

I get on with him/her

I share things with him/her

I give him/her fun

I care about him/her

I love him/her

I miss him/her if we are not together

I am proud of him/her

I look up to him/her

I help him/her

I show him/her how to do things

I teach him/her new things

I stick up for him/her

I tell him/her what to do

I make him/her do things

I boss him/her around

I call him/her names

I tease him/her

I annoy him/her

I argue with him/her

I get him/her in trouble

I get angry with him/her

I bully him/her

I think a lot of him/her

I fight with him/her

How I feel about my sister/brother.

Can you please tick which of the following statements you agree with – or how much you agree with them.

- | | | | | |
|-----|---|------------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. | We like the same things | often | sometimes | never |
| 2. | We look alike | very alike | alike | not alike |
| 3. | We have the same personality | very alike | alike | not alike |
| 4. | We tell each other things we don't want other people to know | often | sometimes | never |
| 5. | We tell each other everything | often | sometimes | never |
| 6. | We go to places and do a lot together | often | sometimes | never |
| 7. | We spend a lot of time together | often | sometimes | never |
| 8. | We play together a lot and have fun | often | sometimes | never |
| 9. | We compete a lot with each other | often | sometimes | never |
| 10. | We want to see who is the best at something | often | sometimes | never |

Growing up with my sister/brother

11. We have always lived together.
(Please tick)

Yes
No

12. If not, can you tell me why?

.....
.....

13. We have been away from each other for longer than
(Please tick)

over 2 nights
over a week
over a month
over six months
over a year

14. Can you tell me why?

.....
.....

15. Some children miss their sisters and brothers a lot when they are not together. How much did you miss your sister/brother?
(Please tick)

a lot
quite a lot
a little bit
not at all

What about when I am grown up?

(Please circle)

- | | | | |
|---|------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| 16. How often do you think you will see him/her | often | not often | Never |
| 17. I would like to live near to him/her | very near | not so near | far away |
| 18. We will do a lot together when we are grown up, for example, go shopping, baby-sit for each other, go to football or help each other in other ways | yes | not sure | No |
| 19. We will have great fun together | yes | not sure | No |
| 20. I would miss him/her if I never saw him/her again | yes | not sure | No |

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Well done!!!

FOSTER CARE SAMPLE (21 children – 11 families, 7 girls and 14 boys)

CHILD	GENDER	AGE	CORE SIBLINGS	TYPE OF SIBLINGS	NO PLACED WITH	NO SEPARATED FROM	POSITION IN FAMILY	KIN SIBLINGS
1. Arron	M	9 years 9 months	4	2 half-sisters 2 half-brothers	0	4	second youngest of 5	Not known
2. David	M	8	4	1 twin sister 1 half-sister 2 half-brothers	1	3	youngest (twin) of 5	Not known
3. Judy	F	8	4	1 twin brother 1 half-sister 2 half-brothers	1	3	youngest (twin) of 5	Not known
4. Alex	M	8	2	1 full sister 1 half-brother	2	0	youngest of 3	1 half-brother aged 16 1 half-sister aged 13
5. Nina	F	11	2	1 full brother 1 half-brother	2	0	middle child of 3	1 half-brother aged 16 1 half-sister aged 13
6. Fraser	M	12 yrs 11 mths	2	1 half-brother 1 half-sister	2	0	oldest of 3	1 half-brother aged 16 1 half-sister aged 13

CHILD	GENDER	AGE	CORE SIBLINGS	TYPE OF SIBLINGS	NO PLACED WITH	NO SEPARATED FROM	POSITION IN FAMILY	KIN SIBLINGS
7. Kelly	F	8 yrs 4 mths	3	1 full brother 2 half-brothers	1	2	youngest of 4 (oldest was adopted as a baby - returned to family at 18)	7 half-brothers.
8. Peter	M	10 yrs 1 mth	3	2 half-brothers 1 full sister	1	2	second youngest of 4 (oldest was adopted as a baby - returned to family at 18)	7 half-brothers
9. Andrew	M	9 yrs 6 mths	1	1 half-brother	0	1	younger of 2	1 half-sister (foster carer says there are more sibs- father has other children)
10. Daniel	M	11 yrs 10 mths	1	1 half-brother	0	1	older of 2	1 half-sister (foster carer says there are more sibs- father has other children)

CHILD	GENDER	AGE	CORE SIBLINGS	TYPE OF SIBLINGS	NO PLACED WITH	NO SEPARATED FROM	POSITION IN FAMILY	KIN SIBLINGS
11. Sam	M	8 yrs 9 mths	2	1 full sister 1 full brother	0	2	youngest of 3	Not known
12. Sarah	F	9 yrs 7 mths	2	2 full brothers	0	2	middle child of 3	Not known
13. Cheryl	F	9 yrs 11 mths	6	5 full sisters 1 full brother	1	5	middle child of 7	father has another family abroad - number of half-siblings not known
14. Lea	F	11 yrs	6	5 full sisters 1 full brother	1	5	third oldest of 7	father has another family abroad - number of half-siblings not known
15. Simon	M	10 yrs 11 mths	2	1 half-sister 1 half-brother	2	0	oldest of 3	1 half-sibling
16. Nicky	M	8 yrs 9 mths	2	1 half-sister 1 half-brother	2	0	middle of 3	1 half-sibling

CHILD	GENDER	AGE	CORE SIBLINGS	TYPE OF SIBLINGS	NO PLACED WITH	NO SEPARATED FROM	POSITION IN FAMILY	KIN SIBLINGS
17. Stephen	M	11 yrs 11 mths	3	1 full sister 2 half-sisters	1	2	oldest of 4	3 step-siblings aged 15, 17 and 19
18. Gina	F	8 yrs 9 mths	3	1 full brother 2 half sisters	1	2	second oldest of 4	3 step-siblings aged 15, 17 and 19
19. Eric	M	12 yrs 3 mths	2	1 full sister 1 half-brother	0	2	middle child of 3	2 step-brothers
20. Stuart	M	11 yrs 3 mths	2	1 full sister 1 full brother	0	2	youngest of 3	1 half-brother
21. Michael	M	12 yrs 6 mths	1	1 full sister	0	1	younger of 2	1 half-brother
TOTAL	14 male 7 female	average age 10	57	29 half-siblings 28 full siblings	18	39	4 oldest 9 middle 8 youngest	35 27 half-siblings 8 step-siblings

University of Glasgow
Centre for the Study of the Child and Society

Exploration of Sibling Relationships for Children in Care
Research Study

**CHILD'S FAMILY BACKGROUND AND SIBLING
RELATIONSHIP HISTORY QUESTIONNAIRE**

Marjut Kosonen

CHILD'S FAMILY BACKGROUND AND SIBLING RELATIONSHIP HISTORY QUESTIONNAIRE

Name and office of Social Worker completing questionnaire: Tel No:

CHILD DETAILS Child's Name..... Date of completion:

1. URN No: 2. Child's date of birth: 3. Child's age: Years Months

 4. Gender of child: 5. Child's ethnic background (select from code list)

 6. How long ago was the case first referred to the Social Work Department? (in years and months)
 7. Primary reason for the initial referral (select from list)
 8. How long is it since the last RIC? (in months) 9. Current statute (select from list):
 10. Is the child's name on the CP Register?: Yes No 11. Has the child's name been previously on the register? Yes No
 12. Category of registration (select from list) 13. Are any of the child's siblings currently on CP Register? Yes No
 14. If yes, number of siblings registered: 15. Have any of the child's siblings been previously on register? Yes No
 16. If the child's name is not on the CP Register, is there any other evidence that the child may have been subject to physical, sexual or emotional abuse? Yes No
- If yes, please give details
-

CHILD'S FAMILY COMPOSITION

17. Do the child's family members, who live at home, include any of the following?:

	Yes	No	
Birth mother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Birth father	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Stepmother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Stepfather	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Mother's cohabitee	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Father's cohabitee	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Grandparent(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Say who
Other relative	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Say who

Do any of the family members not live at home?:

Yes

If not living at the family home, please state where they live and approximate distance to family home (in miles):

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

18. Please complete the following details in respect of the child's siblings (include all siblings, full, half, step, adoptive etc. regardless whether the child has ever lived with them: If not living at the family home, please state where (e.g. foster placement, residential unit, with relatives etc.) sibling(s) live(s) and approximate distance to the child's current placement (in miles) and reason for the separation from the child:

	Type of sibling (see code list)	Lives at home		Sibling's living situation	Distance from child's placement	Reason for separation
		Yes	No			
Sibling 1	<input type="text"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 2	<input type="text"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 3	<input type="text"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 4	<input type="text"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 5	<input type="text"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 6	<input type="text"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

PLACEMENT DETAILS

19. Where is the child currently placed? : Please tick

- Temporary foster home
 - Mainstay foster home
 - Barnardos foster home
 - Department residential unit
 - Residential school
 - Secure unit
 - Relative foster care
 - Other (please specify)..
-

20. Date of current placement: Expected length of placement:

21. How far is the child's placement from the family home? miles

22. How well does the current placement meet the child's needs:

Unsatisfactory Satisfactory Well

Please give details:

.....

.....

.....

CHILD'S PAST FAMILY SITUATION

Yes No Don't know

23. Prior the current RIC has the child always lived with both parent(s)
24. If no, please give details of **child's previous living situations**, including placements in care and length of each living situation i.e. with birth mother (birth – 18 months), with birth mother + cohabitee (19 months – 3 years). Alternatively, if you have a flow chart or a chronological history of child's previous living situations (AO14a), please attach this to the questionnaire.
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-

25(a) Number of previous admissions into care 25(b) Number of placements

26. Total length of time the child has spent in care and placed outside the family home.

CHILD'S SEPARATIONS FROM SIBLINGS

27. Please give details of child's separations from siblings, as far as you know.

	Type of sibling (use previous categories)	Has always lived with the child.	No of separations over 2 weeks from the child	Total length of all separations	Proportion of childhood spent together %	Reasons for separations	Don't Know
Sibling 1		Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 2		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 3		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 4		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 5		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 6		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>

ASSESSMENT OF CHILD'S FAMILY

27. Please give a brief description of the family and problems which lead to child being placed in care:

28. Please give an assessment of the quality of emotional climate, family stress and conflict in the family, and how these reflect in family relationships (i.e. family violence, aggression, general negativity etc.):

29. Please give an assessment of quality of parenting, parental consistency, stability and physical/emotional availability of parents to this child and child and his/her siblings:

30. Were there any differences in the way this child and his/her siblings were treated by parent(s)? Yes No
If yes, what differences?

31. Have there been any marked changes in the family relationships, emotional climate of the family or quality of parenting (which you are aware of) during this child's childhood? Yes No
If yes, please describe (i.e. changes for better or worse/when?)

32. Have there been any significant changes in the family composition or living situation, since the child has been in care?
Yes No
If yes, what has changed?

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

34. Please use the following table to describe your assessment of the family relationships for the child immediately prior to the child's admission to care. Tick as many boxes as you consider relevant and which describe the relationships best.

Family Members	Quality of Relationship								
	Close	Warm	Supportive	Caring	Indifferent	Cool	Conflictual	Hostile	Don't Know
Birth mother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Birth father	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Stepmother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Stepfather	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mother's cohabitee	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Father's cohabitee	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 2	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 3	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 4	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 5	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 6	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maternal grandparent(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paternal grandparent(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other relatives (state who)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

SOCIAL WORKER'S VIEWS

35. What, in your view are the most salient characteristics of the child's relationship with each sibling Please state both positive and negative aspects of the relationship.

Sibling 1	
Sibling 2	
Sibling 3	
Sibling 4	
Sibling 5	
Sibling 6	

36. Do you hold any particular views on placing children in care with their siblings?
Please tell me what your views are

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

37. Has being in care affected **this child's** relationships with his/her sibling(s)? Yes No
If so, what has changed?

.....
.....

38. What do you think are the benefits for **this child** to be placed together with sibling(s) (if applicable)?

.....
.....

39. What do you think are the disadvantages for **this child** to be placed together with sibling(s) (if applicable)?

.....
.....

40. What do you think are the benefits for **this child** of being separated from sibling(s) (if applicable)?

.....
.....

41. What do you think are the disadvantages for **this child** of being separated from sibling(s) (if applicable)?

.....
.....

SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION

ASSESSMENT OF SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

42. Has the assessment of the child at any time up to now, included an assessment which specifically focused on the child's relationship with his/her siblings? Yes No

If yes, when was this done?

If yes, can you describe how this was done:

.....

.....

.....

How important a part of the assessment was it?

.....

43. Were any of the following activities used as part of the assessment? Please tick which applies: Yes No

43(a) • Child's own views were sought on his/her relationship with each sibling?

• If yes, what were the child's views:

.....

43(b) • Child's siblings' views were sought?

• If yes, what were the views of each sibling:

.....

43(c) • Children were seen together as part of the assessment process? Yes No

43(d) • If yes, how many siblings were seen together:

43(e) • **Parents were asked to comment on the child's relationship with siblings?** Yes No
• **If yes, what insights did parents offer:**

43(f) • **Was anyone else involved in assessing child's relationship with his/her siblings, such as foster/ residential carers, psychologist, etc?** Yes No
• **If yes, say who.**

43(g) • **Were any other methods used in the process, such as 'Patterns & Outcomes' sibling relationship questionnaire, family map, paper & pencil exercises etc?** Yes No
• **If yes, say which methods did you use:**

43(h) • **Have you or someone else observed the child's behaviour and interaction with siblings as part of the assessment process?** Yes No
• **If no, give reasons.**
• **If yes, with which siblings?**

43(i) • **When was this done?**
.....
.....

43(j) • **How did you do this (i.e. t the family home, foster home, somewhere else, with parents etc.)**
.....
.....

PLACEMENT DECISION

Questions refer to the **current placement of the child.**

44. Please describe **when** (date) the placement decision was made?

45. **Who** made the decision?

46. **What information** was available to influence the decision?

47. Was the decision made to place the child (a) • with one or more but not all of the siblings (State no of siblings) _____
or (b) • with all of the siblings
or (c) • with none of the siblings
Yes No

47(a) Were the **child's feelings and wishes** sought regarding the placement with siblings or without?

If not, why not:

What were the child's feelings and wishes?

47(b) Were the **child's siblings' views** sought on the decision to be placed with the child or not?

If not, why not:

If yes, what were the views of individual siblings on the matter?

.....

47(c) Were the **parents' views** on placing the child with siblings or not sought?

If not, why not:

If yes, what were parents' views on the matter?

.....

Yes No

47(d) Were foster carers' views sought on the placement of child with siblings or not sought?

If not, why not:

If yes, what were their views:

47(e) Was anyone else consulted? If yes, who?

47(f) What, if any, were the practical or financial difficulties influencing the decision?
.....
.....

47(g) Can you say what were the most important factors influencing the decision to place the child with the siblings or not?
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Yes No

47(h) Are you satisfied with the decision to place the child with sibling(s) or separately?

If not, why not:

47(i) What are the child's current views, as far as you know?
.....
.....

48. Please use the following table to indicate the frequency of face-to-face contact between the child and his/her family members.

	Lives with child	Daily	At least weekly	At least monthly	2-3 times a year	None	Don't Know	Frequency and type of any other contact
Birth mother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Birth father	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Stepmother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Stepfather	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mother's cohabitee	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Father's cohabitee	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 1	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 2	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 3	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 4	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 5	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling 6	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maternal grandparent(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Paternal grandparent(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other relatives (state who)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 48(a) How were contact arrangements for the child agreed?
.....
- 48(b) Who made the decisions regarding contact?
- 48 (c) When were the contact arrangements last reviewed?
- 48(d) Have the child's feelings and wishes about the adequacy and type of contact with siblings living separate from the child been sought? Yes No
- If not, why not:
- If yes, what are the child's feelings and wishes?:
- 48(e) Have the child's siblings' (living apart) views about adequacy and type of contact with the study child been sought? Yes No
- If not, why not:
- If yes, what are the siblings' views?:
- 48(f) Have all siblings, who have contact, been given the child's address and telephone number? Yes No Some Say who _____ Don't know
- 48(g) Has the child been given the addresses and telephone numbers (if exist) of all siblings who have contact? Yes No Some Say who _____ Don't know
- 48(h) Have the carers been given the addresses and telephone numbers (if exist) of all siblings who have contact? Yes No Some Say who _____ Don't know
- 48(i) Can you describe what happens between the child and each sibling living separate from the child, when they meet (for instance, how do they get on, what do they do together)?
-

PLANNING FOR FUTURE

49. What is the child's current care plan, please tick?

Return home to parent(s) Remain with current carers Move to the care of a relative or a friend

Permanent placement in a family Move to residential care (state where?)

Other (please describe)

49(a) If the child is currently separated from all or some of his/her siblings, does the plan include reunification with siblings?

Yes No N/A

49(b) If yes, is this part of reunification with parents? Yes No Please give details.
.....

49(c) Or reunification with siblings in care? Yes No Please give details.
.....

49(d) If yes, state with which siblings.
.....

49(e) Expected timescales.
.....

49(f) If no, state reasons:
.....
.....
.....

49(g) Are there any particular practical or financial obstacles to reunification with siblings? Yes No N/A
If yes, please give details.
.....
.....

50. What do you feel is the significance of each sibling to the child in the future, i.e. what do you see is the likely role for siblings in the child's life in the long-term?

Sibling 1	
Sibling 2	
Sibling 3	
Sibling 4	
Sibling 5	
Sibling 6	

51. Is there anything else you wish to say about this child's relationship with his/her siblings?

.....

SIBLING RELATIONSHIP QUESTIONNAIRE – FOSTER CARE STUDY

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT YOUR SISTERS AND BROTHERS?

I am interested in children's opinions about their sisters and brothers. For example, what do you think is good about having sisters and brothers, what is not so good, and what is OK, or simply bearable about having sisters and brothers?

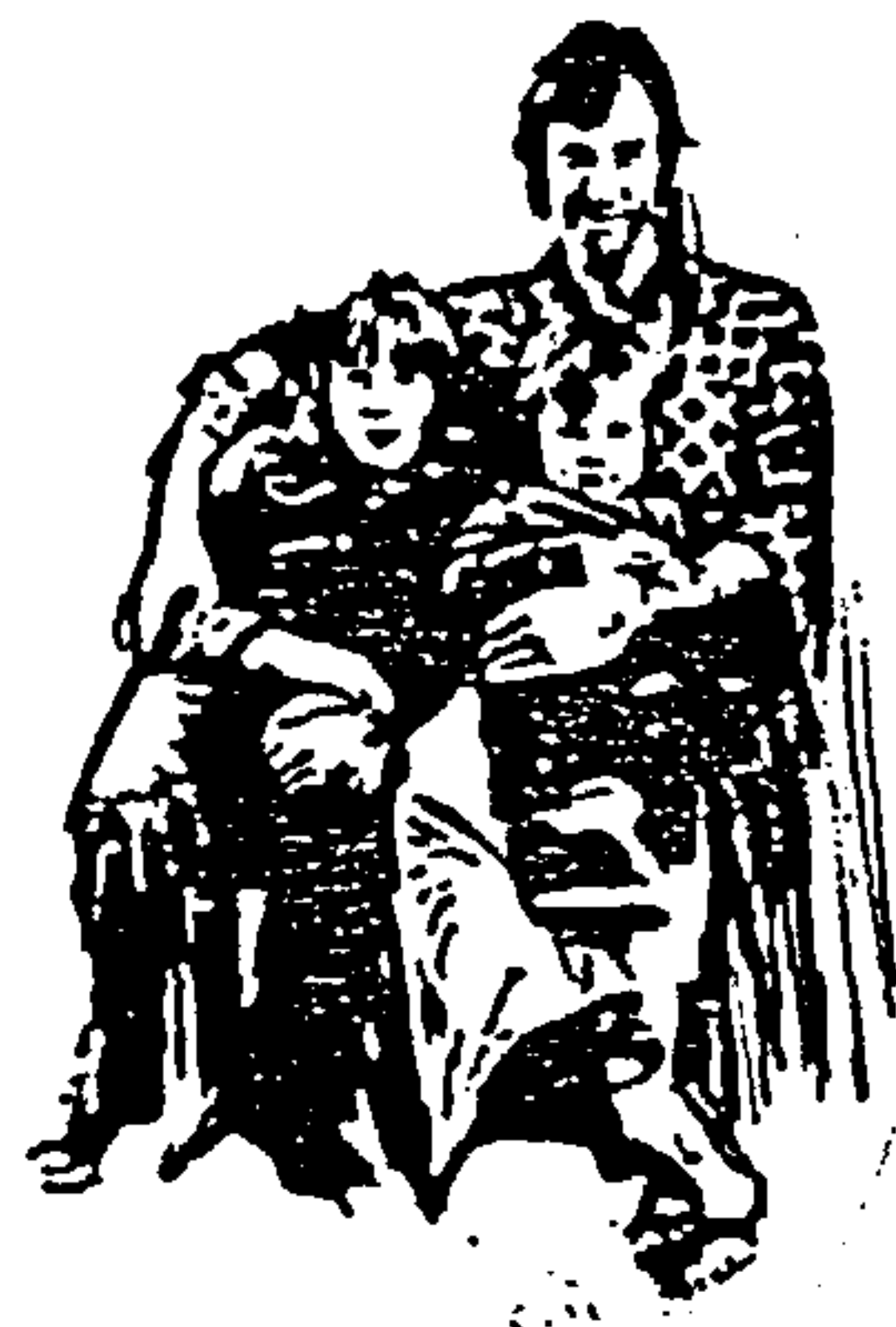
I would like to know what you think about your own sisters and brothers, and how you get on with each one of them. You may feel quite differently about each one of your sisters and brothers, and that is quite normal.

What you say about your sisters and brothers is CONFIDENTIAL. That means no one else will know what you say apart from me. I will not tell other people, such as foster carers, parents or your sisters and brothers what you have said.

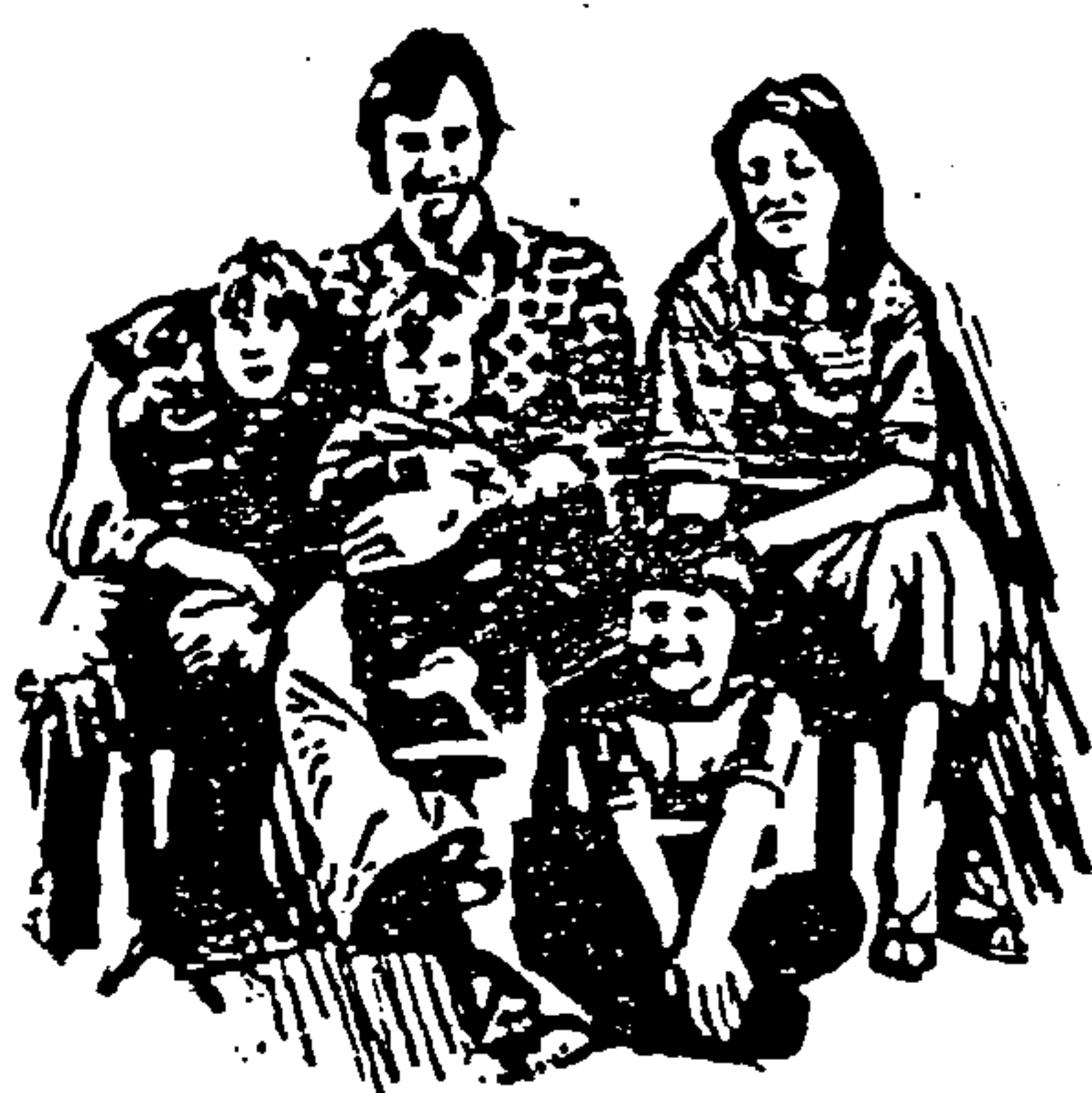
Hope you enjoy completing this questionnaire.

FIRST A FEW POINTS ABOUT FAMILIES

Families come in many shapes and sizes.
Some are small,



Some are large,

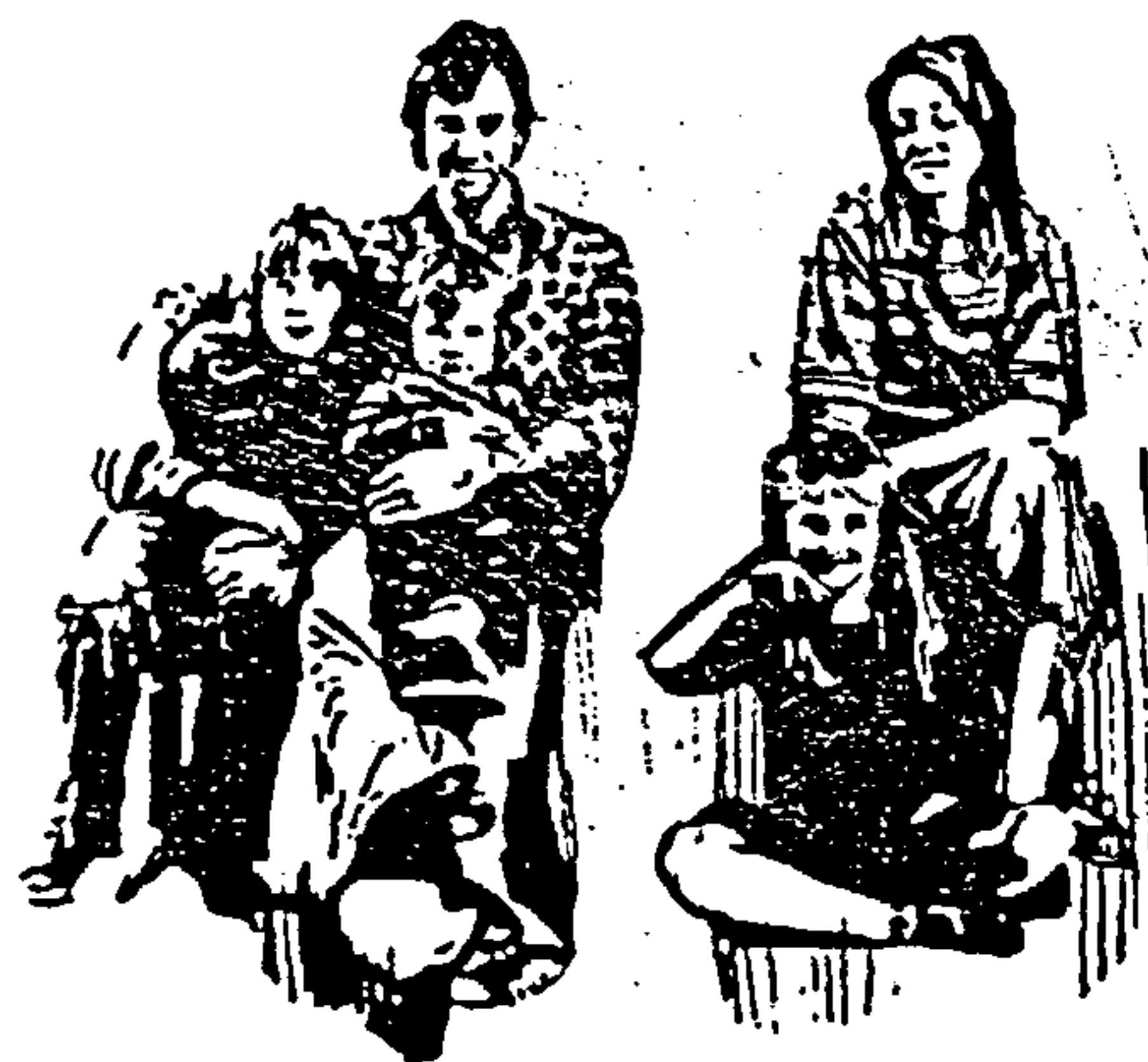


some families live with a
mum and a dad,

others with one parent, a mum or a dad.

There are also different kinds of sisters and brothers, some who were born to the same mum and dad, others may have the same mum but have a different dad, or may have the same dad but a different mum. They are often called half-sisters and brothers.

There are also step-sisters and brothers. They have come to live in the same family after one of their parents has set up a home with a new partner or got married for a second time.



The new partner may have children, they are called **step-sisters and step-brothers**.

I want to know whom you think of as your family, and I will ask you to answer a few questions about them.

SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS QUESTIONNAIRE – FOSTER CARE STUDY

Child's Code No

1. I am aged (please tick)

8	
9	
10	
11	
12	

2. I am (please tick)

a girl	
a boy	

3. Who lives in the foster home? Write down everyone including people and pets.

	Relationship to you	Child's age
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

4. Who belongs to your family and lives at home? Write down everyone, include people and pets, and their relationship to you, i.e. mum, dad, stepmother or father, sister, brother etc.

Please make clear if anyone is a step parent/sister/brother or half sister/brother.

	Relationship to you	Sister's/brother's age
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

5. Are there any members of your immediate family such as father, sister, brother etc not living at home? (please tick)

Yes	
No	

If so, who are they?	Relationship to you	Sister's/brother's age
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

6. **What about friends?** Write down the names and ages of your best friends and say whether they are a boy or a girl. You can write as few or as many as you like.

Name	Please Circle	Age	Name	Please Circle	Age
	Boy/Girl			Boy/Girl	
	Boy/Girl			Boy/Girl	
	Boy/Girl			Boy/Girl	
	Boy/Girl			Boy/Girl	
	Boy/Girl			Boy/Girl	

7. **How many of these are also friends of any of your sisters/brothers**

8. **How many sisters and brothers do you have?** (include half-sisters/brothers, stepsisters/brothers and foster sisters/brothers)

9. **How many of them live with you?**

10. **What is your position in the family?**
Please tick

- I am the youngest
- I am the oldest
- I am the middle child/one of the middle children

11. **Think about your own family, foster family, friends, pets and other people you know (like teachers and neighbours). Who is most important to you? Put the most important ones first, then second most important ones etc. You may have more than one on the same line.**

	Their relationship to you
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

12. **The things I like most about my sister(s) and brother(s) are:**

.....

.....

.....

.....

13. **The things I like least about my sister(s) and brother(s) are:**

.....

.....

.....

.....

14. What is different about your sisters and brothers (apart from the fact that they may live with you) compared to your friends?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

15. When you are worried about something who do you tell first?
(please tick – you can tick more than one)

- older sister
- younger sister
- older brother
- younger brother
- mother
- father
- foster mother
- foster father
- friend
- grandmother
- grandfather
- someone else
- nobody

say who
.....

16. When you need help with something you cannot do, who do you ask?
(please tick – you can tick more than one)

- older sister
- younger sister
- older brother
- younger brother
- mother
- father
- foster mother
- foster father
- friend
- grandmother
- grandfather
- someone else
- nobody

say who
.....

17. Does/do your sister(s)/brother(s) look after you sometimes?

Yes No

18. Do you like being looked after by your sister(s)/brother(s)?

Yes No Sometimes

19. Why

20. Do you look after your sister(s) and brother(s) sometimes?

Yes No

21. If so, do you like looking after your sister(s) and brother(s)?

Yes No Sometimes

22. Why
.....

23. I wish I were
(please tick)

the youngest in my family
the oldest in my family
the middle child/one of the middle children

24. Why
.....

25. Sometimes children think that parents treat sisters and brothers differently. Who is the favourite child in your family?
(please tick)

me my older brother
my older sister my younger brother
my younger sister nobody

26. What do you think a perfect sister is like? Please describe her.
.....
.....
.....
.....

27. What do you think a perfect brother is like? Please describe him.
.....
.....
.....
.....

28. Would you rather be an only child?

Yes No Sometimes

29. Why.....
.....
.....
.....

Child's Code No

SISTER'S/BROTHER'S NAME _____

She/he is aged

sister
brother
half sister
half brother

step sister
step brother
foster sister
foster brother

CIRCLE ALL THE WORDS AND PHRASES WHICH DESCRIBE HIM/HER AND HOW YOU GET ON WITH HIM/HER.

nice to me

shares things with me

cares about me

loves me

is proud of me

helps me

sticks up for me

tells me what to do

calls me names

teases me

argues with me

gets angry with me

gets on with me

fights with me

misses me if we are not together

is fun to be with

shows me how to do things

looks up to me

makes me do things

teaches me new things

annoys me

bosses me around

bullies me

gets me in trouble

thinks a lot of me

I am nice to him/her

I get on with him/her

I share things with him/her

I give him/her fun

I care about him/her

I love him/her

I miss him/her if we are not together

I am proud of him/her

I look up to him/her

I help him/her

I show him/her how to do things

I teach him/her new things

I stick up for him/her

I tell him/her what to do

I make him/her do things

I boss him/her around

I call him/her names

I tease him/her

I annoy him/her

I argue with him/her

I get him/her in trouble

I get angry with him/her

I bully him/her

I think a lot of him/her

I fight with him/her

How I feel about my sister/brother.

Can you please tick which of the following statements you agree with – or how much you agree with them.

1. We like the same things	often	sometimes	never
2. We look alike	very alike	alike	not alike
3. We have the same personality	very alike	alike	not alike
4. We tell each other things we don't want other people to know	often	sometimes	never
5. We tell each other everything	often	sometimes	never
6. We go to places and do a lot together	often	sometimes	never
7. We spend a lot of time together	often	sometimes	never
8. play together a lot and have fun	often	sometimes	never
9. compete a lot with each other	often	sometimes	never
10. want to see who is the best at something	often	sometimes	never

Growing up with my sister/brother

11. We have always lived together.
(Please tick)

Yes
No

12. If not, can you tell me why?

.....
.....

13. We have been away from each other for longer than
(Please tick)

over 2 nights
over a week
over a month
over six months
over a year

14. Can you tell me why?

.....
.....

15. Some children miss their sisters and brothers a lot when they are not together. How much did you miss your sister/brother?
(Please tick)

a lot
quite a lot
a little bit
not at all

What about when I am grown up?
(Please circle)

- | | | | | |
|-----|--|-----------|-------------|----------|
| 16. | How often do you think you will see him/her | often | not often | never |
| 17. | I would like to live near to him/her | very near | not so near | far away |
| 18. | We will do a lot together when we are grown up, for example, go shopping, baby-sit for each other, go to football or help each other in other ways | yes | not sure | no |
| 19. | We will have great fun together | yes | not sure | no |
| 20. | I would miss him/her, if I never saw him/her again | yes | not sure | no |

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Well done!!!

FOSTER CARE STUDY

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Today we are going to talk more about your sister(s) and brother(s).

Can we start by talking about each one of your sisters and brothers. I would like you to tell me a little bit about each one of them, which one would you like to start with?

1. My sisters and brothers

Say something about each one of your sisters and brothers and how you get on with them.

Prompts: things I like most about
things that annoy me about
my sister always
my brother always
my sister is someone who
my brother is someone who
I wish my sister(s) and brother(s)

2. Earliest memories of siblings

What do you remember about (names of siblings) when you were very young – your earliest memories.

Prompts: my earliest memory of is
my most special memory of is
when I was small we used to

3. Relationship with siblings before coming into foster care

What do you remember about (name of siblings) the time before you came into foster care, tell me

Prompts: when I was at home, my sister(s) and brother(s) used to
things that I liked about them when we were at home
things that made me upset about them
things that made me happy about them
if I had a time machine I would go to a time when
if I could change one thing it would be

4. Views about foster placements with/without siblings

Tell me about what you like most about being in this foster home.

Prompts: three things I like about my foster home
three things I would like to change about my foster home
did anyone ask if you would like to live with your sister(s) and
brother(s)
who?
what did you say?
three best things about staying withare
if I could decide I would like to live with

5. Family likeness/identification

Who do people say you look like in your family?

Prompts: people say I look like
the person most like me in my family is
the person least like me in my family is

6. Support/help

Prompts: when I need help I go to
things that they help me with
when I am worried I talk to
when I have a secret I can always trust
When I need a hug I go to

7. Obligations/responsibilities

Prompts: I always help my sister(s) and brother(s) with
it is my job to make sure that my sister(s) and brother(s)
what can a sister/brother do for you that other people cannot?
I worry about my sister(s) and brother(s) because
When my sister/brother is upset, I will

8. Separation

Some children miss their sisters and brothers a lot when they are not together – others don't. How much do you miss?

Prompts: why?
 who do you miss most?
 What do you miss about
 I wish my sister(s) and brother(s)
 I would like to spend a day with
 if I could change one thing it would be
 I feel really sad about
 I feel really happy about
 I feel so angry about
 if I had special powers I would

9. Keeping in touch

Tell me, how do you keep in touch with (name of separated sibling(s))?

Prompts: how often do you see?
 would you like to see more or less often?
 where do you meet?
 tell me what do you do together when you meet?
 has anyone asked you how often/whether you would like to
 see
 who?
 do you know where(separated siblings) live?
 do you have Address and telephone number?
 do you visit or telephone?
 does anyone help you to keep in touch with?

10. Expectations of future

If you could decide what happens to you and your sister(s) and brother(s) in the future – what would you decide?

Prompts: what I would most like to happen to me and my sister(s) and brother(s) is
 if I had special powers I would
 if I could change my life I would
 the ideal family for me is one which
 when I grow up I will

11. Is there anything else you would like to say

12. Thank you for telling me so much about your sisters and brothers. I have really enjoyed hearing what you have said.

Is there anything that worries you about what you have said to me? If so, I'll leave my name and address so you can write me a letter later on if you wish.

Is there anything you would like me to tell your social worker?

PROMPT CARDS

**things I like most
about my sisters
and brothers**

**things that annoy
me about them**

**my sister
always ...**

**my brother
always ...**

**my sister is
someone who ...**

**my brother is
someone who ...**

**my earliest
memory of my
sister/brother
is**

**my most special
memory of my
sister/brother
is ...**

**when I was small
we used to ...**

**when I was at
home, my
sister(s)/
brother(s)
used to ...**

**things that made
me upset about
them ...**

**things that made
me happy about
them**

**three things I like
about my foster
home ...**

**three things I
would like to
change about my
foster home ...**

**best things about
staying with my
sister(s)/
brother(s) here
are ...**

**if I could decide I
would like to live
with ...**

**people say I look
like ...**

**person most like
me in my family
is ...**

**person least like
me in my family
is ...**

**when I need help
I go to ...**

**things that they
help me with ...**

**when I am
worried I talk to
...**

**when I have a
secret I can
always trust ...**

**when I need a hug
I go to ...**

**I always help my
sister(s)/
brother(s) with ...**

**it is my job to
make sure that
my sister(s)/
brother(s) ...**

**I worry about my
sister(s)/
brother(s)
because ...**

**when my sister/
brother is upset, I
will ...**

**I miss my
sister(s)/
brother(s)
because ...**

**I would like to
spend a day
with ...**

**when I see my
sister(s) and
brother(s) we ...**

**I would like to
see them more
often or less
often ...**

**if I had special
powers I would ...**

**what I would
most like to
happen to me and
my sister(s) and
brother(s) is ...**

**ideal family for
me is ...**

**when I will grow
up I will ...**

University of Glasgow

Centre for the Study of the Child and Society

**Exploration of Sibling Relationships for Children in
Care Research Study**

**FOSTER CARER'S PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD'S
RELATIONSHIPS WITH SIBLINGS**

January 1996

Marjut Kosonen

NOTES TO FOSTER CARERS COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

Understanding how children, who are separated from their parents, get on with their sisters and brothers is not always easy. Research shows that children who have suffered adverse early experiences, such as abuse, neglect, separation, loss and family stress have particular difficulties in developing positive relationships with other people, including their siblings.

Sibling relationships can be complex for children in care, and they can include both negative and positive aspects.

The purpose of this study is to consider sibling relationships from the **study child's** perspective only. All questions should be considered from the child's perspective.

Part 1 of the questionnaire contains general questions relating to the child in your foster home. Your views on his/her relationships with other people and with his/her sisters and brothers in general are sought in this part of the questionnaire.

Part II of the questionnaire should be completed in respect of each sibling living with the child, or with whom there is significant contact. You should complete Part II only where you have had **opportunities to observe the child's behaviour and interaction with sibling(s)**. **Answers should be based on actual observed behaviour of the child and his/her sibling.**

You may have observed the child with sibling(s) on access visits, and feel that you are able to complete a questionnaire in respect of some siblings who are not living with the child.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

**FOSTER CARER'S PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD'S RELATIONSHIP WITH SIBLINGS –
PART I**

Name of the foster carer completing the questionnaire:
(main foster carer)

Address Tel No

Date of completion:

CHILD DETAILS

1. URN No

2. Child's Name

3. Do any of the child's siblings live with the child? Yes No

If yes, please give names and ages of siblings living with the child
.....
.....

4. Names and ages of siblings (including half and step-siblings not living with the child
.....
.....

5. Does the child share a room with his/her sibling(s)? Yes No N/A

6. How long has the child lived with you?
(years-months)

FOSTER CARER'S VIEWS

7. Please tell me what are your general views on placing children in care with their sisters and brothers?
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

FOSTER FAMILY COMPOSITION AND CHILD'S RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE FOSTER HOME

8. Please list everyone who lives with the child (i.e. foster mother, foster father, foster carers' children, their ages, other foster children and their ages, anyone else).

Use the following table to describe the quality of relationships for the child. Tick as many boxes as you consider relevant and which describe the relationships best.

Foster family members	Quality of Relationship									
	Close	Warm	Supportive	Caring	Indifferent	Cool	Conflictual	Hostile	Don't know	
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

7. Can you describe the main features of the child's relationship with your own children?

8. How does the child get on with other foster children (if there are any) in your family?

9. Who are the most important people for the child in the foster home?

10. How important are the child's siblings to him/her compared to other foster children or your own children?

11. What about friends? Does the child have particular friends he/she sees outside the school and who are important to him/her?

14. Are any of these friends also friends of the child's siblings? Yes No
 If yes, how many.

CONTACT WITH SIBLINGS

15. Do you have the **addresses and telephone numbers** (if exist) of child's parents and siblings with whom the child has contact?

	Yes	No	Some	Say who	No Contact
Mother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>
Father	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>
Sibling(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>

16. Does the child **keep in touch with siblings** not living with him/her?

Yes No Some

Say who

17. What are the **arrangements for contact with siblings**?

.....

18. **Who arranges contact** between child and his/her siblings?

.....

19. Which members of his/her **family does the child miss most**? Give examples to illustrate.

.....

CARER'S ASSESSMENT OF THE CHILD'S RELATIONSHIP WITH SIBLINGS

20. How does the child **get on with siblings** he/she is placed with?

.....

21. How does the child **get on with siblings** living separate from the child?

.....

22. What does the child like doing with siblings he/she lives with?

23. How much time do they spend together?

24. What does the child like doing with siblings not living with him/her, but with whom there is contact?

25. How much time do they spend together?

26. Has the child's relationship with siblings changed in any way since he/she came to live with you? Yes No

If yes, in what way?

27. On the basis of your knowledge of this child, can you sum up the positives and negatives that the child's relationship with each sibling holds for him/her.

	Positives	Negatives
Sibling 1
Sibling 2
Sibling 3
Sibling 4
Sibling 5
Sibling 6

CARER'S VIEWS ON THE CHILD'S PLACEMENT WITH SIBLINGS

28. What do you think are the **benefits** for this child to be placed together with **sibling(s)** (if applicable)?
.....
.....
.....
.....

29. What do you think are the **disadvantages** for this child to be placed with **sibling(s)** (if applicable)?
.....
.....
.....
.....

30. What do you think are the **benefits of being separated from siblings** for this child (if applicable)?
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31. What do you think are the **disadvantages of being separated from siblings** for this child (if applicable)?
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.....

32. What do you feel is the **significance of each sibling to the child in the future, i.e. what do you see is the likely role for siblings in the child's life in the long-term?**

Sibling 1
Sibling 2
Sibling 3
Sibling 4
Sibling 5
Sibling 6

33. Has anyone else **asked your views on this child's relationship with his/her siblings** as part of an assessment, or for any other reason?
Yes No

If yes, who and for what purpose?
.....
.....
.....

34. Has anyone else **asked your views on the desirability of placing this child with his/her siblings or separate?**
Yes No

If yes, who and when?
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35. Is there anything else you wish to say about this child's relationship with his/her siblings?

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Can you, please, complete a separate questionnaire (Part II SIBLING RELATIONSHIP QUESTIONNAIRE – CARER VERSION) in respect of each sibling living with the child.

PART II – SIBLING RELATIONSHIP QUESTIONNAIRE – CARER'S VERSION

(Based on Furman SRQ Revised Parent 1990 (the maternal and paternal partiality scales have been omitted)).

CHILD'S NAME

URN No Sibling's name Age

He/she is a (please tick)

Sister Half-sister Stepsister
 Brother Half-brother Stepbrother

		Hardly at all	Somewhat	Very much
1.	Some siblings do nice things for each other a lot, while other siblings do nice things for each other a little. How much does do nice things for this sibling.	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
2.	How much does this sibling do nice things for	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
3.	How much does show this sibling how to do things he or she doesn't know how to do?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
4.	How much does this sibling show how to do things he or she doesn't know how to do?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
5.	How much does tell this sibling what to do?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
6.	How much does this sibling tell what to do?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
7.	Some siblings care about each other a lot, while other siblings don't care about each other that much. How much does care about this sibling?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
8.	How much does this sibling care about	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
9.	How much do and this sibling goes places and does things together?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
10.	How much does this sibling insult and call names?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
11.	How much does insult and call this sibling names?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
12.	How much do and this sibling like the same things?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2

		Hardly at all	Somewhat	Very much
13.	How much do and this sibling tell each other everything?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
14.	Some siblings compete with each other a lot, while other siblings compete with each other a little. How much do and this sibling compete with each other?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
15.	How much does respect and look up to this sibling?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
16.	How much does this sibling respect and look up to?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
17.	How much does disagree and argue with this sibling?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
18.	Some siblings co-operate a lot, while other siblings co-operate a little. How much does co-operate with this sibling?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
19.	How much does this sibling co-operate with?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
20.	How much does help this sibling with things he or she can't do by him or herself?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
21.	How much does this sibling help with things he or she can't do by him or herself?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
22.	How much does make this sibling do things?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
23.	How much does this sibling make do things?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
24.	How much does love this sibling?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
25.	Some siblings play around and have fun with each other a lot, while other siblings play around and have fun with each other a little. How much do and this sibling play around and have fun with each other?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
26.	How much does tease this sibling?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
27.	How much are and this sibling alike in terms of personality?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
28.	How much do and this sibling share secrets and private feelings?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2

		Hardly at all	Somewhat	Very much
29.	How much does this sibling get angry with and fight with?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
30.	How much does admire and feel proud of this sibling?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
31.	How much does this sibling admire and feel proud of?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
32.	How much does get angry with and fight with this sibling?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
33.	How much does share with this sibling?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
34.	How much does this sibling share with?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
35.	How much does teach this sibling things that he or she doesn't know?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
36.	How much does this sibling teach things that he or she doesn't know?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
37.	How much does boss this sibling around?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
38.	How much does this sibling boss around?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
39.	How much does this sibling love?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
40.	Some children spend lots of time with their siblings, while others don't spend so much. How much free time do and this sibling spend together?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
41.	How much does this sibling tease?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
42.	How much do and this sibling look alike?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
43.	How much do and this sibling tell each other things they do not want other people to know?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
44.	How much do and this sibling try to see who is the best at anything?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
45.	How much does think highly of this sibling?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
46.	How much does this sibling think highly of?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2

		Hardly at all	Somewhat	Very much
47.	How much does this sibling disagree and argue with?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
48.	How much does this sibling annoy?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
49.	How much does annoy this sibling?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
50.	How much does this sibling stick up for?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
51.	How much does stick up for this sibling?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
52.	How much does this sibling bully?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
53.	How much does bully this sibling?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
54.	How much does this sibling miss if they are not together?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
55.	How much does miss this sibling if they are not together?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
56.	How much does this sibling get into trouble?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2
57.	How much does get this sibling into trouble?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2

Children's involvement with siblings as rated by the Family Relations Test (Bene and Anthony, 1985)

Child	Mean sib score	Individual sibling scores	Positive	Ambivalent	Negative	Non involved
1. Arron	15.7	younger sister 25 younger brother 24 older sister 8 older brother 6			younger sister 25 younger brother 24 older sister 8 older brother 6	
2. Judy	13.5	twin brother 29 older sister 15 older brother 7 older brother 3	older sister 15 older brother 7	older brother 3	twin brother 29	
3. David	9.5	older sister 16 twin sister 14 older brother 5 older brother 3	older sister 16	older brother 5 older brother 3	twin sister 14	
4. Alex	7.5	older sister 2 older brother 13			older sister 2 older brother 13	
5. Nina	6.5	older brother 10 younger brother 3		younger brother 3	older brother 10	
6. Fraser	30	younger sister 28 younger brother 32		younger sister 28 younger brother 32		

Child	Mean sib score	Individual sibling scores	Positive	Ambivalent	Negative	Non involved
7. Kelly	8.5	older brother 10 older brother 7		older brother 10	older brother 7	
8. Peter	23	older brother 33 younger sister 13	older brother 33		younger sister 13	
9. Andrew	30	older brother 30		older brother 30		
10. Daniel	8	younger brother 14 older sister 2		younger brother 14	older sister 2	
11. Sam	11	older brother 20 older sister 2	older sister 2		older brother 20	
12. Sarah	12.5	younger brother 15 older brother 10	younger brother 15		older brother 2	

Child	Mean sib score	Individual sibling scores	Positive	Ambivalent	Negative	Non involved
13. Cheryl	16.2	older sister 18 older sister 17 older sister 16 younger brother 16 younger sister 15 younger sister 15	older sister 18 older sister 17 older sister 16 younger brother 16 younger brother 15 younger brother 15			
14. Lea	13.8	young sister 17 older sister 14 older sister 14 younger sister 14 younger sister 12 younger sister 12	young sister 17 older sister 14 older sister 14 younger sister 14 younger sister 12 younger sister 12			
15. Simon	20.7	older brother 22 younger brother 20 younger sister 20	older brother 22 younger brother 20 younger sister 20			
16. Nicky	2	older brother 2 younger sister 2			older brother 2 younger sister 2	
17. Stephen	8.3	younger sister 11 younger sister 10 younger sister 4	younger sister 11 younger sister 10	younger sister 7		
18. Gina	14	older brother 16 younger sister 13 younger sister	younger sister 13 younger sister 13	older brother 16		

Child	Mean sib score	Individual sibling scores	Positive	Ambivalent	Negative	Non involved
19. Eric	0.67	older sister 0 younger brother 0 younger brother 2		younger brother 2		older sister 0 younger brothers 0
20. Stuart	4	older sister 2 older brother 8 older brother 2	older sister 2		older brother 8 older brother 2	
21. Michael	15.5	older sister 19 younger sister 12	younger sister 12		older sister 19	
Total 21 children	12.9	60 siblings (100%) (2 non-involved – 3.3%)	27 siblings (45%)	12 siblings (20%)	19 siblings (31.7%)	2 siblings (3.3%)

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