Assessment of Sibling Relationships

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and

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Outline of Session

- Introduction to afternoon
- What are we asked to assess?
- What assessment tools are available?
- Formulating around sibling relationships
- Should siblings be placed together or apart?
Brainstorm

- What questions regarding sibling relationships are we asked to address?
What assessment tools are available?

- Bene-Anthony Family Relations Test
- Story Stem
- Sibling Relationship tool (Sanders, 2004)
- Modified Strange Situation Procedure
- Observation of Contact
- Informal tools, e.g. house wish to live in in the future
What factors do we need to consider in an assessment?

• What are the individual needs of the child?
• What are the child’s wishes for the future?
• What are the dynamics of the children’s relationships with each other?
A Framework for Assessment (from Family Futures)

- **Parenting Intensity**: What is the degree of developmental trauma that the child has experienced? How much re-parenting will they need and what time and energy will this require?

- **Nature of the sibling relationship**: What intensity of parenting will be required to manage sibling dynamics? Will the ability to form a secure attachment be jeopardised by the demands of managing sibling relationships?
• **The compatibility of the sibling’s parenting needs?:** What parenting approach is needed to suit each child’s needs and does this fit with the style needed for each sibling?

• **The security of the sibling relationship:** What are the dynamics in the interactions between siblings and are they at risk of re-enacting unresolved traumatic experiences?
When does a sibling become an attachment figure?

- Often we need to differentiate an attachment bond vs an affectionate bond.
- In many parts of the world basic child care is performed by older children as a matter of necessity.
- In role reversal, the child is the psychological parent and puts the protection of their parent before their own needs but they are not necessarily an attachment figure for younger siblings.
- For the sibling to become an attachment figure the caretaker child must fill the basic requirements of an attachment figure - provision of physical and emotional care and continuity and consistency in the younger child’s life, together with emotional investment in the child (Howes, 1999)
Sibling Patterns of Relating
(Leavitt, Gardner, Gallagher and Schamess, 1998)

- **Absent**: Children have failed to form enough connection to an adult even to seek out other relationships.

- **Adult Lockout**: Siblings have developed a bond with one another that serves as a substitute for or even a barrier to parent-child attachment.

- **Half and Half**: Siblings have a genuine but extremely problematic sibling relationship due to their dysfunctional attachments to their caregiver (interactions involve re-enacting difficulties in their environment).

- **Trauma Shield**: Siblings have developed defences to cope with living in an extremely traumatic context that can lead to them being fused and reliant on one each to cope.
Group Activity

In two groups to consider:

1) Reasons for keeping siblings together
2) Reasons for keeping siblings apart
The following conditions may indicate that siblings should be placed separately:

- Intense rivalry or jealousy, with each child totally preoccupied with, and unable to tolerate the attention their sibling(s) may be getting.
- Exploitation, often based on gender e.g. boys may have been seen or see themselves as inherently superior to their sisters with a right to dominate and exploit them.
- Chronic scapegoating of one child
- Maintaining unhelpful alliances in a sibling group and family of origin. Sibling patterns of behaviour may be strongly entrenched and may prevent re-parenting or learning new cultural norms
- Maintaining unhelpful hierarchical positions e.g. the child may be stuck in the role of victim or bully
- Highly sexualised behaviour with each other
- Acting as triggers to each others traumatic material potentially retraumatising each other.
Impact of Age Differences

• An older sibling may not be able to invest emotionally in a new family and will hinder the emotional investment of a younger child.

• The care plan in the best interest of the child may be different (e.g. foster care and direct contact vs adoption and indirect contact)

• Younger children can be easier to place and placement with older siblings may provide a delay.

• Different relatives may be available to provide a permanent placement (is the adult-child relationship more important than the sibling relationship?)
References

• Sanders (2004): Sibling Relationships
• Lord and Borthwick (2008): Together or apart: assessing siblings for permanent placement
• Mullender (1999): We are Family: sibling relationships in placement and beyond