



## Research to Practice Forum 2019 – *Relationships for Life*

### Sibling relationships for children in out-of-home care

Betty Luu – University of Sydney  
Caroline Brown – Key Assets  
Joanna Reece – Barnardos Australia



We acknowledge the tradition of custodianship and law  
of the Country on which the University of Sydney  
campuses stand. We pay our respects to those who have  
cared and continue to care for Country.



## **This session...**

- To encourage more thought to the importance of sibling relationships for children in out-of-home care
- To stimulate conversation about sibling relationships for children in out-of-home care

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## **Proposed structure of the session**

- Introductions and overview
- Interactive case studies and discussion
- Wrap-up

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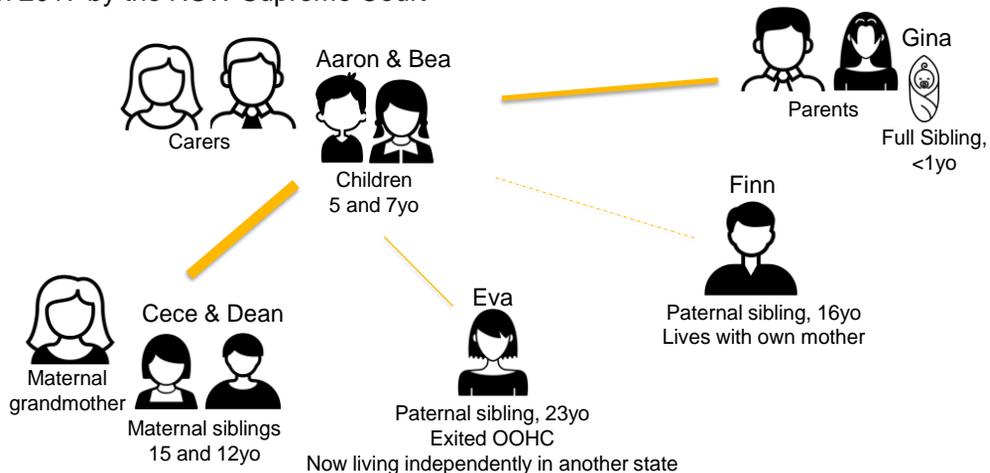
## Betty: Research on siblings for children in OOHC

- Sibling relationships can be one of the most enduring and important relationships children can have
- Factors that may facilitate or hinder sibling co-placement
- Potentially protective effect of living with siblings while in OOHC
- Maintaining sibling relationships

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## Sibling relationships in the context of open adoption

- The Institute's current work involves a case file review of adoptions from care finalised in 2017 by the NSW Supreme Court



## Caroline: Sibling Care in Tasmania

- Sibling Group Care Model established and funded by the state government, auspiced by the Department of Communities in 2015.
- Began with the closure of family group homes and the transfer of siblings and carers to family based foster care.
- Provides foster care placements for groups of three or more related children
- Task was to recruit carers for these large sibling groups.
- Strong interest and community support for maintenance of sibling connectedness.
- Provides social work support, training, practical support, respite and youth work to carers.
- There is a higher level of support provided than general foster care.
- Now 36 carers in the program.

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## Outcomes for children

- Very few critical incidents
- Almost all school age children attend school full time
- All children connected with family or significant others outside of the siblings they are placed with
- Rarely do siblings need to be separated
- Good placement stability

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## How does Sibling Care Differ from Unrelated Foster Care

- Multiple children arrive all at once!
- The sibling group arrives with a set of pre-existing relationships that the carer needs to learn and adapt to.
- The dominant culture may become the sibling culture rather than the foster home.
- The shared experience of trauma may mean that there is open discussion of what occurred in the family of origin.
- Carers need to be involved in reunification – which is much more likely to occur if a sibling group is intact.

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## Joanna: The Barnardos Find-a-Family Program, Siblings

- The Barnardos Find-a-Family program is a service for children aged 0-12 years of age, that operates in NSW.
- Focus on permanency planning through open adoption - ensuring a child's birth family relationships, culture, and connections are maintained and developed.
- Carers capacity to take a subsequent placement is explored during their assessment. Current siblings' carers are considered if another sibling comes into care.
- We actively recruit carers for larger sibling groups through our website, social media and by holding information sessions.
- Carers are provided with ongoing training and support (including 24-hour case management support).

## Practices to Support Relationships for Siblings Placed Apart.

- Match carers in close geographical proximity to encourage organic and informal contact between the siblings when children are unable to be placed together.
- Visits occurring in siblings' homes, attending birthday parties, pre-school/school, recreational activities – or simply just 'hanging out' together.
- Use of electronic communication including emails, Skype, and telephone calls between the carers and siblings.
- Therapeutic shared life story work, conducted as a group, to develop the children's understanding of their shared story. Useful when there is a large age gap or children have differing needs – e.g. an intellectual or physical disability.
- Development and use of social stories to communicate and further develop their understanding of each other and encourage curiosity/questions and sharing of memories.

## Case Study: The King Siblings – 5 Children

- Rodney, Peter, Carl, Jane and Kate, came into care aged between 6 weeks to 5 years. FACS recommended contact 6 times per year.
- Peter and Carl, were placed with their grandparents.
- Rodney (the eldest) has a diagnosis of autism and a significant disability. Despite wrap around services put in place, Rodney experienced multiple placements and was then placed in residential care.
- Jane and Kate were placed in a short-term placement, which became their permanent and adoptive placement.
- Visits were complicated due to the differing ages and needs of the children and their lack of understanding of their relationships with their biological family.
- Rodney exhibited aggressive behaviour at visits towards his siblings, which resulted in them being anxious and resistant to attending contact.
- Differing care arrangements caused tension between the carers, grandparents and residential facility, impacting additional informal visits.

## Wrap-up

- Understanding the issues and challenges children and siblings in out-of-home care face
- Awareness of the benefits of maintaining connections with siblings, and the potential negative impacts when this does not occur
- Identifying practices that help facilitate sibling relationships and contact for children in out-of-home care when they are placed together or apart

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## Thank you!

### Connect with us

- Joanna Reece, Barnardos Australia [jreece@barnardos.org.au](mailto:jreece@barnardos.org.au)
- Caroline Brown, Key Assets [Caroline.Brown@keyassets.com.au](mailto:Caroline.Brown@keyassets.com.au)
- Betty Luu, The University of Sydney [betty.luu@sydney.edu.au](mailto:betty.luu@sydney.edu.au)