Berry Street
Giving Sorrow Words: Siblings in out-of-home care
“Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak whispers the o’erfraught heart and bids it break”

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 4, Scene 3
Why do siblings matter?

• They are the longest relationships of our life
• They provide practical and emotional support
• They connect us to our past and our futures
• They affirm and re-affirm our identity
• They may be our primary attachment figure
• They are a source of unconditional affiliation
• They know us, our story and our history…there are few secrets from siblings
The unique attachments of children from backgrounds of abuse and neglect: what we know

- Particularly strong attachments to one another
- Identification of siblings as “positive family”
- Provision of family continuity
- Help with establishment of identity
- Can protect from the alienation of profound abuse
- Likely to be a support post care
“It’s not just the thinking about him that’s bad. It hurts my body...the missing him” Billie aged 18
“I haven’t been allowed to see them for years. I wish I could see them even for an hour. I’d tell them that even though they are gone from my life they are never forgotten”

Destiny aged 20
How many siblings are we talking about?

In Australia we don’t exactly know!

In Australia there are approximately 40,307 children in OOHC (2014)

Now 7.8 children per thousand aged 0-17 are in care in Australia (2012-13).

*This rate is 57.1 per thousand for Aboriginal children*

Two thirds of children admitted to OOHC are less than nine years old.

In Australia children are coming into care at a younger age and staying in care longer. (AIHW, 2014)
1 in 20 children in OOHC are in residential care, some of these are sibling groups.

Nearly 40% of children in OOHC have been in care for more than five years.

In Australia the median age of entry to care is nine.
How many are siblings? (50%-75% USA)

How many siblings are placed together in OOHC? (<25% USA)

How many siblings are ever reunited if placed apart?

How often do separated siblings see each other?

****We don’t know…are we not counting what doesn’t count?
Critically, what are the rights of siblings in OOHC in Australia?

United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*

Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities

Legislation in Victoria, a state snapshot example:

In Victoria there are no rights to mandate placement together, ensure eventual placement together, enforce access provisions, Permanent Care Orders not compelled to include sibling access.
What we do know from research

Siblings want to be together in care

Siblings want regular access when they cannot live together

Siblings grieve the loss of living with each other

Siblings separated in care may not see their siblings for years

Post care young people are more likely to seek out siblings for support than parents
Why contact is not the answer

“Now that continuing contact between separated siblings has become the norm, there is a real danger that such arrangements can be seen as an acceptable substitute to placements together. Arrangements for ‘contact’ can only come a poor second…”

The need for legislation

The U.S context:

California, Ohio, Massachusetts, New York, Minnesota, Alabama etc have legislated that it is a

“… presumption that it is in children’s best interests to stay with their siblings”

New York City has mandated joint sibling OOHC placement unless it would jeopardize a sibling’s welfare.
“To the extent that legislatures have protected sibling relationships at all, they tend to treat that protection more as a legislative gift bestowed at the discretion of lawmakers than as recognition of the legitimate claims of children” (Hasday, 2012:903)
Learning from other places:
The USA: Michigan DHS and sibling contact

California: sibling visitation

New York: Keep looking…siblings must be placed together

England and Wales: acknowledge the need to be together and that case planning must be for reunification if siblings are separated.
The Problems are also the Solutions…

- Legislation to ensure rights to co-placement
- Practice awareness of the sibling relationship
- Case planning of siblings as a group
- Rivalry, “parentification” and abuse in the context of attachment
- Time constraints which prevent access and contact schedules
- Improving data tracking processes of sibling placements: we don’t know what we don’t know
- Being clear about who a sibling is
- Children’s “best interests” paramount and not defined in relation to available resources or their parents
What Australia can do to avoid another apology for loss, pain and not listening to children:

✓ Privilege the rights and needs of siblings to be together over arguments about resources, adults and time
✓ Reassess attachment theory so that siblings can be understood to be life-long attachment figures
✓ Insist on behalf of children, for legislative and practice changes which ensure that siblings are kept together
✓ Ensure that child welfare and parent demands do not supersede the planning necessary for sibling placement
✓ Increase understanding and education regarding the long-term benefits of sibling co-placement
✓ Consult with siblings regarding what they want
✓ Be part of true “best interests”
Thank you

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