

Siblings in Family Transitions*

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This research focuses on how siblings are organized following two types of family transitions: foster care placements and parental divorce. Its goal was to identify the family characteristics associated with intact and split sibling groups. The sample was composed of 294 families. Results indicate that siblings are more likely to be separated when children are older and when they have larger age gap with their siblings; arrangements in which siblings are separated produce greater instability for them.

This article deals with sibling arrangements following family transitions. In the context of our research, a family transition is defined as a process of change that affects family structure, that takes place over a period of time, and that gives rise to a new organization. We chose to study two forms of family transitions: foster care placement and parental divorce. The decision to study these two transitions simultaneously was based on the expertise of the team members regarding each of the two transitions, as well as on the theoretical and empirical work elucidating the restructuring processes that they share.

Our research approach is based on a field of study focusing on events that lie outside the regular cycle of family life (see Beaudoin et al., 1997). For example, the death of a child would be considered part of that category of events, whereas the birth of a child is generally part of the expected cycle of family life. Many authors have pointed out that events that lie outside the regular cycle of family life give rise to transitions that present common features. Briefly, let us say that they are less predictable. In other words, most of the time, they are not part of the possibilities that couples consider when they decide to have a family. They also have the potential for greater disruption in family relations and roles (conjugal, parental, sibling). These events provoke high-risk family transitions in terms of the adjustments that must be made by both parents and children. These events, particularly the ones that have a direct impact on family structure through the withdrawal or addition of a member, interested us. Such is the case for both the placement of a child in substitute care and parental separation. As stated by Bloom (1998), parental separation and placement of children throws all family members into a period of restructuring during which family actors change their relationships, roles, and interactions.

While parental separation puts an end to conjugal life of two adults, it does not necessarily end the relationship between those adults and their children, nor the relationships between siblings. However, in some situations, a loss of contact with the non-custodial parent or with siblings can be observed. In the case of placement in foster care, the context is different because it constitutes a means of protecting the child whose development or safety is compromised, for example, due to negligence, physical abuse, or the child's behaviour problems. Depending on the situation, children may experience different degrees of disruption in their relationships with their parents. However, when a child is placed in Québec's youth protection services there is a clear resolve not to replace the parents, but rather to encourage them to maintain connections with their child so that they can continue to play their role as parents. In summary, while we acknowledge the specificity of these two transitions with respect to what is involved for the children and their families, we believe that studying them together contributes to a more global understanding of family transitions that are the result of events not part of the predictable transitions in the life cycle of families. Our article lies within that perspective.

Such transitions, which can have short- and long-term repercussions on the well-being of those concerned, affect a significant portion of young people and families. In Québec, children in foster care represent 4% of youth under 18 years of age and include those whose development is most likely to be compromised (Gouvernement du Québec, 1995a). The most recent data on parental divorce show that over 27% of youth in Québec do not live with both biological parents, but rather in single-parent households or reconstituted families (Gouvernement du Québec, 1995b). In the United States, an estimated 482,480 children lived in out-of-home care by the end of 1995 (Child Welfare League of America, 1997) and the proportion of children that do not live with both biological parents is estimated to be 31% (Hines, 1997).

These transitions constitute periods of tension and vulnerability for sibling relationships since brothers and sisters may be separated from one another. In the case of foster care placements, siblings may be separated from each other either because they are placed with different foster care resources or because not all children are placed in foster care. In the case of parental divorce, they may be divided by a split custody decision or by a later parental arrangement. Subsequently to family transitions, two main sibling arrangements are possible: the sibling group may be "intact" or "split". The sibling group is considered intact when all its members live under the same roof, whereas it is considered split when at least one of its members lives apart.

Research on family transitions has focused on the conditions prevailing when transitions occur and on their effects on parents, children, and parent-child relationships. However, few studies have dealt with changes within the sibling group during family transitions. Yet research on child development points to the hypothesis that the sibling subsystem plays an important role during changes in family structure (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Garbarino, 1982; Peters & Kontos, 1987). When it remains intact, the sibling group represents an element of continuity within the process of family reorganization (Carrier, Drapeau, & Carrette, 1995; Schibuk, 1989). Many studies also indicate that siblings can play an important role in helping each other to adjust to family transitions (Aldridge & Cautley, 1976; Hegar, 1986; Kempton, Armistead, Wierson, & Forehand, 1991).

Our research, which was carried out in Québec (Canada), focused on the family characteristics associated with various sib-

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ling arrangements and on their potential impact on sibling relationships. This article has two objectives: (a) to identify the family characteristics (parents and children) associated with sibling arrangements, that is, intact and split sibling groups; and (b) to assess relationships between siblings according to whether they are together or separate.

Review of the Literature

In the following sections we will present a summary of research results on siblings and foster care, and on siblings and parental divorce, respectively. We will focus mainly on the findings that deal, on the one hand, with the family characteristics associated with sibling arrangements, and on the other hand, with the potential impact of separating siblings on relationships between the children.

Siblings in Foster Care

The characteristics of the children, their family environment, and their foster care history have been identified as factors associated with sibling placement patterns. Thus, children placed with siblings displayed fewer behavioural problems (Aldridge & Cautley, 1976; Hegar, 1986) and had fewer previous placements (Aldridge & Cautley, 1976; Thorpe & Swart, 1992). On the other hand, children most likely to be separated from their siblings are older, from larger sibling groups, have a developmental disability, are placed in an institution, or are not all placed in foster care at the same time (Aldridge & Cautley, 1976; Boer, Westenberg, & Van Ooyen-Hoben, 1995; Cutler, 1984; Hegar, 1986; Staff & Fein, 1992; Thorpe & Swart, 1992).

Findings diverge on the subject of sibling arrangements according to the children's sex. In some studies girls are found to be placed together most often (Aldridge & Cautley, 1976). In others, boys are placed together (Staff & Fein, 1992), and in yet others, children of the same sex are placed together most often (Hegar, 1986). Boer et al. (1995), however, concluded that there is no difference. Sampling procedures and the criteria for including or not including certain children in the sibling group may explain these contradictory results.

Some authors have focused on the potential impact separating siblings may have on the quality of relationships between the children after placement. Carrier et al. (1995) found that separating children can, in some cases, improve sibling relationships. Separation may decrease the rivalry and competition that sometimes exists between siblings and can be conducive to richer, though less frequent, contacts between them. The children questioned in the study felt a sense of loss and expressed nostalgia for the presence of their brothers and sisters. Festinger (1983) reports the same feelings amongst children who had spent at least five years in foster care; in this retrospective study, a considerable proportion of the young adults lamented the lack of contact they had with siblings during their placement. Furthermore, Gardner (1996) remarks that children in foster care very often exclude their separated siblings from the representation of their sibling group. Therefore, it appears that children become emotionally detached from their siblings when they are separated, while at the same time deploring the separation.

Siblings and Parental Divorce

Some authors have focused on the issue of sibling arrangements upon parental divorce. According to research, children are

more likely to be separated when the father is granted custody because he tends not to take on all of the children (Chang & Deinard, 1982; Spanier & Glick, 1981). In addition, fathers more often have custody over older children and boys (Chang & Dienard, 1982; Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993; Monahan, Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1993; Spanier & Glick, 1981). In their review of the literature on court decisions regarding custody arrangements upon divorce, Kaplan and colleagues also point out that children are more often separated when there is a large disparity in their ages and when at least one child has behavioural problems (Kaplan, Ade-Ridder, & Hennon, 1991; Kaplan, Hennon, & Ade-Ridder, 1993).

As far as sibling relationships are concerned, Kaplan et al. (1993) concluded that separating siblings can undermine the roles played by brothers and sisters. Split custody arrangements can also lead to conflicts and tensions between children, particularly when parents themselves are in conflict.

In conclusion, a number of similarities emerge from the research results on siblings in foster care and siblings experiencing parental divorce. In both situations, age seems to be an important variable. Whether in foster care situations or parental divorce, older siblings are most likely to be separated. In addition, a child's behavioural problems often constitute a justification for separating siblings both in the case of foster care placements and in custody decisions. The sex of the children also appears to play a role in the choice of sibling arrangements. The authors we consulted maintain that upon divorce, boys tend to stay with their fathers while girls remain with their mothers, suggesting that children of the same sex are most often left together. Although the portrait is not as clear, the same tendency appears true in the case of foster care placements. In our view, these similarities justify examining sibling relationships side by side during both types of transition. This examination will contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the issue by highlighting the common or differing experiences, whatever the family transition may be, of members of the sibling group. Therefore, the specific family context of each transition studied may have an impact on what the members of the sibling group experience.

Methodology

Sample

The study of sibling relationships is faced with the challenge of defining the "unit of observation." Choices had to be made in order to ensure that the children did in fact have an objective sibling relationship (a blood tie and a shared living situation) and to clearly distinguish the two sibling arrangements. Therefore, we excluded *subjective* sibling relationships (e.g., two children who live together but have different parents) and siblings who, although they do have blood ties, have never shared a family living situation.

In our study, all children born to the same mother and who had lived together for at least one year were considered to *belong to the same sibling group*. All children born to the father from an earlier or a later union, as well as any children unknown to the other siblings (e.g., children given up for adoption at birth) were excluded.

Two sibling arrangements were examined in our research: *intact* and *split* sibling groups. A sibling group is considered *intact* if all the children who were living together at the time of

the transition were still living together at the time of the study. A sibling group is considered *split* if at least one of the children was living apart from the other members at the time of the study, whereas he or she was living with them at the time of the transition. However, to be considered a split sibling group, the separation of the siblings had to be due to the family transition. As a result, situations such as an adult child who leaves home to move into an apartment were not taken into account.

Participants came from three youth center administrative regions (rural, semi-rural, and urban) adjacent to Québec city in the province of Québec (Canada). In order to obtain a sufficiently representative sample of both types of arrangements and an equivalent number of sibling groups from each region in both forms of transition, a quota sampling technique was used. Since sampling and data collection procedures differed for each form of transition, they will be presented separately under the headings “foster care placement” and “parental divorce”.

Foster care placement. This sample contains sibling groups made up of at least two members placed in foster care by one of the three participating youth centers. In this sample, at least two children per sibling group were less than 18 years of age. This was our only way of ensuring that the children had at least one sibling, because the information on children over age 18 is not available. A minimal duration criterion was set at 60 days in order to exclude short-term placements. A list of all of the potential sibling groups was drawn up from a record of children placed in foster care by these three agencies. When the number of sibling groups exceeded the pre-established amount required, sibling groups were selected at random. No specific criteria exist in these youth centers for placement of sibling groups. The main reason for placement either for the intact or split sibling group was negligence.

Parental divorce. This sample was made up of sibling groups from families whose parents were separated either legally or *de facto*. (In order to simplify the different kinds of separation experienced by the children in this study, the term “parental divorce” is used throughout this article to refer to parental separation.) No criterion was fixed for the amount of time lapsed since the transition. Parents were either recruited from a list of participants in an earlier study dealing with custody arrangements following parental separation (parents had agreed to be contacted, if needed, for another study) or through newspaper advertisements describing the nature of the study and requesting the collaboration of separated parents with at least two children. At the time of the study, only one of the siblings had to be less than 18 years of age. However, for a family to be included in the sample, any siblings over age 18 had to be living with one of the parents (and not away from home, in an apartment, for example).

The study population was composed of 294 family units (150 in the foster care sample; 144 in the parental divorce sample) including 618 children. Of the families in the foster care sample, 62 had intact sibling groups (134 children) and 88 of these families had split sibling groups (201 children). In the parental divorce sample, families were distributed as follows: 85 had intact sibling groups (168 children) whereas 59 had split sibling groups (115 children).

The length of time since the family transition was distributed similarly for both groups. (\bar{x} = 4.75, min. = 4 months, max. = 16 and a half years). However, the groups differ in terms of the

mother’s age [placement = 35 years vs. divorce = 40 years; $t(241) = 6.23, p < .001$], the father’s age [39 vs. 42; $t(137) = 3.38, p < .001$], the number of children in the family [2.9 vs. 2.4; $t(267) = 3.38, p < .001$] and the children’s ages [10.9 vs. 11.9; $t(614) = 3.06, p < .01$]. There are also differences in the variables that reflect their socio-economic status. For instance, compared to the mothers in the foster care sample, the separated mothers have a higher educational level [$\chi^2(3, N = 263) = 151.67; p < .0001$], are more likely to be employed [$\chi^2(1, N = 294) = 110.2; p < .0001$] and have a higher average income [$\chi^2(2, N = 294) = 100.86; p < .0001$]. The two study samples can therefore be seen to be very different from each other in terms of their respective socio-demographic features. In spite of the discrepancies between the two groups, our aim was to identify the similarities and differences in the experiences of the siblings following the family transitions under study.

Instrument and Procedure

Questionnaire on the sibling group and family transitions. A questionnaire was elaborated specifically for this study. It was addressed to an adult well acquainted with the family. The aim was to get a general picture of the family, of the children, and of the children’s relationships with each other.

More specifically, several questions dealt with the families’ sociodemographic characteristics, that is, the number of children in the sibling group, the parents’ ages, their educational and income level, and the mother’s employment status. Data regarding fathers was compiled individually for each child because children from the same sibling group could have different fathers. Other questions dealt with the family transition (foster care placement or parental divorce).

The questionnaire also provided information on each of the children in the family, that is, age, sex, current home, number of changes in homes since the transition (change in foster care arrangement in the case of foster care placement or change in guardian in the case of parental divorce), the length of time since the last change in living arrangement, and whether or not the child had problems (e.g., health problems, handicap, behavioural problems). When a child had at least one such problem, the rating “1” was given, whereas “0” indicated that the child did not have any such problem.

Finally, a variety of questions aimed to assess the relationship each child has with each member of his or her sibling group were asked. They dealt with the frequency of contacts between siblings (answers varied from 0 *no contact in the past year* to 8 *daily contact*), and the perception of the caseworker or the parent concerning the quality of the relationship each child has with his or her sibling(s) (0 *not at all harmonious* to 4 *very harmonious*) as well as their perception of the extent of change in these relationships since the family transition (0 *not at all changed* to 4 *greatly changed*).

Collection procedures. In the foster care situations, caseworkers were asked to answer the questionnaire, thus facilitating data collection with Québec youth protection services for whom anonymity is very important. The caseworker responsible for at least one of the children in the family answered the questions verbally to one of the authors of this article. Whenever necessary, the child’s youth center file was also consulted. In the case of parental divorce, the questionnaire was also filled out verbally by one of the parents during a phone interview with the re-

Table 1
Means of Families' Sociodemographic Characteristics by Type of Sibling Group for Each Form of Transition

Family Characteristics	Foster Care Placement (<i>n</i> = 150)				Parental Divorce (<i>n</i> = 144)			
	Sibling Group		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	Sibling Group		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>
	Intact <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Split <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)			Intact <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Split <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)		
Number children/sibling group	2.5 (0.9)	3.3 (1.2)	148	4.02***	2.4 (0.7)	2.3 (0.6)	142	0.44
Number of mother's unions	1.4 (0.6)	1.5 (0.7)	148	0.93	1.1 (0.3)	1.2 (0.4)	142	1.07
Mother's age	32.8 (6.3)	36.5 (7.3)	131	3.00**	39.4 (5.5)	40.0 (4.9)	142	0.74
Father's age	35.9 (9.4)	41.2 (7.7)	89	2.93**	42.4 (5.8)	42.4 (5.6)	142	0.03
Length of time since transition	4.2 (3.5)	4.5 (3.2)	79	0.38	5.0 (3.6)	5.3 (3.1)	142	0.53

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .0001.

searcher. In order to become acquainted with the questionnaire, the parent (mother in 70% of the cases) had received it in advance by mail. All parents and caseworkers contacted agreed to participate.

Results

Analyses comparing sibling groups were carried out separately within each form of transition, that is, foster care placement and parental divorce. In order to verify any statistical differences, *t* tests were carried out to compare the means of continuous variables and chi-squared tests were made to compare distributions of categorical variables. Some missing data were detected for certain families in foster care: data concerning the fathers (unknown fathers or unknown information) and data concerning the length of time since the transition (date of the first placement for the sibling group). Where data were missing, observations were deleted from analysis.

In studies on siblings, researchers have to choose between different units of analysis: the family as a group, individuals, or dyads (Staff & Fein, 1993; Staff, Fein, & Johnson, 1993), each of which provides different information. For the purposes of this article, two units were selected: the family as a group (*N* = 294) and the children in the family (*N* = 618). To begin with, the results presented here involve the *family unit*, that is, the variables that reflect the families' sociodemographic characteristics. Then they focus on the *child unit*, first the children's characteristics and second, the characteristics of sibling relationships. We wish to point out that in this case, the data on children in the same family are not statistically independent. In each section, results are presented first for foster care placement and then for parental divorce.

Families' Sociodemographic Characteristics

In order to detect any statistical differences of the means between sibling arrangements, *t* tests were carried out for each of the following variables: number of children in the sibling group, number of unions the mother has had, mother's age, father's age (if the sibling group had different fathers, the mean of the fathers' ages was used), and the length of time since the transition. Table 1 contains the results of these analyses separately for foster care placement and for parental divorce.

In the case of foster care placement, means of certain sociodemographic characteristics differ statistically between the two types of sibling arrangements. The number of children per sibling group tends to be higher when they are split [*t*(148) = 4.02; *p* < .0001]. The analyses also reveal that mothers and

fathers whose children are in the split sibling group tend to be older than those in which the sibling group is intact [mother: *t*(131) = 3.0; *p* < .003; father: *t*(89) = 2.9; *p* < .004]. The same analyses were carried out for the parental divorce group; however, no differences appeared in the two sibling arrangements with regards to the variables analyzed (Table 1).

Differences between distributions were also verified for a certain number of categorical sociodemographic variables: the mother's and the father's income level, their level of schooling and the mother's employment status (with or without paid employment). The results are presented in Table 2.

In the case of foster care placement and with regards to these variables, there was no difference between the two types of sibling arrangements. However, the majority of mothers and fathers with at least one child in foster care had an income level below \$10,000 and no high school degree. On the other hand, in the case of parental divorce, several variables distinguish the two groups of siblings: a higher proportion of mothers whose children are separated from each other earn less than \$10,000 than mothers whose children are together [$\chi^2(1, N = 131) = 11.0$; *p* < .001]; they also are more likely to be unemployed [$\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 5.39$; *p* < .02].

Child-Related Characteristics

As for child-related characteristics, means between sibling arrangements were compared in terms of age, the age gap between siblings, the number of changes in homes, and the length of time since the last change.

As shown in Table 3, children in foster care who are in the split sibling group tend to be older [*t*(333) = 6.7; *p* < .0001] and to have a larger age gap with their siblings [*t*(333) = 2.65; *p* < .008] than children who live with brothers or sisters. They also had more previous placements [*t*(331) = 2.02; *p* < .04] and their last placement occurred more recently [*t*(331) = 1.97; *p* < .05].

In the case of parental divorce, results are similar. Compared to the others, children who are separated from their siblings tend to be older [*t*(281) = 2.98; *p* < .003], to have changed homes more often [*t*(153) = 4.7; *p* < .0001], and the time lapsed since the last move tends to be shorter [*t*(265) = 2.1; *p* < .04]. Although these children tend to have larger age disparities with their siblings, the results are not statistically significant.

Concerning child-related characteristics, the distributions of three categorical variables were also compared: the children's sex, the existence of problems, and where the children live. The results are presented in Table 4. In the case of foster care, a higher

Table 2
Distributions of Families' Sociodemographic Characteristics by Type of Sibling Group for Each Form of Transition

Family Characteristics	Foster Care Placement (n = 150)					Parental Divorce (n = 144)				
	Sibling Group		df	n	χ^2	Sibling Group		df	n	χ^2
	Intact	Split				Intact	Split			
Mother's income			1	100	2.8			1	131	11.0**
under 10,000\$	76.2%	60.3%				3.9%	22.6%			
10,000\$ or more	23.8%	39.7%				96.1%	77.4%			
Father's income			1	62	1.1			1	124	0.4
under 10,000\$	64.5%	51.6%				6.9%	9.8%			
10,000\$ or more	35.5%	48.4%				93.1%	90.2%			
Mother's education			2	117	2.53			2	131	2.89
high school not compl.	89.3%	80.0%				11.3%	3.9%			
high school completed	4.3%	12.9%				33.7%	29.4%			
post-secondary ed.	6.4%	7.1%				55.0%	66.7%			
Father's education			2	88	0.17			2	143	1.02
high school not compl.	82.5%	79.2%				10.6%	15.5%			
post-secondary ed.	10.0%	12.5%				29.4%	24.1%			
behond high scool	7.5%	8.3%				60.0%	60.4%			
Mother employed			1	144	0.04			1	142	5.4*
Yes	12.5%	11.4%				79.8%	62.1%			
No	87.5%	88.6%				20.2%	37.9%			

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .0001$.

Table 3
Means of Child-Related Characteristics by Type of Sibling Group for Each Form of Transition

Children's Characteristics	Foster Care Placement (n = 335)				Parental Divorce (n = 283)			
	Sibling Group		df	t	Sibling Group		df	t
	Intact M (SD)	Split M (SD)			Intact M (SD)	Split M (SD)		
Children's ages	9.0 (4.3)	12.2 (4.2)	333	6.7***	11.4 (4.0)	12.8 (3.8)	281	3.0**
Age gap between siblings	2.8 (1.8)	3.5 (1.9)	333	2.7**	3.5 (2.0)	4.0 (2.2)	281	1.7
Number of changes	0.6 (0.9)	0.8 (1.0)	331	2.0*	0.2 (0.4)	0.7 (0.9)	153	4.7***
Length of time since last change	3.4 (2.8)	2.8 (2.6)	331	2.0*	4.4 (3.5)	3.6 (3.0)	265	2.1*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .0001$.

Table 4
Distribution of Child-Related Characteristics by Type of Sibling Group for Each Form of Transition

Children's Characteristics	Foster Care Placement					Parental Divorce				
	Sibling Group		df	n	χ^2	Sibling Group		df	n	χ^2
	Intact	Split				Intact	Split			
Sex			1	335	0.07			1	283	0.04
Girls	49.3%	47.8%				44.6%	43.5%			
Boys	50.7%	52.2%				55.4%	56.5%			
Problems with child			1	335	0.86			1	283	0.78
Yes	22.4%	26.9%				5.9%	8.7%			
No	77.6%	73.1%				94.1%	91.3%			
Home ¹			3	335	13.3**					
Specific foster family	18.7%	11.9%								
Non-spec. foster family	79.8%	76.6%								
Other resources	1.5%	11.4%								
Home ²								2	283	50.4***
Mother has custody						57.1%	47.8%			
Father has custody						10.1%	43.5%			
Joint custody						32.8%	8.7%			

Notes. ¹foster care placement. ²parental divorce.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$. *** $p < .0001$.

percentage of children with intact sibling groups live in a specific foster family, whereas a higher percentage of separated siblings live in a resource other than a foster family [$\chi^2(2, N = 335) = 13.3; p < .001$].

In the case of parental divorce, it is not surprising that children who live apart from their siblings live either with their mother or with their father, while a majority of those who live in an intact sibling group live with their mother. In our view,

Table 5
Means of Children's Sibling Relationships by Type of Sibling Group for Each Form of Transition

Sibling Relationships	Foster Care Placement (n = 335)				Parental Divorce (n = 283)			
	Sibling Group		df	t	Sibling Group		df	t
	Intact M SD	Split M SD			Intact M SD	Split M SD		
Frequency of contacts: from 0 "never" to 8 "everyday"	7.9 (0.5)	3.9 (1.8)	241	29.9***	7 (0.6)	5.2 (1.3)	146	19.5***
Quality of the relationship: from 0 "not at all harmonious" to 4 "very harmonious"	2.7 (1.1)	2.2 (0.9)	249	4.4***	3.0 (0.8)	2.7 (1.0)	198	2.8**
Changes in the relationship: from 0 "not at all changed" to 4 "greatly changed"	2.3 (1.3)	2.6 (1.2)	308	2.3*	2.1 (1.1)	2.7 (1.4)	209	4.4***

p* < .01. **p* < .05. *p* < .0001.

what is most interesting is that the children in the split sibling groups are also less likely to be in a situation of joint custody than those who live with their brothers and sisters [$\chi^2(2, N = 283) = 50.4; p < .0001$].

In both cases, foster care placement and parental divorce, there is no difference between the proportion of boys and girls, or the proportion of children with problems. Both transitions include approximately 50% of male and 50% of female children. Approximately one child in four placed in foster care has some kind of problem while less than one in ten in a parental divorce situation presents problems.

Sibling Relationships

The variables that reflect sibling relationships are the frequency of contacts between children (including telephone calls), the quality of the relationship between children, and the degree of change in this relationship since the transition. Table 5 presents analysis on these variables for both foster care placement and parental divorce.

As expected, children separated from their siblings are in contact with them less often. This is apparent both in the case of foster care placement [$t(241) = 29.9; p < .0001$] and in the case of parental divorce [$t(146) = 19.5; p < .0001$]. The lowest level of contact between siblings can be observed among the split sibling group in foster care. Moreover, children with an intact sibling group are perceived as having more harmonious relationships with their brothers and sisters than children in split sibling groups [foster care: $t(249) = 4.4; p < .0001$; parental divorce: $t(198) = 2.8; p < .005$]. Finally, the results of the analyses also highlight the differences between the two types of sibling arrangements as regards the extent of changes in sibling relationships since the transition. Thus, it appears that both foster care placement and parental divorce have a greater impact on the children's relationships when the sibling group is split than when it is kept intact [foster care: $t(308) = 2.3; p < .02$; parental divorce: $t(209) = 4.4; p < .0001$].

Discussion

This article presents the results of a study on siblings and family transitions. It had two main objectives; to identify the family characteristics associated with sibling arrangements following parents' divorce or the placement of children in foster care; and to evaluate the effects of these arrangements on sibling relationships.

One of the first observations we made in the course of this

study deals with the complexity of the sibling subsystem. Although we had established criteria prior to the phase of data collection, we still needed to devote a number of hours to defining a sibling group. Nonetheless, reality often surprised us, forcing us to redefine our criteria. Even in the following, relatively simple example, the complexity of the subject is evident. Two children, A and B, were born to the same mother with different fathers. In a later union, the father of A has a child with a new partner. B's father already had another child from a previous union. Therefore, A and B's sibling groups are not the same.

Choices had to be made and we are aware that our decisions cut us off from a part of the reality of the sibling subsystem. For instance, the subjective reality of a sibling group was not taken into consideration. It could be that a child considers the son of his or her mother's new partner as a brother, even if he is not a blood relative. The complexity of sibling groups mirrors that of today's family. Indeed, a number of authors have emphasized the difficulty of defining the boundaries of new family forms in contemporary society.

We also wish to point out some limits to the study which lead us to use caution in interpreting the results. First of all, the procedure for data collection with the two study populations was not identical. In one case, parents answered questions directly, whereas in the other, caseworkers were questioned. This difference could be a source of bias since these two categories of respondents do not have the same perspectives on family life. Obviously, parents have a deeper understanding of the family situation than does the social worker. However, our selection criteria assure that the practitioners know the members of the sibling group in the study sample because they too had been placed in foster care. In the case of children in foster care, we were able to consult the child's file in order to complete our information, and unfortunately, data were sometimes missing (e.g., father's age). This considerably limits the extent to which the research findings can be generalized, at least on certain levels. Another limit is that the parental divorce sample was made up of volunteers who may be different from the rest of the population. Finally, our study is retrospective and, therefore, does not provide any information on the situation as it stood before the separation of the sibling group. This limit is particularly apparent when one attempts to determine what the connection is between the separation and the quality of relationships within the sibling group.

That being said, our study findings justify examining the two types of transitions side by side. A number of similarities have emerged in spite of the marked differences in the sociodem-

ographic characteristics of the two family profiles, which leads us to conclude that the members of the sibling groups, to a certain extent, have a similar experience of family transitions. Our study has revealed that children are more likely to be in the split sibling group when they present certain characteristics, and that arrangements in which children are separated from their siblings produce greater instability for them.

More specifically, children in the split sibling group tend to be older and to have greater age disparities with their siblings. These results also appear in other studies, both in foster care situations and in cases of parental divorce (Carrier et al., 1995; Hegar, 1986; Kaplan et al., 1993; Monahan et al., 1993; Staff & Fein, 1992; Thorpe & Swart, 1992). The child's level of development, his or her specific needs, and the psychological distance between siblings all help explain these results. For instance, the specific needs of teenagers as compared with their younger brothers or sisters can be an important motive for placing them in different resources which are better able to accommodate them (Carrier et al., 1995). In this study, teenagers placed in foster care more often expressed the wish to be separated from their siblings than did younger children, and caseworkers take their wishes into account when making decisions. Both caseworkers and teenagers considered that daily contact between siblings is less essential during the teenage years (Carrier et al., 1995). A similar explanation may be valid in the case of parental divorce. It is also likely that older children who have been in joint custody, or who are faced with the possibility of it, prefer to live in a single home rather than going back and forth between their mother's and their father's homes. In fact, this is one of the inconveniences of joint custody often mentioned by children (Drapeau, Samson, & Cloutier, 1996). This hypothesis was corroborated by one of our study results according to which children in split sibling groups are less often in joint custody situations than children in intact sibling groups.

We have also seen that children with split sibling groups experience more instability than those with intact sibling groups. On average, children in foster care who are in the split sibling group have a greater number of previous placements while those in the parental divorce situation have changed homes more often. This finding confirms previous findings regarding the greater stability of being placed together (Aldridge & Cautley, 1976; Staff & Fein, 1992; Thorpe & Swart, 1992) and of granting custody to the mother (Maccoby et al., 1993).

Finally, sibling arrangements seem to affect sibling relationships, either in terms of the frequency of contacts or the quality of the relationship. In both types of transitions, there may be many explanations for this finding, for example, geographical distance, the inability of young children to initiate contact themselves, conflicts between children or, in the case of parental separation, major conflicts between former spouses which limit contacts between households (Carrier et al., 1995; Kaplan et al., 1993). In foster care situations, there may be other reasons, such as clinical contraindications for contacts between children or a lack of organizational resources (Carrier et al., 1995). In spite of the potential diversity of reasons, it is worth noting that the findings from two different categories of respondents (caseworkers and parents) converge. We must, however, be cautious, because the quality of sibling relationships prior to the transition may have influenced the choices regarding arrangements. In addition, in order to not unduly overload the interview, the different facets of sibling relationships were not explored in depth. It

nonetheless remains true that separating the sibling group can cut a child off from a part of his or her support system. Indeed, a number of studies have demonstrated that the support of brothers and sisters plays a vital role in a child's adjustment to family transitions (Aldridge & Cautley, 1976; Drapeau & Bouchard, 1993; Kempton, Armistead, Wierson, & Forehand, 1991). Further research is necessary to more thoroughly evaluate the impact separating siblings may have on relationships between brothers and sisters.

Some findings point to differences in the two facets of the research, specifically regarding the families' sociodemographic characteristics. In the case of foster care, the number of children per sibling group tends to be higher when they are separate than when they are together, which is not true in the case of parental divorce. The limited availability of foster care resources may explain this finding. Indeed, it is rare that foster families are able to accommodate all members of a sibling group when it includes a large number of children (Cutler, 1984; Hegar, 1986; Kosonen, 1996). In the case of parental divorce, as we have seen, sibling arrangements are largely determined by the mother's income and employment status; when the mother's income is low and she is unemployed, siblings are more often separated. This finding is perplexing. Do mothers in such unfavourable conditions have to be relieved of a part of the financial burden their children represent? It is also possible that the children, particularly the older ones, wish to remain with their father, who, it is well-known, generally has a better economic situation than his ex-wife, thus enabling him to more easily fulfill their growing needs. Further research is necessary to better understand the connection between the economic situation and custody arrangements within the sibling group.

Finally, our results do not indicate any relation between the children's sex or the presence of behavioural problems and the decision to separate or keep siblings together. It is possible that our rudimentary assessment was insufficient to gain adequate insight into the situation of behavioural problems. Or it may be that our unit of analysis accounts for the lack of results. In our study the entire sibling group constituted the unit of analysis. Therefore, in the case of a split sibling group, a sub-group could be living under the same roof. For example, in the case of three siblings, one child lived with one parent, and two lived with the other. A more detailed study of sibling subgroups may help better identify the characteristics of children who are alone or who, on the contrary, live with other siblings. The same explanation may hold true for sex-related differences. When research that has shed light on sex-related findings is examined, one realizes that most analyses were carried out on separated sibling subgroups (Aldridge & Cautley, 1976; Boer et al., 1995; Chang & Dienard, 1982; Hegar, 1986; Maccoby et al., 1993; Staff & Fein, 1992). Our research provides a complementary perspective on this situation by stressing differences and similarities between split and intact sibling groups taken as a whole.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Intervention

The study findings presented here point to the usefulness of examining two forms of transition simultaneously for a more in-depth understanding of the sibling system: that is, the placement of children in foster care, and the divorce of parents. The many similarities lead us to conclude that siblings have common ex-

periences during family transitions. As we have seen, brothers and sisters are most often separated when the children share certain characteristics, and they experience greater instability when separate arrangements are made for them. Our findings also indicate that separating siblings can be associated with less harmonious relationships between children, thus depriving them of a part of their support system.

This study points to some interesting avenues for reflecting on intervention strategies for children experiencing transitions. First of all, we must not assume that they know their brothers and sisters. As our research clearly indicates, the boundaries of the sibling group are often difficult to define, a fact that can create obstacles to appropriate intervention (Kosonen, 1996). In our view, an evaluation of this component of the family is therefore essential to any form of action. The evaluation must take into account the objective and subjective dimensions of siblings relations and the quality of the latter. This will help to better identify the boundaries of the sibling system and eventually to find more appropriate ways of intervening in it. This could reach beyond the decision of whether or not to keep siblings together, the sibling sub-system itself could be the object of intervention, which is often neglected in practice.

Second, the similarities observed between the two forms of family transitions studied here lead us to believe that criteria or judgments implicit in our society prevail over the decision whether to separate siblings or keep them together. We believe that these criteria are worth clarifying and discussing in light of the children's well-being, whether within the legal system, within protective services, or by the actors directly involved in the situation. For example, is it wise to separate older and younger children when we know that the former can play an important protective role for the latter, especially in times of crisis? It is important to have a clear view of the needs of each of the children in the sibling group and the objectives that are being pursued. Hegar (1986) provides some indications regarding the decision whether to place sibling groups separately or together. He believes that the decision should be based on the level of stress experienced by each of the children. It must also be kept in mind that the decision that is made can have an impact throughout the child's entire life because we know that the lack of contact between siblings during childhood significantly decreases the likelihood that contact will be maintained during adulthood.

Finally, our research has shown that separating siblings can be associated with decreased contact between them, whereas many studies have indicated that siblings can play an important role in helping each other to adjust to family transitions (Aldridge & Cautley, 1976; Hegar, 1986; Kempton et al., 1991). Although it may sometimes be appropriate to separate children for counselling purposes, for example, efforts could be made to preserve the ties between the children. As Carrier and her collaborators have pointed out (1995), separation can itself be an opportunity to improve the quality of relationships between siblings. However, for this to be true, significant efforts have to be made to maintain ties between the members of the sibling system. That may mean that following a divorce, court orders mention what contacts will be established between the children who are in separate custody arrangements (Kaplan et al., 1991). It also means that in separate sibling placement situations, intervention plans explicitly deal with the sibling sub-system (Kosonen, 1996). These measures are particularly necessary for

young children who are dependent on adults to maintain contacts with their brothers and sisters.

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