A Qualitative Case Study on Sibling Relationship Experiences of Adolescents Discharged from Child Care Institutions

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Abstract

This study investigated the sibling relationships in adolescents discharged from child care institutions. The purpose of this study was to influence the development of social welfare intervention plans to support sibling relationships in brothers and/or sisters who grow up in child care institution. We enrolled four adolescents who had grown up together with their sibling(s) at the same child care institution. We examined the individual responses of the adolescents after in-depth interviews, which were conducted between March and August 2017. Our qualitative case study revealed that the adolescents had not been exposed to sufficient interactions or opportunities at the child care institutions that enabled them to form strong sibling relationships with each their sibling(s). After being discharged, adolescents remained on awkward terms with their sibling(s) onto adolescence, but did not sever family ties. Based on these findings, the social welfare interventions suggested in this study aim to promote and support positive sibling relationships among siblings discharged from the same child care institutions.

Keywords : Child care institution, adolescent, sibling, relationship, qualitative case study

1. Introduction

Sibling relationships are non-elective as with parent-child relationships. Most children generally spend more time with their siblings than with their parents or friends[1]. A study found that a healthy sibling relationship during adolescence, a period marked by teenage angst, has a positive effect on self-identity, self-esteem, and peer relationship[2]. Moreover, sibling relationship was found to be a predictor of subsequent peer relationship outcomes[3].

It is unsurprising that sibling relationships among children from child care institutions may
be different from those among children from normal families. This is because, unlike children from normal families, these children grow up separated from their parents, who are one of their most important recipients of attachment, from a young age and with a childhood trauma of separation. Thus, we can hypothesize that siblings who grow up in child care institutions may form a non-normal sibling relationship.

Sibling relationships among children from child care institutions have not received attention by researchers. Previous studies have generally investigated the level of adjustment and independence to understand the life during and after a child’s stay at a child care institution. Most studies related to child care institutions have addressed adjustment of children and adolescents within[4],[5] and outside the institution, respectively[6],[7]. But given the importance of childhood sibling relationships the relationship of a child with their sibling, who would be their only blood-relation near them, cannot be understated. However, there is a lack of studies investigating children from child care institutions in terms of sibling relationship.

Therefore, we investigated the sibling relationships in adolescents discharged form child care institutions, which aim to return children or adolescents to their original homes. These adolescents, i.e., those who have turned 18 and thus can no longer stay in child care institutions, have been shown to live independently as opposed to return home[6],[7]. Even though many of them would have lived in the child care institutions with their siblings, a limited number of studies have so far addressed sibling relationships.

Children in child care institutions spend the majority of their childhood separated from their parents, irrespective of their choice. This means that they spend relatively more time with their siblings who co-entered the facility than with their parents. Here, we investigated sibling relationships to develop social welfare interventions that promote sibling relationships in child care institutions, especially because these relationships have a prominent and long-term influence on a person’s life[8].

2. Literature Review

Despite their influential role on family configuration, few studies have investigated sibling relationships in adolescents discharged from child care institutions. Studies have generally focused on how these adolescents adjust to society.

Moreover, most have investigated siblings from normal families. A study on university students from normal families found that people were more likely to find reassurance from
sibling relationships if they were the same-sex as their sibling(s)[9]. Similarly, another study suggested that compared to boys, girls were more likely to be reassured in a multi-sibling relationship[10]. However, these studies are limited in that they investigated only characteristics of sibling relationships in adolescents and university students from normal families.

In countries where children are normally allocated to foster homes as opposed to child care institutions, sibling relationship quality has been shown to be essential for child development and adjustment to foster care[11]. Furthermore, sibling relationship during childhood has been shown to be a strong environmental factor that affects not only childhood but also post-childhood life; a positive sibling relationship in childhood was found to enhance psychological well-being in adulthood[12]. As well as quality of life, both during childhood and adulthood, it has been shown to significantly influence peer relationship during adolescence and interpersonal relationship during adulthood. Therefore, for us to improve the quality of life in adolescents who grew up and were discharged from child care institutions it is important to investigate their sibling relationships.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Participants

We enrolled four adolescents who grew up and were discharged at the age of 18 from a single child care institutions. As to participant selection, We received initial recommendations of research participants from social workers at the child care institutions. These initial research participants then introduced us to the other research participants. We described the purpose of the study to the participants and then filled out the research agreement.

Each adolescent had or had had a sibling(s) who grew up from the same child care at the same time. All study participants were students, half of them lived in a self-supporting institution and the other half lived independently in studio-type rooms. The durations of their stays in child care institutions were between 7 and 11 years.

The general characteristics of the study population are summarized in Table 1.
3.2 Method of Analysis and Collection

We collected data by in-depth interviewing each discharged adolescent. We conducted the interviews, which were recorded with participant consent, across 5 months between March and August, 2017. Each participant was interviewed at least 3 times during these 5 months. Each interview was conducted for as long as needed. After each interview, we shared and checked the interview contents with the participants through social networking services (SNS).

To conduct a qualitative analysis, we used a case study method. To determine the common characteristic relating to sibling relationship among the participants, we performed a within-case analysis. Then using these characteristics, we performed cross-cases analysis to delineate the sibling relationships in the participants.

3.3 Compliance to Qualitative Research and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the reliability and the validity of our findings, we made every effort to conduct an ethical research and to adhere to the principles of qualitative research. The authors worked closely together throughout the study, from its inception to data collection, to enhance reliability. In addition, all data analyses were double checked with each participant, and their feedback was taken to account. All data used in the study were kept confidential.

4. Results and Discussion

The children in child care institutions are lacking chances to be loved, are not given a lot of choices to live and love, and are more likely to have difficulties changing the institutional environment that they are in. The sibling relationships experiences of adolescents discharged
from in child care institutions are as follows.

### 4.1 An environment non-permissive of sibling affection

Because child care institutions do not accommodate a sibling-friendly environment, for instance, by allowing them to share rooms or spend time together as siblings, siblings in child care institutions spend more time separated than together during childhood. In fact, they form stronger and closer bonds with their peers than their siblings. This environmental barriers leads to psychological barriers to sibling relationships, as evident from the fact that our participants were no more affectionate of their siblings than they were of their peers and were not open to sufficient opportunities for sibling bonding.

> My brother did not tell me about my mother. I heard it through someone else. I’m not very close with my brother. We were enemies at the child care center. It was never better than with others, I don’t know why. I was more friendly with others than my brother. <Research participant A>

> My younger brother and I were in the same room and we used the other room. Brothers at the child care center were not always assigned to the same room, but I don’t have to be so close with my brother. <Research participant B>

> I think it is better for my family to live together without having to send the children to a child care center, even if the parents are struggling. The facility is not a home, it is just a facility. I don’t talk about my younger brother going to the facility first. It isn’t a good memory. <Research participant C>

> In the case of my younger brother, he was sent to the child care center when he had needed a lot of love from our parents. Every day he was hit by the boys in the facility. I was young. My brother was having a hard time, but I couldn’t help him. I could not even take care of my younger brother at child care center. <Research participant D>

### 4.2 Increasingly deepening conflicts and wounds without reconciliation

Some participants who tended to be passive and introverted were envious of their more confident and extroverted siblings. In contrast to their siblings who were always the center of attention, they expressed difficulty at forging relationships with others. They grew up used to
the comparisons that people made of them with their siblings.

When the participant was the younger sibling, they expressed that their older brother was someone who often physically abused and mistreated them unprovoked. They expressed fear and dislike for their brothers for these reasons, indicating that children in child care institutions may have broken sibling relationships. They did not like being siblings because of being compared, and as time went on, this conflict became much deeper.

Most parents like the first child. My family only liked the first child. I grew up realizing that a lot like since I was a kid. I was shrinking away and avoiding my family in front of such families. I was always hated by my family, who do not care about me and only care about my older brother. <Research participant A>

People like my younger brother more than me. I put it in my mind and I can not express it properly, but my brother does everything he wants. I also envy my brother, but I don’t want to be compared to my younger brother. <Research participant B>

I was a child that was not noticed a lot by others at the child care center. But my younger sister was very popular and I could not help being compared to her. <Research participant D>

4.3 Unexpressed feelings of regret

The older siblings expressed, in hindsight, regret at not being a better sibling and for harassing their younger siblings. However, these feelings were never translated into words of apology. The participants responded that they did not know how to express their feelings, were embarrassed, or did not have the courage to do so.

He doesn’t know that I’m having this hard time because I don’t talk to him. I don’t want to tell him first because my brother isn’t the type to feel sorry for me. Maybe I can’t talk to him first. I don’t know how to say it. <Research participant A>

I don’t express it to anyone else. I always think I have to change my personality, but it isn’t easy. I can’t express my heart to my younger brother. <Research participant B>

There are so many things I’m sorry and want to apologize for to my younger brother. When I was a kid, I hit my younger brother a lot. I don’t know why. Nevertheless, my brother treats me well as a brother. I’m grateful to my brother and I’m sorry, but I cannot express that to him. <Research participant C>
4.4 Acknowledgement of a non-intimate sibling relationship

Participants with a younger sibling expressed gratitude at the fact that their younger sibling(s) still regarded them as a brother-figure despite the fact that they did nothing to deserve it. Knowing well the hardships of growing up in a child care institution, they also expressed that they wanted their brothers to do well in life and to live together as a family. However, the non-intimacy between siblings was inevitable as they were brought up in an environment that did not foster any sibling relationships. They were living apart from each other, and they felt like parallel lines that could not meet.

I didn’t ask why he did it to me. We aren’t used to talking directly to each other. Unlike before, I appreciate him taking care of me now but I can’t say “thank you.” The relationship with my brother still remains awkward. <Research participant A>

I’m a little weak. When something happens, I am more used to running away or hiding somewhere. Because I am older, I have to take more responsibility than my younger brother, but I can’t take care of him. I am more actually comfortable with myself than with him. <Research participant B>

I think I will live with my brother later in my heart, but I don’t know how he will accept it. Now we are living apart from each other. I can’t contact him often. <Research participant C>

We don’t meet together at the same time. My sister and brother still have a bad relationship. It has been going on since they couldn’t get along at child care center. I wish I had restored the relationship between my brother and sister back then. <Research participant D>

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

We evaluated the sibling relationships in adolescents who grew up from child care institutions. On the basis of our evaluation, we recommend the following three social welfare interventions that may support sibling relationship after their discharge from these institutions.

First, an independent space should be provided within child care institutions for siblings throughout their upbringing, for instance, by allocating siblings to the same dormitory room.
Such measures would increase opportunities for positive sibling interactions. This is important because unlike siblings from normal families who can build intimate sibling relationships and more easily reconcile with each other after an argument, just because they live in a normal home. Therefore, a physical space where siblings can spend together is thought to be important for the psychological well-being and development of children and adolescents.

Second, interventions concerning the psychological well-being should be provided to siblings in child care institutions if we are to support positive sibling relationships. Because child care institutions in Korea do not treat siblings as siblings, the environment does not permit sibling to have any time together as a family or for them to care for each other. Unsurprisingly, the end-result is a sibling relationship that is either non-intimate or less intimate than peer relationship. Therefore, when there is conflict between siblings, child care institutions should provide timely and appropriate interventions to prevent siblings becoming distant.

Third, post-discharge support for sibling relationships is needed for adolescents from child care institutions. The age of 18 when they are discharged from the institution is when much preparation is required for future life. For many of them, they are not fully ready to enter into a highly competitive and career-focused society. For this, I recommend that they receive continued counselling until they are ready to be fully independent psychologically and emotionally. Each person has their own adjustment period. Not everybody adjusts at the same pace. This means that child care institutions should take this into consideration in order to ensure better long-term outcomes for these children.

Our research revealed that siblings from child care institutions still regarded each other as siblings, although they did not have an intimate bond, and regretted that they did not build a stronger relationship because they do not know how to express their feelings or were embarrassed. Most siblings end up living a life independent of each other after discharge; however, if they are to improve their quality of life and their ability to build healthy interpersonal relationships during adulthood, it is paramount that child care institutions introduce and adopt social welfare interventions that enhance sibling relationship quality.

References


