

SUMMARY (ENG)

An out-of-home placement may be necessary for children who are experiencing serious adversities within their current home setting. This is a drastic last resort to ensure the safety and proper development of the child, or to give the child a treatment that is not possible within their current setting. The Guideline for Out-of-Home Placements (*Richtlijn Uithuisplaatsingen*) for youth support and protection advises to place siblings together unless it is otherwise not possible or desirable. Previous research has shown that 35-50% of siblings are placed separately, however it is unclear whether this is largely due to practical considerations (i.e., no place available for multiple children) or contraindications (i.e., such as conflicts or sexual abuse between the children). In addition, one of the studies was based on estimates derived from interviews, and the other study was limited to a specific region within the Netherlands. Therefore, the aim of the current study was to obtain a valid and reliable estimate of the percentage of siblings who are placed separately after joint out-of-home placement throughout the Netherlands, as well as identify the reasons for separation. To investigate the research question, a multi-method, multi-informant study consisting of document analysis and interviews was conducted.

Methods

Document analysis

The document analysis was conducted with a representative sample of seven youth care organizations that provide foster care and family group homes in the Netherlands. These institutions together form a good reflection of all youth care organizations in the Netherlands in terms of their location (they are spread nationwide), and size (consisting of relatively small and large organizations). These organizations accounted for 25% of the total number of organizations that provide foster care and family group homes (7 out of 28 institutions).

First, out-of-home placements from the 2015-2020 period were selected via the participating institutions. Next, only full-time placements were selected, meaning part-time foster care (e.g., weekend foster care, vacation foster care) was not included. In addition, only placements were included that were mandated (i.e., involving a child protection order). If siblings were placed separately, additional document analysis was conducted to identify possible reasons for the separate placement. For the current study, siblings were defined as children who share at least

one (non-)biological parent and were residing at the same address at the time of the out-of-home placement.

Interviews

During the interviews, respondents were asked to name factors based on their own experiences (or experiences of colleagues) that might play a role in the decision to place siblings together or apart, to provide an estimate of the number of separated placements, and to suggest ways to reduce the number of separated placements. Interviews were conducted with 37 respondents, including professionals that refer cases to family-centered placements ($n = 8$), professionals employed by organizations that provide foster care and family group homes ($n = 10$), foster- and family group home caregivers ($n = 7$), juvenile judges and professionals employed by the Child Protective Services Board ($n = 8$), and foster care workers ($n = 4$). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded deductively.

Results

Results from the document analysis

During the period 2015-2020, a total of 1,717 siblings from 726 families were jointly placed out-of-home at the selected institutions. A total of 480 children were placed separately (28%, 95% CI[26%, 30%]), of which 316 were placed alone and 164 were placed with at least one sibling (but not with all siblings). Results showed that children were significantly more likely to be placed separately during emergency placements (45%, 95% CI[41%, 49%]) than during regular placements (15%, 95% CI[13%, 18%]). Separate placements were also significantly more common in non-kinship care (40%, 95% CI[35%, 45%]) than in kinship care (14%, 95% CI[12%, 17%]), and more common in foster care placements (29%, 95% CI[27%, 32%]) than in family group home placements (15%, 95% CI[10%, 20%]). In addition, separate placements occurred significantly more frequently when more siblings were involved in the out-of-home placements. Placements involving two children had the lowest proportion of separate placements (13%, 95% CI[11%, 15%]), followed by placements involving three children (43%, 95% CI[39%, 48%]), whereas placements involving four or more children had the greatest proportion of separate placements (77%, 95% CI[70%, 82%]).

The reasons for separate placement were not systematically registered at any of the participating institutions. Therefore, it was not possible to give a reliable overview of the most frequently occurring reasons for separate placements. To give somewhat of an impression of

the reasons for separate placements, a distinction was made between explicitly stated and non-explicitly stated reasons. In about half of the separate placements, no information was available in the files about any reasons that might have led to the separate placement of siblings (51%, $n = 243$). Among the files that did mention the (possible) reason(s) for separate placement, it appeared that this was due to practical considerations (26%, $n = 124$) as much as due to contraindications for joint placement (23%, $n = 113$). The practical considerations mentioned in the files turned out to be about the unavailability of a foster family or family group home for the joint placement of all the children. Per child there can be several (possible) reasons for a separate placement. For the 113 separate placements where contraindications (probably) played a role, 123 reasons were coded.

The following concerns regarding joint placement were most often mentioned: parentification, where one of the siblings assumes the parental role (42%), conflicts between the siblings (16%), behavioral problems (9%), specialized care needed for one or more siblings, but not for all children (9%), a negative influence of the siblings on each other (7%), and (suspected) sexual abuse between the siblings (3%). However, these reasons were seldomly mentioned explicitly as reasons for the separate placement; in 13%, 10%, 18%, 55%, 50%, and 0% of the cases, respectively. Other reasons given for separate placements were: the siblings did not have a close relationship with each other, placing them together would lead to a heightened risk of placement breakdown, the placement location needed to remain hidden but one of the children was so loyal to the parents that no safety arrangements could be made, and, lastly, that each child could receive more individual attention if they were placed separately.

Results from the interviews

Factors involved in the decision to place children separately that emerged from the interviews are divided into child factors, foster-parent factors, and practical considerations. The most frequently mentioned child factors are: a negative dynamic between the children, one or more children (but not all children) is in need of specialist care or treatment, and parentification. Other frequently mentioned child factors were: conflicts between the children, behavioral problems that create a risk of delaying or threatening the development of the other siblings, and (suspected) sexual abuse between the children.

The most frequently mentioned foster-parent factors were: the capacity of the foster parents in combination with the gravity and nature of the individual care needs of the siblings, and the (age) preferences of the foster-parents. Regarding practical considerations, the (lack of)

available foster families and family group homes were the most frequently mentioned factors relating to separate placements. There are relatively few foster families available that are willing or able to take in multiple children, for example due to a lack of space (insufficient number of rooms), or financial- and/or other resources. Finally, some other factors that (might) outweigh joint placement were mentioned, including: the interest of the individual child, preventing placement breakdown (i.e., in cases where sibling placement is viewed as a risk factor for breakdown), and kinship placement.

Additionally, respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of separate placements in the event of a joint (simultaneous) out-of-home placement. Most respondents indicated that this was difficult to estimate. Estimates ranged from 20% to 80%, with most respondents estimating that 50% of joint out-of-home placements ended in separate placement of the siblings. Respondents were also asked whether there are differences in the number of separated placements when it comes to emergency versus regular placements, and between kinship and non-kinship placements. Some respondents indicated that separate placements are more frequent in regular placements than in emergency placements, but other respondents indicated that separate placements are more frequent in emergency placements than in regular placements. Furthermore, respondents indicated that separate placements are more frequent in non-kinship placements than in kinship placements.

Next, respondents were asked to what extent they think it is possible to further reduce the number of separate placements, and what would be required to do so. The vast majority of respondents indicated that it would be possible to further reduce the number of separate placements. Many suggestions were given for reducing separate placements, which can be roughly divided in: (I) increasing the availability and/or capacity of foster families and family group homes that can take in multiple children, (II) better facilitating and supporting foster and family group home caregivers, and (III) removing financial barriers experienced by foster and family group home caregivers. Examples of suggestions are: recruitment campaign aimed at (potential) foster- and family group home caregivers for awareness of the problem of separate placement of siblings, deploying more help in foster- and family group home caregivers for taking care of siblings, and a higher compensation for the costs incurred when taking care of multiple children.

Finally, respondents indicated that passing legislation for the right of siblings to be placed together is necessary to uphold the preference of placing siblings together. However,

respondents did state some concerns about the feasibility and practicality of placing this into legislation. For example, it is important that the conditions for joint placement are met (e.g., enough places, clear guidelines), that it is clear who is responsible for sufficient availability of foster families and family group home that can take in multiple siblings, and that it is made clear what the consequences are if there is no foster family or family group home available.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Separate placement of siblings seems to be less common (28%, 95% BI[26%, 30%]) than previously estimated. Unfortunately, in the current study it was not possible to obtain reliable estimates of how often separate placement is a result of practical considerations (i.e., no place available for multiple children) or because of contraindications for joint placement (i.e., such as conflicts or sexual abuse between the children). The document analysis showed that very limited information is available about reasons for separate placements. Based on the files in which at least some information could be found about the (possible) reasons for separate placements, it seemed practical considerations played a role in about half of the cases, and contraindications for joint placement played a role in the other half. Based on the interviews, it can be deduced that siblings are mainly placed separately due to the limited availability of foster families and family group homes that can take in multiple siblings. The findings regarding the reasons for separated placements as found in the file research and in the interviews are partly in line with the Guidelines for Out-of-Home Placement. However, the information regarding the (possible) reasons for separate placements given in the Guideline is very limited. It is expected that youth care professionals who work in the field of foster care could benefit from more extensive justification information, and examples of the contraindications for joint placement.

Due to the limited registration of information in the files on (the reasons for separate) placements, it is important to take into account several considerations when interpreting the results. Firstly, it was generally not clear whether the placements were out-of-home placements or placement moves (to new foster homes). However, it is expected that the number of placement moves is limited, because the current study only included the first placement of a child (i.e., first placement in the study period from 2015 to 2020). In addition, even in the case of placement moves, it is important to know what the reasons are for no longer placing the siblings together. Indeed, placement moves may still be due (in part) by practical considerations. Second, it was not possible to obtain reliable estimates of the most

common reasons for separate placements, because this information was not systematically registered. For follow-up research on separate placement of siblings, it is crucial to make the registration of certain information mandatory.

Finally, based on the current study, some recommendations have been formulated for (I) the registration of placements, (II) follow-up research on separated placement of siblings, (III) the Guidelines for Out-of-Home Placement, and (IV) reducing separated placements.