

Keeping Siblings in Care Connected: Improving Relationship Stability via the Mockingbird Family Model

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ABSTRACT

Children and young people in Australian foster or kinship care are separated from their siblings for a range of reasons. These may include issues that are behavioural, sibling-related, the capacity of carers to host multiple children, or policies that enforce a one-child-per-bedroom rule. This study investigated strategies enhancing stability and meaningful connections among siblings within the Mockingbird Family, a social network model of foster and kinship caring. Case examples, network mapping, and visualisation of the Mockingbird Family networks are presented alongside results from thematic analysis of qualitative data. The findings suggest that the Mockingbird Family facilitates meaningful contact and sibling connections, even when coplacement was not possible. Sibling coplacement and contact provide crucial benefits such as emotional support, stability, shared experiences, and a sense of belonging, contributing to children's and young people's development, healing from trauma, and overall wellbeing.

IMPLICATIONS

- Keeping sibling groups connected and in contact can reduce placement breakdown and contribute to their overall wellbeing.
- The Mockingbird Family model of foster care provides a range of options for keeping siblings meaningfully connected through coplacement within the same constellation and opportunities for other siblings to join in Mockingbird Family activities.

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Supporting children and young people to maintain contact with their biological family when living in out-of-home care is reflected internationally in legal, policy, and child protection practice guidelines (Font & Kim, 2022). Keeping sibling groups connected as they move through, and in and out of, out-of-home care is a repeated message from DiGiovanni and Font (2021)'s 30-year review of studies as the morally right thing to do. Ongoing safe contact with family and keeping strong connections between siblings

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may offer children and young people a chance to develop a sense of belonging, identity formation, and some stability not found elsewhere (Font & Kim, 2022; Segal, 2023). With this in mind, this study is on sibling and sibling-like¹ connections and relationships between children and young people in the Australian pilot of the Mockingbird Family, an innovative social network approach in foster and kinship care (McLaren et al., 2023; Patmisari et al., 2024). The current analysis mapped sibling movements and narrated the Mockingbird Family's role in keeping siblings connected, especially in facilitating meaningful connections between siblings.

The Mockingbird Family is a licenced family-based foster and kinship care model originating in the United States (Mockingbird Society, 2022). Foster and kinship households are formed into microcommunities, known as constellations, replicating extended family-like groupings. A skilled carer, known as the Hub Home provider, is centrally located in reasonable proximity to six to ten foster and/or kinship households in their constellation. This central carer co-ordinates training, provides respite, and avails themselves 24/7 for advice and support. Each constellation regularly comes together for social and activity-based gatherings, for example, art and craft, playground, and beach walks, or camps, and so on, giving the children and young people the opportunity to form friendships and meaningful relationships with each other and all the carers. In addition, the Hub Home provider undertakes meetings, advocacy, and negotiations with foster care agency providers and statutory services (Mockingbird Society, 2022). The model promotes a collective approach to caring, drawing on the social wealth of all its members. By working together, this model has the potential to improve protectiveness and stability. It can preemptively address difficulties experienced by carers, children, and young people before they escalate into significant crises (McLaren et al., 2023).

The Mockingbird Family is well established in the USA and UK. Evaluations of this community's caring approach have consistently shown greater carer retention and improvements to children and young people's placement stability compared to single-family foster caring (Mockingbird Society, 2019; Northwest Institute for Children and Families, 2007; Ott et al., 2020). The sociocontextual dynamics of the model place value on constellation members' network capacity, in which carers support each other, and support connections between siblings and other children and young people associated with the Mockingbird Family (McLaren et al., 2023; Patmisari et al., 2023). The model creates opportunities for meaningful relationships to develop between siblings, other children, and young people in care, and carer's biological children (McLaren et al., 2023). Support to develop meaningful relationships is particularly important for children and young people who have experienced excessive placement disruptions, lost connections with their families of origin or siblings, and who may have few friends (Fawley-King et al., 2017; McAuley & Trew, 2000). Models that support developing and keeping siblings connected are important on a number of levels.

In their review, DiGiovanni and Font (2021) noted that the literature often frames sibling placement from a moral perspective, suggesting it is inherently the right thing to do. Others argue that biological siblings often share experiences of abuse and/or neglect, deep emotional bonds, and may have developed protective behaviours towards one another (Barnea et al., 2023; McWey et al., 2022). Being in care together with a sibling is argued to provide opportunities to process trauma, adjust to a new placement, and heal together (Seale & Damiani-Taraba, 2016), which may lead to better

socioemotional outcomes and development trajectories compared to siblings who are separated and placed alone (Barnea et al., 2023; Hillman et al., 2023). When moving through multiple placements with new caregivers, maintaining contact with one's siblings may be the only constant in a young person's life (Ginsberg, 2021; Herrick & Piccus, 2005). Keeping connected with siblings offers chances of having a life-long meaningful relationship with someone (DiGiovanni & Font, 2021; Segal, 2023). In the absence of safe, supportive, and healthy relationships with biological parents, the potential benefits of meaningful relationship stability through keeping connected with siblings is an important consideration.

However, there are many challenges with placing sibling groups. Practical concerns include the lack of large homes and the willingness of foster and kinship carers to accommodate siblings (DiGiovanni & Font, 2021; Herbster & Ocasio, 2021). Cases of sibling aggression, violence, and harmful sexual behaviours between siblings often necessitate their separation (DiGiovanni & Font, 2021; James et al., 2008; Yates, 2018). Particular considerations may impact carer and placement choice where one or more siblings have a mental illness, disability or behavioural issues (Herbster & Ocasio, 2021), enter out-of-home care at different times, or differ vastly in age (Frost & Goldberg, 2020). The larger the sibling group and greater the age span, the more difficult and less likely they will be placed together with a single foster or kinship carer (DiGiovanni & Font, 2021). As a result, large sibling groups can become splintered across single or double-sibling placements and across out-of-home care accommodation types (Luu et al., 2020). Maintaining sibling contact among groups who are located across multiple placements becomes challenging for children and young people, as well as for child protection workers due to policy and systemic issues impacting their decision-making. In addition, placing siblings together may not be in their best interests, such as when there is sibling-perpetrated violence (DiGiovanni & Font, 2021). Whatever the circumstances, Collings et al. (2020) found that separated siblings become disenfranchised, distant, and may not even know each other. Separation represents lost opportunities for siblings to develop quality contact that is meaningful to them.

Some researchers advocate the coplacement of younger with older siblings, drawing on social learning theory to emphasise the importance of exposure to dynamic interactive processes between them and their foster carers in addressing problem behaviours (James et al., 2008; Waid et al., 2021; Waid & Dantas, 2023). The reality is that older siblings are more likely to be separated and placed into residential care, while their younger counterparts are found in foster or kinship families (Collings et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2019). Loss of desire for connection is known to increase when children and young people are separated from their siblings and moved through multiple placements, leading to relative estrangement (Angel, 2014; Jones et al., 2019). Although coplacement may be valuable, the contact needs to be safe and meaningful for siblings who cannot be coplaced.

Keeping children and young people connected with their siblings and the nurturing of meaningful connections is important. When sibling coplacement is not possible, authors suggest that comprehensive approaches in support of visitation may mitigate some of the adversity associated with maltreatment and separation (Font & Kim, 2022; Waid & Dantas, 2023). Other innovations, such as sibling camps, have been observed to help with some level of connection and identity formation (Rogers & Ali, 2021; Waid et al., 2021), but they do not necessarily ameliorate estranged sibling

relationships (Collings et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2019). In the absence of sibling relationships, sibling-like relationships with the biological children of foster carers, or with other children and young people in foster care, have likewise been shown to be a protective factor (Barnea et al., 2023; Wojciak et al., 2018). This study contributes to the body of knowledge by describing the coplacement and meaningful contact of siblings through the Mockingbird Family.

In consideration, the research questions informing our current study were “How does the Mockingbird Family contribute to sibling coplacement or otherwise meaningful contact?” and “What are the benefits of sibling coplacement and contact, as observed in South Australia’s first Mockingbird Family constellations?”

Method

Undertaken in 2023, qualitative interviews and constellation mapping were employed for this study to capture the multidimensional aspects of sibling cohabitation, contact, and relationship formation associated with the Mockingbird Family. This offered a comprehensive understanding of collective support with sibling connections.

The Mockingbird Family sample pool included South Australia’s first six constellations, consisting of 41 Hub and satellite homes, 65 foster carers (24 couples caring; 17 sole carers), and 51 children and young people in foster care. In response to calls for participants, carers ($n = 19$) nominated themselves and the children and young people ($n = 21$, age $M = 7.1$ years) in their care. Foster care agency workers ($n = 9$) and statutory child protection workers ($n = 5$), with Mockingbird Family members in their caseloads, nominated themselves for participation on receipt of study information via their employers (sample pool size unknown). The biological children of carers were not studied. Aboriginal kinship families were not involved in this Mockingbird Family pilot and, therefore, not studied.

Informed consent was provided by adult participants who took part in interviews, which were single, individual, face-to-face interviews. Carers were interviewed in person. Foster care agency workers and statutory child protection workers were interviewed via video link (Microsoft Teams). While carers consented for children and young people (all less than 18 years), researchers used age-appropriate language to explain the study, and what participation involved, and sought their assent to speak with them. Interviews with children and young people were during regular Mockingbird Family gatherings and undertaken alongside art and other activities. Two researchers (HM, EP) moved among the group and had multiple small conversations with those where consent/assent was received. While undertaken as individual, face-to-face interviews, they were completed in the visual vicinity of carers and close to other children and young people. Activities were not subject to analysis; they assisted in rapport building and occupying the children and young people. When physical and spoken responses of children and young people indicated the loss of interest, interviews were stopped. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, de-identified, and analysed. Two additional agency workers (Mockingbird Family coordinators) participated in documenting the constitution of each Mockingbird Family constellation and narrating microsystem changes observed (with HM). This enabled network maps to be drawn, and three examples were selected for reporting. Pseudonyms and sufficient altering of diagrammatic

representations of Mockingbird Family constellations preserved anonymity. Study approval was granted by the Flinders University Human Ethics Committee (No.577).

Inductive thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2022), involving multiple readings of interview transcripts, coding, and clustering codes into themes. When sibling connections were identified as a dominant theme, this informed further discussion between a researcher (HM) and the two Mockingbird Family co-ordinators (KT, HB). While keeping a focus on the children and young people, six network visualisations were mapped, with each depicting the most significant change. When three unique changes were identified, one representative visualisation for each was identified for reporting. The inductive–deductive analysis, wrapped around social network mapping, enabled deeper underlying meanings to be understood. Network mapping critically informed theme development and facilitated visual representations of Mockingbird Family networks (see Figures 1 and 2).

Results

The Mockingbird Family model replicates an extended family-like network, providing a range of options to keep siblings, cousins, or close family friends, meaningfully connected. Just like any family, each Mockingbird Family constellation is a dynamic system where interactions and relationships between people evolve over time. Accordingly, our results are framed around examples of three cases that visualise the constellations as dynamic microsystems capable of responding to the changing human needs within them.

Connecting Siblings Together When Moved Apart

In the first case example, Anne and Arthur are biological siblings who live together in Home A (see Figure 1). Ideally, respite care takes place within each constellation by their Hub Home provider. When Anne and Arthur's household was joined into a

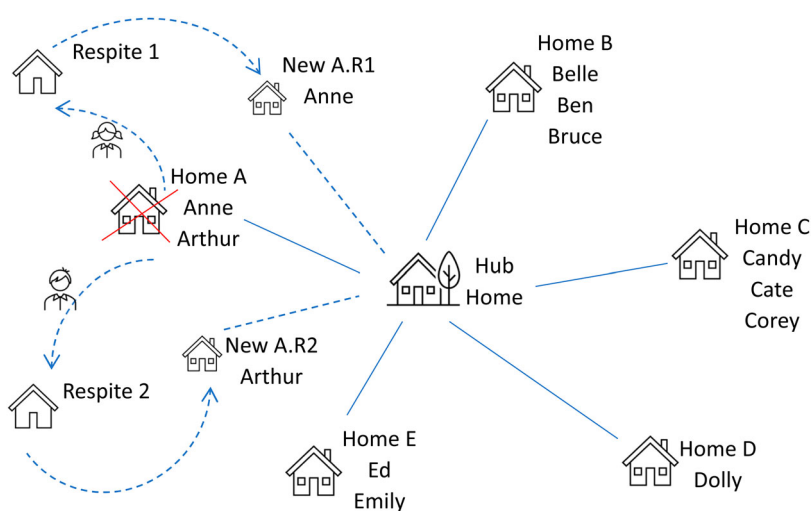


Figure 1 Keeping biological siblings in the Mockingbird Family together but living apart

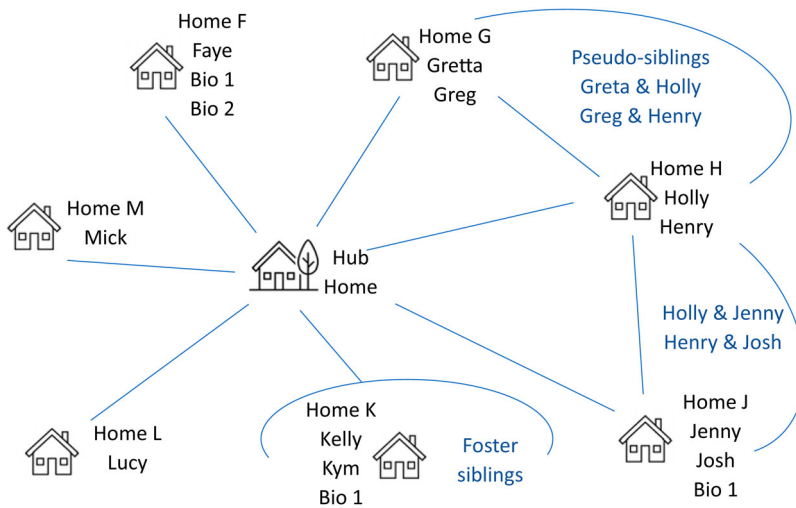


Figure 2 Forging meaningful foster and pseudo-sibling relationships in the Mockingbird Family

Mockingbird Family constellation, each had an existing respite carer. An agency worker advised, “The respite carers wanted to connect, but they didn’t want the obligation of being involved in everything.” Respite 1 and Respite 2 connected with the constellation for social activities, when activities coincided with their provision of respite.

A year following the formation of this constellation, Home A could not continue foster caring. Keeping Anne and Arthur together, in their constellation, was of paramount consideration. However, a new carer to join the Mockingbird Family could not be found. Respite 1 agreed to become the long-term foster carer for Anne and joined the Mockingbird Family (New A.R1), and, likewise, Respite 2 agreed for Arthur (New A.R2). An agency worker advised, “The respite carers were getting a taste of the Mockingbird and going, ‘Oh yeah, this makes life a bit easier’ and they changed their status from respite to long-term carer.” Another agency worker added, “Anne might have ended up somewhere completely else if it wasn’t for Mockingbird.” While Anne and Arthur were in different homes, stability was maintained through renegotiating roles, enabling them to remain in their existing Mockingbird Family constellation. The Hub Home provider added, “Anne and her brother have a better relationship living apart but still connected ... Anne is older and enjoys having some space ... When they meet up, Arthur throws himself into her arms.” At the same time, Anne and Arthur maintained the relationships made with other children and young people in their Mockingbird Family. Anne was asked if she had other siblings, and replied, “I have. I mean in the Mockingbird” and pointed at another young person and said, “She is my sister.” Having meaningful relationships via the stability that the Mockingbird Family creates has the potential to provide profoundly positive outcomes for children and young people, like Anne, that may extend into adulthood and across the life course.

There were perceptions that connection and support from within the Mockingbird Family improved the capacity of foster carers, and therefore stability for the children and young people. In this same constellation, there were larger than usual sibling groups. According to an agency worker, Home B was caring for siblings Belle and Ben

when “The Department for Child Protection decided that, because of the structure of support from being in Mockingbird, that they could manage to have the third biological sibling [Bruce].” Likewise, couple carers in Home C, who were new to foster caring, agreed to care for a sibling group on being introduced to the Mockingbird Family and seeing the value of support from skilled and experienced carers. An agency worker added, “The Mockingbird Family enabled that family, that wouldn’t have normally been able to have three, let alone a newborn, to actually have three” and explained that the model is responsible for creating environments that increase carer capacity to care for and keep siblings together.

Making Meaningful Foster and Sibling-Like Relationships

The second case example focuses on the relationships made between nonbiological siblings, which are commonly termed foster or pseudo-siblings. Several dynamics were observed in which the biological children of foster carers developed sibling-like bonds with the children and young people fostered by their families, for example, in Home K (see Figure 2). Similarly, children and young people in foster care across different satellite homes in the same constellation had bonded and identified as siblings, for example, in Home G and Home H, and Home H and Home J.

The Hub Home provider and carers in this constellation encouraged language such as “cousins” in creating a sense of family. The children and young people, however, variously referred to themselves as “cousin”, “sibling”, “sister”, or “brother”. One young person shared, “The Mockingbird Family is not like your blood family. It’s like God-family, like God-sister”, and another shared having two families, the “foster family” and the “Mockingbird Family”. Some of the children and young people in this constellation had very close sibling-like relationships. For example, Greg and Henry introduced themselves as “brothers”. They had frequent sleepovers at the Hub Home, and then at one another’s homes. A worker explained, “It is not being labelled as respite, as it normally is with children and young people in care. It is an extension of family that they get to hang out with. It makes a difference.” The language by carers and agency workers nurtured expressions of siblinghood as representations of the significant relationships formed in the Mockingbird Family. These sibling-like relationships, for some of the children and young people, were the first they had ever had. Another young person in this constellation who had biological siblings, when asked, only identified other young people in the Mockingbird Family as brothers or sisters.

Agency workers advised that sibling-like relationships formed in the Mockingbird Family constellations relatively quickly, with sleepovers a factor in their formation. Sleepovers were important, especially for children and young people living with sole carers, that is, in Home M and Home L. One of the workers shared:

... for the children [and young people] who have no biological siblings and are alone in foster care, having someone their own age they can call on, or go to see, who are going through things like them makes a world of difference.

Sleepovers also were invaluable for the sole carers as “they get a break at short notice when they need it, and the children became closer to each other”. Strong relationships were formed between sibling groups: for example, Home G, Home H, and Home J

each fostered sets of biological siblings (all were close to $M = 7.1$ years). Across these three Homes, the sets of siblings each identified children from the other Homes that they called their “brother”, “sister”, or even “twin”. An agency worker stated that the model allowed these “relationships to develop in a really natural ... organic way, in a nice environment for them”. Both carers and workers expressed valuing the collective approach of the Mockingbird Family in relation to growing sibling-like bonds, which were critically important in the context of trauma histories, behavioural problems, multiple placements and school changes, and exclusion by school peers.

Making Sibling Connections Within and Outside

Many children and young people in our sample had siblings placed elsewhere, with non-Mockingbird Family foster carers, in kinship or residential care, or independent supported living, and some were living with biological parents. There was a deep desire among carers and agency workers to help rebuild relationships between siblings in and outside the Mockingbird Family. In the third case example (see Figure 3), William lived with the Hub Home provider, who was also his foster carer. He had three siblings: Winnie and Willow lived in residential care and Wendy lived with a non-Mockingbird Family foster family. An agency worker advised:

The Hub Home has brought William’s siblings in a few times. Based on this, we are looking at it conceptually in terms of what Mockingbird can do ... even if a carer cannot manage to keep all the siblings all of the time.

Keeping siblings connected was practised through bringing potentially estranged siblings to Mockingbird Family constellation gatherings at the Hub Home, group picnics or park visits, allowing connections in a safe place and with the support of multiple carers.

The Hub Home provider advised that, although William’s sisters are much older than him, and “might want to mix with their own age”, it saddened her that William’s sisters

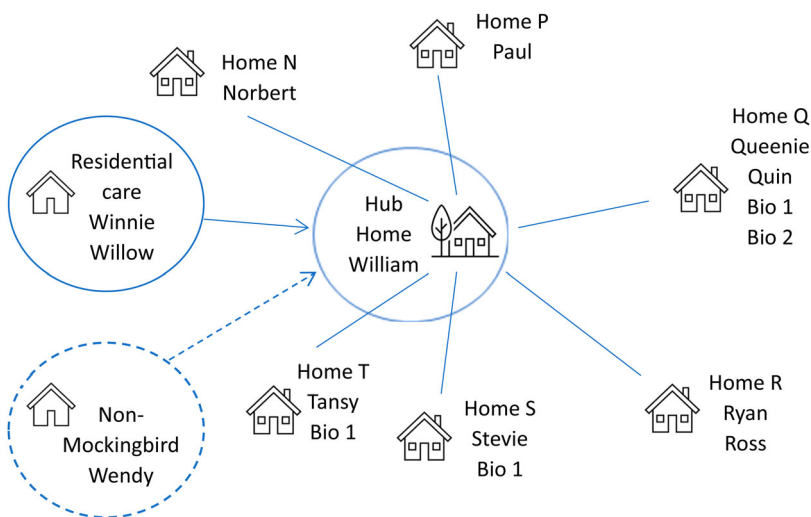


Figure 3 Keeping siblings outside the Mockingbird Family connected with siblings within

“missed out on the opportunities for family life that he has”. She said, “William has responded well to having his sisters over, but is torn between having to share attention. Nonetheless, he is loving the kind of naughty things that siblings do.” Consistent with the views of agency workers and other carers, she emphasised the importance of younger and older siblings having time together, negotiating social hierarchies and roles between them, and developing relationships for the future. Importantly, the Hub Home provider wanted William’s sisters to:

... experience a bit of freedom ... help themselves to the fridge for an ice-cream without having to ask, and when there is a Mockingbird event, to be invited, mix with some others their own age, and experience the importance of sharing childhood.

She arranged for the sisters to attend Mockingbird Family activities, initially with a residential care worker present, then more recently without a worker.

Following this example, agency workers talked about Home R. They spoke about Ryan and Ross, who are biological siblings. While this household did not have the capacity to foster more than two, workers were planning the introduction of a third biological sibling with another family in the constellation:

There are three siblings [Ryan, Ross, and Randall]. Two are in the constellation, but the family cannot take more. One is in residential care [and] has slightly higher needs, so Mockingbird is able to offer the three of them a safe space to do lots of stuff together ... one of the other foster carers in the constellation will ... take him in.

Many additional examples were provided of siblings who were estranged and where previously there was little opportunity to connect them across care types or contexts. They reflected on past experiences of rules and bureaucracy in comparison, “When you’re talking about the Mockingbird, they’re [Child Protection Services] a lot more flexible.” Workers endorsed the role of the Mockingbird Family in building capacity and shared value systems based on inclusivity. They observed strength among the foster carers in each constellation to advocate in favour of keeping siblings connected, and they supported each other in these endeavours. This was echoed by a young person who expressed, “We don’t just care about ourselves. We care about other people ... The Mockingbird Family is where we take everyone in ... We all have fun together.” Opportunities to build friendships, connections, and relationships were likewise important to the children and young people.

Many of the children and young people talked about biological siblings who were living somewhere else. One shared, “I have brothers and sisters. They don’t live with me. [They] drive me a bit crazy. Well, when [they] come to visit me, it is pretty nice.” Another shared, that siblings “are supposed to be annoying ... that makes you feel like part of your family”. When disconnected from siblings, however, a young person said, “Being alone is really bad and depressing.” Another expressed yearning for his siblings, “It’s shit. I miss them so bad.” In support, carers and agency workers advised that the Mockingbird Family had capacity and was extending beyond the immediate constellation in ways that could benefit reconnecting siblings who had been estranged. They shared possibilities, upon the back of William’s example, due to the increased capacity of foster carers who were members of a network and foster caring together. The capacity of constellations to connect distant siblings is further enhanced by the shared value

systems based on inclusivity, which is mimicked by the children and young people themselves.

Discussion

Results underscore the Mockingbird Family as a dynamic extended family network that meaningfully connects siblings, cousins, or close family friends within its constellations. The Mockingbird Family has the potential to enhance stability through fostering larger sibling groups, sibling visitation, and the nurturing of bonds. The model builds foster carer capacity to support complex sibling groups, demonstrated by flexible transitions from respite to long-term care. The model fosters meaningful, sibling-like bonds, highlighting the value of social connections for the children and young people in care. The model's flexibility and inclusivity facilitate sibling connections across care settings, offering a transformative approach to child welfare.

Network mapping showed that, despite one placement breakdown, the Mockingbird Family enabled siblings to be rehomed within their constellation and to be effectively kept together. Respite carers on the periphery participated in constellation activities and developed confidence to become full-time carers, having had a "taste" of the social network support. As a result, children and young people remained in the constellations they had become familiar with and maintained the meaningful connections forged. Strength in carer numbers instilled the confidence of Statutory authorities, enabling sibling visits from residential care. Positive experiences of reconnecting siblings within the Mockingbird Family with siblings from outside were motivating for other carers, who then followed with similar actions.

The importance of stable, safe, and supportive care for children and young people is important for their development. However, children and young people in out-of-home care will experience multiple placements due to carer availability and attrition (Konijn et al., 2019; Montserrat et al., 2020). As siblings move through multiple placements, they become separated and estranged from one another (Angel, 2014; Jones et al., 2019), move schools, and lose meaningful connections formed with peers (Fawley-King et al., 2017). Instability experienced by children and young people in care has known associations with adverse physical and psychological outcomes (Asif et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2018). The reality of child protection, however, is that foster family disruptions and placement instability are largely unavoidable (Asif et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2018). Models like the Mockingbird Family are therefore highly promising. The three examples showed the potential to improve the chances of keeping biological siblings together, reconnect estranged siblings, and forge sibling-like relationships. The Mockingbird Family model showed the capacity to improve some aspects of stability, which is critically important in the formation of meaningful connections that will last lifelong.

Keeping siblings meaningfully connected occurred via Mockingbird Family activities in which the children and young people of all ages engaged in fun activities. This was critical for relationship formation on several levels. As argued by scholars, sibling and sibling-like relationships, characterised by hierarchical elements and reciprocal dynamics, are critical for social learning (James et al., 2008; Waid et al., 2021; Waid & Dantas, 2023). Many children and young people in the current study, prior to joining

the Mockingbird Family, had behavioural problems, and multiple placements and school changes, resulting in exclusion by school peers and no meaningful sibling or sibling-like relationships. This impacted child development, attachment, and regulation of behaviours, which became reasons for ongoing exclusion, placement breakdown, separation from siblings, and instability. Children and young people's behaviour often is identified as a reason for placement breakdown.

When engaged in data collection during the Mockingbird Family catch-ups, there were highly charged behaviours, expressions of rivalry, negotiations between the children and young people, and also support and acceptance of each other. Whiteman et al. (2011) proposed that these interpersonal dynamics are healthy and fundamental to child development. Keeping siblings together in these constellations/microsystems, and otherwise supporting the development of sibling-like relations, may help repatriate some of the harm associated with abuse histories, removal, and then unstable placements, and issues with identity formation, connection, and a sense of belonging (Barnea et al., 2023; Herrick & Piccus, 2005). Elements of stability found through strengthening networks of support offer these children and young people a good chance of keeping connected. Accordingly, the Mockingbird Family has the potential to help recovery from trauma and promote overall wellbeing through improving stability.

Although there are limitations in the small sample sizes, this is due to examining the Mockingbird Family during its early implementation piloting in Australia. Nonetheless, there is promise in the model for siblings and other children and young people in need of care, friendships, meaningful relationships, and more.

Conclusion

Our network mapping enabled visual representations of the work of the Mockingbird Family in keeping siblings meaningfully connected. The diagrams complement rich carer and sibling stories from our research. These examples raise possibilities, such as when sibling coplacement may not be possible, that the Mockingbird Family offers the opportunity to keep siblings connected within and outside of the constellations. This is for both biological siblings, foster siblings, and pseudo-sibling formations. Keeping siblings connected is critically important for children and young people's development, mental health, wellbeing, and for healing from trauma. Finding new ways to strengthen the environments surrounding children and young people being cared for, and being supported to heal, is important. Having other young people in their lives with which to play, develop, argue, or negotiate, and form bonds is an important part of childhood and a child's right.

Note

1. Terminologies in use: 1. Biological siblings; 2. Foster siblings, bonded biological and child/young person in care, in the same foster family; and 3. Pseudo-siblings, bonded multiple child/young persons in care, sibling-like relationships.

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