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Sibling Time Activity Day Pilot: Evaluation Report

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April 2024



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Acknowledgements

We thank the carers, children and professionals who took part in interviews and completed feedback forms. We gratefully acknowledge the input from the Activity Days team at Coram but responsibility for this report's contents rests with the authors.

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Funding and competing interests

The Sibling Time Activity Day delivered by Coram's Activity Days team, and its evaluation by Coram's Impact and Evaluation team, were both funded by the Hadley Trust.

About Coram

Established as the Foundling Hospital in 1739, today we are a vibrant charity group of specialist organisations, supporting hundreds of thousands of children, young people and families every year.

At Coram, we champion children's rights and wellbeing, making lives better through legal support, advocacy, adoption and our range of therapeutic, educational and cultural programmes.

Coram's Impact & Evaluation team carries out research and evaluation projects in partnership with public sector and third sector organisations, and works across the Coram group of charities to help teams to evaluate their effectiveness. More information about Coram can be found here: www.coram.org.uk.

1. Introduction

This report describes an evaluation of Coram’s Sibling Time Activity Day service, piloted in Leicestershire in early August. The evaluation ran from 1 July to 30 December 2023. In this report, ‘children’ and ‘young people’ may be used together or interchangeably to refer to somebody below 18 years-old. Further, though it is acknowledged that people may now prefer the term ‘family time’ to ‘contact’, the term ‘sibling contact’ is used throughout this report to clarify that relationships between siblings (and not other family members) are of principal interest to this evaluation.

Service description

Sibling Time was developed by the Coram Activity Days team. It offers local authorities a fun, supportive, therapeutic and safe environment for children who are looked after or adopted to have meaningful contact with their siblings. The service was designed for children that are separated from their siblings by care, including those in fostering, adoptive and kinship care arrangements.

Researchers held a Theory of Change session with two members of the Activity Days team to understand the context, activities, mechanisms for change and outcomes of this newly developed service. As shown in Figure 1, Sibling Time was designed as a session running on a single day for approximately three hours. The session is facilitated by a range of professionals including Activity Days staff, social workers, play specialists and (optionally) a creative therapist. Parents and carers are invited to attend with their children, but stay in a separate space for the majority of the session.

The focus of the session is child-led free play with supported activities. There is also a group activity at the end of the session, bringing together children, parents, carers and professionals. Throughout the free play, parents and carers are offered training around various topics such as supporting sibling contact and life story work (helping individuals to interpret their lives and develop their sense of identity), as well as signposting to further support from the local authority. Children are given a memento to remember the day and are offered the chance to have a photo taken with their siblings.

By bringing siblings together in a safe, supportive environment, the Activity Days team hopes the service can bring more siblings into contact that can be sustained, supporting children’s wellbeing and sense of identity. The team also hope the service can help parents, carers and professionals to feel more confident in enabling sibling contact, through bringing together parents and carers, delivering training and raising awareness of the importance of sibling contact. Ultimately, the vision for the service is to influence social care culture towards increased sibling contact.

Figure 1. Theory of Change for Sibling Time Activity Day

Why separated siblings?

Siblings may be living in different households, in different care arrangements. Sibling separation is common particularly for paternal siblings. Siblings generally want to see each other and know that they are safe and well. Sibling contact can provide immediate benefits like a sense of belonging, as well as long term possibilities for a supportive relationship throughout a child’s life.



Why sibling time?

Evidence shows that well-facilitated sibling contact is associated with positive well-being outcomes (Flyer et al). In a survey, 12/33 respondents had negative views about how their LA supports sibling contact.



Intervention

One session bringing sibling groups together lasting 3 hours. Facilitated by social workers, play leaders and where possible a creative therapist. Majority of the day is free play with activities including sports, magic, den building and arts and crafts. Group activity with play leaders. Light touch training and discussion for parents and carers on supporting sibling contact and life story work. Optional sibling group photos. Signposting to further support from local authority.



Mechanisms

Bringing siblings together in a safe supportive environment. Creating positive memories of time spent with siblings. Building positive relationships between parents and carers of sibling group members. Raising awareness of the importance of sibling contact. Practical support for parents / carers on enabling and supporting sibling contact.



Short term outcomes

More separated siblings in contact. Separated siblings feel heard and that their wishes are acted upon. Parents and carers feel confident in supporting sibling contact. Social work professionals more confident in facilitating sibling contact.



Long term outcomes

Improved emotional wellbeing for separated siblings. Positive sense of identity for separated siblings. Separated siblings have an important trusted relationship with their sibling that can continue until adulthood. Change in social care culture towards increased sibling contact.

Unintended consequences

Can bring up difficult feelings for siblings.
Can be disappointing if siblings do not attend.
Information could be shared with birth families unintentionally.

2. Literature review

This section of the report presents a brief overview of literature relating to sibling contact. It aims to summarise research that explores carers' and young people's experiences of contact with and separation from their siblings. It also looks at policies or interventions used to support sibling contact.

According to the Department for Education, there were 83,840 looked after children in England on 31 March 2023 (Department for Education, 2023). A recent report from the Children's Commissioner further indicates that 37% of looked after children with a sibling are separated from them upon being placed in care (Children's Commissioner, 2023). Alternative research, however, suggests the numbers may be greater: for example, one report from Jones and Henderson suggests that around 70% of children in care with a sibling experience some form of separation (Jones and Henderson, 2017); and another study suggests that 75% of these children have lived apart from a sibling at some stage (Parker and McLaven, 2018). There are nuances to this, however. For example, one study indicates that sibling groups are less likely to be separated in a kinship care arrangement as compared with unrelated foster care (Ashley and Roth, 2015; Wellard et al, 2017).

It is suggested that sibling contact for those who have been separated by the care system may be beneficial for numerous reasons, such as supporting children's right to self-determination and having positive implications for wellbeing (Lundström et al, 2012; Jones, 2016). However, the emphasis is not on the mere occurrence of sibling contact,

but rather on its quality; sibling contact is only associated with positive outcomes when it is well-managed, for example with parents and carers actively supporting contact and taking children's wishes into account (Iyer et al, 2020). Indeed, harmonious sibling relationships are important for the development and livelihoods of all children (Monk and Macvarish, 2019). For looked after children specifically, well-managed sibling contact may have positive effects on identity formation and overall mental health. For example, in one study by Cossar and Neil, one of the adoptive mothers interviewed notes how powerful the relationship between her child and their birth sibling was in creating a sense of belonging (Cossar and Neil, 2013). Looked after children themselves often report a strong desire to stay in contact with siblings (Jones and Jones, 2018). Despite this, the maintenance of sibling relationships for looked after children remains an overlooked area of practice (Monk and Macvarish, 2019). This can manifest in different ways, including the neglect of sibling contact in care planning reports and assessments (Jones and Jones, 2018).

Whilst there are and have been basic sibling contact interventions implemented in the UK, some research indicates young people may be dissatisfied with these more 'typical' arrangements in terms of quality, frequency and degree of supervision by social workers (Selwyn and Lewis, 2023; Cossar and Neil, 2013; Parker and McLaven, 2018).

This is supported by the latest available data, with 22% of 8-10 year-olds and 31% of 11-18 year-olds in a recent survey feeling they saw their siblings too little (Lewis and Selwyn, 2022). In contrast, some new sibling contact initiatives have shown signs of promise. For example, in one study young people went away on a 'sibling camp' that allowed children to spend long periods of time with siblings and participate in activities (Rogers and Ali, 2021). Children appreciated this extended exposure to their siblings, building their relationships over the duration of the camp and increasing their understanding of one another. Further, in one US study, a series of 12 sessions were run for separated siblings to develop their social skills, with results demonstrating an improvement in relationships between these children (Kothari et al, 2017; Parker and McLaven, 2018). Not all such interventions have shown signs of promise, however: another US study showed that a sibling reunification initiative for looked after children led to a reduction in sibling support, with children having 'idealised' images of their siblings pre-intervention that often fell down upon spending time with them (Waid and Wojciak, 2017; Parker and McLaven, 2018). The evidence on new initiatives therefore varies depending on the specifics of the intervention.

The most recent UK-based sibling contact initiative to be evaluated is the Siblings Reunited (STAR) programme (Hardy and Codling, 2023). STAR is an initiative in Scotland that supports contact between siblings in instances where the local authority does not support this. The intervention aims to initiate sibling contact in a range of scenarios, both indoors and outdoors, and uses a range of activities such as film watching or outdoor activities to promote sibling interaction. The contact is facilitated by volunteers who are not

social workers, combatting any preconceptions siblings may have of these individuals. Following STAR, 56% of those referred had 'clear plans' to remain in contact with their siblings, with only 16% planning for no further contact. Siblings, caregivers and social workers all reported a 'high level of satisfaction' in relation to the programme (Hardy and Codling, 2023).

More evidence is required to understand the perceptions of children and young people regarding their contact arrangements. Previous research has investigated the impact of sibling contact on young people through their adoptive parents' eyes, with impressions ranging from positive to negative (Cossar and Neil, 2013; Meakings et al, 2021). In the latter study for example, while one adoptive parent was confident that their child was able to enjoy a 'nice, easy loving relationship' with their sibling, another professed that the contact 'doesn't do them any good' (Meakings et al, 2021). There appears to be a lack of evidence relating to the perspectives of children and young people themselves. It is important that these young people's voices are captured, as their wellbeing is often related to the outcomes of sibling contact arrangements (Selwyn and Jones, 2023).

Notwithstanding the lack of evidence on children and young people's perspectives, understanding the perspectives of carers remains important. Many adoptive families feel overwhelmed by the task of facilitating sibling contact and unsupported by care professionals (Meakings et al, 2021). Without support and commitment from parents and carers, any sort of contact arrangement is likely to fail in the long term (Sen and Broadhurst, 2011).

3. Methods

In this section of the report, we describe our five research questions, our methods for data collection, our ethical considerations and our approach analysing the data.

Research questions

Our research questions were refined and agreed with a team of Activity Days staff at the start of the evaluation in July 2023. As this is a new service being piloted for the first time, our research questions were largely formative to enable findings and conclusions that promote learning and development for the service. Our evaluation sought to answer:

1. Was the Sibling Time Activity Day implemented as expected, according to the activities outlined in the Theory of Change?
2. Which parents/carers and children/young people registered for the Sibling Time Activity Day and what were their characteristics?
3. What was the experience of attending the Sibling Time Activity Day for parents/carers, children/young people and professionals?
4. What are the perceived impacts for children and families of attending the Sibling Time Activity Day, from the perspective of parents/carers, children/young people and professionals?
5. What are the costs for the Activity Days team of delivering the Sibling Time Activity Day?

Ethics

This research was approved by Coram Research Ethics Committee (REC) in August 2023. The Coram REC adheres to the widely accepted Economic and Social Research Council’s research ethics guidance[1] and the Social Research Association’s research ethics guidance.[2]

Children and young people attending this service were either adopted, fostered or in kinship care, and had experienced separation from their siblings. The Sibling Time event and our evaluation (feedback forms and interviews) required these children and young people to reflect on their experiences with their siblings. This had the potential to bring up difficult emotions and memories of being separated from their family, with potential associated trauma. We planned for interviews to take place approximately one month after the Sibling Time session, to allow time for any difficult feelings resulting from the day to be expressed and processed with the support of the carer (the Activity Days team supported carers through this process). Our approach to interviews was sensitive and empathic, and we shared a list of support services with all adult participants following interviews.

Data collection

We used six main methods to address our research questions:

1. Theory of Change session
2. Observation of the intervention
3. Interviews with social work and play professionals, parents/carers and children/young people
4. Collection and analysis of administrative data
5. Collection and analysis of feedback forms
6. Reflective session with Activity Days team

All evaluation activities, including data collection methods, sample sizes and research questions addressed, are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of evaluation activities

Method	Data collection	Sample size	Research questions
Theory of Change session	One hour meeting held over Microsoft Teams, facilitated by two researchers	2 x Activity Days staff	1
Observation of intervention	One Coram researcher attended, making notes focused on: the organisation and delivery of activities; interactions between siblings; and the efficacy of keeping parents and carers in a separate space	Observation of 1 x Sibling Time session	1, 3
Interviews	Interviews were held over the phone/video call approximately 1-2 months after the Sibling Time session	1 x parents/carers 1 x children/young people 2 x social work/play professionals	3, 4
Administrative data	Routinely collected administrative data covering the characteristics of attendees was shared by the Activity Days team and analysed	Data was received for the 10 children/young people and 9 parents/carers that registered to attend	2, 5
Feedback forms	Feedback forms were developed and administered at the event by the observing researcher	13 x adults completed forms, including 6 parents/carers and 7 professionals 6 x children/young people completed forms	3, 4
Reflective session	One hour meeting held over Microsoft Teams, two weeks after the Sibling Time session, facilitated by two researchers	1 x Activity Day staff	1

[1] Economic and Social Research Council (2022) 'Framework for research ethics'. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics-guidance/framework-for-research-ethics/>, accessed 12 December 2023.

[2] Social Research Association (2021) 'SRA research ethics guidance'. Available at: <https://the-sra.org.uk/SRA/SRA/Ethics/Research-Ethics-Guidance.aspx>, accessed 12 December 2023.

Data analysis

Observation data

For the observation of the Sibling Time event, conducted in early August, we used a semi-structured observation template. This observation template was developed in collaboration with the Activity Days team. Notes were made under headings, such as 'Facilitators and barriers to engagement'. There was an 'Other' heading to ensure any additional details which were relevant to the research questions were captured. We analysed the observation notes thematically.

Interviews and reflective session

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach. Discussion guides were developed, but interviewers could pick up alternative lines of questioning based on participants' responses. All questions asked by interviewees were related to the research questions outlined earlier in this report.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim from interview recordings. We then used thematic analysis to generate our main themes. Transcripts were analysed in Microsoft Excel, with codes generated under headings such as 'Experience and impact of taking part'. Our thematic analysis was inductive, so that findings were grounded in what participants said, ensuring a clear link between data and themes.

Administrative data

Routinely collected administrative data regarding the characteristics of attendees was collected from 10 children/young people and nine parents/carers that attended the Sibling Time event. Data was analysed using Microsoft Excel.

Feedback forms

Attendees of the Sibling Time event, including children, parents/carers and professionals (but not including the Activity Days team) were asked to complete feedback forms based on their experiences of the event. Six out of 10 children, six out of 11 parents/carers and seven out of nine professionals provided responses to the forms. Children and young people answered a short questionnaire, while parents, carers and professionals were asked more detailed questions. Data was analysed via Microsoft Excel.



Observation of the Sibling Time event

One Coram researcher observed the Sibling Time event, held in early August 2023. Families were greeted in a friendly and enthusiastic manner by professionals helping to run the event. Some professionals appeared to have met certain parents and carers before. Various activities were laid out across the venue, which was a medium-sized communal hall with an outdoor space. Music was playing from speakers in the hall, and a range of refreshments was laid out for all attendees. At first, there appeared to be a large number of professionals in comparison to the number of children and young people attending, though this balanced out as more families arrived.

Children and young people

Children and young people appeared to experience the Sibling Time event positively, enjoying the activities laid out in the communal hall and outdoor space, with activities such as 'bottle rockets' appearing to be particularly popular.

Activities took a free-form structure. As intended, there was little formal instruction or guidance from professionals, with children and young people encouraged to discover activities as they pleased. Towards the end of the event, there was one slightly more 'structured' activity as children/young people and parents/carers gathered around to build a giant cardboard robot, though even this activity was relatively free-form. Not everyone had to participate in this activity, and one sibling group stayed on the other side of the outdoor space doing an arts and crafts activity.

Children and young people tended to stay within their sibling groups, rarely interacting with other sibling groups. Each sibling group was allocated a staff member on arrival. One sibling group was accompanied by two parents/carers for the entire duration of the event, due to the age of one child, who was a toddler (this arrangement was agreed prior to the event). Staff members appeared to be very successful at engaging the sibling groups, with children and young people seeming to enjoy their presence and playing lots of games with them. Some staff members preferred to stand back while siblings were interacting, whereas other staff members appeared to be more involved. Occasionally, siblings went to visit their parents/carers in a separate room, though this occurred very infrequently and visits were brief.

Sibling groups generally interacted enthusiastically and positively with one another. One child enthusiastically shouted, 'Siblings!' as their siblings arrived into the activity room, running over to give each of them a hug. Another sibling group had a large age disparity, with one being a teenager and another being a toddler. Despite this age difference, there appeared to be lots of positive interaction and shared participation in activities between the two. Overall, the energy levels were high, with all children and young people appearing to have fun in their own way. This feeling of fun lasted throughout the duration of the event. There was little to no indication of stress, anxiety or problematic interactions between siblings, and there appeared to be no discussion of family dynamics amongst siblings.

At various points throughout the day, sibling groups were encouraged by staff members to have their photo taken in the photo room, which had a series of inflatable props for children and young people to pose with. Children and young people seemed to enjoy this experience, using the props and taking several photos in various different poses.

During the lunch break, sibling groups sat with their allocated staff member to eat food provided by the Activity Days team, with some games continuing intermittently. More photos of sibling groups were taken at the end of the day. Children and young people generally appeared disappointed that they had to leave, though after hugging their siblings goodbye things appeared to end on a positive note.

Parents and carers

Parents and carers also appeared to experience the Sibling Time event positively. There was an initial hesitation to head straight into the separate training room, which was intended for adults, though this did not last long. From this room, parents/carers were unable to see their children or any of the activities, though they were free to leave the room if they wanted to check on their children.

Parents/carers were given a choice of two training sessions by the Coram staff member in the training room: one on sibling contact and one on life story work. The parents/carers chose to do the training on life story work, though they were familiar with some of the concepts discussed. However, they still engaged with the training and appeared to find it useful. Some parents/carers seemed to know each other, and struck up friendly conversations. It appeared that some already had each other's contact details; for example, at the end of the event, one parent/carer said to another, 'Let me know about Sunday'. There were no observable tense or negative interactions between parents/carers.

When observing the activities (for example, when building the giant robot at the end), parents/carers intentionally stepped back, allowing children and young people to interact, and making conversation with staff members about what a beneficial experience the event was. Some parents and carers took a more involved stance with the robot building activity, and generally seemed to be having fun with the children, young people, staff members and other adults.

Interviews with parents, carers and children

Parents, carers and children enjoyed attending the Sibling Time event. The opportunity for children to see their siblings, often for the first time in a long time, was valuable for the families involved.

Sibling contact was important for the children who took part

Prior to the event, children, parents and carers felt excited and enthusiastic about the prospect of sibling contact. They had not attended anything similar before, or heard of similar programmes in their local area:

'...AS SOON AS WE HEARD ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF MEETING [THE SIBLING], WE JUMPED AT IT REALLY' (PARENT/CARER 1).

Some children already had good relationships and regular contact with siblings in separate adoptive or foster arrangements, but this was exclusively organised by parents and carers, without support or guidance from social workers. Sibling contact was seen by parents, carers and children as something incredibly valuable, but rare.

When one child was asked what they liked the most about Sibling Time, and what it was that would make them want to go again, seeing their sibling was the clear answer. The child wanted more time with their sibling on the day, was incredibly enthusiastic about attending again, and jumped at the opportunity to show the interviewer a photo of their sibling from the day. The importance of this contact for the child involved was evident.

'...WHEN [ADOPTED CHILD] IS OLDER, I WANT TO BE ABLE TO SAY THAT WE CONTINUED THAT CONTACT WITH [THEIR] BIRTH SIBLING [...] WE'RE REALLY CONSCIOUS THAT IT'S IMPORTANT FOR [THEIR] OWN IDENTITY AND UNDERSTANDING OF WHERE [THEY HAVE] COME FROM' (PARENT/CARER 2).

The Sibling Time setting was important for parents and carers

Parents and carers particularly appreciated 'how the day was structured, what the different activities were, and the way it was regulated and managed by the staff that were there' (Parent/Carer 2). The setting facilitated the siblings to play and helped parents manage potentially challenging family dynamics.

'...IT FELT LIKE THERE WERE ENOUGH STAFF THERE THAT IF [CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE] DID START SAYING THINGS THAT THEY SHOULDN'T THEN, YOU KNOW, IT COULD BE MANAGED WELL' (PARENT/CARER 1).

Having specialist staff on hand to encourage play, set boundaries and answer any concerns or questions was appreciated by parents:

'IT'S GOOD FOR ME TO BE ABLE TO SAY, 'I DON'T MAKE THE RULES, THE SOCIAL WORKERS ARE TELLING US WHAT WE CAN AND CAN'T DO' [...] I CAN DEFER RESPONSIBILITY TO SOMEBODY ELSE, WHICH IS ALWAYS HELPFUL' (PARENT/CARER 1).

Participants felt that after initial nerves and awkwardness, siblings played together well. A range of activities were laid out 'in a venue which was full of age-appropriate target activities, all very exciting, and [child] very much flourished in that environment' (Parent/Carer 2). Parents/carers felt that 'the play [specialists] were really, really helpful' (Parent/Carer 1). Favourite activities included making potions, bottle rockets, soft play and making a giant cardboard robot. One activity that was highly valued by the parents/carers and children interviewed was the photo booth,

which incorporated props and fun into a memory-making activity that they could take home with them:

'[THE CHILDREN] WERE SO EXCITED WITH [THE PICTURES], THEY'VE SHOWN [THEM] TO EVERYONE' (PARENT/CARER 1).

Parents/carers also appreciated the separate training course that was held for them while children played in an alternative room, though felt that the course covered a topic with which they were already familiar (life story work).

Participants were excited but apprehensive about taking part

One child interviewed said they were 'excited' but perhaps a 'little bit nervous as well' about taking part in Sibling Time (Child 1). Parents and carers were excited about the prospect of sibling contact, but there were common apprehensions about taking part.

Parents were '...concerned about resurrecting feelings between siblings, how they would manage difficult questions, and the after-effects of attending an event like that' (Parent/Carer 2). For some children, '...there are safeguarding issues' (Parent/Carer 1). Due to a carefully curated setting and preparation, parents and carers felt like their children were not negatively affected by the event, with one parent saying:

'I THOUGHT THAT THERE WOULD BE MORE EMOTIONAL FALLOUT AFTERWARDS...' (PARENT/CARER 1).

An online question and answer meeting was organised by Leicestershire County Council and facilitated by the Activity Days team for parent/carers.

Both parent/carers interviewed found the group meeting helpful and reassuring:

'THEY GAVE US MORE DETAILS AROUND THE FACT THAT THERE WOULD BE A SOCIAL WORKER ATTACHED TO EACH SIBLING GROUP, THEY WOULD HAVE CONTROL OVER THE PHOTOS [...] THEY WERE GOING TO A LOT OF EFFORT TO FIND ACTIVITIES THAT WOULD ENCOURAGE, ENGAGE BETWEEN SIBLING PAIRS AND BE AGE APPROPRIATE, SO ... YEAH, SO WE WERE HAPPY TO GO AHEAD' (PARENT/CARER 2).

Parents and carers felt that Sibling Time had made future sibling contact more likely

Parents and carers said that the Sibling Time event had the potential to enable future contact between siblings. The parent/carers interviewed felt that well-supported and carefully facilitated contact helped to build relationships between the parent/carers of siblings and the siblings themselves:

'FOR US IT'S DEFINITELY A POSITIVE THING, AND GOOD WILL COME OF IT' (PARENT/CARER 1).

The parents and carers also spoke about the impact of one-off sibling contact with no follow up sessions. One parent/carer said that their children were talking about their sibling more often since the event, but that they were cautious to manage expectations about future contact. Generally, parents and carers felt that there had been a lack of communication from the Activity Days team and Leicestershire County Council about the possibility or likelihood of future Sibling Time events. This left them in a difficult position, because they were unsure whether to wait for more communication and what to tell their child(ren) when they asked. Continuity of contact was seen as essential, and there was the suggestion that unless contact could be regularly sustained, it may be better for there to be no contact at all. It is noted that conducting check-ins with families following Sibling Time events is part of the Activity Days team's guidance to local authorities, though there was no indication of this being implemented in this instance.

'IT'S REALLY IMPORTANT THAT THIS ISN'T JUST A ONE-OFF, CAUSE YOU CAN'T GO, 'OOH MEET YOUR [SIBLING]. OH NO, YOU CAN'T SEE [THEM] AGAIN.' YOU KNOW?' (PARENT/CARER 1).

Interviews with reflective session with professionals

One social work professional and one play specialist were interviewed, and two Activity Days staff took part in a reflective session about the Sibling Time event (all referred to as 'professionals' or 'staff'). Professionals said that the setting and activities had helped siblings to play together and strengthen relationships, and talked about ideas and recommendations for future sessions.

Professionals felt that sibling contact was important for the children who attended

Professionals' reflections echoed what parent and carers had told us. They talked about the importance of sibling contact for adopted or fostered children, and the lack of existing facilitation or support:

'IN AN AREA WHERE THERE ISN'T A CORAM, OR THE LOCAL AUTHORITY DON'T DO THAT, IT IS LITERALLY UP TO THE INDIVIDUAL PARENTS. IF THEY, IF THEY DECIDE TO MEET UP WITH THE OTHER ADOPTIVE FAMILY, BRILLIANT. IF THEY DON'T, IT'S NOT HAPPENING' (PROFESSIONAL 2).

Professionals felt sibling contact was important for the children's sense of identity and self, helping them to understand their history. Some children were recruited to take part by a social worker based at Leicestershire County Council, who contacted foster children who had expressed a wish to see their siblings. This was an effective way of identifying sibling groups, as adopted children tend to have less contact with social workers. Sibling groups included a wide range of ages and relationships, but the importance of spending time together was universal.

'NOBODY KNEW HOW THE INTERACTION WAS GOING TO HAPPEN BETWEEN THE OLDER [SIBLING], WHO LIVES IN RESIDENTIAL, WITH [THEIR] YOUNGER [SIBLING], BUT THAT COULDN'T HAVE GONE ANY BETTER' (PROFESSIONAL 3).

Sibling Time was rewarding for the staff involved

Professionals found the day emotional, which underlined the value of Sibling Time for staff involved. Seeing siblings meet for the first time, play together and care for each other was described as 'heart-warming' and 'magical' (Professional 2). One professional said:

'IT WAS REALLY EMOTIVE. IT FELT QUITE HOPEFUL AND JUST REALLY SATISFYING WHEN YOU SAW THEM PLAYING TOGETHER [...] SEEING THEM SORT OF REUNITE FOR THE FIRST TIME' (PROFESSIONAL 1).

Positive interactions with parents and carers were important to the success of Sibling Time. Staff helped parent/carers manage fears around sibling contact (including concerns it may lead to safeguarding issues). Staff felt the day was well-managed, and 'everyone turned up knowing exactly what they were there for, ready for the day, really well prepared. And that's the adults and the children' (Professional 1). One professional commented that they hoped 'it took some of that fear away, [...] making them feel [...] Empowered, confident' (Professional 1).

Staff felt that the child-led activities were successful

The activities were largely 'child-led' and 'sensory', involving 'free and self-directed play' (Professional 2). For some activities 'you need to bring another person in' which encouraged children to play together. At the end of the day, parents/carers and children from different sibling groups made a giant robot together. Professionals reflected this was a good way to round off the session. However, as with the parent/carer and child interviews, the photo booth was a particularly important activity:

'WE ACTUALLY GAVE THEM SOMETHING TO LEAVE WITH, THEY ALL LEFT HOLDING A PHOTOGRAPH OF THEM WITH THEIR SIBLINGS THAT THEY COULD GO HOME AND PUT STRAIGHT ON THEIR BEDSIDE TABLE. I THINK THAT WAS SOMETHING THAT WORKED REALLY WELL' (PROFESSIONAL 4).

Ensuring activities were age appropriate for the range of children attending was a challenge for professionals. One teenager felt some activities were 'a bit babyish', whereas other children were 'a little bit too young and small' for certain games (Professional 1). However, having open-ended, imaginative play that was not 'outcome-focused' supported children to play together, and the children naturally adapted their play:

'OBVIOUSLY THE TEENAGER IS MINDFUL THAT THE PLAY HAS GOT TO BE MORE GEARED TOWARDS [THEIR] YOUNGER SIBLING' (PROFESSIONAL 2).

Social workers and play specialists felt comfortable taking a step back at many points during the day - to 'fade into the background once those children are playing, because that's when the important stuff's happening' (Professional 2). However, staff were always on hand if the children needed support initiating an activity or game.

'I THINK THAT WORKED REALLY WELL AT THE SIBLING DAY BECAUSE IT NEEDED THAT HANDS-OFF APPROACH. IT NEEDED THEM TO JUST FEEL COMFORTABLE' (PROFESSIONAL 2).

Deciding the correct number of staff for the day was challenging, but the professionals interviewed felt the balance was about right.

'WE WORRIED IT WOULD BE TOO ADULT HEAVY [...] BUT ACTUALLY IT KIND OF FELT RIGHT ON THE DAY 'CAUSE EVERYONE DID JUST INTERACT AND DO THEIR ROLE' (PROFESSIONAL 3).

Deciding the correct number of staff for the day was challenging, but the professionals interviewed felt the balance was about right.

'WE WORRIED IT WOULD BE TOO ADULT HEAVY [...] BUT ACTUALLY IT KIND OF FELT RIGHT ON THE DAY 'CAUSE EVERYONE DID JUST INTERACT AND DO THEIR ROLE' (PROFESSIONAL 3).

The setting was important to the success of the event, but brought challenges for staff

The environment helped the event to work well. This included the venue, the music that was playing and the food available. According to professionals interviewed:

'THE VENUE IS MASSIVELY IMPORTANT TO THE FEELING. IF A CHILD WALKS INTO THE VENUE AND INSTANTLY FEELS SAFE, THEN THE SKY'S THE LIMIT' (PROFESSIONAL 2).

There were logistical challenges with using a new space. The organisers had not seen the room before arrival due to Leicestershire County Council making the booking, and setting up in the morning was 'more pressured and rushed than [they] would have liked' (Professional 4). Some professionals discussed holding Sibling Time in a more natural 'outdoorsy' setting (Professional 2), but others raised the practical value of an enclosed space:

'IT THEN CONTAINS PEOPLE REALLY WITHOUT IT BEING FEELING OVERCROWDED' (PROFESSIONAL 3).

Parents/carers and children were in separate spaces for a lot of the day, but adults were always nearby, and children could check in whenever they wanted to. Professionals reflected that this let children 'just be with their siblings and play with their siblings' and prevented the parent/carers' emotions or family dynamic affecting the environment (Professional 4). It also gave parent/carers time to build relationships and learn from each other, and as one professional reflected, laid the foundation for future sibling contact:

'I'M ALREADY HOPEFUL THAT IT WILL GIVE [PARENTS] THAT CONFIDENCE TO MOVE IT OUT OF THIS EVENT AND THAT IS WHAT OUR AIM WOULD BE, WHERE IT'S SAFE AND APPROPRIATE TO DO SO. IT'S ABOUT BUILDING THOSE RELATIONSHIPS FIRST BETWEEN THE ADULTS AND THAT'S WHY IT WAS REALLY IMPORTANT TO HAVE THAT ADULT TIME' (PROFESSIONAL 1).

There were some practical challenges, such as planning the right amount of catering and the session timing (which clashed with toddler nap time). Professionals felt that there could have been more sibling groups in attendance, but 'maximum 15 children would have been about right' (Professional 1).

Professionals felt that they learned a lot from the day

Staff reported that they felt more confident facilitating sibling contact after the event compared with prior to the event; for most staff, this was their first time facilitating sibling contact. Reflections centred on how to take the programme forward and encourage take up, as well as potential new activities. In particular, one member of staff was seen as an important driving force:

'[SOMEONE] WHO HAS THAT REAL CLEAR PASSION, IS POSITIONED IN THE RIGHT PLACE, WHERE THEY'RE ON THE GROUND ENOUGH TO BE IN COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES ARE, BUT ALSO WILLING TO [...] WORK CLOSELY WITH MANAGEMENT AND SENIOR LEVEL AS WELL' (PROFESSIONAL 3).

A significant challenge for the programme is cost:

'THERE'S NO FUNDING ATTACHED TO IT AND NO BUDGET ATTACHED TO IT' (PROFESSIONAL 4).

The Sibling Time event gave professionals an idea of the cost to run a session and evidence behind how it works. It was clear that financing the project remains a barrier to wider implementation.

There were suggestions for adapting activities for future sessions, including more memory making creative activities, more things for siblings to take away as a keepsake, (though they did receive framed sibling photos, a teddy elephant and a custom-made t-shirt for their elephant), and more options for collaboration and involvement between carers and their child's siblings.

Administrative data

Children and young people

For the 10 children and young people who registered to attend the Sibling Time event, the mean average age was eight years-old. All registered child attendees were White, with half of them being 'White Other' and half of them being 'White British'.

Parents and carers

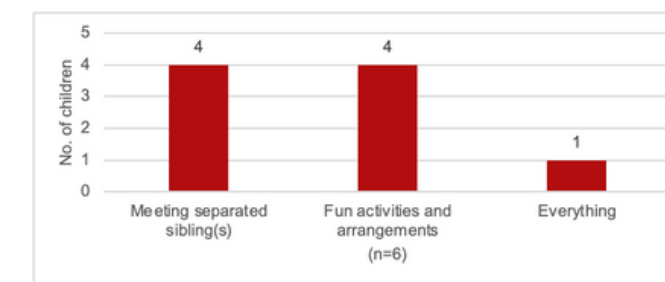
Of the nine parents and carers who registered to attend the Sibling Time event, the majority were either foster carers (44%) or adopters (44%). There was one residential placement manager who registered to attend the event.

Feedback form data

Children and young people

Children were asked questions relating to their experiences of the session. All of the children reported that they enjoyed the session, with five of them (84%) reporting that they enjoyed it a lot. All of the children mentioned something that they liked about Sibling Time, with one child mentioning that everything was great. Most children stated that they liked the fact that they were able to meet their separated siblings, and that they were able to take part in fun activities and arrangements (Figure 2). One of the children also stated that they liked the opportunity to get to know others alongside spending time with their own family.

'Table 1. Summary of evaluation activities



Parents and carers

In addition to questions about their own and their children's experiences, parents and carers were asked about how they came to know about the event, the nature of sibling contact before the event, and possibilities of contact in the following months.

Three respondents (of the five who answered this question) reported that they were told about the event by a social worker, while one said the source was a colleague at work, and another said that an email had been received about the event. All parents felt that they were well prepared and had received all relevant information regarding the event in advance. In spite of this, four parents (67%) reported that they/their children had some worries or concerns prior to the event, with two reporting slight anxiety and apprehensiveness mixed with excitement. One parent reported that they were expecting an emotional reaction from the child, possibly about if/when another such interaction would be able to take place. Another parent noted more minor concerns, like the timing overlapping with the child's nap time, and whether there would be support for parents/carers.

'THERE WILL BE EMOTIONAL FALL OUT, WE KNOW THIS AS WE DEAL WITH IT REGULARLY. THE DIFFERENCE HERE IS NOT KNOWING IF/WHEN IT WILL HAPPEN AGAIN' (PARENT/CARER SURVEY RESPONSE).

All parents felt that their children had positive feelings towards the event, mentioning that they were quite excited to be with their siblings and that they had a good time.

One parent/carer mentioned that they were not sure how the children would feel in the coming days, but felt it would be positive in the long run.

'THEY WERE NERVOUS, EXCITED AND HAPPY TO SEE THEIR [OLDER SIBLING]. I DON'T KNOW HOW THEY WILL FEEL LATER OR WHAT WILL BE BROUGHT UP BUT I THINK IT'S POSITIVE IN THE LONG RUN' (PARENT/CARER SURVEY RESPONSE).

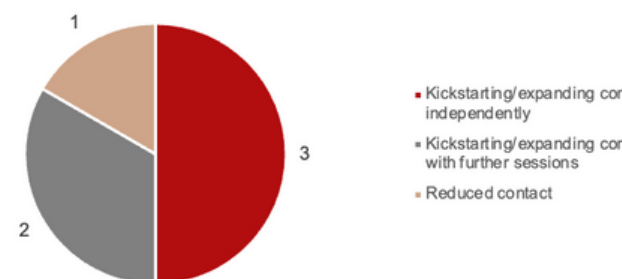
Parents also had positive feelings about their experiences at the event, with five of the six (84%) who completed the form stating that they had an excellent experience, while one felt the experience was good. When asked specifically about the length, activities and entertainment, the facilities (including venue and refreshments) as well as the learning experience, all parents who responded (three to four responses for each aspect) rated these aspects as good or very good. None of them had any problems with not being directly involved in the sessions and were happy to be able to check in on them from time to time. One parent mentioned that not being around could actually allow siblings to be more at ease to be able to rekindle their relationship.

'THEY NEED TO HAVE THIS TIME WITH [NAME] TO REBUILD A RELATIONSHIP, THEY MIGHT FIND IT DIFFICULT WITH ME IN THE ROOM' (PARENT/CARER SURVEY RESPONSE).

Three of the five responses (60%) mentioned that there was some form of sibling contact in place before the event, with two respondents reporting informal (direct) ways of contact and one reporting a mix of formal (facilitated) and informal (direct) contact. They also reported a mix of intervals, with one reporting 'monthly contact in the community', while another reported contact once in three or four months. A respondent cited that informal contact was possible because having a good relationship with the foster carers of the siblings. With regards to future contact, nearly all parents/carers were looking to kick-start or expand contact, of which some were still looking at future Sibling Time or similar sessions as a way to do so in the short-term. One parent cited that contact may reduce as the adoption procedure had started for the child. All parents responded positively to

recommending the session to others, including adoptive parents and to attending more Sibling Time sessions in the future.

Figure 3: Parent opinions on future prospects of sibling contact



Professionals

Like parents, professionals were asked about how they came to know about the event, the level of preparation, the nature of sibling contact before the event and possibilities of contact in the following months, in addition to questions about their own experiences.

Most professionals at the event (five of the seven who responded) heard about the event through colleagues, other social service workers or social service organisations. One professional stated coming across the event while searching the internet for these types of sessions. Professionals felt well prepared and stated that they had received more than adequate information in the build up to the event and as part of an initial briefing carried out on the day of the event. Half of the professionals stated having some concerns related to the sensitive nature of the context, around how parents/children would react to meeting the sibling, as well as the risk of information sharing and reaching birth parents, that may deter adopters from taking part in the sessions.

'THE RISK OF INFORMATION SHARING AND IT GETTING BACK TO BIRTH PARENTS. WORRIED ADOPTERS WOULDN'T WANT TO TAKE PART' (PROFESSIONAL SURVEY RESPONSE).

All of the professionals felt that children were engaged throughout the sessions and enjoyed themselves and the opportunity to spend time with their siblings.

Many of them felt that children were able to rekindle and build on their relationships with each other through this quality time spent together. One professional mentioned that an older sibling was not sure how they would fare with younger children, but ended up being very happy with the time that they spent with their sibling.

'I THINK THE CHILDREN ENJOYED TODAY. THEY ALL SEEMED TO GET INVOLVED AND WERE HAPPY SPENDING TIME WITH EACH OTHER. I THINK THEY GAINED MORE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR SIBLINGS AND LEARNT FURTHER ABOUT EACH OTHER, HOW EACH OTHER PLAYS AND EACH OTHER'S PREFERENCES AND BEHAVIOURS' (PROFESSIONAL SURVEY RESPONSE).

'CHILDREN APPEAR SMILING AND CONFIDENT, HAPPY TO EXPLORE THE ACTIVITIES. I ASKED ONE CHILD WHAT HAD BEEN THEIR FAVOURITE PART SO FAR AND THEY SAID SEEING THEIR [SIBLING]' (PROFESSIONAL SURVEY RESPONSE).

'[NAME] WAS VERY HAPPY TO HAVE SPENT TIME WITH YOUNGER SIBLING – WAS WORRIED [THEY] DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO PLAY WITH LITTLE CHILDREN' (PROFESSIONAL SURVEY RESPONSE).

Five of the seven professionals (71%) rated their experience of Sibling Time as excellent, while the other two rated it as good. Three professionals responded to the more specific questions about length, activities and entertainment, the facilities (including venue and refreshments) as well as the learning experience:

- All of them stated that the length was good, with one qualifying that some younger children did need a nap and that anything longer may become tiring for children in general.
- Two of them felt that there was a good range of activities, with one worker mentioning that more activities could be added for older siblings if they would be coming in to see each other.
- The facilities being outdoors and contained was also highlighted by one individual, and another mentioned that the venue and refreshments were very inclusive.
- One member of the team mentioned that they had learnt a lot that they could apply to the development and delivery of a direct contact service like this for families.

- Another attendee highlighted that the event was blessed with great weather, and that the photo booth was a lovely touch to make the occasion memorable for the children.

'WELL ORGANISED AND PLANNED DAY, BONUS WAS THE WEATHER! A LOVELY TOUCH WAS THE PHOTO BOOTH – SIBLINGS BEING ABLE TO TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS AND HAVE THEM AS A SOUVENIR OF THEIR EXPERIENCE TODAY' (PROFESSIONAL SURVEY RESPONSE).

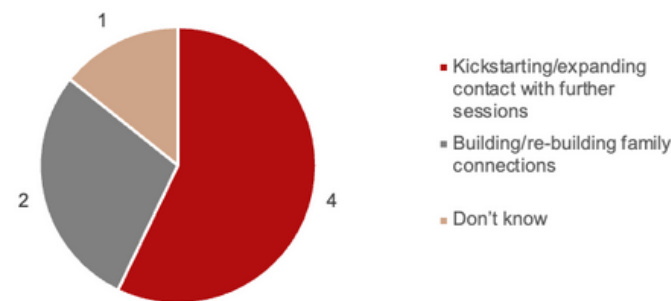
On their role in the session, the professionals felt that their involvement acted as positive reinforcement to help the children in their interaction and also gave a sense of security to the parents/carers that were in the adjacent room. One individual mentioned that the children felt safer knowing that the parents were nearby and often went to them in between to show them what they were doing.

'I THINK [HAVING PARENTS/CARERS IN A SEPARATE SPACE] WAS GOOD AS THE CHILDREN KNEW THERE WAS SUPPORT AND ADULTS, BUT ALSO HAD THE FREEDOM TO PLAY AND INTERACT WITH EACH OTHER. THEY DIDN'T SEEM TO MIND IF I [PROFESSIONAL] GOT INVOLVED WITH THEM AND WERE HAPPY THAT THEIR PARENTS/CARERS WERE IN THE NEXT ROOM, AS SOME CHILDREN OCCASIONALLY WENT TO THEM TO SHOW THEM WHAT THEY'VE DONE' (PROFESSIONAL SURVEY RESPONSE).

'I WAS SUPPORTING THE SIBLINGS. IT WAS HARD AS I WANTED TO GIVE THEM TIME ALONE BUT ALSO KNEW IT WAS A RISK MANAGEMENT MEASURE FOR THE ADOPTERS THAT I STAYED NEARBY' (PROFESSIONAL SURVEY RESPONSE).

Four of the seven professionals (57%) knew of the nature of sibling contact prior to the event, with three of them stating that there was some form of contact (either formal, informal, or a mix of both). With reference to future contact, some professionals felt that it was a great way of building/re-building family connections.

Figure 4: Opinions of professionals on future impact of sibling contact



However, professionals also felt that sustained facilitation and support like this was essential in order for parents/carers to be comfortable enough to build a connection in the community without supervision.

'I THINK INITIAL SIBLING CONTACT WOULD BE SUPERVISED IN A SIMILAR SETTING. IF THE FIRST CONTACT, PERHAPS WITH LESS CHILDREN. BUT FOR THIS EVENT TO CONTINUE FOR SIBLING CONTACT ONCE THEY HAVE ESTABLISHED A RELATIONSHIP. TO OFFER THIS PERHAPS EVERY COUPLE OF MONTHS' (PROFESSIONAL SURVEY RESPONSE).

'SIMILAR FORMAT 2-3 TIMES A YEAR BUT WITH AN EVENTUAL AIM FOR PARENTS/CARERS TO FEEL CONFIDENT TO MOVE IT ALONG TO UNSUPERVISED IN THE COMMUNITY. IT WILL HAVE A ROLLING EFFECT AS NEW FAMILIES ARE MADE AND CAN USE THIS AS A STARTING BLOCK ON THEIR CONTACT JOURNEY' (PROFESSIONAL SURVEY RESPONSE).

All professionals were inclined to recommending the session to others, and to being a part of more Sibling Time sessions in the future. The key reasons given for the endorsement were that the informal setting made children more comfortable and the contact helped reinforce the connections between siblings and build positive relations.

'I WOULD RECOMMEND THIS AS IT HELPS MAINTAIN AND BUILD ON THE SIBLINGS' RELATIONSHIPS AND THE CHILDREN SEEMED TO REALLY ENJOY IT. IT IS NOT A FORMAL SETTING AND I THINK THIS HAS HELPED THE CHILDREN FEEL COMFORTABLE' (PROFESSIONAL SURVEY RESPONSE).

The discussion section of this report attempts to answer the research questions with reference to findings from the observation, interviews, administrative data and feedback form analysis. There is also consideration of areas that future research should focus on and limitations of the study.

Answering the research questions

1. Was the Sibling Time Activity Day implemented as expected, according to the activities outlined in the Theory of Change?

According to the Theory of Change (Figure 1), which was co-produced with the Activity Days team, the following activities were expected from the Sibling Time event:

- One session bringing sibling groups together, lasting three hours.
- Facilitated by social workers, play leaders and where possible a creative therapist.
- Majority of the day is free play with activities including sports, magic, den building and arts and crafts.
- Group activity with play leaders.
- Light touch training and discussion for parents and carers on supporting sibling contact and life story work.
- Optional sibling group photos.
- Signposting to further support from local authority.

Analysing these activities against the data collected from the observation, interviews and feedback forms, there is evidence that the Sibling Time event was largely implemented as expected.

The Sibling Time event did indeed take the form of one session bringing sibling groups together. Three different sibling groups attended this event, with

siblings interacting positively with one another for the duration of the event. Little to no mixing of sibling groups was observed, with siblings largely preferring to interact as part of their own sibling group. Siblings were brought together in a variety of ways, including through the activities laid out across the venue, as well as through the photo booth. Some siblings had not seen each other for an extended period of time before coming together at the Sibling Time event. The duration of the event was roughly what was expected, with activities commencing from 11am (with some late arrivals) and concluding at approximately 2pm (with some early exits).

The Sibling Time event was facilitated by the Activity Days team, professionals from Leicestershire County Council and play specialists from a separately contracted organisation.

The majority of the day was free play. Children and young people were free to participate in any activities they desired, and staff stood off where possible, allowing children/young people to play freely, make their own choices and interact with their siblings. The photo booth was perhaps the most 'structured' activity, with staff members inviting children/young people into the booth, taking photos of them and prompting them to use the various props on offer. The range of activities on offer was as expected, with sports (such as cricket), magic (such as potion making), den building, arts and crafts and more activities all on offer for the duration of the event.

Light touch training and discussion was provided for parents/carers in a separate room to the Sibling Time activities. Parents/carers were given the option of deciding whether to have sibling contact or life story work training, and chose the latter. Parents/carers mostly remained separate from children/young people for the event, actively engaging with the training and making conversation with one another.

Sibling group photos were willingly taken by all children and young people who attended. There were multiple opportunities for photos, such as the photo booth, where there was a mixture of photos with and without props and with or without silly poses. Photos were also taken with sibling groups upon leaving the event.

Parents and carers were signposted to further support from the local authority before the event through an online information session, as well as during and after the event by the professionals that were on hand to assist.

2. Who registered for the Sibling Time Activity Day, and what were their characteristics?

As revealed through analysis of administrative data, the characteristics of those who registered for and attended the Sibling Time Activity Day were as follows:

- The mean average age of children/young people who registered was eight years-old.
- Half of the ten child attendees were White British, whereas the other half were White Other.
- Of the nine parents/carers who registered to attend the event, four (44%) were foster carers, four were adopters and one was a residential placement manager.

3. What was the experience of attending the delivery of the Sibling Time Activity Day for parents/carers, children/young people and professionals?

As revealed through analysis of interview data and feedback form data, the experience of attending the Sibling Time Activity Day was almost universally positive amongst parents/carers, children/young people and professionals.

For parents/carers:

- Adequate information was received prior to the event. The Q&A held in the weeks before the event was useful and informative, and communication of the details of the day via email was helpful.
- There was some apprehension before the event about how the children would find it and whether any difficult situations would arise, though this quickly settled upon arrival.
- The venue was appropriate, safe and easy to access. The activities looked safe and enjoyable, and parents/carers appreciated the choice on offer.
- The fact that staff were on hand to welcome and observe children/young people was seen as a positive.
- Children were able to interact and bond with their siblings safely and freely, an opportunity which parents/carers felt their children valued highly.
- The timing of the event was appropriate. However, there were some issues such as fitting in nap time for toddlers. Parents/carers acknowledged it would be difficult to cater for all children, but raised the possibility of an earlier start time.
- The provision of food and drink was viewed positively, helping to maintain children/young people's energy levels.
- The separate training room for parents/carers was well received. The training on offer was informative, but perhaps covered topics already known to certain parents/carers (such as life story work). Parents/carers generally did not feel anxious about leaving their children in a different room, due to the presence of staff members.

For children/young people:

- Some children/young people felt a mixture of nervous and excited before attending the event. Upon arrival, they dove straight into activities and began interacting with their siblings. Observation data indicates that they were having fun and enjoying the event throughout, and feedback form data indicates that 84% of children/young people enjoyed the event 'a lot'.
- Children/young people enjoyed the range of activities on offer, especially the bottle rockets, giant robot building and photo booth. They also enjoyed playing with staff members, and mostly remained within their sibling groups.
- Relationships were developed between sibling groups, some of whom had not seen each other for years. Some children/young people were disappointed when they had to leave and were excited about the possibility of attending future events.



For professionals:

- Professionals interacted warmly with parents/carers and children/young people, appearing to enjoy facilitating activities and helping siblings to forge stronger relationships.
- Professionals reported that they found the day emotional, but also felt that they were more equipped to facilitate sibling contact sessions going forward.
- Professionals felt the day was well organised and smoothly run. They felt the number of staff on hand to help was mostly appropriate (though some staff members were released early) and that the type and range of activities meant that children/young people were always engaged and enjoying themselves. They appreciated the outdoor space available at the venue. They also appreciated the information provided to them prior to the event, as well as the briefing conducted on the morning of the event.
- Some practical challenges existed, such as running an event in an unfamiliar space, or ensuring there was enough time for set-up. Some professionals remarked that there could have been more activities for older children and that there was some difficulty around catering for those younger children who needed to take their nap time during the time the event was run.
- Professionals also felt that the separate training room for parents/carers worked well, with siblings encouraged to interact on their own and parents/carers gradually feeling more comfortable about leaving their children in the main activity room.
- Professionals highlighted the importance of facilitating sibling contact, but stressed that such events should be run regularly in the future, as sustained contact is important.
- Five (71%) professionals rated their experience of the day as 'excellent', whereas the others rated it as 'good'.

4. What are the perceived impacts for children and families of attending the Sibling Time Activity Day from the perspective of parents/carers, children/young people and professionals?

Reflecting back to the Theory of Change (Figure 1), the desired outcomes for the Sibling Time event are as follows:

Short-term outcomes:

- More separated siblings in contact
- Separated siblings feel heard and that their wishes are acted upon
- Parents and carers feel confident in supporting sibling contact
- Professionals feel more confident in facilitating sibling contact

Long-term outcomes:

- Improved emotional wellbeing for separated siblings
- Positive sense of identity for separated siblings
- Separated siblings have an important trusted relationship with their sibling(s) that can continue into adulthood
- Change in social care culture towards increased sibling contact

Evidence analysed as part of this evaluation indicates that there are signs of promise with respect to achieving several short-term outcomes, though further research must be conducted to assess progress against the long-term outcomes.

According to parents/carers:

- The Sibling Time event made future contact between their children and their children's sibling(s) more likely. This was due to a combination of factors, such as having the opportunity to meet their children's sibling(s) (thus reducing any nervousness around contact), or being able to have contact in a safe, regulated environment with professionals present.

- Their children benefitted from the Sibling Time event. They enjoyed meeting their sibling(s), had the opportunity to make memories with them (for example through the photo booth) and in some instances met their sibling(s) for the first time in many years. Parents/carers reported that children/young people were talking about their siblings more since the event and expressed a desire to see them again.
- Parents/carers felt more confident and comfortable facilitating sibling contact. They felt that the Sibling Time event helped them to make their first step on the journey of facilitating sibling contact. However, there was still uncertainty about whether they were ready to facilitate sibling contact outside the confines of the Sibling Time event at this stage. There was a feeling that holding more Sibling Time events would be beneficial.
- Parents/carers further indicated there may be a negative impact on their child(ren)'s wellbeing if future Sibling Time events are not held. There was a feeling that a 'one off' meeting between children and their sibling(s) had the potential to do more harm than good. Some degree of emotional fall out was seen as inevitable, but the uncertainty surrounding future contact exacerbated this possibility.

According to children/young people:

- After the Sibling Time event, children/young people appeared to be more excited about the prospect of seeing their siblings again in the future, speaking about their sibling(s) more and expressing a desire to see them again. Progress against the short-term outcome of these children feeling heard and having their wishes acted upon may be contingent upon future Sibling Time events being held, or sibling contact being facilitated outside of the Sibling Time space.

- The Sibling Time event helped children/young people to make memories with their sibling(s), which could contribute to their wellbeing and sense of identity (two desired long-term outcomes). For example, one child enthusiastically showed an interviewer a photo of them and their sibling(s) that was taken at the Sibling Time event.

According to professionals:

- It was felt that the Sibling Time event would lead to more contact between siblings. Professionals also reported that they believed this event would contribute to children and young people's sense of identity and wellbeing.
- Professionals felt more confident facilitating sibling contact after the Sibling Time event compared with before it. For many staff, this was their first time facilitating sibling contact.

5. What are the costs for the Activity Days team of delivering the Sibling Time Activity Day?

The total cost for running the Sibling Time event was approximately £5,000. This was largely made up of staff costs, including the separately contracted play specialists, as well as catering and equipment costs.

Limitations and implications for future research

As this is a pilot study for an intervention that has only been delivered once to date, future research is required to build upon this evidence. Additionally, this study had a low sample size, making it difficult to extract generalisable themes. For example, only five interviews were conducted, which means that the themes discussed in this report may have been different had more interviews been conducted. Only one interview was conducted with a child/young person, and so further research should

explicitly attempt to engage with children and young people to understand their views on a wider scale.

More generally, future research should aim to explore the impact of the Sibling Time intervention on a larger level, for example seeing whether impacts vary depending on the area of the country where the event is held. Additionally, future research should explore the impact of the Sibling Time intervention against metrics such as ethnicity, gender, age and care status, to generate more detailed evidence. This will help to ensure the intervention serves the interests of a wide range of individuals going forward.

One way to explore the impact of the intervention on a larger scale is to consider the use of validated outcome measures. These are externally validated measures which allow service planners to assess the performance of the intervention against quantifiable metrics, evidencing its impact. Pre- and post-intervention surveys may support in the collection of this data; for example, standardised surveys could be issued to Sibling Time attendees both before and after the event (at certain intervals, such as immediately after, six months after and one year after). This allows for measurement of the impact of the intervention at a variety of time points. An important part of this process is piloting prospective outcome measures with participants, asking them whether the use of certain measures feels appropriate, which outcomes are the most important and how best to engage with participants to collect data.

In summary, this study provides analysis for just one Sibling Time event in an attempt to assess whether the intervention shows signs of promise. More extensive research should be conducted in the future to fully assess the short- and long-term impacts of this intervention.

6. Recommendations

Evidence from this report demonstrates that the Sibling Time intervention shows signs of promise. Planning and organisation of the event was viewed positively by all research participants. The event itself was implemented as expected, with all attendees experiencing the day positively and some initial signs of positive impacts for parents/carers and children/young people in evidence. However, some amendments to the service would help to improve it going forward.

Activities

- **Provide training to staff about facilitating play** to ensure that there is a common approach for all professionals at the event. For example, some professionals were more involved in directing play than others, which has the potential to discourage sibling bonding in a way that 'free play' does not.
- Introduce **even more opportunities for 'memory making'** for children/young people. Those opportunities already offered (such as the photo booth) were very well received. However, some participants expressed a desire that more photos were taken on the day (providing the correct consent procedures are followed), or that children/young people were given more memorabilia from the event (despite already receiving some).
- Develop a more specific or tailored **training offer for parents/carers**. Seek information prior to the event about which courses each cohort of parents/carers would find most beneficial. Seek to prepare a range of training courses that can be offered, to maximise the benefits for parent/carers attending.
- **Continue to gather evidence on and adapt the types of activities on offer**. This recommendation was largely implemented at the pilot event, with activities tailored to the characteristics of children/young people

attending. In the future, even more relevant activities could be provided for older children and young people, and activities could be adapted to the age, interests and abilities of children attending.

Engagement

- **Refine communication with parents/carers**. Ensure parents/carers are aware of what the Sibling Time event is, what it is not, and whether there are likely to be future iterations of these events going forward. For some parents/carers, no contact between children and their sibling(s) may be preferable if there is no guarantee of future Sibling Time events being held, and so parents/carers should be made aware of any plans (or lack of plans) for future events.
- **Consult with all stakeholders** prior to future Sibling Time events to seek views on the preferred time and location for the event. This includes parents/carers, professionals and children/young people. Ensure attendees can easily access the venue, are aware of what the venue will be (i.e. a community hall with indoor and outdoor space) and are happy with the timing of the event (i.e. taking considerations such as nap time into account). Continue to offer an online Q&A session for parents/carers prior to each event. Communicate with professionals about how the Sibling Time event can interact with and support other interventions and services that children in care receive.
- **In the future, co-produce Sibling Time sessions with stakeholders**. Seek regular feedback from parents/carers, children/young people and professionals about how best to develop further Sibling Time events. Embed regular data collection and monitoring processes (for example, analysing feedback forms after each session, and gradually developing more detailed or specific feedback forms).

- **Seek to engage a range of different communities**. It is important to ensure that the Sibling Time offer is available to and accessible by a diverse range of communities, allowing its benefits to be extended to the whole population of looked after children seeking contact with their siblings. This may include developing more comprehensive communication and outreach strategies. Engaging local authority partners in outreach and recruitment may facilitate this.

Data and evidence

- **Collect data at a local level**. If the Sibling Time intervention is to be rolled out more widely, ensure that data is gathered at a local level to support its monitoring and evaluation. For example, those from Leicestershire may wish for Sibling Time events to be organised and delivered in a different way to those from another area of the country. Collecting data at a local level helps to ensure events are appropriate for those that attend them in different areas of the country.
- If the intervention is rolled out further, **conduct more large-scale evaluation**. This will help to generate more detailed evidence about the benefits of the Sibling Time intervention and sibling contact interventions more widely. Sibling contact is currently an under-researched area, so generating additional evidence is important. Future evaluation should focus on the long-term outcomes highlighted in the Theory of Change, exploring the feasibility of collecting data and developing outcomes measurement tools to evidence the impact of the intervention.



7. Conclusion

This mixed-methods pilot evaluation aimed to establish whether the Sibling Time intervention, held in early August 2023, shows signs of promise.

The study used a range of methodological approaches to explore these questions. First, a literature review was conducted to establish the context and evidence base for pre-existing sibling contact initiatives. A Theory of Change was co-developed with the Activity Days team, highlighting the rationale, activities and mechanisms for change for the intervention, as well as desired outcomes. An observation of the Sibling Time event was then conducted using a semi-structured observation template and subsequent thematic analysis. Five semi-structured interviews took place with two parents/carers, two professionals and one child/young person, which were thematically analysed to generate a set of key themes. A reflective practice session was held with two Activity Days team members, with this also being analysed thematically. Administrative data was gathered and analysed via Microsoft Excel to determine the characteristics of people who registered to attend the event, and Microsoft Excel was also used to descriptively analyse feedback form data, which was provided by six children/young people, six parents/carers and seven professionals.

To conclude, the Sibling Time intervention demonstrates signs of promise, with all attendees reporting an almost universally positive experience of the organisation, administration and delivery of the Sibling Time event. Information relating to the logistics of the event was regarded as being adequate by attendees, with parents/carers appreciating the Q&A session ran prior to the event. Attendees were mostly happy with practical elements of the day, such as the timing and the venue, though some consultation with parents/carers about the best time to run the event would have been beneficial.

The event itself was enjoyed by all participants, with a wide range of activities on offer, friendly staff to help children/young people bond with their siblings, an informative training activity provided for parents/carers, and other miscellaneous benefits such as the photo booth and provision of food and drink all contributing to the success of the day. The intervention was regarded as being likely to promote future contact amongst siblings, though parents/carers would have appreciated more communication about the possibility or likelihood of future events being held.

It is hoped that this study contributes to the development of knowledge and insights about the Sibling Time intervention and about sibling contact initiatives more widely.

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