Article

Exploring the Perspectives of Key Adults towards Sibling Relationships of Children in Contact with Child Protection Services (CPS): An Integrative Review

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Abstract

This integrative literature review examines the perspectives of key adults, including social workers, foster parents, and adoptive parents, on sibling relationships of children in contact with Child Protection Services (CPS). A systematic analysis of 13 peer-reviewed papers highlights the significant role sibling relationships play in the well-being, identity development, and stability of children in care. Findings reveal that positive sibling relationships, characterized by warmth, support, and closeness, are often viewed as critical in promoting children's resilience and sense of continuity. Consequently, both social workers and foster/adoptive parents advocate for the co-placement of siblings when relationship quality is high.

However, strained or negative sibling dynamics, including aggression, hostility, or instances of sibling sexual abuse (SSA), frequently lead to decisions for separate placements. Comprehensive therapeutic interventions and strict safety protocols are underscored as essential in such cases to address the emotional and relational needs of all parties involved. Despite the consensus on maintaining sibling bonds, challenges persist due to logistical, bureaucratic, and resource constraints. Social workers cite limited time, restrictive policies, and difficulties in locating suitable foster homes for sibling groups as barriers to supporting these relationships. Similarly, adoptive and foster parents report emotional exhaustion, complex family dynamics, and inadequate agency support as significant obstacles.

The findings underscore the necessity of multidisciplinary collaboration, increased training for foster parents on sibling dynamics, and clearer documentation and communication between CPS, caregivers, and other stakeholders. Proactive strategies, including facilitating sibling contact and providing targeted interventions, are deemed critical to sustaining sibling relationships and enhancing child welfare outcomes.

Keywords: Sibling Relationships, Child Protective Services (CPS), Key Adults' Perspectives, Siblings in CPS, Preserving Sibling Bond, Child Welfare, Integrative Literature Review

1. Introduction

Sibling relationships are often the most consistent of human relationships with significant effects on the child's skill development of prosocial behaviours, academic competence, and conflict resolution (Bank & Kahn, 1997; Kramer & Conger, 2009). The nature of sibling relationships impacts children's everyday experiences including the way they form friendships and later intimate partnerships (Herrick & Piccus, 2005). In times of family crises, siblings may be important attachment figures in the absence of a dependable parental caregiver (Bank & Kahn, 1997).

Sibling relationships are complex and variable: some relationships are affectionate, while others are in constant conflict (Dunn, 2002; Hovland & Hean, 2021, 2023). The context in which the sibling relationship develops is especially important; the Child Protection Services (CPS) is one of these contexts, and exploring sibling relationships within this context offers insight into the different facets of sibling relationship dynamics, helping to shed light on our understanding of the sibling bond, trauma, and togetherness. Sibling relationships, though frequently overlooked, represent a critical aspect of familial dynamics that must be considered when children come into contact with CPS (Hovland & Hean, 2021, 2023; Shlonsky et al., 2005; Whelan, 2003). Children's sibling relationships may change as children enter foster care depending on whether siblings are placed together or not (Wojciak, 2017; Wojciak & Waid, 2021). Many scholars emphasize the importance of maintaining sibling relationships, recommending either co-placement or the facilitation of direct contact in cases where siblings are separated to foster sibling bonds. The exception to this recommendation arises in instances where there are compelling reasons for separation, such as instances of intersibling abuse (Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Shlonsky et al., 2005; Washington, 2007). Many national regulations urge local authorities to preserve sibling relationships following placement. Despite this, contact between siblings often decreases, or is lost altogether after placement in foster care (Meakings et al., 2017; Wojciak, 2017).

1.1 Role of Key Adults within CPS on Sibling Relationships

Key adults within CPS, including foster and adoptive parents, as well as social work professionals, hold pivotal roles in assessing and making decisions about sibling

placements, providing support and facilitating visits between siblings if necessary. Their work significantly impacts children's lives, potentially influencing sibling relationships long term (Hovland & Hean, 2023).

Foster and adoptive parents play a central role as substitute caregivers and integral members of the CPS team, responsible for safeguarding children's best interests (Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Wojciak, 2017). Their responsibilities include ensuring children's safety, psychological well-being, medical care, and maintaining sibling relationships. In addition to caregiving duties, their role is crucial in collaborating with biological families and building networks with service providers and community resources (Cooley & Petren, 2011; Harding et al., 2018).

Similarly, the role of social workers is also pivotal within the CPS framework, tasked with case assessments, intervention development, and placement decisions (Sharpe, 2014; Wojciak, 2017; Yates, 2018). How social workers think and respond when working with populations, particularly in maintaining sibling relationships, has significant long-term implications for children's safety, well-being, and family bonds (Ferguson, 2018; Wojciak & Waid, 2021).

While social workers and foster parents significantly influence sibling relationships among children in CPS, Hovland and Hean (2023) argue these relationships are often not prioritized in their work. Wojciak (2014) further posits that children may undervalue their sibling bonds when case managers and foster parents fail to actively facilitate sibling visitations, phone contact, or co-placements. This raises the need to investigate why sibling relationships are not prioritized by key adults within the CPS system.

Although research on supporting siblings within CPS is growing (Hovland & Hean, 2021, 2023; Washington, 2007), there remains a limited understanding of the perspectives held by CPS professionals on fostering these relationships. Therefore, gaining insight into the perspectives of key adults is crucial for enhancing caregiving practices, improving decision-making during interventions, and informing child welfare policies (Shlonsky et al., 2005). This integrative systematic review therefore

critically examines and synthesizes the current empirical evidence regarding key adults' perspectives on sibling relationships, addressing the following question:

What is known internationally regarding the perspectives of key adults towards sibling relationships of children in contact with CPS?

2. Methods

An integrative review (IR) was taken to synthesize a varied range of methodologically diverse empirical studies (Toronto & Remington, 2020; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). PRISMA reporting guidelines were followed to enhance the transparency of the search process (Fig. 1) (Moher et al., 2009).

2.1. Search Strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted of published, peer-reviewed studies, assisted by a university librarian and co-authors with research experience within the area of CPS and sibling relationships. The databases CINAHL, PsychINFO (OVID), SocIndex (EBSCO) and Scopus were searched. The search strategy also encompassed citation tracking and reference list verification to help identify additional relevant articles. The literature search was conducted from Fall 2022 to Spring 2023, utilizing different combinations of keywords relating to adults' perspectives, specifically those of adoptive, foster parents and social workers on sibling relationships of children in contact with CPS (Table 1).

Table 1: Search Terms

> Social workers OR Child welfare professionals OR Case Workers OR Case managers OR Case Supervisors

> Foster parents OR Adoptive parents OR Foster caregivers OR Caregiver OR Kinship foster carers

AND

> Child protection services OR CPS OR Child welfare services OR Social services OR OR Institutional care OR Alternative care OR Foster care OR Substitute care system

AND

> Beliefs OR Experience OR Perspectives OR Attitudes

AND

> Sibling OR Sibling relationships OR Brother or sister OR Siblings influence OR Kin OR Foster siblings OR adoptive siblings.

 Note: (*) is used to provide all possible word variations.

2.1.1 Defining Key Adults

An essential aspect of our search strategy was the key term 'adults'. We define this as adults commissioned by the CPS to temporarily or permanently take over the children's care, safety, well-being, and development previously provided by the birth parents (Munro, 2011; Pecora et al., 2012). These adults include:

> *Social Workers:* They are professionals responsible for assessing the needs of children and families, developing and implementing care plans, and coordinating services to protect children from harm. They work closely with families, law enforcement, healthcare providers, and the judicial system to ensure the child's safety and well-being (Munro, 2011).

> *Foster Parents:* They provide temporary or permanent care for children who have been removed from their biological homes due to abuse, neglect, or other family issues. They offer a safe and nurturing environment, support the child's emotional and physical needs, and work with social workers, biological

parents and other foster parents towards reunification or other permanent solutions (Pecora et al., 2012).

Other Adult Caregivers: This group includes relatives (kinship caregivers), legal guardians, adoptive parents and other adults who assume the responsibility of caring for a child in need on either a temporary or long-term basis (Pecora et al., 2012).

2.1.2 Defining Sibling

We define siblings in this review as sisters and/or brothers sharing the same parent(s), as well as those who have experienced a shared childhood, or possess a reciprocal bond. This definition encompasses full, half, adoptive, and step or bonus siblings (Yates, 2018; McHugh, 2019).

2.1.3 Defining Perspectives

We define perspective as an individual's attitudes and beliefs regarding a particular subject or issue, which are shaped by their experiences, values, and social contexts. This definition is informed by the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010), which conceptualizes perspectives as comprising beliefs, attitudes, perceived behavioural control, and subjective norms. These factors collectively influence an individual's intentions and decisions to engage in specific behaviours (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

2.2 Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review are outlined in Table 2. Key adults are defined as individuals commissioned by the CPS to provide care and support to children in contact with CPS. Experiences of other adult groups, such as biological parents, schoolteachers, and other professionals unaffiliated with CPS, were excluded from the review. No geographical restrictions were not applied in during the literature search; however, limiting the review to studies published in English may have introduced a selection bias.

The timeframe for included studies was set from 1990 onward to capture research conducted over the past three decades, coinciding with the adoption and enforcement of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Convention explicitly affirms children's rights to maintain family connections, including with siblings (Article 37), thereby reframing sibling relationships from a matter of professional discretion to a rights-based obligation. While we acknowledge that professional deliberations and domestic policies supporting sibling relationships existed prior to 1990, the UNCRC marked a global turning point in child welfare policy and research focus. It accelerated the international adoption of child rights frameworks, informed legislative reforms, and reshaped how sibling placement and contact are conceptualized within contemporary child protection systems. Therefore, the year 1990 represents a pivotal moment in formalizing sibling contact as a fundamental right.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

	Inclusion Criteria	**Exclusion Criteria**
Population	Parents: foster parents, adoptive parents, caregivers Professionals: social workers/child welfare professionals and mental health professionals collaborating with CPS	Children/siblings Other adult population: biological parents, teachers, and other professionals not associated with CPS
Context	Sibling relationships in the context of Child Protection Services (CPS)	Other settings not related to CPS, such as: sibling relationships in general context, sibling death caused by natural or medical reasons
Place of Study	No geographical location	
Time period	1990-2023	Before the given time period
Language	English	Other languages
Study Design	Peer-reviewed journal articles with quantitative, qualitative and mixed method approaches, theoretical and empirical papers are included	Literature reviews and articles that are not peer-reviewed, reports, policy documents, master's and PhD thesis

2.3 Search Outcome

The initial search yielded 795 papers after duplicates were removed. The first author conducted a preliminary screening of the articles, resulting in a reduction to 84 articles. A more in-depth review of article titles and abstracts then took place. During this screening phase, an inter-rater reliability check was conducted by the research team on 30% of the first phase of retrieved papers (n=84) by the research team. Discrepancies between reviewers were addressed by refining and agreeing upon the definitions and inclusion/exclusion criteria. This process resulted in a final selection of 13 articles for the review (Fig. 1)

The final list of papers was categorized into two groups:

Adult carers: The perspectives of foster parents/kinship foster care (n=4), adoptive parents (n=2), and other caregivers (n=1).

Child welfare professionals: Social workers/caseworkers (n=5), supervisors/managers (n=1), and mental health professionals[1] (n=1).

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[1] While most health professionals' perspectives were excluded from the review, one specific study reported the perspectives mental health professionals relating to sibling sexual abuse cases involving CPS, which was therefore included in the study.

Figure 1: Flow diagram following PRISMA Guidelines (Moher et al., 2009)
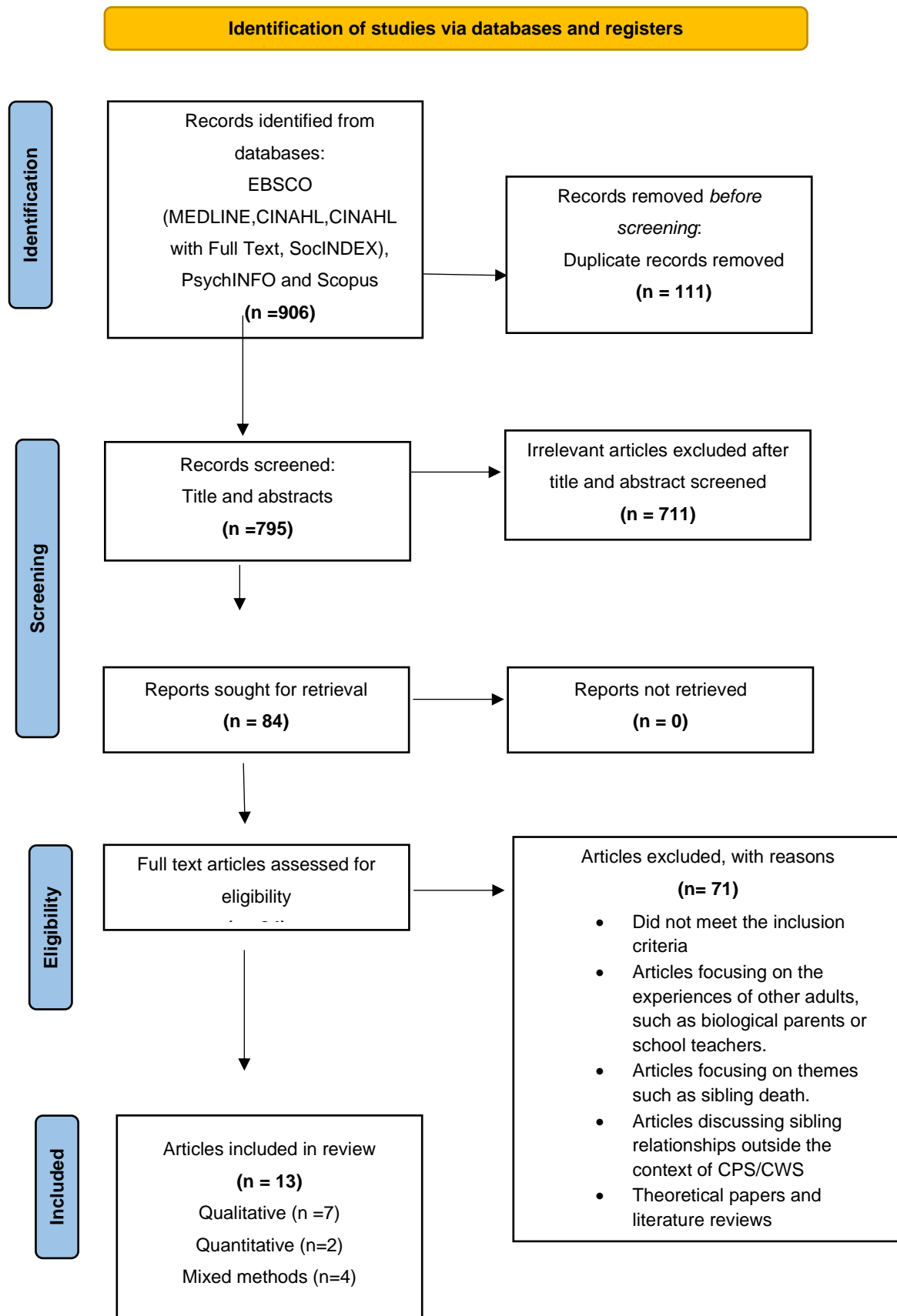
3. Data Extraction and Analysis

The first author developed an extraction table to systematically document and categorize information pertaining to several domains, including the characteristics of the article, such as a study's purpose, methodology, sample, focus on key adults, method of analysis, and geographical context (Table 3). Additionally, data were extracted on the theoretical framework underpinning each study, as well as the primary findings and conclusions presented in each paper.

3.1 Data Synthesis Guided by the Theory of Planned Behavior

The findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the included studies were analysed using Thomas and Harden's (2008) three-stage thematic synthesis. First, the researcher familiarized herself with the data by reviewing the sections labeled 'findings' or 'results' in each article, noting potential patterns and insights. Data were then imported into NVivo for line-by-line coding, conducted both within and across studies. Emergent codes were systematically organized into main themes and sub-themes, capturing recurring, consistent, and divergent patterns related to sibling relationships in CPS.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) was adopted as a guiding theoretical framework to help strengthen the interpretive power of our thematic analysis. TPB links beliefs, attitudes, and social norms to behavioural intentions and actions. It offers a structured lens for understanding decision-making in CPS, where behavioural intentions regarding sibling relationships such as co-placement or separation are not only moral and relational, but also shaped by personal beliefs, systemic constraints and resource scarcity.

According to TPB, an individual's intention to perform a behaviour is the strongest predictor of whether that behaviour will occur. And this intention is shaped by three interrelated constructs: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) (see Figure 1).
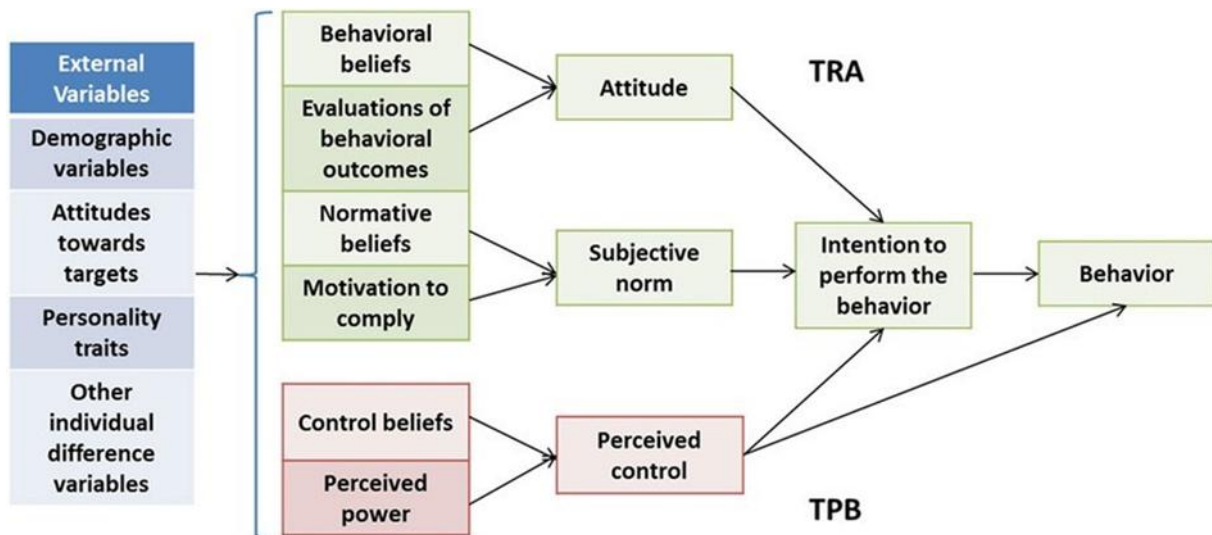
Figure 1: Schematic presentation of the reasoned action model, Fishbein & Ajzen (2010)

Attitude refers to an individual's positive or negative evaluation of performing a behaviour. In this review, this captures key adults' (social workers, foster parents, adoptive parents) beliefs about the value of sibling relationships, including whether they believe maintaining sibling bonds is generally beneficial (e.g. providing continuity, emotional support, and stability) or potentially harmful in certain circumstances (e.g. in cases of inter-sibling abuse or conflict).

Subjective norms represent the social and institutional pressures influencing the key adults' decisions. In CPS, subjective norms stem from national legislation, child welfare agency policies, professional guidelines, and the expectations of colleagues or supervisors. For example, child welfare professionals often adhere to the policy narrative that 'siblings are better together,' even when their professional judgment suggested otherwise. This highlights how organizational culture and dominant child welfare discourses directly shape placement practices and attitudes toward sibling co-placement.

Perceived behavioural control reflects an individual's perception of their ability to perform the behaviour. Within CPS, this reflects whether key adults feel capable of enacting their intentions, given external constraints such as high caseloads, limited placement availability for sibling groups, foster carers' capacities, or financial limitations. Thus, perceived behavioural control serves as a critical lens to understand why intentions may not always translate into action.

By mapping these constructs with the thematic analysis of the 13 reviewed studies, it allowed for a nuanced understanding of how personal beliefs, social and institutional norms, and systemic constraints interact to shape the behaviours of key adults' decisions about sibling co-placement, separation, and contact. For instance, where attitudes towards sibling relationships are positive, but behavioural control is low (e.g. due to bureaucratic or logistical challenges), key adults experience frustration and burnout. Conversely, in cases where attitudes towards the target behaviour are ambivalent (e.g. sibling relationships perceived as harmful) but policy norms strongly encourage co-placement (subjective norms), professionals report feeling conflicted and pressured. This triangulation illustrates how TPB helps explain not just what decisions are made, but how and why key adults rationalize their choices within the constraints of CPS.

By framing the findings through TPB, this review provides a more structured account of how personal beliefs, organizational norms, and systemic constraints converge to shape the perspectives and practices of key adults. This approach not only enhances theoretical coherence, but also offers actionable insights for improving training, policies, and support systems to help bridge the gap between intentions and outcomes in managing sibling relationships within CPS.

3.2 Sample Characteristics

Out of the finalized 13 articles, seven were qualitative studies using semi-structured interviews for data collection, two were quantitative studies utilizing surveys, and four were mixed-method studies combining surveys with semi-structured interviews. The studies were conducted in various countries: Canada (n=1), France (n=1), Isarel (n=1), UK (n=5) and, USA (n=5). The inclusion criteria of only English-language studies may have contributed to the dominance of UK and USA-based research. Among 13 studies, six focused on the perspectives of foster parents/caregivers or adoptive parents, while the remaining six delved into the viewpoints of social workers or child welfare professionals. One study examined the attitudes of both foster mothers and case workers.

Table 3: Characteristics of studies included in the analysis (next page)

Authors/ Year	Title	Key Adults in Focus	Methods	Sample	Analysis	Country
Carretier et al. (2022)	Disclosure of Sibling Sexual Abuse by Hospitalized Adolescent Girls: Three Case Reports.	Perspectives of mental health professionals on sibling sexual abuse (SSA)	Vignettes of 3 case studies of 13–15-year-old adolescent girls who disclosed SSA during inpatient hospitalization.	3 case studies	Vignette Analysis	France
Frost and Goldberg (2020)	"People said we were nuts ... I understand what they were saying now": An exploration of the transition to parenthood in sibling group adoption.	Experiences of adoptive parents (same-sex couples) adopting sibling groups	Longitudinal qualitative study: Parents were interviewed before (T1), immediately after (T2) and 2 years after they adopted (T3) Semi-structured interviews via phone resulted to 34 interviews from 12 participants across a period of almost three years.	12 parents in 6 same-sex couple	Reflexive thematic analysis	United States of America
Gervais and Romano (2019)	Parental Perspectives on the Emotional, Relational and Logistical Impacts on Siblings of Youth Who Sexually Offend.	Parents' perspectives on youth who sexually offend	Semi-structured interviews and self-report measures between March 2011 and March 2017	16 caregivers from 10 Canadian families	Thematic coding process	Ontario, Canada

Kosonen (1996)	Maintaining Sibling Relationships-- Neglected Dimension in Child Care Practice	Social workers' perspectives on children in foster and adoptive care	Mixed method: Survey + telephone interviews Questionnaire filled by social workers in respect to each child followed by telephone interviews contact to SWs to clarify the information	337 children (285 in foster care and 52 in adoption placements); 297 children (82 percent were known to have siblings)		Scotland, UK
Linares et al. (2015)	Reducing Sibling Conflict in Maltreated Children Placed in Foster Homes	Perspectives of sibling pairs and foster parents	Quantitative study, Randomized controlled trial	Siblings pairs and their foster parent (N=22) randomized into a three component intervention (n=13) or a comparison (n=9) group.	Regression Analysis	United States of America
Meakings et al. (2021)	Birth Sibling Relationships after Adoption: Experiences of Contact with Brothers and Sisters Living Elsewhere.	Experiences of adoptive parents	Longitudinal, mixed methods wave 1: 4 months placements wave 4: 4-year placement	Questionnaires w/ adoptive parents; mostly mothers (wave 1= 96, wave 4=68) Interviews with 40 participants	Thematic Analysis	Wales, United Kingdom

Parker and McLaven (2018)	'We all belonged in there somewhere': young people's and carers' experiences of a residential sibling contact event	Experiences of caregivers and young people	Qualitative study, semi-structured interviews, open-ended, exploratory style	6 young people (2 male and 4 female) and 6 of their caregivers (2 kinship carers and 4 foster carers)	Thematic Analysis	United Kingdom
Reder and Fitzpatrick (1995)	Assessing the Needs of Siblings Following a Child Abuse Death.	Perspectives of child welfare professionals	Qualitative study	Child abuse case studies		United Kingdom
Smith (1996)	An exploratory survey of foster mother and caseworker attitudes about sibling placement	Attitudes of foster mothers and case workers	Mixed method study (survey with case workers + interviews with foster mother)	38 foster mothers (interviews)		United States of America
Renner and Driessen (2019)	Siblings who are exposed to child maltreatment: Practices reported by county children's services supervisors.	Experiences of county children's services supervisors/ managers	Quantitative study, Survey	44 respondents		United States of America

Tener and Silberstein (2019)	Therapeutic interventions with child survivors of sibling sexual abuse: The professionals' perspective.	Perspectives of child welfare/mental health professionals	Semi structured interviews	20 Jewish Israeli mental health professionals: 16 clinical therapists and 4 Child Protection Officers (CPOs)	Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)	Israel
Wojciak et al. (2018)	Sibling Relationship in Foster Care: Foster Parent Perspective	Perspectives of foster parents	Semi-structured interviews	N=15 foster parents	Thematic Analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006)	United States of America
Yates (2018)	'Siblings as Better Together': Social Worker Decision Making in Cases Involving Sibling Sexual Behaviour	Perspectives of Social workers	Semi-structured interviews	21 social workers	Grounded-theory study analysis	Scotland, UK

4. Results/Findings

4.1 Limited Information on Theory-Data Connection

A critical review of the selected literature reveals a notable deficiency in the articulation and application of theoretical frameworks, resulting in a conceptual ambiguity across the studies. Of the 13 papers reviewed, only four explicitly discuss their theoretical foundations. Frost and Goldberg (2020) engage with family systems theory, while Linares et al. (2015) refer to a mix of family systems, social learning theory, and conflict mediation perspectives, though this is not elaborated upon in their papers. Parker and McLaven (2018) cite several theories, including psychoanalytic-evolutionary, social-psychological, social learning, and family-ecological system theories, but provide only a cursory description. Yates (2018) briefly touches on constructivist grounded theory to underpin their methodology.

Even in these instances, the engagement with theory is often superficial, with frameworks either implied or briefly mentioned, lacking substantive integration into the analysis or interpretation of findings. This insufficient connection between theory and data has led to missed opportunities for generating deeper insights and advancing theoretical development. For instance, several studies fail to demonstrate how their empirical results support, challenge, or extend existing theoretical models, thereby constraining the reader's ability to grasp the broader implications of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This lack of rigorous theoretical engagement renders the research fragmented, with limited capacity to inform both future inquiry and practical applications.

4.2 Methodical Findings of the Study

Of the 13 finalized articles, seven employed qualitative research methods, two adopted quantitative approaches, and four employed mixed-method designs. The qualitative studies employed semi-structured interviews, alongside vignettes and self-report measures (Carretier et al., 2022; Frost & Goldberg, 2020; Gervais & Romano, 2019; Meakings et al., 2021; Parker & McLaven, 2018; Reder & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Mixed-method studies integrated surveys followed by semi-structured interviews (Kosonen, 1996; Smith, 1996). Two employed a longitudinal research design (Frost & Goldberg, 2020; Meakings et al., 2021). The quantitative studies employed a randomized controlled trial and survey design, respectively (Linares et al., 2015; Renner & Driessen, 2019).

These studies were conducted across five countries: Canada (n=1), France (n=1), Israel (n=1), the UK (n=5), and the USA (n=5), with the predominance of English-language studies likely influencing the geographic distribution. Six studies centred on the perspectives of foster parents, caregivers, or adoptive parents, while an additional six focused on the views of social workers or child welfare professionals. One study examined the attitudes of both foster mothers and case workers.

4.3 Thematic Findings from the Review

No paper specifically addressed the perspectives towards sibling relationships in isolation; instead, the importance and impact of these relationships on the child were discussed as factors influencing the perspectives of the adults involved.

4.3.1 Keeping Siblings Together

Both groups of key adults, adoptive/foster parents and social workers described positive sibling relationships as characterized by increased warmth among siblings reflected through intimacy, affection, support, companionship, and closeness (Frost & Goldberg, 2020; Kosonen, 1996; Meakings et al., 2021; Smith, 1996; Wojciak et al., 2018).

For social workers, observations of these positive sibling relationship dynamics led to decisions favouring sibling co-placement (Yates, 2018). Social workers emphasized the importance of positive sibling relationships in promoting children's well-being by providing a sense of stability and continuity, particularly amidst the uncertainties surrounding their removal from biological homes (Kosonen, 1996). Therefore, social workers generally agreed that siblings should be placed together, unless separating them is deemed to be in the best interests of the children (Kosonen, 1996; Smith, 1996).

Similarly, foster and adoptive parents, when evaluating the quality of the sibling relationship positively, expressed a greater willingness to accept sibling groups into their homes, recognizing the benefits of such placements, not only for the child but also for themselves, and saw this as having a positive impact on the child, themselves as parents and the broader CPS system (Frost & Goldberg, 2020; Kosonen, 1996; Meakings et al., 2021; Smith, 1996; Wojciak et al., 2018). They highlighted how siblings provide mutual support, fostering a sense of security and comfort in the new home environment (Frost & Goldberg, 2020; Meakings et al., 2021; Smith, 1996; Wojciak et al., 2018).

4.3.2 Keeping Siblings Separate

Key adults also noted that sibling relationships could sometimes be strained, ambivalent, or even entirely absent, especially when a younger sibling was born after the older child's placement. In such cases, or when negative sibling dynamics were evident, the consensus was that siblings should be placed separately (Kosonen, 1996; Meakings et al., 2017; Smith, 1996).

Social workers acknowledged that sibling co-placement is 'not always' advantageous, noting that in some instances, the dynamics between the siblings could be detrimental (Yates, 2018). In these situations, the social worker discussed organizing separate placements and maintaining contact through limited visitation or intervention strategies aimed at repairing strained relationships (Parker & McLaven, 2018). When sibling relationships were characterized by negative qualities, co-placement was thought to exacerbate tensions, leading to a further deterioration of the relationship. In such cases, separating siblings was deemed safer and more beneficial for the children's well-being (Carretier et al., 2022; Gervais & Romano, 2019; Yates, 2018). High levels of aggression, abuse and hostility among siblings and in the worst case, instances of sibling sexual abuse (SSA), were described as factors that hindered the effectiveness of the co-placement (Carretier et al., 2022; Gervais & Romano, 2019; Tener & Silberstein, 2019; Yates, 2018).

In cases involving sibling sexual abuse (SSA), social workers expressed a heightened sense of responsibility to ensure that offending siblings were placed separately (Carretier et al., 2022; Yates, 2018). They prioritized the immediate removal of the offending child to protect the victimized sibling, and to facilitate the overall improvement of the family dynamic (Gervais & Romano, 2019; Tener & Silberstein, 2019). Social workers often advocated for a strict 'no contact' policy between siblings prior to implementing intervention measures aimed at repairing relationships, particularly when separation was mandated by the criminal justice or child welfare system due to the nature of the abuse (Carretier et al., 2022; Gervais & Romano, 2019).

Foster and adoptive parents similarly emphasized the necessity of separating siblings when the quality of their relationship was poor, noting the detrimental effects of

negative sibling interactions. For instance, adoptive parents reported that children often felt 'uncomfortable and anxious' before visiting their siblings (Meakings et al., 2021), while many foster parents reported the instances of 'falling out' among siblings during placements, negatively impacting relationship quality (Wojciak et al., 2018).

In cases of SSA, foster and adoptive parents reported heightened feelings of stress and discomfort experienced by the entire family, despite their efforts to maintain normalcy (Gervais & Romano, 2019). Foster parents expressed concerns about safety, emphasizing the need for stringent safety measures and surveillance when contact between siblings occurred (Gervais & Romano, 2019).

4.3.3 Maintaining and Promoting Sibling Relationships

In case of separated placements, key adults highlighted the importance of maintaining sibling contact irrespective of their placement situations. Key adults recognized that preserving these relationships supports continuity, fosters a sense of identity, and promotes the overall wellbeing of the children (Kosonen, 1996; Meakings et al., 2021; Parker & McLaven, 2018; Wojciak et al., 2018).

Social workers and foster/adoptive parents both reported making genuine efforts to facilitate sibling contact and encourage communication between siblings, recognizing its long-term significance for the well-being of children in care (Meakings et al., 2021; Parker & McLaven, 2018; Wojciak et al., 2018). They observed positive outcomes from sibling contact and believed their efforts had significant impact on the children's lives, actively facilitating visitations when siblings had been placed apart (Frost & Goldberg, 2020; Meakings et al., 2021; Wojciak et al., 2018).

Key adults also highlighted the importance of mediating conflicts and encouraging interactions to strengthen sibling bonds. These proactive approaches were considered essential to help prevent the loss of shared identity and maintain emotional connections (Kosonen, 1996; Linares et al., 2015). In cases involving SSA, social workers and foster/adoptive parents highlighted the necessity of comprehensive therapeutic interventions. Social workers advocated for multidisciplinary and integrative approaches that addressed the needs of the abused child, their siblings, and the family as a whole. Such interventions, spanning from

initial disclosure to the conclusion of the therapeutic process, were considered vital for ensuring the well-being of all parties involved (Carretier et al., 2022).

Adoptive and foster parents often described sibling contact as a source of comfort, emotional support, and stability for the children, viewing sibling bonds as essential for supporting continuity and maintaining vital connections in the face of adversity (Kosonen, 1996; Meakings et al., 2021).

Similarly, adoptive and foster parents emphasized the importance of collaboration and strong working relationships with both CPS and other foster parents/families to help promote sibling relationships. They also advocated for a 'whole systems approach' involving all the key stakeholders to promote and sustain these bonds (Meakings et al., 2021; Wojciak et al., 2018, p. 2603). Additionally, foster parents highlighted the need for an increased awareness and education regarding sibling relationships and their dynamics, expressing a desire for more detailed information about the child's siblings to better strengthen these connections (Frost & Goldberg, 2020; Meakings et al., 2021; Wojciak et al., 2018). They also advocated for specialized training on sibling dynamics to help foster parents make informed caregiving decisions (Wojciak et al., 2018).

Adoptive parents emphasized the role of open communication and positive family rapport in maintaining sibling relationships (Frost & Goldberg, 2020; Meakings et al., 2021). They noted that higher levels of 'communicative openness' were strongly associated with the sustained preservation of sibling bonds over time (Meakings et al., 2021, p. 2486). In instances where agency's support was lacking, some adoptive parents took it upon themselves to organize sibling visits independently, demonstrating their commitment to maintaining these relationships (Meakings et al., 2021).

4.3.4 Systemic Barriers/ Limitations to Maintaining Sibling Relationships

While adults consistently emphasized that decisions regarding co-placement or separation of siblings in contact with CPS were primarily influenced by the quality of the sibling relationship, they also acknowledged that, in practice, these decisions were often influenced by additional, practical considerations. Thus, despite a firm

belief regarding the importance of placement decisions for siblings aligned with sibling relationship quality and a commitment to supporting sibling bonds irrespective of placement outcomes, a range of financial, bureaucratic, logistical and communication challenges frequently hindered their ability to effectively collaborate with sibling groups (Smith, 1996; Wojciak et al., 2018).

Social workers reported facing considerable challenges, including high caseloads and limited time, which strained both their physical and mental well-being and, in-turn, diminished their capacity to adequately support children (Kosonen, 1996; Smith, 1996). Further difficulties arose from navigating restrictive bureaucratic structures within CPS, adhering to legal mandates, and managing the influence of colleagues' and leadership opinions, all of which could compromise their ability to collaborate effectively with stakeholders involved in sibling cases (Kosonen, 1996; Meakings et al., 2017; Wojciak et al., 2018).

Another significant barrier cited by social workers was the difficulty in placing larger sibling groups together, compounded by the limited availability of foster carers who are 'able and willing to provide care for three or more children' (Kosonen, 1996, p. 819). The logistical and resource implications of co-placing sibling groups often constrained social workers' scope of practice, particularly with respect to financial and practical support. These challenges included securing adequate housing, coordinating transportation, providing training for foster carers, managing domestic responsibilities, and offering emotional support (Kosonen, 1996; Meakings et al., 2021). Furthermore, social workers reported that sibling groups with special needs or significant demands faced even greater difficulties in identifying suitable foster families for placements (Kosonen, 1996; Renner & Driessen, 2019). Maintaining contact among separated siblings also proved challenging due to factors such as limited information on siblings' whereabouts, frequent location changes, or the birth of new siblings after placement (Frost & Goldberg, 2020; Parker & McLaven, 2018).

For adoptive and foster parents, tensions arising from negative family dynamics between their families and children's biological families was perceived as a significant challenge, often resulting in sibling contact being viewed as 'less favorable', and, ultimately, reduced over time (Meakings et al., 2021, p. 2493). Many adoptive and

foster parents reported experiencing emotional exhaustion from juggling household responsibilities, coordinating with social workers, and maintaining sibling contact (Frost & Goldberg, 2020; Parker & McLaven, 2018; Wojciak et al., 2018). Foster parents caring for larger groups of children frequently felt 'overwhelmed and outnumbered,' with time constraints contributing to a reluctance or inability to actively support and maintain sibling relationships (Meakings et al., 2021, p. 116).

Some adoptive and foster parents also highlighted systemic gaps in support, such as the lack of assistance from adoption agencies in facilitating planned, direct contact. They pointed to the absence of measures like 'ensuring mutual consent for exchange of personal information,' which they felt could ease coordination (Meakings et al., 2021, p. 2491). Additionally, some adoptive and foster parents expressed their frustrations over the slow mediation process adopted by the agencies, which some parents addressed passively, further diminishing sibling contact (Frost & Goldberg, 2020; Meakings et al., 2021). Adoptive and foster parents emphasized that early negotiations regarding proposed contact arrangements should be clearly documented to avoid ambiguity. Unclear or incomplete documentation was reported to lead to confusion or uncertainty about professionals' recommended plans, ultimately causing sibling contact to falter (Meakings et al., 2021).

5. Discussion

5.1 Synthesis of Key Finding through TPB Perspective

Our review identifies a conceptual and theoretical gap in existing studies, which often lack a systematic lens for analysing how beliefs and contextual factors shape adults' perspectives in this domain. To address this deficiency, we incorporate Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as a theoretical framework to anchor a thematic analysis of the 13 reviewed studies reviewed. While alternate frameworks, such as ecological systems theory or stress and coping model, may capture broader contextual influences or the emotional burdens of caregiving, TPB offers explanatory strength by linking cognitions, social norms, and perceived control to behavioural intentions and actions. Its explicit focus on the relationship between beliefs, intentions, and action (or inaction) provides a robust foundation for analysing how sibling relationships are interpreted, prioritized, and managed by key adults in CPS context.

Our synthesis of the 13 studies on key adults' perspectives regarding sibling relationships of children in CPS reveals three principal behavioural intentions: (i) co-placing siblings, (ii) separating siblings, and (iii) maintaining and promoting sibling contact irrespective of placement situations. These intentions are shaped by a complex interplay of individual beliefs, professional and policy expectations, and structural constraints.

The first behavioural intention, **keeping siblings together,** reflects a consistently positive attitude among key adults (social workers, foster parents, and adoptive parents) toward the value of sibling relationships. These attitudes are grounded in beliefs that sibling bonds provide stability, emotional support, and continuity during periods of upheaval (Frost & Goldberg, 2020; Kosonen, 1996; Meakings et al., 2017; Smith, 1996), thereby reinforcing intentions to co-place siblings. Subjective norms further strengthen this orientation, as co-placement is widely regarded as a best practice within the profession and is embedded within child welfare policy, exemplified by the prevailing 'siblings are better together' discourse (Yates, 2018). However, the realization of these intentions is frequently constrained by perceived behavioural control. Structural resource constraints, such as shortages of foster placements for sibling groups, high caseloads, time limitations, and a lack of other resources, often hinder the capacity of key adults to act on their positive attitudes and normative commitments (Kosonen, 1996; Wojciak et al., 2018). These perceived barriers therefore diminished key adults' sense of behavioural control over sibling co-placement, thereby reducing the likelihood that co-placement will occur, even when intentions are positive.

In contrast, the second behavioural intention, **keeping siblings separate**, emerges in situations where key adults perceive sibling relationship as negative or potentially harmful. Here, although key adults maintain a general belief in the value of sibling bonds, their behavioural beliefs about specific risks, such as sibling abuse, persistent conflict, or heightened anxiety, can outweigh these positives, leading to a more cautious or negative attitudes toward co-placement. In such cases, separation is framed not as a rejection of sibling ties, but as a protective measure to safeguard individual children's well-being.

Subjective norms in these contexts become more complex. While the dominant policy discourse and professional rhetoric often emphasize the benefits of sibling co-placement, child protection norms and expectations of individualized assessment also hold considerable influence. These parallel norms create space for professionals to justify separation when it is seen as necessary for safety, stability, or emotional health. Thus, decisions to separate siblings often reflect a negotiated balance between the general 'siblings are better together' expectation and the equally salient norm of prioritizing child protection. Likewise, perceived behavioural control plays a notable role in shaping these decisions. Practitioners frequently report feeling more confident and empowered to recommend separation when supported by policy exceptions or organizational precedents that explicitly allow it in cases of risk (Carretier et al., 2022; Yates, 2018). In these scenarios, the presence of clear behavioural concerns legitimizes decisions to separate siblings, reinforcing professionals' sense of agency and reducing the potential conflict between their intentions and systemic expectations.

Finally, the third behavioural intention, **maintaining and promoting sibling contact irrespective of placement situations**, reflects consistently positive attitudes among key adults. The behaviours entail, facilitating sibling visits, encouraging communication, and managing conflict between siblings (Frost & Goldberg, 2020; Kosonen, 1996; Meakings et al., 2021; Wojciak et al., 2018). These attitudes are grounded in beliefs that sibling contact preserve identity, supports emotional well-being, and provides continuity during periods of disruption (Kosonen, 1996; Meakings et al., 2021). Such beliefs foster strong intentions to sustain sibling bonds through practical efforts such as facilitating visits, encouraging communication, and managing sibling conflict (Frost & Goldberg, 2020; Wojciak et al., 2018).

Subjective norms also shape this intention through complex ways. While policy frameworks increasingly emphasize the importance of maintaining sibling contact, their operationalization remains inconsistent across systems, creating ambiguity and limited accountability (Yates, 2018). As a result, key adults experience institutional pressure to prioritize sibling contact, yet lack the clear guidance or structural support to implement it effectively. Furthermore, key adults sometimes depart from prevailing

norms when they believe sibling contact may be harmful, particularly in cases involving histories of abuse, neglect, or intense conflict. In such contexts, individualized assessments, informed by professional judgment and personal beliefs, often take precedence over compliance with policy mandates. Likewise, as with other behavioural intentions, perceived behavioural control plays a decisive role in whether positive intentions are realized. Key adults frequently cite logistical and systemic barriers, including transportation difficulties, foster parent fatigue, inadequate interagency collaboration, and limited training on sibling dynamics, as significant obstacles to sustaining sibling contact (Frost & Goldberg, 2020; Meakings et al., 2021; Wojciak et al., 2018). These constraints substantially reduce their ability to translate favourable attitudes and normative expectations into practice.

5.1.1 Addressing the Critical Paradox

At the heart of understanding these behavioural intentions lies a critical paradox; while social workers and foster/adoptive parents consistently value sibling relationships and intend to preserve them, systemic barriers often prevent these intentions from being realized. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) provides a useful framework for unpacking this paradox. TPB emphasizes how attitudes (valuing sibling ties), subjective norms (policy expectations, professional standards), and perceived behavioural control (availability of placements, workload, resources) combine to shape decision-making. Within CPS, positive orientations toward sibling relationships are frequently undermined by systemic, institutional constraints, such as limited foster homes for sibling groups, high caseloads, and logistical challenges across jurisdictions. These barriers weaken perceived behavioural control and reduce professionals' ability to act on supportive intentions, highlighting that decision-making is shaped less by individual beliefs than by structural realities.

While subjective norms frequently reinforce the ideal of sibling co-placement as reflected in policy discourses such as, 'siblings are better together,' this ideal is complicated in practice by case-specific assessments. In high-risk contexts, such as sibling abuse or unresolved trauma, practitioners often navigate between competing norms: One that prioritizes children's rights to continuity in family relationships or prioritizing their individual safety and best interests. This illustrates the flexible, and

sometimes ambiguous, nature of subjective norms in defining 'good practice' within CPS.

Barriers to implementing supportive sibling policies manifest differently across the three behavioural intentions. For co-placement, resource shortages (e.g. lack of suitable foster homes, funding, and licensing limitations) are the primary constraints. For separation, emotional and legal complexities dominate, with clear risk thresholds and professional autonomy making separation more likely when harm is evident. For maintaining sibling contact post-separation is constrained by relational and organizational challenges, including weak inter-agency coordination, transport difficulties, and caregiver fatigue. Despite positive beliefs and policy support, these obstacles consistently limit the ability of professionals to uphold sibling-supportive practices.

In sum, TPB clarifies not only how professionals form intentions, but also why these often collapse under systemic pressures. Although attitudes and norms broadly support sibling connections, practice is mediated by structural constraints, revealing sibling placement decisions as institutionally situated processes shaped by interdependent organizational, logistical, and normative factors.

5.2 Limitations

This review highlights several critical limitations, encompassing theoretical, methodological, geographic, and practical dimensions, which should be considered when interpreting the findings.

A prominent theoretical gap is the limited integration of frameworks; only four of the 13 reviewed studies explicitly engaged with theory, often superficially. This lack of theoretical grounding constrains the ability of existing research to provide nuanced insights into sibling dynamics, or to inform evidence-based policy and practice. Greater engagement with robust theoretical models is needed to strengthen analytical rigour, and deepen understanding of sibling relationships within CPS.

Methodologically, the predominance of qualitative designs offers rich contextual insights, but introduces subjectivity and limits generalizability of the findings. The small number of studies (n=13) further restricts the breadth of available evidence. Research has focused narrowly on specific aspects of sibling relationships, primarily placement decisions, leaving other critical areas, such as maintaining sibling bonds post-separation and other aspects of sibling relationships within CPS.

Geographically and linguistically, the concentration of studies in Western countries (Canada, USA, UK, France, and Israel) restricts the applicability of findings to global contexts. Moreover, the inclusion criteria of English-language publications introduce a linguistic and selection bias, excluding studies from non-English-speaking regions where cultural norms, legislative frameworks, and caregiving models may differ substantially. Such exclusions may overlook culturally specific practices, alternative caregiving models, or policy approaches that could broaden or challenge current understandings of sibling relationships in CPS.

Finally, there is a practical and contextual limitation in the narrow focus on placement decision. Many studies do not explore the complexities of maintaining and prioritizing sibling relationships in situations of separation, limiting the synthesis of a full picture of sibling dynamics. Addressing these dimensions requires more in-depth and diverse research approaches that consider relational, logistical, and systemic factors affecting sibling relationships.

Collectively, these limitations underscore the need for research that is theoretically informed, methodologically diverse, and globally representative to help enhance an understanding of sibling relationships in CPS, and to support more effective policy and practice.

5.3 Implications and Recommendations

This review highlights several implications for policy, practice, and future research in child protection services (CPS), framed through the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to understand how attitudes, norms, and perceived control shape sibling-related decisions.

5.3.1 Policy Implications

The findings suggest that efforts to improve sibling outcomes should move beyond simply informing practitioners toward empowering them through systemic support. Policies should strengthen subjective norms: A clear expectation that sibling relationships are actively supported and enhance perceived behavioural control by ensuring the capacity to act on those expectations.

- *Foster care licensing:* Updating licensing criteria and streamlining approval for sibling groups can increase placement feasibility, and signal a system-level prioritization of co-placement.

- *Operational Support:* Policies should explicitly authorize resource planning and coordination for sibling placements and contact, addressing high caseloads and logistical challenges.

- *Structured Collaboration:* Formalizing collaboration among social workers, foster/adoptive parents, and biological families ensures that co-placement and contact are systematically planned, rather than optional, reinforcing norms and enhancing practical capacity.

5.3.2 Practice Implications

Practitioners demonstrate strong intentions to support sibling contact, yet systemic constraints and complex family dynamics necessitate flexible, context-sensitive approaches. Agencies should prioritize comprehensive training, address structural and resource limitations, and reduce logistical barriers.

- *Sibling-Focused Programmes:* When co-placement is not feasible, programmes such as sibling camps or facilitated visitation provide concrete pathways to maintain bonds, normalizing these practices and increasing implementation feasibility.

- *Contact Planning:* Documented sibling plans, detailing frequency, format, coordinators, and strategies to overcome barriers, operationalize system

expectations and clarify professional and caregiver roles, thereby enhancing the sustainability of sibling relationships.

5.3.3 Implications for Future Research

The findings of this review underscore the need for more comprehensive, multidisciplinary research to support sibling relationships within CPS. Several key directions for future research emerge outlined as follows:

- *Theoretical Expansion:* Further application of TPB can illuminate how subjective norms and perceived behavioural control influence key adults' intentions and behaviours, especially across diverse cultural and legislative contexts.

- *Broadening Perspectives:* Research should capture the experiences of social workers, foster, and adoptive parents beyond placement decisions, exploring relational, logistical, and systemic challenges in maintaining sibling bonds. Mixed-methods and longitudinal designs can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how beliefs translate into practice.

- *Longitudinal and Outcome*-Focused Studies: Tracking the long-term outcomes of co-placement, separation, and facilitated contact programmes can inform evidence-based interventions that optimize child well-being.

- *Geographical, Cultural, and Linguistic Considerations:* Future research should examine how culture, ethnicity, and language influence sibling relationships, including the role of siblings in preserving cultural identity and navigating acculturation pressures. Expanding beyond English-language and Western-focused studies will provide insights into alternative sibling care models, culturally specific practices, and diverse policy approaches.

6. Conclusion

This review, interpreted through the lens of the TPB, reveals that key adults within CPS (social workers, foster and adoptive parents) exhibit three primary behavioural

intentions regarding sibling relationships: to keep siblings together, to separate them when necessary, and to maintain sibling contact irrespective of placement. These intentions are guided by beliefs about the intrinsic value of sibling relationships and the perceived outcomes of their actions. While policy generally favours co-placement, decisions are shaped by adults' subjective evaluations of sibling relationship quality and dynamics. Applying this framework clarifies why positive intentions to maintain sibling bonds, such as co-placement, separation management, or facilitating contact are not always realized in practice, thus highlighting the mediating role of systemic constraints. In doing so, TPB provides a nuanced explanation of the interaction between personal, organizational, and structural factors, advancing the theoretical understanding of how decision-making around sibling relationships is shaped in child protection contexts. This theoretical contribution not only strengthens the conceptual grounding of the current review, but also offers a foundation for future research and practice interventions aimed at bridging the gap between intentions and outcomes.

The findings highlight that the perceptions and attitudes of key adults directly influence both placement decisions and ongoing relationship maintenance, underscoring the importance of enhanced education and awareness around sibling dynamics within CPS. Intentional actions, structured support, and improved communication within foster families and the broader care system can strengthen sibling bonds, and improve outcomes for children in care.

However, systemic and structural barriers frequently constrain the ability of key adults to act on their intentions, despite strong positive attitudes toward sibling relationships. These constraints point to the need for policy reforms and the provision of adequate resources to enable practitioners to translate supportive intentions into practice.

In summary, this review underscores that key adults' perspectives are shaped by their beliefs, attitudes, and perceived control over resources, and while intentions to preserve sibling bonds are consistently strong, systemic challenges limit their enactment. The study further identifies gaps in understanding the influence of adult attitudes on sibling relationships, hence highlighting the need for continued research to inform policy, practice, and interventions that effectively support sibling connections within CPS.

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