SIBLING RELATIONS IN ALTERNATIVE CHILD CARE RESULTS OF A STUDY ON SIBLING RELATIONS IN SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES IN AUSTRIA

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SUMMARY

The following contribution analyses the importance of sibling relations for children and youth in alternative care. While living together with siblings in situations outside the biological family becomes more and more ensured by legal rules there exists only few knowledge about the dynamics in common placed sibling groups and about the resulting challenges for the pedagogical work. The contribution is based on the results of a qualitative research project which was carried out on request of SOS Children's Village Austria. The aim of the project was to reconstruct the perspectives of children and youth living in SOS Children's Villages on the biographical development and the dynamics of their sibling relations for deriving conclusions and recommendations for the pedagogical work with siblings in alternative care.

Keywords: Child and youth care, qualitative case studies, sibling relations, pedagogical work with siblings

INTRODUCTION

The involvement of the family of origin in professional education and care of children and youth is considered as a standard in youth welfare in the mean time. But in this, there is only little attention drawn towards the siblings, although sibling relationships have an enormous impact on the growing up, the life orientation and the course of life of a person (Schneewind, 2010).

Sibling relations rank among the most important relationships during a persons lifespan. They are the longest lasting relationships of a person (Kasten 2003, 21). Even very early in their live siblings who grow up together spend more time with each other than with their parents. Sibling relations significantly influence how relationships with partners and friends are designed during ones personal biography, because they, as memorized relationship knowledge, stimulate repetition of acquired behaviour patterns (Cierpka 2001, 444). Besides the parents, siblings are the second source of attachment relationships (Walper et al. 2009, 20); this especially is true for children in risky family constellations and parent-child relationships in a crisis.

Sibling relations have a high relevance for wellbeing, developmental possibilities and the potential of social support of a person. At the same time their importance in each individual case is hardly definable, due to the great number of influencing factors and the broad scope of acting. This makes a survey on the pedagogical meaning of sibling relations difficult.

Given the enormous significance that siblings have concerning the development and the course of life of a person, it is surprising how fragmentary the exploration of sibling relations still is. So far, science has obviously paid more attention to hierarchical parent-child relations as well as professional pedagogical interactions than to cooperative-horizontal relations (Cierpka 2001, 422). Whereas during the last decades peer group relations increasingly moved into the focus within the field of childhood and youth research (in the context of children and youth-culture studies), internationally there is only since the 1980s a noticeable psychological sibling research existing (f. i. Bank & Kahn, 1982, Lamb/Sutton-Smith 1982, Dunn 1983). An independent pedagogical sibling research does not exist jet.

Existing studies on siblings in alternative care indicate that joint placement of siblings has a positive influence on their development. But the studies manly took place in foster families (Gardner 2004, Hegar 2005, Wulczyn & Zimmermann, 2005). Because children usually wish joint placement (Herrick & Piccus, 2005), in recent years the right of children and youth, to also keep up sibling relationships in situations of alternativecare[1], is pointed out. In 2009, the United Nations adopted guidelines for the alternative care of children and young people which strengthened the focus on sibling relations. In these guidelines sibling relations are considered as important. It is stated that, "siblings with existing bonds should in principle not be separated by placements in alternative care unless there is a clear risk of abuse or other justification in the best interests of the child. In any case, every effort should be made to enable siblings to maintain contact with each other, unless this is against their wishes or interests" (United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, § 16).

This was the framework for SOS Children's Village to start various research projects on siblings in alternative care in five European countries: in Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Spain. The research dealt with the legal situation of siblings in the five countries, with data about the common placement of siblings in SOS Children's Villages, with the assessment of sibling relations, the needs of professionals working with sibling groups in alternative care and the views of children and young people on their own sibling relations.

The first finding in all countries was that there is only few knowledge existing on sibling relations in alternative care. Despite of statements on the importance of siblings in guidelines and quality standards, in the practice of alternative care there is not paid very much attention to siblings. As a result of all the projects, it came out that, "in actual fact, many sibling children are separated in the care systems throughout Europe, and too often they have no contact with each other. No country is officially tackling this issue. There are also no legally binding principles or influential children's lobbies" (SOS Children's Village International, 2012).

In SOS Children's Villages we can find a different situation. Because of their basic principles and their organisational structure, they have particular opportunities for common placement of siblings. In France SOS Children's Villages accept only sibling groups. At the moment, 93% of the children live with one or more siblings in the same Children's Village family, only 7% of the children live there without siblings. In Spain 70% of the children live together with siblings, in Austria 69%, in Germany 65% and in Italy 50,6% (SOS Children's Village International 2012, 20-21). In fact, a lot of sibling groups live together in SOS Children's Villages, but in many cases the professionals face problems in dealing with sibling groups. This was the reason for undertaking research with the goal to improve the knowledge basis for the work with siblings.

In the following I want to introduce the Austrian study on sibling relations in SOS Children´s Villages. First the social framework and the research assignment will be explained. Then the research design will be outlined and finally chosen findings will be presented.

GENERAL ASPECTS OF THE AUSTRIANS SIBLING RESEARCH

Sibling relations are influenced by the present general changes in families. The shrinking of families and reduction of the numbers of children overall results in a reduction of siblings. The increasing percentage of separations, single-parent households and one-child-families lead to a pluralisation of appearances of sibling configurations and to the fact that growing up with siblings no longer is an unquestioned matter of course. Nevertheless, growing up with siblings is still the normal case for Children in Austria. Only 17% of the children in primary school age are growing up without siblings (Beham 2010, 430f.)

While in overall Austrian society there is a strong orientation towards the two-children-family-model visible, family configurations in the context of alternative care differ from the established family ideal. Separations, large numbers of children, step-siblings and half siblings as well as sibling groups without parents are found there. An analysis of the sibling groups who the SOS Children´s Villages take care of found that 59% of the sibling groups consist of four and more children and 17% even of seven and more (Hagleitner, 2009, 3f.).

The social standards which define status and appearance of sibling relations are linked to the specific culture. In Central European societies like in Austria there are only few formal rules concerning the structuring of sibling relations. Obligations

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1   The term „alternative care" includes residential care and foster care. In this article the focus is led on SOS Children's Village where we can find an intermediate form of care between family-oriented residential care and professional foster care.

to care for each other, solidarity and solicitousness decrease, whereas implicit expectations concerning the taking over of responsibility and supporting each other persist in varying extend (Wilk, 1999, 224; Kasten, 2010, 2). Hence, in our society sibling relations are shapeable within a broad framework. The designing manly takes place in the particular family, whereas family ideals, living situation of the family, the parent-child relationship and the individuality of the children are determining.

In the context of alternative care, sibling relations involve a higher level of stress and developmental risks, caused by the live circumstances.

Therefore the following domains of stress have to be distinguished:

- Children and young people in alternative care have experiences of loss and separation which they have to come to terms with, which usually lead to an existential uncertainty about the conception of the world and the self-perception (Hrdina 1998, 77). At the same time sibling relations can be confusing, because of constellations of patchwork siblings, half siblings and stepsibling and can be diffuse concerning processes of affiliation and identification.
- The transfer into situations of care or alternative care is stressful and partly connected to traumatic experiences. The transfer itself can be preceded by traumatic experiences of neglect or other dangers prior to the accommodation (Wiemann, 2008).
- Relationships with adults are often determined through uncertainty and experiences of lack of parenting skills (Walper et al., 2009, 54), which, to a large extend, throws the children and young people back to their own abilities of self-education and self-configuration.

In spite of the strains, siblings can be important social resources during the process of transition into alternative care. Experiences of separation can partly be compensated by the intensification of sibling relations; nevertheless negative experiences with relationships can also lead to destructive relationship dynamics between siblings (Walper et al., 2009, 54). Overall it seems that the breaking up of relationships with familiar siblings reduces the disposition of the affected children for building up trust. Contrariwise children react less "dysfunctional in bounding" the more familiars they can bring with them from their old environment. Their capabilities to transfer boundings to new persons are increased because they did not lose all attachments previously

(Wiemann 2008, 3). In addition, joint placement of siblings is fear reducing and supports the process of coping with traumatic experiences.

In Austria there are no clear legal regulations concerning the joint or separate placement of siblings. The placement is lead by the relatively diffuse term "Kindeswohl" (child`s well-being), which leaves a quite large scope of discretion (JWG, 1989). As a part of family live, sibling relations are protected by the constitution in principle. However, when decisions are made concerning the placement of children often economical thoughts respectively availability of care places have priority (Grasl & Murg-Klenner, 2010).

RESEARCH DESIGN

The main issue at the beginning of the Austrian sibling research was to search criteria for the decision process on co-locating or separating the siblings in alternative care. This should be done by identifying stress factors and resources in sibling relationships. In this framework the request for the sibling study at the University of Klagenfurt/Celovec was to investigate the perspective of the children and adolescences on their sibling relations. This was realized by qualitative case studies on groups of siblings who live together in SOS Children's Villages families. The research team consisted of Ulrike Loch, Sylvia Leitner and Stephan Sting.

The empirical findings of our study shifted the opening question of co-locating or separating the siblings to the question of the pedagogical dealing with sibling relationships: Dealing with sibling groups takes part in the "construction" of sibling relations. Therefore it is not possible to identify stresses and strains as well as resources of sibling relations in an absolute and stable sense. Against it sibling relations are variable and they interact with pedagogical influences (Leitner, Loch & Sting, 2011).

In order to improve the knowledge basis about the importance of sibling relationships in alternative care we followed four research questions:

1. What is the meaning of siblings for children and young people in the context of alternative care at the present?
2. What do the processes of sibling relations look like from the perspectives and the experiences of the children and young people?
3. Which experiences with siblings were supportive and beneficial for positive developments?

4. What would the children and young people have wished for concerning the relations to their siblings, especially during challenging caretaking processes?

The aim of the research was to create detailed case studies of the biography and the dynamics of sibling groups living together in SOS Children's Villages. After this we identified common topics of all cases for a case-overlapping analysis. At the end we derived conclusions and recommendations for the pedagogical work with sibling groups.

Because of the risky and ambivalent character of sibling relations in alternative care our study required sensitive and sophisticated procedures. The methodical implementation was carried out through a three-step data collection procedure. During the first survey phase, there were nine sibling groups explored.The sibling groups are characterized by the facts, that they have at least one parent in common and at least two siblings are together in the SOS Children's Village. From each of these groups one child (aged 12 to 14[2]) was biographically interviewed (Loch & Rosenthal, 2002). In these interviews the designing of family sculptures was integrated. This enabled the youths to express their sibling relations nonverbal, by using sticker points with different colours and positioning them to each other and to other persons. The creation of family sculptures was part of the interview process. It was used for making the interview situation more child-oriented (Bock, 2010) and for getting deeper and more concrete information.

During the second phase of the survey five sibling talks took place, which were guided by the methods of group discussions (Bohnsack, 2010; Nentwig-Gesemann, 2006). All biological siblings of a sibling group, who lived in the same SOS Children´s Village, took part. The main focus of the sibling talks was not only the verbal dimension but also the dynamics of interaction in the sibling group (Berger/Luckmann, 1998). As a support for the discussion interactive sibling pictures were developed. In this process the children and youth got the possibility to "bewitch" themselves into animals, draw those on paper, explain their "qualities" as animals and then collaborate by relating them to each other.

During the third phase of the survey a participating observation with four sibling groups within their SOS Children's Village family took part, in order to make the performative creation of sibling relations

in interactive processes visible (Ecarius, 2010). In addition,theme-centred interviews with professionals who work with the sibling groupswere made.

The stepped methodical-design is oriented towards the theoretical sampling developed by Glaser and Strauss (1997, in which the phase separation between survey and analysis is canceled. The collected data were hermeneutically analyzed between the individual survey phases (Oevermann, 1993, Rosenthal, 2005), and then the results within a case (thus a sibling group) were triangulated. Contrasting of the results of the individual data materials took place in order to make comprehensible understanding possible as well as to determine the scope of the individual data (single perspective in biographical interview and in the thematic interview – situational group-interactions in sibling conversations and during participant observation). Thereafter theorization of the individual case took place (Apitzsch, 2003; Rosenthal, 2005). During the final analyzing step the individual results of the explored cases were contrasted with each other and – by taking account of the previously mentioned research questions - summarized to case-overlapping results and perspectives for pedagogical praxis.

RESULTS

Because of the complexity of the cases description of individual case-reconstructions goes beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, I will introduce selected results from the case-overlapping analysis. First I will outline the results concerning the value of siblings in alternative care. Then we will deal with the question in which form the configuration of sibling relationships is a pedagogical task. Afterwards selected aspects of configuration tasks will be explained.

Findings about the importance of siblings

Biological (half) siblings have an accentuated importance in the social network of children and adolescents

In all of the evaluated sibling groups it is evident that the biological siblings have an emphasized position within the social network of the children and youth living in the Children`s Village. Children and youth who have at least one parent in common are considered biological siblings. For

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2   The selection according to their age, is based on the findings in childhood research, that younger children "for developmental-psychological reasonsare barely able to conceive and illustrate their biography entirely." (Grunert & Kügler 2006, 251).

the siblings living in a SOS Children´s Village family means to live in two families at the same time: In the first place, they live in a household with the Children´s Village mother in sense of a main bonding person, partly supplemented by other caretakers. Also part of the Children´s Village family are the other children and youth who are not part of their family system of origin. In their role, as so called house siblings, they can take over either the position of other children or youth in the same household or even can be considered as good or best friends. Secondly, the siblings in the Children´s Village live in their family of origin, which is always present due to their biological siblings. During alternative care, memories about the family of origin are constantly actualized by joint experiences and memories of the siblings. Also the family of origin is repeatedly restored through contact with biological parents of (individual) siblings and the relationships, family histories and family myths that are passed onduring these contacts. The family of origin remains to be important for siblings in alternative care, even when there has been no contact to parents and/or siblings for years. This means that "not being visited" does not relativize the meaning of the family of origin (totally), as we found in all sibling groups.

> Thirteen year old Sara Nebel[3] illustrates this living in two families in an impressive way when she made her family sculpture, by positioning her brother twice in the sculpture – as a biological sibling and as a housesibling.

The doubling of her brother expresses different closeness and expectations towards biological siblings and house siblings. Biological siblings are tendentially expected to be more loyal and are linked to more fear of loss then social siblings.

Special bounds exist between co-located siblings in alternative care

A special position is taken by biological siblings who experience the situation of alternative care together. This is true for all cases that were explored by us. The extraordinary role of the siblings who live in the Children´s Village is mainly explained by the fact that they unite both: Childen's Village family and biological family. This extraordinary status is expressed through a special emotional bounding, which in some sibling groups occurs as an intimate relationship of trust, in others, situations of rejec-

tion, prevail. In all evaluated sibling groups this special bounding comes along with fears of loss. Triggered by these fears of loss the great numbers of observed rejections in every day live are explained. This means that the fear of loss in the evaluated biological sibling groups is so massive that it significantly structures the development of the biological sibling relationships in the Children´s Village.

The fear of loss of the children and youth in alternative care are based on real experiences of loss. They experience that living together with siblings is principally more questioned from others (parents, social pedagogues, social workers, courts etc.) than in biological family contexts. Based on this experience sibling relationships lose the naturalness of living together in alternative care. In spite of temporary or geographical separation, emotional relationships on the basis of real experiences, wishes and family myths remain to exist over geographical distances and distance of time. After separating siblings (e.g. through separate placement or through returning/moving out of one sibling and remaining of the other child in the Children´s Village) the pedagogical support to keep up sibling relations is important, except professional reasons, like protection from violence, contradict.

Sibling relations in alternative care are characterized by a specific ambivalence

One result of the existing sibling researches is, that all sibling relationships are characterized by "a deeply ingrained emotional ambivalence, in other words the existence of intensive positive feelings (love, affection) and negative feelings (refusal, hate) at the same time" (Kasten, 2010, 3f.). Ambiguities and ambivalences like affinity and dissociation, solidarity and rivalry, closeness and distance are in general characteristic features of sibling relationships (Kasten, 2003, 36ff.). As sibling relations are involuntary, often very different personalities are linked together, among whom a high level of conflict potential can exist. In spite of their fundamental ambivalence the quality of sibling relations largely is considered positive (Teubner, 2005, 80f.)

Because of the tension between emotional closeness and fear of loss the ambivalence of sibling relations is intensified in alternative care. For this reason, in all our evaluated sibling groups, the causal connection between resources and strains could not be clearly determined. In every case both aspects were entangled. In very intimate, trustful relation-

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3   All names in the text are pseudonyms in order to anonymize.

ships there was a symbiotic dependence and a blur of personal limits observed at the same time, which complicated processes of personality development and identity formation.

> Thus, within the sibling group Atkin, the younger sister Angelika decided not to go to secondary school, although she had good grades. She justified her decision with the fact that her older sister has been rejected by this school and for this reason the school would not be right for her either. So the close relationship to her older sister blocked Angelica's educational career.

In very violent, destructive relationships the negative referencing towards each other turned out to be a form of mutual perception.

> In the sibling group Schmidt, the manners among themselves were characterized by depreciation, assaults and violent acts. The children and youth themselves called that "to nerve". Our survey found that this "nerving" also includes the positive aspect of maintaining the relationship.

Depreciating, aggressive relationship models also can convey stability and continuity and by that way protect from loneliness. If in these forms of sibling constellations it should become necessary to separate siblings in order to protect from violence and assaults, it never the less appears to be necessary that the contact between the siblings is not stopped. All in all the research pointed out that the positive aspects of mutual attachment and support dominate in the sibling relations.

Sibling relations as a task for "pedagogical configuration"

The fundamental ambivalence leads to the fact that sibling relationships are shapeable to a great extend. The enormous significance which biological siblings have for each other in alternative care makes the pedagogical dealing with sibling relationships an important task. The joint placement of siblings in a Children´s Village family establishes a "family within the family". Which relationships between biological siblings, social sibling's respectively further children in the Children´s Village family emerge and which dynamics of relations, given the complicated origin experiences, develop depends on pedagogical interventions as well. This claims to consider the shaping of sibling relationships as a "pedagogical configuration task". "Pedagogical

configuration task" means that on the one hand the contribution of pedagogical interventions to the construction of sibling relations has to be considered and that on the other hand pedagogical interventions have to be carried out in a way which enforces supportive sibling relations. An important aspect in the process is to integrate the biographical experiences of the siblings themselves, because in these experiences the biographical knowledge of the children and youth about what siblings are and should be is included.

In addition to the work with parents, which is already established in many parts of alternative care, it is necessary to establish the work with siblings also. For the work with siblings the following aspects are especially relevant:

- Professional decisions and interventions have a configuring effect on sibling relationships: All interventions which are undertaken with one child have consequences in the whole sibling group, they become reflected and processed among the siblings and influence their behaviour.
- Sensitivity on sibling dynamics and knowledge of family history is necessary: In alternative care there are often changes, interruptions and discontinuities. For that reason the knowledge about family histories becomes lost; only the children themselves beware the memory of their family and sibling experiences and can guarantee continuity.
- The various sibling ideals, specific experiences of sibling groups and the individual sibling images of the staff have to be reflected: Images of sibling relations are part of the family ideology of societies and institutions. They include normative models and specific expectations concerning sibling relations.

The expectations towards sibling relations that are imposed from others often do not go along with to the live experiences the children and youth made in alternative care, which can be shown by the example of "Klaus".

> Klaus lives in the Children's Village since he was 2 years old, without siblings. At the age of 7 his half siblings, Chiara and Georg, are also accommodated in his Children's Village family. Up to that point, he has met Chiara only once and he has never seen Georg before. During the first contact with 2-year-old Georg, Klaus is supposed to give him the feeding bottle in order to calm him

down. Georg is screaming for his mother and does not want to stay in the Children's Village. Finally Klaus opens the door for him and enables him to escape, with the feeding bottle; then he lies down and goes to sleep.

Klaus was confronted with an expectation of brotherly caretaking, which he was not able to meet. In this situation of the arrival of his siblings he was in need himself. As a result of this, he still is considered to be rarely willing to take over responsibility at the time of the interview, when he is 13 years old.

Using the example of Klaus, it becomes obvious that normative ideas on care between siblings were imposed, which he is not able to meet because of the situation (sudden arrival of his younger brother, who he had not seen before) and his biographical history (growing up in the Children´s Village family without siblings). A reflection on the professional acts and the special relationship between Klaus and Georg would relativize the impression of irresponsible acting of Klaus. The work with sibling groups must link to the concrete experiences and needs of the individual sibling group and must try to cultivate it during a joint, participative process. Indeed the relation between Klaus, Chiara and Georg has developed to a positive, supportive one in the course of time.

Specific Configuration Tasks

As a result of our research it turns out that when working with sibling groups a number of specific configuration tasks have to be considered. In detail we distinguished the following tasks:

- Trust, support and intimacy
- Negative-relationship as relationship
- Verbalization of violence
- Competition, rivalry and approval
- Siblings as compensation for loss experiences
- Generating identity
- Generate community by segregating and distinguishing
- Detachment processes of adolescents.

In the framework of this contribution an explanation of all tasks is not possible. Therefore I want to describe two of these tasks more precisely, in order to reveal which concrete challenges can be concealed behind a social-pedagogical work with siblings. The two chosen tasks can be seen as complementary because they comprise aspects of attachment and detachment between siblings.

Configuration Task "Trust, Support and Intimacy"

The relations between biological siblings that are placed in alternative care together are often characterized by close and intimate bounds of trust. Siblings provide continuity, they share and deal with joint experiences with the family of origin and they often are contact persons for problems, emotional issues and intimate questions. This becomes obvious e.g. in the sibling group Yeter: Jasmin appreciates her brother Martin as a contact person for various issues and for his discretion ("he keeps things to himself"). Martin also emphasizes his emotional closeness with Jasmin ("she often is the only one who understands me"). Martin experiences Jasmin as a central source of emotional support, who provides stability to himin order to get over his fear from the jump off the 5-meter-diving-platform:

"There is a 5-meter-diving-platform and I never dared to jump and then Jasmin said she will jump together with me, we will take each others hands and jump... and then we ran, we jumped and in the air I (…) was terrified, and then it was a good feeling down there, when we landed (…) and then we went jumping all the time."

From Martins experience siblings provide stability in order to get over the fear of anxiety-provoking hobbies. Among the support in every day live in the Children´s Village siblings provide mutual support to each other when dealing with stressful life themes. For example at the time the father of the siblings Yeter is imprisoned they come to terms with that incident together, without adults, but by involving the house siblings Atkin, who experienced similar issues in their family of origin. These examples from the sibling group Yeter show how important siblings are for the process of coming to terms with experiences of live. For this reason it is vital to offer open space (of time and room) to children and youth, where the pedagogical caregivers are not involved in the same extend. Stable bonds of trust between pedagogues and siblings, as well as among the siblings, makes commuting between peer rooms without adults and interactions between the siblings and the professionals, in order to deal with issues of live, possible.

But abonding of trust among siblings in a Children´s Village family can also turn into a burden if e.g. personal limits are not respected and siblings get overwhelmed. This e.g. is found in the sibling group Nebel: Pubescent Sara involves her younger brother Mathias in her self-injuring as

well as in "her problems with the boys". Mathias is emotionally overwhelmed and verbalizes several times that the sexualized talks with his sister are too much for him. At the same time this asymmetric, symbiotic sibling constellation gives little space to verbalize his own needs and to enable him to go through autonomous development processes. Trust, intimacy and the setting and accepting of limits are important issues for both siblings, in order to let go of the relationship model of symbiotic delimitation they learned in the family of origin and which was cemented in the Children´s Village.

Biological siblings therefore are tendentially considered as supportive, in spite of all ambivalences and even when massively rejected on the surface. How far these relationships can remain to be bondings of trust after the child or youth leaves the Children´s Village is a challenge for the praxis. The social-pedagogical design of the transition seems to be very important.

Configuration Task "Detachment Processes of Adolescents"

Detachment from the context of origin is one of the main development tasks during the process of juvenile development. Detachment processes of children and youth in alternative care are precarious for two reasons: In the first place, adolescent in alternative care have to go through detachment processes earlier due to legal rules (in Austria services of Youth Welfare are limited up to the age of 18). Secondly, possibly early experiences of segregation and loss are reactivated.

An extraordinary problematic form of detachment can be found in the sibling group Schmidt, where the oldest sister Sabrina is declared "ineducable" and despite of her worrying behavior, psychological problems and early drop out of school is replaced at her mentally ill mother and is left to herself. This detachment process resembles a failed care process which at the same time is a questionable role model for the siblings that remain in alternative care and makes relationships among them difficult. In this sibling group areflection of the situation of the oldest sister with all siblings and dealing with the biographical perspectives during the transition to adolescence is necessary.

After the violent loss of her parents, the sibling group Atkin lives together in a Children`s Village family. Detachment of their older brother Deniz is initiated by his confrontational moving out of the Children´s Village family. While he considers his moving out only as a short timeout from living together, his two sisters experience a threatening of loss, which triggers explicit, verbalized fears of loss in his sister Susanne.

> Susanne explains her feelings: *"I am afraid I could also loose my siblings or other people, who I am close to."* Finally the moving out of the brother is only of short time, then he moves back into the Village.

Developmental processes of detachment and becoming autonomous are hardly imaginable in this sibling group. Both examples show that specific, social-pedagogically supported work concerning detachment with all siblings is necessary. Preparation and follow-up of detachment processes is not only important for the youth who move out of alternative care, but also for the remaining members of the sibling group.

CONCLUSION

Our research on siblings in alternative care revealed two main aspects concerning sibling relationships: First of all, children and youth in alternative care are confronted with an enormous complexity of relationships. Complicated families of origin, consisting of stepparents and half siblings respectively step siblings, are accompanied by house siblings as social siblings and Children's Village mothers respectively professional caretakers, as further attachment figures. Secondly in this complexity of relationships biological (half) siblings are an important anchor of stability. Even though the sibling relationships – mainly caused by fear of loss – seam to be light minded, cool and destructive, the central role in the social network of the children and youth in our survey is obvious.

The pedagogical work with sibling groups influences – being aware of it or not- the configuration of sibling groups in alternative care. Until now, professional acting mainly oriented itself towards the individual child or young person. The resonance that this acting has on the sibling group is mostly ignored. Our survey makes obvious, that in contrast - in order to strengthen potentials of sibling relationships - well aimed sibling work is necessary, which contains a series of specific pedagogical tasks.

The initial question, if siblings should be placed together or separately has dissolved during the course of the research: A separation of siblings does not terminate the sibling relationship but interrupts the contact to an important part of the personal history of the affected children and youth. Therefore, the right to grow up together with siblings must be agreed to, and the question is not if but how this joint growing up should be designed.

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