I. Introduction

Studies from the field of Evolution and Human Behavior provide insights into human conduct and relationships that are relevant to child welfare law, policy and practice. This article examines a specific line of research that addresses incest avoidance between siblings. The longstanding Westermarck theory maintains that incest avoidance arises from the proximity of siblings during a critical period of early childhood. This proximity gives rise to an inhibiting effect on postchildhood sexual interest.

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4See id. at 151.
Researchers have conducted a series of studies to verify and refine the Westermarck theory. These studies have largely verified the theory, but have also provided additional insights. For example, researchers have begun to define the specific age range within which sibling proximity gives rise to postchildhood incest inhibitions and to determine the specific types of sexual activities that are inhibited by proximity during early childhood.

The findings from the studies are relevant in making placement decisions for children involved in public child welfare systems. Namely, the separation of siblings during early childhood could have serious implications for their subsequent interactions upon reunification. This article focuses on identifying and exploring these implications.

See discussion in Part VI. It must be noted that in exploring the implications of separation and reunification of siblings this article recognizes that postchildhood sibling incest occurs with a frequency that is significant and certainly non-trivial. Arthur Wolf, in his review of studies of the incidence of incest in the general population, concludes that the best evidence available indicates that the frequency of incest reaches a probability of approximately 2% in brother-sister relationships in some localities. See Arthur P. Wolf, Sexual Attraction and Childhood Association: A Chinese Brief for Edward Westermarck 440-46 (1995). In addition, this article takes as given that postchildhood sibling incest entails serious negative consequences that child welfare systems should strive to avoid. Such sexual activity is often
Legal scholars can make important contributions by engaging the work of scientific scholars. They can begin a dialogue among scholars in relevant fields that allows each participant to take small, careful steps to further knowledge and improve practice in focused areas of inquiry. Specifically, the work flowing from the Westermarck theory provides an opportunity to modestly improve a particular aspect of foster care placement policy and practice. The body of work also provides suggestions for additional research that will further inform foster care policy and practice in a particular area. Additionally, I hope it will spur a broader discussion among legal and scientific scholars that will lead to cooperative efforts to improve many aspects of foster care policy and practice.

This article first explains the Westermarck theory in Part II. In Part III, the article explains the first study of the Westermarck theory using biological siblings as subjects. Researchers Irene Bevc and Irwin Silverman designed and conducted the study, publishing the

illegal. See e.g. CODE OF ALABAMA §13A-13-3 (2003); CALIFORNIA PENAL CODE §285 (2003). Even if not formally illegal, this activity can damage family relationships and social standing because of the stigma of incest. This in turn can lead to significant psychological trauma and family disruption. See CODE OF ALABAMA §13A-13-3 (2003)(Commentary: Justifications for Criminal Sanctions); S. Kirson Weinberg, Incest Behavior, in SEX AND SOCIETY 172-78 (1972, edited by John N. Edwards); Wolf, supra at 454-61.

8See Jones supra note 1; Herring 2002 supra note 1; Herring 2003 supra note 1.
results in 1993. In Part IV, the article describes the follow-up study conducted by Bevc and Silverman. The second study also involved siblings and was designed to test and extend the results from their earlier study. They published the results of the follow-up study in 2000. In Part V, the article turns to an examination of current child welfare agency policies and practices surrounding the placement of siblings in foster care, along with a description of relevant legislation and legal doctrine. An integral component of the examination addresses policies and practices surrounding the reunification of siblings within their original biological families following placement in foster care. In Part VI, the article describes the potential risks faced by siblings involved in public child welfare systems in light of the findings from the research surrounding the Westermarck theory. In addition, this part discusses the implications of the identified risks of foster care placement policies and practices. Part VII concludes the article by summarizing the implications of the new knowledge discussed in the article and calls for additional research in this area.

II. The Westermarck Theory

The Westermarck theory posits that physical proximity of opposite sex siblings during early childhood has a significant inhibiting effect on later sexual interest in each other. In other words,


11See id. at 151; Wolf, *supra* note 6 at 1-19.
words, as siblings enter adolescence and adulthood, they are not interested in sexual relations with each other because of the time they spent together during early childhood.  

The Westermarck theory arises from insights into human development provided by the evolutionary paradigm. This paradigm begins by identifying and articulating ultimate level adaptive functions. A function or trait is adaptive if it increases an individual’s reproductive

\[12\] See id.  


\[14\] See id.; Jones supra note 1 (Professor Owen Jones describes the biological term “ultimate cause” by comparing it to the term “proximate cause,”

In biology, the term “proximate cause” refers only to the “how” of behavior. It peacefully coexists with the term “ultimate cause,” which describes the larger “why” of behavior. More precisely, “proximate causes” describe immediate causes, related to the internal mechanisms and development that cause an organism to manifest a particular behavior. They may be defined in terms of physiology and biochemistry, for example, as well as, at times, an organism’s unique developmental-environmental history. “Ultimate causes,” on the other hand, describe evolutionary processes by which the same behavior came to be commonly
success—the survival and prevalence of the individual’s genetic material in successive
generations.\footnote{Id. at 1127-28 (footnotes omitted).}

According to the Westermarck theory, one ultimate level adaptive function is for
individuals to avoid sexual relations with others who are closely related to them biologically.\footnote{Id. at 1132-40.} Individuals who reproduce with others who are closely related to them incur a significant cost in
terms of reproductive success because their offspring are more likely to inherit genetic flaws.\footnote{See Shepher, supra note 12 at 85-133.} For example, parents who are closely related are much more likely to possess some of the same latent genetic defects that become manifest only when one of their offspring receives a matching pair of the defective genes.\footnote{See id.} This raises the risk that the child will inherit birth defects or other
observable. These may be defined in terms of the history and reproductive consequences of behavior. Proximate and ultimate
cause operate together, with all behavior depending on ultimately-shaped proximate mechanisms.

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\footnote{Id. at 1132-40.}
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genetic flaws, resulting in a significant cost to the parents in terms of reproductive success. 19

Their offspring, rather than reproducing and passing the parents’ genetic material to a new generation, may die quickly, or survive with limited prospects for successful reproduction. 20

Individuals benefit in terms of reproductive success if they avoid this increased risk. 21

The identified reproductive benefit is the ultimate cause that leads to an adaptation—successful individuals will possess traits that lead to an avoidance of reproduction with other closely related individuals. 22 More of their offspring will survive and reproduce, passing their genetic material to a new generation. This genetic material will include information that codes for the desired traits, and because of the heightened success of individuals who possess it, this genetic material and the related traits will become prevalent within a population. 23

The Westermarck theory does more than identify the ultimate cause of a specific adaptation. It also proposes the proximate social mechanism that operationalizes this adaptation: physical proximity during the early years of childhood. 24 Namely, individuals who live in close proximity (i.e. within a single family association) during early childhood are likely to develop a

19 See id.

20 See id.

21 See id.

22 See id.

23 See id.; Jones supra note 1 at 1132-40.

24 See Bevc and Silverman, supra note 8 at 172; Wolf, supra note 6 at 1-3.
sexual aversion to each other. In this way, the adaptation developed in response to the ultimate cause is operationalized: avoid sexual relations with individuals with whom you spent a great deal of time during early childhood.

The proximate social mechanism identified by the Westermarck theory makes sense in light of the social environment within which human evolution occurred. Humans developed fundamental traits in a highly stable social environment that extended over several million years. This longstanding social environment consisted of small communities of individuals engaged in hunting and gathering. Within these communities, individuals were most often raised in close proximity to siblings, parents, and other closely related relatives. As a result, proximity to others during early childhood signaled a close biological relationship.

\[^{25}\text{See id.; Shepher supra note 12 at 43-49.}\]

\[^{26}\text{See id. at 67; Matt Ridley, THE RED QUEEN: SEX AND THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN NATURE, 188-92, 282-86 (1993).}\]

\[^{27}\text{See id. at 188-92; Jones supra note 1 at 1129-32.}\]

\[^{28}\text{See id.; Ridley supra note 25 at 188-92.}\]

\[^{29}\text{See id.; David J. Herring, THE PUBLIC FAMILY: EXPLORING ITS ROLE IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY, 20-28 (2003).}\]

\[^{30}\text{See id.}\]
Researchers have constructed studies to test, verify and expound on the underlying logic of the Westermarck theory. Initial studies did not involve biologically related children such as siblings. Instead, researchers examined biologically unrelated children who spent their early childhood in close proximity to each other.

One of the most frequently cited studies examined children raised in Israeli Kibbutzum. Within these communities, unrelated children are raised together in the children’s houses. The children live in very close proximity to each other, much like siblings within more traditional family environments. The researchers found that these children are disinclined to select one another as sexual or marital partners. However, the researchers also found that this disinclination is largely confined to the area of sexual/marital relations, with individuals who are raised together during early childhood tending to remain close friends during adolescence and adulthood.

31 See Bevc and Silverman supra note 2 at 151-52.

32 See id.; Shepher supra note 12; Wolf supra note 6.

33 See Shepher supra note 12.

34 See id.

35 See id.

36 See id.

37 See id.; Bevc and Silverman supra note 2 at 152.
In one of the most comprehensive studies, researchers examined individuals who experienced arranged marriages in Taiwan. A significant number of the married couples consisted of individuals who had lived together as children, interacting much like siblings. These couples experienced a high frequency of sexual dysfunction in comparison to couples consisting of individuals who did not grow up together. This dysfunction was manifested in relatively low fertility rates, elevated divorce rates, and increased occurrences of adultery. Similar studies of arranged cousin marriages in Lebanon yielded consistent findings.

These non-sibling studies largely verify the Westermarck theory’s prediction: proximity during early childhood has an inhibiting effect on subsequent sexual relations during adolescence and adulthood. In the context of incest, what “is,” biologically speaking, appears to equate

38 See id.; Wolf supra note 6.

39 See id.

40 See id.

41 See id.


43 See Bevc and Silverman supra note 8 at 171-172; Bevc and Silverman supra note 2 at 151-52.
with a strongly held human “ought,” namely that individuals should not engage in sexual
relations with closely related individuals.44

While the initial non-sibling studies are helpful in verifying the general operation of the
Westermarck theory, researchers felt that studies of actual sibling relationships would provide
more cogent and detailed insights.45 They have now conducted two studies of actual sibling
pairs, the first of which is described in the next part of this article.

III. The First Sibling Study

In the first study examining the Westermarck theory in light of the experience of opposite
sex biological siblings, Irene Bevc and Irwin Silverman administered a survey to approximately
500 undergraduates at York University in Toronto, Ontario.46 The survey results allowed the
researchers to compare those who reported postchildhood sexual encounters with their sibling to
those who reported no such encounters.47 In comparing the two groups, the study focused on
whether or not the sibling pair had experienced separation for a year or more during early
childhood and on the extent of physical proximity and intimacy between the siblings during early
childhood.48

44 See Wolf supra note 6.

45 See Bevc and Silverman supra note 8 at 172.

46 See id. at 174.

47 See id. at 175-79.

48 See id.
Overall, the comparison confirmed the Westermarck theory.\textsuperscript{49} Separation during early childhood was positively related to postchildhood sexual behavior between siblings.\textsuperscript{50} This positive relationship was statistically significant.\textsuperscript{51} Therefore, the researchers found that opposite sex siblings who had experienced separation during early childhood were more likely to engage in sexual relations with each other as adolescents and adults.\textsuperscript{52}

Beyond the general confirmation of the Westermarck theory, Bevc and Silverman discovered a dichotomy in the type of sexual activity inhibited by proximity during early childhood.\textsuperscript{53} On one hand, they found that subjects separated from their siblings during early childhood are significantly more likely to engage in “mature” postchildhood sexual behavior.\textsuperscript{54} They defined this type of sexual behavior operationally as “completed or attempted genital, oral and anal intercourse.”\textsuperscript{55} On the other hand, they found that separation is not characteristic of siblings who engage solely in “immature” postchildhood sexual behavior, defined operationally

\textsuperscript{49}See id. at 179-80.

\textsuperscript{50}See id. at 180.

\textsuperscript{51}See id. at 176.

\textsuperscript{52}See id. at 176, 180.

\textsuperscript{53}See id.

\textsuperscript{54}See id.

\textsuperscript{55}See id. 174, 180.
as “exhibitionism, touching, or fondling.” Siblings raised together are as likely as separated
siblings to engage in “immature” sexual relations as adolescents or adults.

Bevc and Silverman consider these new findings to be consistent with the evolutionary
paradigm. The prevailing concept in evolutionary psychology is one of domain specificity of
evolved psychological mechanisms. Pursuant to this concept, ultimate causes give rise to very
focused adaptations. The ultimate cause in this context is the evolutionary pressure to avoid
the significant costs that an individual incurs in terms of reproductive success as a result of
sexual reproduction with a close biological relative. The resulting focused, efficient and
precise adaptation is a trait that inclines individuals to avoid activity with close relatives that
could result in reproduction. It would not be necessary for individuals to develop a trait that

56 See id.

57 See id. 176, 180.

58 See id. at 180; Bevc and Silverman, supra note 2 at 152.

59 See id.; Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, Cognitive Adaptations for Social Exchange, in
J. Barkow et. al., The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of
Culture, 163-228 (1992).

60 See id.; Bevc and Silverman supra note 2 at 152, 159-60.

61 See Shepher supra note 12 at 85-133.

62 See Bevc and Silverman supra note 2 at 159-60.
precluded all forms of sexual interest in, and play with, biological relatives. Thus, findings that proximity during early childhood creates a specific barrier against intercourse, but does not inhibit other forms of sexual activity are consistent with the evolutionary concept of domain specificity. These findings lead to a modest reworking of the Westermarck theory—a theory that now identifies a mechanism focused only on inhibiting sexual intercourse between closely related individuals.

Bevc and Silverman recognized that significant ambiguities remained after completion of their original study involving siblings. Specifically, their data did not allow for a full test of the revised Westermarck theory. Such a test would entail a comparison of cases of sibling sexual relationships involving genital intercourse with those involving all other forms of sexual activity. It would allow researchers to fully verify the focused, domain-specific nature of the social mechanism postulated under the Westermarck theory. Unfortunately, Bevc and

63 See id.

64 See id. at 152, 159-60.

65 See id. at 159-60; Bevc and Silverman supra note 8 at 180.

66 See id.; Bevc and Silverman supra note 2 at 152-53.

67 See id.

68 See id.
Silverman’s initial sibling study did not include enough cases of attempted or completed genital intercourse to allow for a statistically significant comparison in this area of inquiry.\textsuperscript{69}

In addition, the initial study included a disproportionate number of nonbiologically related siblings in the group reporting mature sexual behavior.\textsuperscript{70} As Bevc and Silverman have explained, biological relatedness should not be relevant to incest avoidance from the perspective of the Westermarck hypothesis.\textsuperscript{71} Earlier studies had confirmed that the critical factor is proximity during early childhood, not biological relationship.\textsuperscript{72} However, Bevc and Silverman also recognized that in the context of current social mores, the absence of a biological relationship between siblings may reduce inhibitions to intercourse independent of early separation.\textsuperscript{73} Thus, it would have been better to remove nonbiological siblings from the study’s data set. However, if the researchers had removed this data, the number left in the group reporting mature sexual behavior would have been too small for a statistically meaningful comparison and analysis.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{69}See id.

\textsuperscript{70}See id.

\textsuperscript{71}See id.; Bevc and Silverman supra note 8 at 176.

\textsuperscript{72}See Wolf supra note 6; Shepher supra note 12; McCabe supra note 41.

\textsuperscript{73}See Bevc and Silverman supra note 8 at 176; Bevc and Silverman supra note 2 at 152-53.

\textsuperscript{74}See id.
Because of the identified ambiguities of their initial study, Bevc and Silverman decided to replicate the original study with a larger sample of incest cases involving opposite sex siblings. They were especially determined to obtain a sample that would include a significant number of cases involving attempted or completed genital intercourse.

IV. The Second Sibling Study

Bevc and Silverman constructed their second study to test two primary hypotheses. First, they wanted to test whether separation during early childhood corresponds to a higher frequency of genital intercourse, but not a higher frequency of other sexual activity between biologically-related, opposite sex siblings. This is the core hypothesis of the revised Westermarck theory.

Second, they wanted to test whether the extent of day-to-day proximity and intimacy between siblings during early childhood correlates negatively to postchildhood incest. Based on the Westermarck theory, previous authors had postulated that sexual prudery in childrearing may lead to an increased frequency of postchildhood incest. Bevc and Silverman’s first study

75 See id.

76 See id.

77 See id.

78 See id.

79 See id.

80 See id. at 153.
failed to verify this hypothesis, so they designed the second study to more fully test this possible extension of the Westermarck theory. \(^8\)^1

The second study recruited participants in two ways. First, the researchers placed advertisements in major Toronto newspapers seeking volunteers to answer a survey on sexual experiences between brothers and sisters. \(^8\)^2 Eighty-two individuals completed the survey in response to the advertisements. \(^8\)^3 Second, the researchers recruited volunteers from Toronto’s York University evening classes in order to secure a control group of individuals who had no sibling sexual experiences. \(^8\)^4 In addition, some of these volunteers may have had sibling sexual experiences and would thus increase the size of the incest group. \(^8\)^5 Ninety-eight individuals completed the survey in response to this in-class request. \(^8\)^6 All respondents were assured of

\(^8\)^1 See id.; Bevc and Silverman supra note 8 at 179-80.

\(^8\)^2 See Bevc and Silverman supra note 2 at 153.

\(^8\)^3 See id.

\(^8\)^4 See id.

\(^8\)^5 See id.

\(^8\)^6 See id.
complete anonymity. 87 The researchers excluded seven respondents because their survey returns were inadequate, leaving a study sample of 173 individuals. 88

In designing the survey instrument, the researchers reviewed the literature concerning the critical period of childhood for the development of incest avoidance. 89 They found a wide range of views, with one writer asserting that the critical period extends only through the first 3 years, 90 another stating that it extends through the first 6 years, 91 and others arguing that there is a gradual reduction in the effects of separation through the first 10 years, possibly lasting even until the adolescent period. 92 In light of these disparate views, Bevc and Silverman decided to use the most comprehensive criterion of 10 years for their examination of childhood intimacy and proximity. 93 Thus, their survey instrument focused on the subjects’ experiences from ages 1 to 10. 94

87 See id.

88 See id.

89 See id. at 154.

90 See Wolf supra note 6 at 198-213.

91 See Shepher supra note 12 at 61.


93 See Bevc and Silverman supra note 2 at 154.
Because the survey instrument would rely heavily on subjects’ memory of their childhood environments and interactions, the researchers pretested the instrument to ascertain if such reliance would be effective. 95 They presented their questions to 39 students with a mean age of 32.5 years and asked, for each question, whether the subjects could recall their sibling relationships in childhood clearly enough to give a valid response. 96 Depending on the specific question, between 74% and 87% of replies were affirmative. 97 Bevc and Silverman found these rates acceptable and proceeded with the study. 98

The survey instrument included a series of questions concerning the subjects’ childhood relationships. 99 The survey began by asking the specific study participant for general information about each of his or her opposite-sexed sibling. 100 This information included the age of the particular sibling, the nature of biological relationship between them, and the periods of

94 See id.
95 See id. at 154-55.
96 See id.
97 See id.
98 See id.
99 See id. at 154.
100 See id.
time, if any, that they had lived separately during childhood. The subjects were also asked their ages during any period of separation, whether they had any contact with their sibling during the separation, and if so, how frequently.

In addition, the survey instrument asked subjects for detailed information concerning their relationships with each opposite-sex sibling when both the respondent and the sibling were less than 10 years old. This information is pertinent to determining the extent of proximity and intimacy, and included “how much time they had spent together, how much time they had spent together by choice, how much physical contact they had with their sibling, how close or distant they had felt toward their sibling, how frequently they had seen the sibling in the nude or partially dressed, and how frequently the sibling had seen them in the nude or partially dressed.” The researchers also asked the respondents to recall the relevant period and to approximate how many years they had slept in the same bed with the particular sibling, in different beds in the same room, or in different rooms. Finally, the researchers asked the subjects to respond to questions about sexual activities with their opposite-sexed sibling. The

101 See id.
102 See id.
103 See id.
104 See id.
105 See id.
106 See id. at 155.
survey instrument included a list of fifteen items describing sexual activities ranging from exhibitionism to genital intercourse, and an item allowing subjects to indicate that they had no sexual experiences. 107  The survey also included an open-ended item for activities not covered on the list. 108  If respondents checked any sexual activity item, the survey asked them to indicate their ages when the sexual activity with the sibling began and ended, if it had ended. 109

It should be noted that the survey asked respondents for several items of basic demographic data. The survey asked participants to provide their sex, age, and racial or ethnic identification. 110  For their childhood years, the survey asked respondents the population of their city or town and the religious affiliation and socioeconomic status (as determined by five measures) of their families. 111  The researchers did not make any specific demographic predictions with regard to sibling sexual activity. 112  However, they included the demographic measures to ensure that these measures were not confounding factors in the analyses of other variables related to the study’s predictive hypotheses. 113

107 See id.

108 See id.

109 See id.

110 See id. at 154.

111 See id.

112 See id.

113 See id.
The survey results allowed the researchers to divide the participants into three groups.\textsuperscript{114} They placed 54 respondents in the “genital intercourse” category.\textsuperscript{115} Nine of the individuals in this group reported attempted vaginal intercourse with an opposite-sexed sibling, 10 reported vaginal intercourse without ejaculation, and 35 reported vaginal intercourse with ejaculation.\textsuperscript{116} The researchers placed 35 respondents in the “other sexual activities” category.\textsuperscript{117} Individuals in this group reported some form of sexual activity with a sibling, but not attempted or completed vaginal intercourse.\textsuperscript{118} (The researchers included in both of these sexual activity groups only individuals for which the reported sexual activity extended beyond the time that one of the participants was 11 years old. They did this in order to exclude sexual activity that clearly represented childhood play, and thus was not relevant to the predictions of the Westermarck theory.)\textsuperscript{119} The researchers assigned 81 respondents to the “no sexual activities” category.\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{114}See id. at 155.

\textsuperscript{115}See id.

\textsuperscript{116}See id.

\textsuperscript{117}See id.

\textsuperscript{118}See id.

\textsuperscript{119}See id.

\textsuperscript{120}See id.
Individuals in this group reported no postchildhood sexual activity of any kind.\textsuperscript{121} (Three respondents reported sexual activities that ended before either participant reached age 11. The researchers excluded these three individuals from the study population because they were unsure whether they belonged in the no sexual activities category. As a result, the total study population was 170.)\textsuperscript{122}

Bevc and Silverman report and discuss the study’s results in two primary areas.\textsuperscript{123} First, they analyzed the effects of separation during early childhood.\textsuperscript{124} The data revealed that the 21 sibling pairs separated for more than one year during the period when both were less than 10 years old, accounted for 31.5\% (17) of the “genital intercourse” group, 2.9\% (1) of the “other sexual activities” group, and 3.8\% (3) of the “no sexual activities” group.\textsuperscript{125} Comparisons among groups indicated that, to a statistically significant degree, separation during early childhood was more prevalent in the “genital intercourse” group than in both the “other sexual activities” and “no sexual activities” groups.\textsuperscript{126} The researchers also analyzed the study data after eliminating 12 biologically unrelated sibling pairs, 9 of whom were originally in the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{121}See id.
\item \textsuperscript{122}See id.
\item \textsuperscript{123}See id. at 157-59.
\item \textsuperscript{124}See id. at 157-58.
\item \textsuperscript{125}See id.
\item \textsuperscript{126}See id.
\end{itemize}
“genital intercourse” group, 1 of whom was in the “other sexual activities” group, and 2 of whom were in the “no sexual activities” group. 127 This second analysis revealed that separated sibling pairs accounted for 20% (9) of the “genital intercourse” group containing 45 individuals, 2.9% (1) of the “other sexual activities” group containing 34 individuals, and 3.8% (3) of the “no sexual activities” group containing 79 individuals. 128 The differences among the groups remained statistically significant, with separation during childhood more prevalent in the “genital intercourse” group than in both the “other sexual activities” and the “no sexual activities” groups. 129

Bevc and Silverman examined separately sibling pairs who lived apart for more than one year when both were less than 3 years old. 130 They found that for the 17 separated sibling pairs included in the study’s original “genital intercourse” group, 15 had experienced separation when both were under 3 years old. 131 In contrast, none of the 4 separated sibling pairs included in either the “other sexual activities” group or the “no sexual activities” group had lived apart when both were younger than 3. 132

127 See id. at 158.

128 See id.

129 See id.

130 See id. at 157.

131 See id.

132 See id.
The researchers concluded that the data confirmed the study’s main hypothesis at a “significant and robust level.” They stated that “early prolonged separation relates to attempted or completed genital intercourse between siblings but not to incestuous behavior exclusive of these acts.” As to the Westermarck theory specifically, the researchers concluded that the study data “strengthened the revised interpretation of the Westermarck effect emanating from the [Bevc and Silverman] 1993 study, that early sustained cohabitation between siblings operates as a barrier specific to potentially reproductive acts rather than as a general suppressor of sexual interest.”

Although Bevc and Silverman recognize that the definition of a critical period for the Westermarck effect is controversial and that their study did not generate the random sample of separated sibling pairs necessary for a precise test of the parameters of the critical period, they raise the possibility that their data may help to determine the critical period of development. Because 15 of 17 separated sibling pairs in the “genital intercourse” group experienced separation for at least a year before either reached the age of 3, the study’s data support the concept of a critical period that terminates at age 3.

133 See id. at 159.

134 Id.

135 Id.

136 See id. at 160.

137 See id. See also Wolf supra note 6 at 198-213.
Bevc and Silverman’s second primary area of analysis concerned the variables of proximity and intimacy.\(^\text{138}\) They found statistically significant differences among the 3 distinct sexual activity groups for 3 measures of proximity and intimacy—how much physical contact the siblings had experienced; how frequently the respondent had seen his or her sibling nude; and how frequently the sibling had seen the respondent nude.\(^\text{139}\) Sibling pairs included in either the “genital intercourse” or the “other sexual activities” groups had significantly higher levels of proximity and intimacy on these three measures than sibling pairs included in the “no sexual activities” group.\(^\text{140}\) In other words, sibling pairs in the two sexually active groups had experienced significantly more physical contact and viewing in the nude than sibling pairs who were not sexually active. The researchers found no significant differences among the groups in terms of sleeping arrangements (i.e. same bed, different beds, or different rooms), although they noted little variability on this factor, with 77.2% of sibling pairs sleeping in different rooms.\(^\text{141}\)

In contrast to the absence of findings concerning proximity and intimacy variables in their 1993 study, Bevc and Silverman note that their 2000 study “showed significant positive relationships with postpubertal sexual behavior of both physical contact and nudity.”\(^\text{142}\) These

\(^{138}\) See Bevc and Silverman supra note 2 at 158-59.

\(^{139}\) See id.

\(^{140}\) See id.

\(^{141}\) See id.

\(^{142}\) Id. at 160.
findings call into question the predicted effects of childhood physical intimacy. Accordingly, Bevc and Silverman assert that advice to parents that early intimate contact between siblings will actually decrease the probability of incest is misguided. They conclude by stating, “The sole, critical, early proximity variable mediating sibling incest avoidance appears to be consistent cohabitation.” To decrease the probability of incest, siblings simply have to live together. They do not need extremely close physical contact or an especially intimate relationship.

The demographic data reveal that the study sample consisted of 67 women and 103 men, with an average age of 33.4 years and a range of 19 to 64. The racial makeup was 84% white, 11% Asian, and the remaining 5% divided among various racial categories. Fifty-one percent of respondents lived in cities with more than half a million residents, with the remainder living in

\[\text{\footnotesize 143 See id.} \]
\[\text{\footnotesize 144 See id.} \]
\[\text{\footnotesize 145 Id.} \]
\[\text{\footnotesize 146 See id.} \]
\[\text{\footnotesize 147 See id. at 156-57.} \]
\[\text{\footnotesize 148 See id.} \]
small cities or towns. Thirty-five percent of respondents classified themselves as “middle class,” with a normal distribution around this modal response.

The data analysis revealed no significant differences in sexual activities related to racial categories, size of community, or socioeconomic status. The researchers did find significant differences in sexual activity related to the respondents’ religious affiliations. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents stated that they were raised as Protestants, 34% as Catholic, 10% as Jewish, 9% in eastern religions (Hindu, Buddhist, Moslem, Eastern Orthodox), 4% in other or more than one religion, and 7% in no religion. The analysis revealed that Protestants were significantly overrepresented in the “genital intercourse” group, Catholics in the “other sexual activities” group, and both Jews and eastern religions in the “no sexual activities” group.

In discussing their results, Bevc and Silverman expressly recognize the correlational nature of the study. It remains a “consideration” that the data have shown nothing more than a relation between separation of siblings during early childhood and a higher frequency of

\[\text{See id.}\]

\[\text{See id.}\]

\[\text{See id.}\]

\[\text{See id.}\]

\[\text{See id.}\]

\[\text{See id.}\]

\[\text{See id. at 160.}\]
postchildhood sexual activities involving specific sibling pairs.\textsuperscript{156} On one hand, this correlation might support the adaptationist explanation of incest taboos as an evolved mechanism that operates to prevent reproduction between closely related individuals.\textsuperscript{157} On the other hand, “it is feasible that these findings are due to some latent socialization variable that underlies both early separation and later disregard for sexual convention.”\textsuperscript{158}

While noting this caveat to their study, Bevc and Silverman point out the weakness of the socialization explanation.\textsuperscript{159} They initially note that “the observation that separation was correlated specifically with genital intercourse and not with other incestuous activities renders this interpretation less parsimonious than an adaptationist explanation.”\textsuperscript{160} In other words, the adaptationist explanation provides the simplest and most efficient explanation for the study data, whereas the socialization explanation would have to be very complex in order to accommodate and explain these data. The researchers then assert that “the socialization interpretation also is rendered less tenable by the absence of relationships between sibling sexual activity and demographic variables associated with socioeconomic status.”\textsuperscript{161} That is, if socialization plays a

\textsuperscript{156}See id.

\textsuperscript{157}See id.

\textsuperscript{158}Id.

\textsuperscript{159}See id.

\textsuperscript{160}Id.

\textsuperscript{161}Id.
powerful role in relation to sexual inhibitions between siblings, one would expect to find relationships based on socioeconomic status, a factor that would significantly affect an individual’s socialization experience.\(^{162}\)

On the other hand, the significant differences in rates of sibling sexual activity based on religious upbringing might support the socialization interpretation in some form. Religious categories and practices primarily play a role in the socialization of individuals and do not constitute evolved individual mechanisms or adaptations.\(^{163}\) Unfortunately, Bevc and Silverman do not expressly address these data.\(^{164}\) However, they do call for additional studies, stating that “animal studies would help resolve the question of cause and effect.”\(^{165}\) Such studies would avoid the confounding effect of socialization within a human community.\(^{166}\)

Despite the need for further study, the Bevc and Silverman data allow for fairly strong conclusions in the two primary areas they examined. First, early sustained cohabitation between opposite sex siblings often operates as a barrier to potentially reproductive sexual activities, with indications that the critical period for cohabitation is before either sibling has reached the age of

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\(^{162}\)See id.


\(^{164}\)See Bevc and Silverman supra note 2 at 157.

\(^{165}\)See id. at 160.

\(^{166}\)See id.
3. Conversely, separation of one year or more during this critical period raises the likelihood of postchildhood genital intercourse between siblings. \(^{168}\) Second, early childhood physical intimacy appears to increase the likelihood of postchildhood sexual activity between siblings. \(^{169}\) As the researchers conclude, “The sole, critical, early proximity variable mediating sibling incest avoidance appears to be consistent cohabitation.” \(^{170}\)

The findings of Bevc and Silverman may have serious implications for individuals who have experienced separation from a sibling while in foster care and for public child welfare agencies that manage foster care systems. Placement in foster care during the critical period of early childhood may disrupt the sustained cohabitation that gives rise to sexual inhibition between opposite sex siblings. \(^{171}\) In addition, siblings separated from each other in foster care are often reunited in later childhood or early adulthood, and thus have readily available

\(^{167}\) See id. at 159-60.

\(^{168}\) See id. at 157-58.

\(^{169}\) See id. at 158-60.

\(^{170}\) Id. at 160.

\(^{171}\) A prominent trend in foster care is the high proportion of infants (age 0-1) and toddlers (age 1-2) entering care. See Jill Duerr Berrick et. al., THE TENDER YEARS: TOWARD DEVELOPMENTALLY SENSITIVE CHILD WELFARE SERVICES FOR VERY YOUNG CHILDREN, 57-8 (1998); Peter J. Pecora et. al., THE CHILD WELFARE CHALLENGE: POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH, 308-9 (2nd edition 2000).
opportunities to engage in postchildhood incest. The remainder of this article explores the implications of this type of situation.

V. Sibling Placement Practice, Policy and Doctrine

Literature in the field of child welfare recognizes the potential value of sibling relationships. Sibling bonds can be especially close and intense because of the high degree of interaction among siblings. In biological terms, full siblings share a substantial portion of their differential genetic material. In fact, monozygotic twins share all of their genetic

172 For example, a study of the California foster care system indicates that 40% to 60% of the children who enter foster care at 0 to 2 years of age are reunited with their original families within a period of 2 to 6 years. See Berrick et. al. supra note 170 at 59-62.

173 See generally Eric B. Martin, Maintaining Sibling Relationships for Children Removed from Their Parents, 22 CHILDREN’S LEGAL RIGHTS JOURNAL 47 (2002); Ilene Staff and Edith Fein, Together or Separate: A Study of Siblings in Foster Care, 71 CHILD WELFARE 257 (1992); Rebecca L. Hegar, Legal and Social Work Approaches to Sibling Separation in Foster Care, 67 CHILD WELFARE 113 (1988); Margaret Ward, Sibling Ties in Foster Care and Adoption Planning, 63 CHILD WELFARE 321 (1984); Carole H. Depp, Placing Siblings Together, 12 CHILDREN TODAY 14 (1983).

174 See id. at 16-17; Ward supra note 172 at 322-23; Martin supra note 172 at 47-8.

Dizygotic twins and non-twin full siblings share 50% of their differential genetic material, while half siblings share 25% of their differential genetic material. Because of this shared genetic material, siblings have an interest in each other’s survival and successful reproduction. Through successful reproduction, one’s sibling can help ensure that a significant portion of one’s genetic material is carried forward to future generations. This shared interest in successful reproduction is termed “inclusive fitness” and it underlies the concept of “kinship altruism,” which holds that biologically related individuals will exhibit a strong interest in conferring benefits on each other. This strong biological interest inclines siblings to form and maintain close bonds.

Other factors also support the strength and importance of the sibling bond. Because of the proximity in age between many siblings, the sibling relationship has the potential to be one of the longest and closest. In addition, siblings often live within the same family environment.
throughout childhood, sharing many experiences during a significant period of growth and development.\textsuperscript{183} Furthermore, siblings affect, and in many ways, construct each other’s unique developmental environment.\textsuperscript{184} They provide each other with the distinct experiences that contribute significantly to the development of basic personality traits.\textsuperscript{185} In summary, interactions between siblings not only provide comfort, support and closeness, but also significantly influence an individual’s developmental environment.\textsuperscript{186}

Sibling relationships may be especially important for children experiencing parental abuse or neglect.\textsuperscript{187} Siblings in this situation often must depend on one another for basic care and survival.\textsuperscript{188} In many instances, the older sibling will take on a parental role by providing

\textsuperscript{183}\textit{See id.}

\textsuperscript{184}\textit{See id.;} Judith Rich Harris, \textsc{The Nurture Assumption} (1998).

\textsuperscript{185}\textit{See id.}; Patton and Latz, \textit{supra} note 181.

\textsuperscript{186}\textit{See id.}; Harris, \textit{supra} note 183.


\textsuperscript{188}\textit{See id.}; Patton and Latz, \textit{supra} note 181 at 766.
basic care and protection.\textsuperscript{189} Within such a family environment, the bond between siblings often becomes especially intense and close.\textsuperscript{190}

Children who enter the foster care system often come from family environments within which siblings have developed very strong bonds.\textsuperscript{191} For these children, if separation from a sibling accompanies separation from parents, the risk for psychological trauma and harm is significant.\textsuperscript{192} They are likely to experience guilt for abandoning their sibling and to develop a

\textsuperscript{189}Ward, \textit{supra} note 172 at 322, 326-7; Depp, \textit{supra} note 172 at 15-16.

\textsuperscript{190}See Elstein, \textit{supra} note 186; \textit{Aristotle P. v. Johnson}, 721 F. Supp. 1002, 1005 (N.D. Ill. 1989)(noting that foster children’s relationships with their siblings are especially important because their relationships with their biological parents are often tenuous or non-existent).

\textsuperscript{191}See Elstein, \textit{supra} note 186 at 98.

sense of abandonment and a mistrust of relationships with others. These feelings can lead to isolation and depression.

In contrast, when child welfare agencies place siblings together, there are often significant benefits. A summary of research findings includes:

1. Siblings placed together are more emotionally stable and have fewer behavioral problems than children separated from their siblings.
2. Siblings placed together are more likely to stay in that first placement . . .
3. Case planning benefits from keeping siblings together. Siblings benefit from reunification efforts that help them “learn to function as a group and develop the same expectations about what family life is.”
4. Consistent visitation is the “single most important factor in getting children back with their biological families,” and visitation is “easier” if all the children are in one location.

In addition, an older sibling can impart important information about family history to a younger sibling who may not remember incidents leading up to family dissolution, and other familial

\[193\text{See id.}; \text{Riggs, supra note 191.}\]

\[194\text{See id.}\]

\[195\text{See Elstein, supra note 186 at 102.}\]

\[196\text{Id.}\]
events and people. As the younger sibling matures he or she may have more questions and need help putting the past in a context; an older sibling can provide that context.

The recognized costs of sibling separation and the articulated benefits of sibling togetherness justify a strong presumption that placing siblings together in foster care is best. Increasingly, the official policies of public child welfare agencies reflect and incorporate such a presumption. Public agencies’ protocols increasingly encourage, if not mandate, caseworkers to place siblings together. In supporting caseworkers, agencies have begun to recruit foster

\footnotesize{See id. at 103.}

\footnotesize{See id.}

\footnotesize{See id.; Riggs, supra note 191; Jones, supra note 191 at 1189; Ward, supra note 172.}

\footnotesize{See Riggs, supra note 191; Maureen C. Smith, An Exploratory Survey of Foster Mother and Caseworker Attitudes About Sibling Placement, 75 CHILD WELFARE 357, 358, 369 (1996).}

\footnotesize{See e.g. Sibling Placement Planning in Adoption, CLIENT SERVICES MANUAL 1, STATE OF OREGON DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES (2001) available at http://www.dhs.state.or.us/policy/childwelfare/manual_1/i-f6.htm (last visited 12-3-03); Sibling Placement and Visitation, CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES POLICY, STATE OF MAINE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES available at http://www.state.me.us/dhs/bcfs/policy/policy.htm (last visited 12-3-03).}
parents who will care for sibling groups, rather than only individual children. Some agencies have also begun to train and actively support foster parents in providing care to multiple children. In addition, even when siblings are placed in separate homes, agencies have increasingly encouraged and facilitated sibling contact. For example, the Illinois Department of Children and Families requires at least twice monthly visits between siblings in separate foster homes, except in special circumstances. More specifically, the agency’s policy requires a “sibling visitation plan” that specifies the frequency and length of, and possibly the location and supervision required for, planned visits.

The policy developments in this area reflect the cost/benefit considerations surrounding sibling separation and constitute good social work practice protocols. These considerations are also leading to legislative action. Several states have enacted legislation mandating that child

202 See Elstein, supra note 186 at 104; Riggs, supra note 191.

203 See Elstein, supra note 186 at 104.

204 See id. at 104-106; Riggs, supra note 191.

205 See ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES, TITLE 89, SECTION 301.220 available at http://www.state.il.us/dcfs/policy/pr_policy_rules.shtml (Last visited 12-4-03); Elstein, supra note 186 at 105; Riggs, supra note 191.

206 See id.

207 See id. at 102-103; Staff and Fein, supra note 172 at 268; Ward, supra note 172.
welfare agencies place siblings together.\textsuperscript{208} For example, agencies in California, Ohio, Massachusetts, and New York must comply with such mandates.\textsuperscript{209}

In addition, although the United States Supreme Court has not spoken definitively on the issue, several lower courts have raised the possibility that siblings have certain rights to association.\textsuperscript{210} For example, in \textit{Aristotle P. v. Johnson}, plaintiff foster children challenged the state’s practice of placing siblings in separate foster homes and denying them the opportunity to visit their siblings.\textsuperscript{211} The federal district court held that siblings have a right to associate with each other and to develop and maintain their relationships.\textsuperscript{212} The district judge relied on the Supreme Court’s decision in \textit{Roberts v. United States Jaycees} in which the Court held that “choices to enter into and maintain certain intimate human relationships . . . against undue intrusion by the state because of the role of such relationships in safeguarding individual freedom is central to our constitutional scheme.”\textsuperscript{213} The judge also held that siblings have a Fourteenth

\begin{footnotes}

\textsuperscript{208} \textit{See} Elstein, \textit{supra} note 186 at 104.

\textsuperscript{209} \textit{See} CAL. WEL. & INST. CODE §§ 16002, 16004 (2003); NY CLS FAMILY CT. ACT §1027-a (2003); OHIO ADMIN. CODE § 5101:2-48-16; MASS. REGS. CODE 102 § 508 (10)(2001).


\textsuperscript{211} \textit{Id.} at 1004.

\textsuperscript{212} \textit{Id.} at 1005-6.

\end{footnotes}
Amendment liberty interest in their continued relationship.\textsuperscript{214} Applying a heightened level of scrutiny to the state practice because of the constitutional rights at stake, the judge held that a state actor may interfere with a child’s right to associate with siblings only if the state has a sufficiently compelling interest that cannot be achieved through means that are less restrictive of associational freedoms.\textsuperscript{215}

Despite decisions like the one in Aristotle P., the courts have not reached a consensus on whether siblings have a right to be placed together.\textsuperscript{216} Courts regularly acknowledge the importance of the sibling relationship, but they also indicate that siblings’ right to be placed together, if such a right exists, is not absolute.\textsuperscript{217} Siblings’ claims are subject to a judge’s determination of whether placement together would serve the best interests of the children involved in the particular matter, a decision rule that is extremely indeterminate because it calls for the virtually unlimited exercise of judicial discretion.\textsuperscript{218} In addition, courts have indicated that the sibling relationship is not a determining factor in assessing a child’s best interests; it is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{214}Aristotle P., supra note 209 at 1009-10.
\item \textsuperscript{215}Id. at 1006.
\item \textsuperscript{216}See Elstein, supra note 186 at 105; Patton and Latz, supra note 181 at 747; Hegar, supra note 172 at 116-19.
\item \textsuperscript{217}See Elstein, supra note 186 at 105.
\item \textsuperscript{218}See id.
\end{itemize}
simply one factor to consider.\textsuperscript{219} In the end, courts are largely sympathetic to siblings’ claims for placement together, sometimes expressly requiring state actors to establish compelling reasons to separate siblings, but the courts do not view siblings’ claims as absolute or guaranteed.\textsuperscript{220}

Despite widespread support for placing siblings together as expressed in agency policies and protocols, and increasingly in legal doctrine, public child welfare systems regularly fail to achieve this placement goal.\textsuperscript{221} In examining actual child welfare practices in this area, it is important to note that a clear majority of children entering foster care have one or more siblings, with 30\% of them having four or more siblings.\textsuperscript{222} Once in foster care, a significant number of siblings are separated from one another.\textsuperscript{223} In fact, each year approximately 30,000 brothers and sisters are separated into different foster or adoptive homes.\textsuperscript{224} As Sharon Elstein summarizes, “It appears that most children in out-of-home care have siblings, most are separated from their

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{219}See id.
\item \textsuperscript{220}See id.
\item \textsuperscript{221}See Elstein; \textit{supra} note 186 at 97.
\item \textsuperscript{222}See id.; Staff and Fein, \textit{supra} note 172 at 258.
\item \textsuperscript{223}See id. at 259; Patton and Latz, \textit{supra} note 181 at 757-58; Elstein, \textit{supra} note 186 at 97.
\item \textsuperscript{224}See id.; Patton and Latz, \textit{supra} note 181 at 757-58.
\end{enumerate}
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brothers and sisters, and placement decisions are complicated for these children.”

In addition, visitation between siblings following separation is often non-existent or minimal.

Clearly, the strong presumption that child welfare systems should place siblings together is not in operation. Many factors contribute to this result. The primary factor is a lack of resources. The huge volume of cases in relation to the number of caseworkers, foster parents, and judges makes careful sibling placement practices virtually impossible. Public child welfare agency caseworkers carry high caseloads, often lack relevant training, and almost always have to act quickly to find an appropriate placement for each child whose family has entered a

225 Elstein, supra note 186 at 97.

226 See generally id., Patton and Latz, supra note 181 at 749-52, 758-60; Ward, supra note 172 at 329-30.


period of crisis. Not only does the caseworker have to arrange a speedy placement, but he or she must also work quickly and effectively with parents and various service providers to devise and begin implementing a case plan to address the specific family’s problems. This pressured situation constitutes an inadequate condition for the careful placement of siblings together or for frequent visitation between siblings who are separated.

In addition, public child welfare agencies face a constant challenge in recruiting an adequate number of foster parents. Because of the shortage of foster parents, agency caseworkers often place children anywhere there is an “open bed.” This inadequate environment for achieving placements tailored to the needs of particular children is especially

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230 See Ryan, supra note 228.


233 See id.; McFadden & Ryan, supra note 228 at 217.
acute in the context of sibling placements. 234 Even if enough beds are open in a particular home, a significant number of foster parents perceive sibling placements as more difficult and are inclined to frustrate agency efforts to place siblings together in their home. 235

Judges who should be in a position to check caseworker placement decisions and enlist foster parents to accept siblings into their home also face tremendous pressures because of high caseloads. 236 In urban areas, judges may have to decide thirty to eighty cases each day, with even contested hearings often lasting only ten to twenty minutes. 237 In such situations, judges cannot learn the facts of specific cases in sufficient detail to check caseworkers, convince foster parents, and fashion appropriate court orders that adequately protect sibling relationships. 238

As a result of overloaded public child welfare systems, children are fairly easily removed from the custody of their parents, placed in foster care, and separated from their siblings. 239 In 

234 See Smith, supra note 199 at 371 (describing study findings indicating that a major factor in whether siblings are separated or kept together is simply the availability of space in a particular foster home); Ward, supra note 172 at 324-25.

235 See Elstein, supra note 186 at 102; Smith, supra note 199 at 368.

236 See Herring, supra note 226 at 333-36.

237 See id.

238 See generally id. at 331-48.

239 See Roberts, supra note 226; Martin Guggenheim, The Foster Care Dilemma and What to do About It: Is the Problem that Too Many Children Are Not Being Adopted Out of
addition, affected children and their families often do not receive timely services to address the problems that led to placement in foster care. Although the agency’s official goal is most often family reunification, many children spend well over a year in foster care separated from both their parents and siblings, with family reunification being achieved only after an extended period of separation.

Consider a one-year-old girl, Ann, whose mother uses cocaine on a regular basis, sometimes binging for a period of several days. Ann has a two-year-old brother, Jake. Ann’s mother, Jane, is nineteen years old. When she engages in binge behavior she usually leaves Ann and Jake with her mother, the children’s thirty-six-year-old grandmother, Betty.

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Foster Care or That Too Many Children Are Entering Foster Care?, 2 JOURNAL OF CONSTITUTIONAL LAW 141 (1999).

See Herring, supra note 226 at 344-45; Naomi R. Cahn, Children’s Interests in a Familial Context: Poverty, Foster Care, and Adoption, 60 OHIO STATE L. J. 1189, 1203-04 (1999).


This is a case story drawn from my experiences representing clients involved in the public child welfare system. All names have been changed.
On one occasion, Jane left Ann and Jake alone in her apartment, asking her neighbor to watch them while she ran out to the store. When she failed to return within the next eight hours, the neighbor called the county child welfare agency. An intake caseworker responded to the call, could not find Jane, and immediately placed Ann in one foster home that had one open bed and Jake in another.

When the initial court hearing occurred the next day, Jane had still not returned home. Betty appeared at the hearing and requested custody of both children. The caseworker informed the judge that she had not investigated Betty’s home and could not recommend her home at this time. The judge continued Ann and Jake’s placements in separate foster homes. The judge summarily ordered the agency to investigate Betty’s situation prior to the next court hearing which would occur in thirty days.

At the next court hearing, the agency presented evidence on Betty’s parenting history. Like Jane, Betty had abused drugs during her late teens and early twenties. As a result, Jane had been placed in foster care for a period of two years. Because of this history, the agency recommended that Ann and Jake remain in their separate foster homes. The judge accepted this recommendation. Jane did appear at this hearing and stated that she was prepared to enter a drug treatment facility. The judge ordered her to enter treatment and set a review hearing in six months.

Following the hearing, the agency referred Jane to a drug treatment program that had a six month waiting list. Jane actually entered the treatment program one year after the placement of Ann and Jake in separate foster homes and, after several false starts, eventually completed a residential drug treatment program. Three years after the initial foster care placements, Jane obtained housing. Accordingly, at the subsequent review hearing, the judge returned Ann and
Jake to Jane’s custody. Thus, after more than three years of separation, Ann and Jake were reunited in their mother’s home. Ann was now five years old and Jake was six.

The agency and the court viewed Ann and Jake’s case as a success story. Although the children had to be separated while their mother received treatment, their family was reunified and stabilized. The system had achieved its first preference for a permanency outcome—return of the children to the custody of their original parent. It may have taken longer than was optimal for the children’s healthy development, but nonetheless their family was preserved and they were all back together and safe.

However, the studies addressing the frequency of and conditions for postchildhood sibling incest call into question this perception of success. Ann and Jake not only experienced the possibly temporary psychological trauma of sibling separation, they also experienced separation during the critical period for their development of an inhibition to postchildhood reproductive sexual activities with a sibling. Their separation during this period could

243 See Peter J. Pecora, et. al., THE CHILD WELFARE CHALLENGE, 72-78 (2000); Anthony N. Maluccio et. al., PERMANENCY PLANNING FOR CHILDREN: CONCEPTS AND METHODS (1986).


245 See Bevc and Silverman, supra note 2; Bevc and Silverman, supra note 8.

246 See Riggs, supra note 191; Jones, supra note 191; Ward, supra note 172.

247 See Bevc and Silverman, supra note 2.
significantly raise the risk of sibling incest as they live within the same household as teenagers.\textsuperscript{248}

The consideration of the sibling incest studies in the context of foster care placements may provide a powerful and focused justification for the placement together of certain types of siblings groups. Specifically, siblings like Ann and Jake are affected by the public child welfare system at a critical stage in their development of sexual inhibition. Maybe overwhelmed public systems that cannot meet policy or legislative mandates to place siblings together in all cases could meet a narrower mandate to place together siblings who are within an established critical period of development. This is the possibility explored in the next part of this article.

**VI. The Risk of Postchildhood Sibling Incest: Implications for Foster Care Placements**

The revised Westermarck theory and the studies of postchildhood sibling incest allow one to identify a specific risk related to foster care placements. Namely, children experiencing foster care may be separated from a sibling at a critical period for the development of an inhibition to engage in postchildhood reproductive sexual activity with their sibling.\textsuperscript{249}

The studies identify a critical period when children need to live in close physical proximity in order to develop an inhibition to engage in reproductive sexual activity with one another as teenagers and adults.\textsuperscript{250} The exact specification of this critical period is a matter of

\textsuperscript{248}See id.

\textsuperscript{249}See id.

\textsuperscript{250}See id. at 154, 160.
debate among researchers. Some have indicated that the critical period extends only through the period when both siblings are age 3 or younger. Others have defined the critical period as age 6 or younger, or possibly, age 10 or younger. Bevc and Silverman’s direct studies of siblings indicate that the critical period is when both siblings are age 3 or younger. When siblings are separated for a year or more during this period, the likelihood of postchildhood reproductive sexual activities between the siblings increases significantly.

The recognition of this critical period allows for the development of focused policies and practices designed to avoid increasing the risk of postchildhood sibling incest. Initially, it is important to note the value of a narrow focus in addressing risks confronted by children and families within public child welfare systems. As noted above, these systems are overwhelmed because of a lack of resources, and public agencies and courts have been unable to comply

251 See id. at 154.

252 See id. at 160; Wolf, supra note 6 at 198-213.

253 See Shepher, supra note 12 at 61; Wolf and Huang, supra note 91 at 143-92; Bateson, supra note 91 at 103.

254 See Bevc and Silverman, supra note 2 at 160.

255 See id.

256 See Herring, supra note 226; Roberts supra note 226.
with the basic mandates of legislative schemes designed to achieve both fairness and timely permanent resolution of child dependency matters.\textsuperscript{257}

The worst outcomes occur when public actors attempt to achieve too much. For example, many interpret the best interests of the child decision standard as requiring the public system to secure optimal placements and developmental outcomes for each child.\textsuperscript{258} Not only is this interpretation in conflict with constitutional principles and wise approaches to child welfare matters, it is simply not achievable.\textsuperscript{259} Seeking such an unrealistic goal for each child only sets up public actors and systems for failure. The “best” is never achievable in a resource-starved system. Trying to achieve this goal only results in children who could otherwise return to their original parents and experience minimally adequate care instead being trapped in “temporary” foster care placements for extended periods.\textsuperscript{260} Alternatively, it results in children being denied permanent placements that may not be the “best,” but again would be minimally adequate.\textsuperscript{261}

\textsuperscript{257}See id.; Herring \textit{supra} note 226.

\textsuperscript{258}See Patton and Latz, \textit{supra} note 181 at 753-54; Pecora et. al., \textit{supra} note 242 at 470-72.


The goal of placing all sibling groups together in specific foster homes provides another example of a goal that current public child welfare systems cannot achieve. The value of a more focused approach in this area is that the public system may actually achieve some good results. By focusing on sibling groups within a certain critical age range, public child welfare agencies may realize that placing some siblings together is both beneficial and achievable, even with the limited resources available to them. In light of current system conditions, this type of focus provides real hope for achieving the placement of siblings together in specific foster homes.

The longstanding practice of race matching provides an example of this result. Child welfare agencies would regularly attempt to secure a same-race adoptive placement for African American children in order to meet what they view as the child’s best interests. Because of a shortage of minority parent adoptive homes, the affected child would have to wait for an extended period to exit a temporary foster care placement. See Elizabeth Bartholet, Nobody’s Children: Abuse and Neglect, Foster Drift, and the Adoption Alternative 123-40 (1999).

See Elstein, supra note 186 at 97; Staff and Fein, supra note 172 at 259.

See Pecora et. al., supra note 242 at 262-75, 472-73 (describing the creation, evolution and growth of family-based service programs, intensive family preservation services and casework approaches that focus on securing minimum standards of parenting within an
The focused approach supported by studies surrounding the Westermarck theory entails the creation of a strong presumption that agencies will place siblings together in foster care when both are 3 years old or younger.\textsuperscript{264} This presumption would be especially strong for siblings who are likely to be returned to the custody of their original parents and to live together as teenagers. With this presumption in full operation, public child welfare systems would significantly reduce the risk that foster care will result in postchildhood sibling incest.\textsuperscript{265}

environment of limited public resources). Of course, choosing a specific category or group of children for a focused allocation of a limited resource such as foster parents willing to accept sibling groups entails opportunity costs. Other groups may benefit more from these resources (e.g. adolescent children). Although there does not appear to be rigorous scientific evidence to justify a focus on a different category of children, policy makers will have to weigh all the costs and benefits in determining whether the focused approach suggested in this article makes sense in their particular situation.

\textsuperscript{264}See Bevc and Silverman, \textit{supra} note 2.

\textsuperscript{265}It should be noted that this is just one implication for public child welfare systems that can be drawn from the studies surrounding the Westermarck theory. The studies could also be used to support a considered, studied approach to siblings who engage in non-reproductive sexual play if they have lived together during the critical period for the development of sexual inhibition. Instead of overreacting and automatically separating the siblings, child welfare agency workers could understand that the siblings are not at high risk of engaging in sexual intercourse. In addition, the studies could be used to justify close monitoring of all children placed together in foster homes who did not live together during the critical period for the
By applying the strong presumption of placement together only in cases involving siblings within a discrete and limited age group, public child welfare systems would likely be able to marshal the resources necessary to fully operationalize the presumption. First, because the demand for “sibling together” foster homes would be limited, public child welfare agencies would likely be able to recruit an adequate number of foster parents willing to care for sibling sets who fall within the presumption’s target population.266 Additionally, in making efforts to recruit foster parents, agencies would be able to explain in very powerful terms the need to place certain siblings together. The concrete, understandable goal of avoiding postchildhood sibling incest should be convincing to many potential foster parents.267 These foster parents would likely enter the system and take on sibling placements with a deeper understanding of the need for these placements and a stronger commitment to caring for the siblings together in their home.268

devlopment of sexual inhibition. These children would be at a relatively high risk to engage in reproductive sexual activities.

266 See Ward, supra note 172 at 324 (stating that “aggressive recruitment and the availability of adoption subsidy have proven that homes for sibling groups can be found”).

267 See Smith, supra note 199 at 370 (noting that 77% of surveyed foster parents wanting sibling groups in their homes listed the importance of keeping siblings together as a primary reason. Avoiding postchildhood sibling incest would only make this reason more powerful).

268 See generally Depp, supra note 172 at 17-18.
The focused approach in this area would also affect agency caseworkers. Even if they have not received comprehensive training concerning child development principles or the benefits of placing siblings together generally, caseworkers have the capacity to understand the importance of placing siblings together during a critical period in order to inhibit postchildhood sibling incest.269 Both the concept of a critical age range and the presumption of placement together are easy to understand.270 In addition, caseworkers are likely to perceive the goal of incest avoidance as important.271 The idea that separating siblings creates conditions favorable for what many view as especially repugnant behavior would likely motivate caseworkers to place siblings together.272

269See generally Ellen Ryan, Assessing Sibling Attachment in the Face of Placement Issues, 30 CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK JOURNAL 77, 77-85 (2002); Smith, supra note 199.

270See generally Ryan, supra note 268.

271See Edward W. Sites, Special Needs Adoptions: Resources for Success (UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH VIDEO PRODUCTION 1981)(basic caseworker training video providing a vivid illustration of the problem of sibling incest and how it must be addressed in a serious and sustained manner).

272For discussions of the longstanding, commonly held repugnance to incest, see CODE OF ALABAMA §13A-13-3 (2003)(Commentary: Justifications for Criminal Sanctions)(discussing religious justifications, biological justifications, and sociological and psychological justifications for the incest taboo); Weinberg, supra note 6 (discussing justifications for the incest taboo based on the disruption of family relationships); Wolf, supra note 6 (discussing justifications for the
The result of this focused understanding and heightened motivation on behalf of agency caseworkers would likely lead them to exercise extreme care in placing siblings who are in the critical period of development. Initially, caseworkers would likely work hard to preserve an original family setting that includes siblings within the critical period, aggressively providing intensive family preservation services ranging from in-home service providers to direct financial assistance. Even if caseworkers do not take this aggressive initial approach, or if this approach fails, they would likely work hard to place affected siblings together in foster care. If, as posited above, the agency has recruited, trained and supported foster parents who are willing to accept sibling groups in their homes, caseworkers would likely use the foster care resources to place siblings together. In addition, caseworkers would likely exercise care in reunifying children with their original parents, making sure that siblings are returned together, or at least, not separated for an extended period. The result would be the development and incest taboo based on biological concepts and the psychological trauma experienced by female participants).


274 See id. at 280; Ryan, supra note 268.

275 See id.; Downs et. al., supra note 272 at 280; Elstein, supra note 186.

276 See generally id. at 102-03 (stating that “siblings benefit from reunification efforts that help them learn to function as a group and develop the same expectations about what family life
implementation of a best practices approach surrounding the removal, placement, and reunification of siblings who are 3 years of age or younger.\textsuperscript{277}

In addition to influencing caseworkers, the strong presumption to place certain siblings together would affect judges. In making decisions in child dependency matters, judges would be able to recognize siblings who fall within the target age range.\textsuperscript{278} Upon this recognition, judges would be able to implement the strong presumption to keep siblings together.\textsuperscript{279} Specifically, they would be able to check agency caseworker decisions to separate siblings during the critical period.\textsuperscript{280} By issuing focused court orders at initial judicial hearings in cases involving foster

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{277}See e.g. \textit{id.} at 272-77; Elstein, \textit{supra} note 186 at 102-106.
\item \textsuperscript{278}For illustrations of the capacity of juvenile court judges to understand complex child welfare system and practice issues, see National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, \textsc{Resource Guidelines: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases} (1995); Mark Hardin, \textit{Judicial Implementation of Permanency Planning Reform: One Court That Works} (ABA Center on Children and the Law, 1992).
\item \textsuperscript{279}For a discussion of the extensive powers of juvenile court judges in monitoring and managing child welfare cases, see Herring, \textit{supra} note 226 at 348-52.
\item \textsuperscript{280}See \textit{id.}
\end{itemize}
care placements, judges would ensure that agency caseworkers place siblings together.\textsuperscript{281} At subsequent review hearings, judges could make sure that caseworkers actively support foster parents in their efforts to keep the siblings safe and together during the critical period of development.\textsuperscript{282}

The focused approach in this area would also affect legislators, providing them with an opportunity to enact a statutory scheme that would achieve intended results within resource-stretched public child welfare systems.\textsuperscript{283} By codifying the strong presumption to place siblings together during the critical period for the development of sexual inhibitions, legislators would encourage caseworkers to work carefully and diligently to keep siblings together and would provide judges with a powerful tool to check agency caseworker behavior.\textsuperscript{284} Most importantly,

\textsuperscript{281}See id.

\textsuperscript{282}See id.


\textsuperscript{284}For an example of the powerful effects legislative action can have on public child welfare systems and agencies, see the discussion of the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act in Mary Ann Jimenez, 
legislators would let public child welfare agencies know that placing this group of siblings together constitutes an important public interest—one that calls for the allocation of resources necessary to preserve original families and to recruit and support appropriate foster parents. 285

Legislative action would also lead public agencies to develop more detailed regulations supporting the full implementation of the presumption by caseworkers, including the aggressive use of family preservation services, the careful placement of siblings together, and the coordinated reunification of families. 286 Finally, legislators’ codification of the presumption would effectively require judges to explain, ideally in writing, any departures from the

55, 61-64 (1990). See also the discussion of the potential impact of the promotion of adoption included in the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act in Bartholet, supra note 260 at 188-89.

285 For a discussion revealing the capacity of Congress to convey important and powerful, yet conflicting, public values and interests through passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 and the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, see Jimenez, supra note 283. For a discussion revealing the capacity of Congress to convey powerful public values and interests surrounding child placement and adoption through enactment of the Multiethnic Placement Act and the Adoption and Safe Families Act, see Bartholet, supra note 260 at 186-89.

286 For a discussion of the response by public agencies to enactment of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, see Jimenez, supra note 283 at 61-64. It must be noted that public agencies can resist fully implementing legislative mandates when they conflict with the values and interests of agency leaders and staff members. See Bartholet, supra note 260 at 202-203.
presumption.\textsuperscript{287} This would give rise to a common law supporting the placement of siblings together except in unusual or extraordinary circumstances.\textsuperscript{288}

In summary, the studies concerning the relative risks of postchildhood sibling incest provide a solid foundation for a convincing, even compelling, case to implement a small, incremental focused adjustment in child welfare policies and practices.\textsuperscript{289} Namely, agency caseworkers should identify siblings who are 3 years old or younger. Once identified, agency caseworkers and judges should deal carefully with these siblings. They should work hard to keep affected siblings together. Legislators should support caseworkers and judges by enacting statutes that create a strong presumption to keep together siblings within the targeted group. In this way, state actors can minimize the risk of subsequent sibling incest—sexual activity that society has deemed inappropriate, harmful, and unacceptable.\textsuperscript{290}

\textsuperscript{287}See \textit{e.g.} Mich. Comp. Laws Ann. §712A.18f(1), (2) and 19(3); Mich. Ct.R. 5.973A(4), (5) and B(2)(requiring judicial review of the public agency’s case plan and calling for the judge, on the record, to assess the family’s specific problems and to determine the services necessary to address the identified problems).

\textsuperscript{288}For an example of the development of legal doctrine through written judicial decisions in termination of parental rights cases, see Herring, \textit{supra} note 259 at 174, 191-94.

\textsuperscript{289}See Bevc and Silverman, \textit{supra} note 2; Bevc and Silverman, \textit{supra} note 8.

\textsuperscript{290}The Code of Alabama Commentary provides a concise discussion of society’s views concerning sibling incest:
(1) The law against incest may represent a reinforcement by civil sanctions of a religious tenet. The incest taboo has been rationalized by religious theory in most societies from primitive societies forward. The traditional western theory involves the concept of “tainting of the blood.” This mystical notion is responsible in part for the intense hostility to incestuous behavior which has resulted in this crime being regarded as especially shameful. Despite the admonition of the federal Constitution to separate church and state, this widespread, popular attitude is an important consideration in the employment of criminal sanctions for such conduct.

(2) A second justification lies in the science of genetics. There is secular utility in a prohibition against such inbreeding as would result in defective offspring by reason of the higher probability of unfavorable, recessive genes combining in the children of parents within certain blood relationships. While the science of human genetics has produced inconclusive proof that inbreeding in human populations would eventually show harmful effects, there is a higher probability of unfortunate, recessive gene combinations in the first generation offspring of closely related parents. Boyd, Genetics and the Race of Man, 125 (1953).

(3) A sociological and psychological justification is that the prohibition of incest tends to promote solidarity of the family by preventing sex rivalries and jealousies within the family unit.

CODE OF ALABAMA §13A-13-3. For discussions of the sociological and psychological justifications, see Weinberg, supra note 6; Wolf, supra note 6 at 454-61.
This focused, careful approach holds great hope for actually keeping a discrete group of siblings together. Although it does not ensure that public systems will try to keep all siblings together, its more modest goal is achievable. The achievability of this goal is important for systems that have proven they cannot attain more comprehensive goals.291 Despite evidence, albeit somewhat amorphous and ambiguous, that placing all siblings together benefits children, public child welfare systems have failed miserably in trying to secure these placements.292 By significantly reducing the burden of achieving sibling placements on public systems, a more limited and focused goal comes into sight—a goal that public systems would likely achieve efficiently and quickly.293 And by realizing this goal, public child welfare systems may learn how to successfully and efficiently implement more comprehensive approaches to keeping siblings together.294

VII. Conclusion

This article presents recent research findings concerning the revised Westermarck theory.295 The theory postulates, and the evidence indicates, that children who live together

291 See supra notes 226-240 and accompanying text.

292 See supra notes 172-225 and accompanying text.

293 See supra notes 255-287 and accompanying text.

294 See e.g. Pecora et. al, supra note 242 at 273 (describing how family-based services originated as “a few small-scale and isolated demonstration projects” and grew into statewide programs in a significant number of states).

295 See Bevc and Silverman, supra note 2.
during a critical period develop an inhibition to postchildhood reproductive sexual activity among themselves.\textsuperscript{296} The research results indicate that the critical period of development is age 3 or less.\textsuperscript{297}

This article also explores the implications of the research for siblings at risk for placement in foster care. The findings surrounding the revised Westermarck theory justify a strong presumption to keep together siblings who are within the critical period of development. Although public child welfare systems have developed policies to ensure the placement of siblings together, these systems have failed miserably at achieving this goal,\textsuperscript{298} largely because the public systems do not have the resources necessary to achieve such a comprehensive goal.\textsuperscript{299} The presumption that arises from the revised Westermarck theory focuses on a discrete and limited group of siblings—those who are 3 three years old or less and could provide public child welfare systems with a realistic opportunity to marshal the resources necessary to keep targeted siblings together.\textsuperscript{300}

\textsuperscript{296}See id.

\textsuperscript{297}See id. at 160.

\textsuperscript{298}See Elstein, supra note 186 at 97; Staff and Fein, \textit{supra} note 172 at 259; Patton and Latz, \textit{supra} note 181.

\textsuperscript{299}See Herring, \textit{supra} note 226; Roberts, \textit{supra} note 226.

\textsuperscript{300}See supra notes 255-293 and accompanying text.
This article demonstrates one way in which new knowledge from the field of evolution and human behavior is useful in examining and adjusting child welfare policies and practices.\textsuperscript{301} It can provide a foundation for improvements that are well grounded in both theory and empirical research. These focused improvements may allow key decisionmakers to abandon highly dysfunctional public child welfare system approaches that are based on comprehensive developmental theories and overblown expectations as to what they can achieve for affected children. They may afford a limited, focused approach that more closely matches the public resources available and that achieves real benefits for children who face identified and measured risks.\textsuperscript{302}

Finally, this article demonstrates the benefits of opening a dialogue among child welfare system decisionmakers, child welfare scholars, and researchers in the field of evolution and human behavior. The researchers’ current work is useful, but their work could become even more useful if directed through engagement with those actively participating in the field of child welfare. For example, as researchers such as Bevc and Silverman contemplate additional studies, both animal and human, to further determine cause and effect in the area of sibling incest, it would be helpful if they discussed their approaches with child welfare scholars.\textsuperscript{303} For instance, it may be helpful if researchers pursued Bevc and Silverman’s correlational findings

\textsuperscript{301}See Jones, supra note 1.

\textsuperscript{302}See supra note 255-293 and accompanying text.

\textsuperscript{303}See Bevc and Silverman, supra note 2 at 160 (discussing possible lines of inquiry for further study of the Westermarck theory).
related to religion and postchildhood sibling incest. A discussion among those engaged in relevant fields of scholarship and practice would help to determine if such a research endeavor would be useful, and if so, how to construct it. These types of interdisciplinary discussions provide great hope for the careful, incremental improvement of public child welfare systems.

304 See id. at 157.

305 See Jones, supra note 1; Herring 2002, supra note 1; Herring2003, supra note 1.