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Shreya Mukhopadhyay
Kelli L Dickerson, *Division of Developmental Medicine, Boston Children's Hospital,*
Thomas D. Lyon, *University of Southern California Law School*
Jodi A. Quas, *University of California, Irvine*

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Foster youth's placement preferences: The roles of kin, siblings, and age

Shreya Mukhopadhyay [a], Kelli L. Dickerson [b,c], Thomas D. Lyon [d], Jodi A. Quas [a,*]

[a] Department of Psychological Science, University of California, Irvine, USA
[b] Department of Pediatrics, Division of Developmental Medicine, Boston Children's Hospital, Boston, MA, USA
[c] Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA
[d] Gould School of Law, University of Southern California, USA

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ABSTRACT

Background: Debates exist regarding whether foster youth should be asked about their placement preferences following removal, with only youth aged 12 years and older at times assumed legally competent to provide input.
Objectives: The present study evaluated whether placement-related factors known to predict youth's well-being also shape their placement preferences and whether preferences differ between youth below and above the age at which they are considered legally competent to provide input.
Method: Data ($N = 1033$, ages 6–17 years, 54 % female) were obtained from NSCAW-I. Youth were asked open- and closed-ended questions about their placement preferences.
Results: Among youth removed for shorter periods, placement with kin was related to a greater preference for their current placement (RRR = 0.31, $p < .001$) and desire for permanency in that placement (OR = 1.95, $p = .005$) relative to youth placed with non-kin. However, youth removed for longer periods (e.g., a year) were similar in their desires for their current placement to be permanent regardless of whether they were living with kin or non-kin caregivers. Among younger youth, placement with siblings (RRR = 0.42, $p = .015$) was linked to a preference for their current placement. Racial match between youth and their non-kin caregiver was unrelated to their placement preferences.
Conclusions: Findings revealed that both younger and older youth's placement preferences were shaped by factors objectively linked to youth's well-being and thus align with best practices in placement decisions. The paper discusses the importance of asking youth as young as 6 years about their placement preferences and offers suggestions for social service and legal professionals regarding questioning strategies.

Each year in the United States, over three million children and adolescents (youth) come into contact with Child Protective Services due to allegations of abuse or neglect. Between 4 and 8 % of these youth are believed to be in serious danger of harm and as a result are removed from their caregiver's custody (U.S. Department of Health, & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, & Children's Bureau, 2020). Once removed, crucial decisions are made about where the youth should be placed. Several factors guide such decisions, including at times youth's own desires. That is, some courts solicit

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychological Science, University of California, 4201 Social and Behavioral Sciences Gateway, Irvine, CA 92697-7085, USA.
E-mail address: jquas@uci.edu (J.A. Quas).

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input from youth regarding their placement preferences and take youth's input into consideration when making placement decisions (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020). However, soliciting such input typically only occurs when youth are 12 years or older and presumed capable of expressing a reasonable preference (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020).

Soliciting input even from older youth, though, is controversial (Warshak, 2003). On one hand, youth are often valuable sources of knowledge about their experiences and needs (Barnes, 2007; Coyne, Amory, Kiernan, & Gibson, 2014; Smith, 2007; Spinetta et al., 2003; Zimmerman, 1982). Knowing their preferences about placement may help guide services and support in ways that facilitate their adjustment. Soliciting input about placement may also enhance foster youth's feelings of control or empowerment during the removal process (Melinder, Baugerud, Ovenstad, & Goodman, 2013; Merritt, 2008; Pitchal, 2008). On the other hand, some scholars contend that youth preferences are not equivalent to their best interests, and youth, particularly younger ones but perhaps older youth as well, may not be capable of distinguishing what they want from what they need (Warshak, 2003).

In the present study, we addressed these controversies by examining whether youth's placement preferences are consistent with evidence-based legal recommendations, which typically require efforts be made to place youth with kin, and best practices, which similarly suggest optimal placement is with kin caregivers and/or siblings. We also compared preferences between younger (i.e., those below the age cut-off for legal competency, 12 years) and older (i.e., those 12 years and older) youth to identify age-related differences that can inform debates about the age at which youth are capable of providing reasonable input. Finally, we tested, among youth placed with non-kin caregivers, whether their placement preferences varied depending on whether their race was the same or different than that of their caregiver.

1. Kin and sibling presence and placement preferences in foster youth

A sizable body of research has evaluated how characteristics of foster youth's placement relate to their well-being. One of the most consistent findings is that placement with kin, most often kin caregivers but also siblings, confers benefits, including improved mental health, lower delinquency, better academic performance, greater placement stability, and more frequent contact with biological parents (Akin, 2011; Bank & Kahn, 1975; Holland, Faulkner, & Perez-del-Aguila, 2005; Washington, 2007; Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2018). A smaller set of studies has focused on youth's perceptions of their placement (Chapman, Wall, Barth, & National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being Research Group, 2004; Dickerson, Lyon, & Quas, 2021; Dunn, Culhane, & Taussig, 2010; Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009, 2011; Wilson & Conroy, 1999). Some results similarly suggest that placement with kin and/or siblings is related to more positive feelings in youth about their placement (e.g., contentment, safety, stability, closeness to family). Yet, nuances based on methodology, age, and definitional issues also exist across studies that shape interpretation of these findings.

For instance, Chapman et al. (2004) relied on data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well Being (NSCAW), a longitudinal study of families involved with social services, to assess 6–14-year-old foster youth's perceptions of whether they liked their placement and wanted it to be permanent. No differences in responses emerged between youth placed with kin versus non-kin caregivers, all of whom had been removed for a year. In contrast, using a larger set of youth from the same dataset, Hegar and Rosenthal (2009) reported that youth placed with kin were more likely to say they felt like a part of their family than were youth placed with non-kin caregivers. However, these differences dissipated over time, and most youth with placed with both types of caregivers reported feeling like a part of their family in later waves of data collection.

Hegar and Rosenthal (2009) also found that, among youth removed relatively recently, but not among those removed for longer periods, sibling presence was related to feelings of closeness with the family. Thus, although family relationships seemed to take precedence in shaping youth's feelings early on following removal, but over time, stability may have become important to youth's feelings of closeness as well. These findings were replicated by Hegar and Rosenthal (2011) with an expanded definition of siblings (i.e., biological, step, adopted, and foster) that compared youth placed with all siblings, youth placed with some siblings, and youth living with no siblings. Of note, in both studies, despite variations in youth's reported feelings of closeness to their foster families, virtually all youth said “yes” when asked yes/no questions leading to very little variation in youth's responses.

Dickerson et al. (2021) extended this line of inquiry and examined whether placement type (kin versus non-kin foster families) or sibling presence (biological, step, and adopted siblings) predicted placement preferences in children ages 6–11 years. Children were asked open-ended questions about with whom they wanted to live in the short-term and long-term. Such questions allowed for a broader range of potential responses than yes/no questions. Children placed with either kin or a sibling were less likely to want to be reunified with their biological parents than children placed with non-kin foster caregivers or without siblings. Hints of a placement type × sibling presence interaction predicting placement preferences emerged, but the sample ($n = 100$) was too small to formally test such a possibility.

Taken together, extant research suggests that youth across a wide age range may well prefer the same type of placement settings that have been objectively shown to be beneficial to foster youth and that are strongly encouraged via legal mandates. However, as discussed next, limitations in prior studies preclude this inference from being drawn without additional data.

First, it is important to consider how questions about placement have been asked. Most have been closed-ended yes/no questions about youth perceptions (e.g., “Do you like your current placement?” or “Do you want this to be your permanent home?”; Chapman et al., 2004; Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009, 2011). When open-ended questions have been asked, discrepancies in responses have emerged. For example, in a few studies, when youth were asked if they wanted their current placement to be permanent in a closed-ended manner, 77 % (6 to 13 years; Fox, Berrick, & Frasch, 2008), 50 % (6 to 14 years; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001, pp. 93–94), and 39 % (6 to 14 years; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005, pp. 7-15 to 7-17) of youth responded “yes.” Yet when asked with whom they wanted to live in an open-ended manner, only 37 %, 16 %, and 4 % of youth, respectively, chose their current caregiver. Thus, the yes/no questions made youth appear more satisfied with their current placement than open-ended

questions. Closed-ended yes/no questions have been found to restrict responses and inhibit elaborations in other interview settings (Lamb, Brown, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2018; Lyon, 2014). Thus, it is important to systematically analyze responses to open-ended questions about placement preferences in dependency cases as well, especially across a wide age range.

Second, in states in which courts are required to ask youth about their placement preferences, mandates apply only to youth 12 years and older. Whether such an age cut off for legal competency to provide input is useful has not been adequately examined. Dickerson et al. (2021) shed some light on this issue, demonstrating that 6–11 years old children, all below the age cut-off for legal competency, did not uniformly want to return to their biological caregiver, instead often preferring placements with kin caregivers and siblings. However, whether these patterns would emerge similarly across the age cut-off for legal competency was not examined. Further, studies that have tested for age differences in placement perceptions (e.g., happiness in home) have uncovered mixed results (Chapman et al., 2004; Merritt, 2011), though none has evaluated whether age moderates links between placement type or sibling presence and such placement perceptions. Doing so would inform debates about the need for an age cut-off for soliciting youth's input.

Third, studies have varied in definitions of type of placement in ways that may affect results. Hegar and Rosenthal (2009), for instance, compared placement perceptions between youth in kin and non-kin settings. It is not clear whether the latter included youth living with non-kin foster caregivers as well as youth living in group homes. Youth in these latter two types of placements, though, often differ in significant and meaningful ways in their functioning but also their perceptions of those placements (Chapman et al., 2004; Dunn et al., 2010). Also, siblings have included biological, step, half siblings, and/or adoptive or foster siblings (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009, 2011). Legislatively and theoretically, siblings' presence is believed to be beneficial because it provides a sense of familiarity and stability for youth in an otherwise uncertain context (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services et al., 2020). Youth may feel very differently about placements with familiar siblings who were present prior to removal and unfamiliar siblings. A narrower and legally relevant definition of siblings is important to consider in relation to youth preferences.

And fourth, a potentially relevant though overlooked factor that could shape youth's placement preferences is whether their race matches that of their caregiver, which is not always the case, especially with non-kin caregivers. Transracial foster care placements and adoption have been heavily debated for years (Barn & Kirton, 2012; Johnson, Mickelson, & Davila, 2013). The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) and the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA, 25 U.S. Code § 1902, 1978) seek to protect Black and Native American youth respectively from such transracial placements. To date, however, studies have not evaluated whether youth's preferences about placement vary depending on whether their race is the same or different than that of their caregiver. With kin, youth's and caregivers' race most often match, but such is not necessarily or even likely to be the case with non-kin caregivers. Our sample and study design allowed us to systematically evaluate whether youth placement preferences varied as a function of racial matching between the youth and their non-kin caregivers.

2. Present study

The primary goals of the present study were to investigate how youth's placement preferences relate to (1) type of out-of-home care (kin versus non-kin foster families) and (2) placement with siblings. The study also examined whether (3) age moderated the links between placement type or sibling presence and placement preferences and whether (4) youth's placement preferences varied as a function of whether they were placed with a non-kin caregiver of the same race. Consistent with prior work, we expected that youth would express a preference to remain in placements with kin rather than non-kin caregivers and in placements with siblings compared to those without siblings. We expected this preference to be particularly strong among youth living with both kin and siblings. Although more tentative, we also anticipated that younger youth might exhibit a stronger desire to return to their biological parents than older youth, especially when placed in non-kin care or without siblings. We did not make any a priori predictions about differences in preferences as a function of whether youth and their caregiver's race matched.

3. Method

Our investigation relied on data from the National Survey for Child and Adolescent Well-Being I (NSCAW-I), a publicly available nationally representative longitudinal data set of children and adolescents who had contact with CPS between October 1999 and December 2000. At the time of recruitment, children were between 0 and 14 years of age. NSCAW-I included two samples, the Child Protective Services (CPS) sample, comprising youth who had contact with CPS due to suspected maltreatment, though these youth may or may not have been removed from home and the Long-Term Foster Care (LTFC) sample, comprising youth removed from home for 12 months, on average, at the time of the initial sampling. For additional details on recruitment and design, see Dowd et al. (2004).

3.1. Participants

Youth from both NSCAW-I samples (i.e., CPS and LTFC) who were living in out-of-home care and had at least one sibling (full, half, or step) below the age of 19 years were eligible for the current study. Additional criteria included the following: (a) for all youth, the roster of individuals living in the house could not contain any biological or step parents, (b) for youth in non-kin foster care, the roster of individuals living in the house could not contain any adult biological relatives or adult-age siblings to ensure that reliable comparisons could be made between youth living with kin caregivers and youth living with non-kin caregivers, (c) youth could not be listed as living in a group or congregate care facility to ensure all youth were living in family-like settings, and (d) youth's IQ, assessed during any wave in which they answered placement questions, must have been 70 or higher on the Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test (KBIT) to increase the likelihood that they fully understood the interview questions.

With these criteria, our final sample included 1033 children and adolescents, ages 6 to 14 years at Wave 1 (M_{age} = 10.26 years, *SD* = 3.07 years; 54 % female; 72 % CPS). Distributions of sex and race/ethnicity are shown in Table 1. All youth answered questions about their placement preferences in at least one wave of data collection. Youth's placement arrangements and hence family presence could vary across waves, therefore, analyses were conducted at the level of response. The total number of responses analyzed was 1565 across the 1033 youth.

Finally, for analyses evaluating racial match between youth and caregivers, among youth living with kin, 88 % of youth matched their caregivers' race/ethnicity, as might be expected. Variability, however, was evident among youth living in non-kin foster care, 60 % of whom matched their caregivers' race/ethnicity and 19 % of whom did not (21 % of the youth and/or caregivers were missing information about their race/ethnicity). Since too few Hispanic, Native American, and Pacific Islander youth were in the sample, only Black and White youth placed with non-kin foster caregivers were included in these analyses (*n* = 681 responses, 444 youth).

3.2. Measures, procedures, and coding

Placement-relevant questions were embedded in longer semi-structured in-person interviews conducted with youth across several waves of the study. Interviews were conducted at youth's placement following appropriate consent and assent procedures (see Dowd et al., 2004). Questions about placement concerned a range of topics (e.g., liking their placement, feeling close to their caregivers). Of interest here were two key questions about youth's placement preferences: one open-ended ("If you could live with anyone, who would it be?") and one closed-ended yes/no ("Do you want this [your current placement] to be your permanent home?").

Responses to the open-ended question were originally classified into one of 26 categories (see Dowd et al., 2004). We recoded the categories into three mutually exclusive groups: Biological parent(s) = 0, Current placement = 1 (set as the reference group in the analyses), or Somewhere else = 2 (i.e., neither biological parents nor current placement) (6 % missing responses). Youth's responses to the closed-ended question were dichotomously coded (0 = no, 1 = yes) (9 % missing responses).

3.3. Analytic plan

Analyses were conducted in Stata (Version 15; StataCorp, 2017) using full-information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation. As mentioned, all analyses were conducted at the level of youth responses. First, preliminary analyses were conducted to evaluate response distributions and test for potential confounds. Second, a multinomial logistic regression was conducted with youths' open-ended responses (about with whom they wanted to live) as the outcome. Third, a binary logistic regression was conducted predicting youth's yes/no responses about whether they wanted their current placement to be permanent. In both regression models, youth's gender, race (Black vs. non-Black) and sample (CPS or LTFC) were entered at Step 1; placement type, sibling presence, and age group (6–11 v. 12–17, below v. above the legal cut-off) were entered at Step 2; and the hypothesized placement type by sibling presence interaction and other exploratory two-way interactions (see Tables 3 and 4) were entered at Step 3. These included the age by placement type and age by sibling presence interactions, which tested whether younger versus older youth's preferences differentially varied as a function of other family's presence (kin or siblings), and also interactions with sample (CPS vs. LTFC; e.g., placement type × sample), which tested whether the combination of family presence and sample were related to their placement preferences. Of note, the regression models were repeated at the youth level including only responses from the first wave for sensitivity analyses.

Fourth, because the two types of questions can yield inconsistent responses (e.g., youth said that they wanted to return to their biological parent to the open-ended question but then said yes to the closed-ended question about wanting to remain in their current

Table 1
Sample descriptives.

Variables	Age group		Placement type		Sibling presence		Total
	Younger	Older	Non-kin	Kin	Absent	Present	
	(*n* = 868)	(*n* = 697)	(*n* = 926)	(*n* = 639)	(*n* = 808)	(*n* = 757)	(N = 1565)
Sex (% males)	49*[a]	43*	49**	42**	48	44	46
Race/ethnicity (in %)[1]							
Native American	3	6	5*	3***	5	3	4
Asian/Pacific Islander/Hawaiian	1	2	2*	1*	2	1	1
Black	35	41	35*	41*	37	38	38
Caucasian	34	39	39*	32*	39	33	36
Hispanic	2	2	2*	2*	2	3	2
Multiracial	3	2	2*	3*	2	3	3
Sample (% CPS)	69	70	67**	73**	67**	73**	67

[a] All comparisons in the table are made between younger versus older youth, youth placed with kin versus non-kin caregivers, and youth placed with siblings versus those placed without siblings. Significant differences are marked with asterisks. The total frequencies collapsed across all groups are in the last column ("Total").

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

[1] Percentages do not add up to 100 % due to missing data.

placement), we descriptively examined discrepant responses and compared variations across age groups. Fifth and finally, we explored the role of racial matching in shaping placement preferences by repeating the above-mentioned inferential analyses (both multinomial and binary logistic regression models) including only youth placed with non-kin caregivers. Racial matching was added as a predictor, and placement type, and relevant interactions were removed.

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary analyses

Distributions of potential covariates (gender, sample and race/ethnicity) and main predictors (placement type, sibling presence and age) are presented in Table 1, and distributions of outcomes (open- and closed-ended responses) and main predictors (placement type, sibling presence, and age) are presented in Table 2. Preliminary analyses revealed that proportionally more girls compared to boys were older youth rather than younger youth and were placed in kin rather than in non-kin foster care ($\chi^2 s > 4.54$, $ps < .05$). Next, proportionally more youth in the LTFC than CPS sample were placed in non-kin than kin care and without siblings than with siblings, ($\chi^2 s > 7.81, ps < .01$). Finally, Black youth were more likely to be placed in kin care while White youth were more likely to be placed in non-kin care ($\chi^2 = 8.76$, $p = .003$). Gender, race, and sample were thus included in the analyses as covariates.

4.2. Placement type, sibling presence, age, and placement preferences

4.2.1. Open-ended responses

When we considered youth's open-ended responses about with whom they wanted to live (biological parent, current placement, or someplace else) via a multinomial logistic regression, all three steps of the model were significant ($\chi^2 = 137.37$, $p < .001$ at Step 3, see Table 3 for results). Main effects of sample, placement type, and age emerged. These main effects were subsumed by a sample ×

Table 2
Response rates grouped by placement type, sibling presence and youth's age.

If you could live with anyone, who would it be?									
		Placement type by sibling presence by age group				Placement type by age group		Sibling presence by age group	
		Kin ($n = 588$)		Non-kin ($n = 873$)		Placement type		Sibling presence	
		Without siblings ($n = 232$)	With siblings ($n = 356$)	Without siblings ($n = 542$)	With siblings ($n = 331$)	Kin ($n = 588$)	Non-kin ($n = 873$)	Without siblings ($n = 774$)	With siblings ($n = 687$)
Younger youth	BP[a]	40 %	43 %	54 %	55 %	42 %	53 %	49 %	47 %
	CP[b]	35 %	40 %	23 %	23 %	38 %	28 %	28 %	36 %
	SE[c]	25 %	17 %	23 %	22 %	20 %	19 %	23 %	16 %
Older youth	BP[a]	26 %	29 %	36 %	38 %	28 %	36 %	34 %	33 %
	CP[b]	39 %	31 %	24 %	28 %	35 %	25 %	27 %	29 %
	SE[c]	34 %	40 %	40 %	35 %	38 %	39 %	39 %	38 %
Total	BP[a]	34 %	38 %	43 %	47 %	37 %	45 %	40 %	43 %
	CP[b]	37 %	37 %	24 %	31 %	37 %	26 %	28 %	34 %
	SE[c]	29 %	25 %	33 %	21 %	27 %	29 %	32 %	23 %

Do you want this to be your permanent home?									
		Placement type by sibling presence by age group				Placement type by age group		Sibling presence by age group	
		Kin ($n = 573$)		Non-kin ($n = 852$)		Placement type		Sibling presence	
		Without siblings ($n = 226$)	With siblings ($n = 347$)	Without siblings ($n = 528$)	With siblings ($n = 324$)	Kin ($n = 573$)	Non-kin ($n = 852$)	Without siblings ($n = 754$)	With siblings ($n = 671$)
Younger youth	% yes	55 %	62 %	49 %	48 %	60 %	48 %	51 %	55 %
Older youth	% yes	58 %	62 %	49 %	58 %	60 %	51 %	51 %	60 %
Total	% yes	57 %	62 %	49 %	51 %	60 %	50 %	51 %	56 %

Note. All percentages do not add to 100 % due to rounding up.
[a] Biological parents.
[b] Current placement.
[c] Somewhere else.

Table 3
Multinomial logistic regression of open-ended responses.

	Biological parents vs. current placement				Somewhere else vs. current placement			
	RRR	SE	z	95 % CI	RRR	SE	z	95 % CI
Step 1								
Gender	0.87	0.12	−1.04	(0.66, 1.13)	1.09	0.16	0.56	(0.81, 1.46)
Race (Black vs. non-Black)	1.08	0.15	0.53	(0.82, 1.41)	1.32	0.20	1.83	(0.98, 1.77)
Sample	1.60**	0.24	3.21	(1.20, 2.14)	1.34	0.21	1.85	(0.98, 1.83)
χ^2	16.44**							
Step 2								
Placement	0.52***	0.07	−4.54	(0.40, 0.70)	0.63**	0.10	−2.83	(0.46, 0.87)
Sibling presence	0.95	0.14	−0.32	(0.72, 1.27)	0.75	0.12	−1.75	(0.55, 1.03)
Age	0.77	0.11	−1.82	(0.58, 1.02)	2.42***	0.39	5.53	(1.77, 3.31)
χ^2	116.91***							
Step 3								
Placement × age	0.95	0.29	−0.16	(0.52, 1.73)	0.75	0.25	−0.84	(0.39, 1.46)
Placement × sibling presence	1.66	0.50	1.71	(0.93, 2.99)	1.67	0.55	1.55	(0.87, 3.20)
Age × sibling presence	1.63	0.50	1.60	(0.89, 2.96)	2.30*	0.77	2.50	(1.20, 4.43)
Sample × age	1.11	0.35	0.33	(0.60, 2.05)	1.64	0.56	1.46	(0.84, 3.20)
Sample × placement	0.44**	0.14	−2.56	(0.24, 0.83)	0.74	0.26	−0.85	(0.37, 1.48)
Sample × sibling presence	1.33	0.42	0.89	(0.71, 2.48)	0.88	0.31	−0.35	(0.44, 1.77)
χ^2	137.37***							

Note. RRR = relative risk ratio, SE = standard error, CI = confidence intervals. Open-ended question: "If you could live with anyone, who would it be?"
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

placement type and a sibling presence × age interaction respectively.

The main effect of sample revealed that youth in the LTFC sample were 1.60 times more likely than youth in the CPS sample to prefer staying in their current placement compared to returning to their biological parents (RRR = 1.60, $p < .001$). Youth in the two samples did not, however, differ in their preference for their current placement versus someplace else (RRR = 1.34, $p > .05$). Regarding the main effect of placement type, youth living in non-kin care were 1.92 times more likely to prefer returning to their biological parents (RRR = 0.52, $p < .001$) and 1.59 times more likely to prefer going someplace else (RRR = 0.63, $p = .005$) than staying where they were (see Table 2 for percentages of youth responses across placement type). However, these main effects regarding returning to biological parents versus remaining in their current placement were subsumed by a sample × placement type interaction (RRR = 0.44, $p = .010$). Among youth in the CPS sample, those placed in non-kin care were 3.22 times more likely than youth placed in kin care to prefer returning to their biological parents than remain in their current placement (RRR = 0.31, $p < .001$): 48 % of youth in non-kin care compared to 37 % of youth in kin care wanted to return to their biological parents; whereas 23 % of youth in non-kin care

Table 4
Binary logistic regressions of closed-ended responses.

	OR	SE	z	95 % CI
Step 1				
Sex	1.13	0.13	1.05	(0.90, 1.42)
Race (Black vs. non-Black)	1.13	0.13	1.12	(0.91, 1.43)
Sample	0.70**	0.09	−2.76	(0.55, 0.90)
χ^2	10.09*			
Step 2				
Placement	1.49**	0.18	3.25	(1.17, 1.90)
Sibling presence	1.16	0.14	1.20	(0.91, 1.48)
Age	1.15	0.14	0.80	(0.87, 1.38)
χ^2	24.85***			
Step 3				
Placement × age	0.89	0.22	−0.48	(0.54, 1.45)
Placement × sibling presence	0.93	0.23	−0.30	(0.57, 1.52)
Age × sibling presence	1.16	0.29	0.60	(0.71, 1.90)
Sample × age	0.90	0.24	−0.39	(0.54, 1.51)
Sample × placement	1.92*	0.53	2.38	(1.12, 3.30)
Sample × sibling presence	0.90	0.25	−0.40	(0.52, 1.54)
χ^2	31.15**			

Note. OR = odds ratio, SE = standard error, CI = confidence intervals. Closed-ended question: "Do you want this to be your permanent home?"
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

compared to 36 % of youth in kin care wanted to remain in their current placement. However, placement preferences of youth in the LTFC sample were not shaped by placement type (RRR = 0.70, $p > .05$) and were fairly similar across youth in kin and non-kin care: 38 % of youth in non-kin care and 35 % of youth in kin care wanted to return to their biological parents; 33 % of youth in non-kin care and 40 % of youth in kin care wanted to remain in their current placement. Next, the main effect of age suggested that younger youth compared to older youth were 2.42 times more likely to want to remain in their current placement than go somewhere else (RRR = 2.42, $p < .001$). The age by sibling presence interaction (RRR = 2.30, $p = .012$), though, suggested that the aforementioned effect was being driven largely by younger youth placed with versus without siblings. Specifically, younger youth living with a sibling were 2.38 times more likely to prefer staying where they were versus going somewhere else than were younger youth living without siblings (RRR = 0.42, $p = .015$). However, sibling presence did not predict older youth's responses (RRR = 0.96, $p > .05$, see also Table 2 for youth responses by sibling presence and age). Younger versus older youth also did not differ in their preference for wanting to remain in their current placement versus returning to their biological parents (RRR = 1.62, $p > .05$).

4.2.2. Closed-ended responses

When we examined youth's closed-ended responses regarding whether or not they wanted their current placement to be permanent via a binary logistic regression, some but not all results paralleled the results of the multinominal logistic regression. All three steps were significant ($\chi^2 = 31.15$, $p = .002$ at Step 3, see Table 4). Sample, placement type, and their interaction emerged as significant predictors of youth's placement preferences.

Similar to youth's open-ended responses, youth in the LTFC sample were more likely than youth in the CPS sample to answer yes when asked if they wanted their current placement to be permanent (OR = 0.70, $p = .006$), as were youth living in kin care versus non-kin care (OR = 1.49, $p = .001$; see Table 2 for percentages of youth responses across placement type). Furthermore, as was evident in the open-ended responses, an interaction between sample and placement type (OR = 1.92, $p = .018$) revealed that the tendency to answer yes among youth living in kin care was driven primarily by youth in the CPS sample (OR = 1.95, $p = .005$; 53 % youth in kin care versus 42 % youth in non-kin care said yes). In the LTFC sample, placement type did not predict youth's preferences (OR = 1.01, $p > .05$; 54 % youth in both samples said yes). No other significant differences emerged, indicating that, in contrast to youth's open-ended responses, age and sibling presence were unrelated to youth's closed-ended responses.

4.2.3. Discrepancies between open- and closed-ended responses

Two forms of discrepancies between open- and closed-ended responses emerged. Some youth said that they wanted to live with their biological parents or live somewhere else when asked the open-ended question but then said "yes" when asked if they want their current placement to be permanent; other youth said they wanted to stay in their current placement when asked with whom they want to live but then answered "no" when asked if they want their current placement to be permanent. Collapsed across types of discrepancy, about 30 % of the total response pairs were discrepant. When we examined patterns of discrepant responses, it appeared that youth were more likely to say "yes" to the yes/no question about wanting their current placement to be permanent even though they had not explicitly stated their current placement when asked with whom they wanted to live (86 % of the discrepant responses), as opposed to youth saying "no" that they did not want their current placement to be permanent but naming it when asked the open-ended question (14 % of the discrepant responses). Of note, discrepant responses did not differ between younger versus older youth ($\chi^2 = 0.60$, $p > .05$).

4.3. Racial match and placement preferences

Our final analyses examined whether racial match between youth and their non-kin caregivers was related to youth's placement

Table 5
Response rates among Black and White youth placed with racially matched versus unmatched non-kin caregivers (N = 702).

If you could live with anyone, who would it be?				
	Black youth (n = 327)		White youth (n = 375)	
	Black caregivers (n = 251)	Non-Black caregivers (n = 54)	White caregivers (n = 301)	Non-White caregivers (n = 58)
Biological parents	44 %	37 %	39 %	48 %
Current placement	21 %	22 %	29 %	24 %
Somewhere else	29 %	33 %	26 %	26 %

Do you want this to be your permanent home?				
	Black youth (n = 327)		White youth (n = 375)	
	Black caregivers (n = 251)	Non-Black caregivers (n = 54)	White caregivers (n = 301)	Non-White caregivers (n = 58)
% yes	44 %	50 %	48 %	38 %

Note. 7 % of the Black and 4 % of the White youth were missing information about caregiver's race.

preferences. As a reminder, we only included Black and White youth in non-kin care in these analyses, and conducted both descriptive and inferential statistics to test for potential race-matching differences in preferences. Descriptively, the distribution of youth and caregivers by racial matching is as follows. Overall, 35 % ($n = 327$) of the youth and 37 % ($n = 342$) of the non-kin caregivers were Black, and 40 % ($n = 375$) of the youth and 49 % ($n = 452$) of the non-kin caregivers were White. Among the Black youth, 77 % ($n = 251$) were placed with Black non-kin caregivers, and 17 % ($n = 54$) were placed with non-Black non-kin caregivers (7 % of Black youth were missing information about caregiver race). Of the White youth, 80 % ($n = 301$) were placed with White non-kin caregivers, and 15 % ($n = 58$) were placed with non-White non-kin caregivers (4 % of White youth were missing information about caregiver race). Youth's responses based on placement with racially matched or non-matched caregivers are presented in Table 5. To test empirically whether differences existed in responses based on matching, as a reminder, we conducted regressions with only the Black and White youth living with non-kin caregivers. Placement type and relevant interactions were removed as predictors from the models and a dummy variable indicating whether or not youth's race matched that of their non-kin caregivers was added as a predictor.

The multinomial logistic regression model was significant at all three steps ($\chi^2 = 58.12$, $p < .001$ at Step 3). However racial matching did not emerge as a significant predictor of youth preferring their biological parents (RRR = 0.96, $p > .05$) or some other place (RRR = 0.95, $p > .05$) over their current placement. The binary logistic regression model was not significant at any step ($\chi^2 = 9.82$, $p > .05$ at Step 3), and similar to the multinomial logistic regression model, racial matching did not emerge as a significant predictor of youth wanting their current placement to be permanent (OR = 1.03, $p > .05$). Accordingly, at least for the set of youth living with non-kin foster caregivers included here, youth's placement preferences were not related to whether their race matched the race of their non-kin caregivers.

5. Discussion

The overarching purpose of the current study was to provide insight relevant to ongoing debates about whether youth removed from home due to maltreatment can provide meaningful input regarding their placement preferences, in this case reflected in preferences that are consistent with placements both practically and legally considered to be in the youth's best interest, namely placement with family (Holland et al., 2005; Washington, 2007; Winokur et al., 2018). Youth indeed exhibited a strong desire to be with family, most notably kin caregivers, and at times siblings, but youth also showed a desire for placement stability. Next, we turn to a more detailed discussion of these findings, along with their implications in legal settings in which placement decisions are being made about foster youth.

First, placement type was a consistent predictor of youth's placement preferences. Regardless of whether youth were asked an open-ended question or a closed-ended question, as hypothesized, youth wanted to remain where they were living and were less likely to want to be moved and even reunited with their biological parents when placed with kin rather than non-kin foster families. These trends are consistent with prior investigations of placement preferences (Dickerson et al., 2021; Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009, 2011). Of central interest to the current study, both youth younger than 12 years as well as those 12 and older similarly preferred kin settings. Thus, the two age groups did not differ significantly in their ability to articulate a desire for a placement setting that is likely in their best interest, namely being with kin.

Second, sibling presence also shaped youth's placement preferences, but only partially consistent with our hypotheses. Younger youth who were placed with a sibling (below 12 years of age) preferred their current placement over other settings. Older youth, however, displayed no such differences in placement preferences based on sibling presence. Younger children's need for physical proximity to family members might be related to their desires to remain with their siblings. Adolescents, in contrast, may rely on their knowledge of familial relationships to maintain closeness rather than requiring a sibling's physical presence. Alternatively, or perhaps concurrently, adolescents may feel more conflicted when siblings are present, perhaps preferring placements with siblings but then feeling greater responsibility in caring for these siblings. Adolescents often report more tumultuous relationships with their siblings than younger children (Leichtentritt, 2013; Milojevich, Quas, & Adams, 2017). Future work on perceptions of relationship quality among siblings, along with documentation about birth order and age differences among siblings, would be helpful to understand when and why siblings want to remain together following removal, and when they do not explicitly report a desire to do so. Finally, despite some variation in the links between sibling presence and placement preferences between younger and older youth, younger youth's preference still mapped onto the benefits of sibling presence, further suggesting the age cut off for legal competency might not be as useful as believed.

Surprisingly, and in contrast to our hypothesis, youth's preferences were not jointly influenced by kin care and sibling presence. Dickerson et al.'s (2021) findings hinted at such an interaction, but Hegar and Rosenthal (2009, 2011) did not report any. Perhaps youth's sense of comfort and security mostly come from their relationship with adult caregivers, especially with kin, overriding possible additional benefits of siblings' presence in such a setting.

Third, placement preferences differed between youth in the two NSCAW samples. Though no formal hypotheses were advanced about the samples, prior studies with the NSCAW data have revealed similar trends (Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009, 2011). Youth in the CPS sample, who had presumably been removed for shorter periods of time, had a stronger affinity for kin care and were more likely to prefer returning to biological parents when placed with non-kin foster families. Youth in the LTFC sample, on the other hand, who had been removed for a year or more did not exhibit such an affinity for kin. The latter youth tended to want to remain where they were, regardless of whether they were living with kin or non-kin foster families. One possible explanation is that youth in the CPS sample were still adjusting to their foster families, and thus felt less committed to their placement or perhaps were curious about their biological family, whereas youth in the LTFC sample may have been more settled into and familiar with their current caregivers, reducing their willingness to want to change and adjust to yet another placement. Because the length of time in the placement was not

considered, our interpretation is speculative but highlights the need for more direct investigations of the duration of time needed to adjust in new placements, and an investigaton of how duration, perhaps in conjunction with age, relates to youth's placement preferences. Importantly, similar to placement with kin and siblings, age did not further moderate the sample differences. In other words, preferences among both younger and older youth suggested an affinity for permanency.

Two other important trends are worth noting in the current study. First, our exploratory analyses revealed that whether youth's race matched that of their non-kin caregivers or not, did not shape youth's answers when asked with whom they wanted to live or if they wanted their current placement to be permanent. On the one hand, it may well be that, in light of the myriad of other, more salient, complex, and potentially distressing experiences likely going on in the lives of foster youth removed from home, whether their race matches that of their caregivers simply does not play a large role in their placement preferences. On the other hand, our analyses were somewhat limited. For one, due to sample sizes, we were only able to examine placement preferences of youth in two racial groups (Black and White). As families become more diverse [Diversity in the United States, n.d. (census.gov)] across the country, and as different constellations of caregivers take on the role of foster parents, it will be important to evaluate whether youth's placement preferences vary as a function of these constellations. It will, as well, be crucial to consider how youth race, ethnicity, and other cultural dynamics, all of which may vary across families and between youth and foster caregivers, shape both placement and other outcomes in foster youth. Finally, we did not ask youth directly if they would like to be placed with a caregiver of a specific race. Even relatively young children can differentiate their and others' race (Quintana, 1998), suggesting that they may be capable of answering such a question. Of course, given the value of open-ended prompts, it would likely be more useful to generate narrative responses from youth (e.g., about the types of caregiver characteristics) and code whether race is mentioned.

The second trend concerned the value of open-ended questions to elicit information about youth preferences. When only closed-ended responses have been examined, including in the same data set we examined, youth answers have been limited and potentially even misleading in their implications. In child forensic interviewing, caution is regularly levied against asking only closed-ended questions of youth, given the potential for such questions to increase errors and inconsistent answers, especially among younger children (see Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007; Lyon, 2014). In the present study, youth who were inconsistent between question types were more likely to say “yes” to making their current placement permanent but endorse placement with a relative in the open-ended “wh-” question than to say “no” to making their current placement permanent but state that they wanted to live where they were. Notably no age differences emerged in discrepancies, suggesting that inconsistencies were not a function of immaturity. Instead, perhaps youth were uncomfortable saying directly that they did not want to remain in their current placement but were comfortable doing so when their answer was indirect. Furthermore, younger youth may not equate a “no” response to “Do you want your current placement to be permanent?” with a preference for living somewhere else (for instance with their parents or with a relative). If closed-ended questions are asked, which at times occurs or is necessary, follow-up prompts, such as “tell me more about [child response],” can be highly valuable in clarifying meaning, as is common practice in forensic interviewing (Lamb et al., 2018; Saywitz, Lyon, & Goodman, 2017). Such follow-ups would allow for further insight into what youth mean when expressing a placement preference.

Although the current investigation is novel in its concurrent investigation of family presence and age as predictors of youth's placement preferences, and its rigorous definitions of and screening for family presence, limitations should be noted. First, the study investigated how concrete and easily identifiable characteristics, such as with whom youth lived, related to youth's placement preferences. These characteristics may conveniently guide placement decisions, but they also fail to fully capture complexities of placement contexts (e.g., home culture, rules) that likely play a powerful role in shaping youth's preferences (James, 2004; Koh & Testa, 2008; Perry, Daly, & Kotler, 2012). Subsequent research should extend this literature by examining these complexities as well. Second, longitudinal investigations of changes in placement preferences would be useful to pursue, given that youth's experiences in their placement (like their experiences in any home), as well as developmental desires and needs (e.g., for autonomy), vary with age in ways that could alter their preferences. Finally, NSCAW interviews were conducted in youth's current placement. It is not known as to whether caregivers were present at the time, that is, while youth were answering the placement questions. If so, such may well have influenced youth's responses in important ways, highlighting the need for additional investigations in which youth are asked about their placement preferences in separate contexts that do not give the appearance of potential bias.

Despite these limitations, the current study offers much needed insight relevant to placement decisions for youth who have been removed from home due to maltreatment that is especially useful for judges and social workers involved in dependency cases: Youth as young as six years expressed placement preferences that map onto placements that both legal recommendations and empirical research suggest are optimal for youth well-being. Few age differences emerged in placement preferences, with no indications that younger youth's preferences contradict evidence-based recommendations. Thus, judges and social workers should consider resisting the use of the age cut-off for legal competency (12 years) imposed in many states for asking youth about their input. Though young children may be more dependent on their family of origin, they should not be presumed incapable of providing meaningful input when asked about with whom they want to live. Instead, all youth's preferences should be solicited, while considering developmental nuances that come with asking vulnerable youth about their family, feelings, placement, and own best interest. Young children may need explanation when questions are posed, and follow-ups when answers are provided. Such recommendations do not mean all youth's preferences need to be honored. Instead, their input can be solicited, and when necessary, followed with developmentally appropriate explanations when their preferences cannot be accommodated.

In closing, when asking about placement preferences, legal professionals and social workers should rely, especially in initial probes, on open-ended prompts that allow for a range of responses and information. Insofar as they also ask closed-ended questions, these should be coupled with follow-up prompts to ensure that the meaning of youth's responses is clear. Finally, explanations about what is being asked of the youth or other ground rules about the purpose of the conversation should be included (Lamb et al., 2007; Lyon,

2014). Given youth's consistent preference for family and placement stability across age, soliciting their input is more helpful than has been traditionally believed, not only in terms of obtaining insight into what they desire, but also in terms of involving them in decisions that fundamentally change their lives and trajectories. Hence, it is important for judges to ask youth about their preferences and take the information youth provide into account, along with other details about the youth, their needs, and their family, when rendering life-changing placement decisions.

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