SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

Also by Robert Sanders

An Introduction to Working with Children: A Guide for Social Workers (with M. Colton and M. Williams)

The Management of Child Protection: Context and Change

Area Child Protection Committees (with N. Thomas)

Sibling Relationships

Theory and Issues for Practice

ROBERT SANDERS

Consultant Editor

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*This book is dedicated to the memories of my sister, Sandy,
and my brother, Tony*

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Foreword

Relationships between brothers and sisters have been much less researched and observed than most other kinds of family relationships. Yet our relationships with our siblings are likely to be, as this book points out, the longest-lasting in our lives. No wonder the theme recurs so often in legend and literature, not to mention the Bible. Brothers and sisters may be best friends, a source of support and advice in times of trouble or alternatively a cause of irritation and conflict. In childhood they may be competitors for adult attention and role models for better or worse. In old age they often become the most important informal resource when ill-health or disability strike.

Most practitioners are well aware of this, but until now they have been operating largely in the dark, with no evidence base to guide their decision making. The vast literature on child development and the mother-child relationship mostly seems to assume that the child in question is the only one, although 80 per cent of children grow up in families with at least one brother or sister and the parents of a newborn baby are, as often as not, coping with a demanding toddler at the same time. Birth order too can have lifelong consequences, but the impact may be quite different depending on the number and gender of the other siblings and how they are distributed in the family.

What this book does is to disentangle the innumerable facets of the relationships between brothers and sisters, tracking down and analysing an elusive body of research and making it accessible to the reader. It then becomes possible to move beyond bland assessments of the quality of these relationships towards understanding them in all their complexity, both as they exist at a particular point in time and as they evolve through the life cycle.

Social workers have to make many difficult decisions which depend on their view of sibling relationships, in particular when there is a question of splitting a family so that one or more of the children may have a chance of adoption or a promising long-term foster placement. The assumption that brothers and sisters should always be kept together needs to be re-examined; the mere fact of relationship is not enough to settle the question. Similar issues arise when parents divorce. Skilled and careful assessment is essential, but until now there has not been a readily available text to help achieve it.

Another myth dispelled by Robert Sanders' own research is that in abusive or dysfunctional families siblings provide support for each other. This may sometimes be true, but often children model their behaviour on that of their parents and become aggressive and violent towards each other, or one of the siblings may be scapegoated.

Conflict between siblings can be a severe source of stress for parents even in ordinary families. They may be faced many times a day with the dilemma of when to step in to stop a fight or defend a smaller child, when to sort out the rights and wrongs of the dispute, and when to look the other way and let the warring pair work it out for themselves. There are no easy answers to these questions but the increasing number of professionals providing different forms of support to families, from a social work, health, educational or legal perspective, all need a deeper understanding of sibling relationships and what they can do to improve them when necessary. I am sure that they will find this book a most valuable resource.

Professor Sonia Jackson, OBE, AcSS