

## Chapter 5

# Family contact

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**5.01** This chapter presents a range of information provided in relation to witnesses' families, including witnesses designated as 'orphans' who in fact had living parents. The extent of information provided by witnesses to the Committee about family contact was determined by numerous factors, particularly the availability of family information to the witnesses themselves. In most instances where family information was available, witnesses generally reported having siblings or relatives and that they lived at home or with extended family for some time prior to their admission to out-of-home care.<sup>1</sup>

### Prior to admission

**5.02** Witnesses who had been in care since birth were too young at the time to recall what happened to them. *'I don't know why I was there, where I was before, who sent me there ... no idea what happened.'* Others were unclear about the detail of their family circumstances but remembered being admitted to out-of-home care with their brothers and sisters and at times being visited by relatives. A number of these witnesses learned subsequently that they had lived with their parents and/or relatives for some time before being admitted to care, but had no sense of being part of a family network while they were in the School system. Many other witnesses had clear memories of living with their parents or with their relatives before their admission and maintained contact with their family throughout their time in institutional care.

### Siblings in care

**5.03** Six hundred and eighty four (684) witnesses (86%) reported having siblings, of whom 256 male (62%) and 270 female (71%), reported having brothers and/or sisters who were also in out-of-home care. A further 59 witnesses reported they did not know enough about their family circumstances to know whether or not they had siblings in care. The Committee heard evidence that 2,275 children were placed in out-of-home care from the families of these witnesses. Most, but not all, of those children were placed in Industrial Schools. A number were also placed in Children's Homes, foster homes and other institutions.

**5.04** Two hundred and fourteen (214) witnesses who attended the Committee had at least one other sibling who also attended hearings with the Committee. In total these witnesses represented 86 families.<sup>2</sup>

**5.05** The most common pattern reported by witnesses admitted as part of a family group was of being taken to Court along with their siblings and from there being transferred to one or more Schools. Admissions of family groups generally occurred in the context of a family crisis or intervention in circumstances of illness, poverty or neglect. Most often siblings were reported to

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 4: Chart 1 Pathways to Industrial and Reformatory Schools.

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of compiling demographic information on the witnesses' family background, it was necessary to include each witness's details in the overall numbers resulting in unavoidable overlap in some categories.

be separated, younger boys being sent to junior or mixed Industrial Schools and the girls were admitted to girls Schools. Boys over the age of 10 years were admitted to senior boys Schools.

*My first memory ... I was taken to ...named School... with my sisters in the car. ...(I was)... 4 years. ... I did observe the garda car turning into the ...named girls School... and I knew then that was where my sisters were going. My youngest brother stayed with my grandmother, we lived within a stones throw of the School. I started crying for my sisters and got a slap across the face, that was my first experience of ...named School....*

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*I didn't know I had sisters until I was over 10 or so ... I wasn't even told they ...(X and Y)... were my sisters, I thought they were just other girls that were in there like me. I didn't know I had a brother. I was 2 when I went in there, he was in ...named boys School... When he was 16 he came to see us. ... I couldn't believe I had a brother, there was no bond there....*

### **Parental contact**

**5.06** Six hundred and twenty eight (628) of the 791 witnesses (79%), 349 male (85%) and 279 female (74%), reported having resided with parents or relatives prior to their admission to out-of-home care. Although many of these witnesses reported having no memory of family contact they became aware of their family identity in more recent years through records they obtained under the Freedom of Information Acts, 1997 and 2003 and through subsequently re-established relationships.

**5.07** A further 110 witnesses (14%), 46 male and 64 female, reported being in out-of-home care, including mother and baby homes, foster care, hostels or county homes, since birth. On the basis of what subsequently became known to them about their admission many of the witnesses surmised that they were with their mothers for various periods of time from their birth before they were placed in the School system. Other witnesses reported that they learned in recent years that the possibility of their placement with members of their extended family was not explored at the time.

*There was a space on the form... (admission documents)...(which stated)... "Was the guardian informed?"...It just said "Nil". There was no effort to place me with...named relative...She was quite clear she would have had me, had she known.*

**5.08** Fifty three (53) witnesses (7%), 17 male and 36 female, reported having been in out-of-home care since birth. At the time of their hearing no contact had ever been made by relatives or through family tracing services and they described their past as a mystery.

### **Role of extended family**

**5.09** The important role played by relatives, particularly maternal grandparents, in the lives of witnesses both before and during admission was repeatedly emphasised. Witnesses whose parents died or who were ill, hospitalised, or had abandoned their families were often cared for by grandparents, aunts, uncles and occasionally older siblings for periods of time. There were accounts heard of older children being looked after by relatives while younger siblings went into out-of-home care and of babies being kept at home either with the remaining parent or relatives while older children were admitted to an institution.

**5.10** One hundred and fifty six (156) witnesses (20%), 81 male and 75 female, reported that members of their extended family, i.e. grandparents, aunts and uncles, were their primary caregivers before their admission. Sixty three (63) of those witnesses, 32 male and 31 female, reported being reared by their grandparents prior to their admission to institutional care. In most

instances these subsequent admissions occurred in the context of the grandparent dying, becoming ill or too frail to provide ongoing care.

- 5.11** Fifty three (53) of the 156 witnesses, 18 male and 35 female, reported that they initially lived with a parent in the same house as members of their extended family. Many of these witnesses were extra-marital children whose mothers were supported by their parents and siblings until prevailing circumstances forced the child's admission into out-of-home care.
- 5.12** Another 58 witnesses, 24 male and 34 female, reported that relatives lived near the family home but were unable to assist with care-giving, for reasons including poverty, lack of adequate accommodation or having families of their own to look after. A small number of witnesses reported that relatives had been prepared to provide care when a remaining or bereaved parent was no longer able to do so but such arrangements were not put in place. A small number of witnesses reported hearing that parents had not wanted their children to be separated and sent to different relatives or that proposed placements with relatives were not acceptable to the remaining parent. Several witnesses commented on the irony of being then separated for the duration of their time in institutional care.

### **During admission**

- 5.13** Six hundred and eighty four (684) witnesses (86%) reported having siblings and 374 of those witnesses (47%) reported having little or no contact with any family members during their time in the Schools. As non-marital children many of those witnesses would, effectively, have had no known extended family communicating with them.

*I'd just like to say that the worst thing you can do to any family is separate them. The State robbed me of my childhood and my brothers and sisters. It was bad enough to be taken away from my mother and father but terrible to be taken away from my brothers and sisters.*

### **Contact with siblings**

- 5.14** One hundred and ninety two (192) witnesses (28%) who had siblings, 102 male and 90 female, reported losing contact with their brothers and sisters following placement in the Schools. Additionally, a number of witnesses who were non-marital children were totally unaware that they also had siblings in care. Forty three (43) witnesses, 29 male and 14 female, reported being unaware that siblings were placed with them in the same School at the time. This information was only revealed to them in later years when contact was re-established. Other witnesses reported knowing they had brothers or sisters in the same School but had little contact with them due to the regimented nature of everyday life. With few exceptions, witnesses reported that no perceivable attempt was made by the authorities to promote family contact between siblings in the gender-segregated School system in the period prior to 1970. *'If the nuns had a Feast Day then we were all allowed sit together, all my sisters. That was the only time.'*

*When my father died, my mother ... looked after us, but she worked. ... We were taken to ...named School... we were separated, my brother clung to me, I didn't know where he went. Suddenly after all the years I met my sister ... we were in the same School, they would not let us see her. About four years after I left I got to meet her. My brother was there ...(in the same School)... but we didn't interact ever as brother and sister, we weren't together.*

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*I was shocked ... that was the first time I knew I had an elder brother. ... I had an inclination that I had sisters because of the situation on the beach. We wouldn't be*

*allowed to cross to see them....Our orphanages was brought to ...named... beach and ...residents from girls School... would have been brought down the same day, but they were kept over there ...(indicating a line in the sand).... They were there and the next thing you hear "that's my brother ...X... over there". I remember ...named sibling... saying it. But you weren't allowed have the conversation, you could look across the beach and that was it, there was a line you know ... "thou shall not pass". That line is still there, by the way, we ...(siblings)... find it hard ...(to communicate)... from lack of ... contact as children.*

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*The only way I knew I had a brother was they used to serve Mass on a Sunday morning and that was our only chance of getting to see them. We would all see them, but they were not allowed speak to us. We were proud of them, one was very handsome.... Later when they were older they were allowed over on a Sunday but they were not allowed in, they had to stand at the door, we could talk to them there. Usually visitors were allowed into the parlour, they weren't.*

- 5.15** The separation of brothers and sisters from each other in the Schools was reported by witnesses to be compounded by the practice of placing siblings with different 'foster' or 'holiday' families, where contact between them could not be maintained. However, it was more often reported by witnesses discharged since the 1970s that siblings were placed together in smaller group homes or with the same 'holiday' families.
- 5.16** One hundred and forty (140) witnesses (20%) reported that they were admitted to out-of-home care because of parental death and the subsequent separation of siblings was reported to have had a devastating impact on familial bonds.
- 5.17** An exception to the frequently reported separation of siblings was the experience of brothers and sisters being admitted to mixed gender Schools where it was expected in a small number of Schools that the oldest sister would look after her younger siblings. This convention was reported by a number of witnesses to have contributed to maintaining a bond between siblings that endured into later life. However, some witnesses reported that these expectations had a negative impact on sibling attachment through placing unreasonable demands on children to assume a parental role. The Committee also heard accounts of older brothers and sisters returning to visit siblings after their discharge. *'My brother ... visited me once, he was not encouraged and was told by staff not to be in touch, but I held his address in my head and found him ...(following discharge)... and we are now close.'*

### **Parents and relatives**

- 5.18** Three hundred and seventy six (376) witnesses (48%), 173 male (42%) and 203 female (54%), reported that contact had been maintained with and by their family for the duration of their stay in the School. Witnesses reported that the most typical opportunities for contact with their siblings, parents and relatives existed through informal visiting arrangements, on monthly visiting Sundays, visits home and to relatives during school holidays, letters and parcels sent by parents and relatives and occasional phone calls. Witnesses from some Schools were allowed to go home for weekends if they lived nearby. Visits and other forms of contact were treated as privileges and could be withheld for a variety of reasons.

*I got sent away for mitching from school. ... I did not get harmed there, but I never got home for the 5 years ...(of admission).... I was due to go home once but I broke a window with a football and the Brothers would not let me home.*

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*My mother came down to visit me and she was not allowed in because I was all bruised, she had to wait outside while all the others ...(visitors)... were in.*

- 5.19** Witnesses also reported that visits home depended on their parents' ability to pay the necessary transport fare, which in the case of residents at some Schools was a considerable and often unmanageable expense. Many witnesses were placed too far from home to allow for visits and that poverty and distance contributed to loss of family contact. *'We had no visits from anyone, they were too poor, we were too far away', 'You could have a visit once a month, if your mother had the fare, it would be a week's wages.'*

*My mother didn't want me to go to ...named School.... She wanted me to go to ...named School in local town.... She lived near there, but no, I had to go to ...named School....*

- 5.20** The continuity of family contact either in the form of visits home or visits from parents and other family members was reported by 71 witnesses as the only good memory they had of their time in the School. Some witnesses described their parents putting considerable effort into maintaining contact with them during their admission. A small number of Schools were reported to have provided assistance and support for parents who had to travel long distances to visit their children.

*I was one of a large family. I had both brothers and sisters in separate institutions, our mother visited regularly before going to work in the UK. She spent 2 weeks of holidays in Ireland every year, week one with the boys, week 2 with the girls, nuns in ...named School... (helped her).*

- 5.21** Female witnesses recalled sitting in parlours with parents and relatives who came to visit. In some Schools nuns were reported to supervise the visits directly by controlling the conversation and determining when the visit was over or by their presence in the same room while parents or others were visiting. Other witnesses reported an awareness of contact with their parents being monitored by external authorities.

*My mother, she came in ... to see me down the years and took me out twice, she had to get permission from the ...local authorities... this is on the records ...displayed copy of records.... She got permission, it was written down, that I was to be taken out on such a day, at such a time and brought back on such a day at such a time.*

- 5.22** The Committee heard reports of parents in poor circumstances being turned away or treated discourteously when they came to visit. Female witnesses reported that some girls' Schools had a 'poor parlour' where impoverished parents or visitors were directed. In particular, witnesses whose parents were members of the Travelling community reported this to be a common occurrence. In a number of boys Schools witnesses were warned prior to family visits they were not to discuss what happened in the School or to talk about being beaten or otherwise abused. The visits in the boys' Schools were not generally reported to have been overseen in the manner reported by female witnesses.

- 5.23** The involvement of grandparents, aunts and uncles in maintaining family contact was reported by many witnesses to have provided continuing contact in the absence of parents through death, illness or emigration: *'My mother ...(who had gone to the UK)... visited once, my aunt visited every month even though she had a large family of her own'.*

- 5.24** A number of witnesses reported having no contact with their parents apart from occasional visits in the early years of admission, particularly those who reported that their families had disintegrated in circumstances of poverty, illness and death. Others reported feeling abandoned when their parents went to the UK in search of work and an alternative life. Anger was expressed by a number of witnesses towards parents who did not visit or maintain contact with

them while they were in the Schools and who in their view demonstrated a lack of care and concern for them in this and other ways in the process of their admission and thereafter. Some witnesses acknowledged that their parents were also victims in circumstances of poverty, illness and both rural and social isolation.

*My ma came down every month. You had one visit a month, and if she couldn't come she would send my eldest sister. She ...(mother)... was very religious and if you said anything of beatings she would not believe you.*

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*I had 3 visits in 5 years in ...named School... my mother came to collect a borrowed coat I had worn in Court ...(on the day of admission).... A cousin came to tell me my mother had died; and my sister came to tell me the whole family were moving to England and would send for me when they could. I was allowed out to attend my brother's funeral.*

- 5.25** Many male and female witnesses reported an acute awareness of the protective factor associated with having either family contact while they were resident in the Schools or external contact with concerned adults such as 'holiday' families or 'godparents'. Witnesses believed that residents who had family or other visitors were less likely to be physically or sexually abused. Visitors were seen as people to whom abuse could be disclosed abuse and/or who may act independently to complain about evidence of abuse in the form of bruises or other injuries.

## Following discharge

- 5.26** Five hundred and seven (507) witnesses (64%), 247 male (60%) and 260 female (69%), reported some form of contact with parents, siblings and relatives following their discharge from the Schools as follows:

- One hundred and eighty nine (189) witnesses (24%), 125 male and 64 female, reported that they were discharged from the School to their family home.
- One hundred and ninety three (193) witnesses (24%), 77 male and 116 female, reported that they were subsequently cared for by extended family, grandparents, aunts, uncles and older siblings.
- One hundred and twenty five (125) witnesses (16%), 45 male and 80 female, reported having no contact with their parents or siblings until recent years when, through their own efforts, and at times with the assistance of family tracing services, contact was re-established.

- 5.27** Witnesses reported that contact with parents or relatives after their discharge from the Schools was influenced by many factors, in particular their age when they were first admitted and the extent of family contact throughout their admission.

*The family was supportive and kept in contact, visits, parcels, summer holidays home. I went back home.*

- 5.28** The nature of family bonds and the strength of extended family relationships prior to admission were reported by witnesses to have influenced their connection with family when they returned home. Contact of any kind with family members while in the Schools was positively connected to ongoing relationships following their discharge. However while almost three quarters of all witnesses were admitted from the care of either their parents or relatives, fewer than one in four witnesses were discharged to the family home.

- 5.29** Two hundred (200) witnesses (25%), 87 male and 113 female, reported that they lost contact with their extended family one way or another through the process of their institutionalisation.

They stated that that being separated from parents, siblings and others with whom they had affectionate bonds was traumatic and had a devastating impact on their emotional development.

*They were giving a man's salary to the religious to keep us, me and my sister and brothers, but would not give it to my dad to keep us together. After my mother died, we were very poor. My father would be dressed so poorly when he visited us. The local TD did try to help my father and spoke to ...Ministers of Government... to help my father get us, but he did not succeed.... Once we were split the link was broken, it's hard to link back up again. We think we can be together, my sisters, but we can't.*

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*My mother tried to get me out when I was 15. She tried, she wrote to ...the Government Minister.... Br ...X...he wrote to her and said "no he is better off here".... My mother she wrote every week, she had it hard too. We were branded as criminals when we came out just because we were poor.*

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*My father, he tried so many times to get us back and they would not let him have us. I did not know where he was ...(when discharged)... he tried really hard. I think he gave up in the end, I remember him crying from the time he came in ...(to visit)... 'til the time he left ...(contact had been lost).... I didn't even know he was dead ...crying.... He always came to see us.*

- 5.30** Admission arrangements were also described as having an impact on the subsequent contact between siblings following discharge. When sibling groups were admitted to out-of-home care, sisters who were placed together in the same School were more likely to maintain contact following discharge. In circumstances where their brothers were placed in separate Schools subsequent contact was more often minimal, and frequently lost, following discharge.

*We are all strangers, we don't know each other, we were all destroyed in our heads, the family is split up, but in touch, the years of separation did too much damage.*

- 5.31** Thirty three (33) witnesses reported that they were given inaccurate information about their parents, including being told that they had no parents or that they were dead and discovering in recent years, following search and tracing, that this was not the case.

*I was told about 15 years ago my mother was dead, they told me all my records were destroyed. ...Then... after 47 years I had contact with my mother, I picked up the phone and she said "it's your mum".*

- 5.32** A number of witnesses also learned in later years that their parents had visited or written to them but that the contact was denied and letters were not passed on. Such discoveries were particularly distressing for witnesses who learned they had unknowingly lived near their parents and/or other relatives for much of their adult lives. Other witnesses reported learning about the existence of parents and relatives after their mother or father had died and experienced a double loss as a result.

*The nuns told me my mother was dead, they said "do you see that star up there, well she is up there". Then a few years ago, I got a phone call to say my mother was dead ...(had just died).... ... I'm in such shock, I can't believe it. I asked some questions and then said "it's got to be my mother", if only I had been given a chance to see her, to say goodbye and to say "look mum I understand and I forgive".*

- 5.33** The upset and associated loss of secure relationships that followed separation from parents and siblings was reported by almost all witnesses, including those who had no known family. In different ways this experience of loss of family left a mark on each witness's memory and was a background to their reports on life in the Schools. The following chapters outline the everyday routine of institutional life reported by the witnesses and the types of abuse they experienced and wished to report.

