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Foster Family-based Treatment Association

## Annotations of Research in Treatment Foster Care

### Citation

Bellamy, J. L. (2008). Behavioral problems following reunification of children in long-term foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*, 216–228.

### Keywords

Reunification, behavior problems

### Research Questions

- What effect does reunification have on children's behavior after long-term stay in foster care?
- What risk factors might affect these outcomes?

### Method

*Subjects:* Using the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW), the study author selected a subsample of 604 children who had been placed into foster care between July 1998 and February 1999. Selection was based on randomly selecting Child Protective Service agencies within nine U.S. strata identified by the author, and then determining the eligibility of participants. Eligibility requirements included being in out-of-home care at the time of sampling, being in out-of-home care approximately 12 months, and being placed into out-of-home care after a child maltreatment investigation or in-home service provision. The average age of the children in the sample was 7.75 years. Of the children selected to participate in the study, 50.33% were male, 39.9% were white non-Hispanic, 46.7% were black non-Hispanic, 13.4% were other non-Hispanic, and 16.7% were Hispanic.

*Design:* Eligible children and their caregivers were measured at baseline, at 18-month follow-up, and at 36-month follow-up.

*Materials/Measures:* Achenbach's Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) was used to measure behavior problems at baseline and at 36-month follow-up. Reunification and living arrangement stability were derived from caseworker and caregiver reports. Caregivers' mental health was measured with the mental health scale of the Short-Form Health Survey. Educational level was collected for the caregivers. Domestic violence was measured with the physical violence subscale of the Conflict Tactics Scale. Caregivers provided information about receipt of government assistance and neighborhood problems such as drug dealing and gang activity. Children's demographic information and maltreatment histories were also collected at baseline.

*Procedures:* After data had been collected for all three measurement periods, multiple imputation was used to handle the problem of missing data. Data were then analyzed by first comparing children who had reunified and had remained reunified across all three measurement periods to children who had remained in foster care during the three measurement periods, looking for presence of behavior problems and changes over time. Children who remained in foster care were then compared on various risk factors to children who reunified at some point during the three measurement periods. To examine the effect of reunification on children's behavior problems, the author used a propensity score matching model. A logistic regression incorporating identified risk factors compared children who remained in foster care and children who had been reunified on internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

### **Results/Findings**

There was a greater percentage of children who exhibited internalizing and externalizing behaviors among the group that had remained in foster care across all three measurement periods, although this percentage decreased slightly over time. Among children who were reunified at the baseline measurement and stayed reunified at all measurement times, there was a slight increase in the number of children with externalizing behaviors and a fourfold increase in the number of children with internalizing behaviors from baseline to 18-month follow-up. By the 36-month follow-up time, the percentage of children exhibiting externalizing behaviors had dipped below the baseline measurement, but the percentage of children with internalizing behaviors was still twice as high as it was at baseline.

Although children who had reunified were exposed to significantly more risks than those who remained in foster care, the difference between the groups on behavioral problems was not statistically significant. Risk factors for internalizing behaviors that produced significant results were poor parental mental health, male gender of the child, and the child's history of sexual abuse.

### **Limitations**

The NSCAW data rely on self-report, which could result in potential bias. Because there were only three measurement points, there could be more intricate patterns of behavior that are not identified, and there could be different patterns for those with shorter or longer stays in foster care. Although steps were taken to reduce the problems caused by missing data, the method still has limitations.

### **Application to Practice**

Although externalizing behaviors among reunified children can often be the cause for intervention, this study shows that clinicians should also be sensitive to internalizing behaviors that may be present but go unnoticed. Because poor parental mental health was found to be a significant risk factor for internalizing behaviors, it may be important to incorporate parental treatment into the intervention of child behavior problems. Preexisting problems or the stress of readjusting to parenting roles may have a negative effect on parental mental health.

### **Contact Information**

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