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Foster Family-based Treatment Association

Annotations of Research in Treatment Foster Care

Citation

Wilson, K. (2006). Can foster carers help children resolve their emotional and behavioural difficulties? *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 11, 495-511.

Keywords

Attachment, foster care, responsive parenting, treatment foster care

Research Questions

- What do we know about the strengths and limitations of foster care?
- How can we use this knowledge to ensure better outcomes for the children and young people involved by bringing about changes in their often difficult and disturbed behavior?

Method

Subjects: The author used a sample from a larger longitudinal study that surveyed 472 placements in seven localities in England, including two London boroughs. The original study obtained information from postal questionnaires to foster parents, social workers, and family placement social workers. In addition, approximately 151 older children in these placements responded to a brief questionnaire asking about their experiences of fostering and what they wanted from it. From this group, 24 detailed case studies were conducted, of which 12 were judged successful and 12 were judged less successful, matched on age, gender, and length of time in placement.

Design: Data from the original study were reexamined within the context of effective foster care. As a means to further understand the author's perspective of the model, a qualitative study was done utilizing face-to-face interviews with foster parents and telephone interviews with social workers.

Measures and Procedures: This study asked foster parents to share their perceptions of the conditions that might lead to a placement breakdown. As the author points out, the existing literature focuses on analyses from other members of the foster care system about factors that stress families and might lead to placement breakdown. This study asks the foster parents themselves to identify reasons that might lead them to terminate a placement.

A model of effective foster care was developed that states the foster care placement outcome depends on three things: (1) the children (their motivation, attractiveness, and difficulty); (2) the

foster parents (their persistence and ability to “set limits”); and (3) the interaction between the two. The author used in-depth interviews to further elaborate on the model.

The children’s characteristics were measured using Goodman’s Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (pro-social and difficulties scores) and a brief questionnaire asking the children about their experience of fostering and what they wanted from it. The latter survey yielded a motivation to be in placement score. Foster parent ratings were threefold: (1) a foster parent parenting score based on the views of social workers, (2) a rejection score based on foster parent responses relating to fondness/acceptance of the foster child, and (3) a child-orientation score based on Marjorie Smith’s instrument that counts the number of different things that a parent might do with a child that the child might be expected to like. The current study did not elaborate on these instruments because they were discussed in detail in previous articles by the current author.

Results/Findings

The author reports that despite difficult behavior displayed by children in care, skilled and committed foster parents can succeed in bringing about changes in their children’s well-being, self-esteem, and behavior. The author also reports that all three hypotheses were supported.

- Foster care placements were more likely to be successful and less likely to disrupt when the children were seen as wanting to stay in the placement, had high pro-social scores, and had low measures of disturbance.
- Foster parents who scored well on dimensions of child-orientation, had above-average ratings on parenting, and had low rejection scores were more likely to have successful placements.
- Responsive parenting, viewed as the way in which the foster parent deals with the child, is felt to be a condition that leads to more successful placements. Success was more likely to occur where the foster parent was fond of the child and saw her or him in a good light.

In the qualitative portion of the study, the author employs the formulation of the dynamics of attachment and interest sharing to build a more complete effective foster caring model. She proposes that foster parents need to be skilled in working with attachment issues and handling difficult child behaviors and that the child needs to offer something to the foster parents.

Limitations

It is difficult to judge whether limitations exist because information about the structure of the study is lacking.

Application to Practice

The findings from this study point to the need for changing perceptions of foster care so that it is seen as an environment in which children’s difficult behaviors, poor social skills, and problems with relationships can be addressed. These findings support efforts that may help to prevent some of the negative spirals that exist in relationships between foster parents and the child in care, which could lead to rejection and placement breakdown. The author supports the use of the foster parent as the change agent for the child’s emotional and behavioral responses by strengthening the child’s coping resources and attachment relationships within a secure setting. The author encourages agencies to formulate placements within the framework of the dynamics

of attachment and interest sharing, which requires adequate training, supervision, and support to meet the complex needs of foster parents as they provide for children in their care.

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