

F F T A



Foster Family-based Treatment Association

Annotations of Research in Treatment Foster Care

Citation

Rubin, D., O'Reilly, A., Luan, X., & Localio, A. (2007). The impact of placement stability on behavioral well-being for children in foster care. *Pediatrics, 119*, 336–344.

Keywords

Child behavior, placement stability, NSCAW, foster care

Research Question

- What is the independent impact of placement stability on behavioral problems 18 months after being placed in foster care?

Method

Subjects: The researchers selected 729 children/youths from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) who were in a new out-of-home placement. NSCAW was a nationally representative prospective cohort study, the primary aim of which was to study the health and well-being of children reported to child welfare over a 3-year follow-up period.

Materials/Measures: Well-being was categorized as early stability (stable placement within 45 days), late stability (stable placement after 45 days), and unstable placement (never achieving stability).

Procedures: Propensity scores predicting placement instability based on baseline attributes were divided into low-, medium-, and high-risk categories and added to a regression model to examine the independent association between placement stability and behavioral well-being using the Child Behavior Checklist and temperament scores from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

Results/Findings

Half (52%) of the children achieved early stability, 19% achieved later stability, and a little over a quarter (28%) remained unstable. Early-stabilizing children were younger and more likely to have fewer behavioral problems, no prior history with child welfare, and birth parents without mental health problems. Even after accounting for these baseline attributes, stability of placement was an important predictor of behavioral well-being at 18 months following entry into foster care. Children with unstable placements had twice the odds of having behavior problems as did children who had achieved early stability.

Limitations

The study did not include other measures of well-being. Stability in care was not differentiated between kin and nonkin care. Studies using data from NSCAW have been criticized because the survey is a national sample that does not easily generalize to local child welfare systems.

Application to Practice

Providers of foster care services often struggle with the “chicken and the egg” problem—do behavioral health problems cause placement instability or does placement instability cause behavioral health problems? Although there is a cascading effect, this study, using a nationally representative sample of children who have been maltreated and followed for 18 months, strongly suggests that placement stability, independent of the child’s behavior problems at entry into care, can influence the child’s well-being. Children who failed to achieve stability were at greater risk of behavior problems compared with children who achieved any stability in foster care.

This study adds to the growing research literature revealing that placement disruptions associate with negative outcomes for children who are the victims of maltreatment. Children often come into Treatment Foster Care (TFC) after failing to achieve stability, and most have serious emotional problems. Challenges to placement stability are predictable and should be anticipated, with plans created in anticipation of the challenges. TFC providers need to look for ways to increase the resources they devote toward stabilizing children in placement through accessing specialized treatment and supporting foster parents in managing difficult child behavior issues. Finally, providers need to work closely with child welfare agencies, communicating closely with them during periods of crisis and advocating for alternatives to placement change during these challenging periods.

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