

CHILDREN AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTER

Multiple Placements in Foster Care: Literature Review of Correlates and Predictors

February, 2004

This project is supported by the Children and Family Research Center, School of Social Work, University Of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which is funded in part by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

Multiple Placements in Foster Care: Literature Review of Correlates and Predictors

Every child deserves a stable and lasting family life and should not be deprived of it except for urgent and compelling reasons. This principle of family stability was first espoused almost one-hundred years ago at the 1909 White House Conference on Dependent Children. While progress has been made in preventing the unnecessary removal of children from their parents and in finding other permanent families for children unable to return home, concerns remain for the thousands of foster children who are left behind in public foster care and run the risk of experiencing multiple placements (Bazelton Center for Mental Health Law, 2003).

Prevalence of Placement Instability

Most children who are placed in foster care experience infrequent changes in their placements (Pardeck, 1984; Proch & Taber, 1985). Nonetheless a significant proportion of those who remain in care experience multiple moves (Teather, Davidson, & Pecora, 1994). A common standard is that three or more moves (four placements) constitute *placement instability* (Hartnett, Falconnier, Leathers & Testa, 1999; Webster, Barth & Needell, 2000). By this measure, approximately 40 percent of children in Illinois foster care have unstable placement histories.

Reasons for Movement

A few studies have attempted to sort out the reasons for movement in foster care. The Research Center's 1999 study found that almost one-half of all replacements was either policy-related (e.g. emergency homes, sibling consolidation, kinship placement) or related to problems in the foster home or agency (Hartnett, Falconnier, Leathers & Testa, 1999). A recently completed, unpublished study of placement instability in San Diego County in California found that seven out of ten placement changes occurred for system- or policy-related reasons.

Correlates with Child Well-Being

In the absence of experimental data, the causal impact of placement instability on child well-being is difficult to disentangle. A large body of evidence links multiple placements with behavioral and mental health problems, educational difficulties, and juvenile delinquency (Barber, Delfabbro, & Cooper, 2001; Cooper, Peterson, & Meier, 1987; Dore & Eisner, 1993; Hartnett, Falconnier, Leathers, & Testa, 1999; Palmer, 1996; Pardeck, 1984; Proch & Taber, 1985; Proch & Taber, 1987; Smith, Stormshak, Chamberlain, & Whaley, 2001; Stone & Stone, 1983). This correlation can arise either because problem behaviors produce instability or repeated changes compromise child well-being.

Child development theory posits that repeated movements jeopardize the opportunity of children to develop secure attachments with caregivers and trusting relations with adults (Bowlby, 1973; Robertson & Robertson, 1989). Jacobsen and Miller (1999) found that a stable and familiar placement facilitated bonds of attachment of children even to mothers who were currently not their custodial caregivers. A longitudinal study of placement instability in San Diego County showed that for children who initially did not exhibit behavior problems, the number of placements was associated with later behavioral problems (Newton, Litownik, & Landsverk, 2000). Another found that infants who experience multiple placements experience problems with attachment and bonding (Schwartz, Ortega, Guo, & Fishman, 1994). A recently completed, unpublished longitudinal study by the Research Center showed that multiple placements before age 14 were associated with higher rates of delinquency filings after age 14 (Ryan & Testa, 2004). Still, the deleterious consequences of placement instability have not been uniformly upheld. Some studies fail to substantiate a relationship between the number of moves a child undergoes and the well-being of the child (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Proch & Taber, 1985).

Instability Risk Factors

Problem behaviors, prior instability, and age of the child at placement have all been found to be important predictors of placement instability.

Problem Behaviors: The Center's 1999 study found that child behavioral need was the most important reason for placement changes in unrelated foster homes. Forty-five percent of foster parents and nearly forty percent of caseworkers reported that the foster home's inability to deal with the child's behavioral problems, such as physical aggression, property destruction, disobedience, and police involvement, was among the top two reasons for the placement's ending. The 2000 San Diego study also found that initial externalizing behaviors (e.g. delinquent and aggressive behaviors) were the most important predictor of placement changes (Newton, Litownik, & Landsverk, 2000).

Prior Instability: Another California study found that a higher number of placement changes was linked to higher rates of subsequent instability (Webster, Barth & Needell, 2000). Children who had two or more moves during their first year of care were more likely to experience placement instability in long-term foster care than children who had two or fewer placements during their first year.

Age at Placement: There is also much evidence that older children are more likely to experience multiple placements than younger children (Hartnett, Falconnier, Leathers, & Testa, 1999; Pardeck, 1984; Proch & Taber, 1987; Smith, Stormshak, Chamberlain, & Whaley, 2001; Webster, Barth, Needell, 2000; Wulczyn, Kogan, & Harden, 2003). Children entering care as toddlers has also been found to be associated with placement instability (Webster, Barth, & Needell, 2000). Some investigations have found that the effects of age drop out once child behavioral problems are taken into account ((Newton, Litownik, & Landsverk, 2000), but others find these effects remain significant (Hartnett, Falconnier, Leathers & Testa, 1999).

Other Predictors: Being removed for reasons other than neglect has been shown to increase the likelihood for placement instability (Webster, Barth, Needell, 2000). Children from homes with a history of substance abuse have also been shown to experience more frequent moves (Cooper, Peterson, & Meier, 1987; Pardeck, 1984). Children were found to experience fewer placements when their parents prepared them for placement and even when they accompanied them on pre-placement visits and to the placement itself (Palmer, 1996). The longer time a child

awaits a permanent home with an adoptive parent or guardian, the more likely the child is to experience multiple placements (Pardeck, 1984; Proch & Taber, 1985).

Protective Factors for Stability

Research suggests that placement stability might depend as much on foster parent and worker characteristics than on the behavioral characteristics of foster children (Teather, Davidson, & Pecora, 1994).

Kinship Care: Children placed formally with relatives have demonstrated greater placement stability than children placed with non-related foster families (Testa, 2001; Webster, Barth, & Needell, 2000). After appropriate safety checks, kinship care is the safest and most stable form of substitute care that can be made available to children who are removed from parental custody (Garnier & Portner, 2000). But kinship care is not an unconditional safety net. Inadequate financial support, caregiver health, and a lack of extended family support services can undermine the stability of kinship care (Terling-Watt, 2001).

Foster Family Care: The Center's 1999 study compared stable with disrupted placements and identified the following predictors of stability in unrelated foster homes: specialized foster care, receipt of therapy, and foster parent empathy and tolerance. Better matching of children who exhibit difficult behaviors with foster parents who are adequately trained and equipped can lead to preventing placement breakdown (Dore & Eisner, 1993; Proch & Taber, 1985; Proch & Taber, 1987). A study of a professional foster care program in Cook County, Illinois reported higher levels of stability when compared to both specialized and regular foster homes (Testa & Rolock, 1999). A study of foster parent characteristics found that authoritative foster mothers, who set limits while being accepting of behavioral infractions, are less likely to become upset when children misbehave and are less punitive than authoritarian mothers (Redding, Fried, & Britner, 2000). Foster families, who are more accepting and do not place the responsibility for adapting exclusively on the foster youth, also exhibit greater stability (Butler & Charles, 1999). The embeddedness of a foster family in a network of social support is associated with fewer disruptions. Mothers who reported knowing their neighbors well and having at least three good

friends had foster children who were less likely to experience placement disruption than children in more socially isolated foster families (Fine, 1993, as cited in Redding, Fried, & Britner, 2000).

Caseworker Characteristics: Several caseworker characteristics have been identified as related to placement stability. The more time and attention a caseworker expends on the case and with the foster family, the better the rapport with the family, and low caseworker turnover, are all associated placement stability (Stone & Stone, 1983; Teather, Davidson, & Pecora, 1994).

Conclusions

A review of the literature reinforces the value of a structured system of needs-assessment that develops individualized care plans for children, targets the recruitment of empathic caregivers and trained specialized foster homes, routinely evaluates high-need children, and offers appropriate interventions to children and foster caregivers to minimize placement instability.

References

- Barber, J.G., & Delfabbro, P.H. (2003). Placement stability and the psychosocial well-being of children in foster care. *Research on Social Work Practice, 13*(4), 415-431.
- Barber, J.G., & Delfabbro, P.H., & Cooper, L.L. (2001). The predictors of unsuccessful transition to foster care. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 42*, 785-790.
- Bazelton Center for Mental Health Law (2003). *Suit against nation's largest child welfare system settled with commitment to reform*. Los Angeles, CA: Bazelton Center for Mental Health Law. www.bazelton.org/newsroom/3-17-3katiea.htm
- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss: Separation (Vol. 2)*. New York: Basic Books.
- Butler, S., & Charles, M. (1999). 'The past, the present, but never the future': Thematic representations of fostering disruption. *Child & Family Social Work, 4*(1), 9-19.
- Cooper, C.S., Peterson, N.L., & Meier, J.H. (1987). Variables associated with disrupted placement in a select sample of abused and neglected children. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 11*, 75-86.
- Dore, M.M., & Eisner, E. (1993). Child-related dimensions of placement stability in treatment foster care. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal, 10*, 301-317.
- Garnier, P.C. & Poertner, J. (2000). Using administrative data to assess child safety in out-of-home care. *Child Welfare, 79* (5), 597-613.
- Hartnett, M.A., Leathers, S., Falconnier, L., & Testa, M. (1999). Placement stability study. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center.
- Jacobsen, T. & Miller, L.J. (1999). Pp. 347-378 in Solomon, J. & George, C. (Eds). Attachment Disorganization. New York: Guildford.
- Newton, R.R., Litrownik, A.J., & Landsverk, J.A. (2000). Children and youth in foster care: Disentangling the relationship between problem behaviors and number of placements. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 24*(10), 1363-1374.
- Palmer, S. (1996). Placement stability and inclusive practice in foster care: An empirical study. *Children & Youth Services Review, 18*(7), 589-601.
- Pardeck, J.T. (1984). Multiple placement of children in foster family care: An empirical analysis. *Social Work, 29*, 506-509.

- Proch, K., & Taber, M. (1985). Placement disruption: A review of research. *Children and Youth Services Review, 7*, 309-320.
- Proch, K., & Taber, M. (1987). Alienated adolescents in foster care. *Social Work Research & Abstracts, 23*, 9-13.
- Redding, R.E., Fried, C., & Britner, P.A. (2000). Predictors of placement outcomes in treatment foster care: Implications for foster parent selection and service delivery. *Journal of Child & Family Studies, 9*(4), 425-447.
- Robertson, J. & Robertson, J. (1989). *Separation and the very young*. London: Free Association Books.
- Schwartz, I.M., Ortega, R., & Guo, S. (1994). Infants in nonpermanent placement. *Social Service Review, 68*, 405-416.
- Smith, D.K., Stormshak, E., Chamberlain, P., & Whaley, R.B. (2001). Placement disruption in treatment foster care. *Journal of Emotional & Behavioral Disorders, 9*(3), 200-205.
- Teather, E.C., Davidson, S.D., & Pecora, P.J. (1994). *Placement disruption in family foster care: The Casey Family Program*. Seattle, WA: The Casey Family Program Headquarters & The Honolulu Division.
- Terling-Watt, T. (2001). Permanency in kinship care: an exploration of disruption rates and factors associated with placement disruption. *Children & Youth Services Review, 23*(2), 111-126.
- Testa, M. (2002). Kinship care and permanency. *Journal of Social Service Research, 28*(1), 25-43.
- Testa, M.F., & Rolock, N. (1999). Professional foster care: A future worth pursuing? *Child Welfare, 78*(1), 108-124.
- Webster, D., Barth, R.P., & Needell, B. (2000). Placement stability for children in out-of-home care: A longitudinal analysis. *Child Welfare, 79*(5), 614-632.
- Wulczyn, F., Kogan, J., & Harden, B.J. (2003). Placement stability and movement trajectories. *Social Service Review, 77*(2), 212-236.