

Children's Relationship with Foster Caregivers: Findings from 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study

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Having a good relationship with a foster caregiver contributes substantially to children's well-being in foster care. Assessing this relationship for Illinois children helps us understand and potentially help improve their quality of life. Previous data from 1999 to 2005 in Illinois and nationally show that children in out-of-home care have positive relationships with their foster caregivers,¹ but this was not studied for a number of years after that.

This research brief updates the assessment of Illinois children's relationship with their foster caregivers using data collected in 2017-2018. This brief is one in a series that presents capsule summaries of results from the 2017 Illinois Child-Well-Being Study in different domains of well-being.

2017 Illinois Study of Child Well-Being

The 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study provides a snapshot of the well-being of children and youth in out-of-home care in Illinois in 2017. The Children and Family Research Center (CFRC) drew a stratified random sample of 700 children and youth from the population of children and youth in DCFS care in October 2017. The Survey Research Laboratory of the University of Illinois at Chicago conducted the interviews with caseworkers, foster care providers, and children age seven and older between December 2017 and July 2018. For more information, see the full report of the study.²

¹ Bruhn, C., Helton, J., Cross, T.P., Shumow, L. & Testa, M. (2008). Well-being. In Rolock, N. & Testa, M. (Eds.) *Conditions of children in or at risk of foster care in Illinois 2007: An assessment of their safety, stability, continuity, permanence, and well-being*. Children and Family Research Center, School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Urbana, IL; Hartnett, M.A. & Bruhn, C. (2006). *The Illinois Child Well-Being Study. Year One Report*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center; Hartnett, M.A., Bruhn, C., Helton, J., Fuller, T. & Steiner, L. (2009). *Illinois Child Well-Being Study: Year Two Final Report*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Johnson, P. R., Yoken, C., & Voss, R. (1995). Family foster care placement: The child's perspective. *Child Welfare, 74*, 959-974; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families (2001). *National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being: One Year in Foster Care Report*. Washington, D.C.

² Cross, T.P., Tran, S., Hernandez, A., & Rhodes, E. (2019). *The 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study: Initial Report*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Children’s Positive Experience of Their Foster Caregiver

A large majority of children reported that they felt good when they were with their caregiver (81.7%) and felt close to them (83.7%). Children also reported that they felt their caregiver cared about them (88.1%), trusted them (55.1%), helped them (78.9%), thought they were capable (84.7%), and enjoyed spending time with them (72.4%).

Children reported a range of normal activities with their caregiver in the previous four weeks. Majorities of children reported shopping (83.5%) and going to the movies with their caregivers (56.8%). Most children talked over things with their caregiver: grades (80.3%), other school things (71.8%), personal problems (55.1%), and dating (51.2%). Smaller percentages of children and youth reported going to a religious observance with their caregiver (39.8%) or doing a school project with them (22.4%), though we do not know how often such activities were a part of foster families’ lives. Almost all youth reported that they liked living with their foster family and felt like part of the family. A large majority of children felt that they could stay with their foster caregivers until they grew up (86.1%).

Children were asked where they would like to live now, where they expected to live within the next year, and whom they will live with when they turn 16 years-old. About a third of children (32.3%) reported wanting to live with their current foster caregiver and most children (64.9%) expected to be living with their current foster caregiver next year. Almost a third of children (30.1%) wanted to live with their current foster parent when they turn 16.

Large majorities of children said that their caregivers “very often” knew where they were (85.0%) and whom they were with (79.7%). The majority of caregivers set curfews (72.0%), and they usually asked when the child would return home, but this was much more frequent for girls (68.3%) than boys (31.7%). Caregivers never left their child at home alone.

There was no significant difference between the ratings children gave foster caregivers who were kin (also known as “kinship caregivers”), and the ratings they gave foster caregivers who were not related. A large majority of both types of caregivers received positive scores.

Sometimes Experiences are Challenging

Some children experienced challenges with their caregivers; for example, 42.7% said it was “sort of true” or “very true” that their caregiver did not know how the child felt about things. Some children (21.6%) said it was “sort of true” that their caregiver does not let them make their own decisions, and 17.0% said it was “sort of true” that they did not know what their caregiver wanted from them. However, the positive reports from children far outnumbered the challenges.

Children and Caregivers have Positive Feelings about Adoption

Most children and youth wanted their caregiver to adopt them (63.0%). Likewise, caseworkers reported that a majority of caregivers (86.3%) expressed interest in adopting their child and almost all (91.4%) had plans to adopt if the child did not return home. Factors that supported the caregivers' decision to adopt the child include love and affection (92.7%), the child being related to the foster family (70.4%), and the caregivers' long-term intention to adopt (59.4%). Among the small number of caregivers who did not express an interest in adopting, the biggest reasons were the expectation that the child would return to their original home (38.8%), and interest by the child's family members in adopting the child (33.1%).

Discussion

Most children reported positive experiences with caregivers, whether or not the caregiver was a relative. A large majority of caregivers was reportedly interested in adopting the child, and most children wanted their foster caregiver to adopt them. Children usually reported that caregivers monitored them and disciplined in appropriate ways. These results are consistent with previous research both in Illinois and nationally.

The finding that children were just as positive if they had a kin caregiver or a non-kin caregiver might be a little surprising. We might expect children to feel more positive about a grandmother or aunt or uncle than about a foster parent who they were not related to. The lack of difference might reflect a "ceiling effect"—both kin and non-kin caregivers were rated positively; and there may not have been enough positive points on the scale to show any difference. It is also possible that children in kin and non-kin care are in very different situations—children with an unrelated foster parent might rate them very highly because they do not have a relative they are close to. An isolated child receiving love and support from a foster parent could easily feel just as positively as another child feels about a kin caregiver.

This analysis has limitations. The well-being study lacks follow-up data to measure such outcomes as the stability of foster care placements and follow-through on adoption. It is also possible that children felt some demand to give positive ratings, even though interviewers talked to children without caregivers present and assured children of confidentiality. However, the fact that most in a random sample of Illinois children in out-of-home care reported an enduring positive relationship with their foster parent is a powerful statement about their contribution to children's quality of life.

Child welfare service agencies often receive negative publicity related to rare tragedies that make the newspaper headlines.³ However, day after day, foster parents provide help and support that children value and count on, and DCFS and other child welfare agencies deserve credit.

³ Gainsborough, J. (2010) *Scandalous politics*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press

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