How do Foster Families Influence the Behavioral Outcomes of Children in Out-of-Home Care?

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Background

- Children in out-of-home care have experienced much adversity along with family disruption.

- Research indicates that children in out-of-home care have higher rates of behavioral difficulties in comparison to children with maltreatment histories who remain in their homes (Burns et al., 2004; Doyle, 2007; Fernandez, 2006; Keil & Price, 2006; Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006; Sullivan & van Zyl, 2008).
Background

- The extent to which children in out-of-home care exhibit behavioral difficulties is influenced by a number of variables.

- Masten (2006) found that outcomes for children with maltreatment histories can be grouped into three broad categories:
  - Individual differences
  - Relationships and parenting
  - Community influences
Study Objectives

• Track behavioral functioning in three domains over a 3-year period for school-age children in out-of-home care in Ontario (Canada)
  • Conduct problems
  • Emotional difficulties
  • Prosocial behavior

• Examine predictors of behavioral trajectories, with a particular focus on the influence of foster caregiver variables
Participants

• Data from the Ontario Looking After Children (OnLAC) project
  – Canadian adaptation of the Assessment and Action Record (AAR-C2)
• Children in foster care placements who were 5-9 years old in 2007 and who had behavioral data on at least 2 time points (2008, 2009, 2010)
• N = 362 (Conduct, Emotional), N = 364 (Prosocial)
• 55% boys, 45% girls
• Average age was 7.6 years (SD= 1.3)
Foster caregivers responded to items from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman et al., 2000)

- Conduct (5 items, e.g., *often fights with other children or bullies them*)
- Emotional (5 items, e.g., *often unhappy, depressed, or tearful*)
- Prosocial (5 items, e.g., *considerate of other people’s feelings*)
Foster Family Predictors

- Positive parenting *(How often do you do something special with the child that he/she enjoys?)*
- Ineffective parenting *(How often do you feel you are having problems managing the child in general?)*
- Years of fostering *(Up to 3 years, 4-9 years, or 10+ years)*
- Caregiver training *(PRIDE, Foster parenting techniques)*
- Child attachment to foster parent *(definite attachment or little to no attachment)*
- Number of children in the home
Child Predictors

- Child sex
- Age at first placement
- Number of placement changes
- Contact with biological parents (regular contact in person/telephone or no regular contact)
- Child receiving treatment (psychiatrist, psychologist, and/or other mental health provider)
- Adverse life experiences (death of a birth parent, severe poverty)
Trajectories for Conduct Problems

- **Moderate, stable conduct (31.5%)**
- **Low, stable conduct (68.5%)**
Trajectories for Emotional Difficulties

- **Moderate-high, descending emotional** (8.4%)
- **Low-moderate, stable emotional** (52.5%)
- **Low, stable emotional** (39.1%)
Trajectories for Prosocial Behavior

- **High, stable prosocial (16.7%)**
- **Moderate-high, stable prosocial (68.9%)**
- **Low-moderate, increasing prosocial (14.4%)**

Year

![Graph showing trajectories for prosocial behavior between 2008 and 2010.](image-url)
Results for Conduct Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor Variables</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineffective parenting</td>
<td>1.17***</td>
<td>1.09-1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children in the home</td>
<td>1.16**</td>
<td>1.01-1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child receiving treatment</td>
<td>1.98**</td>
<td>1.16-3.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reference group is low, stable conduct problems
OR = Odds ratio; CI = Confidence interval
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001
## Results for Emotional Difficulties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor Variables</th>
<th>Low-moderate, stable emotional</th>
<th>Moderate-high, descending emotional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>95% CI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years fostering</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineffective parenting</td>
<td>1.14***</td>
<td>1.06-1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive parenting</td>
<td>1.13**</td>
<td>1.04-1.24</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child receiving treatment</td>
<td>2.13**</td>
<td>1.30-3.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reference group is low, stable emotional difficulties
OR = Odds ratio; CI = Confidence interval
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001
# Results for Prosocial Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor Variables</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive parenting</td>
<td>.85*</td>
<td>.72-.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child attachment</td>
<td>4.77*</td>
<td>1.26-18.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children in the home</td>
<td>.64**</td>
<td>.49-.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child receiving treatment</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.10-.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reference group is low-moderate, increasing prosocial behavior

OR = Odds ratio; CI = Confidence interval

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001
Discussion

• There were distinct groups of foster care children in terms of behavioral functioning across time (conduct, emotional, prosocial)

• There was not much change in behavioral functioning over time.
  – Only three years were assessed
  – Too large of an age cohort
  – Informant bias
  – Change in informant of children’s behaviors (foster caregiver)
Discussion

- Foster families appear to influence the behavioral development of children in their care
- For parenting,
  - Ineffective parenting predicted worse behavioral functioning over time (conduct, emotional)
  - Positive parenting predicted worse behavioral functioning over time (one of the emotional and one of the prosocial trajectory groups)
- Fewer children in the foster home predicted better behavioral functioning over time (conduct, one of the prosocial trajectory groups)
Discussion

• Definite attachment to the foster caregiver was associated with better behavioral outcomes (one of the prosocial trajectory groups, effect for emotional wiped out by inclusion of child variables)

• For child variables, receiving treatment in Year 7 was associated with worse behavioral outcomes (conduct, one of the emotional and one of the prosocial trajectory groups)