

F F T A



Foster Family-based Treatment Association

Annotations of Research in Treatment Foster Care

Citation

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Keywords

Foster care, social environment, important nonparental adults

Research Questions

- How do older foster care youth compare to other youth on indicators of well-being and adjustment?
- Do foster care youth differ from other youth in their perceived social environments?
- Are the associations between measures of well-being and adjustment and perceived social environments different for the two groups?

Method

Subjects: The foster care participants were randomly selected from a complete list (188 foster care youth) of all youth 17 years of age or older in foster care in Los Angeles County for at least one year. The participants were in the protective custody of Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services and lived in a variety of situations: nonkin foster homes (58%), kin foster homes (17%), group homes (20%), independent living programs (3%), and detention centers (2%). Out of the full list of 188 foster care youth, 163 foster care youth (46% male and 54% female) participated.

The comparison sample of participants consisted of 163 high school students from four Los Angeles area high schools who were selected from a larger sample of 1,183 youth from another study and matched to the foster care sample on age, gender, and ethnicity. Most of the comparison participants' parents were at least high school graduates, and 22% of the fathers and 29% of the mothers had a 4-year college degree or beyond. Close to a majority of the participants reported living with their intact, biological family (45%), 34% lived with a single parent, 13% lived with a parent and a stepparent, and 8% had other living arrangements (e.g., joint custody). None of the matched sample lived in foster care.

Design: This study examined the well-being and adjustment of older youth prior to the transition from foster care to independence and focused on the quality of youths' social environments in multiple domains (parents, peers, and important nonparental adults) in order to explore whether

they may complement and compensate for one another. The researchers began with three main hypotheses:

1. The youth in the foster care system would have higher levels of depressed mood and problem behavior and lower levels of self-esteem, work orientation, and academic achievement.
2. Compared to the comparison group, foster care youth would perceive their biological parents and peers as affording them lower levels of warmth and support and as having higher levels of problem behavior and depressed mood.
3. For foster care youth, the associations between parental variables and adolescent well-being would be weaker, and the associations between important nonparental adults and peer social support with well-being would be stronger, than those found in the comparison sample.

Materials/Measures: Researchers used two main measurement categories: adolescent well-being and adjustment, and perceived social environment. In the first category, depressed mood was assessed using the 20-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D Scale). Educational aspirations and educational expectations were assessed by questions using a 4-point scale of responses. Problem behavior was assessed by a 20-item misconduct scale. Self-esteem was assessed by the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Work orientation was measured by the 10-item Work Orientation Scale. In the second category (perceived social environment), depressed outlook of peers and important nonparental adult was assessed by 3-item scales. Perceived problem behavior of peers and important nonparental adult was measured by 7-item scales. Support from parents, important nonparental adults, and peers were measured by identical 7-item scales. The preceding scales were developed prior to the present study. Perceived warmth and acceptance from parents and peers was measured by 8-item scales based on the Parental (Peer) Warmth and Acceptance Scale.

Procedures: The foster care youth completed a survey and participated in an individual, in-person interview. The comparison group youth completed a survey during a regular class period at their schools.

Results/Findings

The youth in foster care had significantly higher levels of work orientation, but lower grades in school and lower educational expectations and aspirations. No differences were found for the depressed mood, self-esteem, and problem behavior areas. In the perceived social environment category, youth in foster care reported receiving less support from their parents, but more support from their important nonparental adults. Foster care youth were more likely to have important nonparental adults than were the comparison group youth, and girls were more likely to have important nonparental adults than boys. In addition, foster care youth reported greater involvement in problem behavior by their peers, but less by their important nonparental adults. The comparison group reported more support from their parents than from important nonparental adults and more support from their important nonparental adults than from their peers. Based on the associations between the social environment and adolescent adjustment domain, perceived warmth was not related to either achievement or adolescent misconduct.

Limitations

All data were based on adolescents' self-report, and some of the social support scales that were administered to the foster care youth were not available for the comparison sample (i.e.,

important nonparental adults' warmth and acceptance, parental depressed mood, and parental involvement in problem behavior). Because this study is cross-sectional, the researchers cannot claim that associations between measures of the social environment and adolescent well-being are causal in nature. Studies that follow youth from pre- to post-emancipation, using appropriate comparison groups, will provide needed information on these at-risk youth. Foster care youths' future is uncertain after they leave the foster care system. Future research should examine whether well-being and adjustment decline upon leaving the foster care system.

Application to Practice

This study suggests the important role that nonparental adults play in the lives of youth in foster care, particularly as they prepare to leave the system. Providers of foster care services should recognize the importance of nonparental adult support and assist youth in making these connections. Providers should also assist foster care youth in maintaining these connections throughout their stay in the foster care system.

Contact Information:

Susan P. Farruggia, PhD, E-mail: s.farruggia@auckland.ac.nz

This annotation was written by Gizem Arat, MSW, a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh.