

F F T A



Foster Family-based Treatment Association

Annotations of Research in Treatment Foster Care

Citation

Southerland, D. G., Mustillo, S. A., Farmer, E. M. Z., Stambaugh, L. F., & Murray, M. (2009). What's the relationship got to do with it? Understanding the therapeutic relationship in therapeutic foster care. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 26, 49–63.

Keywords

Therapeutic foster care, therapeutic relationship, child mental health, evidence-based practice of social work, common process factors

Research Question

- Is the therapeutic relationship significantly related to the child's behavioral and functional outcomes?

Method

Subjects: For this study, 183 subjects were selected from the members of the Willie M. program residing in treatment foster care in North Carolina between June 1999 and May 2001. The Willie M. program provides services for seriously emotionally, neurologically, or mentally handicapped youth who are violent or assaultive.

Design: This was an exploratory study in an area of service that the authors indicate has not been studied previously. This study was designed to measure the influence of the therapeutic relationship between the TFC parent and the child in care on the emotional and behavioral functioning of the child. The researchers also looked at the influence of the TFC parent's view of his or her role, the amount of training and supervision the TFC parent received, and the parent's level of satisfaction with the supervision. Data were collected from existing records on the youth and interviews with the TFC parents.

Materials/Measures: The severity of the problems the child was dealing with was measured using the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale for Children. The data collected from the TFC parents were analyzed using the Trusting Relationship Questionnaire and the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale. The authors indicate that each of these tools has good reliability and validity ratings.

Results/Findings

The reported findings indicate that the strength of the relationship between the child and parent is a key factor in the improved functioning of the child. Of most interest to the authors was the finding that children whose TFC parents saw their primary role more as a parent than as a treatment provider showed more improvement than children whose parents saw themselves as

more of a treatment provider. The findings for experience, training, and the quality of the supervisory relationship, while not significant, all tended toward supporting the position that these are necessary but not sufficient factors for change.

Limitations

Because this is an exploratory study based on participants in one program, it has limited generalizability. The study is also based on existing records and on the self-reports of the TFC parents. It is hoped that future studies which build on this one would include interviews of the children and comparisons of the TFC parents' views of the supervisory relationship with those of the supervisors. As the authors point out, this is also a cross-sectional study and thus does not consider the ongoing developmental nature of the therapeutic relationship. Children who were included in the study had been in the program between 2 months and 10 years; thus the nature of the therapeutic relationship would vary widely.

Application to Practice

This study, while exploratory, does support the concept of treatment foster care, specifically the value of the professionally informed parent-child relationship for the positive behavioral and emotional development of the child in care. Although the findings regarding parent training and supervision were not significant, the study does support the training and supervision provided by TFC programs.

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