

F F T A



Foster Family-based Treatment Association

Annotations of Research in Treatment Foster Care

Citation

Miller, K., Fisher, P., Fetrow, B., & Jordan, K. (2006). Trouble on the journey home: Reunification failures in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 28*, 260–274.

Keywords

Foster care; foster children; reunification; reunification failures

Research Questions

- What factors/practices correlate with foster care reunification failures?
- What factors/practices aid in successful reunification efforts?

Reunification with the primary family is the predominate goal of the majority of youth placed in foster care settings (others include adoption, independent living, and emancipation). Roughly 50% of the nearly 600,000 foster youth in care are placed in a non-relative family foster home. As many of these reunifications result in failure, leading to recidivism (30%), the authors chose to examine post-reunification variables (i.e., parent characteristics, child characteristics, parent service utilization, child service utilization, family environment, and neighborhood environment) as they relate to reunification failure.

Method

Subjects: Data utilized in this study were collected from a subsample of individuals taking part in a related study evaluating early intervention foster care programs. A total of 52 children in the related study met the authors' requirements (3–6 years of age, not yet enrolled in first grade, and having reunification as their primary permanency goal), and 16 of those youth (31%) were reunified with at least one birth parent within 3 months of the initiation of the study. The ethnic composition of the sample represented that of the region from which data were collected, and no significant differences were found between reunified families and the regular foster care families. Finally, most of the participating families received some sort of governmental financial assistance.

Design: In this correlation study, data were examined from children assigned to a regular foster care comparison group to assess specific variables that impacted successful or failed reunification efforts. Demographic/general information collected for examination included the following:

- child age at reunification
- mother's age
- time in care prior to reunification

- time spent with biological parents
- annual household income
- types of governmental assistance
- parental education
- primary reason for placement
- child maltreatment
- neighborhood quality
- number of children and adults per household

Materials/Measures and Procedures: Pertinent information was gathered via the following:

1. Review of the child's case file records (child maltreatment was coded by the Maltreatment Classification System)
2. Structured interviews with foster parents and biological families to assess service utilization (assessors received 4–6 hours of training on interview techniques and data collection/coding, and ongoing training as necessary)
3. Data collected within 3 months of reunification from the 30-item measure regarding the child's contact with service professionals: the Family and Professional Collaboration Scale (FPCS; Dechillo, Koren, & Schultze, 1994)
4. Data collected regarding family and neighborhood environment within 3 months of post-reunification utilizing the Home Visitor Impression Scale (HVIMP; Fisher & Greenly, 2000) and the Home Environment Impression Scale (HOME; Fisher and Greenly, 2000)

For participating in the study, biological families were offered \$25 for each successful interview, were proffered questionnaire packets, and received a home visit. Food was provided for evening appointments, and travel expenses were paid for out-of-town families visiting the center. Finally, families who completed their questionnaire packets on time were entered in a prize raffle.

Results/Findings

The authors reported that, of the 16 reunifications examined, there were 5 failures. (Of the failures, children spent an average of 7.3 months in their biological family home.)

- Parent characteristics, such as receipt of governmental financial aid, household income, maternal education level, and maternal age, did not differ significantly between failed and intact reunifications.
- The child's age and the type of maltreatment perpetrated did not present any significant differences between failed and intact reunifications.
- The rate at which mothers visited dentists and medical specialists within the first 3 months of reunification showed negative associations with reunification success.
- Parent utilization of substance abuse treatment was negatively associated with reunification success whereas parent participation in individual, marital, or group therapy did not correlate significantly with failed or intact reunifications.

- Consistent provision of information and referrals to parents by the primary service provider was linked with reunification success.
- Time spent in foster care before reunification was not correlated with either success or failure.
- Children receiving educational and therapeutic services were linked to reunification success.
- Parenting quality (organization, monitoring, and appropriate discipline, including removal punishments and positive reinforcement) clearly impacted reunification success.
- Overall quality of physical home environment was linked with success of reunification.

Limitations

Clearly the major limitation of this study was the small sample size ($n = 16$), limiting more complex, multivariate data analyses and model testing. The authors recommended replication studies using larger, more ethnically and age diverse samples to support the group differences found in this particular study.

Application to Practice

The use of independent assessors to conduct interviews, home observations, and neighborhood observations is a clear strength of the study, suggesting there is a need to widen investigations beyond those factors more typically found in state information management systems. Many past studies have noted the failure of some state agencies to effectively address the specific needs of children and parents who are reunified after out-of-home care. This study expanded those previous studies by identifying factors associated with poverty, parental substance abuse, parenting skills, physical home environment, and service utilization, expounding on the variable currently studied as related to reunification failures. Of great note is the finding that (despite the small sample size) reunification with parents who were substance abusers or in substance abuse treatment typically resulted in reunification failure. Finally, the authors' posit that parenting skills, educational services to the children, and individual, group, and family therapy should be structured into the reunification plan to aid in positive reunifications.

Application to Policy

The findings that reunification with parents who were substance abusers or in substance abuse treatment typically resulted in reunification failure, reinforces the previous recommendations to reform policies regarding reunification of children to parents recovering from substance abuse. The current pressure to decrease time in out-of-home care before reunification may in the long run be counterproductive to achieving successful reunification.

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