

FFTA



Foster Family-based Treatment Association

## Annotations of Research in Treatment Foster Care

### Citation

Barber, J., & Delfabbro, P. (2005). Children's adjustment to long-term foster care. *Child and Youth Services Review, 27*, 329–340.

### Keywords

Long-term foster care, foster care, child well-being, satisfaction

### Research Question

How do children adjust to long-term foster care?

Psychosocial adjustment of children in long-term foster care was investigated in two interrelated studies. Repeat measures of child well-being and consumer feedback were used to investigate effects of long-term foster care.

### Method

**Subjects:** The first study tracked 235 children (121 boys and 114 girls with a mean age of 10.8 and an age range of 4–17) entering care over a 1-year period and monitored over a 2-year period. Children were selected from a cohort of youth entering out-of-home care between May 1999 and April 2000 via a central referral agency for a metropolitan and rural area of Australia.

The second study sampled 48 children from a broader foster care population in South Australia (23 girls and 25 boys with a mean age of 13.1 [S.D. = 2.40]). These children were selected based upon availability and capacity to answer questions about their well-being. The children were selected from a metropolitan area of Adelaide or country towns within a 50 km radius of the city. The children had been in their current placement for a mean of 5.1 years (S.D. = 4.65 years). The mean item score on the conduct disorder subscale did not differ from the intake scores of the same sample in Study 1.

**Design:** The first study used a quasi-experimental design. Data were gathered and compared at intake, 4 months, 8 months, 1 year, and 2 years.

The second study employed a semi-structured interview of consumers who had been in foster care a minimum of 2 years. Data were gathered at one point in time using a satisfaction survey.

**Measures/Procedures:** In the first study, data were gathered on demographics and whether the child had been diagnosed with a mental health problem. Data were gathered from agency records and an existing database, and then verified by the caseworker. Data from the caseworker interview were based on an abbreviated form of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Boyle 1987). The CBCL measures

four scales: conduct disorder, hyperactivity, somatization disorder, and emotional disorder. For this study, only conduct disorder, hyperactivity, and emotional disorder subscale items were used.

In the second study, the child's social worker administered six subscales of the CBCL and a measure of child satisfaction from Stuntzner-Gibson, Koren, and DeChillo (1995) as well as the Barber and Delfabbro (2000) 14-item caregiving scale.

### **Results/Findings**

In the first study, there were improvements in conduct, hyperactivity, and emotional disorders as well as significant improvements in the child's school attendance, participation in school, and school exclusions, which were maintained over 2 years.

In the second study, children were satisfied with almost all aspects of their current placement.

Taken together, these results suggest that the children adjust well to long-term foster care as reflected by the overall positive developmental trajectory in standardized measures of psychological adjustment and by the generally very positive feedback of the children interviewed.

### **Limitations**

Absence of an experimental control group obscures the clinical significance of these results. Not only is it impossible to attribute improvement to foster care itself but it is also impossible to determine whether the extent of improvement is greater or less than could be expected under different conditions. Also, the results could have been attributed to the population selected; this is especially particular to the second study.

### **Application to Practice & Policy**

From a policy point of view, "the present studies caution against the common assumption that long-term foster care is antithetical to psychosocial adjustment." The legal status of foster care may not matter as much as the day-to-day experience of life in a particular child's home. In this respect, what may matter more are the attitudes and behaviors of the caregivers rather than what types of caregivers they are. Perhaps the pressures of reunification or adoption could overshadow the more important aspects of building stable relationships and providing quality of care.

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