

Kinship Care May Lead to Increased Behavioral Well-Being

Relative placement is often preferred over placement with strangers. New research supports this view. Children placed in foster care with relatives had fewer behavioral problems 36 months after placement than children placed with nonrelative caregivers, according to a recent study.¹ These problems were lowest for children entering kinship care within one month of out-of-home placement, but even children who entered kinship care later had fewer behavioral issues than those in nonrelative care. All three groups had rates of behavioral problems higher than the general population, however.

The study, led by David M. Rubin, MD, MSCE, of the Children's Hospital of Pennsylvania, used data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW). Authors looked at NSCAW for 1309 children who met the study criteria.² The NSCAW survey interviewed kids, biological parents, caregivers, and teachers when the study began and again at 18 months and then 36 months. Behavioral well-being was measured by caregiver responses to the Child Behavior Checklist. Although the study looked at a wide range of ages,³ the results were not much different when the data was analyzed after excluding younger children.

Behavioral Well-being

Children who were first placed into nonrelative foster care started out with more problems. They were more likely to have: used mental health services, have an abnormal score on the initial behavioral assessment, have a caregiver with serious mental health issues, and have taken medication within the past 12 months. Researchers found differences in levels of behavioral well-being even when the children's different levels of risk were controlled for, however. At 36 months after placement behavioral problems were estimated in:

- 46% of children in nonrelative care;

- 39% of children entering kinship placements more than one month after entering care; and
- 32% of children who were placed with relatives within one month of entering care.

Placement Stability

Children with unstable placement histories were also more likely to have behavioral issues when compared to those who achieved a lasting placement or reunification within 45 days of entering care (and children placed in kinship care within one month of placement were more likely to achieve this early stability). Researchers also controlled for placement stability when determining the behavioral outcomes listed above.

Caveats

Although this study supports placing children in kinship care when possible, the authors caution that:

- this was not a randomized study (so other factors may have affected the outcomes);
- they could not tell whether children in nonrelative care had kin who might have been placement options;

- relative caregivers may report behavioral problems in their children less often than teachers or nonrelative foster parents.

Despite these considerations, the authors say "when kinship care is a realistic option and appropriate safeguards have been met, children in kinship care might have an advantage over children in foster care in achieving permanency and improved well-being...."

The full study is available at <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/162/6/550>

—Lisa Pilnik, Staff Attorney

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Endnotes

¹ Rubin, David M. et al. *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* 162(6), 2008, 550-556.

² Youth who spent a significant portion of their placement in group homes or residential treatment facilities were excluded, as were children who did not live at home at the time of the initial maltreatment investigation. Only children who entered care within a specific range of dates were included.

³ Baseline ages for the youth studied were: 28% 2 years or younger, 50% age 2 to 10, and 22% older than 10.

⁴ Rubin et al.

Building on Past Research

The NSCAW data is a boon for researchers and children's advocates due to the "scant and conflicting evidence of improved outcomes" when children are placed with kin instead of nonrelatives.⁴ In the behavioral outcomes study, Dr. Rubin and his coauthors explain that previous research shows children placed with relatives are more likely to experience stable placements, stay in their home neighborhoods, live with siblings, and keep connected to biological parents.

However, the study notes that "long-term outcome studies have...failed to demonstrate a significant difference between children raised by kin and foster parents." Relative placements may also be more risky for children because they may *spend more time with abusive parents* and it is more likely that *kinship caregivers will have similar problems* to the ones the child's parents faced. The study also acknowledges the challenges faced by children in foster care because relative caregivers generally:

- are older and have more health issues (physical and mental)
- receive less support and fewer services from child welfare agencies and have fewer other resources
- are single and have lower incomes