Kinship and non-kinship foster care: Differences in contact with parents and foster child's mental health problems

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ABSTRACT

Foster care placements, especially placements with kin, are the first option of choice when parents cannot maintain the care for their children. Therefore, an evaluation of this type of out-of-home-placement, with special attention for the differences between kinship and non-kinship placements, is necessary. In this study both types of foster placements (n = 186) are compared for two important aspects: contact with/attitude of parents and mental health of foster children. Non-kinship foster placements fare better on different aspects of contact with/attitude of parents than kinship foster placements. Foster children in kinship foster placements have less behavioral problems than non-kinship foster children. However, not the type of foster placement but the number of previous out-of-home placements is the most important predictive factor for behavioral problems. Implications for practice and policy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

When children are in need of an out-of-home placement, preference is given to a family foster care placement. The subsidiarity principle underlying the Flemish child welfare system (Grietens, 2007), the growing number of children in need of out-of-home care, the high occupancy of other residential facilities and the unlimited capacity of foster care agencies lead to an increasing number of foster care placements (Audenaert, 2010). In 2010, 4,803 children resided in foster families (i.e. 40.7% of the total number of children in out-of-home care) (Agentschap Jongerenwelzijn, 2010). In the Flemish legal jurisdiction, two types of foster care are distinguished: kinship foster care (i.e. formal placement within the family or social network of the parents or the child) and non-kinship foster care (i.e. formal placement with unrelated/previously unknown foster parents). The same classification can be found in other European studies (e.g. Farmer, 2009; Strijker, Zandberg, & Van der Meulen, 2003). The proportion of placements within the family or social network increased from 39% in 2000 to 54% in 2010, making kinship foster care currently the most important form of foster care in Flanders (Pleegzorg Vlaanderen, 2010). Also internationally kinship foster care is the fastest growing form of out-of-home

placement (Goertzen, Chan, & Wolfson, 2007). Proponents argue that kinship placement should be preferred because it offers more continuity (e.g. in family, culture, community) (Goertzen et al., 2007), spares the child a trauma of placement with strangers (Dubowitz, Feigelman, & Zuravin, 1993), might facilitate ongoing contact with parents (Dubowitz et al., 1993) and might ensure foster parents to be more committed (Strijker et al., 2003). On the other hand, the growing number of kinship placements might also just reflect the shortage of non-kinship foster carers (Shore, Sim, Le Prohn, & Keller, 2002). Several international studies have shown that kinship foster parents are a more vulnerable population than non-kinship foster parents. They are older, poorer, less educated and are more often single-parent families (Ehrle & Geen, 2002). Critics also argue that boundaries and responsibilities may be more difficult to negotiate (Dubowitz et al., 1993). Another concern is the possible association of a failing parent with a failing network (Strijker et al., 2003). A comparison of the functioning of both types of foster care is thus needed in order to inform policy and practice. This study aims at contributing to this topic by focusing on two aspects: contact with/attitude of parents and the mental health of the foster child. We will focus on these two aspects since the quality of cooperation with parents (Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001) and behavioral problems of the foster child (Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007) are the two main reasons for a placement breakdown (i.e. an unfavorably prematurely terminated foster care placement (Strijker & Zandberg, 2005, p.77)). First, we give a brief overview of the limited (mainly international) research on this topic. Next, our results are presented and discussed.

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1.1. Differences between kinship and non-kinship foster placements concerning contact with/attitude of parents

Parents have an important influence on the success of a foster placement (Oosterman et al., 2007). Different aspects play a role, e.g. contact frequency between child and parents, acceptance of the foster care placement by the parents and the relationship with the child and with the foster parents. Concerning child–parent contact frequency, McWey, Acock, and Porter (2010) found that frequent contact has a positive impact on child well-being and on reunification rates. Contacts with parents may, however, also be difficult for foster children (Leathers, 2003). It is usually expected that kinship foster care placements facilitate more frequent contact with parents. Empirical evidence is, however, inconsistent. Holtan, Ronning, Handegard, and Sourander (2005) found the proportion of foster children not having contact with their parents to be smaller in kinship than in non-kinship foster care. Both Berrick (1997) and Strijker et al. (2003), however, failed to find a difference between kinship and non-kinship foster placements in the proportion of foster children having regular contact with their parents (respectively 'more than two times a week' and 'monthly'). Secondly, acceptance of the foster care placement by the parents may affect the placement success. Strijker and Knorth (2009) found that non-acceptance of the foster placement by the mother impedes the foster child's adjustment to the foster family. Foster children, placed on a voluntary basis (instead of court ordered), are also less likely to experience a second foster care placement (Fernandez, 1999). Concerning the difference between non-kinship and kinship foster care in this area, Keller et al. (2001) assume that the latter is more acceptable for parents. Holtan et al. (2005) indeed found that less parents appealed the placement decision in case of kinship foster care placements. Strijker et al. (2003), however, failed to find differences between non-kinship and kinship placements concerning the attitude of parents towards the placement. A related important aspect is whether the parents show their child that he/she has their permission to stay in the foster family. Bakhuizen (1998) states that foster children function better if they have this permission because it reduces loyalty conflicts. Strijker and Knorth (2009) indeed found that foster children who did not have this permission showed more behavioral problems and were more likely to experience placement breakdown. Leathers (2003) also found a positive association between a measure for loyalty conflict and anxiety and oppositional defiant behavior in the foster child. To the best of our knowledge no comparisons between kinship and non-kinship foster care on this specific topic have been made. A last important aspect concerning the parents, is the quality of their relationship with the foster parents. Linares, Rhodes, and Montalto (2010) found a relationship, characterized by conflict/triangulation, to be predictive of both internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems of the foster child. Furthermore, a good cooperation between parents and foster parents is associated with a lower risk of breakdown (Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001). This last aspect is particularly important because, in Flanders, parents usually retain some parental rights and responsibilities. Foster care is by definition temporary. Even in long-term foster care no assurance can be given regarding the permanency of the placement. Therefore foster parents and parents are encouraged to cooperate in parenting. Concerning differences between both types of placements in this area, Linares et al. (2010) reported that kinship foster parents experienced more support and shared communication with parents, but also more conflict. Strijker et al. (2003) failed to find a difference between kinship and non-kinship placements in attitude of foster parents towards parents. Based on these limited research findings, it can be concluded that parents have an important influence on the success of a foster care placement, in different ways. Studies investigating the differences between kinship and non-kinship foster placements on this topic are scarce and inconclusive. If differences are found, they are generally in favor of kinship foster care. It should, however, be mentioned that other, pre-care factors may have confounding influences (e.g. the severity of maltreatment may have an influence on the contact frequency with parents; the success of previous parenting interventions may affect the parents' attitude towards the placement and whether or not they show their child that he/she has their permission to stay in the foster family; personal problems of the parents may impact the quality of the relationship with the foster parents).

1.2. Differences between kinship and non-kinship foster children concerning mental health problems

The high prevalence of emotional and behavioral problems in foster children is well documented in several national and international studies (e.g. Armsden, Pecora, Payne, & Szatkiewicz, 2000; Van Holen, Vanderfaeillie, & Haarsma, 2008). It is, however, less clear whether or not differences exist between kinship and non-kinship foster children. Only a few studies used standardized measures that allow a comparison of the behavioral functioning of both types of foster children. In the U.S., standardized measures from the Achenbach system are used in three studies that allow such a comparison. Keller et al. (2001) found that kinship foster parents reported significant lower scores on the composite scales internalizing, externalizing, and total problems of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991a) compared to non-kinship foster parents. Landsverk, Ganger, Newton, and Johanson (1996) did not find significant differences on foster parent's mean CBCL-scores between these two types of foster children, but when a cut-off was used to differentiate children with problems (defined as a score above the 85th percentile on the above mentioned scales) from those without problems, these authors did report a higher percentage of non-kinship foster children in the problematic range. Shore et al. (2002) used the Teacher Report Form (TRF; Achenbach, 1991b) to compare teachers' reports of mental health problems in kinship and non-kinship foster children. These authors did not find significant differences between both types of foster children. An Australian study (Tarren-Sweeney & Hazell, 2006) reported no differences in internalizing problems, but significantly less externalizing and total problems (on the CBCL) in kinship foster children. Only two European studies used the CBCL to investigate differences in behavioral problems between kinship and non-kinship foster children. In a Norwegian sample less total problems were found in kinship foster children (no differences in internalizing or externalizing problems) (Holtan et al., 2005). A Dutch study only reported on the level of total problems, and found no differences between kinship and non-kinship foster children (Strijker et al., 2003). Two studies analyzed differences in behavioral problems between kinship and non-kinship foster children, when controlling for other explanatory variables. Holtan et al. (2005) found that type of placement was not significant when gender of the foster child and placement outside the local community were taken into account. Keller et al. (2001) reported that differences in internalizing and externalizing problems between both types of foster children were no longer significant when accounting for the child's gender and race.

Only in one Flemish study (Van Holen et al., 2008), the CBCL was used to compare the behavioral functioning of foster children in kinship and in non-kinship foster care. These authors did not find any differences. The sample size of this study was, however, small ($n = 70$) and consisted of foster children of just one foster care agency. Bronselaer, Vandezande, and Verreth (2011) studied a larger, representative sample of foster children. They found that non-kinship foster children were more often aggressive, hyperactive, fearful, and sad than kinship foster children. Since the authors did not use a standardized behavioral measure, comparisons with other studies are difficult. Moreover, they did not control for other explanatory variables.

These research results suggest that non-kinship foster children are at lower risk of having behavioral problems. Differences are, however, not always significant. Moreover, it is not clear whether differences are caused by the type of placements or are the result of other