



# Children's adjustment to long-term foster care

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## Abstract

The psychosocial adjustment of children to long-term foster care was investigated in two studies. The first study tracked 235 children over 2 years and obtained repeated measures of foster child well-being, while the second study employed semistructured interviewing to obtain consumer feedback of 48 children in the care system. Taken together, results suggested that 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. © 2004 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

The philosophy of permanency planning is built on the assumption that the ideal environment for raising children is the conventional nuclear family structure involving one and preferably two stable parent figures who are willing to accept responsibility for the child care until he or she comes of age. So strong is this belief that US child protection jurisdictions would prefer to terminate the rights of biological parents altogether rather than expose children to less stable or less conventional arrangements. Permanency planning received official sanction in the US Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (1980) which was a response to the alarming numbers of children who were experiencing

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harmful separations and indeterminate stays in care (cf. Barth & Berry, 1987; Bryce & Ehlert, 1971; Claburn, Magura, & Resnick, 1976; Katz, 1990; Maluccio, Fein, & Olmstead, 1986). A further legislative attempt was made to keep children out of care in 1993 when the US Senate passed the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (1993) which, *inter alia*, increased funding for family preservation services across the country. Further legislative support for the goal of permanency was provided by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997), the aim of which was to prevent children returning from foster care to unsafe homes and to find permanent homes for those unable to return to their biological families. Under this Act, a permanency planning hearing must be conducted within 12 months of placement for each child entering care and every 12 months thereafter (Gendell, 2001). The State is required to petition for termination of parental rights in cases where a child has been in care for 15 of the preceding 22 months (with some limited exceptions); where the court determines that a child has been abandoned; where parents have attempted to murder or have committed voluntary manslaughter of one of their children; or where parents have committed felony assault resulting in serious bodily harm to one of their children (Lindsey, 2001). The Adoption and Safe Families Act also created financial incentives to State welfare departments to increase their rate of adoptions. A total of \$US20 million was awarded each year until 2003 to States that led the nation in adoptions. Not surprisingly, children began moving out of the foster care system in large numbers. In the 1st year after the Act, for example, the numbers moving from foster care to adoption increased by almost 30%, from 28,000 in 1996 to 36,000 in 1998 (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). In Australia, by contrast, termination of parental rights remains very rare, meaning that children can and do remain in foster care indefinitely. Meanwhile, reunification efforts are expected to continue and/or parental contact is to be maintained except in those rare cases where it is either manifestly dangerous or distressing to the child. From a permanency planning viewpoint then, Australian foster children are in an invidious position; as foster children, they are provisional family members and are constantly exposed to the prospect of being uprooted and reunified with biological parents at some time in the future.

While the case for placement permanence with stable parental figures may seem intuitively appealing, we have previously pointed out that the evidence on which permanency planning is based remains flimsy. Not only is there no evidence to suggest that the policy shift toward placement permanence has improved the psychosocial adjustment of children in out-of-home care but there is some evidence that foster children are not necessarily impaired by transient living arrangements for up to 1 year in care (Barber & Delfabbro, 2000), provided that the children were not evicted from placement but moved for positive reasons, such as proximity to friends or biological family. In this paper, we examine the question of whether long-term fostering is associated with adverse psychosocial outcomes. In the first part of the paper, we present foster children's placement movements and psychosocial well-being after different lengths of time in care. Stage 1 spanned the period from intake to 4 months, Stage 2 from 4 to 8 months, Stage 3 from 8 months to 1 year and Stage 4 from one to 2 years. An unstable placement then was one where a child had to change placement at least once in the period. In addition to placement stability and psychosocial adjustment, this paper also presents the feedback of foster children on their placements. A key tenet of the United Nations Convention on the

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