



Research article

Profiles and predictors of behavioral resilience among children in child welfare



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ABSTRACT

Children living in out-of-home care have experienced a multitude of adversities, often resulting in compromised functioning. The current study used Ontario Looking After Children (OnLAC) project data to estimate developmental trajectories of behavioral outcomes (i.e., conduct and emotional problems) over a 4-year period (i.e., ages 6–10 to 9–13) in 313 children living in out-of-home care. Predictors measured at baseline (e.g., sex) and across the subsequent 4-year period (e.g., parenting practices) were also investigated. Findings indicated that 64.2% and 58.6% followed resilient trajectories for conduct behaviors and emotional functioning, respectively. Predictors of resilient trajectories included internal developmental assets, number of children in the home, whether the child was receiving treatment, and positive parenting. Findings need to be interpreted with an understanding that children in out-of-home care have varying levels of functioning across various domains (e.g., educational, social) other than the ones measured here. Predictors were static and dynamic and cut across various contexts, emphasizing the importance of considering child functioning within an ecological model.

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Introduction

Childhood maltreatment can have a detrimental impact on a number of domains including psychological, behavioral, social, and cognitive and language skills (Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010). Such difficulties may continue into later life, if left unaddressed (Cicchetti, 2013). While empirical investigations have provided valuable information on the development and treatment of such outcomes, research has also begun to focus on those who function well despite experiences of adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). This concept, known as resilience, is defined as “the capacity of a dynamic system to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability, or development” (Masten, 2011, p. 494).

The study of resilience is applicable to children living in out-of-home care because they have experienced much adversity that could compromise their well-being (Sullivan & van Zyl, 2008). Children in out-of-home care tend to have higher rates of behavioral difficulties in comparison to maltreated children who remain in their homes and to non-maltreated children (Doyle, 2013; Sullivan & van Zyl, 2008). For instance, foster care children must face removal from their family in addition to a number of household transitions upon entering care, which have been linked to increased behavioral problems (McDonald, Allen, Westerfelt, & Piliaven, 1996).

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Despite experiencing adversities, some children in out-of-home care exhibit resilience often defined as few behavioral problems or as satisfactory performance in age-salient developmental tasks (e.g., emotion regulation; Bell, Romano, & Flynn, 2013; Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Polo-Thomas, & Taylor, 2007; Walsh, Dawson, & Mattingly, 2010). Resilient children do not necessarily excel in their behavioral functioning but rather function in the average range, typically defined as scoring at or close to the normative mean on behavioral measures (Luthar et al., 2000). Also, resilience may not remain stable over time, and resilience in one domain (e.g., academic performance), does not necessarily indicate resilience in other domains (e.g., social relationships; Cicchetti, 2013; Luthar et al., 2000; Walsh et al., 2010). Finally, resilience is influenced by both internal (e.g., self-efficacy) and external (e.g., nurturing caregivers) factors (Masten, 2006).

Prevalence and Predictors of Resilience

Research indicates varying rates of resilience among maltreated children, ranging from 9.2% (Flores, Cicchetti, & Rogosch, 2005) to 48% (Dumont, Widom, & Czaja, 2007). This variability is likely explained by the range of definitions and methodologies that have been used to assess positive adaptation. Studies have collected data from different informants (e.g., child, teachers, caregivers) over different time periods (e.g., childhood, adolescence, adulthood). Diverse forms of reporting (e.g., prospective, retrospective, longitudinal) have also been used.

Turning to resilience predictors, these can be organized by means of an ecological model (Belsky, 1980; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998) into several levels that are nested within one another and that have varying degrees of proximity to the individual. Two of these levels exert more direct influences on children's development and functioning, namely the *microsystem* (e.g., family environment) and *ontogenic development* (individual characteristics that influence adaptation). *Exosystem* influences refer to settings that do not involve the individual (e.g. caregiver's workplace), while *macrosystem* influences include broader cultural values and beliefs. Interactions between settings in which an individual is actively involved can also occur, which refer to *mesosystem* influences.

Child and family factors (microsystem influences) related to better outcomes among children in out-of-home care include regular and consistent contact with biological parents, placement type, developmental assets, and parenting practices. Children who maintain quality contact with biological parents have better outcomes (Knott & Barber, 2005), and those living with kin generally have greater placement stability and better opportunities to maintain contact with their extended family, community, and culture (Barber & Delfabbro, 2004). However, it is important to note that recent research (Font, 2014) concluded that children's initial level of functioning might be a selection factor such that higher functioning children (i.e., lower baseline internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, and higher math and reading scores) have a higher likelihood of entering kinship care. Finally, an emerging finding is the impact that developmental assets can have on outcomes (Bell et al., 2013; Filbert & Flynn, 2010; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). Developmental assets represent internal (e.g., positive values) and external (e.g., boundaries/expectations) resources that contribute to a child's ability to thrive. Research has indicated that the greater the availability of these assets, the better a child's functioning is across a number of domains (Scales et al., 2000). For instance, Filbert and Flynn (2010) examined predictors (i.e., developmental assets, cultural assets) of prosocial behavior, self-esteem, educational performance, and behavioral difficulties among a sample of 97 10–17 year olds living in out-of-home care. The findings revealed that after controlling for sex, age, and cumulative risk, developmental assets significantly predicted a higher level of prosocial behavior, general self-esteem and educational performance, and a lower level of behavioral difficulties.

With regard to the foster family, a positive caregiver–child relationship, characterized by parenting practices that involve praise, communication, and consistency, is important for behavioral adaptation among children in out-of-home care (Cheung, Goodman, Leckie, & Jenkins, 2011; Legault, Anawati, & Flynn, 2006). Research investigating the impact of foster caregiver training and years of experience on children's outcomes is scarce (Festinger & Baker, 2013), and studies indicate mixed findings (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Nash & Flynn, 2009). However, these variables might lead to a greater ability to support foster children in their recovery from trauma-related difficulties. Finally, foster family household size may play a role in child outcomes through its influence on parenting practices. Fewer children in the household might provide caregivers with more time to devote to each child. Limited research has found that a greater number of children in a foster home contribute to greater placement disruptions (Chamberlain et al., 2006).

Resilience Over Time

Although several studies have investigated the prevalence and predictors of resilience among maltreated children, fewer have tracked outcomes longitudinally (Dumont et al., 2007; Fergusson & Horwood, 2003; Helton & Bruhn, 2013; Jaffee et al., 2007; Jaffee & Gallop, 2007; Lansford et al., 2006; McGloin & Widom, 2001; Proctor, Skinner, Roesch, & Litrownik, 2010). Among the studies that have followed child outcomes over time, findings generally indicate that a substantial proportion of maltreated children are resilient over time, and a number of child (e.g., sex) and family (e.g., stable household) factors are related to resilience. For instance, in a U.S. study (Proctor et al., 2010), the behavioral adjustment of 279 children who entered foster care before the age of 4 years and had spent at least five months in care was tracked over an 8-year period. At baseline (age 4), 44.8% were in an out-of-home placement, 35.4% had been reunited with a biological parent, and 19.7% had been adopted. Growth mixture modeling identified three internalizing and four externalizing behavior trajectories. For internalizing behaviors, 66.7% had stable adjustment, 25.4% had mixed/decreasing adjustment, and 7.9% had increasing

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