



Research article

Behavior problems of children in foster care: Associations with foster mothers' representations, commitment, and the quality of mother–child interaction[☆]



Karine Dubois-Comtois^{a,b,*}, Annie Bernier^c, George M. Tarabulsky^d,
Chantal Cyr^e, Diane St-Laurent^a, Anne-Sophie Lanctôt^a, Janie St-Onge^a,
Ellen Moss^e, Marie-Julie Béliveau^c

^a Department of Psychology, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, Trois-Rivières, Canada

^b Department of Child Psychiatry and Research Center, Hôpital du Sacré-Coeur de Montréal, Montréal, Canada

^c Department of Psychology, Université de Montréal, Montréal, Canada

^d Department of Psychology, Université Laval, Québec, Canada

^e Department of Psychology, Université du Québec à Montréal, Montréal, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 March 2015

Received in revised form 16 June 2015

Accepted 30 June 2015

Available online 15 July 2015

Keywords:

Maltreated children

Foster care

Behavior problems

Relationship quality

Representations

ABSTRACT

This study investigated different environmental and contextual factors associated with maltreated children's adjustment in foster care. Participants included 83 children (52 boys), ages 1–7 years, and their foster caregivers. Quality of interaction with the foster caregiver was assessed from direct observation of a free-play situation; foster caregiver attachment state of mind and commitment toward the child were assessed using two interviews; disruptive behavior symptoms were reported by foster caregivers. Results showed that quality of interaction between foster caregivers and children were associated with behavior problems, such that higher-quality interactions were related to fewer externalizing and internalizing problems. Foster caregivers' state of mind and commitment were interrelated but not directly associated with behavior problems of foster children. Type of placement moderated the association between foster caregiver commitment and foster child behavior problems. Whereas greater foster caregiver commitment was associated with higher levels of adjustment for children in foster families (kin and non-kin), this was not the case in foster-to-adopt families. Finally, the associations between foster child behavior problems and history of maltreatment and placement related-risk conditions fell below significance after considering child age and quality of interaction with the foster caregiver. Findings underscore the crucial contribution of the foster caregiver–child relationship to fostering child adjustment and, thereby, have important implications for clinical services offered to this population.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Evidence generally supports the notion that children placed in foster care are at heightened risk of experiencing behavior problems. Indeed, prior research has suggested that the behavior problems of foster children are linked to past experiences

[☆] This research was supported by grants received from the *Fonds de recherche du Québec–Société et culture* (FRQ-SC).

* Corresponding author.

of maltreatment, higher number of placements, and late age placement such as in the preschool and school-age period (Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000; Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007; Taussig, 2002). However, less is known about the characteristics of foster caregivers that are associated with behavior problems exhibited by their foster children. As suggested by Chamberlain (1996), foster caregiver behaviors may serve to maintain, exacerbate, or reduce behavior problems in foster children. Studies are needed to better understand what characteristics of foster caregivers act as protective or risk factors for the development of behavior problems in foster children. Although numerous studies have shown that relationship quality with the parent is an important predictor of child adjustment in various spheres (e.g., Dubois-Comtois, Moss, Cyr, & Pascuzzo, 2013; Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010; Groh, Roisman, van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Fearon, 2012), studies testing this association among foster families are sparse. The way in which interactions between foster caregivers and children are related to behavior problems is unclear.

Studies have shown that types of foster family and foster parent motivation to care for placed children are associated with differences in child adjustment trajectories as well as with differences in the success of fostering (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Rosenthal & Curiel, 2006). Less is known about foster caregiver mental representations and mother–child interactive quality. Accordingly, the objective of the current study is twofold: (1) to evaluate the association between foster mother representations, quality of the relationship with the foster child, and foster child behavior problems after controlling for previous experiences of maltreatment; and (2) to examine type of placement as a potential risk factor in the association between foster mother representations or quality of the relationship with the child, and foster child behavior problems.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2015), about 1% of children were abused or neglected in the US in 2013. Neglect was the most frequent form of maltreatment (79.5%), followed by physical abuse (18%), sexual abuse (9%) and psychological maltreatment (8.7%). The examination of US child protection narratives suggests that 36–91% of children experience multiple types of maltreatment (Gilbert et al., 2009). In addition, between 21% and 42% of children with substantiated maltreatment were re-reported to Child Protection Services (CPS) agency within 18 months and recurrence of maltreatment was between 6% and 24% (Casanueva et al., 2015). Recent data provided by the Quebec Association for Child Protection (QACP, 2013) showed that 80,540 children were investigated for maltreatment by the Québec child protection system in 2012–2013, of which 31.8% were between 0 and 5 years of age. For this group of children, substantiated maltreatment-related investigations included physical abuse (12.9%), physical, material and health-related neglect (65.1%), psychological and emotional abuse (18.4%), and sexual abuse (2.3%). Fifty-three percent of these children were placed in out-of-home care (QACP, 2013).

Child maltreatment, which generally precedes child out-of-home placement, is considered to be an important risk factor for child behavioral, emotional, and academic maladjustment (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005). Accordingly, it has been found that children in foster care (aged 0–17 years) show rates of mental health and behavior problems 2.5 times higher than those of children from at-risk populations with no history of abuse (Clausen, Landsverk, Ganger, Chadwick, & Litrownik, 1998; dosReis, Magno Zito, & Safer Soeken, 2001; Zima et al., 2000). Others have reported that the levels of behavioral problems presented by foster children (aged 0–12 years) are similar to those of abused children living with their biological parents (Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006; Mennen, Brensilver, & Trickett, 2010). In addition, children with disabilities, who have experienced substantiated maltreatment, are about twice as likely to be in out-of-home placements, than are children (aged 0–18 years) with substantiated maltreatment without disabilities (Lightfoot, Hill, & LaLiberte, 2011). Taken as a whole, these results clearly suggest that neglect and harsh experiences before placement are detrimental for children. Therefore, because out-of-home placement is intended to promote child wellbeing through the development of a healthier caregiver–child relationship, it is important not only to consider the background of children in foster care in explaining (mal) adjustment, but also experiences of care with the foster parent.

Quality of Interactions between Foster Mother and Child

Bowlby (1969/1982) theorized that differences in the quality of early relationships with caregivers have a long-term impact on child adjustment and mental health, given that parent–child interactions shape children’s internal working models of self and relationships with others. Internal working models are defined as mental representations of self, caregivers, and others that include expectations about caregivers’ responsiveness and child’s self-worth and strategies to seek comfort (Bretherton, 1990). Mother–child interaction is a mutual process during which the mother guides and supports the child in exploring affects and thoughts, thus assisting in the organization of child emotional experiences, and by extension, the development of emotional and social abilities (Thompson, 2008). Studies have shown that children who experienced sensitive care and harmonious interactions with their mothers are more likely to be socially adapted and use more effective emotion regulation strategies than their peers who experienced less supportive mother–child interactions (e.g., Fearon et al., 2010; Groh et al., 2012; NICHD, 2006). Evidence from foster care research appears to suggest a similar phenomenon. A study by Oosterman and Schuengel (2008) showed that the interactive sensitivity of foster mothers, during a 15-minute semi-structured interaction with children aged 2–7 years, was negatively associated with teacher-reported externalizing problems in kindergarten or daycare. Another study, conducted with a sample of early adolescents in foster care (aged 13 years), showed that higher levels of positive family communication in the foster home were associated with lower levels of adolescents’ externalizing and internalizing behavior problems (Vuchinich, Ozretich, Pratt, & Kneedler, 2001). In addition, higher levels of negative family communication were correlated with greater child behavior problems. These two studies

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/344584>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/344584>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)