



Foster care placement change: The role of family dynamics and household composition



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 March 2016

Received in revised form 24 June 2016

Accepted 24 June 2016

Available online 28 June 2016

Keywords:

Siblings

Placement stability

Foster Care

Child welfare

ABSTRACT

Sibling co-placement and kinship care have each been shown to protect against the occurrence of placement change for youth in substitute care. However, little is known about the effects of different combinations of sibling placement and relative caregiver status on placement change. Nor does the field fully understand how family dynamics may differ in these households. Utilizing data from the Supporting Siblings in Foster Care study, this paper examines family dynamics across four typologies of living composition, and tests the effects of living composition membership on the odds of experiencing a placement change over an 18-month period of time. Findings suggest that across living composition typologies, children who were placed separately from their siblings in non-relative care were more likely to be older, have more extensive placement histories, and experience more placement changes both prior to and during the study than were children in other living composition groups. Family living composition was found to influence the occurrence of placement change. Specifically, children co-placed in kinship care were least likely to experience movement; however, sibling co-placement in non-relative care was also protective. Results reveal the need to conduct additional research into the experiences of children in different family living arrangements, and tailor case management services and supports to children in substitute care accordingly. Implications and future directions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Foster care is arguably the most intrusive intervention available to child welfare agencies. Placement into out-of-home care is designed to be a temporary intervention that helps address immediate safety concerns, while permitting child welfare agencies the time needed to investigate and treat any risk conditions and/or threats to child safety (Berrick, 2015). When a child's removal from the family is required, the goal is to create circumstances that allow children to be reunified with their caregivers or be placed into a permanent, family-like living arrangement in a reasonable period of time (CWLA, 1995; Maluccio, 2003).

When children are placed into out-of-home care, federal law requires the establishment of a timeline for child welfare agencies and families to design and implement a plan that provides for the child's permanency. To help prevent children from languishing in out-of-home care, child welfare agencies are required to develop and implement a legal permanency plan for the child within an 18 to 22-month period of time, barring particular case exceptions (Adoption and Safe

Families Act of 1997). The timely resolution of threats to child safety and placement into a permanent, family-like situation are cornerstone child welfare system components for youth who experience placement into out of home care (Courtney, 1994; Maluccio, Abramczyk, & Thomlinson, 1996). Recognizing the concerns related to disruption of family bonds when removal is required, more recent federal legislation prioritizes the co-placement of siblings and kinship care placements whenever possible (Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008).

Approximately 415,129 children were residing in out-of-home care in 2014 (USDHHS, 2015), and approximately 22–70% of foster care placements will disrupt in a given year (Blakey et al., 2012). Children who experience foster care placement change are at greater risk of experiencing lengthy stays in care (Webster, Barth, & Needell, 2000), and the implications for well-being can be substantial. For children who experience multiple placement changes, the stress associated with the maltreatment experience and subsequent removal from their family system is compounded by the instability associated with movement from foster home to foster home (Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). Foster care placement instability has been shown to negatively impact a number of important areas in a child's life, including a child's emotional and behavioral well-being (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Rubin, 2008).

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Multiple placement changes can lead to behavior problems (Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000; Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007), and increase the likelihood of experiencing future placement changes (Newton et al., 2000; Price et al., 2008). Unplanned placement changes may negatively impact child welfare case planning and service provision, redirecting limited agency resources to stabilizing a placement when those resources and services may be better utilized working on the underlying conditions which necessitated the initial foster care placement. Placement changes have been shown to disrupt health care utilization and continuity (Rubin, Alessandrini, Feudtner, Localio, & Hadley, 2004), and children who experience placement changes utilize outpatient mental health visits (James, Landsverk, Slymen & Leslie, 2004), emergency mental health services, psychiatric hospitalization, and crisis mental health services at greater rates than children in stable placements (Fawley-King & Snowden, 2012). Placement instability has also been shown to negatively impact academic performance and school achievement (Allen & Vacca, 2010).

Unwanted placement change is therefore a serious issue for child welfare organizations, and as the literature suggests, the implications for child well-being are significant. Foster care systems must ensure that when children are removed from their families, services and case management are provided in a way that minimize risk of prevent placement change so that related consequences can be prevented.

This study utilizes data from a sibling-focused intervention study to investigate the effects of family dynamics and household living composition on the experience of foster care placement change. The central aim of this investigation is to examine how different indicators of family dynamics manifest in different living composition typologies, and to explore the moderating effects of living composition on placement change.

2. Literature review

Research on unwanted placement change in substitute care settings have identified a number of conditions that cause children in care to experience moves from one home to another. These conditions generally fall into child, family, and agency/system level factors (Waid, 2014). For children, behavior problems (Chamberlain et al., 2006; Fisher, Stoolmiller, Mannerling, Takahashi, & Chamberlain, 2011), poor foster home adaptation (Brown & Bednar, 2006), health problems (Eggertsen, 2008), and older child age (Oosterman, Schuengel, Wim Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007) are associated with increased rates of placement change. For caregivers, the inability to set appropriate limits and rigidity in rule setting (Crum, 2010), reduced treatment engagement, and mood lability (DeGarmo, Chamberlain, Leve, & Price, 2009), health problems (Terling-Watt, 2001), fatigue, and burnout related to caregiving demands (Heller, Smyke, & Boris, 2002) are also associated with placement change. Agency factors include the use of short term and emergency shelter care placements (James, Landsverk, & Slymen, 2004) and caseworker turnover (Ryan, Garnier, Zyphur, & Zhai, 2006). Case history, including prior placement changes, can increase the likelihood of future placement disruptions (Price et al., 2008). Prior placement changes have also been associated with increased problem behaviors, initiating a reciprocal process which in turn increases the likelihood of future instability (Newton et al., 2000).

Certain conditions in family systems appear to protect against the occurrence of placement change, such as good family connections and supportive relationships in the home setting (Brown & Campbell, 2007), as well as the child's sense of integration and inclusion in foster home processes (Leathers, 2005, 2006). Specifically, a child's sense of integration in the home has been shown to mediate the association between problem behaviors and placement disruption (Leathers, Spielfogel, Gleeson, & Rolock, 2012). Parent engagement has also been shown to moderate the risk of negative placement disruptions (DeGarmo et al., 2009).

Whether a child resides in kinship care or is co-placed with their siblings appears to protect against the occurrence of foster care placement change. Children who enter into kinship earlier in their foster care stay experience greater stability (Rubin, 2008) and children in kinship care tend to experience fewer foster care placements and less foster care change over time (Benedict, Zuravin, & Stallings, 1994; Cuddeback, 2004; Iglehart, 1994; Price et al., 2008). Sibling co-placement also has been shown to promote positive permanency outcomes, with co-placed siblings reunifying more quickly than siblings who are placed apart, including siblings in kinship placements (Albert & King, 2008). Co-placed siblings are also more likely to fare better on reunification, guardianship, and adoption related outcomes than siblings who are placed in partially intact groups, those who were completely separated from their siblings, and those who had no siblings in care (Akin, 2011).

To date the child welfare literature has focused primarily on co-placement of siblings, but sibling relationships are understudied and may play a particularly important role to understand among youth in foster care (Lundstrom & Sallnas, 2012). Siblings are powerful vehicles of socialization (Bank, Burraston, & Snyder, 2004; Bank, Patterson, & Reid, 1996; Snyder, Bank, & Burraston, 2005) and these relationships develop within the context of family (Criss & Shaw, 2005). Siblings serve as friends, advocates, allies, playmates, as well as role models and socialization agents (Brody, Stoneman, & McCoy, 1994) and research has demonstrated that during some life stages, children report spending more time with their siblings than with friends, parents or even by themselves (McHale & Crouter, 1996). When youth are removed from their homes and much that is familiar to them, siblings may serve as sources of emotional support and provide relational continuity (McBeath et al., 2014).

Therefore, it could be argued that foster family dynamics are related to youth placement changes. Family dynamics may incorporate a variety of components, but often include aspects of the home environment, caregiver characteristics including youth's relationship with their caregiver(s), youth's relationships with other children in the home (e.g., youth's relationships with siblings), and youth's behavior. It is well known that child behavior impacts overall family dynamics in reciprocal fashion (Newton et al., 2000). For researchers and practitioners interested in intervening to promote placement stability and child well-being, examining the influence of family dynamics and home setting characteristics are critically important.

3. Limitations of current research

Investigations that have examined how sibling co-placement and kinship care influence placement change have done so primarily with administrative data, and while research supports a protective effect for co-placed sibling groups (Akin, 2011; Albert & King, 2008) or placement into kinship or non-relative care (Eggertsen, 2008; Rubin, 2008), additional research is needed to understand if different combinations of household living composition offer varying degrees of risk or protection.

Studies have identified multiple factors related to placement instability; yet, little is known about how family dynamics are expressed in different household living arrangements. If family members in different living compositions interact with one another in substantively different ways, this would carry important implications for child welfare research and practice. Little is known about how interactions between children, siblings, and caregivers operate across different home setting typologies, and if potential differences in interactions could explain placement related outcomes.

4. Study purpose

This study sought to (1) understand if family dynamics differ across four typologies of family living composition, and (2) determine if family living composition moderates the occurrence of foster care placement

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