



Living situation and placement change and children's behavior[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Using a national, representative sample of children who received child welfare services, this paper builds longitudinal path models that examine four effects: prior change in living situation or placement on subsequent change, prior behavior problems on subsequent problems, behavior problems on change in living situation or placement, and change in living situation or placement on behavior problems. The first three just-mentioned effects were significant (positive associations) in all models. At some time points, living situation and placement change predicted internalized behavior problems (positive association) but, overall, the effects of change in living situation or placement on children's behavior problems, if any, were small. Implications for practice and policy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

A considerable body of research examines the effects of out-of-home placement on children in the child welfare system. Research has focused on children's continued residence in foster care without progression towards permanency, the impacts of multiple out-of-home placements, and, more generally, on changes in living situation. These changes may involve moves within the foster care system (from one placement setting to another), moves into and out of that system (often from the child's home to placement or from placement to home), and moves outside of foster care (for instance, from the birth home to relatives or from relatives to the birth home). Considerable research has focused also on behavior problems among children who receive child welfare services. For instance, 48% of children in families investigated for child maltreatment have clinically significant behavior problems (Burns et al., 2004). Similarly, 47% of children in long-term foster care have such problems (Leslie, Hurlburt, Landsverk, Barth, & Slymen, 2004).

Using data from a longitudinal study with a large national probability sample, this paper examines the interrelationship of change in living situation and/or placement and children's behavior problems. It focuses on four effects: prior change in living situation and placement on subsequent change, prior behavioral problems on subsequent problems, behavioral problems on change in living situation and placement, and change in living situation and placement on behavioral problems.

Its goal is to help researchers and practitioners in child welfare understand the interrelationships of change in living situation and placement with behavior, and, thus, to inform practice. We begin by reviewing research on the four just-mentioned effects.

2. Literature review

2.1. Predictors of change in placement

2.1.1. Prior placements

Rosenthal and Villegas (in press) tracked across four years the living situations of 3000 Oklahoma children and youth who had been adjudicated as dependent. Their event history analysis found that the greater the number of placements experienced at any given time, the greater the risk for subsequent placement. Using a subsample from the Child Protective Services (CPS) sample of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW), Aarons et al. (2010) found that the number of placement changes between baseline and 18 months predicted (positive association) the number of changes between 18 and 36 months. The NSCAW CPS sample, also the sample used in this paper, is a nationally representative sample of children and families referred for child maltreatment investigation in 1999 and 2000 (Dowd et al., 2007).

[☆] This study used data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, which was developed under contract with the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (ACYF/DHHS). The data were provided by the National Child Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect. The information and opinions expressed herein reflect solely the position of the authors. Nothing herein should be construed to indicate the support or endorsement of its content by ACYF/DHHS.

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2.1.2. Behavior problems

Numerous studies have found that behavioral problems predict increased risk of placement moves or placement disruption. Indeed such problems may be the strongest predictor of disruption. For instance, using the NSCAW CPS sample, Barth et al. (2007) found that children with clinically significant behavioral problems were 2.5 times more likely to experience four or more placement moves than were children without such problems. In a California sample, Chamberlain et al. (2006) found that the number of problem behaviors per day predicted placement disruption and that there was a threshold effect; the strength of association of behavior to disruption was stronger above about six behaviors than below this. In a longitudinal study of infants and young children in care in the Baltimore area, Lindhiem and Dozier (2007) found that children's behavioral problems predicted reduced caregiver commitment eleven months later. In their systems of care research, Farmer, Mustillo, Burns, and Holden (2008) found that Child Behavioral Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991) scores were positively associated with the number of placements experienced. (On the CBCL, higher scores convey greater behavior problems.) In a Dutch study, externalized behavior problems (acting out, aggression, lack of control, etc.) and attachment disorder predicted a greater number of placement moves (Strijker, Knorth, and Knot-Dickscheit, 2008). Oosterman, Schuengel, Wim Slot, Bullens, and Doreleijers (2007) meta-analysis yielded a combined effect size of $r=0.24$ for behavior problems on risk of placement disruption.

Leathers (2006) prospective study of adolescents in long-term foster care in Cook County in Illinois found that caseworker reports but not caregiver reports of behavior problems predicted placement disruption. The youths' degree of integration into the foster home mediated the association between behavior problems and risk of disruption; when youth were well integrated, this risk was lower.

In a San Diego County sample, James, Landsverk, Slymen, and Leslie (2004) identified four patterns of placement stability or instability in the first 18 months of out-of-home care. "Early stability" was achieved within the first 45 days of placement. "Late stability" was achieved within 9 months. "Variable stability" conveyed 9 months of stability at some time but instability at the end of the 18 months. Finally, some children never achieved stability, that is, a 9-month period without a move. Externalized behavior was the "main distinguishing predictor classifying the patterns." (p. 202). Such problems predicted reduced stability. Other studies that link behavior problems to instability include Cooper, Peterson, and Meier (1987), Palmer, 1996 and Teare et al., 1999.

2.1.3. Other predictors

A common finding is that children in kinship foster care experience fewer placement moves than do those in nonkinship foster family care (Connell et al., 2006; Koh, 2008; Koh & Testa, 2008). Oosterman et al.'s (2007) meta-analysis reported that older age predicted higher disruption risk, a finding corroborated by James (2004), Pardeck (1984), and Farmer et al. (2008).

2.2. Predictors of behavioral problems

2.2.1. Prior behavior

Achenbach (1991) reported one-year and two-year stabilities (correlations) for the various scales that comprise the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), the behavioral measure used in this study. These stabilities are quite high. For instance, for the externalizing scale, two-year stability is 0.86 and for the internalizing scale (withdrawn, inhibited, anxious, etc.), this stability is 0.70. These high stabilities suggest considerable continuity in behavioral problems in normative, representative samples.

Aarons et al.'s (2010) NSCAW CPS study found strong effects of behavior problems at prior waves on behavior problems at subse-

quent ones. This was so for both internalizing and externalizing problems.

2.2.2. Placement and placement change

2.2.2.1. *Studies that do not use the NSCAW CPS sample.* A growing number of studies examine the association of placement or placement change to behavioral and related outcomes. Hussey and Guo (2005) used multi-level modeling to assess the progress of children in treatment foster care in a private agency. The number of prior placements was associated with worse behavioral outcomes. Lawrence, Carlson, and Egeland's (2006) Minnesota-based longitudinal study tracked behavior for maltreated children who did and did not experience foster care. Controlling for baseline behavior, teachers' reports of later behavior did not differ significantly for these two groups of children. Davidson-Arad (2005) examined social worker perceptions of outcomes for children in Israel, ages 3 to 13 at baseline, who were at risk for out-of-home placement. Over a 15-month period, those who were placed improved on quality of life measures while those who remained at home did not.

In Australia, Barber and Delfabbro (2003) found that placement instability did not predict behavioral outcomes during the first eight months of care. On the other hand, placement disruption predicted "psychological deterioration" at one-year and two-year follow-up times (Knott & Barber, 2005, p. 1).

Doyle (2007) examined outcomes related to employment, delinquency, and teen pregnancy for large samples of Illinois youth whose families were investigated for child maltreatment. Some youth were placed in out-of-home care while others were not. Referral of caseworkers to youths' cases was, typically, rotational and, thus, effectively, random. Doyle used caseworker propensity to place as an instrumental variable to control for selection bias. Placement was associated with more negative outcomes for delinquency and teen pregnancy. In contrast, Berzin's (2008) propensity score matching analysis using the National Longitudinal Study of Youth sample did not find significant effects of placement on outcomes at young adulthood. Outcomes examined included obtaining a high school diploma, teen parenting, drug use, and arrests.

Newton, Litrownik, and Lansverk (2000) examined the effects of placement change using a sample of 415 youth aged two or older who entered foster care in San Diego and remained in care for at least five months. They administered the CBCL to caregivers approximately five months after entry into care and again about 17 months after entry. Controlling for behavior problems at five months, the number of placement changes predicted behavior problems at 17 months; the greater the number of changes, the worse the behavioral outcome.

2.2.2.2. *Studies that use the NSCAW CPS sample.* Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, and Localio's (2007) study sample comprised children residing at home during the maltreatment investigation and subsequently placed in care for at least 18 months ($n=729$). In groups of children at low, medium, and high risk for instability, the actual pattern of stability predicted behavioral outcomes. In all three groups, outcomes were worst for those whose placement pattern was unstable, intermediate for those who achieved late stability, and best for those who achieved early stability.

Berger, Bruch, Johnson, James, and Rubin (2009) implemented five methods—ordinary least squares regression, residualized change, simple change, difference-in-difference, and fixed effects—with and without propensity score matching. Any youth in placement at both baseline and 18-month time points was excluded. Youth ranged from 4 to 14 years of age at baseline ($n=2453$). The authors concluded: "Although results from the unmatched OLS and residualized change models suggested that out-of-home placement is associated with increased child behavior problems, estimates from models that more

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