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Relationship between type of placement and competencies and problem behavior of adolescents in long-term foster care

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Abstract

Children entering foster care are a high risk population for socio-emotional, behavioral, and psychological problems. The problems may persist in spite of environmental improvements. The aim of the presented study was to explore the impact of placement type on competence and problem behavior of adolescents in long-term foster care. The study included all children deprived of parental care residing in Belgrade, Serbia, 12 to 17 years old, and living in out-of-home care for at least 1 year prior to study start. Competencies and problem behavior were assessed with Youth Self-Report (YSR). Children living in foster homes scored lower on competence and higher on all problem scales than children living in foster families. The type of placement had significant main effect on scores on activity competence and thought problem scales. Discussion of these results tried to explain observed differences in terms of differences in the family and placement histories of the studied groups.
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1. Introduction

During the last two decades, Serbia faced complex and dramatic events and changes. From socialism and one-party system, it entered transition period and multiparty system. War was going on in the close surrounding causing a huge number of refugees coming to Serbia. All this led to major economic disturbances such as high inflation, rise of unemployment rate and consequently

increased part of population living below poverty. It is not surprising that all kinds of social pathology have become more frequent in such social surrounding, leading to increased number of children deprived of parental care.

There are 1928 children residing in group foster homes and additional 2100 in foster families in Serbia according to data from August 2001. Out of this number, 567 children are living in group foster homes and 217 in foster families in the Belgrade territory (Lukic-Havelka & Seratlic, 2002).

1.1. Child welfare system in Serbia

In Serbia, the social care of children deprived of parental care is organized through Social Work Centers. These centers are the basic units of social welfare system and they are organized in each municipality. Each center has an expert team engaged in work with children deprived of parental care. An expert team comprises of a social worker, psychologist, pedagogue, and legal representative.

Long-term foster care has two forms: foster families and specialized institutions for children deprived of parental care—group foster homes. These two types of placement are not antagonized or mutually excluding. A child can be moved from foster home to foster family and vice versa, according to its needs. In everyday practice, each case is evaluated individually and depending on child's needs and actual circumstances, an expert team, having in mind the best interests of the child, makes the decision about placement type.

When it is identified that a child is endangered by familial circumstances (direct approach of one of the parents to the Social Work Center, report from relatives, neighbors, teachers or school psychologists, or bringing a child because of street bagging or drifting), the first step of the expert team is to assess the possibility for a child to stay in its own family. The expert team acts towards improvement of family circumstances with advisory work and other types of social support including financial support. If this fails, a child is removed from its family and, from this point forward, the child is under custody of the expert team. The expert team decides about the type of placement, assesses eligibility of potential foster parents, prepares the child and future foster parents for placement, cooperates with professionals working in group foster homes, supervises everything that is happening during the placement, and at the same time tries to help biological parents to resolve problems that caused the placement.

1.2. Literature review

It is well documented that children in foster care are a high risk population in the terms of socio-emotional, behavioral, and psychological problems. The rate of psychological problems is significantly higher than 10–20%, which has been estimated in community populations, and is higher than the estimates for youth living below poverty (Farmer et al., 2001). Previous studies reported that one-half to three-fourths of children entering foster care exhibit behavior or social competence problems (Clausen, Landsverk, Ganger, Chadwick, & Litrownik, 1998; Dimigen, De Priore, Butler, Evans, Ferguson, & Swan, 1999; Halfon, Mendonca, & Berkovitz, 1995; Harman, Childs, & Kelleher, 2000; Pilowsky, 1995; Simms, Dubowitz, & Szilagyi, 2000). Entering foster care system presents a significant psychological challenge; children must cope with the effects of traumatic events precipitating their entry into foster care, face a temporary or permanent loss of their parent(s), experience additional trauma of being isolated from familiar surrounding (schools, friends, siblings), and adjust to new families and living situations. Psychological problems may persist in spite of major environmental improvements, and as several studies suggested, foster