

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Child Abuse & Neglect

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/chiabuneg

Research article

The relative safety of paternal, maternal, and traditional foster care placements



Jesse J. Helton*, Brian B. Boutwell¹, Michael DiBernardo

College of Public Health and Social Justice, School of Social Work, St. Louis University, St. Louis, MO, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Safety
Kinship care
Child welfare

ABSTRACT

When children are placed into foster care the caseworker must give preference to an adult relative, many of whom are grandparents, over an unrelated caregiver. This kinship preference is based in evolutionary biology, which suggests that the imperative to care for a child should be greater for kin versus non-kin. However, not all kin are related to a child in the same way, and level of paternity uncertainty may influence level of care provided. For instance, maternal grandparents can be assured that they share genetic material with their grandchild, while paternal grandparents may not have the same level of certainty. Owing to the possibility of paternity uncertainty, we hypothesize that out-of-home placements with paternal grandparents will be at a greater risk of subsequent investigations than placements with maternal grandparents or with foster parents. We secured data on placements $n = 560$ of children ages 1.5 to 17 following a maltreatment investigation from a merger of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being NSCAW II and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System NCANDS. Kaplan-Meier and multivariate Cox regression were used to examine the difference in time to the first new investigation by type of out-of-home placement while controlling for covariates. Consistent with our hypothesis, placements with paternal grandparents were at a higher risk of a subsequent investigations than placements with maternal grandparents or non-kin foster parents. Results suggest a need for further considerations of child safety in foster care based on genetic relatedness of caregivers.

1. Introduction

When children are removed from their home due to abuse or neglect, federal law requires that child protective services (CPS) caseworkers give preference to a genetic relative over a nonrelated caregiver when determining placement (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001, 2016). This kinship preference is based implicitly on evolutionary psychological theory (Testa & Slack, 2002; Testa, 2013), which predicts that a genetic connection with an adult caregiver shields children from situations harmful to their wellbeing (Hamilton, 1964). However, not all kinship relationships are created equal, and caregivers from the mother's side may provide better care for children than caregivers from the father's side (Perry, Daly, & Macfarlan, 2014). Most previous child welfare research compares the relative safety of out-of-home placements between nonrelated out-of-home caregivers (termed "foster parents" hereafter) and any type of genetically related caregivers, called kin caregivers; but kin are a large and heterogeneous group. We use a well-regarded theory from evolutionary psychology to create two different groups of grandparent caregivers based on their level of paternity certainty to the child, and then compared these two groups to foster parents to ascertain

* Corresponding author at: Jesse Helton, St. Louis University, School of Social Work, Tegeler Hall 303, 3550 Lindell Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63103, United States.
E-mail address: heltonjj@slu.edu (J.J. Helton).

¹ Department of Epidemiology (Secondary Appointment).

child safety while in out-of-home care.

1.1. Evolutionary psychology

Evolutionary considerations have been slow to penetrate the thinking of scholars working in the area of child welfare (for exceptions, see [Testa, 2013](#)). The notion that biological kin are best situated to care for children, however, is one evolutionarily informed idea that has taken deep root into both child welfare theory and practice. The logic that biological kin have some imperative to care for one another is well established. The risks associated with having an unrelated parent (especially a stepfather) in the home was illustrated by prior evolutionary scholars ([Daly & Wilson, 1996](#); [Littlefield & Rushton, 1986](#)). Yet, as [Trivers \(1974\)](#) pointed out decades ago, conflict is pervasive in nature, not just among unrelated individuals, but also among biologically related kin. Parents and offspring share *half* of their genetic material, not all ([Trivers, 1974](#)). So, while the interest of parents and children often align, they can also conflict ([Daly & Wilson, 1996](#)).

In addition to the issue of parent-offspring conflict, there is another facet of evolutionary theory that is relevant to but overlooked in child welfare literature: the capability of being entirely certain of sharing genes with a child is luxury only the mother enjoys. Fathers (in the absence of DNA testing), can never be completely certain of paternity ([Goetz & Shackelford, 2009](#)). This uncertainty, coupled with the natural conflict that already exists between parents and offspring, can serve to foster unforeseen difficulties for children in need of placement into a new home. Knowing something about levels of genetic relatedness, as well as the relative certainty of paternity, allows for straightforward predictions as it relates to child welfare. For example, consider that both maternal and paternal grandparents share the same amount of DNA with their grandchildren. Only the maternal grandparents (in particular, the maternal grandmother), however, can be certain that their grandchild actually shares their genes ([Daly & Wilson, 1996](#)). This leads to the prediction, then, that the greatest risk for inadequate care may come from placing children with paternal, versus maternal, grandparents.

The hypothesis that children living with a paternal kin may be more at risk for abuse and neglect than those living with maternal grandparents is rooted in part on a particular insight from [Trivers \(1974\)](#); see also [Hamilton \(1964\)](#) using general evolutionary logic. As a broad rule, the imperative to care for other individuals in the population increases in relation to the amount of genetic material that we share with them ([Hamilton, 1964](#)). Humans in particular are more prone to provide long-term care and form strong emotional attachments to children, parents, and other closely related kin. As a guiding principle, Hamilton's rule works well for predicting investment in offspring and cooperation between family members (and can also be extended to non-kin individuals; see [Axelrod, 1984](#)). A complication arises, however, as a consequence of the fact that humans reproduce by combining their genes using sexual reproduction.

Human reproduction involves the combination of male sperm and female eggs internally in the female reproductive tract. As a result of this concealed fertilization, ancestral males lack complete certainty regarding their genetic relatedness to children ([Goetz & Shackelford, 2009](#); [Trivers, 1974](#)). While females are certain that their offspring belong to them, the risk for cuckoldry in males likely drove the evolution of several psychological mechanisms designed to solve problems related to paternity uncertainty ([Daly & Wilson, 1996](#); for a general review see [Goetz & Shackelford, 2009](#)). It is worth noting, too, that it is not only the male who is uncertain about their relatedness to the child, but the parents of the male (i.e., the child's grandparents) possess a similar level of dubiety regarding their genetic overlap with their grandchild. The mother's parents (in particular, the maternal grandmother), of course, can be assured of their relatedness to their grandchild.

Using the logic mentioned above, [Daly and Wilson \(1996\)](#) were some of the first scholars to apply evolutionary concepts in the study of child homicide. [Daly and Wilson \(1996\)](#) reasoned that the presence of an unrelated male stepparent in the home with a younger child might endanger the safety of the child. To the extent that the stepparent (unconsciously or consciously) views the child as a rival for attention and affection from the mother, and thus a barrier to their own genetic fitness, they may withhold resources or even actively harm the child ([Daly & Wilson, 1996](#)). Indeed, empirical evidence seems to support these evolutionarily informed hypotheses ([Daly & Wilson, 1996](#); [Weekes-Shackelford & Shackelford, 2004](#)).

To date, less time has been spent considering the role of paternity uncertainty as it relates to grandparents and the care that they might invest in their grandchildren should the need arise. [Littlefield and Rushton \(1986\)](#), however, hypothesized that concerns about genetic relatedness to a child might inform the amount of grief experienced by parents and grandparents in the wake of a child's death. The results supported their hypothesis as maternal grandparents grieved more than paternal grandmothers, and thus the experience of grief was most intense as genetic relatedness (and the certainty of relatedness) to the child increased. Applying this logic to foster care, we can hypothesize that paternal and maternal grandparents might differ in regards to the quality of care they're willing to invest in their grandchildren, if called upon to do so.

This is particularly important given that placement with grandparents is often a preferred option if and when a child is removed from the custody of his or her biological parents. The assumption, of course, is that since the child is genetically related to her grandparents, the obligation to appropriately care for him or her will be enhanced. Yet, the same prediction that applies to unrelated stepparents can be applied to *potentially* unrelated paternal grandparents. Uncertainty over paternity might increase the risk of harm to a foster child placed with paternal grandparents as compared to children placed with maternal grandparents. To date, though, prevailing ideas in mainstream social work literature, which we discuss below, have yet to fully grapple with this possibility.

1.2. Literature review

Whether children remain in-home or are placed in out-of-home care, ongoing safety after investigation is the primary concern of

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