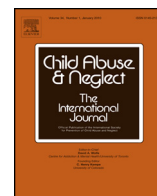


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Child Abuse & Neglect



The impact of changing neighborhoods, switching schools, and experiencing relationship disruption on children's adjustment to a new placement in foster care

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ABSTRACT

When children enter a new foster care placement they may experience several different transitions. Not only will a child move in with a new family, he or she may move to a different neighborhood, change schools, lose contact with old friends, be placed apart from one or more siblings, and have limited contact with his or her biological parents. The current study examined the impact of these transitions on foster children's adjustment to a new placement in out-of-home care. The sample consisted of 152 youth ages 6–17.5 who participated in the second National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II) study and who were residing with relative or non-relative foster families at the time of the Wave I interview. During the Wave I interview, youth were asked to report on the types of transitions they experienced when they moved into their current placement. Linear and Poisson regressions were used to estimate the effect of the transitions on youths' relationships with their new families, mental health, relationships with peers at school, and school engagement. The results showed that youth whose biological mothers contacted them more than once a month had more symptoms of mental health problems than youth who had less contact with their biological mothers. In contrast, changing schools had a positive impact on youths' mental health, and youth who were separated from siblings were more likely to get along well with their school peers. Implications for improving youth's adjustment to new foster care placements are discussed.

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1. Introduction

While the majority of children who are the victims of maltreatment remain with their families of origin, approximately 255,000 are placed into foster care each year ([Administration on Children, 2015](#)). Additionally, between 25 and 50% of foster children experience placement disruptions and must move in with new families at some point in their out-of-home placement career ([Connell et al., 2006](#); [Helton, 2011](#)). Although most research on foster care placement and placement change tends to view each entry into a new placement as a single event, in fact each event classified as a single placement might encompass multiple transitions. For example, when a child is placed with a new family, he may also have to change

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neighborhoods and start attending a new school. He may lose contact with his former friends and be separated from his siblings. The number of visits and amount of contact he has with his biological caregivers may change as well. Understanding the impact of these types of transitions and separations is important, because youth who are placed into foster care are at risk for many negative outcomes including poverty, academic failure, homelessness, criminal justice involvement, substance abuse, and mental health problems (Clausen, Landsverk, Ganger, Chadwick, & Litrownik, 1998; Courtney, 2009; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010; Pilowsky & Wu, 2006).

1.1. Neighborhood transitions

Research on the impact of changing neighborhoods while in foster care is limited. The few studies conducted on this topic have found that it is a common experience. For example, interviews with 316 foster children who participated in the first National Study of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW) revealed that 87% of the children had moved to a new neighborhood when they entered their current foster placement and 54% felt the new neighborhood was nicer than where they lived before (Chapman, Wall, & Barth, 2004). A qualitative study of 59 foster children in Illinois found very similar results (Johnson, Yoken, & Voss, 1995).

In some states, child welfare agencies place a priority on keeping foster children in their neighborhoods of origin, but this practice can have both positive and negative outcomes (Berrick, 2006; Huang & Ryan 2014). Foster children who stay in the same neighborhood may be more likely to retain relationships with their friends and family members and can often remain in their local school. However, many children who enter foster care have grown up in impoverished neighborhoods with high rates of violence and poor quality public schools. Children who remain in these neighborhoods may be more likely than children in wealthier neighborhoods to associate with peers who engage in delinquent or criminal activities (Berrick, 2006; Huang & Ryan, 2014). Results from the Moving To Opportunity experiment, a randomized controlled study in which some low-income families living in public housing in extremely poor neighborhoods received section 8 vouchers which allowed them to move to lower poverty neighborhoods, showed that youth who moved felt safer and were less likely to see drug use than youth who remained in the same neighborhoods (Gennetian et al., 2012). While the MTO study did not focus on foster children, one study of foster care placements in Chicago in the 1980s and 1990s, found that children placed in neighborhoods with high poverty rates, residential instability, and ethnic heterogeneity were more likely to be exposed to a violent neighborhood culture than children in neighborhoods without these characteristics (Huang & Ryan, 2014).

1.2. School transitions

When foster children move to a different neighborhood they are frequently required to enroll in a new school. In fact, between 57% and 93% of children change schools while in foster care (Chapman et al., 2004; Conger & Rebeck, 2001; Fries, Klein, & Ballantyne, 2014; Johnson et al., 1995; Pears, Kim, Buchanan, & Fisher, 2015). When Pears et al. (2015) examined the school mobility patterns of 86 foster children in kindergarten through second grades they found that 78% of the school moves occurred during a placement change, 51% occurred during the school year, and the majority of the moves (86%) involved a transfer to a new school district. School moves can negatively impact foster children by causing them to miss or repeat lessons (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003), lose credits (Weinberg & Luderer, 2004), postpone assessments, and experience gaps in their receipt of special education services (Stone, 2007). These outcomes are especially likely to occur if there is a delay in the transfer of their academic records to their new school (Weinberg & Luderer, 2004). Additionally, the stress of adjusting to a new set of teachers and classmates may provoke anxiety in some foster children (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002). Despite these potential negative outcomes, foster children may benefit from a school transfer if their new school is of higher quality than their former one. One study of 472 foster children attending elementary schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District found that school quality differed by race even when controlling for placement type. A comparison of children's current schools with the original school they would have attended if they remained with their birth parents in their neighborhood of origin revealed that African-American and Hispanic children's current schools were of lower quality, while the reverse was true for Caucasian children (Fries et al., 2014). However, the average quality difference between the current schools and the original schools was low, and the current schools typically had low test scores (Fries et al., 2014).

Much of the prior research on the impact of school transfers on foster children has suffered from methodological limitations such as failing to control for children's academic status and behavior prior to the transfer (Pears et al., 2015), or failing to separate placement changes from school transfers (Eckenrode, Rowe, Laird, & Brathwaite, 1995). Results from studies without these limitations suggest that changing schools can have a negative effect on achievement in math (Conger & Rebeck, 2001), and lead to behavior problems among youth whose school readiness is below average at the beginning of primary school (Pears et al., 2015).

1.3. Separations from family and friends

1.3.1. Loss of friendships. School transfers and placement changes can also lead to disruptions in friendships. Children whose placements are near their birth families and children who are placed in relative care are more likely to maintain ties to their old friends than children who move far away or who are placed outside their families (Mc Mahon & Curtin, 2013). Retaining these friendships, as long as the peers do not engage in deviant behavior, (Melkman, 2015) may be beneficial. A study of 154

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