



Factors associated with service utilization in child welfare: A structural equation model



Dana M. Hollinshead^{a,*}, Sangwon Kim^b, John D. Fluke^a, Lisa Merkel-Holguin^a

^a *Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect, University of Colorado School of Medicine, Department of Pediatrics, 13123 East 16th Avenue, B390, Aurora, CO 80045, United States*

^b *Child Rights International Center, 21, Sajik-ro 12-gil, Jongno-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea*

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ABSTRACT

A key premise of child protective services systems is that families who participate in needed services will be associated with better outcomes. Using data from 1849 cases involved in a randomized control trial study conducted in three child welfare systems implementing Differential Response, this research tested a conceptual framework of engagement by exploring caregiver, caseworker, and agency factors and their roles in enhancing or suppressing service utilization. The findings from this exploratory study identified particular agency, caseworker and caregiver dynamics that were associated with greater participation in services. Controlling for other variables, receipt of an alternative response intervention, a caseworkers' inclusive interaction style, caregivers' positive emotional responses to their caseworker, and their satisfaction with their experiences were associated with utilization of counseling, employment-related, and/or basic needs services. Unexpectedly, caregivers reporting a negative emotional response were also associated with higher levels of service utilization, no matter the service type category; a finding that suggests that service utilization may be enhanced both by supportive and coercive means. The results of this research enhance our understanding of the interplay of policies, practices, casework skills, and caregiver characteristics with respect to child welfare outcomes, including indicators of engagement such as service utilization.

1. Introduction

A key premise of child protective services (CPS) systems is that families who participate in needed services will be associated with better outcomes. The question of what influences a family to accept and partake in services is an important, but understudied element of engagement with implications for a range of policy and practice implementation concerns in child welfare and beyond. Indeed, despite the expansion of system reform efforts designed in part to improve the engagement of families reported to CPS systems (Antle, Christensen, van Zyl, & Barbee, 2012; Merkel-Holguin, Winterfeld, Harper, Coburn, & Fluke, 1997; QIC-DR, 2014; US DHHS, 2003), there is a dearth of research describing factors affecting engagement and how these engagement mechanisms operate to improve or impede service utilization. Further, although common sense suggests these factors matter, the field of child welfare lacks a basic understanding of the relative importance of policies, practices, and interpersonal caseworker and caregiver dynamics with respect to family engagement.

Thus, using data from three states involved in a randomized control

trial study (RCT) of Differential Response (DR; QIC-DR, 2014) this research tested a theory of engagement by exploring caregiver, caseworker, and agency factors and their interrelated roles in enhancing or suppressing service utilization. The results of this research enhance our understanding of the complex interplay of select policies, practices, casework skills, and caregiver characteristics with respect to proximal or intermediary child welfare outcomes, specifically service utilization. While this is a study about a theory of engagement, this analytic effort is not meant to reflect the totality of factors that may play into engagement. Moreover, our use of DR system-related data should not suggest this is a DR effectiveness study. Our premise here is that DR is one of many engagement-enabling approaches being implemented in child welfare systems, and analysis conducted in the course of this study provided an opportunity to explore engagement concepts and dynamics that may be associated with, but certainly not limited to DR systems. Instead, the goal of the study was to peek into the black box regarding relationships between the processes and dynamics that take place between the first point of contact with CPS and a family utilizing services in an effort to understand the dynamics of family engagement.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: dana.hollinshead@childrenscolorado.org (D.M. Hollinshead), sangwoninkorea@gmail.com (S. Kim), john.fluke@ucdenver.edu (J.D. Fluke), Lisa.merkel-holguin@childrenscolorado.org (L. Merkel-Holguin).

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2. Background

2.1. Understanding engagement in child welfare

Engagement research is complex and efforts to undertake empirical tests of engagement theories are rare, but emerging (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Hollinshead, Kim, Fluke & Merkel-Holguin, 2015; Merkel-Holguin, Hollinshead, Hahn, Casillas, & Fluke, 2015). Indeed, the concept of engagement in child welfare may be thought to reflect a positive, helping relationship between a caseworker and caregiver, or other members of the family system, however, the term engagement has been defined by researchers and practitioners, alike, to mean a range of ideas: compliance, involvement, participation, cooperation, and collaboration. These varying constructs create difficulty in teasing out not only what “engagement” is, but also how it relates to measuring the success of child protection interventions. In this article, as noted below in the conceptual framework, we define engagement as both the process and the product of interactions between caseworkers and caregivers.

Further complicating child welfare engagement research is the reality that nearly all families involved with child protection systems find themselves in a non-voluntary relationship (Bohlen, McWey, & Schlee, 2008). Not surprisingly, research affirms that the unanticipated visits from government CPS workers may result in parents having such emotional responses as fear and anger (Dumbrill, 2006; Merkel-Holguin et al., 2015). While data on parent perceptions of CPS are limited and tend to rely on a small sample of respondents, parents generally characterize their interactions with CPS agencies negatively, including being judgmental (Dumbrill, 2010), difficult, humiliating, and intimidating (Buckley, Carr, & Whelan, 2011), shaming (Schreiber, Fuller, & Pacey, 2013), and adversarial (Healy, Darlington, & Feeney, 2011). What remains unclear is the extent to which emotional responses to interventions affect the course of action a caregiver may take when child protective services is involved in their life.

Compounding challenges to engage child welfare-involved families is that, traditionally, child protective services staff must often play a “dual role” in the course of a child welfare intervention (Pelton, 1989). At one end of the spectrum, they are charged with applying investigative skills to ascertain whether maltreatment occurred, identifying perpetrators and victims. At the other end, they are expected to act as trusted government agents who support families in need by connecting them to a myriad of services that aim to remediate the effects of poverty, mental health, substance abuse, or other similar issues. This bi-polarity may confound and certainly complicates the roles and responsibilities of child protective services staff, particularly as they must often vacillate between functioning as pseudo law enforcement versus social work staff.

This dual role dynamic has long been noted to create challenges to engaging families (Pelton, 1989; Yachtmenoff, 2005). As Pelton (1989) notes, “Given the long-standing inclinations to find fault with impoverished parents and to use child removal as a solution to their problems, the investigation role is incompatible with a family preservation role when the two roles (a)re placed within the same individual or under the same administrative roof” (p. 119). Not only may it be unrealistic for all staff to develop simultaneous and equally effective skills at both ends of the spectrum, but the nature and likelihood of engagement may shift as practice moves along a continuum that involves the possibility of threats (e.g., of substantiating someone as a perpetrator or placing a child in care) or coercion. As such, the field is overdue for an inquiry into the effects of different interaction approaches on the identification of needs and utilization of services.

Arguably, service participation is one aspect of a series of events constituting engagement and yet few studies have reported on dynamics associated that foster or suppress service participation (van Zyl et al., 2014; Antle, Christenson, Barbee, & Martin, 2008). Further, a

large portion of families who receive a child maltreatment investigation or assessment will not be offered services, and for those who are, there may be some discretion in accepting and/or engaging with such services. Decades of national data reports on child maltreatment interventions indicate that receipt rates for prevention services and post-response services (i.e., those active after the completion of CPS' response to a maltreatment report) are on average low, and vary significantly by jurisdiction across the United States (US DHHS, 2014). In 2013, 2.9 million duplicate children received a prevention service (often delivered by CPS agencies), while nationally, 64% of victims and 32% of non-victims received post-response services. Still, the rates of post-response services in 2013 were even lower for the three states examined in our analysis below (Reference State A, 43% for victims and 12% for non-victims; State B, 30% victims and 15% non-victims; and State C, 56% victims and 31% non-victims; US DHHS, 2014).

2.2. Differential response and engagement-enabling policy

Of interest to the child welfare field is whether and which interventions might foster engagement and contribute to better outcomes for child welfare-involved families. One such intervention, called Differential Response (DR) has been widely implemented by child protective systems across the United States. This system reform restructures the front-end of the child protective services system by creating two pathways for the agency to respond to child maltreatment allegations: an investigation response (IR) pathway and an alternative response (AR) pathway. Typically, the IR pathway is reserved for child maltreatment allegations that are deemed high-risk, egregious or need the potential involvement of law enforcement; and the AR pathway is intended for low to moderate-risk child maltreatment allegations. Described in greater depth elsewhere (National Quality Improvement Center on Differential Response in Child Welfare [QIC-DR], 2014), DR's popularity appears driven in part by its emphasis on engaging low to moderate risk families with child welfare services, in part by prioritizing a focus on families' service needs rather than maltreatment identification.

Indeed, although implementation of DR can vary (QIC-DR, 2014), the engagement construct is fundamentally associated with its core premise, that parents may be more willing to engage with AR workers and participate in services because the CPS system sets aside fault-finding—there is no requirement to substantiate the allegation or identify someone as a perpetrator. Further, AR workers are encouraged, by design, to work collaboratively with families to identify families' service needs, and link them accordingly to such services. Applying a theory of change, this is believed to support AR caseworkers' ability to establish better relationships with parents who may concomitantly experience the CPS intervention as less intrusive and blaming. Parents, in turn, may be more willing to work with CPS to identify and utilize services that are a good fit for their needs and circumstances. Thus, AR casework has been hypothesized as an active mechanism or mediator in facilitating service uptake.

Some research has established a basis for exploring DR as one example of an engagement-enabling policy. Prior DR studies have utilized indicators of engagement including parents' positive or negative emotional responses to interactions with child protective services (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2015; Loman & Siegel, 2013; Ruppel, Huang, & Haulenbeek, 2011); and satisfaction with the actual casework they experienced (Hollinshead et al., 2015; Loman & Siegel, 2013; Ruppel et al., 2011; Siegel, Filonow, & Loman, 2010). Across these studies, the findings have been consistent: caregivers who were randomly assigned to receive an AR intervention were more positive, less negative, and more satisfied with their child welfare interventions compared to caregivers who received an IR intervention. Still, to date, there have been few efforts to understand whether the policy and practice engagement features associated with AR actually occur, how they interrelate with other ecological factors, and how they might contribute to observed service utilization.

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