

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

Child Abuse & Neglect

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

Predictors of foster parents' stress and associations to sensitivity in the first year after placement



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Foster parents
Foster children
Sensitivity
Parenting stress
Behavior problems

ABSTRACT

In Germany, almost 70 000 children are living in foster families (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2016). Many foster children show mental health problems as they were exposed to an accumulation of risk factors. Hence, foster parents are often faced with challenging parenting situations. The current study focuses on the predictors of foster parents' stress and examines longitudinally whether parenting stress is associated with foster parents' sensitivity. The sample consisted of 55 children (aged from 1 to 6 years) and their foster caregivers. Foster parents' sensitivity was observed during home visits. Caregiver reports were used to assess parenting stress (Parenting Stress Index) as well as foster children's externalizing behavior problems (Child Behavior Checklist). For main caregivers' stress at the beginning of placement, regression analyses revealed both, foster children's externalizing problems as well as partners' stress as predictive. For main caregivers' stress one year after, only initial parenting stress and partners' stress were predictive. Foster parents' sensitivity was correlated with their parenting stress one year after placement. Regression analyses revealed no longitudinal effects of initial parenting stress on overall sensitivity. However, supportive presence was predicted by initial supportive presence and by the interaction between parenting stress and children's externalizing problems at placement. The findings highlight the role of the partner in experiencing parenting stress when taking care of a foster child. Furthermore, they emphasize that foster parents who care for children with behavior problems need adequate support that can buffer initial parenting stress and thereby promote sensitive caregiving.

1. Introduction

When parents are not able to bring up their children in an adequate way, out-of-home placement may be required. In Germany, about 70 000 children are living in foster families (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2016). Due to adverse experiences in their birth families, attachment break-ups and multiple placement histories foster children are often affected by behavior problems (e. g., Kindler, Scheuerer-Englisch, Gabler, & Köckeritz, 2011; Minnis, Everett, Pelosi, Dunn, & Knapp, 2006). Previous research reveals that about 30–60% of the foster children suffer from mental health problems (Maaskant, van Rooij, & Hermanns, 2014; Minnis et al., 2006).

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.02.009>

Received 23 February 2017; Received in revised form 13 February 2018; Accepted 15 February 2018

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Increased behavior problems, in turn, put them at risk for placement disruptions (Fisher, Stoolmiller, Mannering, Takahashi, & Chamberlain, 2011; Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000). Considering foster children's problem load as well as the complex network surrounding foster care (Niepel, 2008), foster parents are susceptible to increased parenting stress. Depending on foster parents' capacities in handling these problems, a mismatch between the resources and demands of being a foster parent could evolve. More precisely, parenting stress may lead to dysfunctional interactions between foster parents and their foster children and therefore affect foster children's attachment development (Gabler et al., 2014). Taking a longer-term perspective, previous findings suggest foster parents' stress and perceived parenting support to also be associated with placement stability (Crum, 2010; Farmer, Lipscombe, & Moyers, 2005). Against this background it is important to increase the understanding of parenting stress, its determinants and consequences in foster families.

1.1. Parenting stress

Deater-Deckard (1998) defined parenting stress as

"...the aversive psychological reaction to the demands of being a parent. [...] Parenting stress is experienced as negative feelings toward the self and toward the child or children, and by definition these negative feelings are directly attributable to the demands of parenthood." (p. 315).

Commonly, parenting stress has been conceptualized as resulting from an experienced discrepancy between personal resources and the demands of being a parent (e. g., Östberg, Hagekull, & Hagelin, 2007). Various multivariate and process-oriented models assume that parenting stress is multiple determined (Crnic & Low, 2002). For example, Webster-Stratton (1990) revealed that extrafamilial factors and interparental factors as well as child factors have an impact on parenting stress.

Along with the definition of parenting stress as a felt discrepancy between resources and demands, the factors predicting parenting stress can be divided into factors affecting, first, parental resources and, second, the demands of being a parent. Regarding the demands, children's mental health and associated behavior problems play an important role. Indeed, the relationship between children's externalizing behavior and parenting stress is well documented (Morgan, Robinson, & Aldridge, 2002). Previous findings in various samples indicated that mental health problems and poor emotion regulation skills contribute negatively to parenting stress (Baker et al., 2003; Creasey & Reese, 1996; Williford, Calkins, & Keane, 2007). Vaughan, Feinn, Bernard, Brereton, and Kaufman (2012) found that caregivers reported the highest levels of stress, when mental health symptoms in both domains, internalizing as well as externalizing, were reported.

In order to handle these demands, social support can be regarded as an essential resource. Poor social support, e.g. in terms of emotional support from spouses or marital quality in general, has been repeatedly identified as a risk factor for higher levels of parenting stress (Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996; Feldman, Eidelman, & Rotenberg, 2004; Gerstein, Crnic, Blacher, & Baker, 2009; Östberg & Hagekull, 2000).

However, less is known about the correlates of parenting stress in foster families. Jones and Morrisette et al. (1999) stated children's emotional instability and aggressive behavior as crucial for foster parents' stress. Vanschoonlandt, Vanderfaillie, Van Hoken, De Maeyer, and Robberechts (2013) found that foster mothers of children showing externalizing problems reported more parenting stress than others. In addition, conduct problems, hyperactivity and violent behavior of adolescents in foster care substantially contribute to increased stress levels in foster parents (Farmer et al., 2005). In a survey foster parents reported stressful events like severe family conflicts or difficulties with the birth parents (Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000). Evidence suggests that such difficulties as well as problems with contacting social workers are also associated with elevated stress levels, while, on the other hand, social support from friends or professionals is linked to less parenting stress in foster families (Farmer et al., 2005). However, to date there is a lack of research examining predictors of foster parents' stress longitudinally taking into account both child factors as well as factors related to spousal support, i.e., the partners parenting stress. Furthermore, the question arises how parenting stress affects foster parents' sensitivity in the longer term.

1.2. Sensitivity

A caregiver's sensitivity includes the perception of the child's signals and their correct interpretation as well as the caregiver's prompt and appropriate response to the child's signals (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974). In non-foster samples there is striking evidence that parental sensitivity is an important factor for children's psychosocial development in terms of attachment security (e. g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; De Wolff & Van IJzendoorn, 1997; Grossmann, Grossmann, Spangler, Suess, & Unzner, 1985; Spangler, Fremmer-Bombik, & Grossmann, 1996; Van IJzendoorn, 1995). Also, in foster families, sensitive parenting was found to be associated with foster children's attachment security (De Schipper, Oosterman, & Schuengel, 2012; Gabler et al., 2014; Oosterman & Schuengel, 2008; Ponciano, 2010). Considering the high number of risk factors foster children are exposed to, the formation of a secure attachment relationship within the foster home can be regarded as a key protective factor coming along with the intervention (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). Therefore, it can be concluded that the capacity to be a sensitive parent is especially important in the context of foster care. Still, despite its critical role in foster children's positive adjustment, only little is known about the factors influencing foster parents' sensitivity

Indeed, it is suggested that parenting behavior is affected by parenting stress (e.g., Rodgers, 1998). Moreover, prior evidence indicates that it is a risk factor for maladaptive parenting practices. For example, Guajardo, Snyder, and Petersen (2009) revealed parenting stress to be associated with parental laxness and overreactive parenting. Likewise, Deater-Deckard and Scarr (1996) found

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