



## Aggressive behaviors among Korean children in out-of-home care: The role of placement characteristics



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### ABSTRACT

Using data from the Korean Panel Study on Children in Out-of-Home Care, this study examined the impact of placement characteristics on aggressive behaviors among children in out-of-home care by placement type. The sample was divided into three groups based on placement type: institutional care ( $n = 118$ ), group homes ( $n = 95$ ), and foster care ( $n = 212$ ). Results from hierarchical multiple regression analyses indicated that the length of stay in out-of-home care significantly influenced aggressive behaviors amongst children in institutional care, such that increased duration of out-of-home care decreased the level of aggressive behaviors. Perceptions of stigma/discrimination also significantly influenced aggressive behaviors displayed by children in institutional and foster care. Children with a higher perception of stigma/discrimination were more likely to exhibit severe aggressive behaviors than were their counterparts. On the other hand, placement characteristics had no significant influence on aggressive behaviors of children in group homes. The study findings suggest that children's mental health problems and disabilities should be considered during the placement procedure and interventions focusing on decreasing stigmatization should be developed and provided for children in out-of-home care.

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### 1. Introduction

Children are placed in out-of-home care when they must be removed from their homes because of a parent's death, child abuse or neglect, poverty, or family breakdown (Iwaniec, 2006). Children in out-of-home care live in diverse settings. In 1888, the first institution for the care of such children in Korea was founded by a French Catholic priest (Choi, 1996). For more than a hundred years, institutional care has been the representative type of out-of-home care in South Korea, and for several decades it was the only option for out-of-home care.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) marked a turning point in out-of-home care services in South Korea, establishing 'more family-like' care as a priority for children in out-of-home care (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003). The Korean government established foster care support centers nationwide in accordance with the United Nations recommendation. With political and legal support, the number of children placed in foster care has increased steadily since 2003 (Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2014). In 2003, 10,222 children were placed in out-of-home care; 46.4% of those children were placed in institutional care, 23.4% were placed in foster care, 0.3% was placed in group homes, and 24.5% were adopted. In 2013, 6020 children were placed in out-of-home care; 42.1% of those children were placed in institutional care, 29.1%

were placed in foster care, and 11.4% were placed in group homes (Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2014). Thus, between 2003 and 2013, the proportion of children placed in institutional care decreased, while the proportion of children placed in both foster care and group homes increased. These recent statistics from the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare indicate that foster care and group homes are fast-growing options for out-of-home placement because 'more family-like' policies for children in out-of-home care were adopted.

Regardless of placement type, it is evident that children in out-of-home care are at a high risk for behavioral and emotional problems (Clausen, Landsverk, Ganger, Chadwick, and Litrownik, 1998; Huh, 2008; Kang, Nho, Chun, and Chung, 2012; Osborn, Delfabbro, and Barber, 2008; Sung, 2006; Zima et al., 2000), and these problems may persist into adulthood (Anctil, McCubbin, O'Brien, and Pecora, 2007; Courtney and Piliavin, 1998; Kang, Shin, and Park, 2009; Reilly, 2003; Lee and Choi, 2008). Behavioral and emotional problems may be influenced by traumatic life events such as child abuse and neglect, the death of a parent, or the breakdown of the family. Moreover, since children in institutions are likely to experience changes in living arrangements and caregivers, they are likely to have poorer psychological outcomes over time than children who were never under the care of the state (Sung and Seol, 2012). Sung (2006) also found that children in institutional care had more behavioral problems than did children living with their biological parents. Previous studies from Western countries show similar findings. Osborn et al. (2008) examined the

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records of 364 children in Australian out-of-home care and showed that children who were removed from their homes because of safety concerns exhibited higher rates of conduct disorders, problems with their peers, and anxiety and depression. The results of Clausen et al.'s (1998) study showed that over 50% of children in foster care had a score over the cut off-point on the aggressive behavioral problem scale. Similarly, children in kinship care also appeared to exhibit behavioral problems (Dubowitz, Zuravin, Starr, Feigelman, and Donna, 1993; Holtan, Ronning, Handegard, and Sourander, 2005). Using a sample of 346 children in kinship care, Dubowitz et al. (1993) noted that 42% of boys and 28% of girls had some sort of behavioral problem in the clinical range, compared with about 10% in the general population. Furthermore, children placed in out-of-home care exhibited significant behavioral problems in comparison to maltreated children who remained in their homes or children who did not experience either maltreatment or out-of-home care; that study was controlled for baseline developmental adaptation and socioeconomic conditions prior to placement (Lawrence, Carlson, and Egeland, 2006). Carpenter and Clyman (2004) showed the lasting effects of kinship care placement on the emotional well-being of women. Women who lived in kinship care during their childhoods exhibited more severe prolonged anxiety and greater unhappiness with life than women who lived at home with their biological parents during childhood.

Because of these concerns, it is critical to investigate factors that predict the aggressive behaviors of children in out-of-home care in order to provide better living environments for such children. One of the prominent theoretical perspectives on aggressive behaviors is attachment theory (Crittenden and Ainsworth, 1989). According to attachment theory, children who have a secure attachment with their caregivers learn to adapt to new environments and can easily become attached to others and build relationships with others. On the other hand, if children have an insecure attachment with their caregivers, they are likely to experience disruptions in attachment to others and exhibit aggressive behaviors (Lyons-Ruth, 1996).

The attachment theory is limited in its ability to explain aggressive behaviors amongst children in out-of-home care because such children have been removed from their homes. For this reason, the effects of placement characteristics on the aggressive behaviors of children in this population should be considered. Results from recent studies indicate that children who experienced placement instability or stayed for a long time in out-of-home care were more likely to show more severe aggressive behaviors than were their counterparts (Leathers, 2006; Lee and Han, 2006; Newton, Litrownik, and Landsverk, 2000; Osborn et al., 2008; Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, and Localio, 2015; Zima et al., 2000). For example, in the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW) study, children who experienced placement instability had a 36% to 63% increased risk of behavioral problems compared with children in stable out-of-home care (Rubin et al., 2015). Similarly, Newton et al. (2000) examined the records of 415 youths in foster care in California and reported that changes in foster care were linked to an increase in behavioral problems and that the length of stay in out-of-home care correlated with the severity of behavioral problems. Lee and Han (2006) also found that the length of time Korean children spent in institutional care was positively correlated with behavioral problems. Similar results were found in Benbenishty and Oyserman's (1995) study, which examined the impact of length of stay in foster care on behavioral problems in a population of Israeli children. However, Zima et al. (2000) reported that the length of stay in foster care was not related to behavioral problems. In addition, children who had experienced family breakdown and had to leave their own homes showed different levels of developmental outcomes depending on the type of out-of-home care they received (Berrick, 1998; Berrick, Courtney, and Barth, 1993). Berrick et al. (1993) reported that children in group homes had poorer developmental outcomes than did children in foster care.

This review of the literature underscores the need for further examination of the impact of placement characteristics on aggressive behaviors

of children in out-of-home care in Korea. Additional studies will lead to a better understanding of the association between placement characteristics and aggressive behaviors. The studies should be controlled for the characteristics of the children including their social developmental characteristics, which have been shown to be risk factors for aggressive behaviors. For example, previous research in the field of out-of-home care investigated characteristics such as age, gender, and emotional disturbance as predictors associated with aggressive behaviors amongst children in out-of-home care (Dubowitz et al., 1993; English, 1993; Huh, 2004; Lee and Bukowski, 2012). Younger children in foster care showed more aggressive behaviors than did older children (Huh, 2004). Gender was a significant predictor for aggressive behaviors amongst children in out-of-home care: males in foster care exhibited more aggressive behaviors than did females in foster care (Dubowitz et al., 1993; Huh, 2004). Similarly, males in group care were significantly more likely to be physically violent than were females in group care (English, 1993). In addition, children's emotional maladjustment was strongly predictive of aggressive behaviors since children often express depression and anxiety through aggressive behaviors (Lee and Bukowski, 2012). The association between placement characteristics and aggressive behaviors could be accounted for by social developmental factors, such as peer relationships, peer delinquency, or peer victimization (Khatri, Kupersmidt, and Patterson, 2000; Kim and Cho, 2009; Kim and Choi, 2010; Sullivan, Farrell, and Klierer, 2006). For children placed in out-of-home care, relationships with peers may play a significant role in developmental outcomes. Kim and Cho (2009) examined the effects of support from friends on the psychological adaptation of children in group homes and showed that support from friends had a positive impact on psychological adaptation. Peer victimization has also been reported to be significantly related to aggressive behaviors (Khatri et al., 2000; Sullivan et al., 2006). Kim and Choi (2010) reported that the delinquency rate of friends had a significant effect on overt aggression of youths.

### 1.1. The current study

Although there is a growing body of research on the influence of children's characteristics and social developmental characteristics on the aggressive behaviors of children in out-of-home care, little is known about the impact of placement characteristics on aggressive behaviors. Moreover, there is very limited research that examines the risk factors for aggressive behaviors in children in out-of-home care by placement type in South Korea.

In the current study, we attempt to explain the effects of placement characteristics on aggressive behaviors of children living in out-of-home care by placement type. Beyond investigating the effects of placement characteristics on aggressive behaviors, the current study also examines how children's personal characteristics affect aggressive behaviors. More specifically, our research questions are as follows:

1. Are there differences among children in institutional care, group homes, or foster care in terms of children's personalities, social developmental characteristics, and placement characteristics?
2. Are there differences in the impact of placement characteristics on aggressive behaviors among children in institutional care, group homes, or foster care?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

This study used data from the Korean Panel Study on Children in Out-of-Home Care (Kang, Chung, Chun, Nho, and Woo, 2014), a nationally representative longitudinal study that investigated the development and functioning of children in out-of-home care. The data were collected using a randomized stratified sampling method organized by administrative districts at the national level. First, the population was

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