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Differences in the early care and education needs of young children involved in child protection

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ABSTRACT

There is increasing attention being given to better coordinated early care and education (ECE) and child protection systems across the nation, as children with child protection involvement are at risk for a range of negative outcomes that have been improved through high quality ECE in other populations. However, there is little empirical evidence to demonstrate what types of ECE experiences are needed for children involved in the child protection system in order to improve their developmental outcomes. This study compared the developmental status in the year prior to kindergarten of low-income children with and without child protection involvement who were enrolled in a range of ECE settings, all of which were rated highly by a state quality rating and improvement system. Using secondary data from a large Midwestern state child protection system and a local ECE evaluation, findings demonstrated that children with child protection involvement were performing more poorly than their low-income peers without child protection involvement on measures of receptive vocabulary, math reasoning, and teacher ratings of anger/aggression and anxiety/withdrawal, but not on ratings of social competence. Growth was made in receptive vocabulary and social competence for all children and there was no significant interaction between group and time for any child outcome measure. These data suggest that children with child protection involvement continue to manifest academic and social difficulties despite attending high quality ECE programs. Implications for improving the early educational opportunities for children with child protection involvement and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

With the continued expansion of the early care and education (ECE) system nationally, combined with growing attention to the ECE needs of children in the child protection system (see the CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010)[1], greater numbers of young children receiving child protective services are also receiving ECE in their communities. In fact, there is a significant overlap in the proportion of children who are involved in the child protection and ECE systems; recent estimates indicate that just over half of all children in the child protection system attend some type of ECE setting (Ward et al., 2009). The recommendations for increasing access to high quality ECE for children involved in child protection are frequently based on evidence that children experiencing poverty benefit from high quality and often model comprehensive ECE programs (Reynolds, Magnuson, & Oh, 2010), as there are few data specific to children involved in child protection (for exceptions, see Lipscomb, Pratt, Schmitt, Pears, & Kim, 2013; and Dinehart, Manfra, Katz, & Hartman, 2012). However, there is reason to think that children with the additional risk of child protection involvement may have even greater developmental challenges and needs than children living in poverty alone (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2012). Specifically, the types of challenges and needs demonstrated by children in the child protection system, who are likely to have experienced trauma, may require very particular strategies and programming components (such as a therapeutic environment) that are not found in a comprehensive ECE program or a typical ECE program.

There is notable diversity in the type and quality of ECE programs available (Adams, Zaslow, & Tout, 2007; Early et al., 2005; Moiduddin, Aikens, Tarullo, West, & Xue, 2012), and thus few opportunities for children involved with child protection to access comprehensive model ECE programs. More research is needed to understand whether children with additional risks beyond poverty, such as those who have been involved with the child protection system, can benefit from typically available ECE programs in their community. In this study, we

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[1] *Child protection* is a term specific in its relation to the maltreatment of children as opposed to *child welfare*, which is a term that often, but not always, encompasses a broader set of services and children. Some authors use these terms interchangeably. This study, and therefore the literature included in this paper, focus on children who have been reported for having been maltreated. We use the term child protection unless a referenced article is specific in its inclusion of children beyond those that have been maltreated. In those situations we have utilized their terminology of child welfare.

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examined the development of children involved in the child protection system who are enrolled in typically available ECE programs the year prior to kindergarten entry to ascertain the extent to which ECE settings could support developmental progress, above and beyond the impact of poverty.

1.1. Developmental outcomes of children experiencing adversity

In the last decade, the science of early childhood has reached new levels of understanding, rich with knowledge about how children's earliest experiences, good and bad, are carried forward into adulthood by influencing the very architecture of their brains (Gunnar & Loman, 2011; Shonkoff, 2011). Children who experience significant adversity in the first few years of life are at greater risk for a range of poor outcomes across the lifespan (Duncan, Ziol-Guest, & Kalil, 2010; Felitti et al., 1998; Melchior, Moffitt, Milne, Poulton, & Caspi, 2007; Miller & Chen, 2013; Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, 2009). Poverty is one of the most significant threats to child development (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000), and there is evidence that positive adaptation in adulthood is compromised by the experience of poverty in childhood (Conroy, Sandel, & Zuckerman, 2010; Duncan et al., 2010; Hertzman & Boyce, 2010; Melchior et al., 2007; Miller & Chen, 2013). Specifically, the differences in children's social–emotional functioning and cognitive performance due to poverty are visible by age two and persist at school entry and throughout the school years (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder, 2013). Children who experienced poverty early are more likely to be retained a grade, not graduate from high school, and be diagnosed with a learning disability. Furthermore, there is evidence that the negative effects of poverty are especially strong when poverty is experienced in the first years of life (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Duncan et al., 2010).

As is the case for young children experiencing poverty, young children who experience the trauma of abuse and/or neglect and enter the child protection system suffer from similar adverse developmental outcomes. Young victims of maltreatment and neglect tend to perform poorly across all domains of development, from cognition, neurological development, and language (Aber, Allen, Carlson, & Cicchetti, 1989; Culp et al., 1991; Pears & Fisher, 2005a; Vondra, Barnett, & Cicchetti, 1990) to the development of core social–emotional processes, such as attachment, emotional understanding, and theory of mind (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995; Dozier, Stovall, Albus, & Bates, 2001; Pears & Fisher, 2005b) to internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Aber et al., 1989; Dubowitz, Papas, Black, & Starr, 2002; Erickson, Egeland, & Pianta, 1989; Fantuzzo, Weiss, Atkins, Meyers, & Noone, 1998; Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, Egolf, & Wu, 1991; Rieder & Cicchetti, 1989; White, Halpin, Strom, & Santilli, 1988; Wiggins, Fenichel, & Mann, 2007). With respect to academic achievement, children in the foster care system are more likely than their peers to have lower grades, be held back a grade, receive special education services and fail to graduate from high school (Eckenrode et al., 2001; Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Piescher, Hong, & LaLiberte, 2012; Urquiza, Wirtz, Peterson, & Singer, 1994). These negative effects on academic performance in high school remain even when the involvement with the child protection system occurred in early childhood (Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008).

Data show that children who have been involved with the child protection system are also likely to have experienced poverty with their biological families at much higher rates than children in the general population (Barth, Wildfire, & Green, 2006; Pinderhughes, Harden, & Guyer, 2007). One of the primary mediators of the relationship between poverty and poor child outcomes is a supportive primary caregiver (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005); thus, children who have experienced both poor quality caregiving, such as that experienced by children involved with child protection, and poverty are likely to have worse developmental outcomes than children with either of those risk factors alone (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2012). The extent to which young children in the child protection system can receive consistent, supportive caregiving, not only at their home or place of residence but also in their ECE settings, is likely to be the key to a successful ECE experience and to positive developmental outcomes.

1.2. Early care and education and children's development

Evidence from the ECE literature demonstrates the significant role that comprehensive, high quality ECE can play in the lives of children at risk for poor school outcomes, particularly for children experiencing poverty (Campbell, Pungello, Miller-Johnson, Burchinal, & Ramey, 2001; Reynolds, Temple, & Ou, 2003; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2010). Characterized by low teacher/child ratios; small group sizes; and services for parents; consistent, warm, and supportive teacher–child relationships; and appropriately stimulating learning/curricular opportunities, these types of comprehensive, high quality programs have demonstrated long-term impact on the academic achievement of children experiencing poverty (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002). However, the extent to which these benefits also hold true for young children involved in the child protection system is unclear, as many children in the child protection system are not necessarily enrolled in comprehensive, high quality ECE settings or settings that provide specialized services to support the unique needs of children who have experienced trauma (e.g. continuity of care providers, low ratios, and comprehensive services for children and parents).

Currently, the program that best approximates comprehensive services (although not necessarily specialized trauma-informed care services) and is most available to poor children is Head Start. Young children in foster care are categorically eligible for Head Start services, and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) encourages local sites to give priority status to not only children in foster care but any child who has an open child protection case for the available Early Head Start and Head Start spaces (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start [OHS], 2010). Though there are no data currently published specific to children involved in child protection, a recent study examined the impact of Head Start for children experiencing non-parental care (not necessarily due to foster care or loss of parental rights through the child protection system) and found that these children demonstrated modestly improved school readiness from the services provided over the course of their preschool year (Lipscomb et al., 2013).

Regardless of this hopeful evidence that Head Start may benefit children involved in child protection, these children are not universally accessing Head Start services. In fact, data from an examination of ECE use by preschool children in the child protection system in Oregon show that over 40% of the children in the sample attended either a non-Head Start ECE program or some combination of Head Start and non-Head Start ECE program (Lipscomb & Pears, 2011). In Colorado, about 50% of 3- to 5-year-old children in the child protection system were enrolled in some kind of ECE program and less than 20% of them were enrolled in Head Start (Ward et al., 2009). Given the already long waitlists for limited spots in Head Start and the substantial use of other ECE programming, the question of whether typically available ECE programs (which include licensed private, non-profit/for-profit, and accredited/non-accredited child care centers; preschools; public pre-kindergarten; and family child care homes) can effectively meet the specific needs of young children in the child protection system is a critical one.

There is reason to hypothesize that typically available ECE programming might be beneficial for children in the child protection system. First, quality ECE settings may provide one of the most consistent caregiving experiences that children involved in the child protection system receive during the first few years of life, particularly when they offer developmentally appropriate and cognitively stimulating environments

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