

# Maternal foster families provide more stable placements than paternal families



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## ABSTRACT

The use of kinship families to provide foster care has been increasing due to changes in legislation and the hope that it will provide better quality placements, but there has been little consideration of differential outcomes based on sub-types of kin. Using data from one Ontario, Canada, child protection agency we compared the frequency and stability of placements with maternal versus paternal kin. We found that maternal relatives provided placements much more often than paternal kin and this was most striking with single grandmothers. 90% of genetically related kinship caregivers were grandparents or other equally close kin. Maternal and paternal kin placements had similar durations, but maternal placements ended significantly more frequently by the child returning home or obtaining a permanent placement, whereas paternal placements more often broke down. A Cox proportional hazards analysis, controlling for child sex, age, reason for placement and caregiver attributes, showed that paternal kin placements were more than twice as likely to break down as maternal kin placements, within a given interval. We discuss whether placement stability should be considered a proxy for placement quality and policy implications, and we comment on aspects of assessing prospective placements.

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## 1. Introduction

In most of the Western world, it is now standard child protection practice to place children who have been removed from their parents' care with kin. In many jurisdictions, preferential placement with kin rather than unrelated foster parents is now mandated by law (Gleeson & Craig, 1994). This constitutes a radical change. Until about 50 years ago, kin were explicitly shunned as potential foster carers, and the transition to preferential kinship care is still ongoing (Daly & Perry, 2011; Ingram, 1996). In Ontario, Canada, where the study reported here was conducted, child protection agencies have been obliged by law to prioritize kin placements since 2006.

Two main justifications are typically offered in support of the shift to kin care (Ehrle & Geen, 2002): that kin are likely to be more committed to the children in their care, on average, than strangers, and that family disruption may be less traumatic when the new caregivers are already known and trusted. Reduced funding for child welfare agencies has also played a role in the rise of kinship care, however. Kin families often receive less financial and other support than traditional stranger foster families, despite having lower incomes, less education, more health challenges, and more dependents in the home (Berrick & Barth,

1994; Cuddeback, 2004; Dubowitz et al., 1993; Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Gleeson, O'Donnell, & Johnson Bonecutter, 1997; Grant, 2000). Whether increasing reliance on kinship care has had a net positive impact on child well-being remains to be determined (Daly & Perry, 2011; del Valle & Bravo, 2013; Font, in press; Ryan, Hong, Herz, & Hernandez, 2010; Winokur, Holtan, & Valentine, 2009).

Kin caregivers are a heterogeneous group (Berrick & Barth, 1994; Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005; Terling-Watt, 2001), but the distinctions among them have received little attention in studies that document the rise of kinship care and compare its attributes and impacts to those of stranger foster care (Zinn, 2010; but see Perry, Daly, & Kotler, 2012; Sallnäs, Vinnerljung, & Westermark, 2004). According to dictionaries and common usage, one's "kin" are one's relatives by genealogical descent, marriage, or adoption. In child welfare law, however, the term "kin" has been expanded to encompass additional people such as family friends or unrelated persons of the same minority ethnic group (Farmer & Moyers, 2008; Geen, 2003). In the relevant Ontario legislation, for example, placement with a "neighbor or other member of the child's community" qualifies as a "kin" placement (Ontario Child Welfare Secretariat, 2006). We will refer to caregivers with a genealogical, marital or adoptive link to the child as "related kin", and other unrelated caregivers who qualify as kin under the legislation as "nominal kin". Whether the usual justifications for favoring kin placements apply to nominal kin, who are not necessarily even acquainted with the child, is questionable, and we have reported that placements with nominal kin are significantly less stable (long-lasting) than those with related kin in Waterloo, Ontario (Perry et al., 2012). Here, we address a further

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distinction within the category of genealogical kin, namely that between relatives through a child's mother versus father.

There is a large anthropological and psychological literature concerning the involvement of relatives other than the parents in child care. Cross-culturally, the most common providers of short-term child care are close kin, especially grandmothers, aunts, and older siblings (Hrdy, 2009; Kramer, 2010; Silk, 1990). Moreover, despite a heavy emphasis on patrilineal kinship in many human societies, most research indicates that maternal kin, especially maternal grandmothers, are more involved than their counterparts on the paternal side, and that their involvement is more beneficial to the children (Coall & Hertwig, 2010, 2011; Danielsbacka, Tanskanen, Jokela, & Rotkirch, 2011; Euler, 2011; Fox et al., 2010; Gaulin, McBurney, & Brakeman-Wartell, 1997; Hawkes & Coxworth, 2013; Huber & Breedlove, 2007; Pollet, Nelissen, & Nettle, 2008; Sear & Mace, 2008; Strassmann & Garrard, 2011; Tanskanen & Danielsbacka, 2012). It seems that both women and men turn mainly to their maternal relatives when resources are scarce, when men are unreliable providers, when marital relationships are unstable, and when paternity may be in question (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Stack, 1974). Because relationship conflicts are often an aspect of why families become involved with child protection services, and because doubts about paternity are probably more prevalent than in the population at large, we anticipate that maternal family would substantially outnumber paternal family as kinship caregivers.

If maternal relatives tend to be more willing kin caregivers, on average, than paternal relatives, one might also anticipate that placements with maternal kin would be more stable, but as far as we are aware, the literature contains no explicit comparisons of placement stability in maternal versus paternal kin homes. Placement stability is the sole outcome measure in the analyses presented here. Placement stability is widely considered an indicator of placement quality because it is associated with better outcomes for children (Carpenter & Clyman, 2004; Jones Harden, 2004; North American Council on Adoptable Children, 2005; Rock, Michelson, Thomson, & Day, 2013). Considerable research shows that repeated moves while in the care of a child protection agency are associated with elevated rates of physical and mental health diagnoses, homelessness after leaving care, involvement with the criminal justice system, and use of illicit drugs (Barth & Jonson-Reid, 2000; Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000; Paxman, 2006; Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007; Rubin et al., 2004). We recognize, however, that placement stability is an imperfect indicator of placement quality, and that the fact that placements with kin are usually relatively stable (Chamberlain et al., 2006; Perry et al., 2012; Winokur, Crawford, Longobardi, & Valentine, 2008; Winokur et al., 2009; but see Herring, Shook, Goodkind, & Kim, 2009; Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007) does not imply that they are necessarily in the best interests of the child.

## 2. The data base

The data analyzed in this paper consist of all primary child protection placements under the auspices of Family & Child Services (FACS) of Waterloo, Ontario, regardless of duration, in which children were placed between January 1, 2008 and December 31, 2010 with caretakers who were their genealogical kin (i.e. putative genetic relatives) on the maternal or paternal side. The stability (persistence) of these placements was tracked through December 31, 2010. "Primary" placement refers to the fact that temporary "respite" placements are excluded.

The data analyzed here represent 313 primary placements with genealogical kin, involving 289 children who experienced at least one such placement. We treat the individual placement as the unit of analysis. This is a subset of the 389 "kin" placements analyzed by Perry et al. (2012); excluded from the present analyses are 45 placements with nominal kin; 23 placements with relatives by marriage or adoption; 5 placements with caregivers who were older full siblings of the placed child and thus could not be categorized as either maternal or paternal

kin; and 3 cases in which files were unavailable for legal reasons. Readers are referred to Perry et al. (2012) for additional details about kin caregiving in Ontario and the larger database from which these cases are drawn.

We collected the following information from agency files: the child's age and sex; the primary kin caregiver's age, sex, and specific relationship to the child; whether there was a secondary caregiver and if so, the same demographic data as for the primary caregiver; how the placement ended (broadly, return home vs placement breakdown vs placement intact at end of study). We also recorded several economic, health status and criminal involvement variables (see Perry & Daly, 2013), but because these could not be coded for many cases they are not analyzed here.

## 3. Maternal & closer kin predominate

The 313 primary kin placements consisted of 202 with maternal kin and 111 with paternal kin. Maternal kin placements included 142 with the child's grandparents, 30 with an aunt or uncle, 4 with a maternal half-sibling, and 26 with more distant relatives. Paternal kin placements included 70 with the child's grandparents, 37 with an aunt or uncle, and 4 with more distant relatives. Because of the small numbers of placements with genealogical kin other than grandparents, we did not compare placement stability across these specific types of relatives, but we address whether placement with grandparents versus all other relatives is a predictor of stability in Section 4.

The circumstances of maternal grandparents who provided care differed from those of their counterparts on the paternal side. Fig. 1 shows that the numbers of caregiving pairs of grandparents on the two sides scarcely differ, but that the maternal side predominates among caregiving couples in which only one was a genealogical relative of the focal child, and that the predominance of the maternal side is even more extreme when it comes to lone grandparents providing care without partner assistance. Grandparents who provided care without the help of a partner consisted of 52 maternal grandmothers, 8 maternal grandfathers, 9 paternal grandmothers, and no paternal grandfathers.

## 4. Placements with maternal kin are more stable

Fig. 2 shows that maternal and paternal kin placements persisted for similar durations through the first year post-placement. Placements that were intact at the end of the study period, but had durations of less than a year, are "time-censored" by being included in Fig. 2 (and in Fig. 3) only up to the study end date.

This apparent equivalence of stability is misleading, however, because it masks a distinction between placements that "broke down" such that the child was then placed elsewhere under the auspices of the agency, and those that ended for the "good" reason that the child left protective

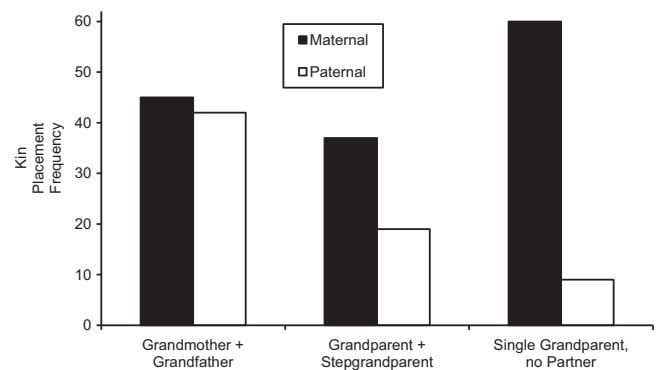


Fig. 1. Frequency of placements with maternal versus paternal grandparents, in relation to the grandparent's current partnership status and the relationship of the grandparent's partner to the placed child.

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