



Teacher-child closeness as a protective factor for at-risk children experiencing residential mobility

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ABSTRACT

The current study explored the extent to which teacher-child closeness during prekindergarten moderates the association between residential mobility and behavior problems in kindergarten for children living in non-parental care. Data were obtained from the Head Start Impact Study. The sample included 260 children (53% male) who were eligible for Head Start. On average, children were 48.57 months old ($SD = 6.95$), and were 42% Anglo-American, 40% African-American, and 18% Hispanic-American. Results indicated that teacher-child closeness during prekindergarten was negatively related to behavior problems in kindergarten. Further, although residential mobility was not directly related to behavior problems in kindergarten, teacher-child closeness was a significant moderator between moving and externalizing, but not internalizing, problems. These findings suggest that closeness with teachers may help to curb the impact of mobility on externalizing problems during the transition to kindergarten for children in non-parental care. Implications for future research and intervention development are discussed.

Introduction

Children living in what is referred to as *non-parental care* represent a subpopulation of children living with someone other than a biological, adoptive, or step parent. Children in non-parental care are often exposed to a greater number of risk factors relative to their peers, such as poverty, maltreatment, and elevated rates of instability, including residential mobility (Allen & Vacca, 2010; Ehrle & Green, 2002). Residential mobility, defined as moving residences/addresses, is a highly formative developmental context that predicts various outcomes for affected children, including poor academic achievement and externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Brown, Ackerman, & Moore, 2013; Coley & Kull, 2016; Evans, Gonnella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, & Salpekar, 2005; Jellyman & Spencer, 2008). However, little research has examined the specific effects of residential mobility on behavioral problems for children also living in non-parental care, or potential factors that may help protect these children from the negative effects of mobility – particularly during prekindergarten, when mobility may have an especially substantial impact on development (Fowler, Henry, Schoeny, Taylor, & Chavira, 2014; Schmitt & Lipscomb, 2016). Close and supportive teacher-child relationships have the potential to contribute to children's resilience in the face of cumulative risk (Cicchetti,

Lynch, Shonk, & Manly, 1992, Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Resnick et al., 1997). Thus, these relationships may moderate the associations between early mobility and behavior problems for a high-risk group of children living in non-parental care. The primary aims of the present study were to: 1) examine the direct effects of residential mobility and teacher-child closeness during pre-kindergarten on externalizing and internalizing behavior problems in kindergarten for children living in non-parental care, and 2) explore the extent to which teacher-child closeness moderates these associations.

Characteristics of children living in non-parental care

The term non-parental care refers to placement with a primary caregiver who is not a child's biological, adoptive, or step parent. Although this includes children in traditional, state-licensed foster placements, an overwhelming majority of children in non-parental care live with relatives and in alternate arrangements that may not be mandated or even supervised by child welfare authorities (Denby, 2011). However, as most research has focused on children formally involved in child welfare, we draw upon this literature as a foundation for the present study.

The number of children living in non-parental care has been

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increasing since 1970 (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). An estimated 2.3 million children reside in a household without either of their parents (Bramet & Radel, 2014; Kreider & Ellis, 2011; Vandivere, Yrausquin, Allen, Malm, & McKlindon, 2012). For nearly a quarter of these children, these living arrangements/placements are temporary, as at least one of their biological parents retain legal custody or parental rights (i.e., voluntary kinship placements; Ehrle, Green, & Clark, 2001; Szilagyi, 2014). In general, children living in non-parental care are considered to be at high-risk for mobility and instability (Bramet & Radel, 2014) as they often move back and forth between a non-parental caregiver and one or both of their parents (Beal & Greiner, 2016). Approximately 30% of children living without either parent will do so for a period of at least 3 years, and a third of these arrangements will last < 2 years (Bavier, 2011).

In addition to residential mobility (Rubin, O'Reilly, Hafner, Luan, & Localio, 2007), young children living in non-parental care face a unique and sizable set of risks, including caregiver mental health problems or substance abuse (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004) and maltreatment (Pears, Kim, & Fisher, 2008). Further, approximately 40% of children in non-parental care live in households that fall below the federally-recognized poverty level (Ehrle et al., 2001). This number is likely higher for children living in informal non-parental care settings (i.e., not formalized foster placements). Kinship caregivers, and specifically grandparent-headed households, may be most at risk because this group tends to be characterized as single parents and has lower educational attainment, employment, income, and access to health insurance (Baker & Mutchler, 2010).

Given the elevated risks experienced by children in non-parental care, it is no surprise that these children often experience poor development across cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Billing, Ehrle, & Kortenkamp, 2002; Ehrle & Green, 2002; Pears et al., 2008). For instance, children living in non-parental care often have adjustment problems in school, including difficulties with self-regulation and poor academic achievement (Billing et al., 2002; Lewis, Dozier, Ackerman, & Sepulveda-Kozakowski, 2007; Lipscomb, Schmitt, Pratt, Pears, & Acock, 2014; Pears, Bruce, Fisher, & Kim, 2010; Pears, Heywood, Kim, & Fisher, 2011). Persistent behavior problems are evident for these children as well and occur prior to and during kindergarten (Lewis et al., 2007; Lipscomb et al., 2014). For example, in one study, preschool children living in non-parental care exhibited higher rates of externalizing and internalizing behavior problems than those experiencing other demographic risk factors, such as poverty (Lipscomb et al., 2014). Therefore, it is imperative to understand potential risk and protective factors that contribute to this population's development of behavior problems during the transition to kindergarten.

The role of residential mobility for the development of behavior problems

The development of behavioral problems, and particularly externalizing and internalizing behaviors, can occur early in life and can have significant, negative implications for later outcomes (Burt & Roisman, 2010; Masten, Desjardins, McCormick, Kuo, & Long, 2010). For instance, early externalizing problems not only predict later behavioral problems, they also are associated with subsequent academic difficulties and lower levels of social competence (Burt & Roisman, 2010; Masten et al., 2010).

Unfortunately, there is very little research that has investigated the role of residential mobility for the development of behavioral problems for children living in non-parental care. Much of the current research examining the impacts of residential mobility, or moving or changing residences/addresses (Anderson, Leventhal, & Dupéré, 2014; Schmitt & Lipscomb, 2016), focuses on academic outcomes in general populations. This work shows that mobile children typically display difficulties in classroom contexts (e.g., following rules) and academic development (Cutuli et al., 2013; Herbers et al., 2012; Pribesh & Downey, 1999;

Voight, Shinn, & Nation, 2012). Evidence from general populations also indicates that children who experience residential mobility, compared to those who do not, have poorer behavioral inhibition and self-regulation skills (Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002; McCoy & Raver, 2014; Roy, McCoy, & Raver, 2014; Schmitt, Finders, & McClelland, 2015), as well as increased mental health problems (Tunstall, Cabieses, & Shaw, 2012), externalizing problems, and to some extent, internalizing problems (Anderson et al., 2014; Coley & Kull, 2016; Jellyman & Spencer, 2008). Notably, Coley and Kull (2016) found that these associations hold when controlling for school mobility, which can often result from moving homes.

Only recently have scholars begun to explore associations between residential mobility and academic and behavioral outcomes for children living in non-parental care or related samples (Fowler et al., 2014; Schmitt, Pratt, & Lipscomb, 2017; Sullivan, Jones, & Mathiesen, 2010). Compared to general populations, residential mobility may look the same or different for children living in non-parental care. On the one hand, children living in non-parental care may move to a new home with their current caregiver(s) much like those living in parental care. On the other hand, children living in non-parental settings may be moving from the home of their current biological or foster parent to a new out-of-home placement. Researchers have reported that residential mobility among children in foster care (often necessitated by a change in primary caregiver or *placement instability*) has adverse effects on learning and academic achievement (Conger & Rebeck, 2001; Geenen & Powers, 2006; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004). In terms of behavioral development, previous research has shown that residential mobility in 4–6-year-old children with past involvement in the child welfare system is associated with elevated externalizing problems (Fowler et al., 2014). Further, results from a recent study indicated that residential mobility during the transition to kindergarten (cumulative moves during pre-kindergarten and kindergarten) predicted subsequent externalizing and internalizing behavior problems among children living in non-parental care (Schmitt et al., 2017). However, no studies to date have explored the potential effects of moving during the prekindergarten year specifically on the development of later behavior problems for this sub-population.

It is important to note that although some of the mobility research on foster children specifically has focused on placement instability, studies of broader samples suggest that the effect of caretaker changes on children's adjustment is moderated by residential mobility, such that children who experience more residential moves show poorer adjustment overall (Astone & McLanahan, 1994; Tucker, Long, & Marx, 1995). Evidence like this suggests that residential mobility may be a key and unique predictor of developmental outcomes beyond placement or even caregiver instability for children living in non-parental care.

Timing and context of mobility

Frequent moves during the highly formative early childhood period (age 5 years and younger) may be particularly influential on children's development (Anderson et al., 2014; Ingersoll, Scamman, & Eckerling, 1989). Within the early childhood period, the prekindergarten year specifically has been identified as an important transitional period for children due to the rapid physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development typical of this time frame (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Knudsen, 2004; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). In particular, this year is regarded as critical for the development of important self-regulation skills needed for subsequent school success (McClelland et al., 2007) and for the prevention of problematic patterns of behavior, including internalizing and externalizing problems (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010). Thus, instability in home environments may be especially disruptive during this period. Indeed, results from one study revealed that moving during the prekindergarten year was associated with poor academic readiness at school entry as well as subsequent academic outcomes for a large sample of children from low-income families

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