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Factors in Length of Foster Care: Worker Activities and Parent-Child Visitation

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This is an exploratory case study investigating factors potentially related to length of foster care placements in a small western state. Findings of earlier researchers are supported. More frequent visits by natural parents are associated with shorter foster care placements.

Introduction

The prolonged placement of children in foster care has been a longstanding concern of child welfare professionals, evidenced by the accumulation of a substantial body of research following Maas and Engler's (1959) landmark study of "foster care drift." The relationship between length of time in foster care and likelihood of termination prior to the attainment of majority age has been well documented (Stein, Gambrill, & Wiltse, 1978).

Investigators have found that visitation between many natural parents and their children in care is infrequent (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978; Gruber, 1978; Mech, 1985), contributing to prolonged foster care for children whose parents cease significant involvement in their lives. In addition, location of parent-child visits

(Hess, 1988, 1987) and the role of the social worker in supporting visitation (Horejsi, Bertsche, & Clark, 1981; Proch & Howard, 1986) have been identified as variables warranting further study as they relate to visitation and duration of care.

Traditionally, child welfare agencies have focused on providing services to the child and the foster parent, while paying little attention to the natural parent's needs and problems (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978; Gruber, 1978). Also, researchers have found that the duration of care is related to the context and the frequency of social worker contact with the child's parents (Benedict & White, 1991; Gibson, Tracy & DeBord, 1984; Turner, 1984).

The exploratory case study reported here involved an investigation of factors potentially related to length of foster care placements in an urban area of a small, western state. Of particular interest to researchers were the efforts made by social workers to promote parent-child visitation, including direct contacts with the natural parents. While some child welfare practitioners have discussed these variables, few empirical studies have been conducted to clarify their importance for the timely termination of foster care.

Review of Literature

Visitation Frequency

Fanshel and Shinn (1978) in a longitudinal study of 624 children entering foster care in New York City found that most children were visited infrequently by their parents throughout their placement and that the rate of visitation declined dramatically as the length of time in foster care increased. Other research findings offer additional evidence of a strong, inverse relationship between visitation frequency and the duration of placement (Aldgate, 1980; Lawder, Poulin & Andrews, 1985; Mech, 1985; Milner, 1987; Seaberg & Tolley, 1986).

Fanshel (1977) noted that the frequency of the social worker's contact with the child's parents was associated with the frequency of visitation and emphasized the need for increased worker-parent contact. Other researchers pointed to the need for workers to systematically promote visitation (Horejsi, et al., 1981). Proch and Howard (1986) found that when parental visitation was encouraged by social workers and specific schedules for visitation were established, parents tended to visit regularly.

Visitation Location

Parent-child visitation while a child is in foster care helps to preserve and strengthen the bond between the child and his or her family (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978; Hess, 1982). However, agency policies frequently work against the goal of frequent visitation by restricting visits to the agency office during normal business hours (Parry, 1975). In addition, worker practices often result in natural parents bearing the responsibility for initiating contact, effectively discouraging visitation (Horejsi, et al., 1981).

Stein, et al. (1978) suggested that workers vary the location of visitation in the belief that visits confined to the artificial environment of an agency office do not adequately promote spontaneous and natural interaction between parent and child. Additionally, visitation outside the agency setting preserves the child's sense of belonging in his neighborhood and community (Millham, Bullock, Hosie, and Haak, 1986).

Social Worker Activity

Research findings indicate that level of social worker contact with parents is related to the likelihood of frequent visitation (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978; Proch & Howard, 1986). Also, the types of roles performed by the social worker and his/her efforts to systematically promote visitation are related to frequency of parent-child contacts.

In tracking the frequency of social worker contacts, Shapiro (1976) noted that social workers had monthly contact with either the child or the parent in 49 percent of cases where children left foster care in the first year of placement. Jones, Neuman and Shyne (1976) identified the relationship between the parent and the social worker as the most important predictor variable of reduced length of stay in care and the achievement of reunification. Similarly, Boyd's (1979) pilot project, based on the premise that frequent worker-parent contact would reduce the time a child spends in care, resulted in two-thirds reduction in the length of time children spent in placements.

Methodology

Researchers examined the relationships among a child's length of stay in foster care, the frequency and setting of parental

visitation, and social worker activity directed toward solving problems, promoting visitation and achieving family reunification. The study involved a sample of 41 closed case records of children under the age of 10 years. These clients had been in the custody of the Nevada Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS), Las Vegas District Office, and had been reunited with a parent after six or more months in out-of-home care. Thirty-one children had been placed in family foster homes and the remaining 10 children had been placed with relatives. The sample was drawn from a computerized DCFS listing of the 91 cases which were closed between June, 1990 and June, 1991.

Quantitative data were gathered on the following demographic variables: child's age at time of placement, mother's age, father's age, child's gender, ethnicity and special education classification, family income, parents' marital status, and parental problems identified at placement. Placement related variables included time in care, number of placement changes, type of placement, reason for placement, frequency of visitation, and location of visits. Social worker activity was assessed with three variables: frequency of contact with parents, evidence of efforts to promote visitation, and evidence of problem-solving interactions with parents.

The researchers calculated the average monthly occurrence of parental visits for each individual case over the length of time the child was in care. Since the average length of stay for a child in foster care in the state is approximately 20 months, the sample was divided into two groups for the purpose of comparison: those in care less than 20 months and those in care 20 months or more. Data for the 31 cases where a child was in a foster home were used for statistical analysis for all visitation related variables. The variable measuring worker contact with parents is included in the analysis of the entire sample of 41 cases.

Findings

Demographics

The final sample included 26 males (63.4%) and 15 females (36.6%). Seventeen of the children involved were white (41.5%) and 24 were minority children (58.5%). The average age at placement was 2.5 years (2.1 years for minority children and 3.09 years

for non-minority children). Minority children remained in care an average of 33.67 months as compared to 17.89 months for non-minority children. They experienced 1.6 placement changes, compared to 1.35 for non-minority children, and had more frequent changes of social workers (2.6 as compared to 1.9).

The category of minority children represents collapsed data for 21 Black, one Hispanic and two Asian American children. Overall, minorities constitute 25.1% of the population of Las Vegas, Nevada, with 9.5% Black and 11.2% Hispanic (Census of Population and Housing, 1990).

The average age of the mothers of the children in the sample was 25.5 years and fathers averaged 30.89 years of age. White parents reported slightly lower rates on the parental problems identified at the time of placement (1.882 versus 2.292). Table 1 reports more detailed information regarding the incidence of parental problems as well as data on income and marital status differences.

Frequency and Location of Parent/Child Visitation

Children in the sample received an average of .759 visits per month ($s=.458$). When the groups are divided by length of stay, those in care less than 20 months received 1.02 visits per month while those in care over 20 months received 0.51 visits per month ($t=3.70$; $p < .001$), suggesting that more frequent parental visits are associated with shorter placements.

When the location of parent-child visits is considered in relation to length of stay in care, a statistically significant difference between the comparison groups is found for visitation frequency outside the agency office. Children in care over 20 months were less likely to have received visits in a setting outside the agency office ($t=4.01$; $p < .001$).

Social Work/Parent Contacts

Parents of the children in the sample had an average of 2.008 contacts per month with their child's social worker ($s=1.061$). When the cases were divided by length of stay, the differences between the groups were statistically significant ($t=3.13$; $p < .003$). Parents of children in care for longer periods have less contact with their child's social worker (1.55 contacts per month) than those who experience shorter placements (2.49 contacts per month).

Table 1

Parental Income, Marital Status and Type of Identified Problem, by Ethnicity (N=41)

	Total	Nonminority	Minority
<i>Income Source**</i>			
Public Assistance	5 (12.2%)	0	5
Employment	21 (51.2%)	12	9
Unemployed	15 (36.6%)	5	10
<i>Marital Status</i>			
Married	18 (43.9%)	16	2
Separated	2 (4.9%)	0	2
Never Married	21 (51.2%)	1	20
<i>Parental Problem</i>			
Substance Abuse	32 (78.0%)	12	20
Economic	32 (78.0%)	8	24
Mental Illness	1 (2.4%)	0	1
Marital Conflict	20 (48.8%)	12	8
Physical Illness	3 (7.3%)	1	2

**Income was reduced to the nominal categories used above in order to better illustrate the frequency of households with parents who were unemployed or on public assistance.

Further analysis indicates that social worker-parent contact appears strongly related to the occurrence of parental visitation during a child's out-of-home placement ($r=.8395$; $r^2=70.48$; $p < .001$).

Social Work Activity

Differences were found between the two sub-samples with respect to specific efforts by the social worker to encourage visitation ($t=2.61$; $p < .019$). Although the frequency of efforts to encourage visitation is minimal overall, it occurs far less when children are in care for longer periods (.428 efforts per month as compared to .135 efforts per month in placements over 20 months).

An analysis of social worker-parent problem solving interactions did not reveal statistically significant differences between the two groups ($t=1.54$; $p < .135$).

Services to Minority Children

Minority children have fewer parental visits (an average of 14.35 compared with 17.71 for non-minority children as noted in Table 2). Minority children were more likely to come from single parent homes ($X^2=23.892$; $p < .000$) where economic strain was an identified problem ($X^2=16.279$; $p < .0001$). Their parents are also more likely to be unemployed or on public assistance ($X^2=4.361$; $p < .037$).

Minority and non-minority cases were compared on social worker activity variables. Significant differences emerged for frequency of the social worker's contact with parents, efforts to solve problems, and efforts to utilize less restrictive visitation settings as noted in Table 2.

The results indicate that the two groups represent two different populations which appear to be served in a distinctly different manner in relation to the variables under study.

Discussion and Recommendations

This study supports the findings of earlier researchers indicating that more frequent parent-child visitation is associated with shorter periods of placement. It also supports the finding that increased social worker contact with parents of children in care is associated with more frequent parental visitation and ultimately with a shorter length of stay. Differences were found in the level of effort put forth by workers to encourage visitation and to utilize visit locations other than the agency office when children remained in care 20 months or more. Overall, indications of efforts to encourage visits and to engage in problem-solving with parents were infrequent.

The majority of the children in the sample came into care due to neglect. Problems with substance abuse and economic strain were prevalent. One-half of the parents were unemployed or receiving public assistance and slightly over one-half were single parents. Development of effective outreach and prevention programs to serve this population is essential; broad social programs

Table 2

*Mean Values and t-Tests for Visitation-Related Variables per Month, by Ethnicity ***

	Nonminority (N=17)		Minority (N=24)
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>t score</i>
	<i>Std. Dev.</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>	<i>Prob.</i>
Visits	1.061	.509	t=5.04
	.421	.320	p <.000
Contacts	2.915	1.365	t=6.56
	.762	.719	p <.000
Problem Solving	.693	.267	t=4.91
	.313	.205	p <.000
Encouraging Visits	.396	.179	t=1.74
	.439	.172	p <.101
Visits Away From Agency	.482	.190	t=2.84
	.339	.201	p <.010

**Data is missing for visit frequency, efforts to encourage visitation, and use of visit settings away from the agency office for children placed in relative homes.

must address the major contributing problems which cannot be solved by the child welfare system alone.

Differential services to minority children reflect the child welfare system's inability to effectively address the needs of the minority population. When the results are examined by ethnicity, findings indicate that fewer services overall are offered to minority children. Minority children clearly appear to be vulnerable to neglect by the system as well as by their parents. Results of this study support the findings of Albers, Reilly, and Rittner (1993) that minority children represent a highly disproportionate number of the children remaining in care for prolonged periods in Nevada.

Given the differences in service delivery provided to minority children and the fact that eight of the ten children placed with

relatives were minority children, questions arise regarding the manner in which extended family resources are utilized. Workers generally regard placement with a relative as preferable to foster care when out-of-home placement is needed—seemingly an advantage for minority children. However, it appears that minority children placed with relatives may be left in their care for an indeterminate length of time with inadequate attention from the child welfare system.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research into the context of the worker's relationship with parents of children in care is needed. Children come into foster care as a result of family problems. Case planning must begin to effectively address family problems in order to successfully and expeditiously reunify families, especially in light of the federal mandate to provide "reasonable efforts" in this regard. The measure of problem-solving interactions utilized in the current study may not adequately capture the most effective process by which social workers assist families in addressing the issues which resulted in placement. Further research into the nature of the worker-parent relationship is warranted.

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