



Research Within Reach, Ep. 5: Early Education and Foster Placement

Does early childhood education help children in the child welfare system?

Introduction

Children under the age of five account for more than one-third of children in foster care in the United States. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) Both the effects of abuse or neglect and the effects of being taken away from a primary caregiver and being placed in foster care can be traumatic for young children, and child welfare workers are regularly faced with this difficult decision.

Researchers, led by Sacha Klein at Michigan State University, recently examined child welfare data to explore the relationship between early childhood education and foster care placement for children who are already involved in the child welfare system (CWS). One significant relationship that emerged is that **when families participated in Head Start (as opposed to no ECE), children were 93% less likely to end up in foster care, a correlation not found by participating in any other types of ECE.**

The Basics:

This research was conducted by Sacha Klein, Lauren Fries, and Mary M. Emmons, who asked two main research questions: (1) "Are young children in the CWS who receive ECE services less likely to be placed in foster care?" and (2) "Does the type of ECE arrangement used by young children in the CWS affect the likelihood that they will be placed in foster care?"

The researchers used data from the Second National Survey of Child and Adolescence Well-Being, which contains data on the experiences of children who have been reported to the child welfare system. This survey collects information on children soon after CWS has closed their investigation (wave 1) and then again approximately 18 months later (wave 2). The researchers were able to study whether there is any relationship between a family's ECE experiences and whether the children were in foster care at wave 2.

The Results:

The researchers found that, compared to families who did not use ECE services:

- In families who used ECE services generally, children were neither more nor less likely to be in foster care at wave 2.
- In families who used Head Start specifically, children were 93% less likely to be in foster care at wave 2.
- In families who used any ECE other than Head Start, children were neither more nor less likely to be in foster care at wave 2.
- In families who used multiple types of ECE, children were nearly seven times more likely to be in foster care at wave 2.

The researchers also found that certain categories of children were more likely to be in foster care: those with more prior involvement with the welfare system, younger children, and non-Hispanic white children.

The Implications:

The findings from this study suggest that there might be something about Head Start specifically, compared to other types of early childhood education, that reduces a child's likelihood of being placed in foster care. If further research shows that this relationship is causal, rather than just correlational, it could provide a strong argument for connecting families involved in the welfare system with Head Start as a way to prevent foster care placement. It may also strengthen the argument for expanding Head Start eligibility to not just those in foster care, but to all children in families involved in the welfare system.

The Limitations:

- This study is an observational study, so its findings are all correlational, not causal.
- There are certain limitations to this study that stem from the methodology of the Second National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, such as missing data points and the accuracy of caregiver reports. Several of these might be able to be corrected for in a subsequent study that is able to collect data for this specific purpose.
- The quality of the various early childhood education experiences was not accounted for in this study, partly due to limitations from the national survey. This may explain why the study found positive impacts for Head Start, but not for other ECE services, since there is no way to know what level of care children were receiving in those other options.

The Methodology:

The Sample:

- A nationally representative sample of children who were reported to the child welfare system. The researchers further limited the sample to children under 5 who were living with permanent caregivers during wave 1.

The Measures:

- Participation in early childhood education services, as reported by a permanent caregiver.
- Placement in foster care at wave 2.
- Covariates that were held constant included: child demographics, family demographics, child welfare characteristics (eg. type of maltreatment, whether abuse was substantiated, risk factors)

The Analysis:

- Multicollinearity problems were tested using Pearson correlation analyses and chi-square tests.
- The two research questions were answered using multivariate logistic regressions

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