

background

Report # 71

Foster Care: Making A Better System

July 2005

Foster Care In America

A stable home for all

Addressing child development in foster care

Critical to the development of all children is growing up in a loving, stable home. For too many foster children, however, a high-quality, secure home life remains elusive, recent national studies suggest.

The good news is that reforms and innovative programs offer the promise of a brighter future. Ways to make foster care more developmentally-sensitive have been identified. A few encouraging initiatives are emerging. And federal law has improved efforts to place children in safer foster homes and find them permanent living arrangements more quickly.

Stable, developmentally-sensitive families have several key characteristics, including parents who are not troubled by mental health problems; warm and responsive relationships; appropriate, consistent and positive parenting; emotional availability; and stimulation.

A stable family allows infants and toddlers to form healthy attachments with parents and develop language and emotional expression. Children of preschool age are better able to master self-regulation and reach other milestones. Older children do better in school, are better able to regulate their behavior, form identities, and plan for the future.

Children in stable home are more likely to enjoy better health. They do better academically and are less likely to be held back a grade or drop out of school.¹ They are also more likely to have healthy relationships with peers, develop better social skills, and avoid behavioral and mental health problems.²

Creating such an environment for foster children is challenging, but not impossible. Studies suggest several characteristics that promote developmentally-sensitive foster care arrangements. For example:

- Understanding child development, the risks faced by foster children, and a child's individual developmental needs is critical.
- Foster parents and agency case-workers must work well together toward making sure the child's needs are met. Foster parents who see themselves as part of a team tend to have more successful placements.³
- Foster families who empathize with children's needs and experiences, such as early exposure to trauma, increase the likelihood of children having better social-emotional outcomes.
- Foster parents must recognize and

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respect the fact that most foster children have many family ties and often feel connected to their birth parents, even when they have been abused or neglected. Kinship foster parents, who studies report are more accepting of family ties, report better relationships with foster children than non-related foster parents.

Awareness and acceptance of racial or ethnic heritage help children avoid stress and developmental setbacks.

Promising Initiatives

Several promising models of foster care are emerging.

Family to Family foster care, first introduced in Pennsylvania and four other states, recruits foster parents from the child's community to not only care for the dependent child, but to also develop a mentoring relationship with the child's family. The initiative helps to make separation less traumatic, encourages birth

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parents become better parents, and promotes teamwork among those involved in the child's life.

Shared Family care offers planned out-of-home care to parents and their children. Parents and host caregivers share in the caring of children and work toward improving the birth parents' parenting abilities so that they are able to provide a safe and stable home.

Federal Reform

Among the most significant changes to the child welfare system in recent years has been the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, which set federal goals for the safety and well-being of children in care and emphasized permanency planning.

The number of children entering the child welfare system appears to be stabilizing – but at a high level. The 534,000 children in foster care in 2002 was almost twice the number in temporary homes in 1980.⁴

Studies suggest that improving the developmental outcomes of foster children requires that policies go further to embrace strategies for promoting stable families and meeting the specific developmental needs of children.

Juvenile Courts

Juvenile Court judges oversee the placement and care of dependent children and are highly influential in matters of the child's well-being. But longstanding structural issues in the judicial system interfere with the court's role.

Many courts, for example, do not track and analyze their caseloads. High caseloads and lack of training in child development issues weaken the courts' ability to address the developmental needs of foster children.

The Pew Commission On Children In Foster Care, for example, calls for adopting court performance measures to

help track and analyze caseloads, providing incentives and requirements for collaboration between courts and child welfare agencies, and giving children and parents a stronger voice in matters that deeply affect their lives.

In Allegheny County, reforms begun in 1998 have helped ease an overworked dependency court. Judges today have more time for critical hearings and parents have more opportunities to raise important issues. The court's ability to track ongoing cases was also improved. The hiring of hearing officers to share the nearly 18,000 hearings a year reduced judicial caseloads from an average of 63 hearings a day per judge to about 20 cases a day by 2000.⁵

Improving The Quality Of Care

Several opportunities have been identified to improve the quality of services and care foster children receive. Researchers, for example, call

for the screening and assessment of children to identify health, developmental, and mental health problems at the time they enter foster care.

Measuring how well the health and educational needs of foster children are met are among the recommendations made in The David and Lucille Packard Foundation report, *The Future of Children: Children, Families, and Foster Care*. The report also recommends more intensive training for child welfare staff and building the skills of parents to allow them to provide a more stable home.

In Pennsylvania, such issues are being addressed through the state-supported University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work Child Welfare Education and Research Programs, which have reduced child welfare staff turnover and raised the education levels of caseworkers. (*see Report 72*).



references

This report is based on the following publications:

The David and Lucille Packard Foundation. *The Future of Children: Children, Families, and Foster Care*, 14(1), Winter 2004.

The Pew Commission On Children In Foster Care. *Fostering The Future: Safety, Permanence and Well-Being for Children in Foster Care*. Washington, DC: The Pew Commission On Children In Foster Care, 2004.

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¹ Epstein, J. (1991). Effects on student achievement of teacher's practices of parent involvement. In *Advances in reading/language research: Literacy through family, community and school interaction*, 5, 261-276. S. Silvern, ed. Greenwich, CT: JAI.

² Ladd, G., & Pettit, G. (2002). Parenting and the development of children's peer relationships. In *Handbook of parenting. Practical issues in parenting*. 2nd edition, 5, 377-409. M. Bornstein, ed. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

³ Stone, N., & Stone, S. (1983). The prediction of successful foster placement. *Journal of Contemporary Social Work*, 1: 11-17.

⁴ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means. *2000 Green Book*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000.

⁵ Fraser, J. (2001). *Juvenile Court Hearing Officers Report*, pp. 12-21. Pittsburgh, PA: The Jewish Healthcare Foundation.

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