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Caregiver commitment to foster children: The role of child behavior[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: This study aimed to examine the association between child behavior problems and caregiver commitment to their child in a group of young foster children.

Method: The sample consisted of 102 caregiver-child dyads from the greater Baltimore area. Child behavior was assessed using the Child Behavior Checklist [CBCL; Achenbach, T. M. (1991). *Manual for the Child Behavior Checklist/4–8 and 1991 profile*. Burlington, VT: University of Vermont, Department of Psychiatry; Achenbach, T. M. (1992). *Manual for the Child Behavior Checklist/2–3 and 1992 profile*. Burlington, VT: University of Vermont, Department of Psychiatry], and caregiver commitment was assessed using a semi-structured interview known as the “This is My Baby” Interview [Bates, B., & Dozier, M. (1998). “*This Is My Baby*” coding manual. Unpublished manuscript, University of Delaware, Newark]. For a sub-sample of the dyads ($N=76$), we examined caregiver commitment and parent-reported child behavior at two time points in order to examine the stability of a caregiver’s commitment over time and to examine the direction of the association between the two variables.

Results: Overall, caregiver reported child behavior was significantly associated with caregiver commitment. Both caregiver reported child behavior and caregiver commitment were highly stable over an 11-month period. When we examined the data over time, the effect of caregiver reported child behavior at time 1 on caregiver commitment at time 2 was not significantly larger than the effect of caregiver commitment at time 1 on caregiver reported child behavior at time 2. As a result, we were not able to determine the direction of the association between caregiver reported child behavior and caregiver commitment.

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Conclusions: Our results indicate that caregiver reported child behavior is significantly associated with caregiver commitment to their foster children, even after controlling for factors including age of entry into foster care and time in placement.

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Introduction

Whether or not a caregiver becomes committed to a foster child has important implications for the child. Most importantly, caregiver commitment has been found to predict placement stability for foster parent-child dyads (Dozier & Lindhiem, 2006). This finding is important because placement stability has consistently been found to predict a host of positive outcomes for foster children (e.g., Aldgate, Colton, Ghatge, & Heath, 1992; Fisher, Burraston, & Pears, 2005; Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000). For example, foster children in stable placements are likely to have higher academic achievement (Aldgate et al., 1992) and fewer behavior problems (Newton et al., 2000) than foster children who experience multiple placements. Therefore, understanding the determinants and correlates of caregiver commitment might have important implications for the lives of foster children. In this study, we were interested in whether child characteristics are associated with caregiver commitment. Specifically, we examined whether parents' reports of children's behaviors predict caregivers' commitment.

The reciprocal effects of family characteristics and child adaptation

Several studies have examined the effects of foster family characteristics on foster children's behavioral and emotional functioning (see Orme & Buehler, 2001 for a review). Characteristics that have been investigated include parenting variables, the home environment, demographic variables, caregiver mental health, and social support. Less is known about the effects of child adaptation on caregiver variables. We are particularly interested in the effects of foster children's characteristics on caregivers' commitment to an enduring relationship. Although this has not been studied directly, several studies have documented the association between child behavior problems and placement stability (e.g., James, Landsverk, & Slymen, 2004; Newton et al., 2000; Pardeck, 1983). In a large sample of over 4,000 foster children, mostly between the ages of 6 and 17, children who entered foster care with behavior problems at home, behavior problems at schools, or emotional problems were all more likely to experience multiple foster care placements than children without such problems (Pardeck, 1983). It should be noted, however, that this study did not control for many potential third variables. Externalizing behavior has been found to be a particularly reliable predictor of placement disruptions (e.g., James et al., 2004; Newton et al., 2000). In a recent study, externalizing behavior was found to predict several aspects of placement stability including delays in achieving a stable placement, disruptions late during placement, and multiple short placements in a group of out-of-home care children between the ages of 1 and 16 (James et al., 2004). The methodology of this study, however, did not allow for the inference of causality from these findings. Landsverk and colleagues also examined the direction of the association between problem behaviors and number of placements in a group of children between 0 and 17 in foster care (Newton et al., 2000). They found evidence for a bi-directional effect. Foster children with externalizing behavior early in placement

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