



Parenting stress and parenting behavior among foster mothers of foster children with externalizing problems



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ABSTRACT

Foster children often have externalizing problems. Since foster parents are selected and trained, they are often expected to be able to handle the externalizing problems of these children. Very little is, however, known about foster parents' parenting stress and parenting behavior in the context of challenging foster caregiving. In this study, the parenting stress and parenting behavior of 39 foster mothers of recently placed foster children with externalizing problems were studied. By using standardized measures with normative data, foster mothers' scores on different parenting stress and parenting behavior subscales were compared to published norms. Foster mothers of children with externalizing problems experienced more parenting stress than the norm group. The parenting context, provided by these foster mothers, was similar to the parenting context provided by the norm group. The prevalence of specific dysfunctional parenting behaviors (e.g., less involvement in positive parenting) was small to moderate, but nearly half of the foster mothers could be classified as making dysfunctional adaptations to their parenting environment. Moreover, only the minority of foster mothers provided an adaptive parenting context (e.g., more than average involvement in positive parenting). The implications of these results for pre-service training and on-going support for foster parents are discussed.

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1. Introduction

When children cannot grow up in their own family because their safety cannot be ensured (e.g., due to abuse), an out-of-home placement may be required. In Flanders (i.e., the Dutch speaking part of Belgium), a placement in a foster family is the first option of choice (Vlaams Parlement, 2012). Many children in care, in family foster homes as well as in residential care, have externalizing problems (Armsden, Pecora, Payne, & Szatkiewicz, 2000; Holland & Gorey, 2004; Strijker & Knorth, 2009; Van Holen, Vanderfaeillie, & Haarsma, 2007). Social workers and foster parents often expect that foster children's externalizing problems will decrease and prosocial behavior will increase once they are placed in care and reared by skilled and loving foster parents. Aiming at maximizing these expectations, non-kinship foster parents are selected and take part in a pre-service training, whereas kinship placements are screened and evaluated. Handling difficult behaviors of the foster child and being aware of the impact of fostering on their own family are important topics in the selection,

pre-service training and approbation of foster parents in Flanders (De Maeyer, Klingels, Vanderfaeillie, & Van Holen, 2012). King, Kraemer, Bernard, and Vidourek (2007) indeed found that most foster parents were highly involved in authoritative parenting (i.e., a parenting style characterized by high levels of both parental warmth/affection and behavioral control/supervision (McKee, Colletti, Rakow, Jones, & Forehand, 2008)). On the other hand, there is, however, evidence that foster children's externalizing problems rarely decrease during the foster placement (Proctor, Skriner, Roesch, & Litrownik, 2010; Vanderfaeillie, Van Holen, Vanschoonlandt, Robberechts, & Stroobants, 2013). This could indicate that foster parents are not providing a parenting environment that induces change in foster children's behavioral problems. Based on the literature on genetic child effects on parenting behavior and on reciprocal effects models it is first explained why this could be the case. Next, the limited research concerning this topic is reviewed. Finally, the aim and research questions of this study are explained.

1.1. Genetic child effect on parenting behavior

Since several studies have shown that genes influence about 50% of the population variation in antisocial behaviors (Moffitt, 2005a; Rhee &

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Waldman, 2002), the high prevalence of mental illness, drug/alcohol abuse, and involvement in violence of biological parents (Minnis, Everett, Pelosi, Dunn, & Knapp, 2006) place foster children at a genetic risk for having externalizing problems (Rutter, Silberg, O'Connor, & Simonoff, 1999). Recent findings of studies on gene-environment interplay show a very complex interaction between genetics and environmental risks. An elaborated discussion of this research domain is out of the scope of this article, but a recent review concerning behavioral genetics in antisocial behaviors (Moffitt, 2005b) discussed some findings that may be important to consider when studying foster children's externalizing problems: (1) there is evidence for a genetic child effect on parenting behavior, meaning that children with a genetic vulnerability for antisocial behavior elicit, what Moffitt (2005b) calls, 'bad parenting'. Moreover, this genotype-environment association is mediated by the child's aggression (Ge et al., 1996), meaning that it are mainly children's externalizing problems that elicit 'bad parenting', (2) the environment itself has an influence of its own, meaning that 'bad parenting' by parents can promote the persistence of antisocial behavior, or exacerbate its seriousness. Foster children with externalizing problems might thus be more at a risk, due to their genetic liability, to develop externalizing problems and to elicit bad parenting by their foster parents and the parenting of these foster parents (partly) influences the further development of the foster child's externalizing problems.

1.2. Reciprocal effects models

Reciprocal effects models hold that children's behaviors elicit parental reactions and that parenting practices influence children's behavior (Huh, Tristan, Wade, & Stice, 2006). The coercion theory is such a model that describes how parents and children mutually train each other to behave in ways that increase the probability that children develop externalizing problems and that parents' control over these externalizing behaviors will decrease (Granic & Patterson, 2006). Patterson (2002), for example, describes how early coercive interactions between parents and children (which are characterized by parental demands for compliance, children's refusal to comply and their escalating coercive behaviors, and finally parents' capitulation (Granic & Patterson, 2006)) can lead to more coercive (i.e., aversive behavior such as crying) and less adaptive problem solving behavior in children and less effective parenting strategies in parents. Several studies provide evidence for such a mutual influence. Children's externalizing problems are associated with less effective parenting strategies (such as, decreasing levels of parental support (Gadeyne, Ghesquière, & Onghena, 2004), less parental involvement (Reitz, Deković, & Meijer, 2006), low parental control (Huh et al., 2006), use of aggressive discipline (Sheehan & Watson, 2008), or more harsh-inconsistent parenting (Kim et al., 2003)), which are in turn related to an increase of children's externalizing problems (Aunola & Nurmi, 2005; Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994).

1.3. Do foster children elicit 'bad parenting' in their foster parents?

The question arises now whether foster children elicit such parenting practices also in their foster parents. If this is the case, the parenting of foster parents could promote instead of prevent the further development of foster children's externalizing problems. On the one hand, foster parents are selected and trained or screened before placement and monitored during the placement and might thus be expected not to be strained by foster children's externalizing problems and to provide adequate parenting. On the other hand, given the genetic child effect on parenting behavior and the evidence for reciprocal effects models of parenting and children's externalizing problems, foster parents may not be able to continue to provide adequate parenting.

1.3.1. Foster children's behavioral problems put a strain on foster parents

There is already some evidence that foster children's externalizing problems put a strain on foster parents. Firstly, Lucey, Fox, and Byrnes (2007) found that foster and biological mothers reported similar levels of stress regarding the child's behavior and their interactions with the child. Secondly, McCarthy, Janeway, and Geddes (2003) reported that the level of the foster child's externalizing problems was a significant predictor of the foster parent feeling burdened.

1.3.2. Not all foster parents provide adequate parenting

There is some evidence that not all foster parents provide adequate parenting. Foster parents may struggle to interact with these foster children, whose maladjusted behaviors or patterns of communication may be misinterpreted (Hobbs, Hobbs, & Wynne, 1999). Tripp De Robertis and Litrownik (2004), for example, asked 70 foster mothers how they would typically react to five child misbehaviors. Although adaptive, non-physical discipline (such as limit-setting or verbal assertion) was reported most often, these authors state that there is room for improvement since 48.5% of the foster mothers generated at least one harsh disciplinary response. Linares, Montalto, Rosbruch, and Li (2006) even found no differences between pairs of foster mothers and biological mothers of foster children concerning the use of positive, appropriate and harsh discipline. Orme and Buehler (2001) reviewed the modest number of studies on foster parents' parenting practices and concluded that about 15% of the foster parents manifested poor or troubled parenting. There is also some evidence that foster parents can specifically be pulled into negative interaction cycles when confronted with foster children's externalizing problems (Nilsen, 2007). Vanderfaillie, Van Hoken, Trogh, and Andries (2012) studied the influence of foster children's externalizing problems on foster parents' parenting behaviors two years later. They found that foster children's externalizing problem behavior predicted more discipline, more inconsistent punishment and less positive parenting (i.e., problem solving and involvement with the child) two years later. It is exactly this combination of low level of support and high level of negative control that is associated with a further increase of foster children's externalizing problems (Vanderfaillie et al., 2013).

1.4. Aim of this study

All the above mentioned studies were conducted in regular foster families, not necessarily caring for a child with severe externalizing problems. Although these studies provide useful input for improvement of the general pre- and in-service support offered by foster care services, examining the parenting stress and parenting behaviors in a sample of foster parents caring for children with severe externalizing problems would be useful. Since foster parents are the primary front-line service providers for foster children with severe externalizing problems (Orme et al., 2004), it is important to know how these externalizing problems affect foster parents' parenting stress and parenting behavior. Unfortunately, foster parents' parenting processes, which have great implications for the outcome of children reared in foster families, have received scant attention in the literature (Harden, Clyman, Kriebel, & Lyons, 2004, p. 661). Using standardized measures and comparing the results with normative data can provide information about the proportions of foster parents with clinical levels of parenting stress and about the presence of dysfunctional or adaptive parenting behaviors (Orme & Buehler, 2001). More information about the level of parenting stress and specific parenting behaviors of foster parents caring for foster children with externalizing problems can be used to target interventions and to enhance the caregiving environments that foster children experience (Dolan, Casanueva, Smith, & Bradley, 2009; Harden et al., 2004).

By studying the parenting stress and parenting practices of foster parents of recently started foster placements of children with

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