Foster home integration as a temporal indicator of relational well-being

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A B S T R A C T

This study sought to identify factors that contribute to the relational well-being of youth in substitute care. Using data from the Supporting Siblings in Foster Care (SIBS-FC) study, youth responded to a 9-item measure of positive home integration, a scale designed to assess the relational experiences of youth to their caregivers and their integration into the foster home. Data were collected from youth in six month intervals, for an 18-month period of time. Latent growth curve modeling procedures were employed to determine if child, family, and case characteristics influenced youth's home integration trajectories. Results suggest stability in youth reports of home integration over time; however, children who were older at the time of study enrollment and youth who experienced placement changes during the period of observation experienced decreased home integration during the 18-month period. Results suggest youth's perspectives of home integration may in part be a function of the child's developmental stage and their experiences with foster care placement instability. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

1. Introduction

Family relationships provide a critical context for child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), and healthy family bonds are particularly important to the psychosocial well-being of children who've experienced maltreatment and placement into substitute care (Schofield, 2002; Schofield & Beek, 2005). Placement into foster care requires children to not only make sense of their previous maltreatment experiences, but also necessitates their adjustment to changes to their social environment including adaptation and integration into a new family system (Heptinsall, Bhopal, & Brannen, 2001; Johnson, Yoken, & Voss, 1995). Separation from caregivers and siblings during critical developmental years has the potential to disrupt family bonds, relational continuity, and attachment formation (Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care, 2000; Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Perry, 2006; Waid, 2014; Waid & Wojciak, 2017) and can lead youth to feelings of emotional distress including grief, loss, and sadness (Bruskas, 2008; Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Lundstrom & Sallnas, 2012).

A considerable number of youth move through the U.S. foster care system each year. In 2015 a reported 427,910 youth spent time in care, with an average length of stay of 20.4 months (AFCARS, 2016). Statewide audits of child welfare systems suggest that nationwide, only 43.6% of youth in care achieve permanency within 12–23 months of

removal and on average children experience approximately 4 moves per 1000 days spent in foster care (USDHHS, 2015). It is estimated that in any given year, between 22 and 70% of foster care placements will disrupt (Blakey et al., 2012), requiring children to re-adjust and integrate into new foster family systems.

Recognition of the risks associated with placement into care have led to a renewed focus on the developmental implications of foster care (Zeanah, Shauffer, & Dozier, 2011) and the importance of healthy foster family relationships to the well-being of youth in substitute care (Williams-Mbengue, 2016). As such, understanding youth experiences and identifying the conditions which promote healthy foster family relationships over time may prove beneficial to researchers and practitioners who are interested in assessing and promoting the relational well-being of youth in substitute care.

This study sought to identify factors which contribute to a foster youth's positive home integration into a family foster home over an 18-month period of time. We define positive home integration using a 9-item measure (Kothari et al., 2016) which asks youth to report the extent to which children feel included in their foster family (e.g., the extent to which they feel treated with kindness, the extent to which they feel treated with respect, the extent of their involvement in family decision making, how good their relationship is with their foster parent, how well they get along with their foster parent, how well the foster

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parent listens to the youth, how responsive the foster parent is to their needs, how well the foster parent responds when the child has a specific problem). We begin our investigation with a review of research focused on the relational well-being of youth in substitute care, and follow with a secondary analysis of longitudinal data from the SIBS-FC study (Kothari et al., 2014; Kothari et al., 2017), a randomized controlled intervention trial designed to strengthen sibling relationships for youth in foster care. Using the 9-item youth reported measure of positive home integration (Kothari et al., 2016), we assess youth reports at four six-month intervals, for an 18-month period of time. Child, family, and case characteristics are examined in relationship to youth reported positive home integration trajectories to identify factors that contribute to a youth's positive integration into a foster family home over time. Following a report of findings and discussion of results, we propose areas for future research and practice focused on the relational well-being of youth in substitute care.

2. Literature review

How youth experience placement into care and the relationships they form with their foster families have been the focus of a limited number of empirical studies. Given that youth are the primary recipients of child welfare services, these investigations however provide valuable insights into the relational processes occurring within family systems that promote a child's successful integration into a foster family system, and illustrate the temporal nature of relational well-being for youth in substitute care.

2.1. Operationalizing relational well-being in Foster family settings

Relational well-being in foster family settings have been operationalized a number of ways, including foster home adjustment (Affronti, Rittner, & Semanchin Jones, 2015), foster home adaptation (Dunn, Culhane, & Taussig, 2010; Semanchin-Jones, Rittner, & Affronti, 2016), foster home integration (Leathers, 2002, 2006), positive home integration (Kothari et al., 2016), and child-caregiver therapeutic alliance (Rauktis, De Andrade, Doucette, McDonough, & Reinhart, 2005). These characterizations illuminate the processes occurring within foster family systems that promote successful adjustment and adaptation (Affronti et al., 2015; Semanchin-Jones et al., 2016), identify factors which contribute to the development of therapeutic alliance between children and their caregivers (Rauktis et al., 2005), and examine associations between youth-foster family relationships and other important dimensions of child welfare practice including child behavior (Leathers, 2002; Leathers, Spielfogel, Gleeson, & Rolock, 2012) placement stability (Leathers, 2006; Waid, Kothari, McBeath, & Bank, 2016) and permanency (e.g., adoption) (Leathers et al., 2012).

There is presently no unifying framework for operationalizing relational well-being in foster family systems, however Morissette (1994) provides a useful approach for thinking about foster family relationships as a series of processes which unfold in developmental stages. While the framework focuses primarily on foster parent relationships to child welfare agencies and includes foster parent-agency specific developmental considerations (e.g., foster parent pre-contact preparation, collegial relationships with the agency following successful navigation of foster parenting responsibilities), relationships between youth and foster parents are described and key distinctions are made between a youth's initial adjustment to foster care and their successful integration into a foster family system. Morissette proposes a child's initial placement into a new family home (defined as "contact') as a time characterized by negotiating boundaries, learning the household rules, and gaining familiarity with caregiver expectations. During this stage youth may push boundaries and display behaviors that test the skills of their foster parents. If the youth and their foster families successfully negotiate the challenges associated with the contact stage, the foster care placement transitions into a developmental stage characterized by

stability, predictability, and consistency (defined as "stabilization"). It is during the stabilization stage that family boundaries become established, interactions between caregivers and the child become more consistent, and foster parents become more autonomous in their parenting and decision making.

While not specified in Morisette's developmental framework, we would argue that the period of foster home stabilization is followed by youth's integration into the family system. Positive home integration would be characterized by mutual respect, kindness, and youth feelings of inclusion in the family system.

2.2. Youth, caregiver, and professional perspectives on Foster family relationships

Studies of foster family relationships from youth, caregiver, and professional perspectives highlight the difficulties associated with youth's adjustment to foster care and the importance of inclusive family processes in promoting successful integration into foster family systems. Dunn et al. (2010) asked 180 9–11 year old youth to respond to open ended questions about the hardest and most helpful aspects of placement into out of home care. Youth reported that adapting/transitioning to a new environment and missing their family were the most difficult aspects of foster care placement, and children's appraisals did not differ based on the type of maltreatment they experienced or their length of time in care. Children who rated strong attachments to their foster caregivers however were more likely to report that things would have been worse if they remained in their home of origin than did children with weak attachments to their foster caregivers.

In a study with former youth in care, Affronti et al. (2015) conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 foster care alumni to explore their perspectives on what influenced their adjustment to foster care. Nine themes emerged from the interviews and highlighted a number importance considerations related to how foster caregivers welcome youth into the family system and structure their interactions to promote a successful adjustment to the foster care placement. Youth reported that "good" foster parents demonstrated a sustained commitment to the child and enduring interest in the parent-child relationship. Family members used language which gave the youth a sense of ownership (e.g., your room, our house) and inclusion (e.g., my daughter vs. foster daughter) in the family system. Consistency and predictability of rules, even when restrictive, helped promote youth's successful adaptation to the foster care placement. Youth reported that good foster parents individualized their interactions with the child and respectfully navigated competing loyalties to the birth family. A number of youth also spoke to the importance of siblings; specifically that sibling co-placement provided a level continuity and connection during the foster care placement process. This is consistent with a growing body of research suggesting the presence of siblings in the same foster home is beneficial to youth's emotional well-being and to the stability of their foster care placements (Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Waid, 2014; Waid et al., 2016).

The role of family expectations and rules within the foster home have been identified by youth as important to their feelings of inclusion in the family system. Rauktis, Fusco, Cahalane, Kierston Bennet, and Reinhart (2011) employed focus groups with 40 youth who spent time in out of home care to understand how youth perceived the restrictiveness of their foster home placements, and found that youth reported rules in foster homes differed considerably from non-foster home settings and from other children in the home who were not foster children. Youth perceived foster home restrictiveness as inconsistent and arbitrary rules, with non-individualized expectations from their foster caregivers that were developmentally inappropriate (e.g., not being allowed to have a cell phone or ride in car with friends). Youth who experienced high levels of restrictiveness in the home settings felt angry, resentful, and stigmatized by unrealistic family expectations and agency policies governing the parenting of children in foster care.

Research with foster caregivers suggests similar perspectives to