Caregiver Commitment in Foster and Group Care

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Introduction

- Birth parents are typically highly committed to their children, and expect to have a life-long relationship with them.
- For children placed into out of home care, caregivers may vary in their commitment.
- Higher commitment in foster parents of infants is linked to higher likelihood of adoption or long-term placement (Dozier & Lindhiem, 2006).
- Out of home care sometimes takes the form of foster care, where children live with caregivers in a home environment.
- Sometimes out of home care takes the form of group care, where children live in groups with caregivers who live with them for a series of several days and then are replaced by other adults (cottage care), or who rotate through in shifts (shift care).
- Given that foster care represents a more home-like environment than group care, it was expected to be associated with higher levels of commitment than group care.

Current Study

- This study examined commitment among foster parents, cottage workers, and shift workers for adolescents.
- We hypothesized that foster parents would display higher levels of commitment than caregivers in group care settings.

Types of Care

- Foster Care
  - Children live with foster parents.
- Group Care
  - Cottage Care
    - Staff (sometimes referred to as house parents) work for a series of days and then take a series of days off.
- Shift Care
  - Staff members work shifts, typically with a 6-10 hour shift and are then replaced by other staff.

Results

- There was a main effect for Type of Care (foster/cottage/shift), with foster parents showing higher levels of commitment than cottage care and shift care workers, \( F(2, 74) = 7.36, p < .01 \).
- The association remained significant when controlling for child externalizing behavior \( F(2, 59) = 4.91, p < .05 \).

Method

- Participants
  - 31 foster parents, 28 cottage care workers, 18 shift care workers from a large southern state.
  - Children ranged in age from 13 to 17 years old.
  - Attempts were made to make groups similar in child gender and child age

- Procedure
  - Interviews were completed over the phone and recorded for later coding.

- Measures
  - Primary Outcome: Commitment
    - Commitment was assessed using the This Is My Child Interview.
    - Commitment is defined as the degree to which the caregivers thought of the children as their own.
    - Commitment was scored on a scale from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating higher levels of commitment.
  - Covariate: Problem Behaviors
    - Child externalizing behavior was assessed using the Brief Problem Monitor (Achenbach, McConaughy, Ivanova, & Rescorla, 2011).
    - The BPM includes 19 items and measures externalizing (7 items), internalizing (6 items), and attention problems (6 items).

Discussion

- These findings support the hypothesis that foster parents feel greater commitment to their children than cottage and shift care workers.
- Commitment is expected to be especially important for vulnerable adolescents who have been placed into out of home care.
- These findings suggest the importance of placing children into foster homes when possible.

Selected References