Trajectories of Mental Health in Children Adopted From Foster Care
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ABSTRACT

A wealth of research has established that adopted youth are at greater risk for impaired mental health than their non-adopted peers, given the host of early life stressors that many experience. However, the specific trajectories of risk and resilience into adulthood remain unclear. The present study examines longitudinal trajectories of mental health in 52 adolescents and young adults adopted from foster care. We investigated the contribution of two major pre-adaptive risk factors, abuse/neglect and age of placement, to childhood trajectories of behavior problems. We also utilized these risk factors and behavioral trajectories to predict current outcomes of mental health. Children exposed to abuse/neglect exhibited higher levels of internalizing problems, but not externalizing problems, into adulthood, especially if adopted after age 4. Trajectories of mental health into adolescence/young adulthood remain unclear. Abuse/neglect: some studies show stable effects into adulthood, others unstable. Age of placement: study on present cohort in 12-18 revealed: Internalizing problems consistently higher in children adopted after 4. Externalizing problems increased in younger-placed children, decreased in older-placed children. Goals of study: 1. Clarify trajectories of effects of maltreatment. 2. Extend trajectories of effects of age of placement revealed in childhood into adolescence/young adulthood.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

- Participants: 52 youth (29 males, M age=19.2), 43% history of abuse/neglect, 44% adopted after age 4. 45 primary parents (72% female, 75% heterosexual, 68% married/cohabitating).
- Procedure: Families recruited through DCFS seminars for prospective adoptive parents. Original study: 82 children, 6 yearly visits beginning 2 months post-placement (M age = 3.9). Follow-up study: online survey sent to parents and children when youth reached adolescence/YA.

RESULTS

- Childhood Trajectories of Mental Health
- Predictors of Mental Health in Adolescence/YA
- Preadolescent risk factors:
- Child behavior problems:

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

- Exploratory Analysis:
- • Abused/neglected youth show no heightened externalizing problems by adolescence/YA.
- • Abused/neglected youth have consistently higher internalizing symptoms (anxiety, PTSD, depression) in childhood & in adolescence/YA.
- • Both internalizing & externalizing behavior problems in childhood predict substance use in adolescence/YA.
- • Childhood internalizing problems partially explain link between abuse/neglect & later high marijuana use.
- • Targeting internalizing problems in childhood may prevent later problematic marijuana use.
- • Childhood internalizing/extremealizing problems predict other mental health outcomes not related to abuse/neglect or age of placement. Possible other risk factors include genetic susceptibility, prenatal substance exposure, other pre-placement risk factors.
- • In adolescence/YA, non-abused children do not show psychiatric or substance abuse problems.
- • Effects of later age of placement largely disappear by adolescence/YA for children in adoptive homes.