

"Placement disruption and negative placement outcomes among adolescents in long - term foster care: The role of behavior problems," by Sonya J. Leathers, Child Abuse and Neglect, March 2006. "Who disrupts from placement in foster and kinship care?", by Patricia Chamberlain, Joe Price, John Reid, John Landsverk, Philip Fisher and Mike Stoolmiller, Child Abuse and Neglect, April 2006.

Both of these articles are concerned with the effects of children's externalizing behavior problems on placement disruptions. Both articles are concerned with a subset of placement changes, that is moves of children from one foster home to another non - permanent home (Leathers) or any exit from a foster home or kinship home made for a negative reason ( Chamberlain, et al). Both articles report a strong relationship between externalizing behavior problems and placement disruptions.

Leathers studied the placement histories of 179 young adolescents placed in non - relative foster care for 1-8 years during the late 1990s in Cook, County, Illinois. 83.5 % of these youth were African American; the youth had been placed for an average of 4.63 years on June 30, 1997; these youth experienced an average of 4.23 placement disruptions (failed foster placements) in the 5 years between June 30, 1997 and May 30, 2002. "In this study, a caseworker's report of externalizing behavior problems during early adolescence was a strong predictor of subsequent foster placement disruption before controlling for foster home integration, " Leather's comments. Caseworkers' ratings of youth behavior were more predictive of placement disruptions than foster parents' ratings of youth behavior; on the other hand, "the foster parent's report of behavior problems was a strong predictor of negative placement outcomes including placement in residential care, imprisonment and runaway status 5 years later."

Leathers comments that "Findings from this study are consistent with the hypothesis that a youth's ability to form relationships with an unrelated foster family is a key factor in determining placement outcome." Youth who did not feel a sense of belonging to a foster family were far more likely to experience a placement disruption.

African American youth were two and a half times more likely to experience placement disruptions than youth of other races/ ethnicities. Leathers acknowledges that "this finding is inconsistent with the findings of two previous studies conducted in California." Leathers speculates that her study's findings may be the result of studying adolescents' placement patterns rather than the placement histories of younger children. However, the relationships between and among placement disruptions, foster home integration, externalizing behavior problems and race raise the alarming possibility that African American youth may not experience the same degree of acceptance in foster care as youth of other races / ethnicities, at least in Chicago.

Leathers believes that standardized measures of youths' behavior problems can be utilized to identify children at high risk of placement disruptions and negative placement outcomes. "Additionally, these findings suggest that assessing a young adolescent's relationships within a long - term foster home might be even more important than assessing behavior problems when planning for placements designed to stabilize placements", Leathers states. She adds, "Without increasing positive relational behaviors, services may prove to be ineffective even if behavior problems are reduced."

Chamberlain, et al, studied 246 children, ages 5-12, placed in non - kin foster care or kinship care in San Diego, California. Children placed less than 30 days and children whose placements were intended to last less than 90 days were excluded from the study. Medically fragile children were not included in the study. This study utilized the Parent Daily Report Checklist (PDR), a 30 item measure of child behavior problems completed through telephone interviews with caregivers in a series of consecutive or closely spaced days (1-3 days apart). Interviewers utilizing the PDRs asked foster / kinship parents "Thinking about (child's name), during the past 24 hours, did any of the following behaviors occur?" Parents were asked to recall events of the past 24 hours and respond "yes" or "no" to each of the 30 questions. Based on three such interviews, each child in the study was given a score of 0-30. "The score for each child was the average number of behaviors reported per day (out of the possible 30) divided by the number of calls (3)."

A child's baseline PDR score was a significant predictor of placement disruption. "Baseline PDR increased the hazard of disruption by 17% for every child problem behavior reported." In addition, there was a threshold effect such that disruption rates remained low for children with less than 6 reported problem behaviors and then increased gradually and steadily for children with 6 -14 problem behaviors; "..The risk of placement disruption increased 25% for each additional behavior over 6."

This study found a strong relationship between non - kin foster care and risk of placement disruption; children in non - kin care were about three times more likely to experience placement disruption than children in kinship care.

The authors comment that ".. There is a threshold for the rate of children's problem behaviors that most parents appeared to tolerate well." "For the latency- aged children in this study, once the threshold of 6 problem behaviors was exceeded, placement disruptions began to accrue." The authors suggest that if the threshold of tolerable levels of behavior problems can be identified for various ages of children, "it could represent a practical, relatively expedient method for estimating the resiliency of the foster home environment."

These authors advocate for interventions that "focus on reducing behavioral problems and increasing foster/ kin parenting skills," limiting the number of foster children placed in each foster home and increasing efforts to identify, recruit, train and support kinship placements." They point out that evidence based behavioral interventions are now available and could be employed with children, youth and caregivers to reduce

placement disruptions. This is a practical place to start in mounting a systematic effort to reduce placement disruptions in child welfare systems.