Evidence In Support of the Least Restrictive (Most Family Like) Setting

By Mark Testa, Ijeoma Nwabuzor, Qi Wu & Kevin White

January 2013

- For decades, state and federal child welfare policy and practice have prioritized the placement of foster children into “the least restrictive (most family like) and most appropriate setting available…” U.S Social Security Act, sec. 475. [42 U.S.C. 675] 5(A).

- Between 2003-2010, the US foster care population has declined from a peak 310,000 in 2007 to 270,000 in 2010. In that same timeframe, entries into foster care have declined as well, from over 300,000 in 2003 to a low around 255,000 in 2010, and further declines are being promoted.

- Systematic review of literature revealed 21 (0.5%) studies that adequately account for selection effects using randomization, instrumental variables, or propensity scores. Studies compared:
  - Foster care vs. institutional placement (n=10)
  - Kinship vs. foster care (n=3)
  - Non-removal vs. removal (n=7)
  - Substantiated vs. unsubstantiated (n=1)

- Generally, studies that use rigorous research designs have found (a) less restrictive placements are associated with better outcomes, particularly when extremes are compared, e.g. institutional care versus in-home care or (b) there are no differences in outcomes in less versus more restrictive placements.
  - Majority of studies report foster care children have better outcomes compared to institutionalized children; however evidence is inconclusive.
  - Generally, studies found little differences in placement or well-being outcomes for children in kinship versus non-kinship care, or have found better outcomes for kinship care.
  - Children who are not placed fare no worse or even better on placement or well-being outcomes than children who are placed in foster care

- Research studies have generally found that children placed in less restrictive care (e.g., non-removal or removal) experience more positive placement and well-being outcomes than children placed in more restrictive care (e.g., non-related foster care, group homes, institutions)
Studies Included in Systematic Review


Figure 1. Example of Search Terms used for Sociological Abstracts

(DE=(children or infants or adolescents)) or(child*) or(girl*) or(boy*) or(adolescen*) or(teen*) or(baby) or(babies) or(infant*) or(preschool*) or(pre school*) or(young person*) or(young people)  
AND KW=((relative* within 3 foster*) or(relative* within 3 substitute) or(family within 3 foster*) or(families within 3 foster*) or(family within 3 substitute) or(families within 3 substitute) or(kin within 3 care*) or(kinship within 3 care*) or(kin within 3 caring) or(kinship near caring) or(family based residential treatment) or(foster near care) or(foster near treatment) or(foster near special*) or(foster near therapeutic) or(foster near medical) or(foster-care*) or(DE="foster care") or(substitute near care*) or(foster near family based) or(group-home*) or(group within 3 home*) or(residential treatment center) or(residential group care) or(therapeutic foster care) or("out of home") or(removal) or(placement)  
AND (propensity score analys*) or(instrumental variable) or(instrumental-variabl*) or(quasi* OR AB quasi*) or(greedy matching) or(propensity within 3 analysis) or(propensity score matching) or(propensity within 3 matching) or(propensity scor*) or(propensity) or(clin* within 25 trial*) or((singl* or doubl* or trebl* or tripl*) within 25 (blind* or mask*)) or(Placebo*) or(random*) or(DE="random samples") or(control* or prospectiv* or volunteer*) or(randomized controlled trial) or(controlled clinical trial*) or(control* or comparative stud*) or(evaluative stud*) or(follow-up stud*) or(prospective stud*) or(cause effects) or(cause models)

Figure 2. Systematic Review Article Retrieval Chart

Potentially relevant citations identifies from database search to meet inclusion criteria (N=4896)  
(N=737) citations were considered duplicates  
Citations retrieved for detailed information (N=4159)  
Citations excluded after reviewing abstract (N=4122 and 4123, respectively, for each reviewer)  
Studies included in full review (N=42 and 41, respectively, for each reviewer)  
Citations excluded if the study does not directly answer the research question (N=5 and 4, respectively, for each reviewer)  
Studies included in full review (N=37)  
Citations excluded if the study only uses the simple match (N=17)  
(N=1) citation retrieved through included articles  
Studies included in systematic review (N=21)