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EDITORIAL

Foster Caregiving and Child Outcomes in relative and non-relative Foster families

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A considerable number of children and families are impacted by child welfare services each year due to suspected or substantiated child abuse and neglect. An estimated 3,145,000 children experienced a child protective investigation or an alternative response in 2020, and 618,000 were identified as victims of maltreatment (US Department of Health & Human Services [USDHHS], 2022). Children enter foster care when the abuse and neglect they experience is deemed too severe for them to live in their homes. Some 407,493 children entered foster care during 2020 (USDHHS, 2021). Children are most frequently removed from their parents due to neglect (64%), parental drug use (35%), caretaker inability to cope (13%), and physical abuse (13%; USDHHS, 2021). Upon removal, most children are placed with a relative/kin foster care home (34%) or a non-relative foster family home (45%; USDHHS, 2021)

Although only a relatively small portion of children who come to the attention of the child welfare system are removed from their parents or guardians, a significant number of children are impacted by foster care. Further, meeting the basic needs of children and families impacted by foster care consumes an uneven share of resources given the cost of out-of-home placement, supportive services, and monitoring of the birth parents, adoptive parents or other guardians, and foster families. A substantial portion of foster care is supported by federal Title IV-E funding of the Social Security Act, which covers a range of child welfare services and programs, totaling approximately $30 billion each year; foster care services alone totaled $2.7 billion in 2016 (Child Trends, 2018).

The experience of removal is often chaotic and can be traumatic for both children and parents; especially given the time children spend in out-of-home placements (mean = 21 months; median = 14.6 months in fiscal year 2020; USDHSS, 2021). The goal is for out-of-home placements to be healing and help with reunification, or if not possible, lead to another type of permanent outcome (e.g., adoption, permanent guardianship; USDHHS, 2020). In reality, the foster care system has long been criticized for the lack of stability in caregivers and case workers, the stress on the caregivers, and other systemic challenges. Children in foster care navigate multiple forms of adversity, such as disrupted attachments with their biological/primary parents, uncertainty over their futures, and the continued impact of the maltreatment experienced prior to entering foster care (e.g., Anctil et al., 2007; McCrae, 2009). Youth who are removed from their biological parents or primary caregivers are at higher risk of immediate and long-term effects to their mental and physical well-being (e.g., Gomez et al., 2015; Papovich, 2020; Pecora et al., 2009). It is also important to note that the proportion of Black/African American and American Indian or Alaskan Native children impacted by family separation due to foster care or child welfare services overall is disproportionate, compared with the national prevalence of these racial/ethnic groups in the general population (Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIG], 2016; USDHHS, 2022), an ongoing signal that systemic racism continues to persist in the US child welfare system (e.g., Cahn & Harris 2005; Roberts, 2002; Roberts, 2022; Rodenborg, 2004).

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Despite criticisms and systemic challenges that may impact the experiences and well-being of children and families impacted by foster care, foster caregivers are frontline providers of nurturance and support for children. As indicated above, approximately four out of five children in out of home placements reside with non-relative foster parents or relative/kin/fictive kin caregivers (79%), as opposed to being placed in group homes, institutions, and other types of pre-adoptive or independent living arrangements (USDHHS, 2021). Family foster care, particularly kinship care, as opposed to group or residential care, is the preferred placement type for children (CWIG, 2022). Decades of evidence exists to support the importance of foster caregivers for promoting child well-being, both relative and non-relative. There are somewhat mixed findings in determining whether kinship is better than non-relative foster care (e.g., Hassall et al., 2021; Li et al., 2019). However, there is substantive empirical and theoretical support for kinship care as highly beneficial to children in maintaining family stability, permanency, mental well-being, and cultural connections (e.g., Ariyo et al., 2019; Winokur et al., 2018). Both the benefits and challenges of kinship care have been recognized in the literature, and similar to other aspects of child welfare, findings have shown that Black and brown families face more challenges than White families. Kin caregivers from racially minoritized groups tend to be older, in poorer health, have fewer resources, and have less access to services (Coleman & Wu, 2016; Lin, 2014).

Research focused on non-relative caregivers and families has expanded greatly over the past few decades. Although there are apparently no recent references with nationally or internationally representative demographic information, research has primarily focused on White, married, and middle-aged non-relative foster parents; women have also been the primary respondents among these studies. Interestingly, researchers have found that a small proportion of foster parents appear to provide the vast amount of foster care services (Cherry & Orme, 2019; Orme & Cherry, 2015; Orme et al., 2017). While there are some unique differences among these studies, those providing more foster care may be more willing to foster children with significant behavioral or physical needs, and families may include a caregiver (typically a foster mother) who does not work outside the home. Non-relative foster parents face a number of stressors, including challenges with child behavior, insufficient training, negative interactions with other foster care stakeholders, difficulty in advocating for needed child or family services, and other difficulties or uncertainty in navigating the foster care system (Adams et al., 2018). However, there is also evidence to support that foster parents develop resilience, skills, and relationships as they learn to navigate the foster care system and successfully care for children (Cooley et al., 2017; Saarnik, 2021).

Another pertinent and developing body of literature among foster caregivers and families has outlined the successes of various empirically-supported or evidence-informed parenting or child behavior interventions to support foster families and child well-being (e.g., Bergström et al., 2020; Kaasbøll et al., 2019). These studies generally support that behavioral parent training or skills-based training and support for foster caregivers and children demonstrating subthreshold to moderate behavioral challenges report reduced foster parent stress and improved child behavior. Parenting and positive relationships with youth are particularly important for promoting adaptive development of children in foster care, and research supports that there is a bidirectional or mutual influence between child and foster parent well-being (Chodura et al., 2021; Mancinelli et al., 2021). However, there are also limitations in the quality and scope of training, with a particular gap in how foster parents are prepared during preservice training to care for the mental health needs of children (Cooley et al., 2019).

Although there is a growing number of studies to help us understand foster parenting and child well-being, several focus primarily on the foster caregiver's experience, include only the report of the foster caregiver or youth, are cross-sectional, or include other limitations in generalizability and methodology. Thus, this special issue was developed in order to examine current trends in understanding caregiving/foster parenting and child outcomes in kinship/relative and non-relative foster families, particularly those who were formally involved in the foster care system. This issue was developed to better understand the experience of out-of-home care using a variety of large and well-developed secondary data sets as well as primary data sources that help fill in some of the gaps. It addresses the dearth of supportive training programs for foster care providers, especially kin caregivers. It recognizes policy as a significant tool in making positive change. Articles were focused on research that addressed or supported the mental, physical, or relational health outcomes of children and adolescents in kinship/relative or non-relative foster care by examining various aspects of caregiving/foster parenting.

Overview of Included Studies and Overarching Themes

Primary and Secondary Data Analyses

The first article in this special issue was focused on parenting stress, a construct that has been associated with more negative feelings toward oneself and toward one's children.

Sharda (2022) identified that parenting stress was significantly associated with poorer foster parent well-being, yet social support functioned as a moderator, buffering the negative impact of parenting stress on foster parent well-being.

Two articles in this special issue utilized secondary data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being II (NSCAW). The first article by Mihalec-Adkins et al., (2022) demonstrated that youth who reported more negative relationships with their biological mothers reported significantly higher internalizing behaviors. However, a moderation analysis indicated that a more positive relationship between youth and their foster caregiver, specifically for youth in kinship care, buffered the negative effects of the poorer parent-child relationship on youths' internalizing behaviors. Foster caregiver relationship was not a significant moderator for youth in non-relative foster homes, or among youth living in kinship care who perceived poorer relationships with their biological mothers. This article provides research to support the importance of positive coparenting relationships for the mental health of youth living in out-of-home care, and the subsequent need for training, services, and support in this area.

The second article to use NSCAW II data was written by McWey et al., (2022) who completed a latent profile analysis of youth in foster care and their self-reported internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and then examined whether youth with better relationships with biological and foster parents reported more positive mental health symptom profiles. Results revealed four distinct profiles of youths' mental health symptoms: (1) high internalizing and high externalizing symptoms, (2) high internalizing and moderate externalizing symptoms, (3) moderate internalizing and moderate externalizing symptoms, and (4) low internalizing and low externalizing symptoms. Additionally, youth with better relationships with biological parents were less likely to be in the high symptom group compared to the low symptoms group; however, this relationship was not present for youth who reported more positive relationships with foster caregivers. This article paralleled the findings and implications of Mihalec-Adkins et al., (2022) and the importance of supporting positive relationships between youth and their parents as a means of supporting youths' mental well-being.

An article by LaBrenz et al., (2022) used national data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis System (AFCARS) to examine the impact of same-race foster placements on placement stability. Among the sample, approximately 75% of placements were racially matched, with non-Hispanic White children experiencing the highest rates of racially matched placements. After controlling for demographic characteristics, racial matching was associated with increased likelihood of placement stability.

Training and Parenting Programs

Three articles in this special edition examined parent training programs tailored to specialized populations of caregivers with two focused specifically on kin caregivers. One of the kin caregiver focused articles examined a training program developed specifically for kinship caregivers (Gibbs et al., 2022). The second was specific to adapting training for Black kin caregivers (Wu et al., 2022). The third article examined a training program designed to help prepare foster parents for fostering teens, a program that had previously been tested with American Indian caregivers (Day et al., 2022). These articles are important to consider in terms of foster caregiving and child/youth outcomes because trainings and supports for families impacted by child welfare systems are often developed as a one size fits all. However, there is insufficient evidence to support that what is currently offered is culturally adaptive or appropriate for use with all populations. In other words, many interventions or trainings lack relevance to the population or issue at hand.

Gibbs et al., (2022) examined the lack of attention to training and support for kinship foster parents, even though kin caregivers are increasingly relied on to provide substitute care for relative children. The participants in this study reported that incomplete and inaccurate communication regarding licensing processes, as well as practical difficulties attending training, irrelevant session content, and stringent licensing requirements acted as barriers to access training. Participants in the kin-specific licensure training group reported high levels of learning related to key parenting competencies and increased awareness of kinship permanency supports, although these outcomes appeared less pronounced among those receiving the training in a virtual, compared to in person, format. A strength of the primary research presented in this article was the use of a repeated measures design with measurement taken at first and last sessions, and again at 6-to-8 months post training. Importantly, these authors addressed the lack of instruction surrounding relationship issues for kinship foster parents (e.g., managing the changing roles within the extended family and grief, loss, and relational conflict).

The second program-related article in this issue examined a pilot of the Family CheckUp/Everyday Parenting Program, a parenting program that is rated highly by both the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse and the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse. The authors described an adaptation of the program for use with Black kin caregivers, which was delivered in a family camp setting with outdoor activities for the children in their care (Wu et al., 2022). Participants of the pilot found the program culturally relevant and commented on the importance of having facilitators who were also parents and Black. Participants

expressed a desire for more hands-on activities to practice their new skills, as well as for more content on self-care. The pilot, although small, was consistent with the prior literature in that each kin caregiver was caring for multiple children. Planning for food, transportation, and childcare to accommodate multiple family members was considered important to the success of the pilot and has relevance to other practitioners and researchers focused on kinship families. The family camp component of the pilot was evaluated favorably by the participants, even though the effort to prepare for the trip added some additional stress on the caregivers.

Day et al., (2022) presents exploratory qualitative research on the Critical Ongoing Resource Family Education Teen Edition (CORE-Teen) post licensure foster parent training curriculum, designed for foster parents caring for youth ages 12 through 20 years. This study was implemented across three states and involved a comparison between those who received the training and those who did not. The comparison group was found to have less patience with understanding and interpreting normative teen behavioral challenges compared to the CORE Teen group. Specifically, the comparison group did not make the connection between teens' behaviors, trauma experiences, and mental health, and they were quicker to move to removing the teens from their homes as a solution to behavioral difficulties. A theme in this programmatic research was the importance of preparing foster parents in advance of behavioral challenges with understanding and skills to manage behaviors. This particular training program had previously been evaluated with Indigenous caregivers.

Policy and Macro-level Implications of Foster Caregiving and Child Outcomes

Two of the articles in this issue dealt with macro-level or policy issues. Beal (2022) examined the impact of COVID-19 on stress and access to services, comparing licensed foster parents and kinship caregivers. As Beal and colleagues pointed out, much of the literature comparing licensed foster parents and kinship caregivers has highlighted the differences between these two groups in terms of economic resources, social support, and eligibility for assistance programs. Their survey findings did indicate differences among caregiver types in the amount of available resources; however, in this study licensed and kinship caregivers reported similar access to services, challenging economic and social impacts of COVID-19, and caregiver and child distress during the pandemic. The types of challenges encountered were similar across groups, especially during times when COVID shutdown restrictions were at their peak. As the authors commented, it may be that pandemic conditions "created a level playing field, resulting in similar struggles despite other known inequities between these groups of caregivers." An alternative interpretation is that the support provided from federal, state, and local services created greater equity across these groups of caregivers.

The article by Garrison et al., (2022) involved a comparison between licensed and unlicensed caregivers in Florida. The Florida Guardianship Assistance (GAP) program is a state mandated program that began in July 2019 and provides considerable financial aid and other benefits for the child and permanent guardian. The program incentivizes caregivers to pursue child-specific foster parent licensure. Consistent with prior literature, this study found a challenge in program take-up rates due largely to a lack of awareness about the GAP program and perceived barriers to licensure. This article serves as a reminder that passing a policy may create the structure or resources families need, but successful implementation is key to realizing the intended policy objectives, in this instance increased permanency and positive child adjustment associated with licensure. Similar to the article by Gibbs et al., (2022), this study highlighted the challenges caregivers encounter with barriers to participation and the lack of support to manage relational difficulties with birth parents.

Future Directions

This issue makes a number of contributions to prior literature in further highlighting and supporting the important role that relative and non-relative foster caregivers play in the lives of children and the functioning of the child welfare system. Although the stressors of foster parenting are well-documented, this issue reinforces that foster parenting and kin caregiving is a unique context for raising children and that there appears to be a *broken record* of similar and ongoing stressors persisting or not being addressed for foster families over time (e.g., insufficient access to or lack of knowledge of available training or resources, need for different types of support to manage the demands or burden of foster caregiving, and disparity in meeting the needs of Black and brown kinship caregivers and children). Many parenting stressors are shared with birth or natal families; however, the context of foster care adds strain, uncertainty, and additional demands that are often unable to be addressed immediately upon placement or at any time during the foster care experience. Second, both primary and secondary data provide unique ways to examine families. Whereas primary research is needed to examine emerging trends, unmet needs, and to adapt programming to better meet the needs of diverse children and caregivers, secondary data can provide an additional lens for understanding both family and foster care system functioning. Third, there appears to be an

increase in responsiveness to the needs of children and foster families in terms of the type or focus of research being done. The studies in this issue also highlight the increased training and supports that intend to reduce inequity for kinship caregivers and stabilize foster care placements for all foster families.

In contrast to the additions of this special issue, there is still a marked need for research aimed at understanding individual, family, and foster care system-level issues that impact the well-being of children. For example, continued research is needed to examine how foster caregivers directly improve or influence the well-being of children, whether there are aspects of family life that can be enhanced to better support children and caregivers, and what foster care systems are doing well that lead to placement stability, health, and reunification of children with their birth family. Qualitative, mixed method, and multi-method research should also be used to de-aggregate views, outcomes, and perceptions of those with lived experience in or with the foster care system. Similarly, increased involvement of those with lived experience in or with the foster care system is needed to supplement or even drive change. It is important to consider contextual risk factors, such as challenges in becoming licensed (particularly for states who are increasing the licensure of relative/kin foster caregivers), foster parent retention, limited access to needed training and resources, racial disparity in terms of the inordinate number of Black and indigenous children removed from their families and placed in foster care, and how policy may be a hindrance in meeting the needs of children and caregivers. Additionally, it is vastly important to consider the implicit and explicit strengths and resources of foster families and communities to meet the demands faced by those impacted by foster care.

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