



Northern California Training Academy

Issues and Challenges in Aftercare Services

A Literature Review



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Executive Summary

Purpose of this Review

The purpose of this literature review is to explore issues surrounding the return from foster care of young children and the transition to independent living for older adolescents. Although foster care is intended to improve outcomes and minimize the possibility of future maltreatment and delinquency, researchers and policy makers are increasingly suggesting that continued efforts and resources are needed to further maximize the potential for positive outcomes. This typically is called *aftercare services*. First, risk factors that are present when children are returned home from foster care or for adolescents who “age out” of the foster care system will be examined. Second, aftercare strategies that may be effective in minimizing these risk factors and contributing to better outcomes are considered. The information presented here will help administrators, supervisors and case workers in the child welfare system:

- 1) recognize potential risks that families and youth face at the termination of foster care,
- and 2) come to realize the number of other possible strategies and techniques that are at their disposal to counteract these risk factors.

Method

Literature was reviewed and acquired using the following search databases: Academic Search Premier, PsychINFO and PsycARTICLES. Additionally, in using the World Wide Web, primarily Google, the following Child Welfare Research and Policy Organization websites were searched: Child Welfare Research Center (CWRC) (<http://cssr.berkeley.edu>), Child Welfare Information Gateway (www.childwelfare.gov) and American Humane Association (www.americanhumane.org). These databases were selected to locate peer-reviewed literature. The following search terms were used:

aftercare services, family preservation, independent living skills and foster care transition.

Additionally, an iterative process was used in that the results or discussions from one search were used for further searches based on additional references or key words.

Findings

There is limited research examining the provision and benefits of services for families' post-reunification. Thus, the emphasis of this literature focuses on aftercare services intended to help youth as they exit the foster care system. Youths exiting foster care are at a high level of risk for reentry into care (Kimberlain et al., 2009), experiencing multiple placements within the Child Welfare System (CWS) and at risk for developmental problems such as delinquency, behavioral problems and academic failure (Courtney, Piliavan, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001). In particular, adolescents leaving or "aging out" of the CWS are particularly at risk for a number of negative outcomes. They face higher probabilities of teen pregnancy (out of wedlock), drug abuse, unemployment and homelessness (Collins, 2001; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004). The following strategies and techniques for counteracting the risk factors related to exiting foster care are discussed:

- Substance Abuse Treatment Programs
- Independent Living Skills Training
- Nonparental Mentoring
- Developing Kinship Connections
- Reintegration Services
- Involvement of Older Youths in Permanency Planning

Conclusions

The strategies identified in the report relate to two broad themes: 1) youths need to acquire and refine skills necessary for independent and socially responsible living,

and 2) youths need to create and maintain interdependence between themselves and important adults in their lives. Although the expectation of the Child Welfare System is to provide a permanent and safe environment for youths leaving foster, this is not always possible without continued support and assistance, such as aftercare services.

Purpose of this Review

The purpose of this literature review is to explore issues surrounding the return from foster care for young children and the transition to independent care for older adolescents. Although foster care is intended to improve future outcomes and minimize the possibility of future maltreatment and delinquency, researchers and policy makers are increasingly suggesting that continued efforts and resources are needed to further maximize the potential for positive outcomes once children or youths exit foster care. This typically is called *aftercare services*. First, the risk factors that are present when children are returned home from foster care or adolescents “age out” of the foster care system are examined. Second, a number of strategies that may be effective in minimizing these risk factors and contribute to better outcomes are discussed. It is hoped that the information presented here will help administrators, supervisors and case workers in the child welfare system in two areas: 1) recognize potential risks that families and youths face at the termination of foster care, and 2) come to realize the number of other possible strategies and techniques that are at their disposal to counteract these risk factors.



Introduction

Achieving timely and stable reunification is a primary goal for the child welfare system and is stated to relate to safety, permanency and well-being. Specifically, reunification with the child's family of origin is the most common permanency outcome with 49% of children placed in foster care ultimately reunifying (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), 2008). However, family reunification is not always successful. Re-entry to foster care, also referred to as recidivism, is a problem for foster care services. Some children are again removed from their homes due to abuse and neglect and reentered into the foster care system. Re-entry rates for individual states range from 21% to 38% (Wulczyn, Hislop, & Goerge, 2000). These statistics are problematic when considering that re-entry into foster care can have many adverse consequences for the children such as greater mental and behavioral challenges, academic problems and, for males, a greater likelihood of entering the juvenile justice system (Lewis et al., 2007). Key factors associated with reentry include children with

behavioral or health issues, children placed in non-relative foster care, placement instability, parental mental illness, substance abuse, parental poverty, parental ambivalence about reunification, the amount of family coherence at the time of separation, previous failed reunification attempts and the number of service goals and tasks for the families (Kimberlin, Anthony, & Austin, 2009).

Importance of Providing Aftercare Services for Youth

Adolescents present a special problem in the issue of permanency and foster care reentry. With increased time in foster care and repeated placement, teens are at risk of remaining in foster care until adulthood or “aging out” of the system. It is estimated that every year approximately 20,000 teenagers remain in the foster care system until adulthood (Fagnoni, 1999). The longer a child is in out-of-home care, the less likely reunification becomes resulting in longer stays in foster care with an increased probability for multiple placements (Kimberlain et al., 2009). The issue of lengthy and/or repeated foster placements during adolescence presents an additional developmental challenge in that the second decade of life is a time of great change in brain development, particularly in the frontal lobes (Siegel, 1999). This is relevant because the frontal lobes are involved in impulse control, abstract thinking, planning and the anticipation of consequences. Evidence also suggests that experiential factors, such as structure and consistency within the child’s environment, may play a causal role in the development of these self regulatory abilities (Blair, 2002). These are cognitive abilities that are still in the process of being developed in youths at just the time they are expected to leave the “system” and be independent, disrupting the structure and consistency that has been shown to contribute to the development of these abilities. As a result, it is reasonable to see that the stress and uncertainty experienced in the foster care system, as well as “aging out” at this point in the

adolescent's life, may contribute to considerable and lasting changes in the brain that do not contribute to its positive development (Lupien et al., 2007). This can be seen in research showing that these are the very cognitive abilities that are often found to be diminished or compromised in delinquent children and adolescents (Steinberg, 2005). Thus, while the importance of brain development is commonly discussed during the early years, research finds that sustaining nurturing environments during adolescence is also extremely important and has long term developmental implications.

Furthermore, 60% of children who age out of the foster care system will be unemployed and/or homeless, abusing substances, and/or involved with the criminal justice system within two years (Courtney, Piliavan, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001). Approximately half of these youths will also never graduate from high school and 60% of adolescent girls will become pregnant within 2 years. Thus, achieving permanency for these youths is not simply an individual concern; it is a societal issue as well.

In summary, reunification permanency is an important goal for the Child Welfare System (CWS) that, unfortunately, is not universally achieved. Lack of permanency or aging out of the system is a significant risk factor for problems throughout the lifespan. In addition to illustrating factors that put children and families at risk for repeated foster care placement, recent empirical research suggests that reunited families need continued assistance and services to achieve permanency (Courtney et al., 2001). The present review will examine several issues and strategies that relate to the issue of aftercare services. Some of these strategies will be practices or policies that are already utilized, so literature evaluating their effectiveness will be examined and discussed. Others will be practices or strategies that have not been uniquely applied to the issue of aftercare service but may be well suited to improving their breadth and quality. These were added to provide workers in child welfare and

probation with potential tools for successful and stable permanency planning and aftercare services. Furthermore, a greater understanding of the factors that may lead to reabuse and the practices that circumvent it serve as tools for service providers in helping children and families after an initial report of abuse or neglect.



Methodology

Literature was reviewed and acquired using the following search databases: Academic Search Premier, PsychINFO and PsycARTICLES. Additionally, in using the World Wide Web, primarily Google, the following Child Welfare Research and Policy Organization websites were searched: Child Welfare Research Center (CWRC) (<http://cssr.berkeley.edu>), Child Welfare Information Gateway (www.childwelfare.gov), and American Humane Association (www.americanhumane.org). These databases were selected to locate peer-reviewed literature. The following search terms were used: *aftercare services, family preservation, independent living skills and foster care transition*. Additionally, an iterative process was used in that the results or discussions from one search were used for further searches based on additional references or key words.

Findings



Substance Abuse Treatment Programs

Caregivers. An estimated 60 to 75 percent of foster care cases involve substance abuse in some way (Young, Gardner, & Dennis, 1998). Furthermore, the extended time frame needed to address addiction conflicts with the mandated goals of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997. Because the ASFA requires a timely resolution of the issue of permanency, youths may often be returned to families in which substance abuse treatment is ongoing or where the potential for relapse is high. Because of this, children of substance abusing parents are at a higher risk for re-entry, even after parents have participated in a comprehensive service delivery program designed to help parents with substance abuse issues (Brook and McDonald, 2007). In addition to the inherent risk of relapse, even among parents receiving services, caregivers receiving treatment services report having more “eyes” on them and thus report higher levels of stress and pressure on the family which contributes to a relapse. Therefore, greater appreciation of the need for lengthier times to reunification and continued aftercare services related to the achievement and maintenance of parental sobriety is warranted.

Adolescent Youth. In the case of aftercare service for adolescents, the issue of substance abuse is relevant to them as well. Although the need for and utility of alcohol

and drug services for adolescents is a broad issue independent of the issue of aftercare services, it is clearly of possible importance here. In a systematic review of research on family-based interventions for adolescents with substance use problems, Austin, Macgowan, and Wagner (2005) examined five types of therapeutic interventions: Brief strategic family therapy (BSFT), Family Behavior Therapy, Functional Family Therapy, Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT) and Multisystemic Treatment. Of this group, the authors found that MDFT and BSFT were the most effective techniques for reduction in substance abuse. MDFT is delivered in the home or community making the treatment accessible to families with limited mobility. It involves principles of family systems and ecosystems theoretical approaches and is implemented to identify and change existing risk factors and strengths within the youth. In contrast, BSFT refers to a time-limited therapeutic approach that is based on the fundamental assumption that the family lies at the core of the developmental process and, therefore, efforts to reduce substance abuse need to focus on the many domains of functioning in and around the family such as the relationship with school, neighborhood, peers and the broader community. Within the therapeutic context, the family works to identify problem behaviors within these relationships and then restructure them to maximize positive outcomes.

Given the positive findings of this review, future efforts in aftercare services related to adolescent substance abuse may be warranted. Furthermore, the efficacy of these two family-based approaches points to the importance of interdependence between the youth and family, even in cases where the youth enters into independent living.

Independent Living Skills Training

As mentioned above, an estimated 20,000 adolescences age out of the child welfare system each year. This is significant, and problematic since these vulnerable youths are at risk for a number of negative outcomes such as poor educational experience and achievement and physical and mental health problems. In addition, this group has a much higher probability of becoming homeless, incarcerated or pregnant (Collins, 2001; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004).

Studies of the effectiveness of living skills training depict a viable strategy for minimizing the possibility of negative outcomes. Cook (1994) found that youths receiving skills training in the areas of financial management, education and employment had significantly better outcomes than those that did not receive any training. Similarly, Lindsey and Ahmed (1999) found that after a period of three years, youth participating in an Independent Living Program were more likely to still be living independently and managing their expenses than those who had not.

To implement this at a national level, the Independent Living Program (ILP) was created to assist foster youth in making a successful transition from foster care to independent living by focusing on the teaching of important life skills. This type of intervention is supported by evidence. For example, Iglehart (1994) found that measures of independent living skills were correlated with better school performance and lack of mental health problems. Naccarato & DeLorenzo (2008) assessed the effectiveness of this program by examining the findings of a number of individual studies of outcome variables of participants. Included in their focus were three outcome categories: housing status, educational attainment and employment.

In regard to housing, they found that even in cases where youths went on to independent living, *connections with family remain important*. Thus, they suggested that

resources should be utilized to seek out, create and maintain links with family members to provide transitional housing, social support for independently housed individuals resources and support for life skills. Furthermore, they suggest that case workers and service providers work to help independent youths obtain and maintain low income housing. In regard to education, their results suggest that service providers need to be cognizant of the importance of educational continuity when considering transitions between living arrangements and also need to work closer with educators to maintain high standards for individuals in or recently released from foster care. Finally, in the area of employment, the authors found that though the training of job skills is an important prerequisite for stable and meaningful employment, resources should also be used for initial job placement. This includes *forming relationships* with local employers to create opportunities in the job market for this population that is sensitive to the needs of the youths and also reinforces the skills developed in the ILP. In summary, this study demonstrates the utility and importance of training and education during and after foster care for successful independent living. However, it also points to the need for continued improvements in streamlining this transition into the community by fostering meaningful connections through relationship building, with the family or in the working environment.

In short, living skills programs appear to be a viable method for improving the outcomes of youths aging out of foster care. Continued research is necessary to more carefully parse where this strategy is most effective and where effort and resources are being wasted. One reported area of difficulty is the lack of understanding that youths have regarding the services available to them. Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, Painter (2007) collected qualitative data from adolescent and young adult foster care participants and found that many of them were not informed of the resources and

services available to them. Furthermore, the youths reported that an excessively large caseload for case workers and repeated changes in case load negatively impacted the transition to independent living. This suggests that in addition to the availability of aftercare and transitional services, case workers need to be highly engaged and available to support their clients during this sensitive time period.

Additionally, it may be that the use of such training programs in combination with mentoring efforts may pay great dividends in case outcomes. Having a relationship with a responsible, capable mentor may reinforce the lessons of a skills program and motivate the youth to learn and apply them. More information about the effect of mentoring is provided below.

Nonparental Mentoring

While the previous section focuses on the importance of engendering and strengthening independence in foster youths, some researchers have suggested that instead, the CWS and probation workers should work to create more interdependence between the youth and his or her surrounding family, friends and community (Propp, Ortega, and NewHeart, 2003). This focus on independence is sensible, as a youth that has social, emotional and material support is less likely to suffer mental health issues, resort to criminal activities or become homeless. Mentoring is a commonly identified resource for increasing the social networks of high risk youth. Examining data from National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Ahrens and colleagues (2008) found that teens reporting a nonparental mentoring relationship had better health outcomes, were reportedly less aggressive and less prone to suicidal thoughts. They also found a trend toward higher educational participation in mentored youths as well. The findings of this study and others (e.g., Beier et al., 2000) point to mentoring as a potentially important and beneficial strategy in aftercare services. In fact, mentorship is

emphasized in the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999 in that it is explicitly listed among the possible use of federal funds.

However, this may be a difficult strategy to implement “artificially,” because evidence shows that many programs designed to match youths with mentors are often short term. Such short term attachments can do as much, if not more, harm than good (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Specifically, youths often hold beliefs that many relationships in their life are not reliable and stable. A short term mentoring relationship would reinforce this belief. This potential problem has led some to put an emphasis on “natural” mentoring relationships (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). These reflect relationships that occur outside of any formal service or program and, hence, cannot be created for the youth by case managers or service providers.

Despite the difficulty of detecting positive effects and relatively small effects on mediating risk factors, this is still broadly believed to be an important and useful tool both during foster care and after care. One possible means of implementing mentorship is by identifying and strengthening existing relationships. This may be done through contacting family members or inquiring about other acquaintances or friends that the youth might rely upon.

Developing Kinship Connections

Related to the previous topic of mentoring and social support, the creation and strengthening of weak or nonexistent connections between the youth and relatives can be a powerful tool in maximizing positive outcomes. The importance of kinship relations is manifest when one considers that up to 1/3 of the foster care population lives in a kinship housing arrangement (US DHHS, 2001). Furthermore, evidence suggests that kinship care has the following advantages: continuity of family identity; continued access to other family members; continuity of racial, ethnic and religious

identity and caregiver's familiarity with the child's previous circumstances and family history (Hegar, 1999). Long term or permanent kinship placements have also been found to be more stable and successful (Goerge, 1990; Wulczyn & Goerge, 1992).

Although limited, existing evidence suggests that outreach training and education for kinship caregivers and children can be beneficial. For example, Strozier and colleague (2005) implemented a school-based intervention program designed to increase children's self esteem and help alleviate the stress and burden of being a foster caregiver for kin. Evaluation of this program suggests that they were successful with each of these goals. Additionally, many of the caregivers reported concerns with the child's potential for behavior problems, especially those placed due to parental substance abuse. This points to the need that kinship caregivers have in not only meeting the basic needs of the child but also in receiving education and training to better understand the nature of substance abuse, the typical path of recovery and relapse, and the potential influence (both genetic and environmental) that the parent's substance abuse may have on the development of the child. In any event, this entire process is one that would continue after the child was removed from foster care and placed in the home. However, the ability to assist and mentor an independent, older youth could also require similar training.

In summary, this strategy would require the following resources: 1) case workers would need to "mine" a case file for information regarding living and available relatives, 2) once potential kin have been identified, case workers will attempt to locate and contact them using search technologies on the internet, 3) in cases where family members would be willing to serve as caregivers for a dependent child or a mentor for an independent youth, some type of training and education should be provided to alert them to some of the risk factors of the situation and techniques and strategies that

would help them to provide effective support for the youth. Additionally, such a strategy might also work in cases where the child is returned to the parents. In this circumstance, the relatives could provide additional support to the youth and the family as well as a more educated perspective on the situation.

Reintegration Services

Although typically utilized in cases of juvenile detention to help youths transition back to their families, this strategy may have broader significance for a variety of service areas. This approach is based on a more sociological view of delinquency and problem behavior. That is, instead of merely focusing on the behaviors and socialization of the child (which is the focus of intensive out-of-home care programs), efforts need to be made to change the relationship that the child has with his or her home environment and community. Typically, reintegration efforts utilize a strength-based approach rather than merely focusing on pathology. Furthermore, an additional goal of this strategy is to make the transition to independence more gradual rather than abrupt. Ryan and colleagues (2001) examined the efficacy of such a program in Michigan and found that adjudicated delinquent youths receiving reintegration services after being released from long term residential care were much less likely to be imprisoned five years later than comparison groups. In the case of this particular example, the intervention consisted of a residential program in which youths worked and learned in a strengths-based, peer group environment. Participants work together to develop new skills and coping abilities that will serve them positively in the future.

This strategy highlights one important obstacle to successful outcomes in foster care: the often abrupt nature of the transition from full time, residential care to independent living or a return to a family environment from which problems originated. While this aspect is more explicitly highlighted in the strategy of

reintegration services, it seems implicitly to be important to the previously discussed strategies as well. In the case of independent living skills training or mentoring, a clear benefit is the increased social support the youth feels during the transition to a challenging environment. The transitional nature may be critical in helping the youths change their perception of their environment and the relationship that they have with it.

Involvement of Older Youths in Permanency Planning

Given the risk factors and problems related to adolescents in the foster care system, it is important to choose permanency options that lead to more stable and beneficial outcomes for the youth. Increasingly, policy makers and researchers are suggesting that increasing the involvement of the teen in the permanency planning process is a critical tool in improving placement stability and improving developmental outcomes for the youth. Typically, during this process, the case worker holds meeting with the teen and important adults in his/her life. During this time, they work on identifying sources of support for the youth and building a potential network of adult resources.

An example of a related program is the Longest Waiting Children Project (Badeau, 2005). Implemented over three years in New York, the program's goal was to plan for permanency through meetings of case workers, youths and adults in order to create an individualized plan for the teen. In addition, the program focuses on a number of key areas: 1) identifying potential barriers to permanency, 2) brainstorming to create possible solutions to these barriers, 3) creating a plan utilizing these strategies or solutions, 4) in parallel to a primary plan, pursuing other potential permanency options, and 5) identifying the best options and outcomes with the important voice of the youth.

Results of this program have been positive with nearly 80 of the 100 youths who participated in the program achieving permanency. Overall, it is important to point to the role of youth involvement in the process as a key advantage. When teens are given a large role in creating and shaping their permanency plan, they may become more invested in seeing it succeed and in achieving positive outcomes. Furthermore, the involvement of important adults in this process would help to engender and strengthen the sense of interdependence that is so important to successful independent living.



Conclusions

Although achieving timely and permanent reunification is a primary goal of the foster care process, continued efforts and expenditures of resources may be necessary to create positive outcomes for families and youths. This is especially the case with older adolescents that are aging out of the Child Welfare System and are in need of further support and guidance in order to help them avoid negative outcomes. In this review, some of the potential risk factors that youths face and the importance of stable and healthy living environments during the second ten years of life are discussed. Because adolescence has been found to be an important time for brain development, especially the frontal lobes, it is critical that the necessary support is available to help them learn skills required for long term goal management and self regulation.

Furthermore, a number of strategies that case workers and other adults can offer youth who leave foster care in order to improve outcomes are identified. In particular, these strategies seem to relate to two broad themes. First, youths need to acquire and refine skills necessary for independent and socially responsible living. This is important given the increased level of unexpected pregnancy, homelessness, unemployment and

criminal problems facing adolescents leaving foster care. Second, a focus on engendering interdependence between the youth and important adults is necessary. With the coming onset of adulthood, youths need to find mentors, role models and social support in the mature people in their lives. This can be achieved through kin relationships or others.

In conclusion, this review points to the importance of aftercare services and resources provided to the youth and the family. Although the expectation of the Child Welfare System is to provide a permanent and safe environment for youths leaving foster care, this is not always possible without continued support and assistance. Further empirical evidence is needed to examine which techniques or strategies are most effective, both from a cost perspective and a social/psychological perspective.

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