Sibling Relationships in Foster Care and Externalizing Behaviors

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Abstract

Sibling relationships of youth in foster care are often overlooked and understudied, despite the fact that research has demonstrated positive associations between placing siblings together and youth outcomes. This study aimed to examine the potential benefits of a positive sibling relationship of youth between the ages of 11-16 on externalizing symptoms over three waves of data in a nationally representative foster care sample. Descriptive statistics were conducted to understand frequency of contact between siblings not placed together and sibling relationship quality. Longitudinal growth curve analyses also were conducted. Results indicated that a positive sibling relationship significantly influenced the intercept. Practice and policy implications are discussed in how to utilize this overlooked potential protective factor, sibling relationships, in the foster care system.

Background

Siblings play a significant role in development and well-being (Kim, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2007), and during adolescence in particular, positive relationships with siblings can serve as a protective factor against consequences associated with exposure to risks (Soll, McHale, & Feinberg, 2009). Although mental health correlates of quality sibling relationships among youth in the general population has been well established by researchers (Gamble, Yu, & Kuehn, 2011; Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2008; Yeh & Lempers, 2004), the effects of sibling relationships among youth in foster care have been under studied. Given that youth in foster care are known to have heightened exposure to risks it is important to understand the potential protective nature of sibling relationships among this population. Sibling relationships of youth in foster care have the potential to be the most significant relationship in their lives (Shlonsky, Bellamy, Elkins, & Ashar, 2005). When children are removed from their home, the presence of a sibling with whom they have a strong relationship may help maintain a sense of emotional continuity and safety (Shlonsky, Webster, & Needell, 2003). Ward (1984) emphasized that the presence of a sibling helps mitigate the uncertainty of placement in foster care by having one predictable element.

Sample

Sample from the Long Term Foster Care (n = 757) subsample of the National Survey for Child and Adolescent Wellbeing (NSCAW) .

- N = 188, ages 11 to 16
- Gender: 47.9% Females, 52.1% Males
- Race and Ethnicity: 42.6% Caucasian, 42% African American, 11.2% American Indian, 1.6% Asian or Pacific Islander, & 2.7% as "other," 13.3% Hispanic
- Mean age of child = 13; SD = 1.36

Measures

- Externalizing Behaviors – Child Behavior Checklist“ (CBCL, Achenbach, 1991). The externalizing subscale consisted of subscales aggressive behavior, attention problems, delinquent rule-breaking behaviors, and social problems. In general, high internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and construct validity were found for internalizing scores. For the NSCAW sample, the internal consistency for this subscale was .90 (NDACAN, 2002).
- Sibling Relationships: Sibling Relationship consisted of one question: Compared to others your age, how well do you get along with your siblings. Responses included: worse, about the same, or better.

Measures and Analyses

- Descriptive statistics and longitudinal growth curve modeling

Longitudinal Growth Curve Modeling:

- Unconditional Growth Curve of Externalizing Behaviors = good model fit \( \chi^2(1) = .054, p = .817; \) CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .00.
- Adolescents’ average initial level of externalizing behaviors was 61.67 and there was significant level of variation at baseline as well as a significant decrease in slope (-1.14, p < .05).
- Conditional Growth Curve with Sibling Relationship = good model fit \( \chi^2(2) = 3.31, p = .191; \) CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .05.
- Sibling relationship was significantly associated with externalizing behaviors at baseline (-2.1, p < .05); however, sibling relationships were not significantly associated with adolescents’ rate of change in externalizing behaviors over time (-.02, p > .05).

Discussion

- These findings may have important implications for youth placed in out-of-home care. First, from a nationally representative sample, 75% of the children were separated from their sibling and had very little contact. Often policy and practice does not state how contact and sibling relationships are to be maintained when siblings are separated in foster care. Clearly specifying how to do this would be beneficial to the youth in care, specifically during the first year.
- During that first year of foster care placement, the youth’s perception of their sibling relationship significantly impacts their expression of externalizing behaviors. This is important as the expression of externalizing behaviors are often most associated with placement disruptions and placement disruptions are associated with poorer individual outcomes for the child.
- Given the impact that a perceived positive sibling relationship can have on externalizing behaviors and the fact that externalizing behaviors can negatively impact academic performance, future studies should examine how sibling relationships influence academic performance of youth in foster care.