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Outcomes for looked after children

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Principal researchers

- Harriet Ward, Director
- Emily Munro (Research Associate)
- Chris Dearden (Research Fellow)
- Don Nicholson (Research Associate)

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18 months – completed August 2003

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Where to find more evidence

Full report: (available from CCFR)

Ward, H., Munro, E., Dearden, C. and Nicholson, D. (2003) Outcomes for Looked After Children: Life Pathways and Decision-Making for Very Young Children in Care or Accommodation

This paper was written by Emily Munro

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For further information about the CCFR please contact:

i Professor Harriet Ward
Director

@ H.Ward@lboro.ac.uk

i Suzanne Dexter
Administrator

@ S.Dexter@lboro.ac.uk

i Centre for Child and Family Research
Department of Social Sciences
Loughborough University
Leicestershire LE11 3TU UK

☎ +44 (0)1509 228355

📠 +44 (0)1509 223943

W www.ccf.org.uk

Outcomes for Looked After Children

Life Pathways and Decision-Making for Very Young Children in Care or Accommodation

Data on 242 children looked after by six local authorities between 1st April 1996 and 31st March 1997, and who were still in care or accommodation 12-24 months later revealed that the largest group in this long stay sample were babies admitted before their first birthday. An in-depth study was conducted to explore the life pathways and decision-making process for these very young children. The study found that:

- Many of the children in the study experienced a lack of continuity and stability prior to being looked after, whilst looked after, and after the care episode. In many cases being looked after offered little more stability – although considerably more safety – than remaining with birth parents might have done.
- Over half of the babies (24:59%) had mothers who experienced problems with drug and alcohol misuse, domestic violence or mental illness. Only one of these children returned to the care of their mother.
- By the end of the study (1st April 2002, at least five years after admission), 23 (55%) of the children had been adopted, 14 (33%) had returned to birth parents, two had returned to other relatives and three were still looked after.
- The administrative data concerning length of time looked after can be misleading, as many of the children achieved permanence well before they left care. Eighteen (44%) achieved permanence within twelve months of entry to the system.
- The predominant view that return to birth parents should be the first choice of care plan led to delay for many of the babies. This was exacerbated by a lack of twin tracking or concurrent planning.
- Court directions for additional assessment, shortages of expert witnesses, judges and court time were also causes of delay.
- There was a reluctance to consider foster carers as potential adopters. This was due partly to the fear of losing foster carers, but there were also concerns that some foster carers would not meet the more stringent requirements required of adopters.

Project aims

The project aims to explore the decision making process that influences the experiences of very young children who remain looked after away from home for long periods of time.

Methodology

A longitudinal cohort of 242 children looked after continuously by six local authorities and followed since admission in 1996-7 included 42 babies who were admitted to care or accommodation before their first birthday and were still looked after 12-24 months later.

A comprehensive case file search was conducted in order to trace chronologically all the changes experienced by each of the 42 babies from birth until they ceased to be looked after. Case file data were supplemented by exploration of policy documents and interviews with key personnel.

Family circumstances

Many of the children in the study came from vulnerable families with substantial problems. Over half of the babies (24:59%) had mothers who experienced problems with drug and alcohol misuse, domestic violence or mental illness.

Eighty eight percent of the children came from families that had had involvement with social services prior to admission. Moreover, case file data revealed that at least 14 of the parents had been looked after during their childhood.

Children's circumstances

Whilst over half (27:64%) of these very young children appeared to be healthy, fifteen (36%) were reported to have health problems. In six of these cases the conditions were attributable to neglect in utero as a result of maternal substance misuse. In a further two cases children sustained non-accidental head injuries and had complex health needs as a result. These conditions continued to affect their future care and life experiences.

Nineteen (45%) of the babies were placed on the child protection register at birth, most commonly because they were at risk of neglect or abuse; this risk had commonly been identified through social services previous involvement with the families and siblings.

Abuse or neglect was the primary reason for admission in 31 (74%) cases. Additional case file data revealed that ten babies had not themselves been abused, although siblings had sustained non-accidental injuries.

Placement stability

Particularly for young infants, consistency in primary carer and predictable routine are recognised as instrumental in the development of secure attachments. The findings from this study demonstrate that many of the children experienced a lack of continuity and stability prior to being looked after, during, and after the care episode.

A high proportion of these young children had experienced frequent changes of carer and domicile before they became looked after. Eleven (28%) had moved four or more times prior to entry to care or accommodation.

Between them, the babies experienced 143 placements and 101 moves whilst looked after: the majority of which were classified as 'planned transitions'. Many of these were positive moves to permanent placements. However, others were due to: foster carers going on holiday, to reunite sibling groups or moves from short to long-term placements or for the purpose of assessing parenting capacity. Over half the residential assessments of parenting capacity broke down. For the children concerned this often led to additional placements and delay.

One in four placement moves were 'unplanned'. In four cases these transitions occurred because of an unforeseen change in the carer's circumstances, such as illness or sudden bereavement which meant that the placement was withdrawn. Twenty-one placements broke down; seventeen of these were with parents or relatives, who were unable to provide satisfactory care.

There was also evidence that not all the children achieved long-term continuity or stability once they ceased to be looked after. Some of those children permanently placed with birth parents continued to move between family members after they had left care or accommodation.

Resources

A shortage of placements meant that it was not always possible to find carers who could meet all a child's identified needs. Placement delays were particularly pronounced for children from ethnic minority groups and/or larger siblings groups. Very young children could spend their early childhood moving around the care system waiting for a perfect match that was unattainable within a timeframe consistent with their need for permanence and security.

There was a reluctance to consider foster carers as prospective adoptive carers. One reason cited was that local authorities had a shortage of foster cares and were reluctant to lose their services. Some children, having already experienced frequent change and loss were therefore required to leave foster carers they were closely attached to.

However, some foster carers who had looked after children for several months were nevertheless not considered as suitable adoptive carers.

Delays in achieving permanence

Achieving stability and permanence was a lengthy process for many of the babies in the study; they were looked after for between 14 and 69 months. However, administrative data concerning the length of time looked after can be misleading, as many of the children achieved permanence well before they left care. Eighteen (44%) of the babies achieved permanence within twelve months of entry to the system. Particularly for very young children, long-term stability and continuity of carers are likely to be of greater importance than legal permanence via, for example, an Adoption Order or Residence Order.

When children were placed with birth parents or relatives but protected by care orders there was evidence of purposive delays, where the legal status was retained until such time as their situation was considered stable. Such delays were intended to promote the well being of the children concerned.

In other cases, however, difficult decisions to place them permanently away from home were delayed to the detriment of their long-term well being.

At entry, the most common care plan was time-limited assessment, considered appropriate for 17 babies. The second most common care plan was return to birth family. In the majority of these cases care plans were unfulfilled and the children were eventually adopted.

Retrospectively, it appears care plans were over-optimistic. As a matter of policy and practice, rehabilitation to birth parents was initially considered to be the optimum outcome for most looked after children. The need to demonstrate that parental rights had been adequately acknowledged at times undermined professional judgment and led to further instability and delay.

Data from a further cohort of babies who entered care or accommodation about eighteen months after the first, does indicate that care planning may be more realistic now and that greater use is made of twin tracking.

Court issues

Lack of court time could delay proceedings. Such delays increase the likelihood of additional placement changes. Furthermore, the older children are, the more difficult it becomes to place them permanently.

The low status and lack of confidence in social workers' professional expertise meant that their recommendations were sometimes given little weight by the courts, which preferred to delay proceedings to wait for an 'expert' opinion.

As one chief clerk said 'If in the course of court proceedings, we lose time, for whatever reason, unavailability of experts, guardians not yet allocated... we are losing part of a child's childhood that we can't give back'.

Implications for policy and practice

As this study demonstrates, a complex interplay of factors influence very young children's life pathways and many of the issues that led to change and delay are unlikely to be easily resolved. However, it should be recognised that since 1996-7 a range of policy changes have been implemented. These include: Quality Protects; Choice Protects; Adoption and Children Act 2002 (and accompanying standards); and the Protocol for Judicial Case Management in Public Law Children Act Cases which is intended to minimise delay in the court process. We do not yet know how successful they will be in addressing some of the issues raised by this study.

Messages for improving practice include:

- A need for better training on attachment in very young children, parental drug misuse, its consequences and timetables for rehabilitation.
- The importance of having accurate information about a child's previous experience in order to inform future decision-making.
- A need for better information about how far the authority has been able to match children with appropriate carers, so that time is not lost waiting for the unattainable.