

The health and well-being of children placed in kinship care is better than that of children in foster care



Children in kinship care have better behavioural and mental health than children in foster care

What is the aim of this review?

This Campbell systematic review examines whether kinship care is more effective than foster care in ensuring the safety, permanency and wellbeing of children removed from their home for maltreatment. The review summarizes findings from 102 studies involving 666,615 children. 71 of these studies were included in meta-analyses.

The behavioural and mental health, and the well-being of children placed in kinship care is better than that of children placed in foster care. Children in kinship care experience fewer placement disruptions and incidents of institutional abuse. The likelihood that guardianship is awarded to relatives is higher for children in kinship care compared to foster care.

There are no differences between kinship and foster care for the rates of reunification with birth parents, the length of stay in placement, children's educational attainment, the strength of family relations or the degree to which developmental and physician services are utilised. However, children in foster care are more likely to utilise mental health services and to be adopted, which removes any involvement of their birth parents in their upbringing.

What did the review study?

Kinship care - the placement of children with a family related to the child - is increasingly utilised in many Western countries as an alternative to placing children who have been maltreated in residential settings or with unrelated foster families.

This review examines the effect of kinship care compared to foster care on the safety, permanency and well-being of children removed from their home for maltreatment. Outcomes include children's behavioural health, mental health, placement stability and permanency, educational attainment, family relations, service utilisation, and re-abuse.

What studies are included?

Studies included in this review compare data on the safety, permanency and well-being of children placed in kinship care with data for children placed in foster care.

The review includes 102 studies, all of which were controlled experimental or quasi-experimental



How up-to-date is this review?

This review includes studies published between March 2007 and March 2011. It was published on March 3, 2014.

What is the Campbell Collaboration?

The Campbell Collaboration is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in the social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

About this summary

This summary was prepared by Bianca Albers (Centre for Evidence and Implementation, Save the Children Australia) based on the Campbell Systematic Review 2014: 2 'Kinship Care for the Safety, Permanency, and Well-Being of Children Removed from the Home for Maltreatment: A Systematic Review' by Marc Winokur, Amy Holtan, and Keri E. Batchelder (DOI 10.4073/csr.2014.2). Anne Mellbye (R-BUP) designed the summary, which was edited and produced by Tanya Kristiansen (Campbell Collaboration).



studies: 89 of were conducted in the U.S., and the remainder in Spain, the Netherlands, Norway, Ireland, United Kingdom, Israel, Sweden and Australia.

Is kinship care more effective than foster care in ensuring the safety, permanency and well-being of children removed from their home for maltreatment?

Children in kinship care have better behavioural and mental health than children in foster care, i.e. fewer internalising and externalising behaviours, better adaptive behaviours, fewer psychiatric disorders and better emotional health. They also experience greater stability and permanency in their placement and suffer from less institutional abuse than children in foster care. Also, the chance of relatives being awarded guardianship is greater for children in kinship care than for those in foster care.

Children in foster care are more likely to be adopted than children in kinship care, and they utilise mental health services to a greater degree than children in kinship care.

No differences between children in kinship and in foster care are found for the utilisation of other public services than mental health services (i.e. developmental services, or physician services), or for educational attainment, the rate of reunification with birth parents, or for the strength of their relations and attachment to their family.

Some of the findings are context specific, notably the lesser support which may be given to kinship carers compared to foster carers, and whether permanency of the kinship or foster arrangement, adoption or reunification is the preferred end goal.

What do the findings in this review mean?

Kinship care is a viable option for the children that need to be removed from the home for maltreatment. However, policy issues remain to balance the cost-effectiveness of kinship care with a possible need for increased levels of caseworker involvement and service delivery.

A considerable number of the included studies showed weaknesses in their methodologies and designs. There is a need to conduct more high quality quantitative studies of the effects of kinship care based on robust longitudinal designs and psychometrically sound instruments.