

Placement Disruption... A review of the literature

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This article is based on a small part of a review of relevant literature for a Master of Social Work thesis entitled, 'Do You Mean We're Not The Only Ones?... Experiences of Permanent Placement Disruption'. Statistics and trends from the State of Victoria have been included where relevant.

Over the past two decades, there has been increasing worldwide attention paid to permanent placements of children, especially those with special needs – ie, those who are past infancy (over 1–2 years), actually or potentially disabled, of mixed or minority ethnicity, or who have issues in their genetic or social background which may become evident in the future or which may make access with biological parents complex.

An associated concern has been the growing number of placement disruptions which have occurred as an integral part of this process of placing older, more troubled children. There have consequently been many studies, mainly in the United States and the United Kingdom, which have looked at not only the rates of disruption in particular populations, but also the characteristics of children, parents, family composition and agency service which affect this process.

Rates of Disruption

In comparing rates of disruption from study to study, the researcher inevitably runs into difficulties due to the composition of the sample (young children, older children, disabled children) and the way in which the sample was selected. For example, if a group of children in placement is followed for some period of time until an outcome can somehow be decided upon, the group will consist of some children who have been in placement for a far longer period of time than the others; and will not include some children who began their placements with the earlier cohort, but who have disrupted

before the time of the study. The only way to overcome these difficulties, is to follow a cohort of adoptive placements longitudinally (Festinger, 1990). However, this rarely happens.

Given this, the figures themselves, while interesting, are interpreted and compared with caution. Disruption rates of between 1.9% for healthy young children (Kadushin, 1970) and 53% for adolescents with severe problems (Kagan & Reid, 1986) are reported. Higher rates are consistently associated with older, more disturbed children and with more recent studies, reflecting the increasing number of children with special needs who are being placed. Most studies, however, which report disruption rates for over 4 year olds arrive at figures of between 10% and 20% (Barth & Berry, 1988; Festinger, 1990) although the rates of some studies are higher than this, particularly if they do not include foster parent adoptions (Thoburn & Rowe, 1988).

Foster care disruption rates are reportedly very similar (Aldgate & Hawley, 1986) while both low and high rates have been reported for foster care conversions to adoption (Barth & Berry, 1988; Meezan & Shireman, 1985).

From the mid-1980s, there have been increasing numbers of non-adoptive permanent placements in Victoria, either Extended Plan Family Placements (EPFP), legal custody and/or guardianship arrangements (under the Children [Guardianship and Custody] Act 1984) or, more recently, Permanent Care Orders (under the Children and Young Persons Act 1989).

While a three year period is not a sufficient time to look at long-term trends in placement outcomes, and any disruptions in this time may refer

back to a much earlier cohort of placements, a comparison was nevertheless made between disruption rates of adoptive placements and those of other permanent placements during the period 1/7/1987–30/6/1990 for two agencies and the period 1/7/1988–30/6/1990 for a third agency, which did not start permanently placing special needs children until 1988.

In one of the agencies, the disruption rate of EPFP placements was 20%, compared with the disruption rate of 17% for special needs adoptive placements; in another, the EPFP disruption rate was 75%, compared with 0% of special needs adoptions; while in the third, the EPFP disruption rate was 7.7% compared with 0% of special needs adoptions. Whether these higher rates of disruption for non-adoptive permanent placements are due to the relative lack of legal status of the placements or to other factors such as the possibility of EPFP placements involving older or more traumatised children, is unknown at this stage.

Characteristics of disruption

1. Child Characteristics

Sex of child – in most studies, the sex of a child was not a factor; however, in 3 studies, males were more likely to disrupt (Barth & Berry, 1988; review in Festinger, 1990) while in my own research, special needs placements of girls in Victoria were more likely to disrupt than those of boys (O'Neill, 1991).

Race of child – also not shown to be a factor, except in one New Zealand study (Zwimpfer, 1983), which found that non-European children were more prone to disrupt than European children (this was associated with racial

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difference between parents and children, as well as with same race placements).

Age of child (at time of permanent placement as well as at time of first foster placement) is a consistent predictor of disrupted outcome (Barth & Berry, 1988; review in Festinger, 1990).

Placements with siblings – there have been mixed findings in this area, with both lower and higher rates of disruptions depending on the age of the children and the number of problems (review in Festinger, 1990). Interestingly, Barth and Berry (1988) found that none of the 47 children, placed in sibling groups in childless homes, disrupted.

Number of previous placements is a consistent predictor of outcome, with higher numbers of previous placements being associated with disruption (Barth & Berry, 1988; review in Festinger, 1990).

Previous permanent placement disruptions are associated with disruption, although less so for children over 12 years (Barth & Berry, 1988).

Physical and intellectual handicaps have not been associated with disruption (review in Festinger, 1990).

Behaviours of those children who disrupted were consistently seen as more severe than those whose placements were intact – these behaviours included serious eating problems, inappropriate sexual behaviour, stealing, lying, suicidal behaviour, fire setting, wetting or soiling, vandalism and aggression, running away and a continuing strong attachment to the birth mother (Barth & Berry, 1988; Borland, O'Hara & Triseliotis, 1991; review in Festinger, 1990; Rosenthal & Groze, 1990; Smith & Howard, 1991).

2. Parent Characteristics

Age, employment and income do not seem to be related to disruption. Race is mentioned as a factor only in the New Zealand study mentioned above (Zwimpfer, 1983). Barth and Berry (1988) found that a mother's tertiary education was associated with higher disruption rates.

The couple or single status of parents was found to be unrelated, except for one study, which found single parents over-represented in disruptions. Similarly, shorter marriages (less than 3 years) and previous divorce are related to disruption in one study each, but unrelated over the range of studies (review in Festinger, 1990). Foster parent adoptions are less likely to disrupt (Barth & Berry, 1988; review in Festinger, 1990).

Couples where each partner is equally motivated are less likely to disrupt (review in Festinger, 1990). Similarly, **parents who were able to be divided** were more likely to disrupt (Barth & Berry, 1988).

3. Family Characteristics

Biological children in the home have been associated with disruption in 2 studies and not associated in another 3 studies. However, as older children are generally placed with families who already have biological children, this finding needs to be interpreted with caution (review in Festinger, 1990).

Family support seems to be more important than support of friends (Barth & Berry, 1988).

Participation in support groups provides a buffering of risk (Barth & Berry, 1988).

4. Agency Characteristics

Placements where **children were placed from one agency into a family who had been approved by another agency** were more likely to disrupt (review in Festinger, 1990).

Staffing patterns in which the same social workers did not prepare both the child and the family were more likely to disrupt. Similarly, **change of social workers** during any part of the process is linked with disruption and placement difficulty (Barth & Berry, 1988; review in Festinger, 1990).

'Stretching' of families to accept more difficult children than planned, is associated with disruption (Barth & Berry, 1988). Disruption was also associated with receiving **overly positive information** about the child (Barth & Berry, 1988).

Social worker years of experience in child welfare (average 10 Years) was associated with more stable placements (Barth & Berry, 1988).

Conclusion

Although many of the above are relatively isolated findings and therefore need to be treated with caution until replicated, there are consistent themes in the literature of placement disruption. The challenge for practitioners is to understand these themes, while not allowing them to impinge, in an overly negative way, on the placement of special needs children. ♦

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