

Assisting Carers to Respond to the Mental Health Needs of Children

Josh Fergeus, Cathy Humphreys, Carol Harvey, Helen Herrman

University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria, Australia

INTRODUCTION

Across the developed world, efforts are being made to identify and develop effective interventions that will reduce the prevalence and severity of mental health problems among children and young people in out-of-home care. Foster and kinship carers have been identified as critical in this process. This study utilised the scoping study method in order to develop a better understanding of what interventions and/or support assist carers in responding effectively to the mental health needs of the children and young people in their care.

METHOD

The review was undertaken using the scoping study methodology as proposed by Arksey and O'Malley, and refined by Levac, Colquhoun, and O'Brien. The period selected for review extended from January 2000 to December 2014, inclusive, incorporating international English language literature.

Studies had to make substantial reference to the role of foster and/or kinship carers in achieving better mental health outcomes for children. Searches resulted in 1,064 potentially relevant articles. Abstracts were reviewed to ascertain relevance to the primary research question, resulting in 82 relevant publications being identified for inclusions in the review.

THEMES

Frequency and severity of mental health problems

Children in care are more likely to experience mental health problems than their mainstream peers. This is consistent across various age groupings in the USA, the UK, and Australia. Studies indicate that the frequency and severity of mental health problems among children in care often stem from a history of child abuse and neglect, fractured attachment relationships, and poor placement stability.

Service use

American children in foster care utilise mental health services at a rate five to eight times greater than the population of children who live in poverty. Children in kinship care use fewer mental health services.

Access to services

The complex mental health needs of children in care are not well met by traditional mental health services. Studies report difficulties for carers in accessing mental health services for the children in their care.

Carers as 'gatekeepers' or 'agents of change'

Carers can be an important agent of change when it comes to improving the emotional well-being of children, due to their expert understanding of the individual child.

Carer training and support

When carers have the resources and support they require to care for children, positive child welfare outcomes result. The development of extraordinary parenting skills in carers is necessary to meet the special needs of children.

Interventions involving carers

Enabling carers to be truly equal members of the team around the child has been shown to be important. Trauma-focused behavioural interventions show promise.

Attachment and placement stability

Disruptions in attachment relationships with foster carers may result in an increase in mental health problems and psychiatric emergencies. Multiple placements are also likely to increase the risk of mental health problems.

CONCLUSION

The importance of placement stability, predictability, and adequate attachment to primary caregivers for children in out-of-home is well recognised. However, recognition of the role of foster and kinship carers – their skills, experience, and commitment – in creating these conditions and thereby achieving positive outcomes for children has been slower to develop.

Further research is needed into the role of carers in supporting the development and maintenance of good mental health in the children and their care. Specific attention should be given to establishing the effectiveness of particular interventions and supports that are designed to increase carers' ability to provide stable placements and nurturing care environments.

