Assessing Service Needs of Kinship Families: The Modified Family Need Scale

Background and Purpose: Research indicates that many kinship families are in need of financial, emotional and intervention services (Linsk et al, 2009; Sakai, Lin, & Flores, 2011). Identifying their needs, however, is challenging due to kin caregivers' diverse backgrounds and children's various circumstances in out-of-home placement (Ynacura, 2013). Adding to these challenges is the lack of a reliable and validated instrument to assess the needs of kinship families. This paper explores one such potential tool, the Family Needs Scale (FNS; Dunst et al., 1988), and demonstrates how the FNS could be standardized for applications for kinship families. While the FNS was initially developed for parents of special needs children, we hypothesize that a modified FNS would be a good instrument for measuring kinship family needs.

Methods: This study is based on a sample of 220 kinship caregivers from 5 counties in a northeastern state. The participants were recruited from a pool of kinship caregivers who came into contact with county child welfare services, public assistance, or community-based service agencies. Once they consented to the study, trained research staff conducted telephone interviews or sent out a survey by mail upon their request. Measures included the FNS, the Parental Distress (PD) subscale of the Parental Stress Index (PSI), as well as child welfare involvement and socio-demographic variables. The analysis was conducted in two steps. First, a principle components analysis (PCA) and a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were conducted to assess fit of FNS items and identify subscales. Second, the psychometric properties of the modified FNS were validated using PD and other variables.

Results: Given the paucity of psychometric testing of the FNS, a number of factorial models were run. The first model using all 41 FNS items yielded 10 factors. This model was not only different from the developer's suggested 9 factors; the results indicated a poor fit. After PCA, 19 items were selected based on eigenvalue, factor loadings, and item correlation, resulting in the following 6 factors: Basic Needs, Social Support, Health Care, Self/Family Development, Special Care for Child, and Employment. CFA indicated good fits of the extracted 6 factor model (CFI=0.902; RMSEA=0.071; SRMR=0.062). The modified FNS showed strong internal consistency (α>.70) and discriminant validity (r <.85). Regression models of socio-demographic variables, child welfare involvement, and PD on FNS confirmed criterion validity.

Implications: The modified FNS demonstrates good psychometric properties and is a reliable and valid tool to identify a range of service needs. Not surprisingly, caregivers with lower income and those with higher caregiver distress reported overall higher family needs. In addition, we suggest that agencies pay special attention to basic needs (e.g., food) of low-income caregivers and social support needs (e.g., someone to talk to) of caregivers with older children. We strongly suggest that state and local policies improve their efforts in meeting service needs of vulnerable kinship families that are not in the foster care system. Replication of studies using the modified FNS with other caregivers will improve its applications and will inform practice.

Scheduled Time:
8:30 AM

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