

Predicting Social and Emotional Outcomes in Residential Care: Children's Perceptions of Adult-Child Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

Children living in residential care have histories of adverse experiences that contribute to a range of social and behavioral difficulties.

Their functioning is also influenced proximally by their relationships with the adults who work with them while in care.

Positive relationships enrich the social environment and provide children with a source of strength.

Poorer quality relationships may reinforce negative dynamics experienced in the home and impede healing and healthy development.

The influence of youth-adult relationships may differ depending on demographic and placement-related risk factors.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To what extent is the quality of children's relationship with residential care staff associated with staff's assessment of the children's functioning?

Do these associations persist even when controlling for demographic and placement-related risk factors, and do any of these covariates moderate the associations?

METHODS

Data were collected as part of a larger study described by Izzo, Smith, Sellers, Holden, & Nunno (2020). 535 children across 13 agencies in a southeastern state in the USA were identified for this study.

Agencies provided data regarding child demographics and placement-related risk factors.

Children reported on relationship quality over the past month with cottage staff using a modified Inventory of Parent & Peer Attachment (IPPA) and with the Youth Perception of Relationship Quality (YPRQ) survey (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Izzo et al., 2020).

Two to four weeks, on average, after the child's survey, two cottage staff assessed each child's social emotional functioning using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman et al., 2000). Both ratings were averaged together.

ANALYTIC APPROACH

Linear mixed models were conducted for each of the five SDQ subscales. As shown in the table below, the primary predictor was the IPPA Total Score. If the Total Score was significant, each of the three facets of relationship quality, Trust, Communication, and Alienation were run.

Because children lived together in cottages with the same staff, a random effect of Cottage was included in the model to control for and estimate the amount of between cottage variance.

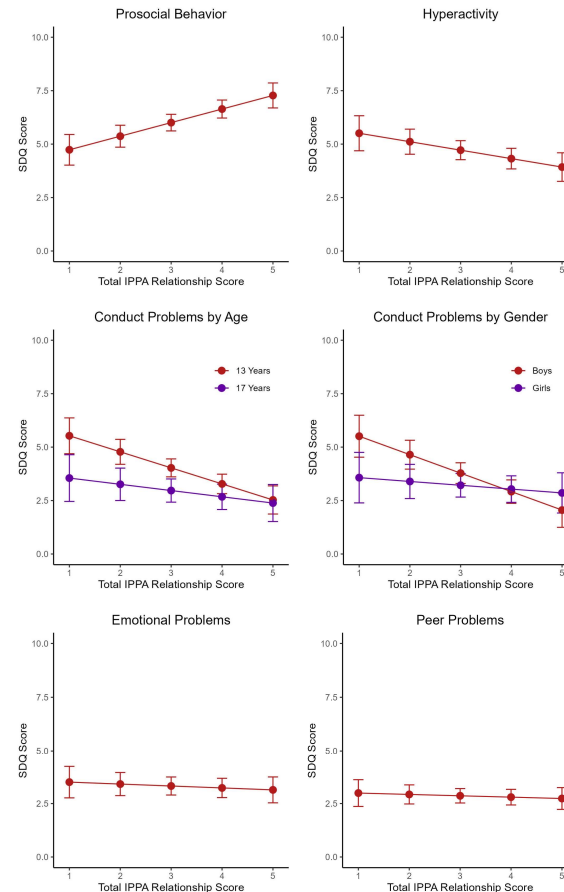
The fixed factor covariates listed in the table were included in all models regardless of statistical significance. Interactions between IPPA and each covariate were assessed individually to test for moderation effects.

RESULTS

Outcomes			
Strengths and Difficulties	N	Range	Mean (SD)
Prosocial Behavior	535	0 – 10	6.08 (2.47)
Conduct Problems	535	0 – 10	3.64 (2.79)
Emotional Problems	535	0 – 10	3.57 (2.51)
Hyperactivity	535	0 – 10	5.03 (2.89)
Peer Problems	535	0 – 10	3.16 (2.13)
Predictor			
Inventory of Parent & Peer Attachment	N	Range	Mean (SD)
IPPA Total Score	521	1 – 5	3.30 (0.89)
- Trust	515	1 – 5	3.35 (0.99)
- Communication	514	1 – 5	3.31 (0.99)
- Alienation	494	1 – 5	2.90 (0.89)
Random Factor Covariate			
Cottage or Residential Unit	130 cottages across 13 agencies over 5 years		
Fixed Factor Covariates			
Continuous	N	Range	Mean (SD)
Age (years)	535	8 – 21	14.38 (2.41)
Prior Placements (number)	436	0 – 5+	1.12 (1.32)
Length of Stay (weeks)	535	0 – 104+	26.22 (24.77)
Categorical	N	Percent	
Gender	535	55.3% Male	
Race	529	66.4% White	
Referral Source	506	56.5% Social Services	

RELATIONSHIP QUALITY → CHILD BEHAVIOR

The figures show estimated marginal means with 95% confidence intervals.



SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Children in residential care who rated their relationships with staff more highly tended to have more prosocial behavior and less hyperactivity.

Staff in residential care reported that younger children have more conduct problems than older children. However, the age difference disappeared when children's relationship quality scores were high.

Similarly, strong relationships eliminated the difference in conduct problems between boys and girls.

There was no association between children's relationship scores and staff's ratings of the children's emotional problems or peer problems.

The project-developed measure, Youth Perception of Relationship Quality (YPRQ), was highly correlated with the IPPA Total Score and showed the same pattern of results.

IMPLICATIONS

Relationship quality between children in residential care and cottage staff is an important predictor of multiple aspects of children's functioning.

As measured with the IPPA and SDQ, these findings suggest that when children perceive that they can trust adults and communicate effectively with them without feeling anger or alienation, they are more likely to be kind and considerate; less likely to fight, lie, or steal; and better able to maintain their focus and attention span.

The lack of an association between relationship quality and emotional problems may reflect the difficulty for staff of observing these problems.

Our findings parallel those reported by Silva, Calheiros, Carvalho, & Magalhães (2022) in a Portuguese sample. They also found associations between relationship quality and externalizing behavior, but not internalizing behavior.

Age and gender differences in the prevalence of conduct problems can be reduced, or even eliminated, through strong relationships with caring adults.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded primarily with generous support from The Duke Endowment, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA.

Additional support was provided by the Center for Mental Health Services/Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration under Grant #1U79SM080012-01. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.



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