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The Prediction of Successful Foster Placement

This study examines the incidence and causes of foster home breakdowns—the unplanned removal of children from foster care. Results indicate that successful placement was most highly associated with the caseworker's expenditure of energy and degree of contact and rapport building.

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SINCE THE EARLY 1960s the incidence of child abuse and neglect has been an area of growing social concern. This concern has led to the increased authority of the state over individuals in the exercise of parental rights and hence to the burgeoning of foster care.

Recently, the institution of foster care has been the object of increasing critical scrutiny. Numerous authors have drawn attention to the potential damage done to the child resulting from separation from biological parents,[1] prolonged foster placement,[2] inadequacies of the foster parents,[3] lack of permanency inherent in foster placements,[4] and the disturbingly high frequency of foster home "breakdowns."[5]

Breakdowns, the unplanned removal of children from foster care, may be the least discussed yet most pervasive and damaging condition among those listed. Virtually no base rate data are currently available on the incidence of foster placement breakdown. However, Harold Martin and Paul Beazley[6] estimated that approximately 25 percent of placed children will fail foster care due to behavior problems and will be shifted from one home to another, experiencing little sense of permanence or emotional attachment.

An awareness of the potentially negative impact of foster care has generated both academic and judicial attempts to specify the factors involved in placement decisions. The necessity of establishing reliable standards governing the removal of children from their homes has been felt most urgently in the courts. The Sims decision reached by the Texas courts[7] strongly tightened state standards governing the removal of children. While perhaps reducing the number of children placed in foster care, the court's action did little to ensure that casework decisions concerning placement will be made with any greater objectivity or reliability.

In a series of studies, researchers attempted to

1. Elizabeth Davoren, "Foster Placement of Abused Children," *Children Today* (May-June 1975): 41.

2. David Fanshel, "Status Changes of Children in Foster Care: Final Results of the Columbia University Longitudinal Study," *Child Welfare* 55 (March 1976): 143-71; David Fanshel, "Children Discharged from Foster Care in New York City: Where-to-When-at-What-Age?" *Child Welfare* 51 (September-October 1978): 467-83; and Victor Pike et al., "Permanent Planning for Children in Foster Care: A Handbook for Social Workers" (Portland, Oreg.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1977).

3. John Touliatos and Byron Lindholm, *Potential for Foster Parenthood Scale* (St. Louis, Mo.: National Foster Parent Association, 1977).

4. Joseph Goldstein, Anna Freud, and Alfred Solnit, *Beyond the Best Interests of the Child* (New York: Free Press, 1973).

5. Harold Martin and Paul Beazley, "Foster Placement: Therapy or Trauma?", in *The Abused Child*, ed., Harold Martin (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1976).

6. Ibid.

7. J. Sims v P. Jiminez, February 23, 1978. Civil action No. 76-H-665, Houston, Texas.

assess which factors were most commonly weighed in placement decisions.[8] Despite a three-year investigation that reviewed placement decisions involving over 300 families, the authors were unable to identify satisfactorily any single combination of factors that reliably led to the decision to place children in foster care.[9]

The inability of researchers to identify salient factors determining placement decisions appears to be a product of low interjudge reliability or the lack of consensus among professionals. Martin Phillips and his colleagues[10] found that judges agreed on the need for placement in less than 50 percent of the cases reviewed. Moreover, in those cases in which judges did agree, there was wide disagreement over the factors identified as determining the need for placement.

In the face of rising awareness of the potential harm incurred to a child as a result of placement, caseworkers are nonetheless required to make placement decisions daily in the absence of any reliable or objective criteria. If factors could be identified that predispose a child to failure in foster placement, perhaps both the child and the foster parents could be spared the painful and harmful consequences of such experiences. Inappropriate placement of a child does pervasive harm to the entire foster care system by creating foster parent burnout and thus reducing the quality and quantity of foster homes available.

An Investigative Study

The present study was undertaken to investigate the incidence and causes of foster placement breakdowns. It was believed that the results might lead to the identification of reliable and objective factors that caseworkers could routinely assess to (1) determine the risk of breakdown, and (2) identify factors that might potentiate placement success.

The sample for the study consisted of case

records of sixty-four children. Thirty-two of the children were male and thirty-two were female. The average age of subjects was eight years, nine months. The case records were selected from three child welfare units located in a mixed urban-rural area of a populous southwestern state.

Definition of the Criterion Variable

The dependent variable of interest was the outcome of foster placement, which was dichotomized as success or failure. Successful placement was defined as the continued maintenance of the child in the initially selected foster placement for a period of no less than sixty days. Failure was defined as removal of the child from the foster family within one and one-half years of placement due to (1) disruptive behavior by the child or (2) noncompliance by the natural parents with the established treatment plan of the child welfare unit.

Children who had to be removed from the placement after a period of eighteen months due to disruptive behavior were not considered for this study because it was believed that a breakdown after this period of time would more closely resemble the disintegration of a natural family with similar degree of psychological attachments as opposed to failure of a foster placement. Conversely, the case records of children removed from foster care placements according to the independent planning of the child welfare unit prior to sixty days were not considered for this study because it was believed that the placement was of insufficient duration to assess the adjustment of the child.

Assessment of Predictor Variables

A questionnaire consisting of sixty-three variables was developed largely from a review of the literature to assess the most pertinent variables related to foster placement outcome. These variables were grouped into four major categories:
1. Characteristics of the agency: source of referral, characteristics of the caseworker, and the contacts by the caseworker with the natural and foster families.
2. Characteristics of the natural parents and their household: type of generating problem; impulsivity of the parents; chronicity of the problem; quality of the marital relationship, parenting

8. See Martin Phillips, Michelle Haring, and Ann Shyne, *A Model for Intake Decisions in Child Welfare* (New York: Child Welfare League of America, 1972); Martin Phillips et al., *Factors Associated with Placement Decisions in Child Welfare* (New York: Child Welfare League of America, 1971); and Edward Sherman et al., *Service to Children in Their Own Homes: Its Nature and Outcome* (New York: Child Welfare League of America, 1974).

9. Phillips et al., "Factors in Placement Decisions."

10. Ibid.

skills, mental health, and intelligence.

3. Characteristics of the foster children: age of the child, physical health, personality, school behavior, school achievement, degree of emotional attachment to parents, and rapport with caseworker.

4. Characteristics of the foster parents and their household: rating of the health, flexibility, ability and motivation; quality of the marriage of the foster parents; and composition of the foster family household.

Several assessment scales developed by other investigators were incorporated in the questionnaire. Behavioral characteristics of the foster parents were assessed through the Potential for Foster Parenthood Scale (PFP).[11] Personality characteristics of the foster children were assessed through the Missouri Children's Behavior Checklist.[12] Mental health status of the natural parents was assessed through the Global Assessment Scale.[13]

Interjudge reliability for all scales employed in this investigation was established in a series of pilot studies. Only scales yielding product moment coefficients of .75 or greater were considered acceptable for inclusion. The scales incorporated from previous research and the majority of those developed by the present investigation were interval in nature. In addition, "dummy variables" were utilized to transform nominal data into scales that were acceptable for the statistical procedures utilized.[14]

Review and Analysis Procedure

Records were selected for review in which: (1) removal of the child from his or her natural home was required due to physical or sexual abuse, neglect or abandonment of the child, or parental inability to provide adequate care, (2) the minimum age of the child was three and one-half years; and (3) the case could be reliably classified as successful or failed foster placement.

11. Touliatos and Lindholm, *Foster Parenthood Scale.*

12. Jacob Sines, and David Owen, "Identification of Clinically Relevant Dimensions of Children's Behavior," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 33 (November-December 1969): 728-34.

13. Robert Spitzer, Michael Gibbon and Jean Endicott, *Global Assessment Scale* (New York: New York State Department of Mental Hygiene, 1973).

14. J. P. Guilford, *Fundamental Statistics in Psychology and Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950).

Records were reviewed in consecutive order from most current to least current. In instances when a child had been removed from the natural home on more than one occasion, the first such placement was selected for review. Cases considered to have insufficient data (those from which it was impossible to code a majority of variables from any one of the four major categories of data) were excluded from this study.

In phase one of the data analysis, an intercorrelation matrix of all the dependent variables was generated. Following removal of variables without predictive utility, the data were subjected to a step-wise multiple regression analysis with the cut-off point designated by the .05 level of significance for the incremental contribution of each variable.

Results of the Investigation

Incidence of Foster Placement Breakdown

Of the sixty-four consecutive case records examined, 48.5 percent of the children were withdrawn from the foster home prior to the completion of the agency plan. In each of the thirty-one cases which resulted in a placement breakdown, the cause for removal was actual or reported disruptive behavior of the foster child and not interference by the natural parents. Where breakdowns occurred, they occurred in most cases within the first four weeks of placement.

Variables Significantly Associated With Successful Foster Placement

Eleven of the sixty-three variables assessed were found to be significantly associated with outcome of the foster placement decision. These eleven variables, their respective coefficients of correlation, and level of significance are listed in table 1 (see page 14).

As evident from table 1, the degree of contact, rapport building, and energy expended by the caseworker was most strongly associated with placement success. No other variable came close to accounting for as large a share of the variance. Four variables related to the foster parents were also significantly associated with placement outcome. Three of the four were derived from the PFP Scale, which was completed by the caseworker. However, the remaining variable, the degree of overall rapport between the foster parents and the agency, proved at least

TABLE 1. Variables Significantly Associated With Successful Foster Placement

Variable	Corre-lation
With respect to the caseworker:	
Contact rapport building, and energy expended by caseworker with the foster parents	.61**
With respect to the foster parents:	
Overall rapport between the foster parents and agency	.37**
Competent foster parents (total score on the PFPS)	.32**
Highly motivated foster mother	.31*
Opportunities for intellectual development provided by the foster parents	.30*
With respect to the child:	
Good school conduct—appropriate classroom behavior and response to teacher's discipline, independent of achievement	.34**
Socialization reflected by the child's empathy, sensitivity, maturity, and development of conscience	.30*
The relative absence of aggressive behavior	.27*
Normal attachment manifest in separation behavior of the child toward his or her natural parents characterized by transient anxiety and depressive signs	.30*
Rapport between foster child and caseworker as manifest in self-disclosure and emotional and verbal spontaneity in meetings	.27*
Acute (not chronic) family problems precipitating child's removal from his or her natural home	.26*

Level of significance:
* = < .05
** = < .01

equally important as the foster parents' skills and motivation in determining outcome.

Characteristics of the child were also important in determining outcome. Not surprisingly, the less aggressive, better socialized child who demonstrated positive attachment toward parents, caseworkers, and teachers had the greatest likelihood of remaining in the assigned placement. Only one variable related to the household of the natural parents, chronicity, was related to outcome. Children experiencing chronically abusive or neglectful parenting had a lower likelihood of remaining in the assigned placement.

In light of the magnitude of the relationship between the energy of the caseworker and the outcome of a placement, the data were reviewed to discover possible relationships between the energy of the caseworker and other predictor variables. Among the sixty-three predictor variables surveyed, none was significantly associated at the .01 level. Two variables that were related at the .05 level were chronicity and source of referral. Caseworkers tended to invest more energy on cases referred from other agencies and invested less energy on behalf of children who had experienced chronically neglectful or abusive parenting.

Prediction of Successful Placement

In order to generate a predictive equation which would have clinical utility for the caseworker having to make placement decisions, the variable reflecting caseworker energy as well as four other variables related to caseworker's actions following placement were discarded. A step-wise multiple regression analysis was then performed, involving the remaining variables to identify the best combination of variables with which to predict placement outcome. These results are displayed in table 2.

TABLE 2. Multiple Regression Analyses Excluding Post-Placement Caseworker Related Variables

Variable	Simple R	Mul-tiple R	R Square	F
Overall rapport of foster parent with agency	−.37	.37	.14	10.06
Child's school conduct	.34	.48	.23	9.34
Chronicity of problem requiring placement	.26	.53	.29	8.19

As viewed in table 2, the multiple regression analysis generated three predictor variables with a combined correlation of .53 with the criterion variable, outcome of placement, thus accounting for approximately 30 percent of its variance.

In the present study, each of these variables

were rated on separate four-point scales in the following manner:

Chronicity of the problem: Where 1 indicates that parents have manifested presenting or related problem for more than 75 percent of the time they have been parents, 2 indicates that they have manifested problem 50 percent to 75 percent of the time, 3 indicates they have manifested the problem 25 percent to 50 percent of the time, 4 indicates they have manifested the problem less than 25 percent of the time.

School behavior: An evaluation of the child's grades in conduct areas, his or her classroom behavior and responsiveness to the teacher's discipline, where 1 indicates very poor, 2 below average, 3 above average, and 4 excellent.

Foster parents' rapport with the agency: An assessment of the level of rapport between the foster parents and the agency as a whole in which consideration is given to the degree of the foster parents' cooperation with the agency. One indicates excellent, 2 above average, 3 below average, and 4 very poor.

When the scores for each of the individual cases are incorporated into the weighted regression equation: $.008 + (-.20)$ (rapport rating) $+ (.23)$ (school conduct rating) $+ (.125)$ (chronicity), a predictive index is generated. When the multiple regression formula was employed to generate a predictive index for each of the sixty-four cases in the present sample, the distribution represented in table 3 was obtained.

TABLE 3. Distribution of Outcome as a Function of Predictive Index

		Actual Outcome	
		Success	Failure
Individual	.67–1.00	12	2
Predictive	.34– .66	18	13
Index	0– .33	3	16

On the basis of the distribution observed in table 3, it may be seen that a prediction could be made for over one-half the sample (excluding those achieving scores in the midrange between .34 and .66) that would be accurate in 85 percent of the cases (28/33). This degree of predictive accuracy is clearly superior to that achievable by merely relying on the base rate of placement success (51.5 percent) in the present study ($z = 3.43$, p .0001).

Significant Findings

Results of the investigation suggest that Martin and Beazley's estimate of 25 percent rate of foster placement breakdown[15] may have been too conservative. In the present sample, nearly one-half of all children placed in care had to be removed from the assigned home, for the overwhelming majority, within four weeks after placement. This finding documents the magnitude of the problem of foster home breakdown and reaffirms the need for caseworkers to act with utmost caution in placing children. The act of separating the child from his or her parents could be only the first in a series of painful separations the child will face.

Influence of the Caseworker

At the same time, the results strongly suggest that the degree of contact, active rapport building, and energy expended by the caseworker may be the single most critical variable in determining the outcome of a foster placement. Successful foster placement appeared to depend more on the actions of the protective service worker than on the family problem which precipitated placement, characteristics of the foster child, or characteristics of the foster parents. Moreover, the present findings suggest that the energy expended by the caseworker with the foster parents occurred largely independent of these other potentially related factors. Among the sixty-three potential predictors surveyed, only two were found to be significantly associated with the caseworker's behavior. The absence of significant relationships between this factor and others suggest that individual caseworkers responded very differently to situational factors (precipitating complaint and characteristics of the foster child and foster parents). Some caseworkers may have spent more time with foster parents with whom they shared good rapport or had "easy foster children," while other caseworkers may have devoted more attention to their more difficult cases. The scarcity of significant correlations with this factor may also have been a result of variability in tolerance by the different foster parents of the behavior of the foster children; some foster parents tended to

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15. Martin and Beazley, "Foster Placement."

handle behavior problems of the foster children silently, while others contacted caseworkers for minor behavioral disturbances.

Two factors that appeared to influence most caseworkers were chronicity of the problem requiring the foster placement and source of referral. Caseworkers tended to invest less energy on behalf of children experiencing chronically neglectful or abusive parenting and more energy on cases referred from other agencies. Perhaps families with chronic problems requiring repeated interventions lead caseworkers to adopt a more passive-withdrawn attitude to avoid experiencing overwhelming frustration.

Foster Parent-Agency Rapport

Among variables having potential predictive significance, the foster parents' rapport with the agency was most highly associated with successful placement. Foster parents who had a high level of rapport with the agency generally obtained a high score on the PFP Scale, which, in turn, increased the probability of their providing a successful foster placement. These findings support the need for a thorough assessment of potential foster parents and the importance of selection of highly competent, emotionally healthy foster parents.

Surprisingly, the simple four-point scale used to assess the foster parents' rapport with the agency was as highly related to placement outcome as the fifty-four item PFP Scale. However, the current results suggest that the quality of the foster parents' marriage and their motivation and ability as foster parents, as assessed by the PFP Scale, significantly contribute to successful placement of the child. Furthermore, it is likely that the competency of the foster parents contributed substantially to the sense of rapport experienced by the caseworker.

In examining other variables significantly related to the foster parents' rapport with the agency, it was observed that foster parents with good rapport with the agency tended to have more children placed with them, particularly more preschool children. These findings suggest the tendency to over-use good foster homes. This conclusion has obvious implications in that better foster homes may consequently experience rapid burnout. This would significantly reduce the overall quality of foster homes available over time.

Behavior of the Child

Behavioral characteristics of the foster child also contributed to determining successful foster placement. The more aggressive and poorly socialized child was more likely to fail foster placement. Since the current literature suggests that aggressive children rather than inhibited children are more likely to be placed in foster care and that the aggressive children are the ones who are also most likely to fail foster placements, the development of some therapeutic alternatives for working with this population seems indicated. One possibility is increased use of "satellite foster homes" that are staffed by professional parent surrogates who, in addition, have twenty-four hour access to mental health professionals.

Predicting Placements

In addition to delineating those factors perhaps causally related to the outcome of placements, it was hoped that the present results might have practical predictive significance. Use of the regression formula for individual cases would appear to provide a caseworker with a significant capacity to predict the probability of the placement's success. Despite the apparent impressiveness of the current data, workers need be cautioned against applying the current findings without consideration of other factors or with expectations of obtaining an identical rate of predictive accuracy. First, the present study represents a pioneer effort in the area of predicting the outcome of foster placements by statistical means. Procedures of this kind commonly require cross-validation (demonstrations of utility with an independent population) to ensure the validity of the prediction equation. Secondly, attempts to use this formula for populations with characteristics dissimilar from those of the one assessed in this study will undoubtedly lead to a shrinkage in the rate of predictive accuracy. The present population contained a high percentage of youngsters withdrawn from their homes due to abandonment and, secondarily, sexual abuse. It is possible that a caseload or population dominated by physical abuse referrals would require an assessment of a different combination of factors to aid in prediction. Thirdly, in the present population, 51.5 percent of the children were successfully maintained in their initial place-

ment. In another population where the base rate for success is lower, the rate of accurate prediction using the present formula would also be expected to decrease. Conversely, in a population where the base rate approached 80 percent success, the present formula would be of little value. Within the scope of these limitations, the judicious use of this formula in conjunction with an application of those variables observed to be significant through this research, and good clinical judgment, should together prove beneficial to the interested caseworker in making appropri-ate placement decisions.

Finally, while the present results have clearly demonstrated the importance of the foster parents in maintaining a foster child in placement, they do not imply that the caseworker needs little contact with the natural parents. These findings must be interpreted in the context of the goal of the present study—the maintenance of a child in foster care. Casework undertaken to insure the rapid integration of the child into his or her family of origin obviously requires that major attention is given to the natural parents.