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Outcomes for permanence and stability for children in long-term care in Ireland

Nora Roarty, John Leinster, Professor Caroline McGregor, Dr Carmel Devaney and Dr Lisa Moran

Synopsis of article

This article is based on research about children in long-term care. It focuses on the factors that help and hinder a child being and feeling stable in their foster home and having a sense of permanence. The research was carried out with children in care in Galway and Donegal between 2008 and 2013. It was proposed by Tusla – Child and Family Agency and carried out by the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUI Galway) UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC).

The main factors that were found to influence permanence and stability were relationships, communication, support and continuity. The research shows that it is not only the connection between the child and the foster family or parent that matters. Instead, the whole system surrounding the child must also be taken into account. A model was developed from the research which showed that children in care often have a more complicated system than other children, as it includes both the family of origin and the foster family. This research has been used to inform and improve practice in the children-in-care teams in Galway and Donegal. In particular, this article outlines resources available to foster families in terms of training, services and support.

Introduction

There are presently over 6,000 children in care in Ireland. Most of them (more than 92 per cent) are in foster care and the majority have an allocated social worker (Tusla – Child and Family Agency, 2017a). Tusla – Child and Family Agency launched its Alternative Care Strategy (Tusla – Child and Family Agency, 2017b) at the Irish Foster Care Association conference in October 2017. As part of its approach to placing children in care, the agency is committed to the principle that the family affords the best environment for raising children and the objective of external intervention should be to support families within the community. One of the priorities of the agency is to provide safer, more reliable and effective services for children in care and to develop a range of placement options for children with additional needs.
The intention behind the research was to have more Irish-based evidence available to back up decisions and recommendations for children in care in Ireland. There was a desire to collect first-hand stories and accounts of what parents, foster parents and children felt was important, in addition to existing literature and statistics. The intention of the research was to learn from it and apply it to ongoing practice and policy developments in Galway and Donegal. There was also a hope that the findings would influence policy and practice at national level.

The objectives of the research were:

1. To produce a comprehensive review of literature on outcomes for permanence and children in care, as an information source for social work practitioners (Moran et al., 2016a, 2016b).

2. To complete a qualitative study (exploratory study conducted through interviews, focus groups, and so on) of young people’s care ‘journeys’, how they interpret permanence and stability, and factors that affect better outcomes (27 participants).

3. To create a comprehensive picture of factors that influence permanence and stability, using quantitative data (information shown in numbers) collected by Tusla – Child and Family Agency social workers from case files.

4. To develop recommendations and guidance for social work practitioners on improving ways of working with children and families, based on the research findings. Practice guidance was developed in 2017, along with the research report (Moran et al., 2017a; 2017b).

**Literature summary**

Permanence is a practical reality, as well as a feeling of security and stability. It is important that children and young people experience stability in care. The factors that lead to a child being and feeling stable and secure in their foster home can be divided into ‘internal’ and ‘external’ factors.

**Internal factors**

- Mental health
- Behavioural and emotional development
- Age at entry to care
- Confidence and self-identity
• School experiences
• Prior experiences of trauma, abuse, and neglect.

**External factors**
• Number of placement moves
• Stability of the family structure
• Foster carer’s ability to cope
• Foster carer’s health and economic resources
• The quality of social and services supports
• Differing expectations between the foster family and the foster child
• Relationships with families of origin
• Relationships with social workers (Moran et al., 2016a; 2016b).

A lot of evidence was found to suggest that a child’s age at entry into care made a big impact – younger children were more likely to achieve long-term permanence and stability than children placed as teenagers, for example. However, overall, it is in fact very difficult to predict if a placement is going to be stable and permanent as many factors affect each individual case. When reviewing the literature, we found that sometimes there was too much emphasis on the negative, individual factors and not enough on the positive, protective factors. This was also highlighted by children-in-care teams when they reviewed the findings of the literature review. We also found that there was great value in thinking about the issues not just in terms of the individual child/family but from a wider system viewpoint. This means that we take into account what Bronfenbrenner (1979) called the ‘ecological system’.

The ecological system includes:

• The microsystem (the child’s inner world and very close family)
• The mesosystem (the child’s wider family and close network)
• The exosystem (the child and family’s wider community)
• The macrosystem (wider policy and procedures like care planning).

Another layer – the chronosystem – was added by Bronfenbrenner in his later work (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). This refers to the fact that systems change all of the time and you have to be aware of the impact of such changes on people over time. As
shown in Figure 1, for this research the model was adapted to take account of the fact that children in long-term care often have not one, but two micro systems in their ecological systems that overlap (their foster family, and their family of origin).

The research was carried out in partnership between researchers from NUI Galway, principal social workers from the children-in-care teams in Donegal and Galway, and administrative managers in both counties. It involved a detailed literature review to begin with, as summarised above. It also involved the collection of some statistical data about children’s specific care plans and placements. However, very few people agreed to give us consent to review their files for this information, which is their right under data protection legislation. This meant that we were not able to provide any statistical findings as we had planned to do.

The main part of the research focused on the views and experiences of young people in care and their foster families and families of origin. 27 interviews in total were carried out.

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system

**Methodology**

The research was carried out in partnership between researchers from NUI Galway, principal social workers from the children-in-care teams in Donegal and Galway, and administrative managers in both counties. It involved a detailed literature review to begin with, as summarised above. It also involved the collection of some statistical data about children’s specific care plans and placements. However, very few people agreed to give us consent to review their files for this information, which is their right under data protection legislation. This meant that we were not able to provide any statistical findings as we had planned to do.

The main part of the research focused on the views and experiences of young people in care and their foster families and families of origin. 27 interviews in total were carried out.
which included foster parents (13), children and young people (10), and parents of origin (4). A Biographical Narrative Interpretative Method was used (BNIM). This approach means that the person being interviewed decides what is important to tell. We did not have any pre-set questions about stability or permanence. We just asked children, young people, foster parents and parents of origin to talk to us about this issue, focusing on what was important to them. As shown below, this has produced some really important accounts of being in care, supporting children in care, and having a child in care. The ‘narratives’ tell stories that are both happy and sad, upsetting and reassuring. Sometimes they are positive about services and sometimes they are negative.

The following section gives some quotes from the research with a focus first on what foster parents said. Then it gives some examples of the four main themes of the research: relationships, communication, support and continuity. All of the findings can be read in detail in the research report available online (Moran et al., 2017a).

**Main findings of the research**

Foster carers wanted to make a difference in the lives of children and this influenced their decisions to foster. However, all foster carers said they were unprepared for the everyday realities of fostering. Some felt unable to cope when children presented with complex physical and intellectual disabilities, or complex family histories (Moran et al., 2017a). For example, in relation to the emotional impact of fostering, the following views were expressed:

> It's important that they (social workers) know about the impacts on foster carers, like placement breakdowns. It has serious effects on the children, the foster child and my own children.

> I couldn't get up after they left because I thought, “Is it me? Is it my fault?” But you must go on, you know. I could have stayed in bed and then I thought, “I have to look after the other kids and go on”.

In relation to the idea of permanence and stability, all foster carers took their caring role very seriously. The following quotes are illustrative:

> Care is what it’s all about [...] I will do my best for them every day to give them a loving home.

> It’s about showing that you care from when they are children. If the foundation isn’t
there, then it isn’t going to appear in later life.

Regarding their relationships with their foster children, foster carers felt that feeling part of the family led to more stable placements. This feeling was important for improving educational and social outcomes for children:

She’s part of the family... she’s a character. She’s my daughter and I love her. They think of her as a sibling, oh they do, yes.

Regarding their relationships with social workers, most foster carers expressed very positive attitudes. However, some foster carers commented that children did not always have access to an allocated social worker. Lack of information from social workers about children’s previous circumstances emerged prominently in foster carer interviews. Training also emerged as an area which could be improved. The need for more training on the reality of foster caring was emphasised.

Regarding service provision, there were mixed views among foster carers about the quality of service provided to them by Tusla – Child and Family Agency.

The social worker has brilliant ideas and it doesn’t cost the earth to put them into practice. She’s very proactive on services that we get.

When I would ask for help, I was told. “Oh, well, there’s a waiting list. Oh well we don’t have the resources.”

It’s very process-orientated and systems-orientated. But when he needs someone out of hours and I’m told, “sorry, this is a 40-hour service”, what can you say?

Relationships, communication, service support and continuity

Moving on to look more generally at the research findings, as mentioned earlier in this article, three main factors emerged: relationship, communication and service support. Underpinning all of this was continuity. The following is a selection of some of the comments in relation to these. For a more in-depth understanding, we recommend that you review the full research findings report, and in particular the individual chapters on the findings relating to parents, children/young people and foster parents in Moran et al. (2017a), and a summary of findings in Moran et al. (2017b).

On communication, some positive comments included:

I think the fact that he understood me. He was very kind and really took the time to get
to know me. That made the difference. (Parent of origin)

That’s what I found with my social worker. He would come in and be all “how was your day today?” “have you any plans?” [...] made you feel you were a normal person. (Aftercare service user)

The social worker is so easy to talk to. (Foster carer)

We absolutely love the social worker! (Young person)

On the other hand, sometimes communication had been difficult leading to very negative consequences:

I find it difficult to trust people in general so meeting people like social workers and everything is quite hard. (Parent of origin)

My social worker told my mother stuff and my mother went mental... I would never, ever trust them. (Aftercare service user)

I found the first social worker very difficult but I like the new one. (Young person)

Regarding relationships, positive comments included:

She works hard to keep the contact going, the social worker. It might be only a letter here and there but you feel better. (Parent of origin, as quoted previously)

Because I knew the social worker for so long, that was the main thing why I could talk to her. (Aftercare service user)

Critical comments also emerged:

I feel like a ghost. Like nothing. (Parent of origin)

There’s an aura around social workers because they have so much power. (Parent of origin)

With regard to service support, positive comments included:

Any improvements? I don’t think so. If they are all like her, then it’s all good... I went looking for money last year for something and I got it. (Aftercare service user)

Again, others were more critical:

I feel unable to cope sometimes... It gets hard. I have no support. (Parent of origin)

Or mixed in their views:
They’re brilliant, the social workers but they are kind of killing it. Too much emphasis on procedure and not on the needs of the child. (Foster carer)

With regard to the underpinning theme of continuity, the challenge of the dual identity referred to earlier is significant:

_I did feel torn between them… like who to choose, who do I call Mammy?_ (Young person)

There are many more interesting findings that emerged from the research (see Moran et al., 2017) that are worthy of more detailed exploration. For example, even though we were not planning to look at power and power relations in foster care and their impact on stability and permanence, it came up a lot! Here are some examples of what people said about social work and power:

_I don’t trust them. They have the power._ (Young person)

_There’s an aura around social workers because they have so much power._ (Parent of origin, as quoted previously)

_There is a power thing for sure… And I see it in letters, e-mails, phone calls, the lot but I call it like it is._ (Foster carer)

_There are good and bad social workers. Power is a factor in how we communicate with them._ (Foster carer)

And more generally about power relations from a young person’s perspective:

_You don’t know who you are or sometimes why you’re there, or why you’re in the stranger’s house or if you’ll be going home. Someone else makes the decisions for you._ (Young person)

Power in this context is not always negative:

_She is one of the best really. I’d say they’re all like that but if I had any questions around anything like money or anything like that… she would know all that._ (Young person)

_She works hard to keep the contact going, the social worker. It might be only a letter here and there but it makes you feel better._ (Parent of origin, as quoted previously)

And finally, some advice for social workers from a young person’s perspective:

_Instead of coming in and going, “right – I’m here about such and such and I was sent..._
from this board to talk about this” and you’re sitting going, “Jesus will you shut up”. You know? It’s hard because at the end of the day you are a child, so there’s no reason to be so formal with you. They need to break it down to a level that you understand. If they’re going to be working with kids, then you need to work on their level. Which I found sometimes they didn’t do.

**Discussion of findings**

These findings were used to develop practice guidance which is available on the Tusla – Child and Family Agency and UCFRC website (Moran et al., 2017b). A range of tips is provided in the practice guidance for working with parents, young people and foster parents. General guidance is also provided.

The research findings are being used within the children-in-care teams to guide practice development. For example, the practice guidance has helped in the preparation of reports presented to the courts where it is recommended that the child is placed in long-term care. It also helps the social worker to present a coherent argument for the speedy resolution of cases where Interim Care Orders are being repeatedly granted, thus delaying a stable and permanent resolution of care for the child. As the research was carried out in Ireland and has been recently published it has an added validity in the Irish context.

“One of the main messages from the research is the importance of training for foster carers about the realities of foster care, to provide insight into the many factors that affect whether a placement will be stable and secure.”

**Recommendations**

Based on the research findings and interactions with colleagues including students, practitioners and foster carers (so far), we make the following recommendations:

- Use and share the research findings and the outputs from the research with different audiences, including practitioners, foster carers, students and researchers.
- Develop foster carer training and support based on the findings. For example, there is much learning from the research findings which can be applied to the training for preparation of foster carers. One of the striking features of the research was the
highlighting by foster carers of a lack of adequate preparation for fostering.

- Consider individual support and advocacy for the parent of origin, for example, in partnership with a voluntary organisation.
- Encourage further studies that go into greater detail about important themes arising in the research.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the research has offered support to children and families, and great learning for everyone involved in foster care. One of the main messages from the research is the importance of training for foster carers about the realities of foster care, to provide insight into the many factors that affect whether a placement will be stable and secure. While it is open for debate how receptive prospective foster carers are to actually hearing some of the hard-to-hear realities of fostering, it is evident that the current training does not equip foster carers adequately. More input from experienced foster carers would allow both the joys and real challenges of fostering to be more clearly represented and understood. It has been of great value to hear from foster carers, children and young people, and their families of origin, such as those who spoke to us in this research, about what helps and what hinders a feeling of stability and permanence in situations of long-term care.

**Organisations:** Tusla – Child and Family Agency Galway, Tusla – Child and Family Agency Donegal and UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway.

**About the authors**

Nora has worked in social work since 2000. She took up the post of principal social worker for Alternative Care in 2012. In her current role as a principal social worker on the children-in-care team in Donegal, Nora has a keen interest in the provision of holistic support to children in alternative care which includes training and support for foster carers and service provision to care leavers.

John qualified as a social worker in 1986 and has been a principal social worker since 2001. In his present role, he is a principal social worker on the Children in Care team in Galway and is interested in developing the links between social work education and practice.
Caroline is professor at the School of Political Science and Sociology at the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) with lead responsibility for the discipline of social work. She is also a senior research fellow at the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre. Her current project work is focused on outcomes for young people leaving care, public awareness of child protection and welfare, family support services, and policy and the interface between child protection and family support practices in child welfare.

Carmel is a lecturer and course director of the Master degree in Family Support Studies in the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, School of Political Science and Sociology. In recent years, Carmel has been lead researcher on a number of projects for Tusla – Child and Family Agency, and has designed and delivered a number of family support training initiatives for managers and practitioners.

Lisa was the lead researcher on the Outcomes for Permanence and Stability for Children in Care study. Her PhD on environmental policy implementation and rural knowledge in Connemara, completed at the School of Political Science and Sociology (2004-2010), received prestigious IRCHSS funding and she was also the recipient of a postgraduate scholarship from the Faculty of Arts, NUI Galway, in 2005. Since her PhD, Lisa has worked extensively in research; in policy and programme evaluation particularly in child and youth studies.

References


