

2011

Impact of Psychotherapy for Foster Children: A Repeated Measures Analysis

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Recommended Citation

Reich, Emily; Borca, Kimberlin; Clausen, June Madsen; and Foster Care Research Group, "Impact of Psychotherapy for Foster Children: A Repeated Measures Analysis" (2011). *Psychology*. 15.

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BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

- Children who are abused, removed from home, and placed in foster care are multiply traumatized and frequently demonstrate significant psychological, behavioral, and social problems.
- Psychotherapy with vulnerable foster youth is complicated by the challenges of multiple placements, social worker turnover, transportation difficulties, and the child's reluctance to attach to another adult.
- Our previous work comparing symptoms at start and midpoint of treatment found that a relationship with a therapist leads to reductions of many symptoms experienced by foster children.
- This study evaluates the cumulative effectiveness of completed mental health treatment for seven foster children enrolled in a nationwide program which provides pro bono relationship-based psychotherapy to children in foster care.

METHODS

Participants

- 7 therapists from two different counties in the state of California providing long-term psychotherapy to one foster child.
- Mean therapist age= 55.54 years (range= 43.37 to 63.63 years, SD = 8.54 years)
- 71.4% female
- 100% Caucasian
- Clinical experience 3-20 years (M= 8.29 years; SD = 5.77 years)
- 71% Psychologists
- 29% Marriage and Family Therapist

METHODS

Procedure

- Telephone interviews with therapists were conducted at the start of treatment, two years into treatment, three years into treatment, and at the conclusion of treatment.
- The average length of treatment was 3.90 years (SD = 1.02).

Measures

Semi-structured telephone interviews about patient demographics, treatment parameters, primary targets of treatment, and the nature of treatment intervention

Analysis

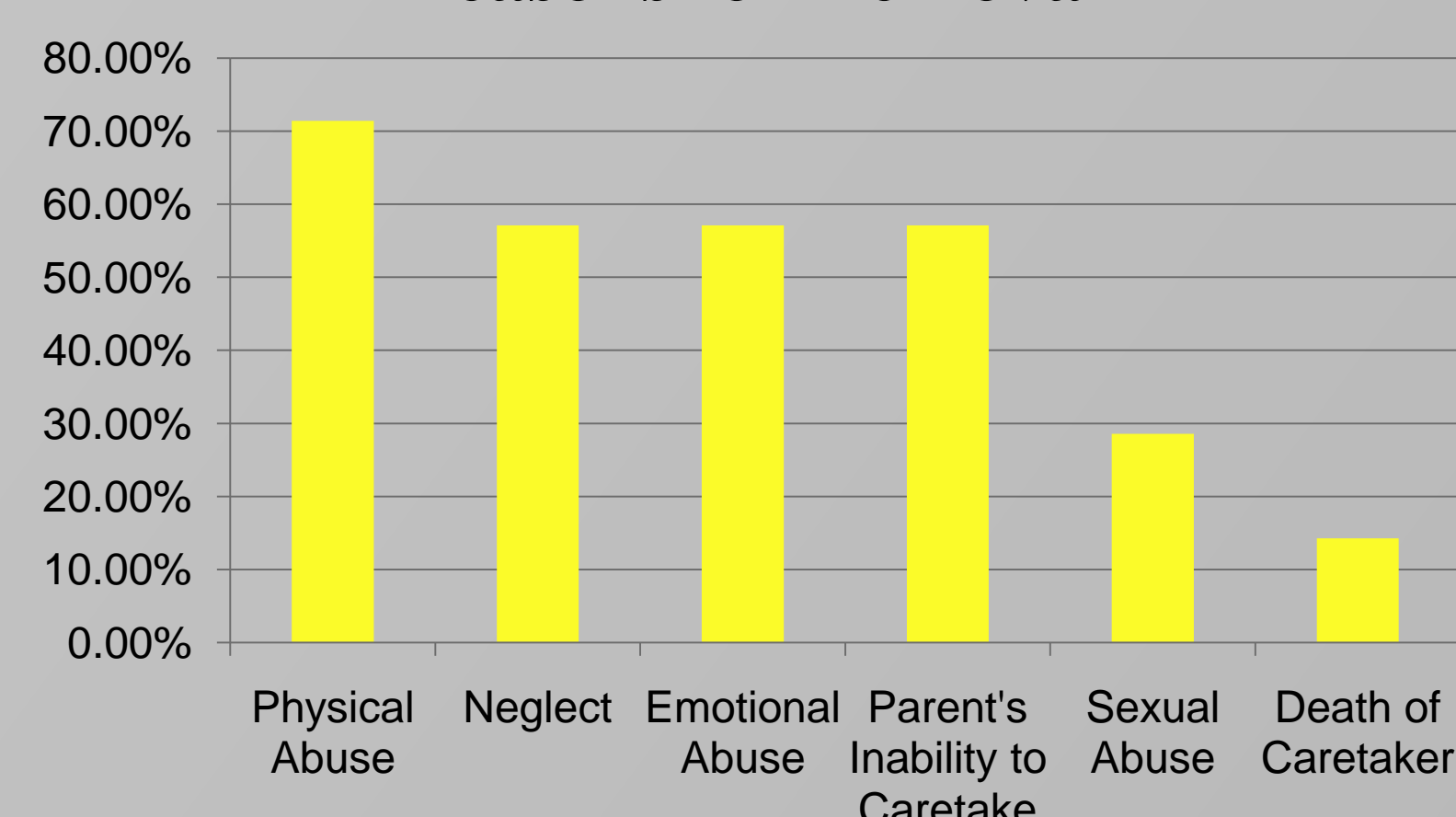
Repeated measures t-tests were conducted on therapist ratings of 22 mental health symptoms and on reports of overall patient progress across three time points (2 years, 3 years, and end of treatment).

RESULTS

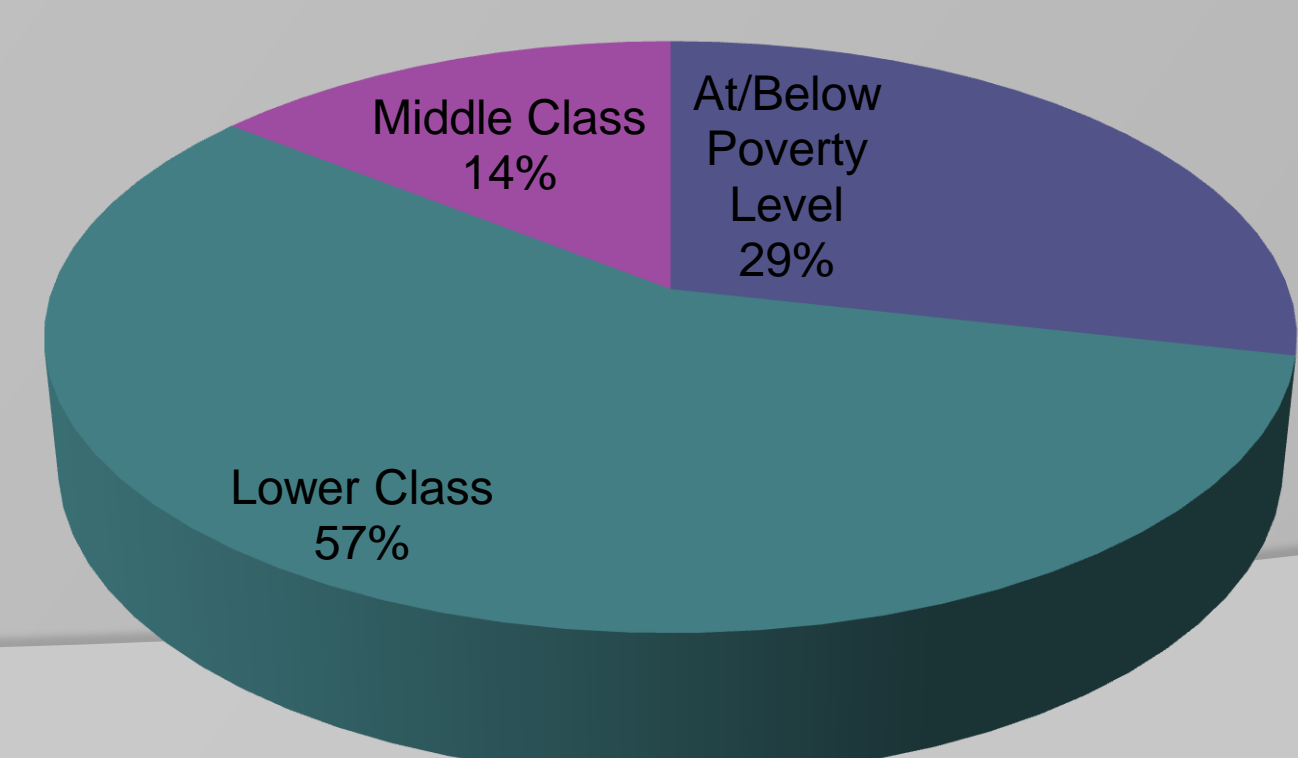
Patient Demographics

- School-aged (M = 7.30 years; SD = 3.93 years)
- 71.4% male
- 57% Multiple Ethnicities
- 43% African American

Reasons for Removal



SES of Family of Origin

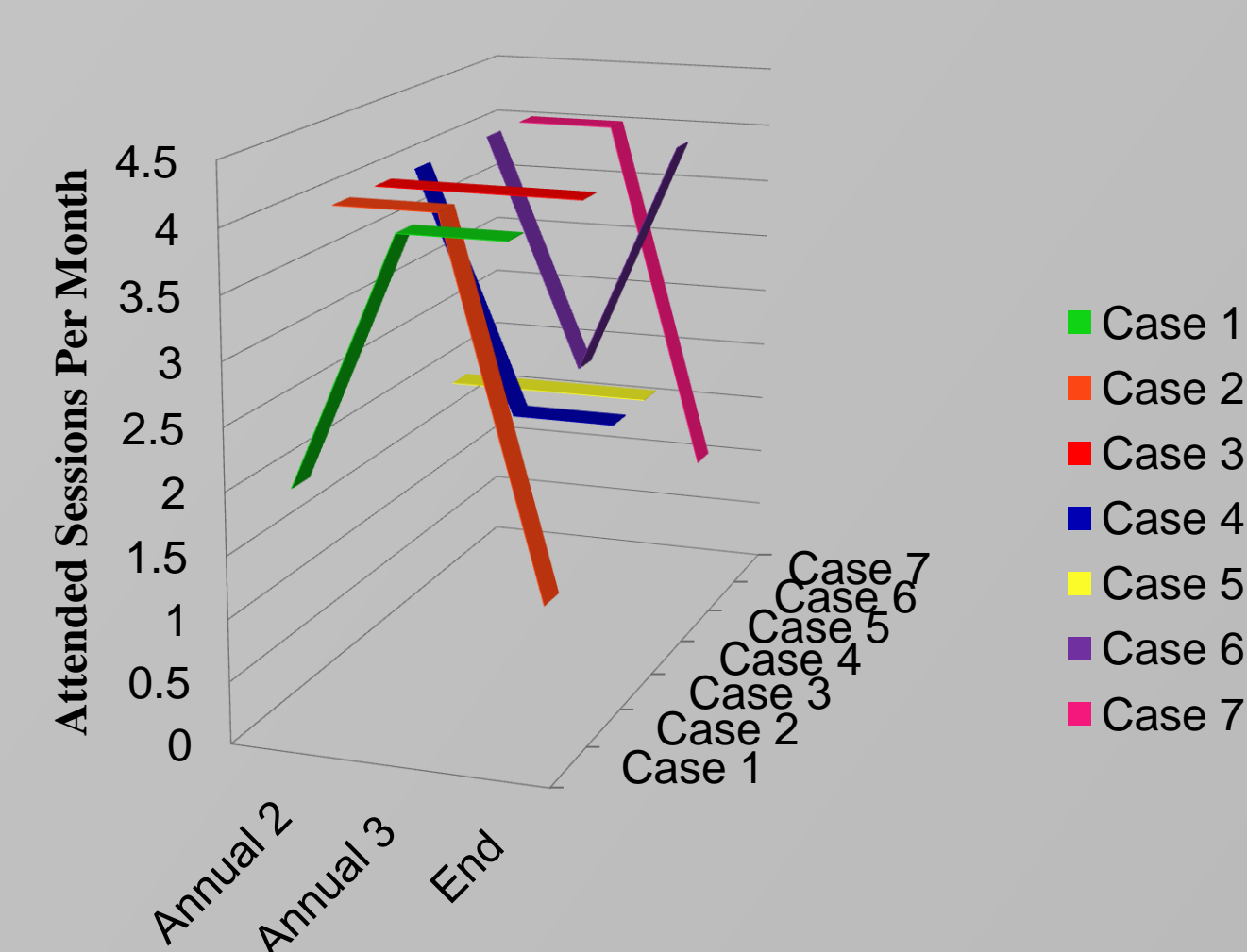


RESULTS

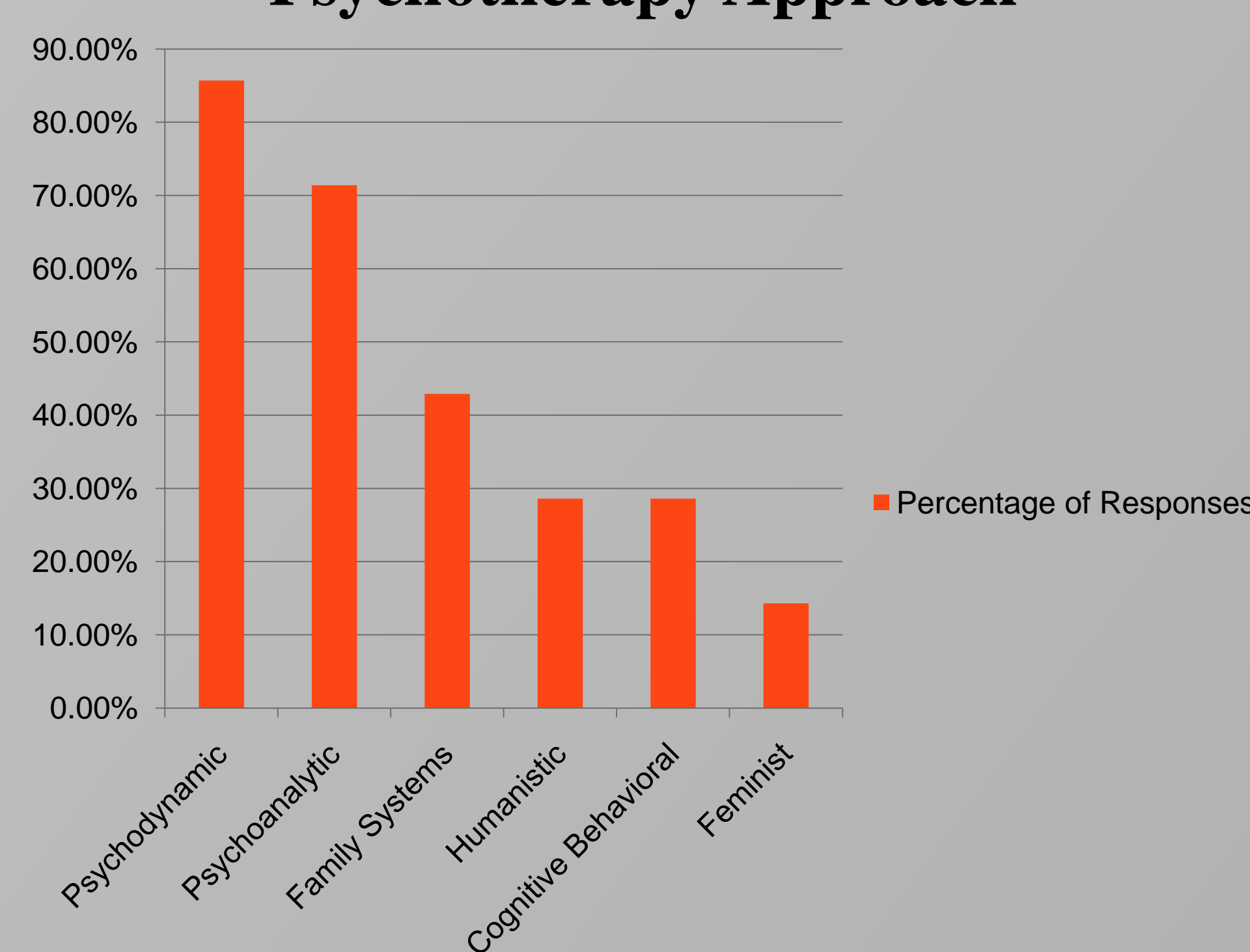
Parameters of Treatment

Therapy was most frequently conducted once every week or every two weeks.

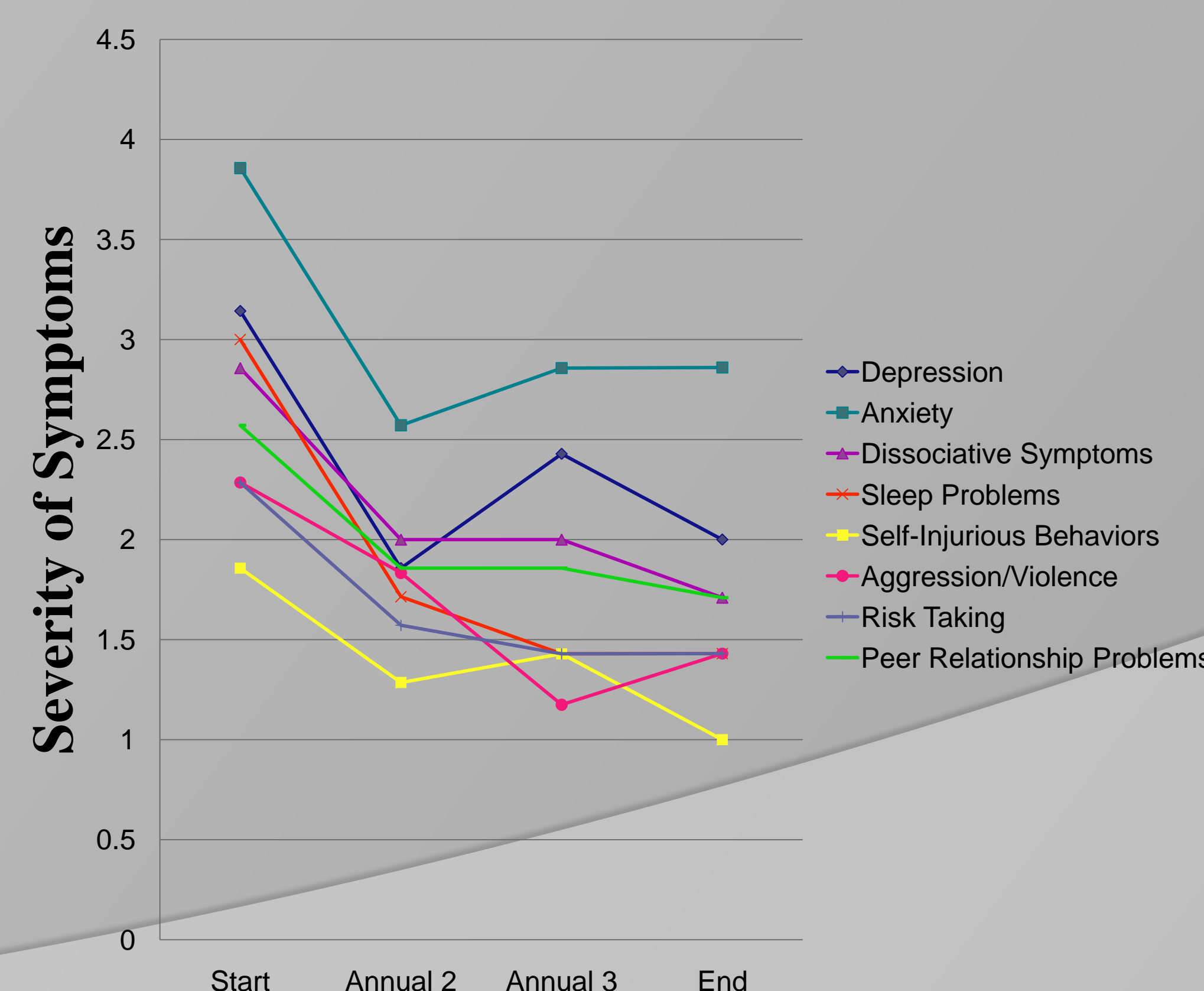
Frequency of Attendance Over the Course of Treatment



Therapist Report of Psychotherapy Approach

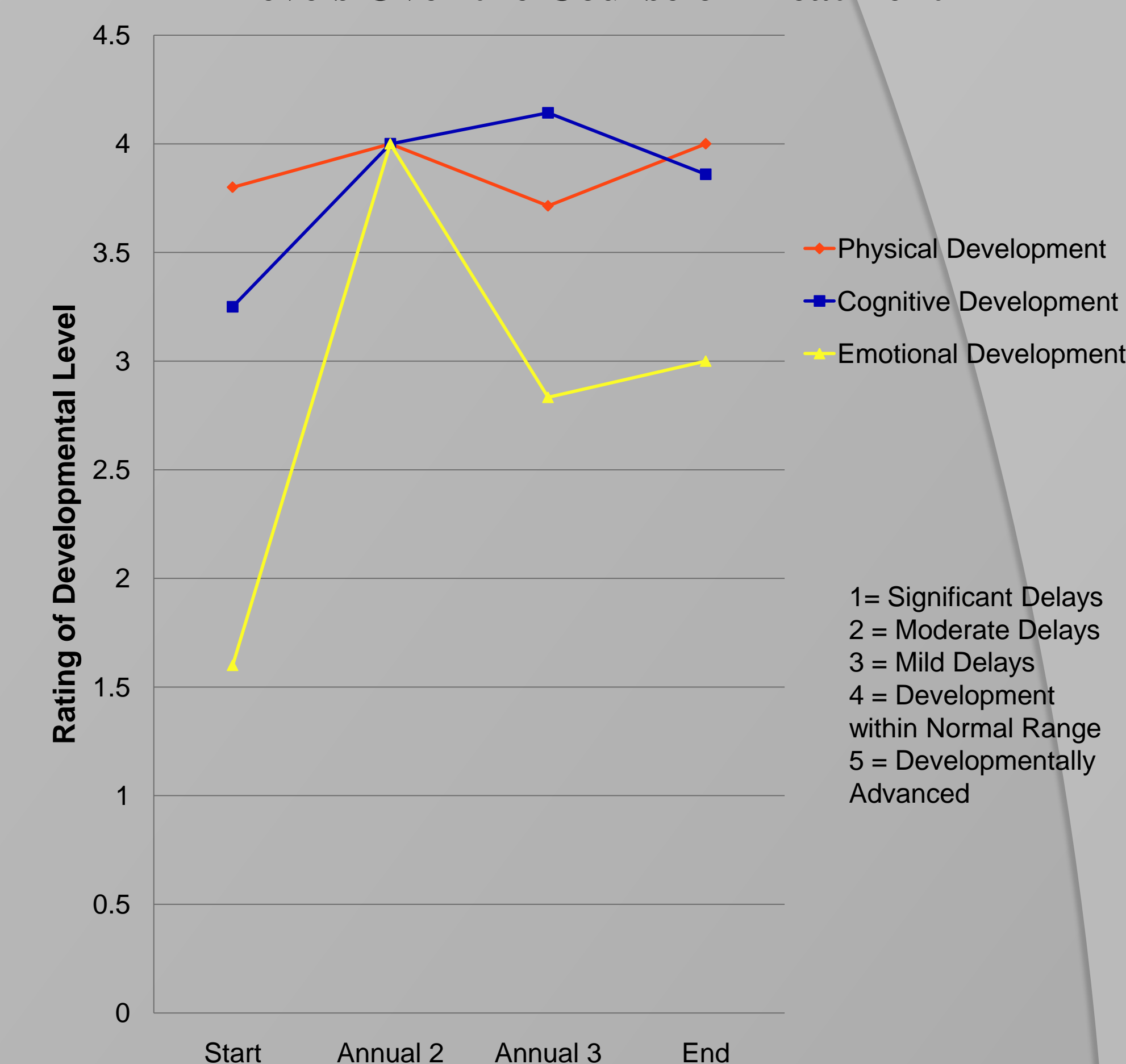


Symptom Improvement Over the Course of Treatment



RESULTS

Therapist Report of Patient Developmental Levels Over the Course of Treatment



DISCUSSION

- This sample of school-aged foster children who were removed from home for reasons of abuse, neglect, and/or parents' inability to caretake were in long-term weekly psychotherapy.
- Current results suggest that relationship-based long-term treatment significantly reduces the symptoms of anxiety, depression, dissociative symptoms, sleep problems, self-injurious behaviors, aggression, risk taking, and peer relationship problems. The pattern of results reveals that symptoms do not reduce steadily but rather fluctuate over the course of treatment, ultimately leading to overall improvement.
- Primary limitations of the current study include small sample size, potential bias of therapist informants, and lack of a comparison group.
- Future work should examine changes in treatment targets, symptom reductions, and long-term psychological health, should collect data from multiple informants, and generate a comparison group.