





Contact with biological parents following child placement in foster care: Associations with attachment security and externalization

Karine POITRAS¹, George M. TARABULSY², Lisa AUGER¹ & Audrey ST-PIERRE²

- 1. Department of Psychology, University of Québec at Trois-Rivières (QC), Canada
 - 2. School of Psychology, Laval University (QC), Canada

Introduction

Placement in foster care is a radical intervention that aims to protect children whose development and security are considered to be compromised in their caregiving environment. Nevertheless, most biological parents maintain contact with their child following foster placement, whether this be for reunification purposes or not. However, the association between parental visits and foster child socioemotional development is poorly documented (Quinton, Rushton, Dance, & Mayes, 1997).

Present study

This Canadian study is conducted in collaboration with three Quebec child protection services. It aims to describe contact experienced between children and their biological parents during their foster placement, as well as the relations between contact, attachment security with the foster parent and externalizing symptoms.

Foster children who have experienced early life adversity often show greater levels of attachment insecurity and externalization (Cicchetti, Rogosch, & Toth, 2006; Stahmer, Leslie, Hurlburt, Barth, Webb, & Landsverk, 2005). These are important variables to investigate, considering the well-documented link between attachment and later development, and the association between externalization and placement stability.

Methodology

Participants

- > 40 12-to-42 months old foster children (See table 1).
- > 40 biological parents (M = 24.05 years old, SD = 3.99) and foster parents (M = 44.20 years old, SD = 8.52).

Table 1. Children and Placement Trajectory Characteristics

	M	SD	Length		
Age	28.52	9.70	12.13-42.50		
Age at first placement	8.58	9.06	0.00-33.00		
Duration of the current placement	14.30	9.81	2.00-39.03		
Security	0.23	0.32	-0.57-0.82		
Externalization	53.40	11.40	28.00-82.00		



Table 2. Correlations Between Contacts, Child Development, Foster Parent and Placement Characteristics (N=40)

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Contacts					
2. Security	0.06				
3. Externalization	0.37**	-0.33*			
4. Age at first placement	0.06	0.01	0.19		
5. Time spent in foster family	0.04	0.28^{\dagger}	-0.23	-0.41*	
6. Sensitivity	0.07	0.33*	-0.30†	0.01	0.28†
*p<0.05; **p<0.001.					

Procedure

- > Interview with biological parents to obtain socio-demographic information and information regarding contact with children.
- Attachment security was assessed by trained research assistants with the *Attachment Q-Sort* (AQS; Waters, 1995) following a 2-hour home visit with the foster family.
- Maternal sensitivity was measured with *Maternal Behavior Q-Sort* (MBQS; Pederson & Moran, 1995) from a videotaped child-foster parent play period.
- > Foster parents completed the *Child Behavior Checklist* (CBCL; Achenbach and Rescorla, 2001) to assess externalizing symptoms.

Results

- \triangleright Children visited their biological parents from 0 to 619.20 hours/month (M=70.12 hours/month, SD=123.14). Results show that contact with biological parents is not related to child attachment security with foster parents, although they are positively associated with externalized behaviors (see Table 2).
- A hierarchical regression was carried out with externalization as dependent variable. Placement trajectory (time spent in high-risk family environment before placement and time spent with the last foster family) and parental sensitivity, which are known to be related to socioemotional development, were included in the model to predict behavioral functioning. Results show that controlling for placement trajectory factors and foster parent sensitivity, contact with biological parents is positively correlated with externalized behaviors (see Table 3). Finally, our results underline that foster parent sensitivity is a primary correlate of developmental outcome.

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Models to Predict Externalization

Variables	R ² (%)	ΔR^2 (%)	F change	B
Age at first placement	0.13	0.13	1.86	0.13
Time spent with the last foster family				-0.11
Sensitivity				-0.30*
Contact with biological parents	0.28	0.15	7.16*	0.39*

*p<0.05.

Discussion

Four elements emerged from the current study:

- 1. Contact between children in foster placement and their biological parents is not linked to attachment security with foster parents.
- 2. Contact with biological parents appears to be linked to the presence of externalizating symptoms, even after controlling for foster parent sensitivity, age at first placement and time with foster family. This result should be considered by child protection services in the way they provide services to foster children who maintain contact with biological parents.
- 3. Foster parent sensitivity during interactions, measured independently from other, was linked with externalization, even after controlling for other variables, testifying to the importance of the quality of interactions for foster child development.
- 4. Finally, the nature of these findings call for more systematic investigations of common, judicial-based events that characterize foster placement. Many courtroom decisions require this research to help ground judicial and child protection processes. Longitudinal, cross-lagged studies, involving multiple assessments and informants and independent observation, that would help in more clearly inferring causal relations, are needed.