

Research Findings at the Intersection of Early Care & Education and Child Welfare

Wednesday November 16th, 11:30am-12:45pm

This session is a poster symposium, with discussion to follow, featuring research findings at the intersection of Early Care and Education and Child Welfare. A total of six studies, which represent the first empirical examinations at the intersection of Early Care and Education and Child Welfare service systems will be presented by four researchers (Helen Ward, Shannon Lipscomb, Laura Dinehart, and Beth Meloy). Discussant, Nilofer Ashan, will then provide a perspective on the potential policy implications of these studies and directions for future research to improve the integration of these two service systems.

Children at Risk in the Child Welfare System: Collaborations to Promote School Readiness

Presenter: Helen Ward, J.D.

Young children involved in the child welfare system have multiple risk factors for developmental problems. Meeting the developmental needs of this vulnerable population requires effective collaboration between the child welfare system, the early intervention/preschool special education system (EI) under IDEA and the early care and education system (ECE). This mixed method, exploratory case study conducted in Colorado examined the degree to which collaboration is occurring between these three systems to address the developmental needs of young children ages 0 to 5. Methods included 134 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with medical providers, IDEA service coordinators and specialists, child care providers, child welfare caseworkers, judicial personnel and foster and biological parents in five selected counties in Colorado. Statewide surveys of foster parents ($n = 266$) and caseworkers ($n = 339$) were also conducted. The presentation will focus on the findings related to ECE including caseworker awareness and training about the benefits of ECE, caseworker practice with regard to ECE enrollment, the degree to which information is shared between ECE providers and caseworkers, and the barriers to child care access for this population of children and families. Broad themes emerging from the findings are that 1.) collaboration seems to be stronger between child welfare and EI programs than between child welfare and ECE; 2.) caseworkers lack training on ECE and ECE providers lack training on the particular needs of children involved in the child welfare system; 3.) caseworkers often don't recognize ECE as an intervention for at-risk children in this population unless the parents/caregivers request it or the child has already been found to have a developmental delay through IDEA and 4.) restrictions in eligibility for child care assistance hamper access to ECE for children involved in the child welfare system.

ECE for Preschool-aged Foster Children: Patterns, Predictors, and School Readiness Outcomes

Presenter: Shannon Lipscomb, Ph.D.

This poster summarizes findings from two studies examining the patterns, predictors, and school readiness outcomes of early child care and education (ECE) for preschool aged children living in foster care, and other out-of-home care situations. Study 1 examined the ECE experiences of 192 pre-Kindergarten age children in foster care. Eighty-eight percent ($n = 169$) had attended either Head Start ($n = 77$; 40% of total), another center-based ECE program ($n = 37$; 19% of total), or both ($n = 55$; 29% of total). Latent class analysis of ECE quantity, quality, type, and duration revealed three patterns: part-time Head Start, part-time other ECE, and full-time mixed ECE. Child and foster family characteristics predicted these patterns, illustrating distinct groups with potential implications for the development of children in foster care. Study 2 utilized data from the Head Start Impact Study to examine the impact of Head Start on school readiness outcomes of 300 children living in out-of-home care (not living with a biological, adoptive, or step-parent). Findings suggest statistically significant impacts of Head Start on children's pre-academic, self-regulatory, and social/relational aspects of school readiness at the end of the Head Start year, which in turn predict children's success in elementary school.

Title: The Effects of Center-Based Care Accreditation on the Development of Children in the Child Welfare System

Presenter: Laura Dinehart, Ph.D.

A corpus of studies provide evidence that high quality childcare can act as protection for children experiencing threats to positive development. Children in child welfare represent a particularly vulnerable population of children in need of high quality early learning experiences. The current work presents preliminary data on the effects of quality care on their developmental outcomes. In light of recent policy discussions requiring children in child welfare to attend an accredited childcare center, we argue that high quality early education as indicated by accreditation might serve parents, educators, public servants, and others as a good indicator of high quality childcare that is able to ameliorate some of the negative consequences associated with experiencing the child welfare system. Overall, the study provides a context by which to examine the critical role of childcare for children in the child welfare system and ultimately to consider future policy implications.

Title: Foster Children's Developmental Outcomes and Placement Stability Benefits from Exposure to Child Care

Presenter: Beth Meloy, MPP

This poster presents findings from two studies on the relationship between the childcare and ECE experiences of children in foster care and their outcomes, both developmental and "structural" (in this case, stability of foster care placements). Very little research has been done, to date, describing the intersection of the child welfare and early childhood service systems. Research describing the benefits of high quality early care and education for similarly at-risk populations of children provide reason for optimism about the likely effects of childcare for foster children. However, the unique needs of this population and their histories of poor and unstable care giving could also lead to negative consequences of childcare experiences, especially if those experiences or unstable or of poor quality. The two studies presented here link child care experiences, including Head Start and CCDF subsidized childcare to improvements in language and cognitive development and foster care placement stability. These findings suggest that encouraging policies that support high quality early care and education experiences for foster children could help to mitigate the negative outcome associated with foster care involvement for young children. However, additional research is needed before a clear link between type and characteristics of ECE experiences and foster children's developmental and structural outcomes.