

What factors impact placement stability for children in out-of-home care? Key findings from the evidence

Children who are unsafe in their home may need to be placed in out-of-home care. Changes in caregivers and multiple placement moves in out-of-home care can impact on children's social and emotional wellbeing and future outcomes. This FACSIAR Summary provides an overview from recent research of the key factors that impact on the stability of a child's placement and includes findings from the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS), the first large scale longitudinal study of children and young people in out-of-home care in Australia.

What does the evidence tell us?

Some placement moves for a child in out-of-home care are planned and necessary such as those from short-term to long-term care or moves from foster care to a kinship placement. However, multiple placement changes for children and young people in out-of-home care, particularly those that are unplanned, disrupt children's attachment to primary caregivers and may impact on future social and emotional wellbeing.¹ Research findings from POCLS highlight that a child's placement stability has a small but significant positive association with their developmental outcomes over time, specifically socioemotional, non-verbal, and gross and fine motor skill development.² For these reasons, monitoring placement moves of children in out-of-home care is important to not only assess individual outcomes but to also measure how well the out-of-home care system is working.¹

The research evidence identifies a range of factors that affect placement stability. These include characteristics of the child, birth family and caregiver; placement type and quality; and service and system factors.³ Limited evidence on the factors that increase placement instability for Aboriginal children and young people was found, highlighting the need for further research for this cohort.⁴

Child and placement factors

A recent meta-analysis that included 42 studies from the USA, Canada, Europe and Australia focusing on placement breakdown (unplanned ending before goals were achieved), placement disruption (unplanned move from one caregiver to another) or multiple placements, highlights a number of factors that increase the likelihood of placement instability.⁵ These factors include:

- The presence of behavioural issues and externalising behaviours in the child or young person. Externalising behaviour includes emotion dysregulation, defiance, tantrums, aggression, property destruction, theft, and substance abuse.⁶
- Placement in non-kinship care.

















- Low quality care provided by caregivers including poor parenting skills and poor boundary setting.
- The age at which a child first enters out-of-home care, with older children being at greater risk for placement instability.
- A history of the child experiencing maltreatment including abuse and neglect, with this risk being highest for children from ethnic minority groups.
- Placement without siblings increases the risk of placement breakdown. Although, an Australian scoping review found mixed evidence on the impact of placement with siblings on placement stability.⁴

The meta-analysis found that while there was no significant overall effect for previous number of out-of-home care placements and previous out-of-home care entries, previous number of out-of-home care placements was found to be a risk factor for placement breakdown for boys only.⁵ Placement type is also important, with an earlier meta-analysis reporting that a history of residential care may be a factor associated with placement breakdown.⁷

Caregiver factors

A recent systematic review of 29 articles identified 16 caregiver factors that contribute to placement stability and permanency, with access to support systems and attentiveness to and ability to nurture the caregiver-child relationship being the two most frequently reported caregiver factors (Table 1).⁸

Table 1: Caregiver factors that contribute to placement stability

| | | | |
|---|--|---|--|
|  | Access to informal and formal support systems |  | Displays positive parenting skills and effective discipline techniques |
|  | Attentiveness to and ability to nurture the caregiver-child relationship |  | Engages in ongoing learning, training and education |
|  | Access to sufficient income or other financial resources |  | Able to tolerate negative feelings and rejection |
|  | Able to promote contact and connection between a child and their birth family |  | Able to work collaboratively with child welfare services and other services engaged with the child |
|  | Demonstrates healthy family functioning |  | Has a religious or spiritual foundation to guide their parenting journey |
|  | Able to engage in self-care |  | Has good physical and emotional health |
|  | Altruistic motivation to foster/adopt |  | Demonstrates effective listening and communication skills |
|  | Thorough understanding of the impact of trauma and able to assist a child to build social-emotional skills |  | Has flexible expectations of children |

Service and system factors

Research evidence also identifies several service and system factors that may increase the likelihood of placement instability including:

- Placement moves due to system or policy mandates.³
- Caseworker turnover,³ particularly during critical points in a child's placement.⁹
- Extent of a caseworker's cultural competency and understanding of the needs of children.⁹

POCLS has found caregiver satisfaction is associated with placement changes

An analysis of placement stability amongst the POCLS Wave 1 cohort of children (n=1,268) explored factors associated with the number of placement changes and the time to first placement change after the Wave 1 interview (approximately 18 months after entering out-of-home care). The analysis found:

- Aboriginal children were no more likely to change placement than non-Aboriginal children.
- Children with a history of placement changes were at higher risk of moving again in the future and tended to change placements more quickly.
- Older children were more likely to change placements and did so more quickly than younger children.
- Children in foster or residential care were more likely to change placements than children in relative/kinship care.
- Compared with children residing with caregivers who reported lower levels of stress in their lives, children living with caregivers who reported moderate stress levels changed placement more often and more quickly.
- Children living with caregivers who were satisfied with their caring experience were less likely and took longer to change placements than children living with caregivers who were less satisfied.
- Children living with caregivers who were satisfied with the help they received from their caseworker experienced fewer moves.¹

What does this mean for policy and practice?

Many risk factors that increase the likelihood of placement instability are known before a placement begins. The evidence highlights a number of practice improvements to strengthen placement stability including:

- Regularly screening children and young people for externalising behaviours and post-traumatic stress symptoms.
- Provision of effective support to children and young people including appropriate treatment of behavioural issues.
- Ongoing support for caregivers to develop parenting skills and manage their expectations and sensitivity towards the child in their care.
- Improved placement matching practices.⁵

Understanding these risk factors, engaging in adequate placement planning and improved support for carers and children may help to enhance placement stability for children and young people in out-of-home care.

About the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS)

The Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS) collects detailed information about the life course development of children who enter out-of-home care and the factors that influence their safety, permanency and wellbeing by using linked data matched to first-hand accounts from children, caregivers, caseworkers and teachers. The POCLS population cohort is children who entered out-of-home care for the first time in NSW between May 2010 and October 2011. More information about POCLS can be found on the study [webpage](#).

The POCLS Evidence to Action Note, [Placement Stability: Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care](#), provides a thorough overview of practice improvements to maintain placement stability for children and young people in out-of-home care.

More information about placement stability can also be found in the following POCLS research reports:

- [Placement Changes Among Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care, Research Report no.8](#)
- [Influence of Placement Stability on Developmental Outcomes of Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care, Research Report no.21](#)

Produced by: Strategy and Evidence, Family and Community Services Insights Analysis and Research (FACSIAR), NSW Department of Communities and Justice www.dcj.nsw.gov.au
Email: facsiar@dcj.nsw.gov.au

Endnotes

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