

Carer parenting practices and children's relationships with their carer's family

What does the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study tell us?

Snapshot

- Child-caregiver relationships and caregiver parenting practices influence the development and wellbeing of children in out-of-home care (OOHC).
- Carers in the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS) showed high levels of warmth, self efficacy in managing their children's difficult behaviour, and monitoring children's activities, and low levels of hostility. These results suggest that carers were generally confident in their parenting practices.
- Carers of younger children tended to show higher levels of warmth and lower levels of hostility than carers of older age groups.
- There was little difference in reported parenting practices between foster and relative/kinship carers. However, residential care workers scored lower than foster carers and relative/kinship carers on warmth, hostility and monitoring.
- Reports from children matched their carers' positive parenting perceptions, with most children reporting that the adult who looked after them always helped them if they had a problem, listened to them and praised them for doing well.
- Young people entering OOHC as teenagers were less likely to have a very close relationship with their caregiver family.
- Practitioners can assist carers to learn positive parenting practices and manage difficult behaviour.

Introduction

Relationships between children and caregivers play an essential role in the development of a child's health and wellbeing. This Evidence to Action Note outlines key findings related to carer parenting practices and the relationships between children, carers and their carer families, for children and young people involved in POCLS. Links to parenting strategies and resources are also included.

POCLS examines the developmental wellbeing of a group of children living in OOHC in NSW. Wave 1 data was collected during their first years in care. The group of children in the study does not represent all children in OOHC and so care should be taken in making comparisons.

The data discussed in this note is reported in detail in the POCLS Wave 1 Baseline Statistical Report¹ [Chapter Seven](#).

Why are parenting practices and the quality of relationships important?

The nature and quality of the relationships between children in OOHC and their carer's family, and the capacity of adults to care for them, can have a crucial influence on children's safety, health, development and wellbeing. Positive child-carer relationships can promote resilience and eliminate feelings of "ambiguous loss" for children who have experienced multiple placement changes.² Parental warmth and responsiveness can also influence child outcomes.³

What did the study find?

POCLS asked carers to report on their own parenting practices across four key aspects:

- **Warmth** – carers' affection, emotional availability and involvement for children aged 9 months to 17 years
- **Hostility** – carers' punitiveness, physical punishment and anger for children aged 9 months to 17 years
- **Monitoring** – carers' knowledge and oversight of the child's activities for children aged 10 to 17 years
- **Self-efficacy in managing difficult behaviour** – including carers' confidence when dealing with challenging behaviours for children aged 2 to 17 years.

The study also asked carers' views on the child's relationships with them and other members of the carer family.

What caregivers said about their parenting practices

Overall, the results suggest carers were generally confident in their parenting of the children and young people in their care. Carers tended to report high levels of warmth, monitoring and self-efficacy when managing difficult behaviour. For example, on the 'warmth' scale carers' mean score of 17.9 was towards the high end of the possible range from 4 (low warmth) to 20 (high warmth). This suggests that caregivers 'often' to 'almost always' showed warmth in their interactions with the child.

The study found significant differences between carers according to the age of the child/ren in their care:

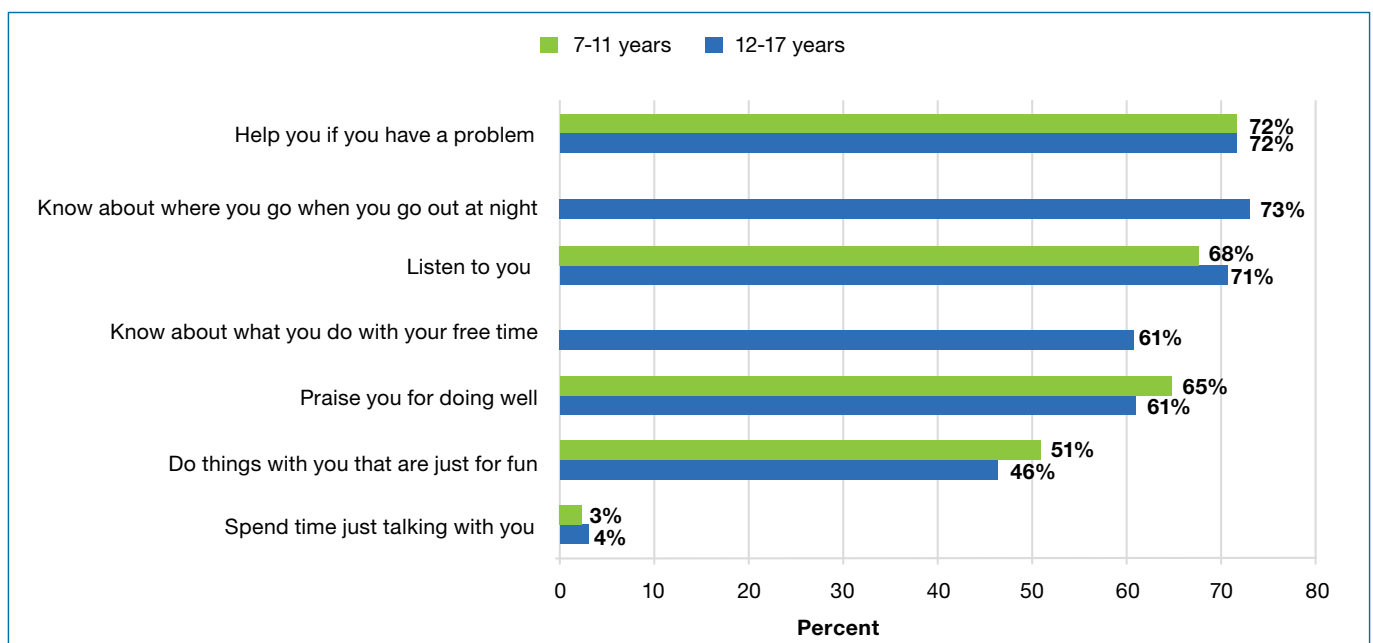
- Carers of the youngest age group (9– 35 months) showed higher levels of warmth than carers of the older age groups.
- Similarly, carers of the youngest age group showed lower levels of hostility than the other age groups.
- Carers of children aged 10–11 years were more likely to have knowledge and oversight of their children than carers of children aged 12–17 years.
- Carers of the older age groups (6–11 and 12–17 years) reported lower levels of confidence when dealing with challenging behaviours compared to carers of the younger age groups (9–35 months and 3–5 years).

There was little difference in reported parenting practices between foster and relative/kinship carers. However, residential care workers scored lower than both foster carers and relative/kinship carers on measures of warmth, hostility and monitoring. Age differences between children across placement types may have contributed to these differences, as children in residential care tended to be older. Residential care workers may also have a different type of relationship with young people than do foster or relative/kinship carers.

Children's perceptions of their caregivers' parenting

The reports from children and young people matched their carers' positive perceptions, with most 7–17 year olds reporting that the adult who looked after them always helped them if they had a problem, that their carer always listened to them and that their carer always praised them for doing well (Figure 1). About three quarters (73%) of 12–17 year olds reported that their carer always knew where they are at night and 61% reported that their carer knew what they did with their free time.

Figure 1: Children aged 7–17 years who reported 'always' on aspects of caregivers' parenting, by age



Source: Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study, Wave 1 Baseline Statistical Report

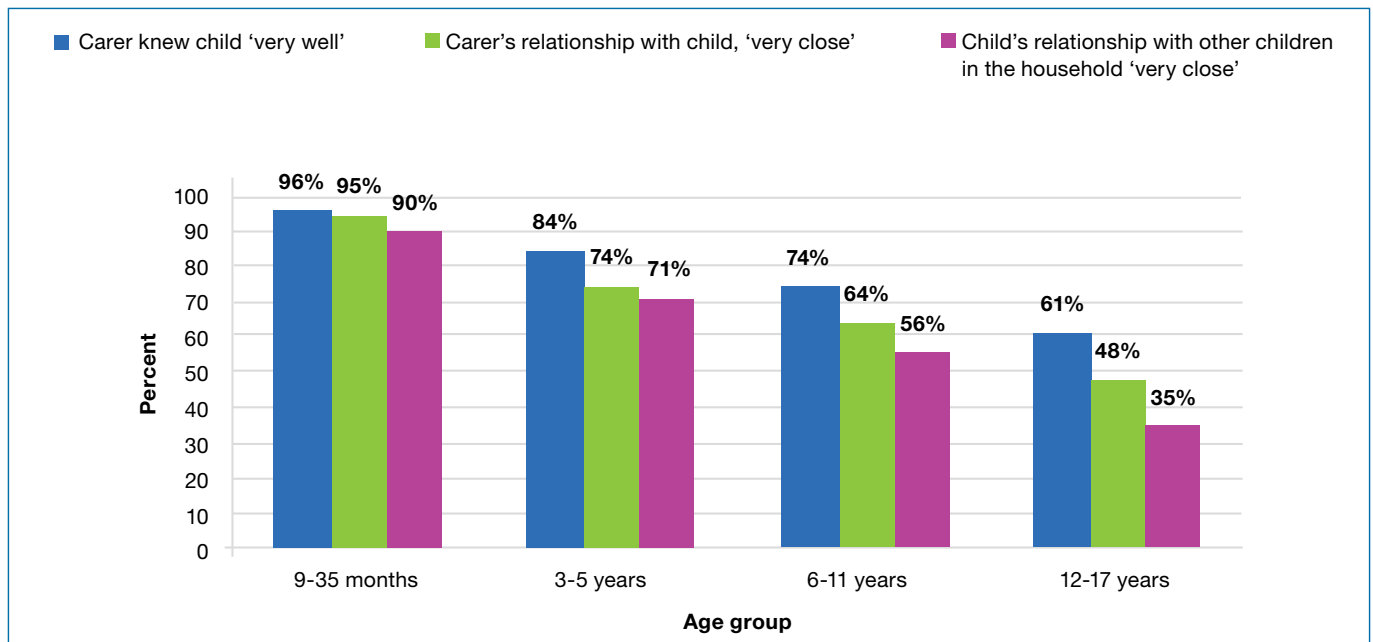
Children's relationships with their caregivers and caregiver families

Overall, carers reported very positive perceptions of their relationship with the child/young person in their care. Most carers (84%) thought they knew their child 'very well', and a further 15% answered 'fairly well'. Only 1% of carers reported knowing their child 'not very well' or 'not well at all'.

Relationships varied across age groups, with carers of the youngest age group (9–35 months) being twice as likely to report having a 'very close' relationship with their child than carers of the oldest age group (12–17 years) (Figure 2).

Carers also perceived the child's relationship with other children in the household to be close, although older age groups were somewhat less likely to be seen as having a positive relationship with other household members than younger age groups. Just over one third of children aged 12–17 years had a 'very close' relationship with other children in the household compared to 90% of children aged 9–35 months.

Figure 2: Quality of child-carer household relationships, by child age



Source: Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study, Wave 1 Baseline Statistical Report

Next steps for the study

The POCLS Wave 1 baseline data provides important information for understanding child-carer relationships. The POCLS Study Working Group is currently undertaking in-depth analyses of Wave 1-3 data to better understand how these relationships influence the long term outcomes of children and young people in OOHC. The researchers will compare POCLS results with the results of other studies to see the similarities or differences between the POCLS sample and the general population.

Parenting strategies and resources

For children in OOHC, research has shown that carers' personal qualities such as effective boundary setting, tolerance, a high level of emotional involvement, child centred caring, kindness, affection, flexibility, good communication and integration of the child or young person into the foster family are factors which contribute to the longevity and success of a placement.⁴ Parenting older children and adolescents can be a challenging time for many caregivers, particularly carers of children and young people in OOHC. Research on adolescent foster parenting skills suggests a range of strategies that can help build a stronger and more positive relationship with adolescent children and help prevent placement disruptions including:

- showing an understanding of the child's past
- being tolerant but firm
- having appropriate expectations of the child's role in the household
- expanding supervision outside of the home
- responding to the child's 'emotional age' as opposed to their 'chronological age'.⁵

Caseworkers can support carers of older children and adolescents by providing adequate information to carers about the child or young person's experiences prior to placement, referring carers to support services, providing opportunities for carers to attend training to further develop parenting skills and providing practical strategies to assist them in their caring role.

The [Raising Children website](#) provides information and resources to support parents and carers in the day-to-day work of raising children.

[Partners in Care: A guide for carers raising tweens and teens](#), produced by NSW Family & Community Services in 2016, offers tips and ideas for both carers and caseworkers.

The FACS literature review, [Effective strategies and interventions for adolescents in a child protection context](#) reviews the evidence for effective interventions to support young people aged 12 to 18 years of age involved in the child protection system.

The FACS issues paper, [Effective casework practice with adolescents: Perceptions and practices of DoCS staff](#) presents the findings of a small qualitative study involving interviews with 44 DoCS staff.

The report, [Perceptions of Parenting: Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understandings of Effective Parenting in Australia](#) published in May 2016 by The Parenting Research Centre, highlights evidence based strategies that can improve parenting.

About the Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study

POCLS is the first large scale prospective longitudinal study on OOHC in Australia. The study examines the safety and developmental wellbeing of a group of children in NSW who entered OOHC for the first time between May 2010 and October 2011 and received final care and protection orders by April 2013. It is led and funded by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) with independent expert researchers providing advice on study design, and undertaking the interviews and analyses. Wave 1 was conducted in the child/young person's first years in OOHC. A total of 1,285 children and young people aged 9 months to 17 years, and their caregivers, participated in the Wave 1 interviews between May 2011 and August 2013.

As the children and young people in the study are first time entries to OOHC they are not representative of all children in OOHC and so caution should be taken in generalising the findings to the total OOHC population.

All publications will be uploaded to the study webpage www.community.nsw.gov.au/pathways

Endnotes

- ¹ De Maio, J & Smart, D 2015, 'Caregiver parenting practices and children's relationships' in Australian Institute of Family Studies, Chapin Hall Center for Children University of Chicago and New South Wales Department of Family and Community Services, Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Outcomes of Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in NSW. Wave 1 Baseline Statistical Report, Sydney, NSW: Department of Family and Community Services.
- ² Storer, HL, Barkan, SE, Stenhouse, LL, Eichenlaubb, C, Mallillin, A, & Haggerty, KP 2014, 'In search of connection: The foster youth and caregiver relationship', *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 42, pp. 110-117.
- ³ World Health Organisation 2004, The importance of caregiver-child interactions for the survival and healthy development of young children: A Review.
- ⁴ Rock, S, Michelson, D, Thomson, S, & Day, C 2015, 'Understanding foster placement instability for Looked After Children: A systematic review and narrative synthesis of quantitative and qualitative Evidence', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 45, pp. 177-203.
- ⁵ Lipscombe, J, Farmer, E, & Moyers, S 2003, 'Parenting fostered adolescents: skills and strategies', *Child & Family Social Work*, vol. 8, no.4, pp. 243-255.

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