

## Child Development at the Intersection of Early Care and Education and Child Welfare

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**Project Description.** Extensive literature supports the notion that young children involved in the child welfare system exhibit a myriad of developmental needs, including developmental delays, and physical and mental health issues. Ample research also demonstrates the potential of high quality early care and education (ECE) programs to improve the wellbeing of other groups of similarly at-risk children. It follows that stable, developmentally appropriate ECE may also have the potential to improve developmental outcomes for children involved in Child Welfare. Yet children involved in this system may also have unique experiences that affect both their use of ECE and its potential impacts. Despite these traditions of research, there is a dearth of research at the critical nexus of these early childhood systems (See Meloy & Phillips, 2012a for a full discussion). This study represents the launch of a new program of inquiry aimed at addressing this gap by providing detailed data about the ECE arrangements experienced by young foster children, factors that predict differing patterns of ECE use within this population, and the developmental outcomes of ECE use. Specifically, it draws upon one national and two state level datasets to address four **research objectives**:

- Provide descriptive data on the ECE experiences of young foster children (timing, amount, type); and uncover any differences in patterns of ECE exposure by child or foster parent demographics;
- Examine the contribution of foster parents' work status, access to public ECE supports, and preferences to patterns of ECE reliance;
- Explore associations between patterns of ECE use and developmental outcomes for foster children;
- Examine all of these questions for the large subpopulation of foster children who also have special needs.

**Sample.** This project utilizes three datasets--the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Wellbeing (NSCAW); a statewide administrative dataset from Illinois created by merging data from the Illinois DHS Child Care Tracking System (CCTS) and the IL Child and Youth Centered Information System (CYCIS); an exploratory survey of child care use and preferences of foster parents of children under the age of five in Maryland.

- The NSCAW dataset is a longitudinal dataset that contains five waves of data. The current study examines the ECE experiences of the 2,255 children sampled whose age ranged from zero to five at baseline (Wave 1).
- The merged CCTS/CYCIS Illinois dataset includes all children who entered the child welfare system in IL between January 2003 and January 2009, before their fifth birthday. This sample was limited to the 18,944 children who remained in foster care for at least three months.
- The Maryland foster parent survey randomly selected 200 foster parents (stratified by licensed/unlicensed), from the 1,100 foster parents who were caring for children under the age of five in MD on February 28, 2011 to receive mailed surveys. 84 foster parents returned the survey, and these responses were merged with MD administrative data, which includes child demographic information.

### **Methods.**

**Measures.** This project involves both secondary data analysis (NSCAW, CCTS/CYCIS) and original data collection (Maryland survey). The Maryland foster parent survey was created using templates from the Study of Early Child Care and the Durham Child Health and Development Study. Questions focused on the childcare used by the foster parents, and why

they selected those arrangements; how they fund the childcare they use; and their beliefs about the benefits and consequences of childcare for themselves and their foster children.

*Data Analysis* The first step of this project is to summarize descriptive data on the age of first exposure to, amount, and type of ECE that young foster children experience, and relationships among these variables, using all three datasets. The next step is to describe the relationship between foster child and/or foster parent characteristics and patterns of ECE use. In all three datasets, these characteristics include child and parent age and ethnicity, child disability status, and type of foster parent (e.g. traditional or kin); in the NSCAW and MD datasets, foster parent income and education level are also included. Work status and access to public ECE supports, and beliefs about ECE, were also be explored using the survey data from MD. In the NSCAW generalized estimation equations; and in the Illinois and Maryland datasets logistic regressions, were used to examine the relationship between foster child and foster parent characteristics and exposure to and type of ECE use. Associations between patterns of childcare subsidy receipt and foster home placement stability were explored via survival analysis of the IL dataset. Growth curve analysis in Stata was used to assess relationships between ECE timing, amount, and type and these cognitive and social-emotional outcomes over time using the NSCAW dataset.

**Results.** Analysis of the NSCAW, the Illinois administrative data, and the Maryland Foster parent survey revealed that many foster children are being exposed to Early Care and Education settings, but that compared to the general population, foster children are exposed to child care and their foster parents utilize subsidies at a lower rate.

*NSCAW:* Growth curve analysis of the NSCAW data revealed that child welfare-involved preschoolers displayed modestly larger gains in cognitive and language development when they experienced ECE than when they did not. Among foster children, significant benefits were found only for preschoolers who were enrolled in Head Start and only for the subgroup of children in kinship foster homes. Among children who remained at home with their biological mother and received in-home services,

improved cognitive and language development was associated with enrollment in childcare, but not Head Start. Additionally, exposure to childcare was associated with more behavior problems over time among children in traditional foster care placements only. This study's exploratory approach precludes causal conclusions, yet these findings provide evidence that improved collaboration between ECE and Child Welfare has the potential to improve the wellbeing of children and families who crosswalk these two service systems. (Meloy & Phillips, Under Review)

*Illinois:* Survival Analysis of the Illinois administrative data suggested that receipt of childcare assistance is associated with a reduced risk of placement disruption over time, especially for children who enter foster care as preschoolers.. Contrary to our hypothesis, the association between childcare assistance and placement stability was not moderated by whether the child was in a kin or traditional foster arrangement, nor was it linked to use of center-based arrangements. The results from this study point to the potential of childcare assistance to facilitate placement stability and thus potentially to benefit the development of foster children. (Meloy & Phillips, 2012b).

*Maryland:* The results of this study confirmed that foster parent employment, education, and income are the strongest predictors of the ECE experiences of young foster children. As for all parents, employed foster parents were significantly more likely to utilize childcare than their unemployed counterparts. In addition, less educated foster parents were significantly less likely to utilize center-based arrangements and marginally more likely to utilize multiple childcare arrangements than their more highly educated counterparts. Additionally, results indicated that older foster parents were less likely to use childcare, which was unique to the foster parent population but is likely linked to previous research that documents lower levels of employment, education, and social support among older foster parents. Surprisingly, neither foster parent's self-reported reasons for selecting their ECE arrangement nor payment method predicted the use of center-based care or multiple arrangements.

It is not clear whether these results (NSCAW and Illinois) represent true effects of childcare exposure

and childcare supports in the lives of child-welfare involved preschoolers, or if, for example, foster parents who have more resources and are more likely to be stable placements are also more likely to seek out childcare and childcare supports.

**Implications for policy/practice.** This project highlighted a critical intersection for early childhood policy. There is no question that young children who become involved with the child welfare system are at significant risk for delayed or derailed development, physically, cognitively, and emotionally. The results of this study clearly justify explicit attention to the ECE experiences of these children as a potentially beneficial strategy for addressing their developmental needs.

There is an inherent role for policymakers in both enabling child welfare-involved families to purchase care and ensuring the purchase of (or enrollment in) high quality, stable care. Specifically, publicly funded ECE programs (both Head Start and the CCA program) were explicitly linked to positive outcomes for foster children. Promoting coordination across these two early childhood systems falls first on the shoulders of the federal agencies responsible for setting research agendas and allocating funding. Ultimately, however, it falls on State and local officials to act on behalf of the vulnerable young children who enter the child welfare system under their jurisdiction. An important initial step on behalf of these officials, would apply this research to state and local ECE policies by prioritizing access to high-quality, stable, subsidized care for foster children, especially those in kinship foster care and those who become involved with the child welfare system but remain in their biological homes.

**Implications for research.** The critical next step for research is to examine mechanisms through which ECE experiences may impact placement stability and developmental outcomes for children in foster care. The obvious candidates for this role are the quality and stability of the ECE arrangements that children in foster care experience. For this notably vulnerable population of children, the experience of toxic stress is prevalent, and thus, notions of biological sensitivity to context come into play and imply that

variation in their experience of high- versus low-quality care will be especially powerful with regard to their well-being and development over time. The stability (or instability) of ECE, and the opportunity it may or may not afford for the development of a secure attachment relationship with adult caregivers, is also likely to be especially salient in the lives of these children for whom care-giving disruptions are commonplace.

Future research that informs this intersection of services for children involved with the child welfare system and links them to developmental outcomes has the potential not only to inform developmental science regarding compensating mechanisms that can short circuit the detrimental impacts of toxic stress experienced early in life, but also to promote effective public policies that integrate ECE and child welfare resources in ways that ensure they will improve the well-being of many of the nation's most vulnerable children.

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### **Related Papers**

Meloy, M. E., & Phillips, D. A. (2012a). Rethinking the role of early care and education in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 882-890.

Meloy, M. E. & Phillips, D. A. (2012b). Foster children and placement stability: The role of child care assistance. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*.

Meloy, M. E. & Phillips, D. A. (under review). Early care and education and the developmental outcomes of child welfare-involved preschoolers.