

Better Orphanage Outcomes; Lasting Gains?

Studies looking at how children of Russian orphanages do after they leave

New studies are looking at whether steps taken in Russian orphanages to give children warmer and more responsive relationships with their adult caregivers result in long-term improvements in the developmental outcomes of those who are adopted, placed in foster care, or moved to other living arrangements.

University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD) researchers and colleagues in Russia reported in a recently published monograph that children in orphanages in which the interventions were implemented showed improved social-emotional and cognitive development and physical growth, at least in the short-term.

What researchers find in the new studies could have implications for child care systems in Russia, other foreign nations and the United States.

“In the United States, early care and education and the way we prepare people to work in that area emphasize skill building, but they do not emphasize social-emotional relationships as much as they could,” said OCD Co-Director Robert B. McCall, Ph.D. “If we find that the orphanage children are improved over the long-term, it could give impetus to bringing our care systems into better balance between skill building and social-emotional development.”

The studies build on earlier research by OCD, St. Petersburg State University and a St. Petersburg orphanage that introduced training for caregivers and structural changes to create a more nurturing environment in which children were more likely to thrive.

Lacking In Warmth

That study, begun in 2000, focused on three St. Petersburg orphanages for children ranging in age from birth to 4 years. Each orphanage had adequate medical care, nutrition, safety, hygiene, toys, adult contact hours and staff:child ratios. But caregiver-child relationships were generally poor. Little attention was paid to the child’s social-emotional development. Most activities were completely adult-directed. Caregivers were distant. Children were segregated by age and whether or not they had a disability. Smiles and laughter were uncommon. Infants greet strangers without emotion.

Assessments of the children’s development showed more than 70% were physically or mentally delayed. Caregivers had high rates of anxiety, a few were seriously depressed, and they had negative attitudes about their work.

In one orphanage, researchers in-

Implications At Home

What researchers find while investigating the long-term effects of steps to promote better social and emotional development among children in Russian orphanages could have implications for American child care and early education.

troduced interventions and structural changes designed to promote more developmentally-appropriate care and better caregiver-child relationships.

The interventions included training caregivers to be warmer and more responsive and to encourage children’s independence and creativity rather than obedience and conformity. Structural changes included assigning caregivers smaller groups of children and exposing each child to fewer, more consistent caregivers to encourage nurturing relationships.

Researchers implemented the training of caregivers in another orphanage, but not the structural changes, and left a third orphanage essentially unchanged.

Promising Outcomes

Significant improvements were seen among children and caregivers in the orphanage where both training and structural changes were implemented.

Caregivers showed lower levels of

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anxiety and depression. They showed less adult-dominated behavior, placed less emphasis on conformity and obedience, and were more flexible when working with children.

Children improved on the Battelle Developmental Inventory. Typically developing children and children with moderate disabilities improved on the personal-social, communication and cognitive subscales. Children's affect scores improved on the Infant Affect Manual, which rates a child's emotions. Children also improved in physical stature — evidence that growth and physical health can be enhanced by improving children's psychosocial experience.

Adopted Children

The new studies, which are funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, investigate the long-term developmental effects of these variations in early social-emotional experience and relationships with caregivers.

One investigates the behavioral outcomes of children adopted into highly advantaged U.S. homes. Children come from the same three Russian orphanages as in the earlier study — but before the interventions — plus similar orphanages in St. Petersburg and other cities primarily in the Russian Federation. The study's intent is to describe the adjustment and development of children who are raised during their early months in institutions that are generally acceptable in terms of medical care, nutrition, sanitation, toys and the lack of abuse, but lack warm, sensitive, and responsive caregiver-child interactions and relationships.

Many other studies involve children adopted from orphanages deficient in every respect, such as the Romanian orphanages of the early 1990s. These new studies explore whether children

who have experienced orphanages that are substandard primarily with respect to the children's early social-emotional experience show the same pattern of typical and delayed or problematic development as children adopted from orphanages deficient in most aspects of care. If so, it would support the idea that the nature of the early caregiver-child interactions is the important aspect of orphanage life that needs to be changed if institutionalized children's long-term development is to be improved.

The second study focuses on the children who experienced one of the three intervention conditions described in the first study and were later adopted into U.S. families or placed in adoptive or foster families or reunited with their biological parents in St. Petersburg.

The primary question in these studies is whether children from the improved orphanages develop with fewer delays or problems over several years in family environments than do children who did not experience the orphanage improvements. In short, do the improved early experiences have a long-term benefit for such children?

The second question is the relative development of children in adoptive vs.

foster vs. their own biological families after having spent some time in the orphanage. Adoption and foster care are relatively new in the Russian Federation and in many other countries that have traditionally relied on orphanages to rear children who lack permanent parents. Are these family alternatives indeed better for children's development relative to staying in the institution as most child welfare advocates argue, and which of these family alternatives is better than the others with respect to children's development?

"We hope these studies will have an influence on changing services in these countries," said OCD Co-Director Christina J. Groark, Ph.D. "Many countries are just starting to encourage adoption and foster care in addition to reunification with children's biological parents, and we hope the results of these studies will encourage policy makers to support programs that promote family alternatives and services to high-risk families that ultimately will provide better environments for children and reduced reliance on institutions."



references

- For more information about earlier research in the Russian orphanages, see:
- St. Petersburg-USA Orphanage Research Team (2005). Characteristics of children, caregivers, and orphanages for young children in St. Petersburg, Russian Federation. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology: Special Issue on Child Abandonment*, 26, 477-506.
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