



background

Report # 119

China's Orphanages

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In China, A Challenge For Orphanages

More beds are being filled with special needs children

Adopting practices that promote warmer, more family-like care for orphanage children is a challenge that University of Pittsburgh researchers have pursued in Russia for some 10 years. More recently, they began working with orphanages in Latin America to help promote the same behaviors. In addition, recent trips to China revealed that orphanages in that nation of 1.3 billion people face a similar task, as well as a new and increasing challenge.

In recent years, China has witnessed a dramatic increase in the proportion of special needs children who reside in the nation's orphanages.

Orphanages in China have seen their primary population shift from one of mostly healthy girls to large numbers of abandoned children with disabilities whose range of special needs are straining the capacity of the nation's social welfare institutes to train staff or hire specialized staff to care for them.

Although improving the conditions of orphanages in China is a work in progress, those efforts benefit from a number of factors. China is developing more robust foster care and adoption systems, the levels of care are rising, orphanage infrastructure is adequate and well-regulated, the nation has a deep-rooted value for family, pragmatic and balanced approaches to solving complex problems are emphasized, and there is political support for improvement and an openness to innovation.

"Despite all of the progress China has made with adoption and foster

care, the vast majority of children who get adopted or placed in foster care are those who are either healthy, young or, if they have disabilities, they are mild, correctable disabilities," said Junlei Li, Ph.D., director of the Office of Child Development (OCD) Division of Applied Research and Evaluation. "Of the children who remain in the orphanages, nearly 90 percent of the children have moderate to severe disabilities."

Dr. Li and OCD Co-Directors Christina Groark, Ph.D., and Robert McCall, Ph.D., visited China to explore whether their experience with orphanages in Russia, Nicaragua and El Salvador could be of help to the government agencies, academics and nongovernmental organizations working to improve orphanage conditions in China.

Success In Russia

Nearly a decade ago, OCD and a team of Russian researchers began in-

Steady progress in foster care and adoption, rising levels of care, a deep-rooted value for family and a willingness to explore child-sensitive practices are among the factors that suggest China is on the path toward resolving the challenges the nation's orphanages face.

vestigating the impact of interventions and structural changes in orphanages in St. Petersburg. The interventions were designed to promote family-like care rather than the decades-old practices that had emphasized conformity and discipline over warmth and sensitivity.

They found both children and caregivers benefitted from conditions that promoted and sustained warm, sensitive and responsive relationships.

Creating those conditions included training and encouraging caregivers to be more warm, sensitive and responsive in their interactions with the children; integrating loving care into daily routines, such as feeding and bathing; and teaching caregivers how to better interact with children who had disabilities. Structural changes to the orphanages included organizing children in smaller groups; assigning children of different ages, as well as children

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with disabilities, to each group; and allowing children to remain in their group with the same children and caregivers for several years.

Children showed significant improvement across all developmental domains.

On average, their developmental quotient rose from 52 to 92 – the largest increase associated with a developmental intervention ever reported. Their social and emotional behaviors matured. Their physical growth improved. Children with disabilities also made significant developmental gains. Overall, children had fewer, but more consistent caregivers. Caregivers substantially improved their responsiveness and involvement with the children. Job satisfaction was higher. And they grew more confident in their ability to care for children with disabilities.

Researchers also saw that training and supervision alone were not enough.

The children who gained the most were those in orphanages where training was supported by structural changes that created better opportunities for caregivers to practice what they learned. That finding not only has implications for orphanage reform, but also for U.S. early childhood policy and practices, which increasingly emphasize training for teachers, social workers and others who work with young children, but do little to promote structural changes to their workplace that would enable them to get the most out of that training.

The Challenge In China

In China, orphanages generally have adequate infrastructure, staffing and funding. Steady progress is being made in adoption and foster care systems that serve as alternatives to plac-

China has made progress in adoption and foster care in recent years. But of the children who remain in orphanages, nearly 90 percent have moderate to severe disabilities.

ing children in orphanages, including children with mild disabilities.

While China has explored ways to create child-sensitive, family-like care in a few of its orphanages, most orphanages still tend to group children by age and segregate those with disabilities in separate wards. Assigning primary or permanent caregivers to groups of children is uncommon. Caregivers often have little time to devote to individual children and perform their duties with little talking and one-on-one interaction.

Complicating reform is a dramatic increase in the proportion of children with disabilities who now reside in orphanages.

Several reasons account for this surge, including a shortage of resources available to parents to help them care for a child with disabilities at home.

The lack of high quality prenatal care and birthing procedures also contributes to an increase in infants with disabilities. For example, China has seen an increase in children with cerebral palsy, a condition often triggered by preventable trauma to the brain during birth.

China's rule limiting family size to one child still creates a climate in

which families favor keeping the most "viable" infant. Previously, the rule led to an increase of girls being placed in orphanages as a result of families preferring to have a male as their only child. When the rule was relaxed to allow families to adopt a second child, the number of abandoned girls declined, but the percentage of children with disabilities in the orphanages increased.

The good news is that several innovative efforts are underway in China to create more family-like care within the orphanages. OCD researchers found that China does not lack ideas or a commitment to family-like care.

Several small-scale experiments intended to promote family-like care in orphanages are underway. And while bringing the best of those experiments up to scale is a challenge, OCD researchers found among Chinese academics, government officials and others an appetite to get the job done.

"We wanted to gauge whether there is an openness and readiness in China for collaboratively creating family-like settings in orphanages to improve the development of children with disabilities, which can involve difficult decisions and hard work. "That was our big question," said Dr. Li. "And the answer was, Yes."

contacts

Christina J. Groark, Ph.D., Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., co-directors of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD); Junlei Li, Ph.D., director of the OCD Division of Applied Research and Evaluation. Contact: Sharon Blake, University of Pittsburgh Office of Public Affairs, (412) 624-4364.

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OCD Co-Directors: Christina J. Groark, Ph.D.; Robert B. McCall, Ph.D.

background writer/editor: Jeffery Fraser; e-mail: jd.fraser@comcast.net

University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development 400 N. Lexington Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15208; (412) 244-5447; fax: (412) 244-5440

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