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The development of problem behaviour in foster children: a Flemish longitudinal research

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Introduction

- In Flanders foster care is increasingly the first option of choice
- Aims of a foster care placement
 - Immediate protection of the child
 - Providing a nurturing and warm home
 - With the birth parents after reunification if possible
 - With foster parents until majority if necessary
 - Promotion of (socio-emotional) development
 - Promotion of pro-social behaviour
 - Reduction of problem behaviour



Development of problem behaviour

- Social workers and foster parents expect decrease of problem behaviour.
- However,
 - Only a few studies examined longitudinally the development of problem behaviour in foster children
 - Most studies examine the development at group level (nothing is said on the development on a case level)
 - Only 2 studies examined development at case level



Development at group level (1)

- Mostly *foster parents* report no change or an increase of problem behaviour (e.g. Bastiaensen, 2001; Chamberlain et al., 1992; Damen & Veerman, 2005; Damen & Pijnenburg, 2005; Fernandez, 2008; Fisher et al., 2000; Nilson, 2007; Strijker et al., 2000, 2005; Van Holen et al., 2007; Van Oijen, 2010)
- In a few studies *foster parents* report small reductions of problem behaviour shortly after start of placement (Barber, 2003, 2005; Wilson, 2006) or at longer term (18 and 36 months) (Aarons et al., 2010)



Development at group level (2)

- *Foster care workers* report a stabilization (Fernandez, 2009)
- Data from *foster children* are inconclusive:
 - A decrease (Fernandez, 2009)
 - No change (Van Oijen, 2010) and
 - An increase (Farmer et al., 2004) are reported



Development at case level

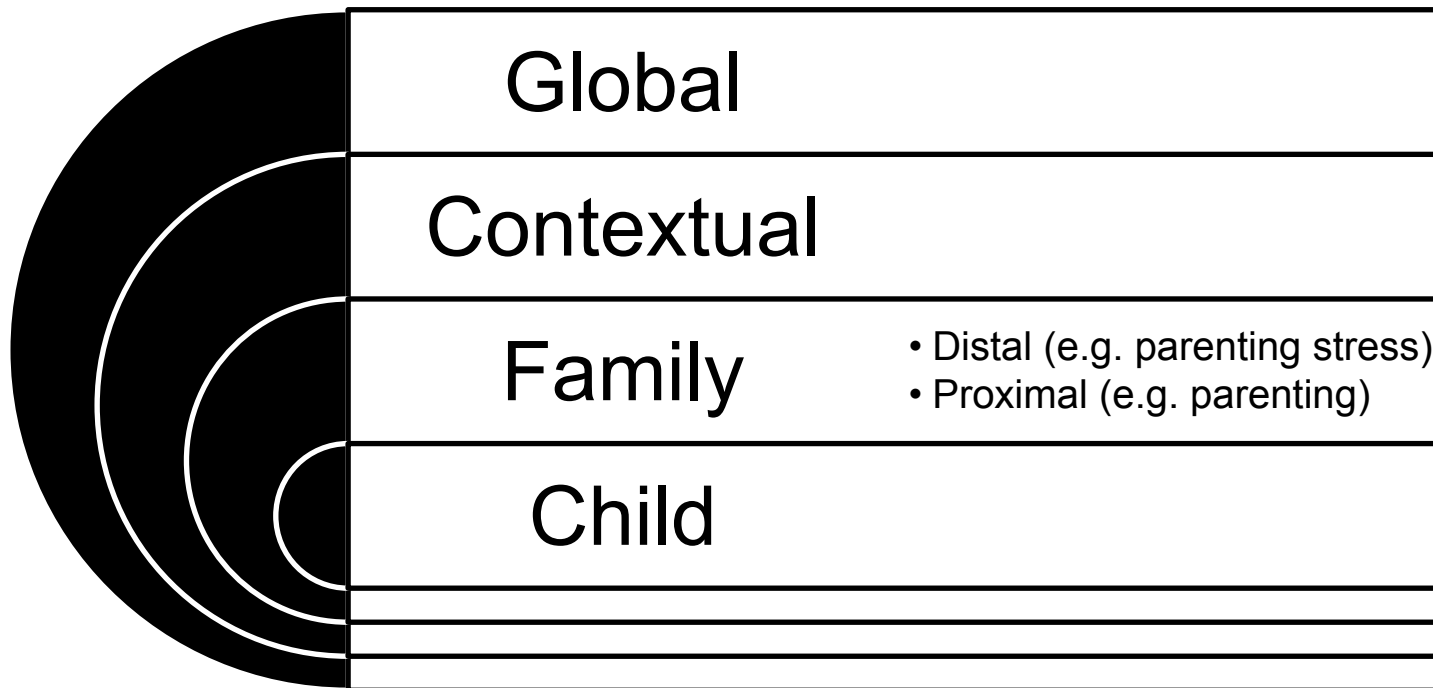
- Few studies examine development at a case level
- For most foster children as reported by *foster parents* the level of problem behaviour remains the same
- An increase is more common than a decrease
- An increase is more severe: more children change in problem status (from normal to borderline/clinical)

Author	Decrease	Stabilization	Increase
Strijker & Zandberg, 2001	13%	66%	20%
Van Oijen, 2010	9%	63%	28%



Development of problem behaviour (1)

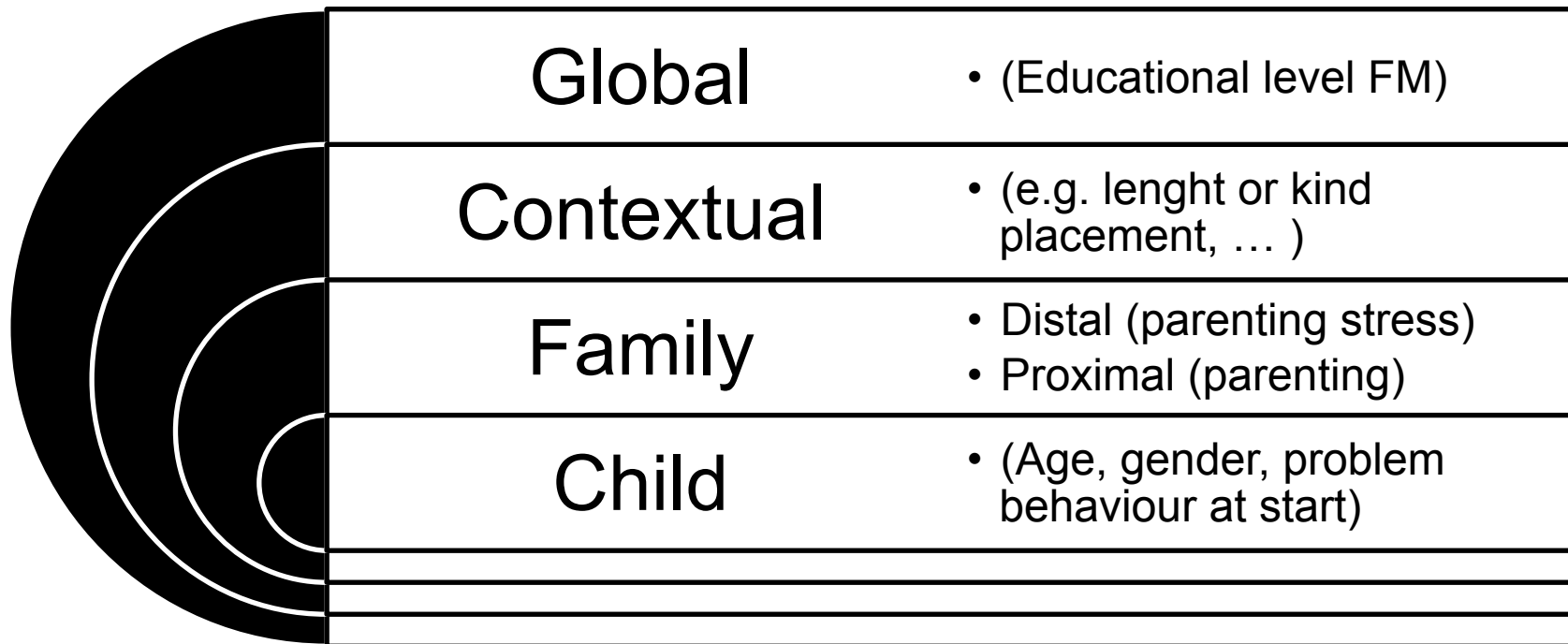
- Development of problem behaviour in *non-foster* children is multi-factorial





Development of problem behaviour (2)

- Development of problem behaviour in foster children is also multi-factorial





Research questions

- How problem behaviour of foster children develops over a period of 2 years?
- Which factors are associated with a decrease or an increase of problem behaviour?



Methods (1)

- Longitudinal design with 2 data collection waves:
 - T1 (2004): 77 Fmothers (out of 96 or 80% response rate)
 - T2 (2006): 49 Fmothers (out of 65 or 75% response rate)
- Characteristics response group (n=49)
 - 37 couples and 12 single mothers
 - 37 non-kinship and 12 kinship placements
 - Fostering 31 girls and 18 boys
 - 33 voluntary placements and 16 children placed by juvenile court
 - Duration of placement from 1 to 11 years (average 4.8 years) (T1)



Methods (2)

- Non-response group: 28 mothers
 - 12 placements already ended (8 breakdowns & 4 planned reunifications)
 - 16 refused collaboration
- Response and non-response group differ:
 - Gender foster child (↑ drop-out foster mothers of boys)
 - Referrer (↑ drop-out of foster mothers of children placed by juvenile court)
 - Problem behaviour (↑ drop-out of foster mothers of children with more PB on T1)
 - Parenting stress (↑ drop-out of foster mothers with more PS on T1)



Methods (3)

- Mothers 2 times questioned:
 - T1 & T2: Problem behaviour with the CBCL (Total problem score)
 - T2: Parenting with Ghent Parental Behaviour Scale.
 - Nine subscales: Positive parenting ($\alpha = .83$), Monitoring ($\alpha = .65$), Rules ($\alpha = .76$), Discipline ($\alpha = .80$), Inconsistent discipline ($\alpha = .60$), Harsh punishment ($\alpha = .62$), Ignoring ($\alpha = .61$), Material rewarding ($\alpha = .71$) and Autonomy ($\alpha = .58$)
 - Positive parenting, Rules and Autonomy form the Support scale ($\alpha = .86$). Discipline, Harsh punishment and Ignoring constitute the Negative Control scale ($\alpha = .69$).
 - T2: Parenting stress with 4 scales of the Nijmegen Child Rearing Questionnaire ($\alpha = .95$)



Methods (4)

- Statistically significant development/ changes were examined with a Reliable Change Index ($\text{score}_{t1} - \text{score}_{t2} / \text{SE}(\text{diff})$)
- $\text{RCI} < -1.64$ or > 1.64 are significant
- Statistically significant is not clinically relevant
- Clinically relevant:
 - Statistically significant change
 - Change of problem status CBCL (normal versus deviant (T-score > 60))

Results (1)

- Behaviour of most children did not change
- But behaviour of more children deteriorated than improved

	Improvement	No development	Deterioration	N
	$RCI > 1.64$	$1.64 \geq RCI \geq -1.64$	$RCI < -1.64$	
Total problem score	8	23	18	49

Note: In the original image, the numbers 8 and 18 are circled in red, and a red double-headed arrow connects them. The number 23 is circled in green.



Results (2)

- No child out of 8 showed clinically relevant progress

Scores T2

		Normal	Deviant	Total
Total Problem score T1	Normal	6	0	6
	Deviant	0	2	2



Results (3)

- 8 children out of 18 (44%) showed clinically relevant deterioration

Scores T2

		Normal	Deviant	Total
Total Problem score T1	Normal	6	8	14
	Deviant	0	4	4



Results (4)

- No child, contextual or global factor is associated with a decrease
- Only family factors (supportive parenting and parenting stress) are associated
- Effects are small

Total Problem score	
Child factors	none
Family factors	
Parenting behaviour: <i>PP</i>	0
<i>MON</i>	0
<i>RUL</i>	0
<i>DISC</i>	0
<i>IncDISC</i>	0
<i>HaPUN</i>	0
<i>IGN</i>	0
<i>REW</i>	0
<i>AUT</i>	0
<i>SUP</i>	+ r= .31
<i>NC</i>	0
ParentStress	- r= .30
Contextual factors	none
Global factor	none



Results (5)

- No child, contextual or global factor is associated with a deterioration
- Only family factors (parenting and parenting stress) are associated
- Effect sizes are moderate

Total Problem score	
Child factors	none
Family factors	
Parenting behaviour: <i>PP</i>	- $r=.29$
<i>MON</i>	0
<i>RUL</i>	0
<i>DISC</i>	+ $r=.30$
<i>IncDISC</i>	0
<i>HaPUN</i>	+ $r=.64$
<i>IGN</i>	0
<i>REW</i>	0
<i>AUT</i>	0
<i>SUP</i>	0
<i>NC</i>	+ $r=.43$
ParentStress	+ $r=.42$
Contextual factors	none
Global factor	none



Discussion

- The expectation problem behaviour decreases is not justified
 - In more foster children problem behaviour got worse
 - A worsening was often more severe
 - No relation with duration of placement \Rightarrow FC may slip back at any time of placement
- Results raise questions about effectiveness of foster care as an intervention and the parenting of foster parents? (e.g. 16% \downarrow PB in FC; 25-60% \downarrow PB in Residential Care)



Discussion

- Due to correlational design causality is not known
- However,
 - Mainly negative parenting and absence of positive relation (including parenting stress) was associated with increase of PB
 - Association of negative parenting with increase PB was stronger than association of positive parenting with decrease
- Thus,
 - Negative parenting \Rightarrow more PB
 - Foster children with more PB \Rightarrow more use of negative parenting



Implications for practice

- Foster parents should be prepared to address problem behaviour (externalizing and internalizing problem behaviour)
- Foster parents should be ready to act as therapeutic agents
- Even in cases of progress, foster children may slip back
- Foster parents should be supported to adapt their parenting and to make it more specific
 - Using alternatives for negative parenting practices
 - Using more positive parenting strategies
- In Flanders recently an intervention was developed, implemented and evaluated with promising results



Limitations

- High drop-out and drop-out of most severe cases
- Only two years follow-up
- Placements were not followed from beginning of placement
- All foster families came from one foster care agency



Conclusions

- Conform literature behavioural problems of foster children remain stable or increase
- Promoting positive parenting and reducing the use of negative parenting strategies can contribute to a reduction of problem behaviour
- Support programs should be developed in order to make foster care more effective
- A start is made in Flanders



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