



33rd Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar
February 4, 2015

Helping Foster Kids Succeed

State Strategies for Saving Lives, Saving Money

Executive Summary of the Briefing Report

In 2013, 6,516 Wisconsin children were exposed to abuse, neglect, or adverse experiences in their own families and placed in out-of-home care. Foster care policy provides policymakers with an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of some of society's most vulnerable members. Placement in foster care can be a turning point for an upward trajectory or for a downward spiral. Foster kids, through no fault of their own, are at high risk for psychological and behavioral problems; these problems decrease the odds that foster youth will be reunified with their parents and increase the odds of longer foster stays and more placement changes. Policymakers across the country have seized this opportunity to provide foster youth with stable environments and supportive adult relationships. This briefing report features three researchers who have devoted their careers to placing foster kids on a positive path to becoming productive workers and contributing citizens. To date, policymakers in 18 states have adopted one of the research-based, family-focused programs or policies described in this report.

Overview of Wisconsin's foster care system

In the first chapter, the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families provides an "Overview of the Child Welfare System and Foster Care in Wisconsin." The goal of Wisconsin's child welfare system is to safely maintain children in their own home, family, and community with connections, culture, and relationships preserved and established. In 2013, 27,037 reports were "screened-in" by county and Milwaukee child welfare agencies with 5,466 substantiated allegations of child abuse and/or neglect. As of December 31, 2013, there were 6,516 Wisconsin children in out-of-home care with about one third (34%) living with relatives. In total, over 8 in 10 (84%) children in out-of-home care are living with a relative or foster family and 1 in 10 (10%) live in a group home or residential care center. Of children in out-of-home care, about one third (34%) are aged 4 and under, and about one third (31%) are 11 to 16. The average number of out-of-home placements for all children in

Wisconsin's child welfare system is 2.5, with an average of 4.8 placements for youth aged 17 to 19. The majority (60%) of youth reunify with their families.

Are there benefits to extending foster care to age 21?

In the second chapter, Professor Mark Courtney of the University of Chicago draws on evidence from his Midwest Study of Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin to address the question, "Do the Benefits of Extending Foster Care to Age 21 Outweigh the Costs?" This chapter focuses on the 377 Wisconsin youth who aged out of foster care in 2013 without achieving a permanent placement. Policymakers are questioning whether foster youth who are too old for the child welfare system are still unprepared to live as independent young adults. Professor Courtney compared how the life chances of foster youth are affected by extending state support through age 21, an option that existed at the time of his study in Illinois, but not in Iowa or Wisconsin. By age 21, Illinois foster youth, compared to their peers in Iowa and Wisconsin, were twice as likely to have ever attended college and more than twice as likely to have completed at least one year of college. Every \$1 that Illinois spends on extending care beyond age 18 increases by nearly \$2 the estimated lifetime earnings of foster youth. Other benefits of extending foster care are delayed pregnancy in late adolescence, delayed homelessness, reduced criminal behavior and justice system involvement among women in early adulthood, and greater involvement of young fathers with their children.

Can we improve children's behavior through strengthening parenting skills?

Patricia Chamberlain, Senior Researcher at the Oregon Social Learning Center, writes about her three decades of experience working with foster youth in the third chapter, "Strong Parenting, Successful Youth: The Parent Training 10 States are Providing to Foster Families." According to Chamberlain, one of the primary reasons

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foster parents stop providing care and children experience placement changes is lack of skill in managing children's behavior. Her carefully designed and evaluated programs help foster youth succeed by strengthening the parenting skills of foster and birth parents. For chronically delinquent foster boys, Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC) decreased delinquent behaviors and increased days spent living with parents or relatives. In an adaptation of MTFC, foster girls referred from the juvenile justice system were less likely to become pregnant and to be incarcerated. For every dollar spent on MTFC, taxpayers saved \$17 in criminal justice and victim costs by the time youth were 25 years old. KEEP, a less-intensive adaptation for "regular" foster youth, reduced behavior problems and placement instability. KEEP Safe, a preventive adaptation for foster girls entering middle school, lowered substance use and placement instability. With effective parenting, foster youth also learned how to be more responsible family members and friends.

Can we reduce or eliminate toxic stress in infants and young children by training parents?

In the fourth chapter, Professor Mary Dozier, Amy E. DuPont Chair of Child Development at the University of Delaware, discusses "Offsetting Toxic Stress by Training Parents of Infants and Young Children in Foster Care: The ABC Program Operating in 11 States." Professor Dozier's research focuses on infants and young children, who are at greatest risk for being maltreated. Her Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-Up (ABC) is a scalable and powerful parenting program that offsets the damaging effects of early toxic stress by training foster and birth parents to be more nurturing, less frightening, and more responsive to their child's cues. ABC increases parents' sensitivity

and improves parents' attachment relationships with their children. Children in ABC were more likely to have secure attachments and less likely to have disorganized attachments than children in a comparison intervention. Also, in contrast to comparison children, ABC children showed better self-regulation and, remarkably, more normal production of a stress hormone, an effect that persisted three years after the program ended.

Viewing foster care through the family impact lens

Foster care is inherently a family issue. The goal of Wisconsin's child welfare system is to safely maintain children and youth in their own families whenever possible. What's more, the most effective approach to helping maltreated and foster kids succeed is promoting the powerful socialization forces of functional family life. The cornerstone is the parent. When parents are trained to be responsive and to use effective behavior management skills, kids show an impressive ability to overcome toxic stress and to catch-up physically, intellectually, and socially. In rigorous studies of exemplary programs, strengthening the parenting skills of birth and foster parents reduced kids' behavior problems at school and home, and taught them to better self-regulate and to be more responsible family members and friends. When kids' behaviors are less problematic and more responsible, the stability of kids' lives improves, reducing the downward spiral that often occurs when foster youth are bounced from placement to placement. One family-centered approach with an independent cost-benefit analysis yielded a resounding return of \$17 for every \$1 invested. ●

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Using research to build better public policy for families

Since 1993, the Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars have connected state policymakers with objective, high-quality research on timely issues such as early brain development, jobs, evidence-based budgeting, growing the state economy, corrections programs, long-term care, prisoner reentry, health care, workforce development, and preparing youth for workforce success. The seminars aim to (a) build greater respect for and use of research in policy decisions; (b) encourage policymakers to examine policies and programs through the lens of family impacts; and (c) provide neutral, nonpartisan opportunities for legislators to engage in open dialogue for fostering relationships and finding common ground.

Check out our website (www.wisfamilyimpact.org) for audio and video of speakers at previous seminars, as well as briefing reports and other resources. The briefing report described here, "Helping Foster Kids Succeed: State Strategies for Saving Lives, Saving Money," accompanied the 33rd Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar. The full report, edited by the Seminar Director, Professor Karen Bogenschneider, can be downloaded from our website. Hard copies are available to state legislators at no charge by contacting Associate Director Heidi Normandin at (608) 263-2353 or hjnorman@wisc.edu.