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The Impact of Long-Term Psychotherapy for Very Young Foster Children

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The Impact of Long-Term Psychotherapy for Very Young Foster Children
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BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

- Child maltreatment is a major societal problem with short- and long-term consequences including behavioral problems, poor self-esteem, depression, anxiety, substance use, revictimization, academic and vocational problems, incarceration, and homelessness.
- Approximately one fifth of children who come to the attention of Child Protective Service agencies are removed from their homes and placed in foster care; this separation often serves as a secondary trauma, compounding existing problems.
- Over one-third of foster children are under five years of age and these children are at increased risk of developmental and psychological difficulties.
- Research has not yet evaluated the impact of mental health treatment for very young children who are in foster care.
- The purpose of the current study is to evaluate the impact of long-term, relationship based treatment (RBT) provided to very young children in foster care by a nation-wide program which provides treatment “as long as it takes” on a pro bono basis.

METHOD

Therapist Participants (N = 13)
- Mean Age: 44.8 years (SD = 10.88 years)
- 92.3% Female
- 84.6% White
- 61.5% Licensed Psychologists
- Clinical Experience: 1 - 25 years (M=10.69 years; SD = 7.63 years)

RESULTS

Patient Demographics (N = 13)
- Pre-School Age at start of treatment (M = 3.80 yrs; range = 2.25 - 4.87 yrs; SD = 0.85 yrs)
- 53.8% female

RESULTS

Parameters of Treatment
- Frequency of Treatment: 53.8% once per week; 23.1% once every other week
- Mean Treatment Duration = 3.62 years (range = 0.42 – 16.08 yrs; SD = 4.46 years)
- The majority of therapists conducted ongoing collaborative work during treatment with the child’s foster parents (61.5%), teachers (61.5%), and other school personnel (38.5%)

DISCUSSION

- This sample of clinically diverse pre-school-aged foster children who were removed from home for reasons of neglect and/or parents’ inability to care take attended long-term weekly/bi-weekly psychotherapy for 3.5 years.
- Therapists conducted ongoing collaborative work during treatment with foster parents, teachers, and other school personnel.
- The most common obstacles to treatment delivery were lack of transportation, lack of support from foster parents and resistance from the patient.
- The majority of therapists reported at least some progress over the course of treatment; patient symptoms which improved significantly included school problems, anxiety, dissociation symptoms, peer relationships problems, relationship problems in current living situation, sexual behaviors, and conduct problems.
- Primary limitations include small sample size, potential bias of therapist informants, and the lack of a comparison group.
- Future work should examine changes in treatment targets and symptom reductions at multiple points during long-term psychotherapy, examine changes in important areas of psychological health over the course of long-term treatment that are not measured by a symptom checklist, collect data from multiple informants, and generate a comparison group.

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