

Youths in child welfare system behave better with early intervention

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Children in the welfare system would have a better chance of staying out of trouble if their caregivers are trained in ways to prevent delinquent behavior before it festers, a new study says.

The current child welfare system emphasizes services to youths experiencing serious behavior problems, but spends less effort on preventive services, said Andrew Grogan-Kaylor, assistant professor in the University of Michigan School of Social Work and lead author of the study.

"These findings suggest the preventive services when youths first enter the child welfare system may alter the pathway to delinquent behaviors for them," Grogan-Kaylor said. He collaborated with Mary Ruffolo and Robert Ortega, both with the U-M School of Social Work, and Jenell Clarke, a doctoral student in the joint program in social work and psychology.

Although specific suggestions are not offered in the study, the authors say that caregivers could meet monthly with a social worker to discuss ways to maintain a positive relationship with their child. These sessions could address issues such as coping with stress, active listening, and communicating honestly with their child. Caregivers could also be encouraged to have regular family times with the child, such as playing board games and reading books.

To improve monitoring, caregivers could be more aware of where the

children are and ask what they are doing and who they are spending time with on a regular basis. The idea of monitoring could be extended to involve group discussions with the parent-child or teens talking with other teens about their lives, the authors indicated.

The study, which looked at nearly 1,200 teens ages 11-14 years, used data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being. Researchers analyzed the child welfare system risk factors the youths faced living at home and the level of delinquent behaviors that occurred during an 18-month analysis.

Older youths were more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors than younger youths. Girls were less likely to engage in delinquent behaviors than boys. Race or ethnicity did not have a statistically significant relationship with engaging in delinquent behaviors, the study showed.

Compared with neglected youths, kids who were physically abused were more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors. Other forms of child maltreatment did not have a statistically significant effect on youths who acted badly, Grogan-Kaylor said.

"An important finding in our study is that race or ethnicity did not increase the likelihood of a youth engaging in delinquent behavior over time," said co-author Robert Ortega. "However, the reality is that throughout this country there is a disproportionate number of youth of color in the child welfare system. By emphasizing effective prevention interventions, we are increasing the likelihood that many of these maltreated youth will be steered away from a delinquency path."

The findings appear in the current issue of *Child Abuse & Neglect*.

Source: University of Michigan

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