Foster Care

A summary of the scientific literature on foster care and Child Protective Services (CPS).



How This Impacts Children's Development

Foster care is meant to be a safe respite for children being harmed by their family members. However, the assumption among the public and some scholars and practitioners is that placements can be harmful, and

rarely, if ever, justified. Policymakers can do more to ensure that the safety and well-being of children in foster care is prioritized. Major pieces of legislation impacting and improving foster care include the “Family First Protection Services Act” (FFPSA) of 2018, and the “Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act” of 2008.

READ THE BRIEF: PRIORITIZING SLEEP HEALTH IN FOSTER CARE: TRAUMA-INFORMED CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICY, 2025

READ THE BRIEF: Foster Care: How We Can, and Should, do More for Maltreated Children, 2020

READ THE BRIEF: youth in foster care: easing the transition into adulthood, 2009

Talking Points from the SRCD Briefs

- In 2018, over 680,000 children were in foster care, with 62% placed due to neglect, 36% due to parental substance abuse, and 13% due to physical abuse.
- While federal law requires each child to have a plan to ensure a safe, permanent placement through reunification with the biological parent(s), guardianship, or adoption, each state has its own policies, regulations, and guidelines regarding “safe and proper” foster care.
- The foster care system often fails to meet safety standards, causing harm to children’s development through frequent moves and leaving them without legal family ties or stable homes as they reach adulthood.
- For example, despite substantial reports of sleep problems among children in foster care, sleep-health related regulations and guidelines vary by state and generally provide minimal standards associated with physical space and safety rather than children's biological and emotional needs.
- Native American and Black children are disproportionately involved in the child welfare system and are often socially and economically disadvantaged compared to White, Asian, and Hispanic children.

Policy Considerations in the Briefs

1. Agencies should leverage strategies to eliminate the potential influence of individual-level bias, such as color-blinded team decision-making for removal and reunification recommendations and ethical use of predictive risk modeling.
2. Policies should utilize child-centered, trauma-informed approaches for selecting sleep arrangements; and evidence-based behavioral methods to address child sleep problems.
3. Minimum standards for foster homes should be strengthened, including prohibiting licensing for people convicted of misdemeanor child abuse or violent crimes, and people who were substantiated as having perpetrated child maltreatment through a Child Protective Services (CPS) case.
4. States should do more to support families that provide care for children with high levels of physical, mental, or behavioral health problems, and extend foster care support beyond the age of 18.
5. Federal policymakers should invest in research and evaluation, including evaluating models of coordination between child welfare agencies and other public institutions that support young people in foster care.

READ THE BRIEF: prioritizing sleep health in foster care: trauma-informed considerations for policy, 2025

READ THE BRIEF: Foster Care: How We Can, and Should, do More for Maltreated Children, 2020

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