NEWS | POSTED AUGUST 20, 2025

Foster Care Timing May Affect Children's School Performance

PRESS RELEASE / CHILD DEVELOPMENT: Embargoed for Release on August 20, 2025

PRESS RELEASE

Published

Wednesday, August 20, 2025

12:51pm

Foster Care Entry and Later Academic Achievement Among Infants Involved With Child Protective Services

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Research shows that early childhood maltreatment is associated with significant delays in social and cognitive development. Unfortunately, according to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, children under age one face the highest risk of maltreatment, particularly neglect. The Child Protective Services (CPS) system is responsible for responding to maltreatment and preventing its recurrence. Most children with substantiated maltreatment reports remain with their parents, and CPS provides services to the parents (including substance use treatment or parenting classes) to rectify the conditions that led to maltreatment. Most foster care entries occur during early childhood, from the newborn period to five years old, but most research on foster care is focused on older children. Debate over the impacts of foster care has persisted for many years, yet little attention has been paid to the timing of children's entry into foster care.

To remedy the gap in literature, researchers from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and the Pennsylvania State University followed 8,795 Wisconsin children referred to CPS during their first year of life from birth until third grade. They examined the associations between the age of first foster care placement and school test scores, exposure to punitive discipline (suspension), and chronic absenteeism. The findings suggest that compared to no foster care intervention, foster care during early infancy is related to a higher likelihood of demonstrating basic or above reading skills and a lower likelihood of chronic absenteeism.

The study which was comprised of 51% male; 47% white, 21% Black, 16% Hispanic, and 16% other race/ethnicity, controlled for factors that may affect both foster care placement and educational outcomes, such as family structure, participation in poverty programs, disability, and maternal age. Researchers examined the following questions: compared with CPS-involved children who never experienced foster care by age five, how is foster care entry before age six months, at six-24 months, and at two-four years associated with third grade academic outcomes (math and reading tests, discipline, and chronic absenteeism). This study also explored racial disparities in foster care outcomes. Early childhood (especially infancy), is a highly sensitive period for cognitive and social development that affects later school performance and the change in environment provided by foster care –whether positive or negative – may be more impactful at younger ages. Improved school outcomes for children experiencing early-life foster care may reflect the fact that children receive more developmental and preventive health care services in foster care and there are a broader array of professionals monitoring their well-being.

This research was featured in a new *Child Development* article with authors Dr. Kierra Sattler from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Drs. Sarah Font and Carlomagno Panlilio from Pennsylvania State University in the United States. The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) had the opportunity to speak with the author team to learn more about the research.

SRCD: Did anything in the results surprise you?

Author team: We were surprised that the positive associations between early-life foster care and children's academic outcomes were concentrated among Black children, with limited benefits for white children. These findings require cautious interpretation, given the uniquely traumatic history of Black families in America and the persistent racialized residential segregation and income inequality in Wisconsin. We also note that within our sample of infants reported to CPS – a distinctly disadvantaged population -- there were substantial disparities in family context for Black and white children, including family structure, maternal age, and anti-poverty program participation.

SRCD: Can you please explain how this research might be helpful for families, policymakers and the Child Protective Services system?

Author team: We believe these results are helpful for multiple audiences in several ways. First, there is large concern about the potential negative impacts of foster care on children who come into contact with CPS early in life that include facing substantial development threats that can disadvantage later academic outcomes. In our specific sample of young children who were the subject of a CPS investigation by age one in Wisconsin, we do not find that foster care placement is negatively related to academic outcomes. On the contrary, we found that early placement was linked to positive academic outcomes and lower absenteeism. Second, we think these findings can be helpful for informing home-based services. When children are placed in foster care, they are more likely to have many different providers checking on them, ensuring that they attend school, or engaging them in intervention services. However, children who remain in-home receive comparatively fewer support and resources, as agencies are primarily focused on safety monitoring and providing rehabilitative services to parents. This highlights an important area of growth for multidisciplinary systems to ensure that similar wrap-around services that include home visiting and early intervention services are provided. This underscores the need to connect children who remain in-home with targeted evidence-based services to mitigate risks to children's development and learning.

SRCD: Can you please address some of the research limitations?

Author team: It is important to acknowledge that our data were drawn from only one state, Wisconsin, and our results may not apply in other locations. Of particular relevance is the racial context of Wisconsin, in which the majority of Black children reside in a single county, Milwaukee, which is highly segregated. In addition, our data lacked information on the types, amount, and effectiveness of services offered to and accepted by families, both in-home and in foster care.

SRCD: What's next in this field of research?

Author team: There remain many questions on the impacts of foster care on children and families. Based on this work, an important follow-up inquiry would be to understand the quantity, duration, type, and quality of services that parents and children receive at home and in foster care. It is unclear from our analysis whether these services – or other factors related to caregiving and the home environment – explain the associations between early-life placement in foster care and children's developmental and academic well-being.

This research was funded by the National Institutes of Health's Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and The Pennsylvania State University.

Summarized from an article in *Child Development*, "Foster care entry and later academic achievement among infants involved with child protective services," by Sattler, K. (University of North Carolina at Greensboro), Font, S. and Panlilio, C. (The Pennsylvania State University). Copyright 2025 The Society for Research in Child Development. All rights reserved.