Resultaat van pleegzorgplaatsingen
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Summary

The objective of foster care placements is generally to restore the original upbringing environment as soon as possible or to obtain clarity in the short term about the feasibility of doing so (Hermanns & Horn, 2000). Where possible, foster care placements are of a clearly defined, temporary nature as every effort is made to return foster children to their homes. However, if it is not possible to reunite children with their families in an acceptable upbringing environment, foster care placement aims to offer new prospects for the children’s upbringing (Weterings, 1991, 2005).

Despite the fact that growing numbers of young people are being placed in foster care, little is known at present about their development during such placements (Lambermon, 2005; Lipscombe, Moyers & Farmer, 2004; Strijker & Zandberg, 2001; Zandberg, Knorth & Strijker, 2007). A study by Strijker and Zandberg (2001) also shows that about 30% of long-term foster care placements in the Netherlands terminate unfavourably and prematurely (in other words, they break down).

Placement breakdowns often have negative consequences for all those involved. For foster children, these may include reduced regulation of aggression, a negative self-image and growing mistrust of caregivers (Junger-Tas, 1981; Van den Bergh & Weterings, 2006). The foster child’s ability to bond with future caregivers is reduced still further (Rosenfeld et al., 1997) and there is a negative spiral of increasing behavioural problems, which in turn increases the risk of future breakdown (Newton et al., 2000). For foster families, breakdown gives rise to tensions in family relationships (Gilbertson & Barber, 2003; Redding, Fried & Britner, 2000) and feelings of failure among foster parents (Denby, Rindfleisch & Bean, 1999; Minty, 1999). This may lead to foster family burn-out and to that family being lost to the care provider (Strijker & Zandberg, 2001).

As yet, no studies have been conducted into the prevalence of placement breakdown among adolescent foster children in the Netherlands. However, foreign studies show a high number of breakdowns for this group, ranging from 40% to over 50% (Farmer, Moyers & Lipscombe, 2004; Leathers, 2006; Sallnäs, Vinnerljung & Westermark, 2004).

The present study seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge concerning the progress of foster care placements and to examine which foster child and foster family characteristics are associated with breakdown. In this, we looked specifically at the long-term foster care placement of adolescents. In addition to placement continuity, this study also investigated the development of foster children during placements. This is because it is not inconceivable
that some placements may continue even though they are not optimal for a child’s development (Farmer et al., 2004; Lipscombe, Farmer & Moyers, 2003; Minty, 1999; Walsh & Walsh, 1990). Placement continuity and the child’s development during the placement are both seen as indicators of placement outcome. The main research question is therefore: What combination of foster child and/or foster family characteristics is predictive of placement outcome?

To answer this question, we examined foster care within the conceptual framework of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory and Kok’s (1997) orthopedagogical theory. Rink’s (2004) 4-variable model was then used as a frame of reference to analyse the parenting environment within the foster families and to conduct a literature review of placement continuity and the development of foster children during placement. This revealed the following.

With regard to placement continuity, the literature review showed consistency among studies in terms of correlation with the foster child characteristics of age, externalizing behavioural problems and care history. Foster children who are older at the start of a placement, who exhibit severe externalizing behavioural problems and who have a longer history of care are at increased risk of placement breakdown. Studies of other foster child characteristics such as sex, ethnicity, physical handicap, motivation and level of intelligence show a less clear-cut association with placement continuity. Less unequivocal results were found with regard to the link between placement continuity and foster family characteristics. Although some studies indicated a correlation between personal characteristics of foster parents (age, degree of stress and motivation) and placement continuity, in general these studies were not replicated or they produced contradictory outcomes. With regard to foster parents’ parenting style, there were indications that support and control aspects of parenting are associated with placement continuity. The chance of breakdown seems to be smaller for foster parents with an authoritative parenting style. Once again, however, the number of studies was very small and research findings were not clear-cut. The same applies to studies of the correlation between characteristics of the foster family’s situational context (such as whether foster parents had children of their own, the age difference between these children and the foster child, and socio-economic status) and placement continuity. There was a marked difference between Dutch and foreign studies with regard to an association with the type of foster family (kinship or non-relative). In contrast to foreign studies, foster family type did not correlate with placement continuity in the Dutch studies. This may perhaps be attributable to differences in legislation and socio-economic circumstances.

For child development during foster care placements, this study reviewed a number of longitudinal studies in the Netherlands and abroad that looked at changes in the emotional and behavioural functioning of foster children. In general, the studies showed stable emotional and behavioural functioning of foster children at the group level. A number of studies also identified changes at the individual level, with improved functioning for between 20% and almost 50% of children.
Answers to the main research question were also sought by setting up an empirical study into the progress of foster care placements. This study had a prospective longitudinal design with two measurement moments. Data was collected from both foster parents and foster children at the level of the foster child (K variable), the foster parent (O variable) and the foster family’s situational context (Sc variable) for new placements involving children between the ages of 11 and 17. In addition to various background variables, this involved emotional and behavioural functioning (both foster parent and child as informants) and the attitude of foster children towards social limits (foster child as informant) at the level of the foster child, the foster parent’s approach to child-parenting (foster parent as informant) at the level of the foster parent and family climate (foster parent as informant) at the level of the situational context.

Results

Placement progress
Almost half (45.7%) of the foster care placements in the study had broken down within eighteen months of the first measurement. The average length of these placements was 13 months. Univariate logistical regression analysis was performed to establish the predictive value of the variables at the level of the foster child, foster parent and situational context. Here the background variables of ‘age of the foster child’, ‘type of schooling’ and ‘residence history’, as well as self-reports and foster parent reports of the child’s emotional and behavioural functioning and parenting score, were associated with placement progress. Family climate was not shown to be associated with placement progress.

Multivariate logistical regression analyses were used to test which combination of predictors most accurately predicted placement progress. This involved first testing a theoretical model, which served as a reference for the other models and which contained the predictors ‘externalizing behavioural problems’ (foster parent as informant), ‘age of foster child’ and ‘residence history’ of the foster child prior to placement as an indication of the child’s care history. The model, which was statistically significant, correctly classified 67.4% of placements. We then tested which combination of predictors could improve the predictive model. We first examined foster parent reports on problem behaviour, then self-reports and finally a combination of the two. We found that the model combining foster parent and foster child reports produced the most accurate prediction of placement progress. This model – involving the predictors ‘externalizing problem behaviour’ (foster parent as informant), ‘internalizing problem behaviour’ (foster child as informant), ‘age of foster child’ and ‘residence history’ – correctly classified 79.5% of placements.

Finally, the parenting score in the multivariate model was not shown to make a unique contribution to predicting placement progress.

Placement progress and foster child development
In the analysis of developmental differences between foster children whose placement broke down and those whose placement proceeded as planned, we found that, at the group level, foster parents in the breakdown group experienced significantly more problem
behaviour at both measurements than those in the other group. Both groups also showed a significant increase in externalizing problem behaviour and overall problem behaviour. Finally, the analyses for internalizing, externalizing and overall problem behaviour showed a significant interaction effect (of placement outcome over measurement). On each of these scales, foster parents in the breakdown group experienced on average a greater increase in behavioural problems during placement than foster parents in the other group. Analyses at the individual level showed that foster parents experienced a significant increase in behavioural problems for almost half the placement breakdowns. For the placements that went according to plan, 15% showed a significant increase in behavioural problems. With regard to changes in self-reported problem behaviour, foster children in the breakdown group reported significantly more internalizing problem behaviour at both measurements. This also applied to self-reported overall problem behaviour, but not to externalizing problem behaviour. No intra-group and interaction effects were found. The analyses at the individual level showed no difference between the two groups. For both the breakdown group and the group whose placements went according to plan, three-quarters of foster children showed no significant change in the problem scores between the two measurements. In addition, in each group, about 15% of children reported a significant decline in problem behaviour and 10% reported a significant increase.

Outcome of foster care placements
Finally, the outcome of the foster care placement was determined using individual development scores and the placement progress for each placement. There were two categories of placement outcomes – ‘positive’ and ‘negative’. Placements that proceeded as planned and for which a decline or stabilization in overall problem behaviour was reported were assigned to the ‘positive outcome’ category. Placements that had broken down or for which an increase in overall problem behaviour was reported were categorized as having a ‘negative outcome’.

From the foster parent’s perspective, half of placements had a positive outcome. From the foster child’s perspective, this figure was almost 60%.

We then tested which predictors could most accurately predict placement outcome. When predicting the outcome from the foster parent’s perspective, the model containing the predictors ‘overall problem behaviour’ (foster parent as informant) and the foster child’s ‘age’ and ‘type of schooling’ correctly classified 66.7% of placements. From the foster child’s perspective, only the predictors ‘age’ and ‘type of schooling’ were shown to contribute to the predictive model. This model was able to correctly classify 71.2% of placement outcomes.

This study has shown that almost half of the foster care placements of adolescents came to an unfavourable premature end, or in other words resulted in breakdown. Multivariate analyses revealed that only foster child characteristics are associated with placement progress. This study demonstrates that it is possible to assess the risk of breakdown at an early stage of the placement. It therefore makes recommendations about applying this in practice.