

Summary Report

The Bucharest Early Intervention Study

Key Findings on Children Living Outside of Family Care

Main Finding

- Children living outside of family care should be placed into family care at the earliest age possible. Early placement into family care results in the best outcome for the child.
- Children living outside of family care suffer greatly from diminished development.
- Placement into family care at an early age significantly improves cognitive, emotional and behavioral development.

Children living outside of family care have a variety of social and behavioral abnormalities:

- Aggressive behavioral problems
- Inattention/hyperactivity
- Delays in social/emotional development
- Syndrome that mimics autism which disappears once the child is adopted

Poor growth

- Children outside of family care lose one month of growth for every 3.0 months living in an institution

Deficit IQ

- Children living outside of family care show diminished intellectual performance which borders on mental retardation.
- Children entering family care before 24 months of age display significant improvement in IQ
- Children entering family care after 24 months of age display only a slight improvement in IQ

Brain Activity

- Children living outside of family care have lower levels of brain activity across all regions of the brain
- Children living outside of family care who are placed into family care demonstrate an increase in IQ and brain development

Emotional Reactivity

- Children living outside of family care demonstrate a significant deficiency in sensory perception including responses to and understanding facial emotion.



An Intervention to Institutionalization: The Bucharest Study

In many parts of the world, institutionalization is the most common care for abandoned and orphaned children. The care that children receive in the early stages of their childhood is an essential factor in their development. Children who have been neglected early in life experience long lasting affects that may be irreversible. Several studies have been conducted to assess the affects of institutionalization on the cognitive and emotional development of children. The Bucharest Study, conducted by a team of researchers, is the first randomized trial of foster care as an intervention to the deprivation children face as a result of institutionalization.

Study Design

The Bucharest Study was conducted for five years in Bucharest, Romania. The study was an examination on the affect that institutionalization has on the cognitive and behavioral development of young children. The study was to assess whether foster care can remediate the affects of institutionalization, and whether foster care is the proper alternative. The participants of the study were an institutionalized group and a non-institutionalized group. The trial consisted of 136 institutionalized children, with no pre-existing medical conditions, between 6 and 31 months, with the average age of 22 months. Of those 136 children, 68 were randomly assigned to remain in the institution, and 68 were assigned to foster care. The non-institutionalized group was used as a control group, and consisted of 72 children who were never institutionalized. The trial consisted of an assessment of physical development, language, social functioning/social-emotional development, environment, cognition, temperament, attachment, brain function, and mental health problems.

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Permanent Care Preferred Over Temporary Care

Based on the principal of the best interest of the child, the UNCRC, the Hague Convention, and the Hague Guide to Good Practice, Joint Council recommends the following hierarchy for the placement of children currently living outside of permanent parental care.

- 1 Family Reunification
- 2 Permanent Guardianship by Extended Family Members (Kinship Care)
- 3 Domestic Adoption
- 4 International Adoption
- 5 Group Homes or other types of State/Private care

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Conclusion

Depriving children of care and attention has severe psychological and physical affects on children. Institutionalized children are deprived of an adequate environment to gain sufficient cognitive and emotional development. The results of the study indicate a deficiency in the physical growth, IQ, brain development, and emotional/behavioral development of institutionalized children. To understand the affects of institutions, it is important to understand the human brain. For the brain to function correctly, it needs a certain amount of stimulation. Children in institutions lack the stimulation to gain adequate brain development, and therefore suffer the detrimental affects of institutionalization.

It is now understood that there are sensitive periods for cognitive development. Generally, synapses (connections between neurons) are overproduced in newborns, who therefore have many more synapses than adults. Over time, synapses are lost, and timing becomes very important. The Bucharest Study indicates that institutionalized children were developmentally delayed in every measured domain, but it also indicates that placing these children in family care will allow for great improvements. The main findings of the study confirmed that children reared in institutions suffer from greatly diminished development, and those who are in family care experience significant improvement in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development. One of the main findings of the study concluded that as a group, children randomly assigned to family care experience a significant gain in cognitive function. In conclusion, the younger the child is when placed in family care, the better the outcome.

Study Publishing (partial list)

- *Infant Mental Health Journal*
- *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*
- *Child Development Perspectives*
- *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*
- *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*
- *Development and Psychopathology*
- *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*
- *Child Development*
- *Infant Behavior and Development*