Placement Stability

Placement stability for children in out-of-home care: its importance and ways it can be increased*  

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FAST FACTS

- Almost thirty per cent of Queensland children who left care in 2014-15 experienced four or more placements.²
- A significant group of children in out-of-home care experienced more severe and ongoing levels of placement instability (more than seven placements).²
- A stable attachment to an adult caregiver is important for the healthy development of all children.³ ⁴ Placement instability affects the development of stable attachments.¹²
- Stability is essential during childhood but also for lifelong healthy development.⁸ ⁹
- Children who have experienced placement instability are more likely to have academic, social and mental health problems.¹²
- A range of factors contribute to placement instability including child, placement and system factors.
- Experiences of early trauma and abuse very frequently co-occur with placement instability.³

A stable and consistent home environment is important for the healthy development of all children. Placement instability, however, can be common for many children in out-of-home care. Policy makers and practitioners need to be aware of factors which contribute to instability and consider introducing strategies to promote stability.

1. Rates of placement stability for Australian children

The Productivity Commission reports annually on the placement stability of Australian children who left care during the previous 12 months. They define placement stability as children experiencing only one or two placements during their most recent time in care. In 2014-15, rates of placement stability were 87.8 per cent (for those in care < 12 months), and 60.3 per cent (for those in care > 12 months).¹

Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services provides data on the number of placements experienced by Queensland children who left care during the previous 12 months.² Of the 1543 children exiting care in 2014-2015, almost 30 per cent experienced 4 or more placements. A sub-group of children in care, particularly those with abuse experiences, experience ongoing and severe placement disruption.³ More than 10 per cent of the Queensland cohort experienced 7 or more placements.

2. Why is placement stability important?

Decades of research have established that a stable attachment to a responsive adult caregiver is important for all children and young people.³ ⁴ This attachment promotes a range of healthy social, emotional and physical...
wellbeing outcomes for children. It is essential during childhood but also for lifelong healthy development.

Research on children in out-of-home care has confirmed that placement stability is essential for establishing and promoting a healthy attachment to a primary caregiver. Healthy attachments appear to reduce issues commonly reported about children in out-of-home care such as stress, behaviour problems and mental health issues.

On the other hand, high rates of placement instability prevent children in out-of-home care from forming attachments to caregivers. High levels of placement instability are associated with a range of negative outcomes for children in out-of-home care including an increased risk of social and mental health problems as well as academic problems at school.

3. Factors that contribute to placement stability

Child characteristics contributing to placement instability include health, mental health, and behaviour problems. Experiences of early trauma and abuse very frequently co-occur with placement instability. The research is mixed on whether or not gender or race affects risk. Younger children are more likely than older children to experience stability. According to UK studies, instability is particularly common in the teenage years.

Several placement characteristics have been found to be associated with instability. For example, placements are more likely to be stable if children are placed with kin, rather than foster carers. Placement disruptions predict later placement instability and as the number of placements increases, placement instability becomes more likely.

System level characteristics predicting instability include carer retention. If a carer leaves the foster care system this can trigger a placement change. Common reasons given by carers for leaving include a lack of adequate support and a lack of recognition of the importance of the foster carer role. The quality of the relationship between the carer, the child’s caseworker and the child safety department also contribute to carer retention. Other system level characteristics such as caseworker turnover and funding arrangements also affect instability.

4. How can placement stability be improved?

Many jurisdictions are taking steps to reduce placement instability. Strategies include improving foster parent recruitment, services to children and carers, and child-carer placement matching. Few jurisdictions, however, are evaluating impact. The following are a selection of strategies which have been evaluated and found to have a positive impact on placement stability either in Australia or overseas.
Wherever possible, placement changes should only occur if they are in the best interests of the child.

There is preliminary evidence indicating that each of the following can increase the placement stability of children in out-of-home care:

- Parent training targeting child characteristics associated with placement disruption such as behaviour problems.

- Supports and services that highlight the value of carers and provide them with appropriate support. This can also increase carers’ satisfaction with their role and improve carer retention.

- ‘Joined up’ services, such as co-located child protection and mental health services. Collaborative services can offer a range of other benefits to children and families.

- Legislation and policies promoting permanency.

Providing behaviour management training. A US study explored the impact of providing KEEP, a parent training program to foster and kinship carers who were caring for children with significant behaviour problems. The KEEP program is designed to increase positive parenting, decrease externalizing child behaviours and increase placement stability. The study included a comparison group who did not take part in the program. KEEP participation was associated with lower levels of placement instability and child behaviour problems.

Supporting carers. Victoria has been trialling a therapeutic foster care program called the Circle Program. This program emphasises the importance of the carer-child relationship and focuses on providing ‘wrap-around’ therapeutic services to support carers with their role. Carers have access to all information about the child and are considered a key part of the care team. Circle Program participation was associated with lower levels of placement instability and higher levels of carer retention and wellbeing.

Restructuring services. A US study explored the impact of integrating services and its impact on reducing instability. It compared agencies that offered both child protection and mental health services with those that had separate child protection and mental health services. Adolescents attending the combined services or those services offering joint training for their child protection and mental health workers experienced lower levels of placement instability.

Amending legislation. A Canadian study examined the effect of Quebec’s 2007 changes to its Youth Protection Act. The changes made foster care time-limited with subsequent orders needing to make permanent living arrangements for the child. The introduction of the Act was associated with lower levels of placement instability.

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2Figures provided by DCCSDS (2016). Table SP.1: Children exiting out-of-home care, by length of time in out-of-home care and number of different placements, Queensland.


