

Rethinking the role of early care and education in foster care

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Abstract

Service integration for foster children has recently improved following scholarly recommendations (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2001) that sparked federal action to integrate child welfare services with intervention services for children with special needs, as well as with local education and Medicaid agencies ([P.L. 110-351, 2008](#)). However, integration with early care and education (ECE) has lagged behind despite the potential of such efforts to help child welfare agencies fulfill their mandate to ensure children's safety, permanency, and well-being (P.L. 105-89, 1997). Research aimed at informing the integration of ECE and foster care is also lacking, as these two areas of investigation have developed along largely parallel tracks. The purpose of this paper is to provide a framework for understanding the potential roles that ECE can play within the foster care system that can, in turn, guide a systematic, policy-focused research agenda. We introduce the paper with a discussion of federal policy barriers to ECE and child welfare service integration, and close with a specific recommendation that the Children's Bureau and the Office of Child Care take steps to encourage research aimed at filling the knowledge gap at the intersection of these two core services for vulnerable children and families.

Highlights

- ▶ A range of 45–78% of all foster parents report the need for daycare services.
- ▶ Foster children's unique needs suggest ECE may provide a protective influence.
- ▶ Stability within ECE may be particularly important for foster children.
- ▶ Very little empirical research has described the ECE experiences of foster children.

Keywords

Foster care

Early care and education

Child care