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Predicting Family Reunification, Adoption, and Subsidized Guardianship Among Adolescents in Foster Care

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Abstract

Although national legislation has attempted to decrease the length of time that children spend in foster care, these policies have been less effective with adolescents than with children, raising questions about how best to promote permanency for adolescents. This study examined factors that predict adolescent adoption, subsidized guardianship, and reunification. The caseworkers and foster parents of 203 randomly selected 12-13 year olds placed in traditional or specialized foster care were interviewed. Permanency outcomes were prospectively tracked for eight years. By the end of the study, over 40% of the adolescents were placed in permanent homes. As hypothesized, a strong relationship with a biological mother predicted successful reunification, and a high degree of integration into a foster home predicted adoption. Additionally, as compared to adoption, subsidized guardianship with foster parents occurred more frequently for youth with strong relationships with their biological mothers and weaker relationships with their foster families. Unexpectedly, behavior problems were not related to any permanency outcomes. Results suggest that promotion of strong relationships with adults is key in efforts to find permanent families for foster children. Furthermore, efforts to attain permanency should not cease during adolescence.

In 1997, at a point when over 500,000 children were living in foster care, concern about the increasing number of children who remained in care for extended periods of time led to the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) (PL 105-89). This legislation limited the amount of time parents had to meet reunification requirements, and in most cases required that a petition for termination of parental rights be filed if a child had been in care for 15 out of the most recent 22 months. Data on permanency outcomes indicate that implementation of ASFA was followed by a slight decline in reunification with biological parents and an increase in adoptions (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [U.S. DHHS], 2005). Because a consequence of this legislation is that children now tend to be legally free at a younger age, a greater proportion of children who might have otherwise experienced extended stays in foster care are more likely to be adopted (Cowan, 2004). Furthermore, the focus on attaining permanency in a shorter time frame has supported increased use of subsidized guardianship arrangements, in which a private guardian assumes legal rights and responsibilities for the child, but some of the biological parent's rights are retained (Bissell & Miller, 2004; Testa & Rolock, 1999).

Unfortunately, ASFA has been less successful in influencing permanency outcomes for adolescents than for younger children (Barth, Wulczyn, & Crea, 2005). Given the advantages that result from establishing permanent ties to a family before leaving care (Bussiere, 2006), it is important to understand more about permanency among adolescents. Little is known about factors that predict different placement outcomes, particularly adoption and subsidized guardianship. To provide more information about factors that might

facilitate or hinder an adolescent's reunification, adoption, or subsidized guardianship, this study explored associations between youth characteristics, relationships with foster and biological families, and placement outcomes among young adolescents placed in non-relative foster care.

In 2001, children 16 and older made up 17% of children in foster care (USDHHS, 2004) and 47% of youth in foster care were age 11 and older (Massinga & Pecora, 2004). Although over half of foster youth age 17 and older entered care during adolescence (Leathers & Testa, 2006), a common misperception is that they grew up in care and therefore are unlikely to return to their biological parents (Beyer, 1986). This perception is supported by the fact that chances for reunification diminish the longer a child stays in foster care (Courtney, 1994; Courtney & Barth, 1996). However, in the past decade, reunification has been viewed as a planned permanency outcome for some youth even after extended stays in foster care, in part because about 15% of youth return to their biological parents' homes after emancipation at 18 or older (Courtney & Barth, 1996; Jones & Moses, 1984). These findings raise a key question, particularly in the context of ASFA and its time restrictions for reunification: Among adolescents who have remained in care for an extended period already, is reunification a viable option? If so, what factors differentiate adolescents who are reunified from those who are not?

Encouraging adoption for adolescents who cannot return home is also a relatively recent development (Wright & Flynn, 2006). The limited research on adolescent adoption suggests that age at removal from the parent's home and child's current age are predictive of adoption, as older children who were removed at an older age were less likely to be adopted than other children (Snowden, 2008; Festinger, 2002). Perceptions of both adoptive parents' motivation to adopt and adolescents' developmental needs have traditionally limited expectations that adolescents could attain permanency through adoption (Kemp & Bodonyi, 2000). Adolescents may not want to become a part of a new family, as they may have enduring ties to their families of origin (Barth & Berry, 1987). Additionally, during adolescence, independence from caregivers typically increases and oppositional behaviors may occur more frequently than in the pre-teen years (Cohen et al., 1993). It is unclear, however, whether these developmental and behavioral issues preclude adoption. Although several studies have examined factors predicting disruption of adolescent adoptions (Barth, Berry, & Yoshikami, et al, 1988; Barth & Berry, 1988; Rosenthal, Schmidt, & Conner, 1988; Smith & Howard, 1991; Smith, Howard, Garnier, et al., 2004; Coakley & Berrick, 2008) no studies have focused specifically on the youth and family characteristics that are predictive of entering adoption in adolescence.

Because subsidized guardianship is a relatively new permanency option, even less is known about the factors that predict use of subsidized guardianship, particularly when this option is considered by an unrelated foster parent rather than a relative. Previous research focused on predominantly kinship care placements suggests that children who enter subsidized guardianship are older than children who are adopted (Howard, Smith, Zosky, & Woodman, 2006), and that the availability of subsidized guardianship increases the overall proportion of children who attain permanency (Testa, 2002). This research supports the idea that subsidized guardianship might be chosen for youth and caregivers with different characteristics relative to adoption. In particular, it has been hypothesized that subsidized guardianship could be a viable permanency outcome for adolescents who are unlikely to be adopted because of existing family ties with the child's biological family (Barth & Berry, 1987; Testa, 2002). Whether this is the case, however, is unclear; the extent to which existing family ties relate to subsidized guardianship or adoption has not been studied.

This study addressed these questions by prospectively following placement outcomes for a group of 12- or 13-year-old foster children until age 20. Children's non-relative foster parents and caseworkers were interviewed in 1997-1998. Over the next eight years, administrative placement data were used to track placement changes and permanency attainment. The adolescents sampled had been in non-relative foster care for an average of over four and half years at the time of interviews, and were therefore might be considered unlikely candidates for either reunification or adoption given the length of time they had been in care and their age. All had entered adolescence just before the implementation of ASFA, providing the opportunity to identify predictors of permanency for adolescents in the service climate created by this legislation.

This study used social exchange theory to conceptualize the factors that determine the likelihood of an adolescent attaining permanency. A substitute caregiver's incentive to provide a permanent home for a foster child has been viewed as a function of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006). For example, in previous research, a substitute caregiver's incentive to provide a permanent home for a foster child has been conceptualized as a function of altruism, an intrinsic motivation, and the amount of financial compensation received for the child's care, an extrinsic motivation (Testa & Rolock, 1999). In support of these ideas, caregivers who either have a biological relationship with a foster child or receive higher payment for care have been shown to provide more stable care than other caregivers (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Reddy & Pfeiffer, 1997; Testa & Rolock, 1999). We extended this conceptualization by considering multiple factors that could potentially influence placement outcomes in non-relative foster care, including variations in the quality or strength of adolescents' relationships with foster parents and adolescents' relationships with biological families.

Using a social exchange framework, the youth's characteristics would also be expected to affect permanency outcomes. Although limited, the research focused on children's characteristics and permanency outcomes supports the idea that caregivers are influenced by the child's individual qualities. Meezan and Shireman (1985) found that foster parents who chose to adopt were more likely than other foster parents to describe their children as affectionate and less likely to describe them as aloof or hostile. The majority (79%) of foster parents choosing to adopt described the child's effect on their family as positive, whereas less than half (42%) of those continuing to foster described the child's effect as positive. Foster children who were adopted were less likely to have school related problems, and just 25% of those who were adopted had behavioral problems as compared to 78% of children who were not adopted.

Given that as many as half of foster children may have significant emotional and behavioral problems (Burns, Phillips, Wagner, et al., 2004; Glisson, 1996; Halfon, Berkowitz, & Klee, 1992), how behavior problems relate to different care outcomes is an important question. Although it has been suggested that adopted adolescents demonstrate more behavior problems (Miller, Fan, Christensen, et al., 2000) and are more likely to be disruptive than younger children (Rosenthal et al, 1998; Barth & Berry, 1988), it is unclear from the literature whether behavior problems affect the likelihood of adolescent adoption. Among adolescents, behavioral difficulties could pose even greater disincentives for reunification and/or adoption than they would in younger children, as teenagers may be perceived as more threatening and difficult to manage than younger children. How depression and anxiety relate to permanency outcomes among adolescents is also unclear, as previous research has not addressed this question. Both emotional and behavioral problems might be more difficult for families to deal with in an older child as compared to a younger child, leading to poorer permanency outcomes in adolescence.

The present study examined how degree of integration into a foster home, receiving an enhanced foster care rate, strength of relationship with biological mother, behavior problems, school problems, and depression and anxiety were related to an adolescent's chances for permanency. Adoption was expected to be predicted by a high level of foster home integration, fewer behavior problems, no school problems, and receipt of an enhanced rate. As compared to adoption, reunification was not expected to be as strongly related to a child's characteristics. Instead, it was hypothesized that reunification would be predicted by the strength of children's relationships with their biological mothers and other factors, such as frequency of visits, which has been found to be a strong predictor of reunification (Davis, Landsverk, Newton, & Ganger, 1996; Fanshel, 1982; Fanshel & Shinn, 1978; Mech, 1985; Milner, 1987).

To understand how the availability of subsidized guardianship has affected decisions about permanency for adolescents placed in traditional non-relative foster care, we focused on the choice of subsidized guardianship over adoption. We expected that subsidized guardianship would be chosen over adoption for youth with stronger relationships with their biological mothers, which might lead an adolescent to resist adoption into an unrelated foster family when reunification is not possible (Barth & Berry, 1987). Foster families might also prefer subsidized guardianship rather than adoption depending on the adolescent's behavioral needs, as subsidized guardianship might be perceived as less legally binding than adoption.

Methods

Sample

The sample included 203 children who were 12 or 13 years old on June 30, 1997. Using a random sampling program, youth were selected from a complete list of all children who had been in substitute care for one to eight years and were currently placed in traditional or specialized foster care. All had entered care in Cook County, IL, which includes the metropolitan Chicago area. The adolescents selected were no different from those in the sampling frame in terms of age, sex, race, and placement history. The sample was limited to children who were 12 or 13 years old to minimize variation in levels of emotional and behavioral problems due to development (Cohen et al., 1993) and to create a cohort of young adolescents to follow through adolescence. Similarly, to minimize variation in experiences while in care, the sample was restricted to children who had been in care between one and eight years. The minority of children (about 14% when this sample was selected) who enter care as infants or toddlers and then remain in non-relative care longer than eight years are more likely than other foster children to have multiple special needs (Block & Libowitz, 1983; Meezan & Shireman, 1985), and different factors are likely to be relevant for permanency attainment for these children than for other children.

Data Collection

In the summer of 1997, structured telephone interviews were conducted with the caseworkers and foster parents of all the selected adolescents. Information was collected about emotional and behavioral disturbance, educational problems, relationships with foster parents and biological parents, and parental visiting. Placement history, demographic characteristics, history of physical abuse, and permanency goals were extracted from electronic administrative data files. Placement movement and permanency outcomes of reunification, adoption, and subsidized guardianship were then tracked for eight years until the end of 2005, when all of the youth had reached age 20.

Measures

Permanency Outcomes—Outcomes of reunification, adoption, and the legal transfer of guardianship from the state to a caregiver without adoption were coded in three separate dummy-coded variables. Children who remained in foster care as of 12/31/05 or who had emancipated from foster care were coded as not having attained permanency. Youth who entered adoption at any point after the interview was completed were coded as adopted, and, similarly, those who entered subsidized guardianship were coded as in subsidized guardianship. Two variables were created to measure reunification. *Successful* reunification was coded for all youth who returned home and remained there until age 20 or 21. The second variable indicated *any* reunification, whether successful or not. This variable categorized all youth who returned home as reunified even if they re-entered care and was used to explore whether there were any differences in predictors of a successful reunification and any reunification. Ideally, successful adoption and subsidized guardianship placements also would have been examined, but limitations in the data prohibited this. Children may have attained permanency soon after the interview occurred or years later, at any point through 2005. Adoption or subsidized guardianship might have occurred either with the parents who completed an interview, or with a different family that the child was placed with after the initial interview.

Behavioral Disturbance—Behavioral disturbance was measured from the foster parent's perspective using the oppositional defiant and the conduct disorder subscales from the Children's Symptom Inventory (CSI; see Gadow & Sprafkin, 1997 for psychometrics). In this study, all items were combined into one measure of behavioral disturbance, as the two subscales were highly correlated ($r = .73, p < .01$). This combined measure has a high level of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha, .90).

Depression and Anxiety—Foster parents reported levels of depression and anxiety using the depression and anxiety subscales from the CSI. These scales were also highly correlated ($r = .66, p < .01$) and so were combined into one measure of depression and anxiety (Cronbach's alpha, .85).

Integration into the Foster Home—Integration into the foster home was assessed using a measure developed by Fanshel (1982) and modified by Poulin (1985). This measure was chosen because it was the only brief measure available specifically designed for use with foster children. Because Fanshel's item included two dimensions (*child's perception of belonging in the foster home* and *probable reaction to being removed from the home*), this question was split into two items that were rated independently by both the caseworker and the foster parent, resulting in four indicators of foster family attachment. Each item described five levels of foster family integration and attachment and required foster parents and caseworkers to choose the description that best described the child. For example, for the two "perception of belonging in the foster home" items, the categories ranged from "First, child does not appear to feel like a part of the family" to "Fifth, child is deeply integrated within the family and experiences foster parents as own family." One of the items (foster parent's assessment of the child's reaction to being moved from the home) did not load on the same factor as the other three items, and so was not included in the final measure. The three remaining items were used to create the "integration into the foster family" measure (Cronbach's alpha, .6).

Strength of relationship with biological mother—An item also developed by Fanshel (1982) was used to measure the child's strength of relationship to the biological mother. Caseworkers and foster parents rated the relationship for each biological parent separately by choosing from five different descriptions of parental attachment. A measure

was created by averaging the foster parent's and the caseworker's ratings. The internal consistency of this measure is .61. In this study, we used only the biological mother measure because most youth did not have contact with their biological fathers.

Parental Visiting—Both foster parents and caseworkers were asked about the frequency of parental visiting in the past six months. Caseworkers and foster parents often did not agree on the number of visits with mothers and fathers that had occurred, so we coded visiting frequency from interviewer notes and open-ended questions. Excellent correspondence between two independent raters was obtained.

Enhanced foster care rate—A dummy-coded variable was created for all children whose foster parents received an enhanced specialized foster care rate for the child's care at the time that the foster parent was interviewed.

Educational Difficulties—Children who had been held back one grade or more or were receiving special education services at the age of 12 or 13 were categorized as having educational difficulties with a dichotomous variable. In 10 cases, it was unknown whether a child had repeated a grade, and therefore we relied only on whether they received special education services.

Past Abuse and Neglect Experiences—Experiences of physical abuse and neglect that occurred before the child was placed in foster care were coded using data extracted from electronic data files of abuse and neglect allegations. Children who had one or more substantiated abuse allegations were coded with a 1, and children who had none were coded with a 0. Because this measure is based only on substantiated allegations, this measure is only likely to indicate whether a child experienced a high level of abuse before placement in foster care. Similarly, neglect was coded as positive for all children who had a substantiated allegation of neglect.

Analyses

Logistic regression analyses were used to test predictive models for each type of permanency outcome. In the reunification model, adolescents who were successfully reunified were compared with adolescents who either remained in foster care or were in adoptive or subsidized guardianship homes. To explore whether predictors of reunification might differ for youth whose reunifications were successful and those who experienced a reunification for at least some period of time, results from this model were compared to the results from a model predicting any reunification that occurred, whether it was followed by re-entry or not.

In the adoption model, youth who were adopted were compared to youth who either remained in foster care or were in subsidized guardianship homes. It was assumed that reunification would be chosen rather than adoption whenever possible, and so would rule out the possibility of adoption or subsidized guardianship, and so reunified children were not included in the comparison group of the adoption model. Finally, to understand how youth placed in subsidized guardianship homes were different from adopted youth, two subsidized guardianship models were examined. The first model compared youth who were placed in a subsidized guardianship to youth placed in adoptive homes. In the second, youth placed in subsidized guardianship homes were compared to youth who remained in long term foster care throughout the follow up period.

We included all youth in the analyses, rather treating youth who moved from the foster home and then attained permanency with a different family as censored observations. Child

characteristics in early adolescence such as behavior problems and capacity to form close relationships within a family are likely to be relatively stable and have enduring effects throughout adolescence. As our central questions related to the extent that these characteristics affect outcomes throughout adolescence, inclusion of all youth provides a more accurate test of the effects of these characteristics than censoring data for youth who moved before possibly attaining permanency.

Because previous research suggests that physical abuse (Barth & Berry, 1987); neglect, particularly when related to parental substance abuse (Marquis et al., 2008; Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002); African American race (Becker, Jordan, & Larsen, 2007; Fein & Maluccio, 1984; Finch, Fanshel, & Grundy, 1986); time in foster care (Courtney & Barth, 1996); and male gender (Kemp & Bodonyi, 2000) may affect permanency outcomes, these variables were included as control variables in the models tested. Time in the foster home was also included to understand whether a child's closeness to the foster family is independently related to permanency outcomes, or whether time in the foster home explained any associations detected between foster home integration and outcomes.

Cases were deleted listwise when missing data occurred (less than 3% for each variable). When possible, logistic regression models were simplified by removing variables that were non-significant that did not influence the pattern of results. To assess the adequacy of the logistic regression models, the model chi-square and the Hosmer and Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test statistic were examined.

Results

Description of the Sample

Out of 243 eligible children, 87% of caseworkers and 84% of foster parents were interviewed. Because we relied on foster parents' reports of behavior problems, adolescents were only included in the study if their foster parent completed an interview. Youth demographic characteristics and descriptive statistics for all variables are shown in Table 1.

By the end of 2005, 42% percent of the sample had attained permanency. Adoption was the most common permanency outcome (19%), followed by reunification (18%, any; 16%, successful) and subsidized guardianship (12%). Seventy-six percent of youth who entered adoption were adopted by the same foster parent who had completed the interview in 1997 and 24% were adopted by a different family. Sixty-four percent of youth in this study entered subsidized guardianship with the same unrelated foster parent who completed the interview in 1997. Unexpectedly, eight of the 24 youth who entered subsidized guardianship (33%) disrupted and re-entered foster care during the follow up period. Due to difficulties in tracking children who re-enter foster care after adoption, we could not compare this percentage with the percentage that disrupted from adoption. Four of the 36 youth who were reunified with biological parents returned to care during the follow-up period. These youth had all been at home for less than a year before returning to care.

Foster parents reported that a high proportion of the children had behavior problems: use of the cut-off scores provided by Gadow and Sprafkin indicates that 48% had severe or moderate conduct problems and 45% had severe or moderate oppositional defiant behavior (not shown).

Multivariate Results

In the first logistic regression analysis, demographic and control variables along with behavior problems, foster home integration, strength of maternal relationship, and frequency of parental visiting were entered into a logistic regression equation predicting reunification.

Time in foster care and depression/anxiety were removed from the model because these variables were non-significant and did not change the pattern of results. Indicators of physical abuse and neglect were highly correlated, as most children had one or the other type of allegation substantiated but not both. Neglect did not affect the results in any of the models, and so only the indicator of physical abuse was included in the analyses.

Logistic regression results are most easily interpreted using odds ratios, shown in the last column of Table 3. Odds ratios range from 0 to infinity. Because the effects of odds ratios are obtained by multiplying, a 1 indicates that the variable has no effect on the outcome variable. An odds ratio with a statistically significant value less than 1 indicates that the variable decreases the odds of the occurrence of the outcome variable (in this case, successful reunification), while significant values greater than one increase the odds.

Examination of the odds ratios in the reunification model suggests that the frequency of parental visiting was a strong, highly significant predictor of successful reunification (see Table 2). Each visit that occurred in the six month period before foster parents and caseworkers were interviewed increased the odds of reunification by 1.13 times. To assess the potential effect of multiple visits, the odds ratios must be multiplied. For example, three visits would be associated with a 1.44 (1.13^3) times increase in the odds of reunification. One visit a month increased the odds of reunification by 1.63 times, indicating that the odds of reunification were 63% greater when visits occurred monthly as compared to no visits occurring.

Strength of relationship with biological mother was also significantly associated with successful reunification: children with the highest level of attachment to their biological mothers (rated as a 5) had 4.71 times the odds of returning home as compared to those rated as having an average level of attachment (rated as a 3). Being older, male, and African American were associated with reduced odds of successful reunification, but these associations only approached significance. Behavioral problems did not appear to be related to chances for returning home in either direction.

In the model predicting *any* reunification, whether successful or not, results were similar to the results of the successful reunification model. One notable difference is that in this model the coefficient for strength of relationship with biological mother only approached significance ($OR = 1.6, p = .06$, not shown), indicating that the few children whose reunifications failed had been rated as having less strong relationships with their mothers than those whose reunifications were successful. In this model, visiting remained significant at the same level ($OR = 1.13, p < .01$, not shown) and the coefficient for African American race became significant ($OR = .23, p < .05$, not shown); youth who were African American were less likely to return home.

As in the reunification models, behavior problems were also unrelated to a youth's chances for adoption compared to subsidized guardianship or remaining in long-term foster care (see Table 3). Youth with a high level of behavior problems were no more or less likely to be adopted than other children. However, as hypothesized, foster family integration was strongly related to adoption, increasing odds by 2.83 times for a difference of one unit. So, a child rated as having the highest level of integration (rating of 4) would have eight times the odds of being adopted than a child rated as having an average level of integration (rating of 2). Having an enhanced rate also was marginally associated with increased chances for adoption, increasing odds by 2.24 times ($p = .08$). In this model, the Hosmer Lemeshow statistic indicated a possible problem with the model specification in the original model tested. Inclusion of a binary variable that contrasted African American boys with all other

youth resulted in an acceptable Hosmer Lemeshow statistic, so this model is shown in Table 3.

Too few children ($n = 16$) remained in subsidized guardianship homes at the end of the follow-up period to reliably estimate predictors of a successful subsidized guardianship placement. Instead, we focused on differences between children who entered subsidized guardianship ($n = 24$) arrangements and those who entered adoption ($n = 36$). Most control variables could be deleted from this model without affecting the results. As shown in Table 4, subsidized guardianship was chosen instead of adoption for children who were less integrated into their foster homes, who had stronger maternal relationships, and who had less depression and anxiety. Because this analysis included only 60 cases, we could not include race in the model, because too few children were not African American to permit an analysis of race.

To assess how children who entered subsidized guardianship arrangements were different from children who remained in long term foster care until emancipation, we completed a final logistic regression analysis predicting subsidized guardianship as compared to long-term foster care. This analysis included only youth who had entered subsidized guardianship at some point after the interview and youth who remained in foster care the entire time. In this model, none of the predictors approached significance, and the overall model was non-significant [$\chi^2(12, N = 129) = 9.31, p = .68$, not shown].

Discussion

Although adolescents who have been in non-relative foster care for an average of four and a half years might be considered unlikely candidates for adoption or reunification, 42% of the adolescents in this study were reunified, adopted or under the guardianship of a caregiver at some point between the ages of 12 and 20. The percentage reunified was comparable to the rates reported in earlier studies, while the percentage adopted was nearly four times higher as compared to early studies (see Hornby & Collins, 1981), suggesting that AFSA had a strong effect on adoption rates in Illinois during this period. At this point in Illinois, a IV-E waiver demonstration project was also in place, which allowed for foster parents to take subsidized guardianship of children in their care and still receive the same subsidy as they would if they adopted (Testa, 2002). This demonstration project may have increased overall permanency rates by allowing foster parents who would not have been open to adoption to take subsidized guardianship. Overall, the relatively high rate of permanency is encouraging and supports the continued pursuit of a permanent home for adolescents in non-relative foster care.

Unexpectedly, associations between behavior problems and permanency outcomes of adoption and reunification reported in previous studies were not found in this study. Instead, strong associations were observed between the strength of an adolescent's relationships with others and permanency outcomes. As hypothesized, strong relationships with biological mothers were predictive of returning home and a high sense of belonging and integration into a foster home was predictive of adoption.

Although previous studies have found that both foster parent and child characteristics predict whether a child is successfully reunified or adopted (Block & Libowitz, 1983; Meezan & Shireman, 1985), most of these studies are limited by cross-sectional designs. Thus, associations between child behavioral problems and failure to successfully attain permanency through reunification or adoption are difficult to interpret, as reports of problems might be influenced by the reunification or adoption decision. The study reported in this article attempted to address this limitation by prospectively tracking permanency

outcomes of 203 young adolescents placed in non-relative foster care for at least a year. As the foster parents and caseworkers were interviewed before any of these children were adopted or reunified, reports of the children's characteristics were not biased by a permanency outcome that had already occurred.

The findings from this study support that the quality of an adolescent's relationships with past and current caregivers should be considered when placement decisions are made. As found in previous studies, children whose biological parents visited more frequently were more likely than other children to return home (Davis, et al., 1996; Fanshel, 1982; Fanshel & Shinn, 1987; Mech, 1985; Milner, 1987). In addition, youth who reported stronger relationships with their mothers were more likely than other youth to be successfully reunified. The strong role of parental attachment in enhancing chances for successful reunification occurred even after controlling for parental visiting. Youth with strong relationships with their biological parents might also advocate on their own behalf to be returned home. Unfortunately, too few children were reunified to test the differences between those who were successfully reunified with those who re-entered care, but a comparison of the results for the model predicting successful reunification and any reunification, whether successful or not, suggest that strength of the youth's relationship with his or her mother might also be a factor differentiating failed and successful reunifications.

The results of this study also suggest that positive rather than negative child characteristics are important in determining whether a youth is adopted or remains in long-term foster care. Although a high level of integration into a non-relative foster home predicts adoption, neither behavioral nor educational difficulties discouraged adoption. These results support that young adolescents who have the ability to form positive relationships with new caregivers should be considered candidates for adoption, regardless of whether or not they have behavior problems or educational special needs. Whether the measure of foster home integration used in this study captured the youth's capacity to form attachments or the fit between the youth and the foster family cannot be disentangled in this study. The majority of the youth adopted were adopted by the foster parent who completed the interviews and reported on the child's level of integration. In a larger study, it would be possible to test whether variation in foster home integration is also related to adoption for youth who were adopted by a different family later on. This would suggest that a child's capacity to form close family relationships presents an important intrinsic benefit to foster parents and children that increases chances for adoption.

At the trend level, enhanced board rates were associated with an increased chance for adoption, implying that commitment to an adolescent's care may be made possible with higher financial support. These results are consistent with those of earlier studies of placement stability, which have linked higher board rates with greater stability (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Reddy & Pfeiffer, 1997; Testa & Rolock, 1999), as well as with the conceptualization of the decision to adopt as a function of adoption benefits. Enhanced rates are generally received for the care of children with special needs, raising the question of whether the effect of behavioral disturbance on permanency outcome is mediated by the enhanced rate variable in this study. As expected, higher levels of behavioral problems were reported among youth placed in homes receiving an enhanced rate than among those not receiving an enhanced rate ($p < .05$). However, in post hoc analyses run without the enhanced rate variable, behavior problems remained non-significant, indicating that the effect of behavior problems has not been mediated by receiving an enhanced rate.

In previous studies, longer stays in foster care and lower rates of reunification were reported for African American children as compared to white children (Becker et al., 2007; Fein &

Maluccio, 1984; Finch & Fanshel, 1985; Wells & Guo, 1999). In this study, African American youth were reunified less often than other children, consistent with these findings. These findings suggest that intensified services, innovative service models, and advocacy may be needed to ensure that African American youth are reunified at the same rate as other youth.

Understanding the choice of subsidized guardianship rather than adoption was an additional goal of this research. Despite the small sample size available to examine this question, tentative results emerged. Youth placed in non-relative foster care that entered subsidized guardianship arrangements had stronger relationships with their mothers and less integration into their foster homes at age 12 or 13. These findings suggest that a youth's emotional ties to his or her family of origin might influence a foster family's choice of subsidized guardianship rather than adoption. Adoption might seem like an inappropriate choice for a young adolescent who has a strong allegiance to another family, while subsidized guardianship, which allows biological parents to retain some rights, might be seen as an acceptable option.

A drawback of subsidized guardianship might be a cost to permanency. Although the small number of youth who entered subsidized guardianship limits these findings, in this study 33% of the youth in 24 subsidized guardianship homes re-entered foster care. This percentage is, however, much higher than Testa's 2004 estimate using Illinois administrative data, which indicated that in a 5 year follow up period 3.5% of guardianship placements disrupted. In our study, a higher percentage might be expected due to the longer follow up period throughout adolescence and entry into subsidized guardianship mainly from traditional foster care during adolescence. It is important to note that we were not able to accurately estimate how many of the adopted youth in our sample re-entered care because of limitations in the administrative data we used; this percentage might also have been high. Two previous studies report adolescent adoption disruption rates of 26% (Barth & Berry, 1988) and 14% (Smith et al., 2006).

However, if subsidized guardianship provides a permanency option for many youth who would not otherwise be adopted (Testa, 2002), the risk of disruption would be offset by the benefits of the majority of youth establishing enduring relationships with caregivers during adolescence. Additional longitudinal research with larger samples is needed to understand the benefits and risks of each option. If non-relative foster families choosing subsidized guardianship for an adolescent are at particular risk for placement disruption, making post-discharge follow up services available to these families will be particularly important.

The lack of association between behavior problems and permanency outcomes in this study can be interpreted in a number of ways. Cross-sectional designs of previous studies may have resulted in quite different results than would have been obtained had a prospective design been used. Alternately, the results of the present study may indicate that behavior problems play a different role in determining outcomes for young children, who have been the focus of most of the previous research, versus adolescents in long-term foster care. Oppositional and delinquent behaviors may be viewed as more developmentally appropriate among adolescents, and so be less likely to influence a caregiver's commitment to adoption.

However, it should also be noted that the sampling strategy used in this study resulted in a sample that is not representative of all foster youth. About half of the older foster youth in Illinois enter care as adolescents (Leathers & Testa, 2006); the sample used for this study entered care prior to adolescence. Youth who enter care as adolescents are more likely to have entered care due to behavioral problems and difficulties with their parents, suggesting that their permanency outcomes might be different from those of adolescents who enter care

prior to their teenage years. Establishing a relationship with a child prior to adolescence may increase chances of adoption or a subsidized guardianship arrangement in adolescence. However, the lack of significant findings in this study do not appear to be related to less variation in severity of behavior problems or a low level of problems in the sample, as the level of behavior problems was similar to that found in population-based studies (Leslie, et al., 2004). Replication of this study in wider populations of foster children is needed to clarify these issues.

Studying permanency outcomes over time raises many methodological questions about how to categorize different placement outcomes. In previous studies, the primary interest has been the prediction of children's entry into permanency through reunification or adoption (Cowan, 2004; Becker, Jordan, & Larsen, 2007), with some studies also considering parental satisfaction and disruptions of these outcomes (James, 2004; Berry & Barth, 1990; Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot et al, 2007). Over time, however, children can have multiple entries into potentially permanent placements; for example, a youth may enter an adoption placement that fails before finalization and then enter a subsidized guardianship placement that succeeds. Or a youth may return home for 12 months at age 13, but then return to foster care where he or she experiences multiple placements until discharge. In our study, because of limitations in our ability to measure adoption disruption and the small number of youth entering subsidized guardianship, we were not able to accurately assess the extent that adolescents were successfully placed in adoptive and subsidized guardianship homes. Ideally, however, permanency studies should focus on youth entering and sustaining legally binding relationships with adults until they reach adulthood, because these are the types of relationships that provide the support and resources that are essential for an optimal transition to young adulthood (Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Wright & Flynn, 2005). A failed permanency placement is not likely to provide any more support than a foster home.

In future studies, interviewing youth directly, rather than relying on caseworker and foster parent interviews, would also provide valuable information. For example, Wright and Flynn (2005) interviewed adoptive parents and adolescent adoptees about adoption success and challenges in a qualitative study that highlighted the complementary needs of the adoptees and parents. Parents wanted children, desired information about the child from the agency, and were able to provide homes for the adolescents. Children wanted a parent and a safe home, and also wanted information about their biological families. Both sides saw adoption as a partnership requiring mutual responsibility. They were also able to elucidate the complexities involved with acquiring new family through the state and the need for ongoing systemic support. Additional research is needed that includes parent and adolescent perspectives on factors that support adoption or reunification of older children, and how the child welfare system can support the sustainability of these placements.

It is also important to clarify how foster parents' and caseworkers' perceptions of an adolescent's relationships with foster parents and biological parents relates to the adolescent's perceptions. Measures of attachment and foster home integration used in this study were easy to administer and so are potentially useful to caseworkers in permanency planning efforts. However, these measures are unlikely to correspond to more in-depth assessments of the youth's attachments (for example, see Allen, et al., 1998). To develop interventions that increase chances for the establishment or maintenance of strong relationships with caregivers, the nature of these relationships and their development must be understood. Although this research suggests that the abilities of adolescents to form positive relationships affects placement outcomes, factors that lead to strong connections between caregivers and foster children have not been identified. Both children and caregivers are likely to contribute to this process. Understanding both perspectives will be necessary to understand how to foster the development of strong relationships and increase

chances for permanency. Some adolescents may never be comfortable with adoption due to the closeness and the roles implied by an adoption; future research should also clarify the role of subsidized guardianship in providing stability for these youth.

The results of this study indicate that a substantial proportion of foster children entering adolescence can achieve permanency through reunification, subsidized guardianship, and adoption. These results provide an optimistic view of the capacities of foster parents to adopt youth with both behavioral and educational special needs. Additional research is needed to understand how to improve permanency outcomes among youth who would benefit from each of these options.

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Table 1Demographic Characteristics and Descriptive Statistics ($N = 203$)

Variable	%	Mean (SD)
<i>Demographic Characteristics</i>		
Boy	51	
Girl	49	
African American	84	
White	9	
Hispanic	6	
Other race	1	
Number of placements prior to interview in 1997		4.31 (2.88)
<i>Permanency Outcomes</i>		
Successful reunification	18	
Any reunification	16	
Entered Adoption	19	
Entered subsidized guardianship	12	
<i>Predictor Variables</i>		
Behavior Problems		13.96 (9.10)
Depression/Anxiety problems		13.21 (7.95)
Foster home integration/bonding		4.25 (.66)
Enhanced foster care rate	53	
Years in foster home at time of interview		2.35 (1.78)
Strength of relationship to mother		3.08 (1.18)
Frequency of visits in past 6 months		6.02 (13.37)
Educational special needs	42	
Physical abuse	14	
Age at time of interview		12.89 (.59)
Years in foster care at time of interview		4.63 (1.80)

Table 2Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Successful Reunification ($N = 203$)

Variable	Log-odds Coefficient	SE	Wald	OR
Age at time of Interview	-.92	.53	3.02	.40 ^a
Male	-.96	.57	2.86	.38 ^a
African American	-1.21	.68	3.19	.30 ^a
Years in foster home at time of interview	.18	.17	1.17	1.20
Educational special needs	.26	.56	.21	1.29
Behavior problems	.26	.60	.19	1.30
Foster home integration	-.15	.44	.12	.86
Enhanced foster care rate	.23	.55	.17	1.25
Attachment to mother	.78	.30	6.75	2.17 ^{**}
Frequency of visits in past 6 months	.13	.03	21.99	1.13 ^{**}

Note C. Contrast group for reunification includes children adopted, in subsidized guardianship, and in long-term foster care. Likelihood ratio for overall reunification model = 76.11, $df = 10$, $p < .001$. Hosmer and Lemeshow static = 8.87, $df = 8$, $p = .35$.

^a $p < .1$;

* $p < .05$;

** $p < .01$.

Table 3Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Entry into Adoption ($n = 164$)

Variable	Log-odds Coefficient	SE	Wald	OR
Age at time of interview	-.58	.39	2.23	.56
African American Male	-.58	.46	1.62	.56
Years in foster home at time of interview	.16	.11	2.16	1.18
Physical abuse	-1.16	.80	2.12	.31
Educational special needs	-.28	.45	.38	.76
Behavior problems	-.62	.66	.90	.54
Depression/anxiety	1.05	.67	2.46	2.87
Foster home integration	1.04	.40	6.88	2.83**
Enhanced foster care rate	.81	.46	3.12	2.24 ^a
Attachment to mother	-.21	.19	1.25	.81
Frequency of visits in past 6 months	-.12	.08	2.29	.89

Note. C Contrast group for adoption includes children in subsidized guardianship and long-term foster care. Likelihood ratio for overall adoption model = 30.42, $df = 11$, $p < .001$. Hosmer and Lemeshow statistic = 6.04, $df = 8$, $p = .64$.

^a $p < .1$;

* $p < .05$;

** $p < .01$.

Table 4Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Choice of Subsidized Guardianship Instead of Adoption ($n = 60$)

Variable	Log-odds Coefficient	SE	Wald	OR
Age at time of interview	.75	.57	1.77	2.12
Behavior problems	1.27	1.10	1.33	3.54
Depression/anxiety	-3.25	1.30	6.25	.04*
Foster home integration	-1.13	.53	4.59	.32*
Attachment to mother	.81	.35	5.36	2.25*
Frequency of visits in past 6 months	.14	.13	1.22	1.15

Note. C Contrast group for choice of subsidized guardianship includes children who were adopted. Likelihood ratio for overall reunification model = 20.41, $df = 6$, $p < .01$. Hosmer and Lemeshow statistic = 7.57, $df = 8$, $p = .48$.

^a
 $p < .1$;

*
 $p < .05$;

**
 $p < .01$.