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Children's Appraisals of their Experiences in Out-of-Home Care

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Abstract

Few studies have asked children directly about their experiences in out-of-home care. This study uses data collected from 180 nine- to-11-year-old children currently in out-of-home care who were asked about their perceptions and appraisals of out-of-home care. Analysis of variance and chi-square analyses were used to examine whether children's appraisals of their lives following removal from their families of origin differ as a function of age, gender, race/ethnicity, type and severity of maltreatment, length of time in out-of-home care, placement type, attachment to current caregivers, and rating of current caregiver/home. Youth who were sexually and emotionally abused, youth who were satisfied with their current caregivers and placements, and girls were more likely to state that their lives would have been worse had they remained with their families of origin. Youth who were physically abused were more likely to report that their lives would have remained the same. Children living in group care were more likely than those living in family foster care or with kin to report that their lives would have been better had they remained with their families of origin. Differences were not found between children living in family foster care and those living with kin nor did children's appraisals differ based on age, race, ethnicity, length of time in out-of-home care, neglect, or severity of maltreatment.

Keywords

Foster care; kinship care; out-of-home care; appraisals; child maltreatment; abuse and neglect

What's been the most helpful thing about being in out of home care?

“Getting fed, bathed, not starving.”

“Playing games. Getting time out when we need it. Dog always by our side.”

“That they love us.”

“[They] make sure we are always clean. They give us hugs and kisses.”

“That I don't have to do as many responsibilities as I used to. I don't have to take care of my brother like I did before. I just have to take care of me.”

“Living!”

As quotes from the current study illustrate, children in out-of-home¹ care can tell us a great deal about their lives when provided the opportunity. In fact, it may be especially important to ask children in out-of-home care about their experiences, because they do not always have relationships with stable adults who can provide a reliable account of their lives. Although there were 463,000 children in out-of-home care in the United States on September 30, 2008 (U.S. DHHS, 2010), few studies ask children to describe their own experiences in out-of-home care. Noting this gap in the literature, several researchers have highlighted the need for such studies (Chapman, Wall, & Barth, 2004; Curran & Pecora, 1999; Fox & Berrick, 2007; Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Johnson, Yoken, & Voss, 1995; Kufeldt, 1984; Unrau, 2007).

Studies that ask children to comment on their out-of-home care experiences are a potentially important source for informing child welfare policy and practices. Fox and Berrick (2007, p. 24) argue that “children possess unique insights – ones that can and should contribute to the development of child welfare practice, planning, and policy.” Unless we ask children in out-of-home care to describe their experiences, policy makers and child welfare workers must base their decisions, at least in part, on commonly held assumptions about the impact of out-of-home care on children. Many of these assumptions suggest that children have negative experiences in out-of-home care; for example, that children in out-of-home care are unhappy, feel helpless, prefer to live with their families of origin, and/or feel dissatisfied with their current living situation (Chapman et al., 2004; Minty, 1999). Early findings suggest, as do the quotes provided above, that these assumptions may not be accurate in all cases or for all children.

Among the handful of studies asking youth formerly or currently in care to comment on their experiences in out-of-home care, findings suggest that the majority of youth have positive appraisals of out-of-home care (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Chapman et al., 2004; Fox, Berrick, & Frasch, 2008; Johnson et al., 1995; Kufeldt, Armstrong, & Dorosh, 1995; Wilson & Conroy, 1999). Youth report that they feel satisfied with their current living situations and safe in their substitute homes, that they receive better care from their substitute parents, and that they have positive relationships with their substitute families. Although most children in care recognize the benefits of placement in out-of-home care, they also have valid concerns (Buchanan, 1995; Courtney et al., 2001; Fox et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 1995; Kufeldt, 1984; Whiting & Lee, 2003; Wilson & Conroy, 1999). They report feeling uncertain about and uninvolved in child welfare decisions, missing their families of origin, and having insufficient contact with biological parents. Furthermore, a portion of the respondents in each of these studies reports significant overall dissatisfaction with out-of-home care.

There are many factors that may be related to children's satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with their experiences in out-of-home care. These include demographic factors such as gender, race, and ethnicity, placement characteristics, the type and severity of abuse leading to placement, and the quality of children's relationships with substitute caregivers. A handful of studies have tried to identify those factors that predict children's satisfaction with out-of-home care. Most of these focus on the role of placement type and other placement characteristics in predicting children's perceptions. In their Illinois study of more than 1000 children in out-of-home care, Wilson and Conroy (1999) found that most children reported

¹Throughout this study, the term “out-of-home care” includes non-relative foster care, kinship care, shelters, group homes, and residential treatment facilities.

high levels of satisfaction with their substitute caregivers, but that children living in family foster care or with kin were more satisfied than those living in group situations. Those living in group settings were also less likely to feel loved and safe. In their sample of 100 children in family foster and group care, Gil and Bogart (1982) found that 81% of those in family foster homes liked their living situation, compared with only 47% of children in group homes. Fanshel, Finch, and Grundy (1990) found that longer lengths of stay and greater contact with families of origin were associated with stronger attachments to substitute families, while Festinger (1983) found that children who recognized the necessity of out-of-home care, and those that reported sufficient contact with their biological families, were more satisfied than others.

In one of the most comprehensive studies undertaken to identify those factors that predict satisfaction with out-of-home care, Chapman et al. (2004) analyzed data collected from 727 children in out-of-home care as part of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, a study of children involved in the child welfare system. This national probability sample included children in family foster care, kinship care, and group homes. Ninety percent of all children in out-of-home care who were interviewed liked the people with whom they were living and felt a part of their substitute family, but there were differences in children's experiences based on placement type. Compared with children living in foster or kinship care, children living in group homes were less likely to (1) see their biological parents on a regular basis, (2) like their current caregiver, and (3) want their current living arrangement as a permanent home. Gender, age, race, and ethnicity had little impact on children's appraisals of their experiences.

The current study used both qualitative and quantitative methods to replicate and expand the growing body of research examining children's appraisals of their experiences in out-of-home care. Qualitative responses were examined in order to understand children's perceptions about the hardest and most helpful things associated with living in out-of-home care. Quantitative analyses were used to determine whether children's appraisals of out-of-home care depended upon age, gender, race, ethnicity, type and severity of maltreatment, length of time in out-of-home care, placement type, attachment to current caregiver, and rating of satisfaction with their current caregiver/home. This study expands the current literature by examining children's perceptions of out-of-home care as a function of maltreatment type, maltreatment severity, and satisfaction with current caregiver/home. It uses a rigorous design and sound methods to address these questions with a representative sample.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study included children who were recruited for a randomized controlled trial of the Fostering Healthy Futures preventive intervention for preadolescent children placed in out-of-home care, which is described elsewhere (Taussig, Culhane, & Hettleman, 2007). All children, ages 9-11, who were court ordered into out-of-home care in two counties during the preceding year (from 2002-2006) were recruited, provided that placement was ordered due to maltreatment, and that the children still resided in out-of-home care at the time of the baseline interview. When siblings met inclusion criteria, one sibling was randomly selected to participate in the study. Ninety-three percent of eligible children agreed to participate in the study and completed the initial interview. The sample for this study includes 180 of the 193 children interviewed at baseline. Data from four children were excluded because they did not speak enough English to understand the study questions, and data from nine children were excluded because their scores on achievement and intelligence tests indicated significant cognitive impairment.

The final sample of 180 children was 49.9% female, with a mean age of 9.9 ($SD = .89$). The racial/ethnic distribution of children was non-exclusive, and included: 46.1% Hispanic, 48.9% Caucasian, 30.0% African-American, and 6.7% Native American. The majority of participants were placed in foster (48.3%) or kinship (45.0%) care, while the remaining 6.7% resided in shelters, group homes, and residential treatment centers. At the baseline interview, children had been in out-of-home care an average of 6.3 months (range: 0 to 13 months). This limited range is a reflection of the fact that children were recruited for the current study only if they had been court-ordered into out-of-home care during the preceding year.

Procedure

This study uses baseline data collected before children were randomized to treatment and control conditions. Data were collected based on interviews with participants and reviews of their child welfare records. Interviews lasted between three and four hours and were administered by research assistants who did not have any advance information about the participants other than their names, ages, gender, and placement types. Interviews were typically completed over two sessions in the homes of participating children, who were paid \$40. Children provided assent, and their legal guardians provided consent, for children's participation. The protocol was approved by a university's Institutional Review Board.

Measures

Age, gender, ethnicity, length of time in out-of-home care, and placement type were obtained from youth report and/or child welfare records.

Appraisal of Removal and Placement in Out-of-home Care—Children's appraisals of their lives following placement in out-of-home care were assessed using the project-designed Foster Care Questionnaire (FCQ). Two open-ended questions from the FCQ were used to solicit qualitative data about children's experiences in out-of-home care. Children were asked, "What's been the hardest thing about being in out of home care?" and, "What's been the most helpful thing about being in out of home care?" A coding manual was developed and used by two of the investigators to code each participant's responses to the two questions. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion among the investigators. If children provided more than one answer, their responses received multiple codes.

Three questions from the FCQ were also used to solicit ratings of children's experiences in out-of-home care. FCQ 1 asked children, "If you had stayed with [your family of origin], would your life be better than it is now, worse than it is now, or the same as it is now?" FCQ 2 asked children "overall, what do you think about being placed in out-of-home care; is it "very difficult," "okay," or "very good/helpful." FCQ 3 asked children to rate their current caregiver/home as, "very difficult," "okay," or "very good."

Maltreatment Type(s) and Severity—Type and severity of maltreatment were coded using the Maltreatment Classification System (MCS; Barnett, Manly & Cicchetti, 1993). The developers of the MCS report adequate estimates of interrater agreement (.60-1.0; Manly, Cicchetti, & Barnett, 1994). In the current study, trained research assistants used the MCS to code: 1) the legal petitions outlining reasons for removing children from their families of origin, and 2) the social histories completed by caseworkers and included in each participant's child welfare record. Six types of maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, failure to provide, lack of supervision, emotional maltreatment, and educational neglect) were coded as present or absent for each participating child. In addition, each child received a "highest severity" score, which represented the highest severity received for any of the six types of maltreatment, as rated on a five-point scale using the anchors and descriptors

developed by Barnett et al. Only maltreatment that occurred within the previous two years was coded because of concern that the petitions might not reliably include information about past history of abuse. All records were consensus coded by two closely supervised research assistants and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion with one of the senior investigators.

Attachment to caregiver—Attachment to substitute caregivers was assessed using a short form of the People in My Life Measure (PML; Gifford-Smith, 2000). The PML is a 30-item self-report measure, which was derived from a longer measure (Cook, Greenberg & Kusche, 1995). The short form has demonstrated high internal consistency (as from .80 to .83) and it reliably discriminates between samples of high risk and normative children. The PML includes items that ask children to rate the quality of their relationships with current caregivers. For example, children are asked to rate to what extent their caregivers, “help me with my problems,” “care about me,” “listen to me,” “accept me,” and “are proud of me.” They are also asked to what extent they “share thoughts and feelings with my caregivers” and “feel angry with my caregivers.” Mean scores range from 1 to 3, with higher scores indicating greater perceived attachment.

Results

Qualitative Findings

Children's responses to open-ended questions asking about the hardest and most helpful things about being placed in out-of-home care are summarized in Table 1. Responses to the question about the “hardest thing” were strikingly similar. Over one third of the children reported that missing their biological mothers was the hardest thing about being in out-of-home care. After “missing mom,” the most frequent responses were “missing family” and “adapting and transitioning to a new home.” One in six children reported that “nothing” was difficult about being in out-of-home care.

Children's responses to the question asking about the most helpful thing about being in out-of-home care were more varied, but over one third of children reported that their new home environment (having new or better opportunities, supports, services, instrumental needs, structure, and safety) was “the most helpful thing about being in out-of-home care.” Only a few children (9%) stated that “nothing” was helpful about being in out-of-home care.

Quantitative Findings

Descriptives—When asked what their lives would be like if they had stayed with their families of origin (FCQ 1), 76 (42%) children reported that their life would be “better than it is now,” 47 (26%) reported that their life would be “the same as it is now,” and 48 (27%) children reported that their life would be “worse than it is now.” Nine children either responded that they did not know or chose to skip this question. In response to FCQ 2 which asks children “overall, what do you think about being placed in out-of-home care,” 55 (31%) children responded that it was “very difficult,” 59 (33%) children reported that it was “OK,” and 61 (34%) children reported that it was “very good/helpful.” Five children stated that they did not know or chose to skip this question. As shown in Table 2, there was a strong association between children's responses to these two questions ($\chi^2(N = 168) = 27.56, p = .000$). Because of this overlap, subsequent analyses, which examine children's appraisals as a function of demographic, maltreatment, and placement characteristics, use only those data collected in response to FCQ 1.

Children's Ratings by Demographic Characteristics—Analysis of variance and chi-square analyses were used to examine whether children's appraisals of their lives following

removal from their families of origin differed based on demographic characteristics. As Table 3 demonstrates, children's ratings did not differ as a function of age, race, or ethnicity, but did differ as a function of gender, ($\chi^2(N = 171) = 6.60, p = .037$). Follow-up analyses were conducted (by combining some categories) to better understand the source of the statistically significant omnibus chi-square analysis. These analyses indicated that girls were more likely than boys to report that their lives would have been worse had they stayed with their families of origin, ($\chi^2(N = 171) = 6.38, p = .012$).

Children's Ratings by Maltreatment Type—Chi-square analyses suggested that children's appraisals differed depending upon whether or not they had been physically abused ($\chi^2(N = 171) = 7.53, p = .023$, sexually abused ($\chi^2(N = 171) = 7.53, p = .023$, or emotionally abused ($\chi^2(N = 171) = 9.96, p = .007$, but did not differ based upon whether or not they had been neglected. Follow-up analyses indicated that children who were physically abused were less likely to report that their lives would have been the same had they stayed with their families of origin, ($\chi^2(N = 171) = 6.90, p = .009$, while children who were sexually abused, ($\chi^2(N = 171) = 7.53, p = .006$, and those who were emotionally abused, ($\chi^2(N = 171) = 7.91, p = .005$, were more likely to report that their lives would have been worse if they stayed with their families of origin.

Children's Ratings by Maltreatment Severity—Analysis of variance suggested that children's reports did not differ based on the highest severity of maltreatment.

Children's Ratings by Length of Time in Out-of-home Care—Analysis of variance also suggested that children's appraisals did not differ as a function of their length of stay in out-of-home care.

Children's Ratings by Placement Type—A trend suggested that children's appraisals of their lives following removal might depend upon placement type $\chi^2(N = 171) = 8.97, p = .062$. Follow-up analyses suggested that children living in group settings were more likely than children living with kin, $\chi^2(N = 89) = 8.26, p = .004$, or children living in family foster care, $\chi^2(N = 94) = 6.51, p = .011$, to report that their lives would have been better had they remained with their families of origin. The appraisals of children living in foster care did not differ from the appraisals of children living with kin, $\chi^2(N = 159) = 0.41, p = .81$.

Children's Ratings by Attachment to Current Caregivers and Ratings of Caregiver/Home—Analysis of variance and chi-square analyses were used to examine children's ratings as a function of attachment to current caregivers and ratings of current caregiver/home. Children who felt more attached to their current caregivers were more likely to report that things would have been worse if they had stayed with their families of origin, $F(2,168) = 6.76, p = .002$. Children's appraisals also depended upon ratings of their current home/caregiver $\chi^2(N = 171) = 22.41, p = .001$. Follow-up analyses indicated that when compared to children who rated their caregiver/home as “very difficult,” $\chi^2(N = 115) = 14.27, p = .000$, or “ok,” $\chi^2(N = 158) = 4.40, p = .036$, children who rated their current caregiver/home as “very good” were less likely to report that their lives would have been better had they remained with their families of origin.

Discussion

This study uses qualitative and quantitative data, which were collected from a representative sample of youth recently placed in out-of-home care, in order to expand our current knowledge about children's experiences in out-of-home care. Qualitative data provided further insight into children's unique perspectives on the out-of-home care experience.

Quantitative data were used to identify those factors that were related to children's appraisals of their lives following placement in out-of-home care.

Children's responses to the qualitative questions were rich and varied. In response to the question asking children to name the most helpful thing about being in out-of-home care, children stated:

“Not having to live with all the pressure of ordinary life.”

“People are starting to listen to me and I'm getting more done.”

“Someone who cares about me.”

“Won't get abused again.”

“Giving mom an easier way to catch up.”

“Don't have to live on the street until [my parents] get out of jail.”

“I don't have to be around bad things.”

In response to the question asking children what was the hardest thing about being in out-of-home care, children reported:

“That we only get to see my parents on Wednesdays and we don't get to watch TV.”

“Seems like I will never see my mom again.”

“I'm worried about what's going to happen to my mom.”

“Eating food I don't like. Not having friends. Being alone.”

“Because you don't know anybody. Have to make new friends.”

“Foster parents are not my type.”

“Having to be moving from treatment center to treatment center.”

“Having people make promises to me and not following through.”

“Can't think of any.”

More variability was noted in children's responses to the question about what's been the most helpful thing about being in out-of-home care; less variability was noted when children were asked to comment on the hardest thing about being in out-of-home care. This finding is similar to a finding reported by Unrau, Seita, and Putney (2008), who asked 22 adults formerly in foster care about the impact of placement moves on their lives. Unrau et al. found that participants had similar responses to a question about the most difficult or hardest part of changing placements, but that participants' responses were more varied when they were asked to comment on the ways in which placement moves may have added to their quality of life.

The responses to both open-ended questions in the current study are also consistent with other studies asking similar questions of children currently or formerly in foster care (Johnson et al., 1995; Whiting & Lee, 2003; Wilson & Conroy, 1999). For example, Wilson and Conroy (1999) asked youth what “they liked most about what had happened to them since they had left their parents' homes.” Children reported that they received better care and that they were doing better in terms of academic performance, self-esteem, and peer relationships. In response to a question about what they liked least, children commented that they missed their families of origin, and that they had trouble adjusting to some aspects of their new homes and to a loss of freedom.

Children's responses in this and other studies demonstrate that children in out-of-home care are willing to talk about their experiences in an open and honest way and that they can share diverse perspectives. In fact, interviewers for the current study reported that most youth seemed to appreciate being interviewed about their experiences and seemed pleased that someone was interested in their opinions. This is an important lesson for researchers, child welfare workers, and caregivers, who may presume that it is better not to ask these kinds of emotionally-charged questions.

Quantitative findings suggested that children were fairly evenly divided in their appraisals of being in out-of-home care, with approximately one-third rating their placement in out-of-home as "very difficult," one-third reporting it was "ok," and one-third reporting it was "very good/helpful." A little less than half (42%) of the children reported that their lives would have been better if they had remained with their families of origin, while approximately one quarter reported that their lives would have been the "same" and one quarter reported that their lives would have been "worse". These findings differ somewhat from those of Barth (1990), who interviewed 55 youth recently emancipated from out-of-home care. In Barth's sample, 69% of the participants reported that their lives would have been much worse, 15% that their lives would have been somewhat worse, 10% that their lives would have been better, and 6% that their lives would have been much better if they had remained with their birth families. The difference in findings may be attributable both to the age of the respondents and to the amount of time that had elapsed since removal from families of origin. The average age of respondents in the Barth study was 21 years and the average length of time since removal was three years. A prospective developmental study of how children's perceptions change over time would be an important area for further investigation.

Quantitative findings also suggested that children's ratings of their lives following removal from families of origin depended upon gender, maltreatment type, placement type, and satisfaction with current caregiver/placement, but did not depend upon age, race, ethnicity, severity of maltreatment, or length of time in out-of-home care. With respect to gender, girls were more likely than boys to report that their lives would have been worse if they had stayed with their families of origin. There are several possible explanations for this gender difference. First, it may be more difficult for girls to remain in an abusive or neglectful environment, either because of the characteristics associated with those environments or because of the unique ways in which girls respond to maltreatment. Alternatively, it may be that girls feel more comfortable about admitting that things would not have been easy at home had they remained with their families of origin. This may be especially true in the current study given that all of the study interviewers were female. It is also possible that girls' responses may reflect a different maturational stage. Finally, the association between gender and children's appraisals might be explained by a third factor such as maltreatment type. Post hoc analyses revealed that girls were more likely than boys to have been sexually abused, $\chi^2(N = 180) = 12.651, p = .000$. Given that children who had been sexually abused were more likely to report that their lives would have been worse had they remained at home, the association between gender and children's appraisals might be explained by the fact that girls were more likely to have been sexually abused.

To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine children's appraisals of out-of-home care as a function of maltreatment type and severity. Furthermore, this study uses information abstracted from children's child welfare records, thereby eliminating the risk that any association between maltreatment and children's appraisals are attributable to shared method variance. When we examined the relationship between children's appraisals and physical abuse, we found that children who had been physically abused were less likely to report that their lives would have been "the same" had they stayed with their families of origin. Stated

differently, children who had been physically abused were more likely to have either strong positive or negative appraisals of their lives following placement in out-of-home care. This is a difficult finding to interpret. It may be that the effect of physical abuse on children's feelings about placement depends upon the severity of the abuse. When the physical abuse is relatively mild, children may see the abuse as more socially or culturally acceptable or may feel that being physically punished by their parents is justified. These youth may rate their lives as "worse" following placement, while those children who suffer from more severe physical abuse may rate their lives as "better" following placement. Post hoc analyses provided some support for this hypothesis as the mean rating of physical abuse severity for those youth who reported that their lives would be worse ($n = 18$) was a quarter of a point higher than the severity rating for youth who reported that their lives would have been better if they had remained at home ($n = 24$). Although in the hypothesized direction, this difference was not statistically significant, $F(1,41) = 2.23$, $p = .143$, perhaps because the analysis was limited to the sample of 42 youth who had been physically abused, and therefore underpowered.

Children who were sexually and emotionally abused were more likely to report that their lives would have been worse if they stayed with their families of origin, but children's appraisals did not depend upon whether or not children were neglected. It is possible that acts of commission (physical, sexual, and emotional abuse) are perceived as more aversive than acts of omission (failure to provide, lack of supervision, educational neglect). It may be easier for youth to fault their parents for acts of commission, while acts of omission may be perceived as beyond their parents' control.

Consistent with findings from other studies (Chapman et al., 2004; Gil & Bogart, 1982; Wilson & Conroy, 1999), we found that children living in group care were more likely than those living in family foster care or with kin to state that their lives would have been better had they remained with their families of origin. On the other hand, we did not find differences between children living in family foster care and those living with kin, a finding that contradicts the widely held belief that children are better off when placed with family. Our finding is largely consistent with the findings of two other studies (Chapman et al., 2004; Wilson & Conroy, 1999). In their sample of 1,100 children placed in out-of-home care, Wilson and Conroy (1999) did not find significant differences between children living with kin and those living with non-relative families in the degree to which they felt loved, safe, and satisfied with their substitute placements. Chapman and colleagues (2004) also found that children living with kin did not differ from children living in family foster care with respect to whether they liked their substitute caregivers, wanted their current living situation as a permanent home, or felt like part of the family. Chapman and colleagues did find, however, that children living with kin felt closer to their substitute caregivers, and were less likely to have run away from their current placement, more likely to have contact with their biological mothers, and more likely to talk to their caregivers about school and dating than those living in family foster care.

Findings from the present study indicate that children's appraisals of their lives following removal also differed as a function of both their attachment to their current caregivers and satisfaction with their current caregiver/home. Not surprisingly, children who felt more attached to their caregivers were more likely to report that things would have been worse if they had stayed with their families of origin. Findings also demonstrated that children who rated their current caregiver/home as "very difficult" were more likely to report that their lives would have been better with their families of origin. These findings replicate those of Festinger (1983) who found that former foster children who had developed a close relationship with their substitute caregivers reported greater satisfaction with the foster care experience. These findings also have important implications for policy and practice. It is

often assumed that children are unhappy in out-of-home care, but findings from this study and others support the notion that children who feel attached to their substitute caregivers and satisfied with their placement have positive appraisals of their lives following removal. Increasing children's comfort and fostering positive child-caregiver relationships may improve children's experiences in out-of-home care.

Of equal importance are our findings of no effect. Consistent with at least one other study (Chapman et al., 2004), children's appraisals of their lives following placement did not depend upon age, race, or ethnicity. In the current study, our failure to find differences based on age may be attributable to lack of variability, as children ranged from 9 to 11 years of age at the baseline interview. The small sample size may also have limited our ability to find differences based on children's race and ethnicity.

Somewhat surprisingly, children's appraisals of their lives following placement did not depend upon the length of time in care or on the highest severity of maltreatment experienced. The lack of association between length of time in care and children's appraisals of care may be attributable to the fact that all participants had been placed in care within the preceding year, thereby limiting the possible range for this variable. The fact that participants in the current study had entered care relatively recently also distinguishes it from many of the other studies reviewed here. With respect to the null finding regarding maltreatment severity, further investigation is warranted as this study was one of the first to examine children's appraisals of their experiences in out-of-home care as a function of maltreatment severity.

Several limitations of the present study must be noted. First, the structure of the interview may have adversely impacted the length and breadth of children's responses to the qualitative questions. These questions were asked at the end of a lengthy interview, and interviewers were required to record children's responses by hand in a limited amount of space. Second, the generalizability of the findings is limited by the fact that the study sample included children within a limited age range who were living in out-of-home care as a result of court order, and by the fact that participants were court-ordered into care by one of only two Colorado counties.

Despite these limitations, this study is the first to examine differences in children's appraisals of their lives following placement as function of maltreatment type, maltreatment severity, and satisfaction with current caregiver/home. It is our hope that this study will inform future research, clinical practice, and child welfare policy, with the goal of improving children's experiences in out-of-home care.

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Table 1
Classification of Children's Responses to Qualitative Questions Concerning Hardest and Most Helpful Aspects of Placement in Out-of-Home Care

Question	Classification	Frequency	%
What's been the hardest thing about being in out-of-home care?	Missing mom	62	34.4
	Missing family	50	27.8
	Adapting/transitioning to new environment	48	26.7
	Nothing	32	17.8
	Missing things about my old home	12	6.7
	Don't know/skip	9	5.0
	Worrying about biological family	4	2.2
	Other	3	1.7
	Answer not responsive to the question	1	0.6
What's been the most helpful thing about being in out-of-home care?	Having a better home environment	69	38.8
	Helps child function better	19	10.6
	Nothing	17	9.4
	Don't know/skip	16	8.9
	Being away from biological parents and/or a bad environment	14	7.8
	Liking substitute family/home	14	7.8
	Being placed with relatives	12	6.7
	Receiving emotional support	11	6.1
	Helps biological family	9	5.0
	Having contact with biological family	9	5.0
	Being cared for	6	3.3
	Everything	4	2.2
	Answer not responsive to question	3	1.7
	Other	3	1.7

Table 2
The Relationship Between Children's Ratings on FCQ1 and FCQ2

	FCQ 2: Overall, what do you think about being placed in foster care?			
	Very Difficult	OK	Very good/helpful	Total
FCQ 1: If you had stayed with [your family of origin], would your life be:				
Better than it is now, <i>n</i>	36	22	16	74
The same as it is now, <i>n</i>	6	23	17	46
Worse than it is now, <i>n</i>	12	10	26	48
Total, <i>n</i>	54	55	59	168

Table 3
Children's Appraisals of Placement in Out-of-Home Care as a Function of Demographic, Maltreatment, and Placement Characteristics

Variable	N	If you had stayed with [your family of origin], would your life be:			F/χ^2	p
		Better than it is now	The same as it is now	Worse than it is now		
Age (years)	171	9.84	9.77	10.17	1.70	.19
Ethnicity (%)						
American Indian/Alaska Native					2.58	.275
No	159	42.77	28.30	28.93		
Yes	12	66.67	16.67	16.67		
Asian					3.07	.216
No	160	45.00	28.13	26.88		
Yes	3	0.00	33.33	66.67		
Pacific Islander					0.95	.621
No	164	43.90	27.44	28.66		
Yes	2	50.00	50.00	0.00		
African American					.30	.860
No	113	44.25	28.32	27.43		
Yes	51	43.14	25.49	31.37		
White					.56	.757
No	82	41.46	29.27	29.27		
Yes	83	46.99	25.30	27.71		
Hispanic					4.00	.136
No	82		39.02	26.83		34.15
Yes	79	49.37	30.38	20.25		
Gender (%)					6.60	.037
Female	84	40.48	22.62	36.90		
Male	87	48.28	32.18	19.54		
Maltreatment Type (%)					7.53	.023
Physical Abuse						
No	120	42.50	33.33	24.17		
Yes	51	49.02	13.73	37.25		

Variable	If you had stayed with [your family of origin], would your life be:					F/χ^2	p
	N	Better than it is now	The same as it is now	Worse than it is now			
Sexual Abuse						7.53	.023
No	153	46.41	28.76	24.84			
Yes	18	27.78	16.67	55.56			
Emotional Abuse						9.96	.007
No	68	57.35	26.47	16.18			
Yes	103	35.92	28.16	35.92			
Failure to Provide						2.04	.360
No	81	39.51	32.10	28.40			
Yes	90	48.89	23.33	27.78			
Lack of Supervision						3.06	.217
No	45	55.56	22.22	22.22			
Yes	126	40.48	29.37	30.16			
Educational Neglect						0.16	.924
No	120	44.17	28.33	27.50			
Yes	51	45.10	25.49	29.41			
Length of Stay in Care (days)	171	212.38	201.62	200.54		0.22	.806
Placement Type (%)						8.97	.062
Foster Care	82	43.90	26.83	29.27			
Kinship Care	77	38.96	29.87	31.17			
Aggregate Care	12	83.33	16.67	0.00			
Attachment to Caregiver (Mean)	171	2.48	2.67	2.68		6.76	.002
Rating of Current Caregiver/Home (%)						22.41	.001
Very Difficult	11	90.91	0.00	9.09			
Okay	54	57.41	27.78	14.81			
Very Good	104	32.69	30.77	36.54			