

Child Protection and the Achievement Gap

Translating research to practice may be difficult, yet a better understanding of current research is necessary to ensure child welfare workers engage in best practices when working with children and families. The Minn-LInK Discussion Guide is designed to help facilitate thoughtful discussions about the information presented in the research brief in order to inform practice and enhance discussion surrounding meaningful issues.

In this issue, the academic achievement of youth with and without child protection system (CPS) involvement was explored to determine if an achievement gap exists at varying levels of an accepted case. In particular, this study analyzed whether a CPS achievement gap existed after controlling for differences in socioeconomic status and race and whether more extensive involvement in CPS yielded increasingly negative academic outcomes. Findings suggested that an achievement gap exists for youth in CPS compared to youth without CPS involvement. The proportion of youth that were proficient on MCA-II math and reading tests was consistently lower in the child protection and out-of-home placement populations than for the general student populations, even after controlling for race and socioeconomic status. However, there was no evidence to support that more extensive involvement in CPS produced a larger achievement gap.

Discussion on Practice Implications

1. Both youth involved in CPS and those experiencing out-of-home placement (OHP) were significantly less likely to demonstrate proficiency on standardized measures of reading and math, even when socioeconomic status and race were controlled. What programs are available to support the academic success of youth involved in CPS? What can we as professionals do to ensure youth involved in CPS receive appropriate educational services and assistance?
2. It appears that the achievement gap exists for youth with CPS involvement regardless of whether they go on to experience more extensive involvement within CPS (e.g., out-of-home placement). This finding suggests that interventions that wait for youth to experience OHP may be too late. This finding also suggests that the way we think about well-being in child welfare (i.e., as part of the OHP process) does not adequately address the needs of all CPS-involved children. How can we promote early intervention services for youth involved in CPS? How can we better assess whether our systems are meeting the needs of all CPS-involved children?

Discussion on Agency- & System-Level Changes

1. This study revealed that the achievement gap between youth with and without CPS involvement is present by the time youth become involved in CPS. This may mean that waiting for a child to enter CPS may already be too late. How can cross-collaboration ensure youth involved in CPS receive early intervention services? What steps need to be taken for child welfare workers and school personnel to collaborate for the academic success of youth involved in CPS?
2. Cross-system collaboration between child welfare workers and school personnel is critical to ameliorate the poor academic outcomes of youth involved in CPS. What barriers exist in cross-system collaboration efforts? How can we work to overcome these challenges and barriers?
3. Information sharing between systems may allow us to identify and monitor youth who are at-risk of school failure. Describe your experiences sharing information with other systems. What are some of the challenges you have faced? What has made it easier?
4. Addressing child well-being from a holistic perspective is a controversial issue, with some individuals proposing that safety (and safety alone) is the role of child protection and other individuals arguing that safety by itself isn't a large enough focus for child protection. What do you think is the role of child protection in ensuring well-being? How do you see your agency's role in ensuring well-being? What barriers exist within your agency from adopting a more holistic perspective? In what ways is your agency already using a holistic perspective in child protection practice?