

Running Away from Foster Care: What Do We Know and What Do We Do?

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Abstract Running away is a serious problem behavior that occurs frequently among youth in the foster care system. Given the severity of the problem, it is important to understand the phenomenon and seek solutions. The purpose of this paper is to examine the literature to determine what is known about youth running away from foster care placements and to identify strategies that have been implemented to reduce the magnitude of the problem. We begin by describing how running away has been defined within the child welfare system and what is known about the prevalence of runaway behavior among youth in foster care. We then consider risk factors related to running away, along with ramifications for youth when they run away. Lastly, we discuss motivations for running and offer suggestions of strategies that can be helpful in efforts to prevent or reduce running. Strategies include promising research that uses a behavioral functional assessment and intervention approach to decrease running and stabilize placements.

Keywords Runaway · Child welfare · Foster care · Elopement · AWOL · Functional assessment

Introduction

The foster care system was designed to protect children who have been or who are at risk for abuse or neglect. Specific reasons for a child being placed in foster care

include a variety of circumstances such as: (a) when a child's parents are unable to take care of their children due to illness, death, imprisonment, or economic conditions, or (b) when a child suffers abuse, neglect, or a lack of supervision from caregivers. In most cases, the child is removed from the home via a court order and becomes a ward of the state, and then it is the responsibility of the local social service or child welfare agency to arrange for an out-of-home placement. Once removed, that child is placed in substitute care, also referred to as out-of-home care. Substitute care placements consist of different types of living arrangements and can include, but are not limited to, traditional foster family care, family or relative foster care, group homes, residential centers, and emergency shelters (Sigrid 2004). Ideally, placements are chosen to best meet the needs of the child. The role of the child welfare agency is to ensure for the safety and well-being of the child while in foster care. For the purposes of this article we will use the term "foster care" to encompass all of the above out-of-home living arrangements.

Given that children in foster care have been removed from their familiar surroundings and many have been victims of abuse, it is not surprising that these children often exhibit challenging behaviors that can result in placement disruptions (Aarons et al. 2010; Keil and Price 2006). One of the challenging behaviors that place the safety of the child in jeopardy is running away.

For the most part, children who run away from their foster placements are teenagers. As a matter of convention, we will refer to these children with the term "youth." The act of running away from placements is also referred to in the literature as "elopement" or going "AWOL." Running away has been defined as an event in which a youth, who is in the custody of a social services agency licensed by the state, disappears, voluntarily or involuntarily, without the

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consent of the caregiver in whose care the youth has been placed (Administration for Children's Services 1992). Child welfare agencies often do not agree on when a youth is termed a runaway. Reporting procedures differ between agencies and group facilities. Therefore, the definition does not indicate the duration of the run. Some agencies report a youth on runaway as soon as they leave their placement without permission while other agencies require the youth to be gone for a minimum amount of time (e.g., 24 h).

When a youth runs away, child welfare personnel along with local law enforcement agencies are responsible for locating and returning the youth back to their placement. Increased resources and effort are needed on the part of child welfare agencies when youth run, as diligent efforts must be made to find the youth and extensive reporting paperwork requirements are mandatory within a certain period of time after the run (e.g., often within 24 h) (Finkelstein et al. 2004). Other government agencies and service providers are also negatively affected by the cost involved with youth who runaway. Law enforcement personnel spend time and effort locating youth and filling out paperwork while school systems lose money when youth are not attending school as school attendance is often tied to funding.

Running away can also hold serious consequences for youth. While on the run, youth may be exposed to the risk of abusing alcohol and drugs, criminal and sexual victimization, sexually transmitted diseases, prostitution, or arrest and incarceration from committing crimes themselves (Biehal and Wade 1999; Courtney et al. 2005; Hyde 2005). In addition, running away interrupts schooling resulting in a lack of skills needed to acquire gainful employment and housing when youth are transitioning to adulthood (Courtney et al.). Running away not only places the youth in harm's way, but also frequently jeopardizes current placements and can lead to more restrictive placements once the youth returns. When a youth changes placement, this can lead to other disruptions including increases in school absences, changes in school placement, and changes to community ties (such as friends, family, and church). Placement changes can also contribute to the development of additional behavior problems in youth who previously did not exhibit such problems (Newton et al. 2000). Two or more placement changes during the first year of out-of-home care are shown to be associated with more subsequent placement changes (Webster et al. 2000). Multiple placement changes prior to the age of 14 have been associated with later delinquency arrests (Ryan and Testa 2005) and subsequent placement instability (Webster et al. 2000). Therefore, running away that results in placement changes could lead to additional problem behaviors and, in turn, these can contribute to increased placement disruption and incidents of running away.

Prevalence

Running away from home is fairly common in the general population with about one in eight youth reporting to have run away from home at some time during adolescence (Whitbeck and Simons 1990). Research on elopement among youth in foster care has typically involved surveying homeless youth or examining discharge data collected by child welfare agencies and/or homeless shelters. Although there is a lack of population-based studies, findings from smaller studies indicate that youth in foster care make up a sizable portion of all runaways (Biehal and Wade 1999; Fasulo et al. 2002; Guest et al. 2009). Sedlak et al. (2002) found that youth in foster care are at least twice as likely to run away as youth of the same age in the general population (2.4 vs. 0.9 %). In the US, approximately 8,000 of the 424,000 youth in foster care in 2009 ran away from their placements (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2003). Courtney et al. (2004) found between 46 and 52 % of 17 year olds in foster care in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin reported running away from care at some point. This does not take into account the number of youth who become labeled as chronic runners, defined as youth who run away three or more times. Courtney et al. found that nearly two-thirds of youth who ran away did so more than once and 36 % ran three or more times.

The majority of episodes of running away tend to be short with an average of 3 days (English and English 1999). Almost half of all runs last less than 1 week (Courtney et al. 2005). However, Courtney et al. also found that almost one quarter of runs lasted 5 weeks or more. This is disconcerting as longer runs may be more likely to expose youth to dangerous situations. Older youth are more likely to run away for longer periods of time than younger youth. Courtney found increases in the time spent away from care as the youths' age increased. Approximately 12 % of runners who were 12 years old ran for more than 5 weeks while runners who were 18 years old ran away from care for more than 5 weeks almost 38 % of the time.

Several studies have reported high incidences of youth coming from foster care residing at runaway shelters. Kurtz et al. (1991) found that 18 % of shelter youth ran away from foster care in a study with over 2,000 youth across eighteen states. MacLean et al. (1999) also found 18 % of youth from a shelter in Seattle reported running away from care and Whitbeck et al. (1997) reported 13 % of youth from shelters and streets from four Midwest states ran away from foster care.

A survey of 170 runaway shelters in the United States found that over 25 % of youth came directly from a foster or group home and 38 % of youth had been in foster care at some time during the year prior to running (Bass 1992). A larger study that gathered data from 689 homeless youth in

Canada revealed that 43 % of the youth had been involved with child protection services and 68 % of the youth came directly from foster care, group homes, or a youth center (Raising the Roof 2009). In addition, youth in foster care who had a history of running away were 92 % more likely to run away again compared to youth who had no history of running away (Nesmith 2006).

Risk Factors

Children placed in foster care are among the most vulnerable for social-emotional problems and behavior problems. The foster care system itself has been widely regarded as a “national disgrace” due to a laundry list of complaints, abuse, missing children, and even deaths of children in care (Time Magazine 2000). The dysfunction of the foster care system creates tremendous problems and contributes to the high incidence of youth running away. While youth who are not in foster care are typically running away from their parents, youth in foster care are often running back to their biological parents, family members, friends, and familiar settings. Abuse, abandonment, neglect, poor school performance, painful family conflict, and involvement with the criminal justice system are all risk factors that have been associated with an increase in the probability of youth running away (Thompson and Pollio 2006; CWLA 2005; Finkelhor et al. 2002). Since most youth in foster care have many of these risk factors, this elucidates the jeopardy youth in foster care may face.

Youth with a permanent custody status (e.g., termination of parental rights obtained, long-term custody to relatives or non-relatives), and those in a home-type placement (e.g., foster home non-relative, family shelter home non-relative, approved relative caregiver) are more likely to remain stable in placements and less likely to run away than those in group facility placements (Witherup et al. 2005). Witherup et al. also examined risk factors related to placement changes and their preliminary findings suggest that being in settings with more than four children or in settings for older youth (ages 12–15 years of age) were associated with a higher risk of placement disruption. The first instance of running away from a foster placement is a strong predictor of future running (Ross 2001). When youth engage in repeated running from care, there is a high risk of detachment from adult bonding, involvement in criminal and gang activity, sexual exploitation, drug abuse, and lack of school attendance and educational attainment (Kaplan 2004).

Age and gender have also been identified as key risk factors associated with running away. Youth between the ages of 15 and 17 years are more likely to run away than youth under 15 years of age (Hammer et al. 2002). Courtney et al. (2005) collected data from 14,282 youth

who ran away from care between 1993 and 2003 and found that almost 90 % of youth ran for the first time after they were at least 12 years of age. This may be changing though, as data from the National Runaway Switchboard (2008) indicated that youth under the age of 12 represented the fastest growing group of callers to the crisis line as calls increased by 172 % between 2000 and 2007. There is also indication that as youth approach the age of 18 they may be less likely to run away. A study examining data from 8,933 youth living in residential facilities found the percentage of running away to be 16 % at age 16, 35 % at age 17, and 28 % among 18 year olds (Sunseri 2003). With regard to gender, most studies have reported a much higher frequency of running away among females compared to males (Courtney and Wong 1996; Courtney and Zinn 2009; Sanchez et al. 2006). Females also appear to be more likely to seek shelter and hotline services. The National Runaway Switchboard reported 75 % of crisis callers were female (National Runaway Switchboard 2008).

Some other common risk factors that are associated with increases in running away include: having a prior history of runs, placement disruptions, using of substances, and being a victim of abuse (Thompson et al. 2004; Yoder et al. 2001). A large scale study of children running away from out-of-home placements in Illinois found several factors that may be predictive of youth and situations associated with running away from placements (Courtney et al. 2005). Girls were more likely to run than were boys. Ninety percent of runners were 12–18 years of age. Other factors associated with higher likelihoods of running were histories of placement instability, the presence of mental health diagnoses or substance abuse problems, and placements in residential facilities. Courtney et al. also found that the probability of running away is highest in the first several months of placement into foster care. Some of the factors that were associated with a lower likelihood of running were living with a relative or living in a setting with a sibling. Based on interviews of youth who runaway (Courtney et al. 2005), some adolescents reported that they were “running to family” in order to: touch base with family and friends; find a sense of safety, comfort, connection, or normalcy; or to assist their mothers or siblings. As the author states, “Some recognize that their families of origin are neither healthy, safe, nor even reciprocally caring environments. But many youth equated being around a biological family with being ‘normal’, and their desire for a ‘real home’ (which foster care was not, in their minds)” (Courtney et al. 2005, p. 4). Other reasons that youth in foster care reported running away included gaining access to preferred food items and/or activities (e.g., fast food, hang out at the mall with friends, cigarettes), escaping from aversive caregivers or restrictions at their foster placement, and gaining access to girlfriends/boyfriends (Clark et al. 2008).

Ramifications

The ramifications for youth who run away are numerous. When on the run, youth are typically not attending school, may drop out of school, and may be involved in criminal activity or be the victim of a crime. Chances are youth are not gainfully employed when on the run and may not be able to establish an employment history that would allow youth to afford proper housing and essentials once they have exited the foster care system.

Delinquency and Victimization

It is well documented that youth on the run are at high risk for a variety of dangerous situations. Youth who run away have an elevated risk of sexual victimization, being the victim of a crime, or engaging in criminal behavior themselves (Graham and Bowling 1995; Molnar et al. 1998; Simons and Whitbeck 1991). Runaway youth, both those in foster care and youth not in foster care, are up to 15 times more likely to be infected with HIV than non-runaways (Booth et al. 1999). Among youth in foster care who ran away that were interviewed in a study by Biehal and Wade (1999), several of the youth had been victims of street robbery or stalking and one participant was stabbed. Nearly half of their sample of over 200 youth had engaged in delinquent behavior and were charged with a criminal offense while on the run. Interestingly, some of the youth had engaged in criminal behavior before entering foster care and this behavior only increased when they were placed together in group placements with other youth who also had a history of criminal behavior. In some cases youth engaged in risky criminal behavior in order to survive on the streets. Youth may engage in petty theft along with other ways to survive, including prostitution. Given the survival mode that youth on the run may be in, they are highly vulnerable to sexual exploitation (Farmer and Pollock 1998). Pimps and those involved in human trafficking may specifically target youth in foster care by providing a place to stay, money, and drugs and alcohol. They may also encourage youth to bring other youth in foster care with them. The illusion of being valued and “part of a family” may also entice youth in foster care to become involved in prostitution or human trafficking.

Education and Employment

Although the data are limited, evidence indicates that youth in foster care tend to fare poorly in the arenas of education and employment, and it is logical to assume that youth who run away from foster placements have even more discouraging prospects. The needs of youth in foster care are

often unrecognized and do not receive enough consideration within the child welfare system and educational system. These two systems often work independently and youth in foster care may be more likely to fall between the cracks and not receive crucial services. For example, a survey conducted in the state of Oregon found that 39 % of youth in foster care had individualized education plans (IEPs), but only 16 % of those youth actually received services (White et al. 1990 as cited in Ayasse 1995). To a large extent, the special education system relies on parental advocacy and support. Youth in foster care typically lack a consistent and knowledgeable advocate. In fact, a study by the Advocates for Children of New York (2000) found that 90 % of foster parents reported no involvement in the special education process. Geenen and Powers (2006) found that foster youth in special education demonstrated lower performance on academic variables and experienced more restrictive educational placements when compared to foster youth not receiving special education services and youth not in foster care receiving special education services. They contend that the negative impact of youth interfacing with both systems may be multiplicative. For example, youth with disabilities in foster care are more likely to experience multiple placement changes. This instability is typically associated with school changes and adjusting to these changes may be extremely challenging for youth in foster care.

Overall, studies have reported that the educational achievement level of foster children is low with studies reporting between one-third to 67 % (estimated at 170,000–345,000) of foster children functioning below grade level (Fanshel et al. 1990; Pasztor et al. 1986; Zimmerman 1982). One study found that two-thirds of youth in foster care repeated one or more grades during their educational career and only 39 % ever completed the 12th grade (Zimmerman 1982). Statistics indicate that 30–40 % of foster care youth receive special education services (Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service 1999). Festinger (1983) found that approximately 22.1 % of men in the general population attend college compared to 2.3 % of male youth in foster care. A study by Courtney and Dworsky (2005) surveyed former foster youth and found that over one-third had received neither a high school diploma or a GED, compared to fewer than 10 % of their same-age peers not in foster care. Reasons for low educational achievement point to high levels of disrupted education and difficulties in school adjustment and performance (Gil and Bogart 1982; Festinger 1983; Jones and Moses 1984). Disruptions in placements can often result in students being placed in inappropriate settings or programs and a lack of implementation of IEPs. There is no known literature on the educational outcomes of youth in foster care who frequently runaway from placements. It could be

hypothesized that running away could lead to an even greater increase in placement disruptions and decreases in school attendance and performance.

Statistics for employment of youth aging out of foster care, regardless of if they ran away while in care or not, are quite sobering. The Chapin Hall Midwest Evaluation (Courtney and Dworsky 2005) is a longitudinal study that has conducted four waves of interviews of approximately 600 youth who exited the foster care system. The first wave of interviews conducted in 2005 when the youth were 19 years old reported that only 40 % of the youth were employed and the mean hourly wage was \$7.54. Most strikingly, is that 90 % of the youth earned less than \$10,000 per year. The most recent wave of interviews was conducted when these same youth were 26 years old with very similar results (Courtney et al. 2011). Only 46 % of the young adults were currently employed with an average hourly wage of \$10.73. The average annual income was reported at \$13,989. No known data exist that specifically look at employment outcomes for youth in foster care who run away, but one would assume that the statistics would be similar or worse given that while on the run youth are unlikely to be gainfully employed, attending school, or receiving job skills training.

Motivation for Running

Youth's motivation for running away typically falls into two categories: running "to" something (friends, family, activities, etc.) or running "away" from something (averse placement, caregivers, etc.). This could also be referred to as access to preferred people or activities and escape from living situations that the youth find unfavorable. In many cases youth are running away for both categories of reasons. For example, a youth may be running away to see her boyfriend and to escape her group home because she does not get along with her roommates.

Accessing family or friends is a key reason that many youth run away. While in foster care youth may have limited or no access to family or friends. Youth whose parental rights have been terminated cannot legally see parents and youth who still have parental rights intact may be subjected to supervised visits that occur infrequently and they may be reliant on their caseworker to provide transportation to the visit. Both Courtney et al. (2005) and Finkelstein et al. (2004) reported that the majority of run-aways ran to their family of origin and/or stayed with friends (including girl/boyfriends). Fasulo et al. (2002) found that a subset of their study youth who ran away permanently were most likely to be living with family (44 %), friends (39 %), or extended family members living in the youths community of origin (17 %).

Activities that youth may be running away to access include sex, drugs, and alcohol. Being in foster care has been associated with high-risk sexual behavior and increased pregnancy rates (Carpenter et al. 2001). Ensign and Santelli (1997) found in their sample that 12.7 was the average age of youth in foster care's first time engaging in sexual intercourse and that 69 % were sexually active before the age of 15. In contrast to the general population in which the average age that youth have sex for the first time is 17 years old and approximately 16 % of youth are sexually active by the age of 15 (Finer and Philbin 2013). Youth who run away may also be at risk for prostitution and human trafficking which has become more prevalent in recent years. Youth may run away to access drugs and alcohol or may runaway to access friends but engage in drugs and alcohol while spending time with friends. While many youth may engage in casual drinking and marijuana use while on the run, some youth engage in serious risky behaviors such as drug dealing, gang involvement, and criminal behavior (Finkelstein et al. 2004).

Youth may also run away from caregivers or environments that they perceive as negative. The relationship between youth and substitute caregivers is an important factor for youth who decide to run. For example, a study from the Netherlands found that when compared to non-runners, youth who ran away from foster care placements reported that caregivers treated them in an authoritarian and cold manner (Angenent et al. 1991). In group environments, several factors may play a part in the relationship between staff and youth. Staff trained in effectively teaching youth appropriate social, academic, and vocational skills and who also engage in interaction styles that are preferred by youth may be more successful in developing positive relationships (Willner et al. 1977). Willner et al. instructed youth to rate categories of caregiver interactions and found a range of behaviors that were preferred by youth including, having a calm demeanor, offering to help, joking, providing positive feedback, and fairness, to name a few. It is possible that youth who have positive interactions with caregivers may be more likely to comply with caregiver requests and accept feedback instead of escaping from caregivers by running away. Another factor specific to staff at group facilities is the work environment itself. Quite often staff do not receive adequate training on how to manage difficult youth behaviors and a lack of adequate compensation in addition to long hours can result in high staff turnover. The majority of direct care staff at shelters and group home facilities for foster children receive minimal to no training in behavior management strategies (Burns et al. 2004; Hicks-Coolick et al. 2003). According to several studies, youth residing in group home facilities may exhibit high levels of social, emotional, and behavioral needs (Burns et al. 2004;

Landsverk et al. 2002; Litronwnik et al. 1999). A study conducted on the state child welfare system in California found that less than half of the agencies required training in behavioral management and the training that was provided was often only 3–4 h in length (Caring for Children in Child Welfare 2004). Concern over the work environment and high turnover rates has led to an increase in research targeting improving the workplace (Ellett 2009; Shim 2010). The study by Shim that included over 750 child welfare caseworkers and supervisors found that clear and effective rewards and incentives specifically targeting job performance resulted in child welfare employees reporting less intention to leave than those employees with less clear and effective incentives and rewards. This research also suggests that employees who are appropriately rewarded and well taken care of may have less stress and enjoy their job which could result in more positive relationships with youth.

In addition to youth reporting negative interactions with staff as reasons for running away, youth also report rules and restrictions in placements as reasons for running. Complaints about rules most often were associated with group and residential placements. It is important to acknowledge that many youth who enter foster care come from environments that may have provided little in the way of rules or structure which may make it difficult for these youth to adequately adjust to strict rules that occur in group settings. Running away allows youth to escape the rules and return to having control over the activities they would like to pursue without restrictions.

Strategies to Reduce Running

The majority of studies published related to running away in foster care have focused on risk factors and determining triggers for running away in an effort to prevent running. Few studies have reported interventions specific to decreasing runaway behavior of youth in foster care. With regard to prevention, Carneiro and Heckman (2003) have suggested that social capital in the form of social skills, attitudes, and cognitive abilities learned in childhood and adolescence may be variables predictive of success in school and life. Whereas the majority of typical young people develop social networks that include family, friends, and other community members who provide guidance and support both financially and socially, many youth living in out-of-home dependency systems lack opportunities to develop these types of social and economic capital (Clark and Crosland 2009; Shirk and Stangler 2004). It would seem that one of the first steps in minimizing this gap for foster youth would be to assist them in identifying preferred living situations and stabilizing them

in these settings (e.g., Clark et al. 2000; Witherup et al. 2006). Lin (2012) suggests that those youth with a number of risk factors predictive of running should be provided with a supportive network of services and when possible be placed in family-like environments. Placement settings might also provide a more flexible set of rules for older youth to provide more independence and the ability to engage in activities that youth not living in foster care can readily access. This has been difficult to accomplish as it requires the child welfare system to evaluate a risk benefit scenario as their primary role is to maintain child safety and providing more independence could lead to youth contacting harmful situations in real world environments.

There are only a handful of studies that have examined interventions with youth who runaway (Slesnick 2001; Slesnick and Prestopnik 2004; Thompson et al. 2002). These studies have developed general intervention approaches to apply to all youth without individualizing the intervention approach to match the unique circumstances related to an individual's behavior. For example, a study of adolescents who ran away compared those who attended at least three family counseling sessions versus those who did not participate (Ostensen 1981). The recidivism of running showed a moderate improvement over a 3-month period for the youth who participated in the counseling versus those who did not. However, a subgroup of adolescents in foster care who participated in the sessions did not differ from the non-participants. Two other studies evaluated different family therapy approaches to decrease youth running away from home (D'Angelo 1984; Slesnick and Prestopnik 2005). Slesnick and Prestopnik (2005) focused on a severe population of substance-abusing runaway adolescents and found improvements on both substance abuse and running by youth. One key factor for improvement was high engagement of parents. A study by D'Angelo (1984) showed a mild positive impact on running and school attendance after a one-shot information and family therapy session. High parental involvement was also highlighted as an important factor in the success of the intervention.

None of these studies focused on youth in foster care who run away. Family therapy may not be a viable intervention for most youth in foster care since they are not living with their biological parents, due to a host of reasons such as prior abuse and neglect, and visitation with family members may be limited or parental rights may have been terminated. Many youth in foster care live in residential settings without family type caregivers, have limited or no access to biological parents, and might run for different reasons than youth not in foster care. For example, youth in foster care might run to see biological parents (with whom they are restricted from visiting) while youth not in foster care often are running away from their parents.

Clark et al. (2008) was the only intervention study found specific to youth in foster care. Clark et al. piloted a behavior analytic approach to assessing and intervening with youth in foster care who run away from placements. Behavior analytic principles and the general process of positive behavior support (PBS) (Sailor et al. 2009) served as the foundation for the runaway intervention model in the Clark study. A hallmark of behavior analysis is its reliance on data to make decisions regarding appropriate treatments (Neef and Iwata 1994), and this characteristic has become most evident within the past two decades with the advent of functional analytic and functional assessment perspectives (Horner 1994; Iwata et al. 1994; Repp and Horner 1999). The “functional approach” of behavior analysis calls for a pre-intervention assessment of environmental conditions that serve to maintain a specified behavior, and then uses assessment information to devise an intervention plan tailored to meet the circumstances and needs of the individual. The term “functional assessment” refers to the “process of gathering information that can be used to maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of behavioral support” (O’Neill et al. 1990, p. 3). Two of the primary outcomes of a functional assessment are: (1) identification of the consequences that maintain the target behavior, which leads to inferences about the function or outcome of the behavior for that individual, and (2) identification of the antecedent conditions (events, situations) that help predict when a target behavior is more likely to occur and when a target behavior is less likely to occur.

In recent years there have been increased efforts to extend the perspectives and methods of behavior analysis to a variety of challenges encountered in child welfare and the foster care system (Stoutimore et al. 2008). While behavior analysis has been well established for some decades in developmental disabilities and other areas, it has taken longer for the discipline to be demonstrated in the realm of child protection. The tenets of PBS, including the importance of intervention feasibility and desirability along with effectiveness are essential additions needed when working in the realm of child protection and with youth who run from placements. PBS uses a person-centered approach to evaluating the functional and environmental reasons that individual’s engage in problematic behaviors (Carr et al. 2002). The overarching goal of PBS intervention is to improve individual quality of life indicators (e.g., physical and mental health, education, living situation, employment, relationships, social supports) by altering environmental arrangements as needed and by teaching and reinforcing desirable alternative behaviors.

Clark et al. (2008) conducted a study utilizing an indirect functional approach methodology using the Functional Assessment-Youth Interaction Tool (FA-YIT) to decrease the runaway behavior of children in foster care. The

purpose of the FA-YIT was for interviewers to establish trust with youth who return from runs, gather functional information as to the reasons youth run from placements, and establish mutually beneficial contingency contracts to increase youth stability. An analysis of 13 adolescents who ran away frequently or “habitually” with whom they intervened using the FA-YIT and a comparison group of “matched” adolescents who had similar patterns of running away but received only “services as usual” was conducted. Each participant in the FA-YIT group received the FA-YIT assessment to determine the function of his/her run behavior and received an individually tailored intervention based on the determined function. For example, if the functional assessment showed that a youth was running away to be with her biological (but previously abusive) mother, perhaps more frequent supervised visits could be scheduled. This intervention could only be selected based on the outcome of the functional assessment as another child might actually find increased visits to be highly aversive. Similarly, if more visits could not be feasibly arranged or the youth does not want direct contact with the parent, the youth might be taught an alternative response such as increased phone calls or “face time” with the biological parent. Data on the percent of days on runaway status showed a significant pre-post reduction for those in the FA-YIT group, in contrast to no statistical change in the comparison group’s outcomes ($p \leq 0.05$). Additionally, the change from baseline to the post-period was significantly larger for the intervention (FA-YIT) group than for the comparison group (two-sample test, $p \leq 0.05$). The FA-YIT intervention group was on runaway 38 % of the time during baseline decreasing to 18 % after the intervention. The baseline for the comparison group was 34 % of days on runaway status and the postcondition was slightly higher at 38 %. The findings for other dependent variables of mean number of runs per year and mean number of placement changes per year were not as conclusive, but again showed greater improvement for the functional group versus services as usual. This study suggests that tailoring an intervention by determining a youth’s motivation for running can be effective in decreasing and stabilizing placements. Once stable in a living situation, youth may be more likely to attend and progress in other life skills including education.

Conclusion

Youth in foster care who chronically run away present a substantial problem within child welfare. While on the run, youth may be in harm’s way and may engage in substance use and a variety of criminal acts. The goals of addressing runaway behavior with youth in out-of-home placements

are not only to reduce the rate of running away and the duration of unsafe days but, more importantly, to provide greater placement stability to enhance the likelihood that these young people can gain social, educational, and functional competencies that will serve them well throughout their adult lives.

In this article, we have examined the research associated with running away behavior by youth in foster care. We reviewed available data on prevalence and the circumstances associated with running and found few studies on attempts to reduce or prevent the problem. Analyses of the factors and motivations associated with running may lead to effective resolutions. However, very few programs or interventions to deter or prevent running that are specific to youth in foster care have been developed. Understanding the reasons why youth run away may be a key factor in developing effective interventions. Further research should evaluate how to develop effective and feasible interventions that are individualized based on each youth's reason for running (e.g., Clark et al. 2008), as well as the long-term efficacy of such function-based approaches in comparison with other strategies. Because so little systematic investigation has been reported, the field is wide open, and in great need, for studies on all aspects of the problem and intervention procedures designed to improve the status of youth in foster care.

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