

Placement stability in kinship and non-kin foster care: A Canadian study

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ABSTRACT

We compared the stability of kinship and non-kin foster placements in the cases handled by one Ontario (Canada) child protection agency in 2008–2010. Non-kin placements were four times more likely than kin placements to end within the first month; this difference then decreased, but kin placements remained significantly more stable in months 2 through 6. Kin placements were also more likely to end successfully by discharge to parents, whereas non-kin placements were much more likely to end because the child moved to another placement. Children's ages did not differ between placement types, and the stability difference persisted when children who had been physically or sexually abused were distinguished from those who had not. Within kin placements, those that were preceded by a non-kin foster placement were more stable than those that were not, and those involving genealogical, marital or adoptive links of kinship were more stable than placements with unrelated nominal "kin". Our results generally support the current policy preference for kin placements, but we conclude by discussing why cautious interpretation remains warranted.

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1. Introduction

In many jurisdictions, placing children who have been removed from their homes with "kin" is now preferred practice. Many professionals believe that kin care is in children's best interests, but the evidence, although generally supportive, remains weak (Cuddeback, 2004; Daly & Perry, 2011; Geen, 2003; Winokur, Holtan, & Valentine, 2009). This is mainly because randomized placement is not generally feasible and has apparently never been used to address the question of differential placement success (Winokur et al., 2009), with the result that placement type is often confounded with important attributes of children and their pre-placement experiences (e.g. Grogan-Kaylor, 2000).

Cuddeback (2004) cites eight empirical studies, all of which were conducted in the USA, indicating that "children in kinship care have more stable placements compared with children in non-kinship care" (p. 629). This differential stability has persisted in most subsequent US research (e.g. Winokur, Crawford, Longobardi, & Valentine, 2008; Zinn, DeCoursey, Goerge, & Courtney, 2006), although Herring, Shook, Goodkind, and Kim (2009) obtained a contrary result in a Pennsylvania study. Whether the typical U.S. result of greater stability in kin placements can be generalized to other countries is not yet clear. A few studies say yes, but in a meta-analysis of predictors of placement disruption using an international sample of research, Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, and Doreleijers (2007) found

no significant impact of kinship. According to Winokur et al. (2009), "As research on this topic is predominantly U.S. based, studies from other countries are sorely needed, especially as kinship care is increasing in popularity elsewhere in the western world" (p. 38).

In the study reported here, we compare the stability of kin and non-kin foster placements at one Ontario (Canada) child protection agency, and assess whether age or abuse history are relevant pre-placement confounds. We then scrutinize whether stability can reasonably be treated as a measure of placement success, by distinguishing placements that ended "well" by discharge to a birth parent, from those that ended "poorly" by a move to another placement. Finally, we examine differential stability within kin placements, distinguishing among relationships that are presently subsumed legislatively under the blanket term "kin".

2. The Ontario child protection context

Canadian child protection law is under provincial jurisdiction. In Ontario, there are four main forms of out-of-home placements for children who have been removed from their parents' care: Kin Service, Kin Care, Foster Care, and Group Care.

Kin Service placements can occur voluntarily or through a court order, and even though placement families must undergo a Kin Service Assessment, the standard of approval is lower than that applying to the other three forms of out of home care. There are no universally available financial or community supports for these families, and those who are eligible for financial assistance or other resources through community programs receive lower levels of support than is available within the child protection system. Requirements for

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monitoring of these families by the child protection agency are also lower than is the case for the other types of out-of-home placement (Ontario Child Welfare Secretariat, 2006).

Kin Care differs from Kin Service (and is similar to Foster Care and Group Care) in that the children are legally in the care of the relevant Children's Aid Society. Both Kin Care and Foster families have to be approved via the SAFE homestudy process (see <http://www.SAFEhomestudy.org>). This entails meeting higher standards than in a Kin Service Assessment, and there is more ongoing monitoring. Kin Care and Foster Care families are also required to follow the agency's policies and procedures, and the children placed with them are eligible for financial, programming and advocacy supports that are unavailable to those in Kin Service.

Dictionary definitions of "kin" encompass genetic, marital and adoptive relatives, but in the child protection field, the word's meaning has been extended (Daly & Perry, 2011). In Ontario, the legal definition of "kin" under the *Child and Family Services Act* of 2006 encompasses not only the above types of relatives, but also some acquaintances and "community members" (which usually means members of the same ethnic minority). This extended definition of "kin" applies similarly to both Kin Service and Kin Care caregivers.

Group Care involves the placement of children in staffed residences, and typically includes a therapeutic component, such as behavior management and life skills support that cannot readily be provided in a family environment. Because these are not family placements, are never intended to be permanent, and tend to involve youths who are older than the children placed in families, we do not consider them further in this paper.

"Permanence" has been a highlighted goal in Child Protection Services in Ontario since the legislative changes of 2006. This goal is considered to have been attained (1) when a child returns to parental care with no subsequent out of home placement; (2) when a court decrees that a Kin Care or Kin Service caretaker now has legal custody of the child; or (3) when the child is legally adopted. Children who have been legally and permanently removed from their parents' care can be adopted, after a period of adoption probation, by a Kin Care, Kin Service or Foster family, or by a stranger adoptive family who has been approved through the SAFE homestudy assessment. Permanence has also been attained, *de facto*, when a youth ages out of care and becomes independent.

3. The data base

The cases analyzed in this paper consist of all primary placements, regardless of duration, that began between January 1, 2008 and December 31, 2010, in which children were placed with families under the auspices of *Family & Child Services* (FACS) of Waterloo, Ontario. "Primary" placement refers to the fact that temporary "respite" placements are excluded. The start date of January 1, 2008 was constrained by the fact that changes in record-keeping, in response to legislative changes in 2006, were not fully implemented until that date. The stability (persistence) of placements was tracked through December 31, 2010.

The data analyzed here represent 852 children who (1) had been removed from their parents' care due to harm or abuse that the children had experienced or were at risk of experiencing, and (2) experienced at least one family (foster, kin care, or kin service) primary placement. For present purposes, kin care and kin service placements are not distinguished. (They did not in fact differ significantly in placement stability, and some placements were converted from one status to the other without the child actually moving, which we treat as a single placement.) Children whose only primary placements were in group homes are not considered here.

The data represent a total of 1269 family placements, 880 with foster families and 389 with kin families. At the end date (December 31, 2010), 31.2% of these 1269 placements were still intact, 34.2% had

ended by discharge to the parents, 29.6% had ended by transfer to another family or group home placement, and 5.0% had ended in some other way (placement for adoption by a non-foster family, aging out of care, running away, and incarceration).

4. Stability of kinship versus foster placements

Fig. 1 shows that kinship placements had greater durations than foster placements in our database. (In this and all similar subsequent figures, each data point is based on all placements that were initiated early enough to have potentially attained the criterion duration by December 31, 2010. Thus, for example, data points for 30 days include all placements initiated by December 1, 2010; data points for 60 days include all placements initiated by November 1, 2010; and so forth.) Table 1 shows that the difference was especially large in the first month, in which the rate at which foster placements ended was over four times higher than that for kinship placements, but it also shows that kinship placements continued to be significantly more stable in each ensuing month for the first six months post-placement. In other words, among placements that had already lasted at least 30 or 60 or 90 or 120 or 150 days, kinship placements were in every case significantly more likely than foster placements to last an additional 30 days.

This difference in stability could reflect the influence of confounded variables (biased placement) rather than being a consequence of placement type *per se*. We cannot, of course, eliminate every possible confound, but we can assess the relevance of some obvious candidates. Ehrle and Geen (2002) noted that children placed with kin are generally younger than those placed in foster homes, citing several U.S. studies, although Beeman, Kim, and Bullerdick (2000) reported a significant difference in the opposite direction in a Minnesota study. In our data base, the age distributions of children in kinship and foster placements are very similar (Fig. 2), and the slight difference in mean ages does not approach significance ($t_{1267} df = 0.56, p = .573$). Thus, we can infer that the effect in Fig. 1 is not an artifact of differences in age.

Another potential confound concerns the type of maltreatment that the children had incurred before coming into care. Placements of children who have been the victims of abusive acts of commission may be less stable than those in which children were removed from parents due to neglect (e.g. Barber, Delfabbro, & Cooper, 2001), and it appears that such children are also disproportionately placed with non-kin. In an analysis of California placement data, for example, Grogan-Kaylor (2000) reported that a history of physical or sexual abuse tended to be associated with being placed in non-kin foster care, whereas a history of neglect without such abusive acts of

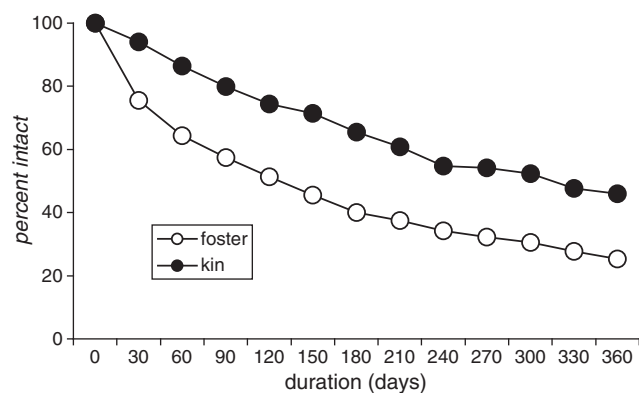


Fig. 1. Percentages of kinship versus foster placements remaining intact at successive 30-day intervals post-placement. Data points are based on all placements that began early enough to have had the possibility of lasting for 30 days, 60, 90, and so forth, prior to the study's end date of December 31, 2010. The "kin" category includes both kin care and kin service placements.

Table 1

Differential probability of termination of kinship versus foster placements month by month. Each row includes those placements that had already lasted for the initial period (0, 30, 60, 90, 120 or 150 days) and that had begun early enough to have the potential to last another 30 days before the study's end date.

	Kinship placements		Foster placements		χ^2_{1df}	p (one-tailed)
	% ending in		% ending in			
	next 30 days (N)	(N)	next 30 days (N)	(N)		
from initial placement	6.0	(384)	24.5	(856)	59.73	<.001
after lasting 30 days	8.0	(351)	15.2	(624)	10.70	<.001
after lasting 60 days	7.0	(313)	11.5	(514)	4.36	.019
after lasting 90 days	6.4	(282)	10.5	(446)	3.67	.028
after lasting 120 days	4.4	(248)	10.3	(379)	7.00	.004
after lasting 150 days	7.1	(225)	12.0	(332)	3.62	.029

commission was relatively prevalent among children in kinship care. We find a similar pattern in our Canadian data: a pre-placement notation of physical or sexual abuse was recorded in 186 of 880 foster placements (21.1%) compared to 34 of 389 kinship placements (8.7%), a large and significant difference ($\chi^2_{1df}=28.92$, $p<.0001$). However, kinship placements are still seen to be more stable than non-kin foster placements in either case (Fig. 3). The difference is more striking when there was no recorded history of physical or sexual abuse, but placements with kin were significantly more likely than non-kin foster placements to persist for six months within both groups (children for whom physical or sexual abuse was noted: $\chi^2_{1df}=6.09$, $p=.014$; children for whom no such abuse was noted: $\chi^2_{1df}=48.01$, $p<.0001$).

5. Does the greater stability of kin placements really indicate greater success?

The data in Fig. 1 and Table 1 show that foster placements were more likely to come to an end than kin placements in each of the first six months post-placement. This need not mean that kin placements are more successful, however, because placements end for diverse reasons. Many do indeed break down, with the child having to be moved to a different family or group home placement. However, many others end with the child being discharged from care and

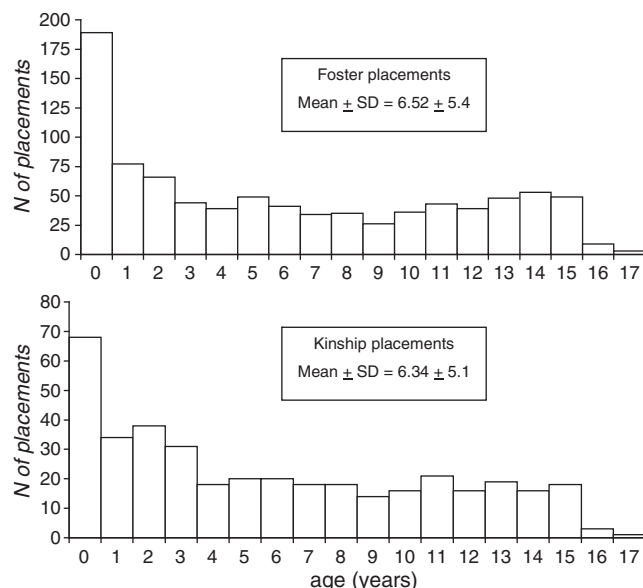


Fig. 2. Age distributions of children at the time of kinship or foster placement.

returning to the parental home, which is typically a preferred objective. In principle, then, a high rate of placement termination could be indicative of a high rate of successful outcomes, rather than of failure.

In the present data set, such is clearly not the case. Even though foster placements were substantially more likely than kin placements to come to an end within the 2008–2010 study period (foster: 74.1% ended; kin: 56.8%), they were substantially less likely to end by discharge to the parents (foster: 31.1% of all placements; kin: 41.1%; $\chi^2_{1df}=11.97$, $p<.001$). Moreover, children in foster placements that came to an end in this desirable way were significantly more likely to be taken back into care again within the three-year study period than their counterparts in kin placements (foster: 19.3% of those discharged; kin: 10.6%; $\chi^2_{1df}=5.68$, $p=.017$). Thus, kin placements were not only more likely to persist than foster placements, but were also more likely to end in successful discharge to the birth parents. Fig. 4 depicts the stability of foster and kin placements when placements that ended in discharge are removed from the data. The trends are initially similar to those portrayed in Fig. 1, in which discharges were included as placement terminations, but over time, the two groups diverge to a greater degree and the stability advantage of kin placements becomes even more striking in Fig. 4 than it was in Fig. 1.

As one might infer from the results presented above, foster placements were far more likely than kin placements to have come to an end with the child moving to another family or group home placement (foster: 36.6% of all placements; kin: 13.6%). And if we restrict the comparison to those placements that did indeed come to an end, foster placements were fully twice as likely as kin placements to end with a move to another out-of-home placement (foster: 49.4% of placements that ended; kin: 24.0%; $\chi^2_{1df}=43.47$, $p<.0001$).

Finally, attaining permanency through adoption is another way in which some placements may “end” successfully. In recent years, FACS Waterloo has presided over an average of 65 legal adoption finalizations per annum. Because our present objective is to assess placement stability, we here treat those cases in which children were eventually adopted by a foster or kin placement family as continuing (uninterrupted) placements, even though such placements are considered “closed” for official agency purposes; the same applies to placements in which a kin family was awarded legal custody and protection status was removed. There is a further complication, however: some placements for adoption by stranger (i.e. by non-kin with no ties to the birth family) are arranged by the agency without being officially designated “foster” placements, and these are not included in our data base. We count 35 such placements that commenced in 2008–2010, and almost all of these have remained stable. If these 35 non-kin adoption placements were added to the 880 foster placements in the analyses presented above, the stability advantage of kin placements over non-kin placements would be slightly reduced, but in no comparison would the greater stability of kin placements be abolished or lose its statistical significance.

In sum, placements with kin really do appear to have had a higher success rate than foster placements. Kinship placements were significantly more likely than foster placements to persist, significantly more likely to end in successful discharge to birth parents, and significantly less likely to end with a move to another placement.

6. Differential stability of kinship placements

6.1. Kin placements with and without prior foster placement

Unlike the situation with non-kin foster care, it is often the case that a child is already residing in a kin home prior to its assessment and approval as either a Kin Care or a Kin Service placement. This is not always the case, however. Instead, potential kinship placements may be sought, and perhaps evaluated relative to alternatives, after

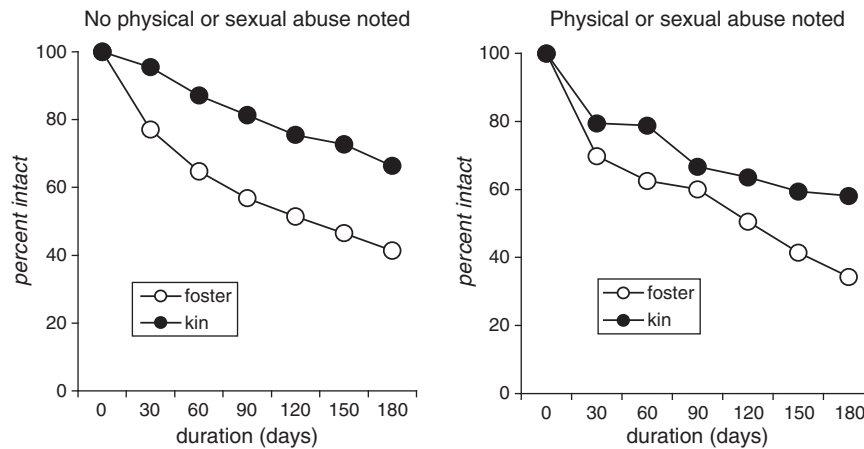


Fig. 3. Percentages of kinship versus foster placements remaining intact at successive 30-day intervals post-placement, distinguishing children in which pre-placement physical or sexual abuse was noted in the case file (right panel) from children in which there was no such notation (left panel).

the child has been taken into care and placed temporarily in a non-kin home.

Having found that kinship placements are more stable than non-kin foster placements in Illinois, Zinn et al. (2006) proposed that “the average number of placements children experience could be effectively reduced by placing them with relatives at entry to care, which would afford children the stability of relative homes without requiring them to endure a subsequent change in placement.” This may be so, but it is also possible that the planned use of a short-term foster placement while a suitable kin placement is being sought may sometimes be an effective way of increasing the quality and stability of the eventual kin placement. Are kin placements after an initial foster placement in fact relatively stable? The data in Fig. 5 indicate that they are. This could indicate that these are superior placements because they were made with greater care. However, other interpretations are possible, and in any event, one should not conclude from these data that the children’s best interests are necessarily served by use of a temporary foster placement. We will return to this issue in the general Discussion.

6.2. Differential stability in relation to the type of “kin” relationship

According to dictionary definitions, one’s “kin” are one’s relatives by genealogical descent, marriage, or adoption. In many jurisdictions, however, “kinship care” is defined in such a way as to incorporate other sorts of links to the focal child (Daly & Perry, 2011). In Ontario,

the government ministry responsible for child protection defines kin as “...a relative, extended family member, or a member of the child’s community” (Ontario Child Welfare Secretariat, 2006). U.S. definitions are similar (Geen, 2003), while in Britain, the same aggregated category is sometimes referred to as “family and friends care” (Farmer & Moyers, 2008). This extended definition raises the question of whether the various relationships subsumed under the umbrella of “kinship care” provide equally successful placements.

Ehrle and Geen (2002) have argued that a major reason why kinship placements are as successful as they are is that “kinship caregivers are likely to have a special interest in the well-being of the child in their care” (p 16). There are both theoretical and empirical reasons to believe that such a “special interest in the well-being of the child” derives from kinship in the dictionary definitional sense of relatedness, and perhaps especially from genetic relatedness. People are products of an evolutionary process favoring “nepotistic” discrimination that benefits genetic kin, and there is considerable evidence that human social sentiments continue to be effectively nepotistic in contemporary environments (see, e.g., Daly & Perry, 2011; Herring, 2008; Kurland & Gaulin, 2005; Testa & Shook Slack, 2002). Thus, placements with nominal “kin caretakers” who are unrelated to the child may be more similar to placements with unrelated foster caretakers than to those with related caretakers.

A study of foster placement breakdown in Swedish teenagers supports this expectation. Sallnäs, Vinnerljung, and Westermark (2004) distinguished “network foster homes”, in which youth were placed

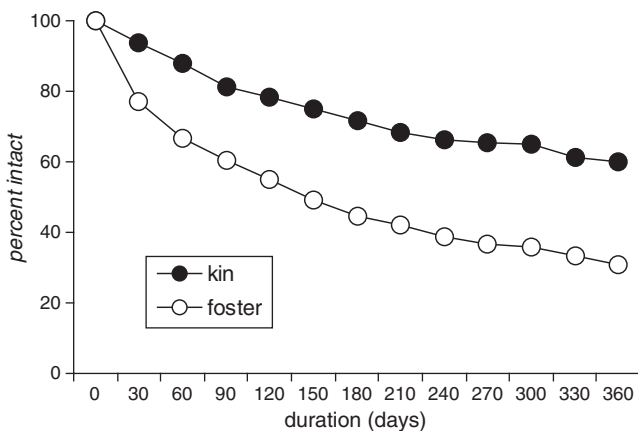


Fig. 4. Percentages of kinship versus foster placements remaining intact at successive 30-day intervals post-placement, with placements that ended in discharge to the parents removed from the data set.

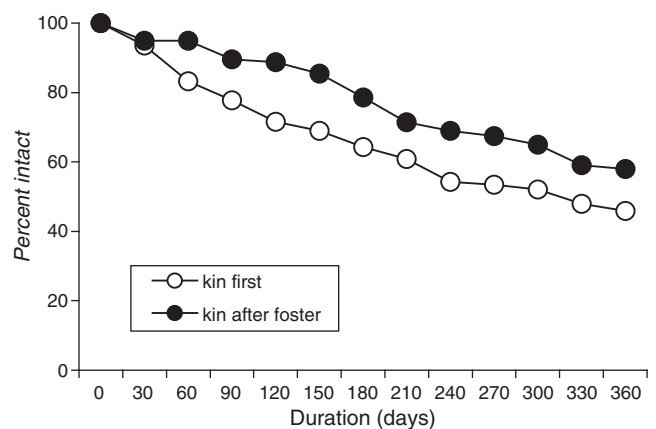


Fig. 5. Percentages of kinship placements remaining intact at successive 30-day intervals post-placement, distinguishing between those that did or did not follow an immediately preceding non-kin foster placement.

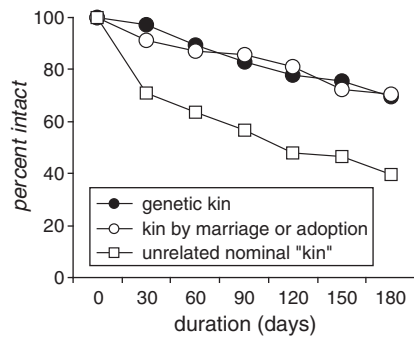


Fig. 6. Percentages of three different subcategories of kinship placements remaining intact at successive 30-day intervals post-placement.

with unrelated neighbors and family friends, from “kinship” placements with relatives, and found that the “network” placements were similar to non-relative foster placements, both being more than twice as likely to break down as placements with genuine kin. In their Pennsylvania study, Herring (2008) categorized “kin” placements as “second degree”, “third degree”, and “non-genetic” and found no effects of this distinction on certain substance abuse and juvenile justice outcome measures; however, this study is unique in having found foster placements to be significantly more stable than kin placements and may thus be exceptional. As far as we know, no other empirical study has distinguished between unrelated nominal “kin” placements and those with relatives.

We subdivided the 386 “kin” placements in our data base into three categories: (1) genealogical relatives, i.e. putative genetic relatives through a descent-based link to the child’s birth parents ($N = 318$); (2) relatives of the child via a link of marriage or adoption ($N = 23$); and (3) community members deemed “kin” under the relevant legislation, who nevertheless had no genetic, marital or adoptive link to the child ($N = 45$). Fig. 6 depicts the stability of these three categories of kin placements. The figure extends only to six months post-placement because of the small numbers in two of the three categories. Placements with unrelated nominal “kin” were clearly less stable than the other two categories, which did not differ from one another. After six months, 60.5% of the nominal kin placements had come to an end, compared to 30.3% of genetic kin placements and 29.4% of marital or adoptive kin placements ($\chi^2_2 df = 13.72, p < .001$). It is also noteworthy how similar are the placement survival trajectories for the unrelated nominal “kin” in Fig. 6 and the unrelated foster placements in Fig. 1; by six months post-placement, 60.5% of the former and 60.0% of the latter had come to an end.

Interpretation of the data in Fig. 6 is complicated by age differences. Children placed with unrelated nominal “kin” were significantly older, averaging 9.8 ± 5.0 (mean \pm SD) years of age when placed, compared to 5.4 ± 4.8 for those placed with genetic relatives and 5.2 ± 5.4 for those placed with marital or adoptive kin ($F_{2, 384} df = 16.78, p < .001$). We therefore compared placement stability within age groups, with the results shown in Table 2: despite the small N s, it is evident that unrelated “kin” placements are relatively unstable regardless of age.

Table 2
Percentages (Ns) of “kinship” placements that had ended within six months, in relation to the child’s age and whether there was a genuine or only nominal link of kinship.

	Age at placement (in years):			
	0–4	5–8	9–12	13–17
Genetic, marital or adoptive kin	23.6 (148)	37.5 (48)	37.5 (48)	38.2 (34)
Unrelated “kin”	66.7 (6)	70.0 (10)	66.7 (6)	50.0 (16)

7. Discussion

The findings reported here are, in general, strongly supportive of the contemporary policy preference for placing children with kin. First, kin placements were more stable than non-kin foster placements, in accord with most prior literature (Cuddeback, 2004; but see Herring et al., 2009; Oosterman et al., 2007). Moreover, even though kin placements in our sample had a lower overall rate of termination than non-kin foster placements, they had a significantly higher rate of ending “well” by discharge to the parents (cf. Wolczyn & Goerge, 1992), and a much lower rate of ending “poorly” with the child moving to another placement.

Nevertheless, continued caution in the interpretation of these results is warranted. One reason for caution is the possibility of pre-placement confounds. We were able to show that age is not a confound in this data set (Fig. 2), and that even though there is a substantial pre-placement bias with respect to the ways in which children had been mistreated before coming into care, differential placement stability persists when cases are partitioned with respect to this variable (Fig. 3). Other possible confounds were not, however, assessed.

Perhaps most important are the distinct agendas and expectations of kin and non-kin foster families. The latter come to the Society primarily with an intent to provide serial care for a number of unknown needy children until permanent placements can be found. The kin families, by contrast, typically have an existing relationship with the child and a sense of that child as an integral part of their extended family, which is likely to imply a longer-term, deeper commitment. Moreover, kin caregivers have often had the child come into the home in a crisis situation, and may fear having their family member placed with strangers (Terling-Watt, 2001). Thus, kin and foster families are apt to approach caregiving with very different intentions, and the agency’s goals in placing children with foster versus kin families must also differ.

The data in Table 1 show a very large difference in rates of placement termination within the first month, which may reflect just such differences in both the agency’s and the placement families’ intentions. However, the data also show that kin placements retain their stability advantage for several further months, indicating that the difference cannot be explained away as being a mere consequence of a certain incidence of brief stop-gap foster placements. Of course, foster families may be more likely than kin families to view a placement as temporary even in the mid- to long term; what is striking here, however, is that foster placements were *not* in fact more likely to be terminated because the child returned home.

The goals of non-kin foster parents may of course change over time as a child is felt to become part of the family, perhaps especially if that child is available for permanent placement. This possibility warrants further study in light of a growing movement in favor of asking foster parents to make a potentially permanent commitment at the outset of any foster placement (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2005). Elgin County, Ontario, has already implemented such a commitment as a requirement for foster parents, and early results indicate good success with respect to both placement stability and permanency outcomes (Ellison & Flegel, 2010). In both the Casey Foundation and the Elgin County models, the need for long term supports of various types for these non-kin foster families is recognized. Practice seems to be running ahead of research in this area, and it remains to be seen whether simply asking foster parents to declare a willingness to commit to children that they have yet to meet will be a successful policy in the longer term.

It must also be stressed that the “success” of a placement is not simply a matter of its stability, and that even stable kin placements may have attributes, relative to non-kin foster placements, that are not in children’s best interests. Ehrle and Geen (2002) summarized a predominantly U.S. literature, concluding that kin caretakers have less education, are more likely to live in poverty, are more likely to

be parenting alone, have higher rates of food insecurity, are older, and have more physical and mental health problems than non-kin caregivers. Similarly, Barth, Green, Webb, Wall, Gibbons & Craig (2008) report that kin homes compare unfavorably with foster homes with respect to caregivers' training, education and health, the level of stimulation, and the use of punitive punishment. We have not measured and compared these variables in our Canadian sample of home placements, but we do not doubt that similar contrasts prevail. One must wonder what consequences placing children in kin homes with relatively limited resources has for both the placed children and other residents of the home, and whether the greater stability of kin placements outweighs the negative effects of these hardships (Ehrle & Geen, 2002). The literature is consistent in indicating that kin families are needier than non-kin foster families, and yet are provided with fewer resources (Daly & Perry, 2011). More attention must be paid to the question of how kin families can best be supported to meet the needs of the children in their care.

The data in Fig. 5 indicate that kin placements after a prior foster placement were more stable than those undertaken directly. We are not aware of other studies in which the same comparison was made, but the result appears to be congruent with some other findings. Barber et al. (2001) found that an initial treatment placement was associated with reduced subsequent placement changes for children in care. Koh and Testa (2008) also noted that although children in non-kin homes were more likely to move out of their initial placement than from kin homes, this move did not result in a greater risk of a third move within a year. In our study, the initial period of fostering may have allowed time for the agency to identify the best kin home (e.g. by a family conferencing process), to complete better assessments that avoided problematic placements, or to ensure that both the kin family and the child had some needed supports in place prior to the placement. Alternatively, it could simply be the case that an initial experience of foster care elevates the child's and/or the kin family's commitment to the kin placement. In any event, our results support the notion that using emergency placements or short term placements to assess children's needs or to implement services does not seem to undermine longer term placement stability, but the impact of that placement change on children and their families must also be considered. Zinn et al. (2006) raised concern about the use of a foster placement prior to a kin placement for this very reason, and Cashmore and Paxman (2006) refer to 'felt' security as a central benefit of kin care that is overlooked if we consider only placement stability. Clearly, further investigation is needed to determine when these initial non-kin placements are warranted and when they should be avoided.

Apart from Sallnäs et al.'s (2004) study of Swedish teens, our study is apparently the first to compare the stability of placements with true kin, in the dictionary definitional sense of "kin", to that of placements with unrelated nominal kin, such as parents of the focal child's friend or strangers who share the service family's minority ethnic origin. Like Sallnäs et al., we too find that these unrelated nominal kin placements perform more like foster placements than like true kin placements with respect to stability, and we conclude that further investigation of this distinction would be valuable. More generally, we suggest that child welfare research and practice might benefit from attention to theories and discoveries about human kinship in the fields of evolutionary anthropology, biology, and psychology (Daly & Perry, 2011).

The results of this study support the view that kinship placements are generally more stable than non-kin foster placements. The most urgent questions for future research, in our view, are (1) to what degree this contrast derives from differential commitment and solicitude toward the children rather than just from differences between foster care and kin care placements in the intentions of the agency and the placement family, and (2) whether that enhanced stability translates into improved life outcomes.

Conflicts of interest

None.

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