

# Maternal foster families provide more stable placements than paternal families



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## ABSTRACT

The use of kinship families to provide foster care has been increasing due to changes in legislation and the hope that it will provide better quality placements, but there has been little consideration of differential outcomes based on sub-types of kin. Using data from one Ontario, Canada, child protection agency we compared the frequency and stability of placements with maternal versus paternal kin. We found that maternal relatives provided placements much more often than paternal kin and this was most striking with single grandmothers. 90% of genetically related kinship caregivers were grandparents or other equally close kin. Maternal and paternal kin placements had similar durations, but maternal placements ended significantly more frequently by the child returning home or obtaining a permanent placement, whereas paternal placements more often broke down. A Cox proportional hazards analysis, controlling for child sex, age, reason for placement and caregiver attributes, showed that paternal kin placements were more than twice as likely to break down as maternal kin placements, within a given interval. We discuss whether placement stability should be considered a proxy for placement quality and policy implications, and we comment on aspects of assessing prospective placements.

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## 1. Introduction

In most of the Western world, it is now standard child protection practice to place children who have been removed from their parents' care with kin. In many jurisdictions, preferential placement with kin rather than unrelated foster parents is now mandated by law (Gleeson & Craig, 1994). This constitutes a radical change. Until about 50 years ago, kin were explicitly shunned as potential foster carers, and the transition to preferential kinship care is still ongoing (Daly & Perry, 2011; Ingram, 1996). In Ontario, Canada, where the study reported here was conducted, child protection agencies have been obliged by law to prioritize kin placements since 2006.

Two main justifications are typically offered in support of the shift to kin care (Ehrle & Geen, 2002): that kin are likely to be more committed to the children in their care, on average, than strangers, and that family disruption may be less traumatic when the new caregivers are already known and trusted. Reduced funding for child welfare agencies has also played a role in the rise of kinship care, however. Kin families often receive less financial and other support than traditional stranger foster families, despite having lower incomes, less education, more health challenges, and more dependents in the home (Berrick & Barth,

1994; Cuddeback, 2004; Dubowitz et al., 1993; Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Gleeson, O'Donnell, & Johnson Bonecutter, 1997; Grant, 2000). Whether increasing reliance on kinship care has had a net positive impact on child well-being remains to be determined (Daly & Perry, 2011; del Valle & Bravo, 2013; Font, in press; Ryan, Hong, Herz, & Hernandez, 2010; Winokur, Holtan, & Valentine, 2009).

Kin caregivers are a heterogeneous group (Berrick & Barth, 1994; Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005; Terling-Watt, 2001), but the distinctions among them have received little attention in studies that document the rise of kinship care and compare its attributes and impacts to those of stranger foster care (Zinn, 2010; but see Perry, Daly, & Kotler, 2012; Sallnäs, Vinnerljung, & Westermark, 2004). According to dictionaries and common usage, one's "kin" are one's relatives by genealogical descent, marriage, or adoption. In child welfare law, however, the term "kin" has been expanded to encompass additional people such as family friends or unrelated persons of the same minority ethnic group (Farmer & Moyers, 2008; Geen, 2003). In the relevant Ontario legislation, for example, placement with a "neighbor or other member of the child's community" qualifies as a "kin" placement (Ontario Child Welfare Secretariat, 2006). We will refer to caregivers with a genealogical, marital or adoptive link to the child as "related kin", and other unrelated caregivers who qualify as kin under the legislation as "nominal kin". Whether the usual justifications for favoring kin placements apply to nominal kin, who are not necessarily even acquainted with the child, is questionable, and we have reported that placements with nominal kin are significantly less stable (long-lasting) than those with related kin in Waterloo, Ontario (Perry et al., 2012). Here, we address a further

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distinction within the category of genealogical kin, namely that between relatives through a child's mother versus father.

There is a large anthropological and psychological literature concerning the involvement of relatives other than the parents in child care. Cross-culturally, the most common providers of short-term child care are close kin, especially grandmothers, aunts, and older siblings (Hrdy, 2009; Kramer, 2010; Silk, 1990). Moreover, despite a heavy emphasis on patrilineal kinship in many human societies, most research indicates that maternal kin, especially maternal grandmothers, are more involved than their counterparts on the paternal side, and that their involvement is more beneficial to the children (Coall & Hertwig, 2010, 2011; Danielsbacka, Tanskanen, Jokela, & Rotkirch, 2011; Euler, 2011; Fox et al., 2010; Gaulin, McBurney, & Brakeman-Wartell, 1997; Hawkes & Coxworth, 2013; Huber & Breedlove, 2007; Pollet, Nelissen, & Nettle, 2008; Sear & Mace, 2008; Strassmann & Garrard, 2011; Tanskanen & Danielsbacka, 2012). It seems that both women and men turn mainly to their maternal relatives when resources are scarce, when men are unreliable providers, when marital relationships are unstable, and when paternity may be in question (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Stack, 1974). Because relationship conflicts are often an aspect of why families become involved with child protection services, and because doubts about paternity are probably more prevalent than in the population at large, we anticipate that maternal family would substantially outnumber paternal family as kinship caregivers.

If maternal relatives tend to be more willing kin caregivers, on average, than paternal relatives, one might also anticipate that placements with maternal kin would be more stable, but as far as we are aware, the literature contains no explicit comparisons of placement stability in maternal versus paternal kin homes. Placement stability is the sole outcome measure in the analyses presented here. Placement stability is widely considered an indicator of placement quality because it is associated with better outcomes for children (Carpenter & Clyman, 2004; Jones Harden, 2004; North American Council on Adoptable Children, 2005; Rock, Michelson, Thomson, & Day, 2013). Considerable research shows that repeated moves while in the care of a child protection agency are associated with elevated rates of physical and mental health diagnoses, homelessness after leaving care, involvement with the criminal justice system, and use of illicit drugs (Barth & Jonson-Reid, 2000; Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000; Paxman, 2006; Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007; Rubin et al., 2004). We recognize, however, that placement stability is an imperfect indicator of placement quality, and that the fact that placements with kin are usually relatively stable (Chamberlain et al., 2006; Perry et al., 2012; Winokur, Crawford, Longobardi, & Valentine, 2008; Winokur et al., 2009; but see Herring, Shook, Goodkind, & Kim, 2009; Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007) does not imply that they are necessarily in the best interests of the child.

## 2. The data base

The data analyzed in this paper consist of all primary child protection placements under the auspices of Family & Child Services (FACS) of Waterloo, Ontario, regardless of duration, in which children were placed between January 1, 2008 and December 31, 2010 with caretakers who were their genealogical kin (i.e. putative genetic relatives) on the maternal or paternal side. The stability (persistence) of these placements was tracked through December 31, 2010. "Primary" placement refers to the fact that temporary "respite" placements are excluded.

The data analyzed here represent 313 primary placements with genealogical kin, involving 289 children who experienced at least one such placement. We treat the individual placement as the unit of analysis. This is a subset of the 389 "kin" placements analyzed by Perry et al. (2012); excluded from the present analyses are 45 placements with nominal kin; 23 placements with relatives by marriage or adoption; 5 placements with caregivers who were older full siblings of the placed child and thus could not be categorized as either maternal or paternal

kin; and 3 cases in which files were unavailable for legal reasons. Readers are referred to Perry et al. (2012) for additional details about kin caregiving in Ontario and the larger database from which these cases are drawn.

We collected the following information from agency files: the child's age and sex; the primary kin caregiver's age, sex, and specific relationship to the child; whether there was a secondary caregiver and if so, the same demographic data as for the primary caregiver; how the placement ended (broadly, return home vs placement breakdown vs placement intact at end of study). We also recorded several economic, health status and criminal involvement variables (see Perry & Daly, 2013), but because these could not be coded for many cases they are not analyzed here.

## 3. Maternal & closer kin predominate

The 313 primary kin placements consisted of 202 with maternal kin and 111 with paternal kin. Maternal kin placements included 142 with the child's grandparents, 30 with an aunt or uncle, 4 with a maternal half-sibling, and 26 with more distant relatives. Paternal kin placements included 70 with the child's grandparents, 37 with an aunt or uncle, and 4 with more distant relatives. Because of the small numbers of placements with genealogical kin other than grandparents, we did not compare placement stability across these specific types of relatives, but we address whether placement with grandparents versus all other relatives is a predictor of stability in Section 4.

The circumstances of maternal grandparents who provided care differed from those of their counterparts on the paternal side. Fig. 1 shows that the numbers of caregiving pairs of grandparents on the two sides scarcely differ, but that the maternal side predominates among caregiving couples in which only one was a genealogical relative of the focal child, and that the predominance of the maternal side is even more extreme when it comes to lone grandparents providing care without partner assistance. Grandparents who provided care without the help of a partner consisted of 52 maternal grandmothers, 8 maternal grandfathers, 9 paternal grandmothers, and no paternal grandfathers.

## 4. Placements with maternal kin are more stable

Fig. 2 shows that maternal and paternal kin placements persisted for similar durations through the first year post-placement. Placements that were intact at the end of the study period, but had durations of less than a year, are "time-censored" by being included in Fig. 2 (and in Fig. 3) only up to the study end date.

This apparent equivalence of stability is misleading, however, because it masks a distinction between placements that "broke down" such that the child was then placed elsewhere under the auspices of the agency, and those that ended for the "good" reason that the child left protective

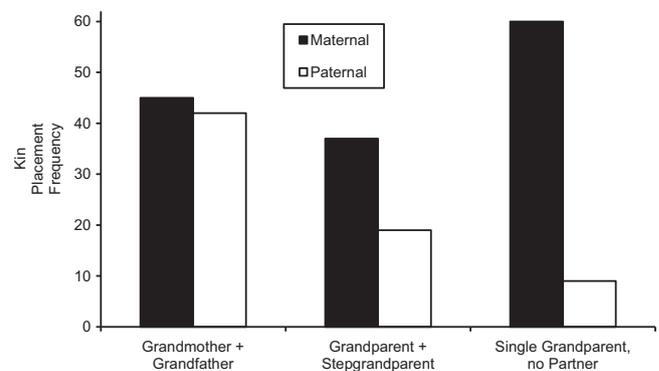
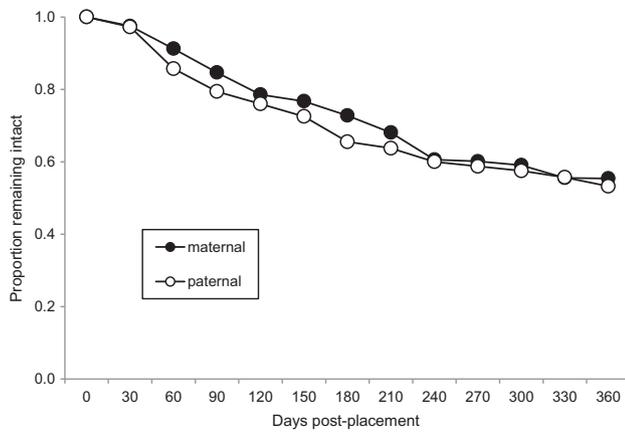


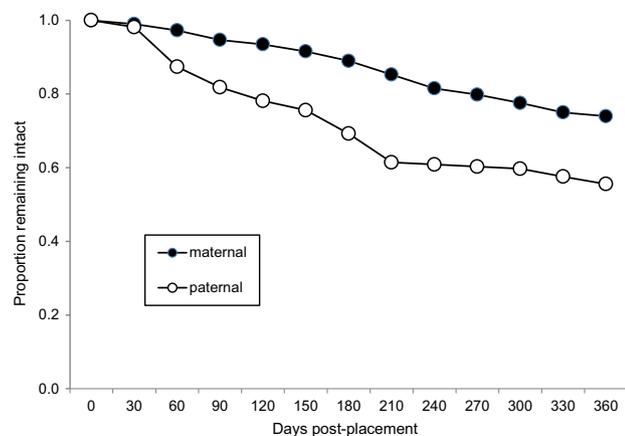
Fig. 1. Frequency of placements with maternal versus paternal grandparents, in relation to the grandparent's current partnership status and the relationship of the grandparent's partner to the placed child.



**Fig. 2.** Survival of placements with maternal versus paternal kin, until termination for any reason (placement broke down and child moved to another placement; child returned to parents; child aged out of care).

care and returned home. Of the 41 paternal placements that came to an end within 360 days, 66% broke down, compared to just 30% of 79 maternal placements that came to an end ( $\chi^2_{1 df} = 13.9, p < .001$ ). This pattern holds true for all types of grandparent-headed families. Considering only placements that ended within the study period, 25% of those with both maternal grandparents broke down and 75% returned home, whereas 71% of those with both paternal grandparents broke down and 29% returned home; 36% of placements with a maternal grandparent and a stepgrandparent broke down and 64% returned home, whereas 100% of placements with a paternal grandparent and a stepgrandparent broke down; and 33% of placements with a lone maternal grandparent broke down and 67% returned home, whereas 100% of placements with a lone paternal grandparent broke down.

Fig. 3 shows that maternal placements persisted much better than paternal placements if only breakdowns ( $n = 61$ ) are treated as placement termination while cases in which the child returned to parental care (or in one case aged out of care) are treated as time-censored cases that were still intact until monitoring ended. To assess the significance of the stability advantage of maternal placements, as well as whether that advantage might be due to any of various confounding variables rather than to the maternal–paternal distinction itself, we conducted a Cox proportional hazards multivariate regression analysis (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2008) of “survival” to breakdown, incorporating the potential predictor variables listed in Table 1.



**Fig. 3.** Survival of placements with maternal versus paternal kin, until placement breakdown with child moving to another placement.

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics associated with the Cox proportional hazards multivariate regression analysis examining placement breakdown.

Variable	Yes	No	% yes
Placement breakdown	61	252	19.5
Physical or sexual abuse recorded	19	294	6.1
Caregiver is child's grandparent	212	101	67.7
Caregiver has partner	213	100	68.1
	Female	Male	% female
Child's sex	153	160	48.9
	Maternal	Paternal	% maternal
Child–caregiver relationship lineage	202	111	64.5
	Mean (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Child age at placement (years)	5.3 (4.7)	0	15
Placement duration (days)	340 (303)	1	1093

The maternal–paternal distinction and child age were the only statistically significant predictors of placement stability in this multivariate analysis (Log Pseudo-Likelihood =  $-313.7$ ; Wald  $\chi^2 = 18.3; p = .006; n = 313$  (Table 2). Their respective hazard ratios indicate that (1) placements with paternal kin were more than twice as likely to break down, per unit time, as those with maternal kin, and (2) the risk of breakdown per unit time increased by a factor of 1.08 for each additional year of age at placement, when the other potential predictors in Table 1 were statistically controlled. The primary caregiver having a partner and explicit notation of physical or sexual abuse in the child protection file were both associated with slight increases in stability, while a male (as opposed to female) child and being placed with a grandparent (as opposed to some other relative) were both associated with slight decreases in stability, but none of these slight associations approached statistical significance.

**5. Discussion**

In this study, maternal family provided more placements than paternal family, and placements with paternal relatives were more susceptible to breakdown. These findings are consistent with a large body of multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural literature indicating that matriversus patrilineage is an important predictor of caregiving and its sequelae, both in small-scale societies and in modern nation states (Coall & Hertwig, 2010; Euler, 2011; Pollet, Nettle, & Nelissen, 2007; Sear & Mace, 2008; Smith, 1988; Strassmann & Garrard, 2011). We are not aware of any previous research that specifically compares child protection placement stability in the homes of the child's maternal versus paternal kin, although the importance of pursuing this question has been noted (Herring, 2008; Perry & Daly, 2013; Testa, 2013). Our interest in the possible impact of parental lineage on kinship care derives from findings in fields beyond social work. Developments in the full range of the human sciences are of potential relevance to those seeking to design and implement practices that are evidence-based and of cross-

**Table 2**  
What variables predict the “breakdown” of kin placements (i.e. placement termination with a move to another placement) in Waterloo County, 2008–2010? Results of a Cox proportional hazards multivariate regression analysis of placement “survival” to breakdown.

Predictor variable	Hazard ratio (RSE)	z	p
<b>Paternal kinship link to child</b>	<b>2.06 (0.6)</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>.009</b>
<b>Age at placement</b>	<b>1.08 (0.03)</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>.005</b>
Male child	1.37 (0.4)	1.2	.23
Physical or sexual abuse victim	0.65 (0.4)	-0.7	.46
Primary caregiver has a partner	0.88 (0.3)	-0.4	.67
Primary caregiver is a grandparent	1.05 (0.3)	0.2	.86

cultural applicability. By understanding fosterage and adoption practices in human history and in the full range of human societies, we may gain insights that can help us find committed and effective placements for vulnerable children in the dominant culture of the modern West, as well as dealing in a more culturally sensitive way with immigrant and minority populations.

The stability advantage of maternal placements was significant when the other variables in Table 1 (child's age and sex, whether the child was known to have been physically or sexually abused, caregiver partnership status, and grandparental versus other kin placement) were statistically controlled. Socioeconomic and health status were not treated as additional control variables in our analyses because they could not be coded for all cases, but it is unlikely that the stability advantage of maternal placements is an artifact of confounding with these variables. The available evidence indicates that rather than being advantaged in these domains, maternal family placements were actually disadvantaged relative to those with paternal family. For those cases that could be coded, Perry and Daly (2013) found that maternal kin caregivers had higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and severe health challenges than their paternal kin counterparts, and less education. They tentatively interpreted these contrasts as indicative of a greater willingness of maternal kin to step forward under the most difficult circumstances.

The striking prevalence of maternal grandparents providing care without the help of a partner (Fig. 1) can be interpreted similarly. Without a second adult to participate in caregiving and/or to provide other resources, child care is likely to be especially taxing for lone grandparents (Zinn, 2010), and Fig. 1 suggests that this most demanding of circumstances deters potential paternal caregivers more than it does their maternal counterparts. The fact that the maternal–paternal contrast in Fig. 1 is intermediate in the case of a grandparent and stepgrandparent is also consistent with this interpretation. This group is expected to be one in which the demands of being a sole caretaker are alleviated, but the partners are less enthusiastic helpers, on average, than genetic grandparents (Coall, Hilbrand, & Hertwig, 2014), and if this is so, greater maternal than paternal kin motivation to provide care in difficult circumstances would predict the observed pattern.

Relatives “of the second degree” (relatedness = 0.25), namely grandparents, aunts, uncles, and maternal half siblings, provided 90% of the placements in this study, and over 70% of “kin” placements within the broader category that includes marital, adoptive, and nominal kin. We expect that such a preponderance of close kin is typical. In a representative sample from Illinois, Zinn (2010) found that grandparents, aunts and uncles provided over 80% of all “kinship” placements, including those with non-relatives. This preponderance of close kin may seem unremarkable because it is so familiar, but it becomes noteworthy when we consider that more distant relatives are much more numerous and that grandparents, simply by virtue of their age, are disproportionately likely to be infirm or deceased. We interpret their numerical prevalence as a reflection of “nepotistic sentiments”, whereby people tend to provide the most support to the closest kin (Daly & Perry, 2011). Relatives of the first degree ( $r = 0.5$ ), namely parents, ordinarily provide the lion's share of direct child care, and full siblings (also  $r = 0.5$ ) are also important caregivers (Kramer, 2010). The rarity of siblings as primary kin caregivers in this study (in which there were 5 placements with full siblings, and 4 with half siblings) and in child protection more generally, is presumably a result of their youth, their limited numbers, and the competing demands of their own young children.

Understanding the needs of relevant subgroups of kin caregivers may help tailor the supports required to promote placement quality and stability. This requires continued investigation into just what the relevant subgroups of kin caregivers are. Our findings highlight two potentially useful categorizations, based on family lineage and on degree of relatedness. Even if it proves to be widely the case that maternal kin, especially grandmothers, are exceptionally willing to provide care and that their commitment translates into exceptional placement

stability, the quality of those kin placements will still require scrutiny. Stability is only one component of placement quality. Perry and Daly (2013) noted cases in which grandparents providing stable placements suffered from such extreme conditions as severe arthritis that impaired basic mobility and manual skills, Alzheimer's disease, depression that had recently required hospitalization, and poorly managed bipolar disorder. That such extreme challenges were found almost solely among grandparents in our sample of kin caregivers presumably reflects grandparental commitment, and indicates that grandparents who provide child care may need exceptional supports, sometimes exceeding what they request. The very fact that some kin caregivers are undeterred by severe challenges requires that we ask whether these placements have the resources available to provide for the complex needs of the children and their caregivers (Berrick & Barth, 1994; Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005; Kelley, Whitley, & Campos, 2011; Ryan et al., 2010; Testa, 2013).

The fact that placements can end for bad reasons (“breakdown”) or for good ones (return to parents, or other permanency outcomes) is another reason to beware of an excessive emphasis on placement stability. We found that placements with paternal relatives were more likely to break down than those with maternal kin, whereas the latter were more likely to end for desirable reasons, and that ignoring this distinction makes maternal and paternal placements appear to be equally stable. We are not suggesting that paternal kin placements should be avoided, but lineage is apparently one important correlate of commitment, and it may be especially important to consider what further supports are needed when children are placed with paternal kin. Both paternal families and nominal kin have sometimes been seen as an underutilized resource for child placements (e.g., North American Council on Adoptable Children, 2005), but we cannot just assume that more such placements will alleviate the shortage of suitable foster homes without further consideration of why such families come forward less frequently than maternal kin, and why they presently provide less stable placements.

Not all kin placements, whether stable or not, yield positive outcomes, and recent evidence suggests that children placed with kin may even fare less well in certain domains than those in traditional non-kin foster placements. Ryan et al. (2010) report that kin placements can be associated with elevated rates of juvenile delinquency. Kelley et al. (2011) found that a highly stressed grandparental caregiver is predictive of child behavior problems. Font (in press) found that kin placements predict poorer reading scores and mixed results on “children's math and cognitive skills test scores and behavioral problems”. We think it likely that these cases in which kinship care appears to be yielding worse outcomes are explained by the fact that kin caregivers are poorer than unrelated foster parents and otherwise disadvantaged, and by the further irony that they nevertheless tend to receive less support from the agencies charged with child well-being (Cuddeback, 2004; Ehrle & Geen, 2002). Berrick and Barth (1994) cautioned that the use of kin who have disadvantaged home environments and receive fewer resources than stranger foster families is setting up a two-tiered system of care for children who cannot live with their parents. Twenty years later, this issue remains a concern.

The present study is based on data from one child protection agency, which works within local policies, legislation and support structures; whether similar results will be found elsewhere remains to be seen. Moreover, since the period covered by this research, the agency that provided the data, FACS Waterloo, Ontario, has changed its practices. We are reporting on placements made when generalist Intake and Family Service Workers engaged with families to locate, assess and support kinship caregiving families, all within their own protection-focused caseloads. In 2011, a dedicated kinship team was established to help workers locate kin families, assess those families, and provide specialist support to approved kinship caregivers. These changes in practice may have led to changes in both the distributions of who provides care and in the differential placement stability that we have reported here and

earlier (Perry et al., 2012). That said, we think it likely that differences between maternal and paternal kin in willingness to provide kinship care and in the stability of the care that they provide will prove to be widespread.

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