

# **Kind and sensitive caregiving in children's residential facilities is important for emotional and mental health**

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Nurturing caregiving from a few consistent individuals helps to minimize the potential emotional and mental-health development issues that can arise from spending the early years of a child's life in an institution. Within such facilities, infants and toddlers reared in daily contact with responsive and warm professionals display better physical, cognitive, and social development. After they are placed into families, they have less aggressive and defiant tendencies and show fewer externalizing behaviors.

These are the primary findings of a newly released study led by researchers within the University of Pittsburgh School of Education's Office of Child Development. A follow-up report to a previous in-depth research endeavor, the study acknowledges that infants and toddlers who reside in traditional institutions for extended periods are more likely to exhibit internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems even after being placed into families for some years. The recent study sought to determine whether positive interventions in these institutions would be associated with improvements in their behavior after transitioning into family care.

"Unfortunately, many children around the world are reared in a regimented fashion by a large number of individuals who provide only the basics of care and support in a businesslike fashion with very little else—no response to crying, no conversation, no play, no hugs," said

Robert B. McCall, one of the study's lead researchers and a co-director of Pitt's Office of Child Development. "The typical neglectful institutional method minimizes sensitive and responsive caregiver-child relationships and produces chronic stress, which leads to higher rates of deficient development and behavioral patterns. Conversely, improved caregiver-child interactions and relationships might be expected to minimize such adverse outcomes, leading to happier and more well adjusted children. We believe these findings are potentially significant to professionals seeking to improve alternative care facilities and train their staff to care for the children in their care."

"This research shows that the characteristics of typical family life are important contributors to the development of infants and toddlers, even when implemented in an institution," said Christina J. Groark, lead researcher and a co-director of Pitt's Office of Child Development. "The quality and consistency of early caregiver-child interactions appear to be the most important elements of childcare, regardless of whether the children live in an institution or a family."

The study, conducted with Russian colleagues, observed the children, facilities, and personnel of three separate institutions—also known as Russian Baby Homes—in St. Petersburg, Russian Federation. Researchers followed 135 children who had spent at least three months in one of the three institutions. Participating children departed for domestic families either during the study or up to six years later and resided in those families for at least one year. The children were between 18 months and ten years of age.

For the study, one Baby Home was allowed to conduct business practices as usual—a representative of the status quo—while the other two were asked to install specific childcare interventions. Staff members within the second facility were instructed to interact with the children in a "parent-like" manner—expressing warm, caring, and sensitive

mannerisms—the same as they would with their own children. The third institution was asked to implement the same parent-like mannerism intervention as well as a series of caregiver-child policy changes. These changes included cutting the number of different caregivers the child experienced regularly and having those same one or two professionals consistently playing a role in the child's daily life. In essence, the policy changes implemented in the second and third facilities looked to mimic parent-child relations as much as possible; in addition, the third Baby Home was made more "family-like" in operation.

When transferred into domestic families, researchers found that the parents of children from the intervention-implemented institutions rated them as being less indiscriminately friendly with strangers and that the children displayed fewer incidences of aggressive behavior, especially when compared to [children](#) who experienced longer stints in the status quo group home.

In addition to his position within the School of Education, Robert B. McCall is a professor in Pitt's Department of Psychology within the Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. His scholarly interests include topics related to attention and memory in infants, developmental changes in mental performance, and design and analysis in developmental psychology, among others. Christina J. Groark is an associate professor within the School of Education's Department of Psychology in Education as well as a co-director for the Office of Child Development. She has provided administrative oversight, management, and practical and scholarly guidance for interdisciplinary projects in the Office of Child Development for 30 years. Pitt psychologists Jennifer L. Salaway and Megan M. Julian also contributed to the research.

**More information:** The development of children placed into different types of Russian families following an institutional intervention.  
[psycnet.apa.org/?fa=main.doiL ... i=10.1037/ipp0000060](https://psycnet.apa.org/?fa=main.doiL...i=10.1037/ipp0000060)

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