

Foster care may boost brain activity of institutionalized children

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Children raised in institutions are more likely to lag physically, socially, and cognitively, but little is known about what happens to children's brains when they live in institutions. Now a new study finds that placing institutionalized children in high-quality foster care may improve their brain activity.

The study, in the July/August 2009 issue of the journal *Child Development*, was carried out as part of the Bucharest Early Intervention Project, a longitudinal look at the effects of institutionalization on brain and behavioral development. It was conducted by researchers at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Children's Hospital Boston, the University of Maryland, Tulane University Health Sciences Center, and Harvard Medical School.

The study assessed how more than 200 Romanian [children](#) between the ages of 5 and 42 months recognized faces. Some of the children in the study had been raised in institutions and then placed in foster care, some stayed in institutions, and some were raised by their families.

Compared with children who grew up in families, children raised in institutions showed a pattern of reduced brain activity when they looked at pictures of a caregiver's face that alternated with pictures of a stranger's face. Children who were placed in high-quality [foster care](#) showed the beginnings of normalized [brain activity](#) when processing faces.

"This study is one of the first to document the neural consequences of early institutionalization," according to Margaret C. Moulson, the study's lead author. "As such, it offers insights into both the negative effects of early psychological deprivation on children's ability to process faces, and the potential positive impact of early intervention." Moulson was a postdoctoral associate at MIT when she conducted the research; she will soon be assistant professor of psychology at Ryerson University in Toronto.

More information: *Child Development*, Vol. 80, Issue 4, The Effects of Early Experience on Face Recognition: An Event-Related Potential Study of Institutionalized Children in Romania by Moulson, MC (formerly with Massachusetts Institute of Technology, soon to be with Ryerson University), Westerlund, A (Children's Hospital Boston), Fox, NA (University of Maryland), Zeanah, CH (Tulane University Health Sciences Center), and Nelson, CA (Children's Hospital Boston and Harvard Medical School).

Source: Society for Research in [Child Development](#) ([news](#) : [web](#))

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