

Scientists say preparing foster kids for school lessens impact of moves

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Katherine Pears of the Oregon Social Learning Center and Philip Fisher of the University of Oregon have documented the movement of foster care kids as they changed schools and the educational impacts on the children between kindergarten and fifth grade. Credit: University of Oregon

A new study clarifies the impact of school moves experienced by children in foster care but also points to how to limit the damage, say researchers of the University of Oregon and the nonprofit Oregon Social Learning Center.

The research, published in the journal *Child Development*, tracked 86 foster children and compared them with 55 children from non-foster families from preschool to fifth grade, using data collected from children, caregivers, school districts and social service agencies in a mid-sized Pacific Northwest community.

Foster children were 3.28 times more likely to move schools than their peers not in [foster care](#), and four times more likely to move and change school districts during a school year. For foster

children, the moves were accompanied with academic and [behavioral problems](#) requiring special interventions as they moved through elementary school.

The data-driven findings help clarify previous studies, most of which had relied on the recall of foster children leaving the system in their late teens, said study co-author Philip A. Fisher, professor of psychology at the UO. Previous research had shown that by age 4 children in foster care already have moved an average of three times.

Policy implications for social service agencies, the courts and schools emerged as the five-member research team explored the academic and behavioral problems. Foster children who began school unprepared were the ones most likely to have troubles later.

"The sobering message of this paper is that foster children make a lot of moves, but the study also offers a ray of hope," said lead author Katherine C. Pears, an OSLC senior scientist and courtesy research associate in the UO's Department of Psychology. "For foster kids who entered kindergarten with good language and literacy skills the moves didn't have a negative effect on them. If you can start children out ready for entering the school system, you will be inoculating them to protect them against subsequent moves."

There should also be, Pears said, a concerted effort to keep foster children who move or must change families in the same schools or, at least, in the same school districts. Such an approach, she said, would provide social stability for foster children, allowing them to maintain already existing relationships with teachers and friends. Doing so, she added, would help foster children keep pace academically within existing educational frameworks within a district.

Children in the new study had been part of an earlier project in which Fisher was studying their transition into kindergarten. Researchers continued to gather data on a subset of the children as they moved toward grades 3-5.

"This gave us a real time look at what happened to these children between grades through records we gathered by following each child," Pears said. "We were able to track their movements, even when they moved to other nearby [school districts](#), out of the county or out of state."

The new findings, Fisher said, bring together two separate streams of research—that which seeks to promote the healthy development of children in foster care and that which focuses on school readiness functioning and success in the general population of students.

Getting youngsters ready for kindergarten can be done inexpensively through a variety of existing preschool programs, said Fisher, who acknowledged in the study that he is involved with the Kids in Transition to School Program, a program he and Pears helped create to prepare high-risk children for kindergarten. He also is a co-owner of Treatment Foster Care Consultants Inc.

Provided by University of Oregon

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