

## Children's Relationships with Birth Parents when Children are in Out-of-Home Care: Findings from the 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study

Theodore P. Cross, Steve Tran, & Aide Hernandez

Most children in out-of-home care because of child maltreatment remain attached to their birth parents despite the abuse or neglect they have suffered from them. Many children hope to reunify with their birth parents, though they may realize that their birth parents need to change to make it possible. More than half of children in the National Survey of Children and Adolescents Well-Being (NSCAW) One-Year in Foster Care (OYFC) study thought they would live with their parents again, three-quarters believed that “things will be different this time”.<sup>1</sup>

Maintaining their relationship with their birth parents contributes to the well-being of Illinois children in out-of-home care. This research brief reports results from data on relationships with birth parents for children in out-of-home care through the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). The brief is one in a series that presents capsule summaries of results from the 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study in different domains of well-being. Another brief in the series assesses the relationship between children in out-of-home care and their siblings.<sup>2</sup>

### 2017 Illinois Study of Child Well-Being

The 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study provides a snapshot of the well-being of children and youth in out-of-home care in Illinois in 2017. The Children and Family Research Center (CFRC) drew a stratified random sample of 700 children and youth from the population of children and youth in DCFS care in October 2017. The Survey Research Laboratory of the University of Illinois at Chicago conducted interviews with caseworkers, foster care providers, and children age seven and older between December 2017 and July 2018. For more information, see the full report of the study (reference listed below).

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families (2001). National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being: One Year in Foster Care Report. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/oyfc\\_report.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/oyfc_report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Cross, T.P., Hernandez, A. & Tran, S. (2019). Children in out-of-home care and their contact with siblings: Findings from the 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study. Research brief. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

## **Visits with their Birth Mother**

Children were asked about visits with their birth mother and their birth father. More than a third of youths (34.3%) saw their birth mother at least once a week, and a small percentage saw her every day (8.7%). However, 37.5% never saw their birth mother. The results were about the same when caseworkers answered a similar question about birth mother visits.

Visits with the birth mother were usually at the foster caregiver's home (43.8%) or the birth mother's home (30.7%). The visits for 82.7% of the birth mothers were supervised. Youth were more likely to see their birth mother at least once a month if they were in kinship care (63.5%) or in a group home or residential treatment (64.6%) than if they were in traditional foster care (37.3%) or specialized foster care (22.2%).

Most children who saw their mothers (80.4%) usually did fun things when visiting her. A number of children (44.9%) talked to her about important things on most or all visits, while 40.7% talked to her about important things hardly ever to some of the time. Some children (24.0%) said they were afraid of their mother, at least occasionally.

## **Visits with their Birth Father**

More than half of children (53.5%) never saw their birth father. When children had been in out-of-home care five years or more, 73.3% never saw their birth father. Only 22.7% of children saw their birth father once a week or more. Visits with the birth father were usually at the foster caregiver's home (31.5%) or some other location (31.4%). Visits at the birth father's home were less frequent (23.4%). The results were about the same when caseworkers were asked a similar question about birth father visits.

Most children who saw their birth father (72.8%) usually did fun things on visits with him. Children varied in whether they talked about important things with their birth father: 20.7% never talked to their father about important things, 47.3% hardly ever did or just some of the time, and 32.0% did most of the time to all of the time. Some children (26.1%) were afraid of their birth father, at least occasionally.

## **Children's Experience of their Birth Parents**

Most children (64.4%) reported a mix of positive feelings (happy, relaxed) and negative feelings (upset, sad, worried) after visits with birth parents. About a third (35.5%) reported only positive feelings after visits with birth parents. No child reported only negative feelings. Majorities of children wanted to see their mother more often (68.4%) and their father more often (58.4%). Small percentages want to see their mother less (11.7%) and their father less (4.9%). Most children said they missed their birth family (71.0%).

## **Children's Feelings about Living with their Birth Parents**

About a third of children (32.9%) wanted to live with their birth mother now, but only half as many thought they would actually live with their birth mother within a year (16.5%). About a fifth of children (20.1%) wanted to live with their mother when they turned 16.

About a fifth of children (21.1%) wanted to live with their birth father now and just 5.5% thought they would live with their birth father within a year. Just 11.1% of children wanted to live with their father when they turned 16.

## **Discussion**

These results show that many children in out-of-home care maintain relationships with their birth parents, but they also show how many children are disconnected from their birth parents. Most children had contact with their birth mother, sometimes frequently, but many children never saw their birth mother, and more than half never saw their birth father. Contact was especially infrequent when children had non-kin foster parents. Most children missed their birth parents and wanted to see them more often.

Visits with birth parents could be both rewarding and challenging. Most children had mixed feelings after visits with birth parents, though positive feelings outnumbered negative feelings in the sample, and no child had purely negative feelings.

Despite their attachment to their birth parents, only small numbers of children wanted to live with their birth parents now or thought they would live with them in the future. Although most children in out-of-home care miss their birth parents, many may have a realistic understanding of birth parents' limitations in being able to take care of them.

Maintaining relationships with birth fathers could be especially difficult. Birth fathers lagged behind birth mothers in the contact they had with their children and the children's appraisal of the possibility of living with them.

We need to learn more about the obstacles to children having contact with their birth parents. We especially need to learn more about why the frequency of contact with birth parents was so much lower when children were in traditional or specialized foster homes. Are there special geographic or relationship challenges that make it more difficult for children living with a non-kin foster parent to see their birth parents?

These results suggest that contact with birth parents can be a positive experience for children in out-of-home care, but not enough children have the positive contact with birth parents they need. Continued effort to support and enhance children's positive contact with birth parents is essential to support the well-being of children in out-of-home care.

### **Recommended Citation**

Cross, T.P., Tran, S., & Hernandez, A. (2019). *Children's Relationships with Birth Parents when Children are in Out-of-Home Care: Findings from the 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

### **Acknowledgements**

Funding for the evaluation was provided by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. The information and opinions expressed herein reflect solely the position of the authors, and should not be construed to indicate the support or endorsement of its content by the funding agency.

### **Related Publication**

Cross, T.P., Tran, S., Hernandez, A., & Rhodes, E. (2019). *The 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study: Final Report*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.