

# What is the relationship between carer involvement in education and school performance of children in foster and kinship care?

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## Background

Research shows that children in care are far more likely to score poorly on tests, be excluded and to have low attendance than their peers (Scherr, 2007; Trout, et al., 2008). Some young people in care enjoy educational success (Jackson & Cameron, 2012), but many reach adulthood with few or no qualifications, which puts them at risk of long term economic and social disadvantage (Forsman, et al., 2016; Okpych & Courtney, 2014). Supporting young people in care to succeed in school may therefore be an effective strategy to improve their long-term life chances.

Previous research (O'Higgins, Sebba & Gardner, 2017) suggests that carer involvement in education may be a protective factor worth targeting in interventions. In this study, I conducted a systematic and mixed methods literature review to examine existing research in greater depth. Then, using existing data on children in care in Ontario, Canada, I investigated whether carer involvement in education is a protective factor for school performance of teenagers in care over time. Additionally, the analysis explored whether carer involvement is a protective factor for children in care who are at significant risk of school failure: those with special educational needs.

## Call to Action

### Policy and practice

- Raise aspirations of foster and kinship carers for children in care
- Recruitment, training, matching and supervision of new carers should include a focus on evidence-based strategies to support their involvement in the education of children
- School and social work professionals need to support carers and work together to support the education of children in care
- Datasets with data on foster and kinship carers need to be developed (in England particularly), made more accessible and should include evidence-based measurement tools

### Research

- More research on the involvement of foster and kinship carers in education is needed
- A theoretical framework describing the involvement of carers should be developed
- Develop evidence based and robust measurement tools to capture carer involvement in education
- Identify effective strategies for foster and kinship carers to be involved in school
- Analyse the relationship between aspirations and school performance further to identify potential confounders, for example, carer level of education

## What did we do?

Using existing data on children in care in Ontario, I answered the following questions:

1. How and how much are carers involved in the education of children in care?
2. Is carer involvement a protective factor for school performance of teenagers in care?
3. Is carer involvement a protective factor for school performance of teenagers in care who have special educational needs?

The analysis used latent growth models and was conducted with *Mplus* v.7.31.

## Who were the teenagers and carers in the study?

Young people		Carers	
Sex	44% girls	Sex	90% female
Ethnicity	17% FNMI	Years fostering	83% more than 4 years
Age	12.65 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.38)	Matched placement	83% ethnic match
Special educational needs	57% with SEN	Training received	95%

## What did we find out?

### **Carers are involved in the education of the children they foster**

Carers were actively involved in the education of the children, but many of the activities they undertook were not associated with children's school performance; this includes help with homework, talking about school and carers' school-based involvement. These findings broadly mirror research on parental involvement for children in the general population (See Hill & Tyson, 2009).

### **Carers' aspirations predict better future school performance**

I examined whether carers' aspirations predicted teenagers' future school performance, after taking into account past school performance. This helps us understand whether carers have high aspirations for high performing children or whether high aspirations predict school performance *progress*. Findings indicate that carers' aspirations predict future school performance, even after taking into account children's past school performance. School performance also predicted future aspirations, so this is a bidirectional relationship, as expected.

### **Carers' aspirations predict better future school performance of children with special educational needs**

The model was also tested for the sample of teenagers who have special educational needs. The model showed that the findings were similar for this group of teenagers. This means that carers' aspirations predict better future school performance, even after accounting for past achievement for teenagers with special educational needs.

## Further information and contact

This study was conducted at the Rees Centre, University of Oxford.

To find out more about Rees Centre research's work on education, see:

<http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/research/education/>

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