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## Evaluating intensive family preservation programs: a methodological review

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### Authors' objectives

To determine the adequacy of evaluations of family preservation services (FPS), which are designed to support families and prevent out-of-home placements of children at risk of abuse or neglect, and to assess the effectiveness of FPS at reducing out-of-home placements of children.

### Searching

MEDLINE, ERIC, PsycLIT, Sociofile (OVID) and HealthPlan were searched from 1977 to 1993 for all English language publications, using the following keywords: 'family preservation', 'family-based services' and 'child abuse'. Unpublished studies were located by direct contact (mail or phone). The Annotated Directory of Family-based Services was also searched and letters were sent to 130 family preservation programmes.

### Study selection

#### Study designs of evaluations included in the review

Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and quasi-experimental studies that met the following three criteria for inclusion: (1) assessment of an intensive family preservation programme; (2) outcome data available in the report; and (3) with a comparison group.

#### Specific interventions included in the review

Intensive family preservation programme: family workers maintain intensive contact with 2 or 4 families at a time and provide home-based, short-term services, including case management, family counselling, improvement of communication skills, and provision of other concrete services such as financial assistance and transportation.

#### Participants included in the review

Children at risk of abuse or neglect, and referred to the state's child protection agencies, were included.

#### Outcomes assessed in the review

The rate of out-of-home placements for children was assessed.

#### How were decisions on the relevance of primary studies made?

The authors do not state how the papers were selected for the review, or how many of the authors performed the selection.

### Assessment of study quality

The criteria of Chalmers et al. (see Other Publications of Related Interest) were adapted to determine the methodological quality of the evaluations. A 15-item questionnaire was used to examine three critical methodological components: assignment of families to the treatment groups (5 items); the adequacy of the description of the intervention (6 items); and outcome measures (4 items). According to the total score, a study was considered as either acceptable (at least 11 of 15 items), adequate (6 to 10 items), or unacceptable (0 to 5 items). Validity was assessed independently by two reviewers, and any disagreements were resolved by consensus.

### Data extraction

The authors do not state how the data were extracted for the review, or how many of the authors performed the data extraction.

### Methods of synthesis

#### How were the studies combined?

The studies were combined by a narrative description; the results from the individual studies were not quantitatively combined.

The relative risk (RR) of placement with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) was calculated for each study.

#### How were differences between studies investigated?

A narrative description of differences between the studies is presented.

### Results of the review

Five RCTs (1,842 children) and 5 quasi-experimental studies (1,082 children) were included.

Based on the 15-point methodological criteria, 2 studies scored at least 11 (acceptable), 4 studies scored between 6 and 10 (adequate), and 4 studies scored 0 to 5 (unacceptable). Methodological shortcomings included poorly-defined assessment of risk, inadequate descriptions of the interventions provided, and non-blinded determination of the outcome.

In 5 quasi-experimental studies, rates of out-of-home placement ranged from 21 to 56% in the treatment groups and from 25 to 59% in the control groups. Only one quasi-experimental study found that the rates of placement was significantly lower in the treatment group than that in the control group (RR 0.67, 95% CI: 0.5, 0.9).

In 5 RCTs, rates of placement ranged from 24 to 43% in the treatment groups and from 20 to 57% in the control groups. Only one RCT found a statistically-significant result in favour of treatment (RR 0.75, 95% CI: 0.57, 0.99).

### Authors' conclusions

Evaluation of family preservation programmes are methodologically difficult, and show no benefit in reducing rates of out-of-home placements of children at risk of abuse or neglect in 8 of 10 studies. Consistent, methodologically-rigorous evaluations are needed to determine the effectiveness of FPS and to guide social policy for high-risk children and their families.

### CRD commentary

The review seems methodologically rigorous, although it does not state how decisions on relevance or data extraction were made.

### Funding

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### Bibliographic details

Heneghan A M, Horwitz S M, Leventhal J M. Evaluating intensive family preservation programs: a methodological review. *Pediatrics* 1996; 97(4): 535-542

### PubMedID

8632942

### Other publications of related interest

Chalmers TC, Smith H, Blackburn B, Silverman B, Schroeder B, Reitman D, et al. A method for assessing the quality of a randomized control trial. *Control Clin Trials* 1981;2:31-49.

**Indexing Status**

Subject indexing assigned by NLM

**MeSH**

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