

# **The Effectiveness of Interventions Designed to Improve the Academic Outcomes of Children and Adolescents in Out-of-Home Care: A Systematic Review**

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# Abstract

Children and adolescents in out-of-home care face a complex set of barriers to learning that place them at serious educational disadvantage. Educational delays limit the future educational and employment prospects of this population leaving them vulnerable to a host of negative long-term outcomes. Longstanding concern for the poor academic status of children and adolescents in out-of-home care coupled with burgeoning interest amongst policymakers on how the academic outcomes of this population can be improved has led to a proliferation of evaluative research studies in recent times. The objective of this systematic review was to locate, critically appraise and synthesise the best available evidence on the effects of interventions designed to improve the academic outcomes of children and adolescents in out-of-home care.

A search for published and grey literature was conducted across a range of electronic sources including ERIC; PsycINFO; PubMed; Social Services Abstracts; Sociological Abstracts, and Proquest Digital Dissertations. The search yielded 7263 unique records that were screened for eligibility. Studies were selected if they evaluated the impact of an intervention on the academic achievement of children and adolescents (<18 years of age) placed formerly or currently in out-of-home care using a randomised control trial study design. Following study selection and critical appraisal six eligible studies of moderate quality were included in the review. Study characteristics and methodological quality data were tabulated and accompanied by a narrative synthesis.

Two studies evaluated the effects of school readiness programs on the pre-academic skills of preschool aged children (three to five years) in foster and kinship care compared to 'services as usual' comparator. One school readiness program demonstrated a statistically significant impact on preschool children's early literacy, (ES = 0.26) while the other significantly improved children's pre-academic math and literacy skills (ES = 0.16) at post-intervention. Two studies evaluated the effects of a direct instruction tutoring program in primary school aged children (six to 13 years) in foster and kinship care using different delivery formats, compared to a wait-list control. At post-intervention, the one-on-one tutoring delivered by foster parents significantly improved children's math computation (ES = 0.46) and sentence comprehension skills (ES = 0.38) while the group-based tutoring delivered by university student volunteers significantly improved children's word reading

(ES = 0.40), spelling (ES = 0.25) and math computation skills (ES = 0.34). No evidence was found for interventions that aimed to improve the academic outcomes of high school aged adolescents (14 to 17 years) in the broader out-of-home care population at greater risk of educational failure.

In conclusion, evidence from this review suggests that multi-component interventions that target individual-level barriers to educational attainment can improve the short-term academic outcomes of young children in foster and kinship care; however, replication of these studies and more robust research is needed before firm conclusions can be made about the effectiveness of these programmes for improving the academic status of children and adolescents in out-of-home care. Implications for future research and policy and practice are discussed.

# Declaration

I, Dagmara Riitano, certify that this work contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or any other tertiary institution, and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by any other person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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