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The development of children in foster care

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Citation

Goemans, A. (2017, June 27). *The development of children in foster care*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/51103>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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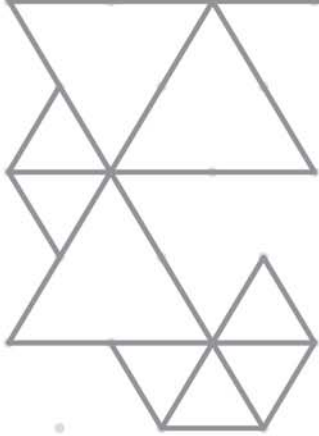
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Title: The development of children in foster care

Issue Date: 2017-06-27



GENERAL INTRODUCTION





Chapter 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Foster care is a form of child welfare wherein a child who cannot be raised by his or her own parents, is placed out-of-home and is raised by alternative caregivers. This dissertation specifically focuses on *family* foster care, wherein a child lives in a foster family with one or two foster parents. Although decisions with respect to out-of-home-placement cannot always be made unequivocally (Britner & Mossler, 2002; Jones, 1993; Lindsey, 1992), family foster care, from now on referred to as *foster care*, is considered to be the best alternative in case of out-of-home placement (Dozier et al., 2014). Foster care most closely resembles the natural home environment of a child, providing stability and continuity of caregivers and the opportunity to build close relationships with substitute parent figures (Roy, Rutter, & Pickles, 2000; Tizard & Hodges, 1978). Foster parents take care of children who might have encountered, or will encounter developmental difficulties caused by a history of suboptimal parenting, neglect, or even abuse (Dubner & Motta, 1999; Greeson et al., 2011; Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010). This can place a burden on the foster parents and increase parental stress (Jones & Morrisette, 1999), and may culminate into prematurely ended placements, i.e., breakdown (Minty, 1999). In addition, many studies show worrying results with respect to the developmental outcomes of children in foster care (Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006; Lloyd & Barth, 2011). *Developmental outcomes* here refer to foster children's outcomes in cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioral functioning as well as academic achievement. However, the development of foster children is not necessarily problematic, and likely depends on several characteristics associated with the foster child, the foster parents, and the foster placement (Van Oijen, 2010). This dissertation analyzes the development of children in foster care, and examines which characteristics are associated with foster children's development.

Development of Children in Foster Care

Children who are placed in foster care are a heterogeneous group and come from families with different characteristics and backgrounds. Foster children's backgrounds and pre-placement experiences are likely to be related to their developmental outcomes at the start of the placement in foster care (Scholte, 1997) as well as later, while in foster care. Many children who are placed in foster care come from families characterized by environments that could pose a threat to their development (e.g., low socioeconomic status, low levels of social support, suboptimal parenting) and foster children have often experienced childhood adversity. Moreover, broken attachment due to the separation from their biological parents and the adjustment to a new family and living situation confronts foster children with additional challenges (Kinard, 1982). Several studies have shown that many foster children have developmental problems upon entering foster care (Clausen, Landsverk, Ganger, Chadwick, & Litrownik, 1998; James, 2004; Simms, Dubowitz, & Szilagyi, 2000; Zorc et al., 2013), and although not many studies control for pre-placement adversities, it is assumed that foster children's backgrounds are likely to have an impact on foster children's development (Turney & Wildeman, 2017; Wald, Carlsmith, & Leiderman, 1988). Once in foster care, one would hope that the safe and stimulating home environment that most foster families offer helps



foster children to recover from their past experiences. However, many foster children continue to experience developmental difficulties during foster care. Foster children's development is often characterized by clinical levels of internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors (Maaskant, Van Rooij, & Hermanns, 2014), adaptation problems (Berkoff, Leslie, & Stahmer, 2006), school difficulties, and poor educational outcomes (Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes, & Rios-Salas, 2015; Jackson, 1994; O'Higgins, Sebba, & Luke, 2015; Sebba et al., 2015).

Although most research presents a gloomy picture of the development of children in foster care, results have not been conclusive. Some studies show that foster care improves children's functioning (Ahmad et al., 2005; Barber & Delfabbro, 2005; Fernandez, 2009; Horwitz, Balestracci, & Simms, 2001; White, 1997). Obviously foster children's developmental pathways vary. We already stated that foster children's development likely depends on several characteristics associated with the foster child, the foster family, and the foster placement (Van Oijen, 2010). It has, for example, been suggested that the age of out-of-home placement (Minty, 1999), foster children's placement history (Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000), the type of foster family (Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2014), and additional support services (Chamberlain et al., 2008) are related to foster children's developmental outcomes. However, much remains unclear about the effects of foster care. To date there are no overview studies on foster children's development and it is not known what works for which foster child. The wide range of outcomes leads to the question which conditions for foster care are most conducive for foster children's positive development. Two important ways to find answers to this question are meta-analysis and longitudinal research.

Meta-analysis

Meta-analysis is a statistical method for deriving at a systematic, quantitative overview of empirical scientific literature. Meta-analysis allows for the combination of results from individual studies into a statistical summary (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2009; Cooper, Hedges, & Valentine, 2009). This is especially useful in research areas such as on the development of children in foster care that are characterized by a wide variety of sometimes conflicting findings from different studies which hampers getting a correct overview of the domain. An important incremental value of meta-analysis is that a more reliable overall effect size is obtained than is available from the individual studies (Borenstein et al., 2009; Cooper et al., 2009). It is particularly helpful in a domain like foster care characterized by small studies with possibly biased samples (Jackson, Gabrielli, Tunno, & Hambrick, 2012). Meta-analysis provides a means for combining the results of studies, by analyzing the overall effect size as well as the variance of effect sizes across studies (Huedo-Medina, Sánchez-Meca, Marin-Martinez, & Botella, 2006). The robustness of overall effects is strengthened by the fact that meta-analysis does not only include published studies in peer-reviewed journals, but also includes so called 'grey literature' (Conn, Valentine, Cooper, & Rantz, 2003). Grey literature concerns unpublished studies, books, dissertations, and studies published outside widely available journals (Conn et al., 2003). In addition to providing a statistical summary and including grey literature, meta-analysis also allows the analysis of publication bias (Rothstein, Sutton, & Borenstein, 2006; Spector & Thompson, 1991). Publication bias may occur because studies with statistically non-significant results or low effect sizes are less likely to be published

than studies with statistically significant findings and large effect sizes. This higher salience and better accessibility of studies with larger effect sizes may erroneously lead to the assumption that effects are larger than they actually are (Rothstein et al., 2006). To assess publication bias, a range of methods can be used, such as the Duval and Tweedie's trim-and-fill procedure (Duval & Tweedie, 2000), the Kendall's Tau method, and Fail-safe *N* analyses (Cooper et al., 2009; Orwin, 1983; Rosenthal, 1979; Rothstein et al., 2006). These methods can assess to which extent publication bias affects an overall effect size and, if needed, an adjusted overall effect size can be estimated (Rothstein et al., 2006).

To provide a better insight into the conditions that are related to the overall effect size, meta-analysis offers several possibilities. One of them is to analyze the effect of moderators. Moderator analysis is of interest for research on foster children because there have been different results between studies. It is not yet known how to explain these partly contradictory findings, but differences in study designs, characteristics of participants, and child care systems could play a role. Moderator analysis allows to study whether, for instance, methodological differences in designs (e.g., sample size, attrition in longitudinal studies) or foster care specific characteristics (e.g., age of the foster child, length of the foster placement) are related to foster children's development. Another option for examining which conditions are related to the overall-effect size is a sensitivity analysis. Sensitivity analyses are performed to assess and compare the robustness of the results for different types of studies or for studies using different inclusion criteria (Egger, Smith, & Phillips, 1997; Spector & Thompson, 1991). Sensitivity analysis allows, for example, to examine whether the results of studies that meet certain criteria (e.g., studies that are published in peer-reviewed journals, had adequate sample sizes, made use of validated instruments, and included covariates) differ from the overall findings of the meta-analysis wherein all studies are included (Egger et al., 1997). Sensitivity analysis is a useful approach, because of the challenges to perform research on foster children. Feasibility limitations of individual studies, e.g., those linked to the need to have consent of foster as well as biological parents, or to find foster care organizations willing to provide access to foster families, may easily lead to methodological limitations, e.g., with respect to the number of variables and measures that can be included and the methods used for data collection, and sensitivity analysis allows to partly control for this.

Longitudinal Research

The second approach used in this dissertation to gain insight in the development of children in foster care is longitudinal research. Longitudinal research is an empirical approach to fill the knowledge gaps with respect to change over time in a particular phenomenon or phenomena. In this case we refer to this change as development and the phenomenon is children in foster care (Heath, Colton, & Aldgate, 1994; McWey, Cui, & Pazdera, 2010; Simmel, Barth, & Brooks, 2007; Taussig, 2002). The majority of studies on foster children are of cross-sectional nature (e.g., Clausen et al., 1998; Lehman, Havik, Havik, & Heiervang, 2013). These studies provide a snapshot of foster children's functioning and as such provide an important stepping stone for understanding the lives and development of foster children and foster parents. Cross-sectional studies can establish foster children's functioning at a specific point in time and examine which characteristics or circumstances are correlated with particular



outcomes. However, cross-sectional studies cannot establish change and predictors for change, and are therefore unable to capture the risk and protective factors that precede foster children's outcomes at a later time point. Longitudinal research is needed to more fully understand the developmental trajectories of foster children and to gain insight in the characteristics or factors that predict their developmental outcomes.

The results of previous longitudinal studies have not been conclusive with respect to the developmental pathways of foster children. Furthermore, past longitudinal research did not always focus on a broad range of predictors in relation to foster children's development, while including a broad range of predictors in a multivariate model could possibly help the identification of the most apparent predictors of the development of children in foster care (Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007). Based on previous research (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Maaskant et al., 2014; Winokur et al., 2014), variables of interest in relation to foster children's development are child characteristics (e.g., age, gender, placement history, duration of the placement), foster family characteristics (e.g., type of foster family, family composition, biological children of foster parents, siblings of the foster child, foster parents' thinking about quitting foster care), and foster placement characteristics (e.g., legal framework, planning for reunification, intervention aimed at foster parents, interventions aimed at foster children, parental visiting). There is a further need for longitudinal studies that do not only look at the general developmental trends or focus on the development of foster children as related to a single predictor, but focus on a broader range of predictors (Van Oijen, 2010). We conducted such a longitudinal study and report it in this dissertation.

An aspect that has not been covered by previous longitudinal studies concerns the bidirectional relations between foster children's development and child, family, and placement characteristics (Van Oijen, 2010). Previous longitudinal studies often exclusively focused on child-to-parent effects (Hurlburt, Chamberlain, DeGarmo, Zhang, & Price, 2010; Vanderfaeillie, Van Holen, Trogh, & Andries, 2012) and although these studies provided insight about the unidirectional effects from foster children to their foster parents, it is generally emphasized that the relationships between parenting and child development are bidirectional (Bornstein, 2009; Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012; Stone, Mares, Otten, Engels, & Janssens, 2016) and need to be studied in a transactional framework (Sameroff, 2009). The transactional model of child development (Sameroff, 2009) is essential for understanding the dynamic reciprocal process by which different systems in the ecology of children's education and development, e.g., as specified in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000) influence each other throughout development. Central to the transactional model is the analytic emphasis placed on the bidirectional, interdependent effects of the child and the environment. Throughout time children affect their environment and their environment affects children (Bell, 1968; Deater-Deckard, 2004; Karraker & Coleman, 2005; O'Connor, 2002). Moreover, environmental settings affect and are affected by each other (Sameroff, 2009) and are therefore by definition subject to change, particularly the environments of foster children which might be subject to many and big changes during their foster placements. Some of these changes are, for instance, changes in living environment, changes in parenting styles, changes of youth care workers, or change of school. This dissertation analyzes the development of foster children in a transactional perspective. We were specifically interested in the transaction

between foster parents' stress and foster children's behavior problems, because this transaction might have important consequences for foster placement breakdown and the development of children in foster care (Brown & Bednar, 2006; Farmer, Lipscombe, & Moyers, 2005). Previous studies, most of them with a cross-sectional design, have examined either unidirectional effects from foster parents' stress to foster children's behavior problems (Kelley, Whitley, & Campos, 2011; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, & France, 2011; Nilsen, 2007; Rork, 2007) or vice versa (Hurlburt et al., 2010; Vanderfaeillie et al., 2012). By studying the bidirectional effects, this dissertation tries to account for dynamic processes between foster children and their foster parents, and to examine the direction, strength, causality, or reciprocity of this dynamic process. Insight in the transactional relations between foster parents and foster children might inform choices whether interventions and additional support should be aimed at foster children, foster parents, or both.

Screening and Monitoring

The previous sections highlighted the two approaches, i.e., meta-analysis and longitudinal research, that were used to work toward the global aim of this dissertation; which is analyze the development of children in foster care, and examine which characteristics are associated with foster children's development. Obtaining clear notions of foster children's development is not only relevant for the academic purpose of writing a thesis, but also for the quality of foster care itself, because it is a precondition to offering support that is adapted to the needs of foster children and foster families. To provide better insight in foster children's development, it is important to capture their development with screening and monitoring instruments that have good psychometric properties. Screening and monitoring of foster children's development, especially their psychosocial development, has increasingly received attention of scholars since the beginning of the 21st century (Garwood & Close, 2001; Leslie et al., 2003). Many years of research on foster children's development (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978; Frank, 1980) has clarified that in order to improve foster children's development, accurate screening of developmental problems is important. This insight has already been conveyed in recommendations and statements with respect to foster care policy and practice (e.g., American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry & Child Welfare League of America, 2003; De Baat, Van den Bergh, & De Lange, 2015). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997), a measure we also used in our longitudinal study, is frequently used as a child mental health screening measure in the Netherlands and elsewhere, both for children in the general population and for vulnerable populations such as children in foster care. Studies have shown that the SDQ provides a good indication for psychosocial problems among children in care (Goodman & Goodman, 2012; Lehmann, Havik, Havik, & Heiervang, 2013; Marquis & Flynn, 2009). However, neither the SDQ nor other standard child mental health checklists such as the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991) adequately capture the specific problems which children who are placed out of home are confronted with, such as attachment- and trauma-related difficulties (Denton, Frogley, Jackson, John, & Querstret, 2016; Lewis, 2014; Milne & Collin-Vézina, 2015). The current dissertation presents a study on the validation of a screening and monitoring measure that focuses on psychosocial difficulties specifically manifested by children in foster care.



Foster Care in the Netherlands

The longitudinal study described in this dissertation is performed in the Dutch foster care context. Most previous studies on foster care, also many of the longitudinal ones, have been conducted outside the Netherlands, mostly in the USA. Research findings from other countries, however, cannot be easily generalized to the Netherlands, because of the differences in the child welfare systems (Punselie, 2006). In the Netherlands, foster care formally exists since the beginning of the twentieth century (Bastiaensen & Kramer, 2012). With the introduction of the 'Kinderwetten' ('Laws for Children') in 1901, laws for child protection enabled the government to restrict parental authority and, in extreme cases, to place the child out of home in settings like foster care or group homes. During the first half of the twentieth century, foster placements had a permanent nature. Once children were in foster care, no efforts were made toward reunifying the child with its family of origin. In the second half of the twentieth century, the belief that children were supposed to grow up with and to be cared for by their own parents gained support and foster care became more often a temporary intervention. Parallel to this was a growing attention and support for the view that foster care should be preferred over other out-of-home settings like group care. If parents were not able to care for their own child, foster placement was believed to be the best alternative (Bastiaensen & Kramer, 2012); an idea that still finds wide support among foster care researchers, policy makers and practitioners within and outside the Netherlands (CRC, 2015; Legrand, 2015; Ministerie van VWS & Ministerie van VenJ, 2013; Roy et al., 2000; Webster, Barth, & Needell, 1999; Wilson & Conroy, 1999).

Nowadays, over 21,000 children at a given moment during a year experience foster care in the Netherlands, and this number has doubled in just over ten years (Pleegzorg Nederland, 2015). Similar to other countries, various forms of foster care can be distinguished: kinship or non-kinship, regular or therapeutic, voluntary or enforced. An important difference between the Dutch foster care system and that of the United States, is that foster care in the USA is almost always 'short-term' and temporal because adoption and termination of parental rights are planned when children cannot return to their parents (Barber & Delfabbro, 2005; Barth, Wulczyn, & Crea, 2004), and foster care in the Netherlands can either be short-term or long-term (Bastiaensen & Kramer, 2012). Dutch foster parents can become guardians of their foster children but adoption from foster care almost never happens in the Netherlands. In short-term foster care, foster care is seen as a temporary alternative and is aimed at the improvement of the situation in the family of origin in order to reunify the foster child with its own parents. Children can remain in long-term foster care for longer periods of time or even until the child reaches the age of 18 (i.e., the age that children are considered adults). The aim of this type of foster care is to create continuity, stability, security, and the best developmental opportunities for the foster child in the foster family. The difference between adoption from care and long-term foster care is that the latter is less definite than adoption from care. Reunification remains an option for foster children, even when in long-term foster placements. Moreover, although Dutch parents lose their parental authority in long-term foster care, they are still required to pay a share of the costs involved in feeding, clothing and educating their child.

As is true for foster care in other countries, foster care in the Netherlands presents several challenges and opportunities. With respect to the challenges, previous studies on Dutch foster children have for example shown that many foster children come from problematic backgrounds (Strijker & Knorth, 2009) and experience behavior problems or breakdown during the foster placement (Van Oijen, 2010). In addition, caring for foster children can be stressful and consequently foster parents consider quitting fostering or actually quit (Van den Bergh, 2013). Yearly factsheets provided by the Dutch national organization for foster care in the Netherlands ('Pleegzorg Nederland') support these research findings and also point at several issues that deserve further attention. There is, for example, a shortage of foster families which makes that several foster children are on the waiting list to be placed in a foster family. This same shortage of foster family also results in difficulties with respect to matching children with foster parents (Zeijlmans, López, Grietens, & Knorth, 2017). Another observation is the increased number of older children and children with more complex developmental problems that come into foster care, which might have to do with the implementation of the new Youth Act in 2015 which prefers placements in foster care over placement in group care (Pleegzorg Nederland, 2015). Moreover, partly driven by research on foster care in the Netherlands, the recently developed guidelines for foster care (De Baat et al., 2015) as well as the 'Monitor foster care' (Lekkerkerker, De Baat, & Van Yperen, 2016) demonstrated that the field is in a process of professionalization. Evidence-based knowledge, and guidelines and tools are provided for foster care professionals, which can be considered an opportunity to further develop foster care and improve its quality. Recommendations as listed in the Dutch guidelines for foster care (De Baat et al., 2015) are, among others, to screen and monitor foster children's development, to support the process of permanency planning, and to reduce the number of placements and prevent breakdowns. Next to providing a general overview of foster children's development, this dissertation tries to connect with the current challenges and opportunities in the Dutch foster care system. Our longitudinal study aims to get an overview of the characteristics that matter most with respect to the development of children in foster care. This knowledge can provide anchors for support services and interventions supporting positive and preventing negative developmental outcomes in foster children. In addition, this dissertation covers the topic of screening and monitoring. We will validate an existing measure to screen and monitor foster children's development and offer recommendations for screening and monitoring practices in foster care.

Research on Foster Care in the Netherlands

As described above there is a number of challenges and opportunities, and researchers try to address them in their studies. Dutch researchers have recently studied a broad range of different topics, such as treatment foster care (Jonkman et al., 2013), foster parent training programs and placement breakdown (Maaskant et al., 2016), permanency planning (Vedder, Veenstra, Goemans, & Van Geel, 2015), comparison of out-of-home placement options (Leloux-Opmeer, Kuiper, Swaab, & Scholte, 2016), the effectiveness of a video-feedback intervention to promote positive parenting in foster care (Juffer, Stoltenborgh, Schoemaker, Marijs, & Alink, 2014), managing and reducing stress in foster carers of young foster children (Van Andel et al., 2014), matching children with foster parents (Zeijlmans et al., 2017), foster



youth's experiences (Steenbakkers, Van der Steen, & Grietens, 2016), and breakdown and reunification (Goemans, Vanderfaeillie, Damen, Pijnenburg, & Van Holen, 2016; Van Rooij, Maaskant, Weijers, Weijers, & Hermanns, 2015; Vanderfaeillie, Goemans, Damen, Pijnenburg, & Van Holen, submitted). Some studies are longitudinal (Bastiaensen, 2001; Damen & Veerman, 2005; Damen & Pijnenburg, 2005; Van Oijen, 2010), for example examining the effects of a specific intervention, but none of them specifically focuses on the more general question which factors are related to longitudinal developmental outcomes of foster children. The longitudinal study described in this dissertation adds to the previous ones because we focused on foster children of all ages, followed them for at least one year while they were with their foster family, and included a broad range of factors that could possibly be related to foster children's developmental outcomes, such as the previously mentioned foster child, foster family, and foster placement characteristics. Several of these characteristics are of specific interest, because findings with respect to these characteristics have been inconclusive (e.g., regarding age, gender, duration of the foster placement, parenting visiting) or are simply understudied (e.g., regarding presence of other foster children in the foster family, family composition, legal framework, planning for reunification). In addition, we intended to establish whether the findings of international studies can be replicated in a sample of Dutch foster children.

General Method

This dissertation has two chapters reporting the results of meta-analyses and four chapters reporting empirical results of our study on the development of children in foster care. The empirical longitudinal study was designed and performed for the purpose of this PhD research project and consisted of three waves, separated by six months intervals. The study was approved by the Leiden University Ethics Review Board of the Institute of Education and Child Studies. The first wave of data collection started in October 2014. We included foster children aged 0 to 18 from all types of foster families (kinship and non-kinship, voluntary or mandated care). We focused on newly placed foster children as well as on foster children who already were in their foster family for longer periods of time. We excluded foster children in therapeutic foster care or in part-time foster care. Data was collected via online questionnaires filled in by the foster parents. To also include foster parents for whom email or internet was not accessible, we offered the option of a paper questionnaire. We performed this study in collaboration with seven foster care agencies in the Netherlands.

Development of children in foster care was assessed with a number of measures, all included in the online questionnaire. Our choice of measures was motivated by our wish to maintain a balance between the length of the questionnaire and the use of validated measures assessing children's development. School functioning and school outcomes were assessed with the shortened version of the School Engagement Measure (SEM; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Friedel, & Paris, 2005) and by collecting data about grades and school absenteeism. The SEM has been shown to have good psychometric properties (Fredricks et al., 2005) and is a short instrument that relates well to other, more extensive, instruments that measure school engagement (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). Behavioral development was measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997). This brief questionnaire with good psychometric properties (Muris, Meesters, & Van den Berg, 2003; Van Widenfelt,

Goedhart, Treffers, & Goodman, 2003) is often used in studies on children's psychosocial development. Similar to the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991), another well-known instrument to measure children's psychosocial development, the SDQ items can be combined into an 'internalizing' and an 'externalizing' subscale, which facilitates a comparison with previous studies on foster children using the same distinction of domains. An advantage of the SDQ over the CBCL is its brief format (25 items for the SDQ versus over 100 items for the CBCL). With respect to the measurement of foster children's psychosocial development, we wanted to devote attention to the topic of screening and monitoring. In our third wave we therefore included the Brief Assessment Checklist (Tarren-Sweeney, 2013b) for children (BAC-C) and adolescents (BAC-A), which is a measure that is specifically designed to assess the mental health of children and adolescents in care. While previous research indicated that the BAC measures may possibly provide enhanced mental health screening and monitoring for foster children, their psychometric properties needed to be further established (Denton et al., 2016; Tarren-Sweeney, 2013b), evidently also for use in the Netherlands. In the last empirical chapter of this dissertation we will describe the psychometric properties of the Dutch versions of the BAC measures.

Focus and Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation analyzes the development of children in foster care, and examines which characteristics related to the foster child, the foster family and the foster placement are associated with their development. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 report the results of two different meta-analyses. Because hitherto there were no overview studies on foster children's development, meta-analyses were used to give a better insight in what is known from previous studies and provide suggestions for what the starting point for future studies on foster children's development could be. *Chapter 2* is a meta-analytic comparison of the developmental outcomes contrasting foster children with children from the general population and children at risk who remained at home. Although foster care is the preferred out-of-home placement option, it is not known how the developmental outcomes of children in foster care relate to those of children in other living arrangements (Janssens & Deboutte, 2010; Mennen, Brensilver, & Trickett, 2010). The aim of this meta-analysis was to provide information on the developmental outcomes in different arrangements. This meta-analysis can guide toward a model of a placement setting that is in the best developmental interest of children (Wald et al., 1988). The results of this meta-analysis give an overview of foster children's functioning in comparison with different groups, but do not capture their development over time. *Chapter 3* captures this developmental aspect by reporting four meta-analyses which examine the longitudinal developmental outcomes of children in foster care. These meta-analyses include former longitudinal studies on foster children's behavioral and adaptive functioning, and provide an overview of the state-of-the-art with respect to longitudinal studies on foster children. It points at strengths and limitations of previous studies and results in suggestions for future longitudinal research on foster children. Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 report the results of our empirical study, of which Chapter 5 and 6 concern the longitudinal findings. *Chapter 4* uses the data of the first wave and reports about the extent to which three clusters of characteristics, those akin to the foster child, the foster family, and the foster placement, were related to foster children's functioning at the time of



research. The advantage of using only Wave I data is that the sample size at Wave I is larger than at later waves. The size enables us to examine a complex model with multiple variables. Even though this study is cross-sectional, it can provide an overview of the characteristics that are most strongly related to foster children's developmental outcomes. This information served as input for the longitudinal analyses. Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 both analyze the three-wave longitudinal data. We were interested in foster children's development with respect to different developmental domains. *Chapter 5* focuses on foster children's psychosocial development. Foster children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors and foster parents' stress will be examined in a transactional framework. *Chapter 6* focuses on foster children's academic development. Predictors of school engagement are examined through multilevel modeling. The last empirical chapter in this dissertation, *Chapter 7*, uses the data of the third wave and attempts to bridge the gap between the information from previous chapters and foster care practice. The topic of screening and monitoring in foster care is an important one, and Chapter 7 aims to take a step toward improved screening and monitoring of foster children by reporting the psychometric properties of an existing measure (Tarren-Sweeney, 2013b) for signaling psychosocial difficulties of children and adolescents in foster care. This chapter reports the results of a study on the psychometric properties of the Brief Assessment Checklist (BAC) for children and adolescents and establishes whether the BAC measures are a valid means to screen and monitor for the quality of psychosocial functioning of Dutch foster children. *Chapter 8* is the general discussion in which the results of the preceding chapters are summarized and critically reflected upon. In addition, the limitations of the studies reported in this dissertation will be discussed and directions for future research will be given.

General Introduction



