

Caring for infants in foster care

A scoping review of literature

April 2017



Project Overview

- Infants are a key population of children in foster care. They also have the *greatest capacity* for overcoming early adversities. Intervention during the early years holds significant potential for promoting positive developmental pathways and family preservation.
- Limited evidence is available about the development of programs related to the education and support of foster care providers who care for infants with prenatal substance-exposure and their families, despite the number of infants requiring this specialized foster care.
- In this *scoping review project* we examined literature from peer reviewed journals and web-based policy documents that have been published in the past ten years.

Research Approach

Overall research question: What are the characteristics of interventions and programs that support the health and development of infants with prenatal substance exposure in foster care?

Specific areas of the literature to explore include:

1. What *care strategies* support optimal physical, cognitive and social-emotional development for infants who have a history of prenatal drug and/or alcohol exposure?
2. What infant foster care program components improve the *satisfaction and retention of foster families*?
3. How can foster families *support birth parents* with substance use challenges to stay connected to their infants and gain confidence in their parenting role?

Research approach:

- Rapid scoping review (Joanna Briggs Institute methodology)
- Literature inclusion criteria: 2006 to 2016, English language, full text, both academic literature and key policy documents from child welfare websites.

The Search for Literature

Databases:

- CINAHL, PsychInfo, MEDLINE
- Grey literature – government/non-profit websites related to child welfare, health and early childhood

Key search terms:

- Infant, foster care, prenatal substance exposure (and various forms and combinations of these terms)

Gathering the relevant literature:

- 156 references found in database searches
- 37 duplicates removed
- 48 excluded for not meeting inclusion criteria
- 18 found by searching reference lists and grey literature
- Final number of sources = 63

Data extraction:

- Details were extracted from all of the sources related to: source type, location, methods, area of focus, primary aim, sample, key findings, recommendations

Looking for themes:

- 4 key themes identified
- Narrative and visual map developed



UVIC Research Team:

Dr. Lenora Marcellus, Principal investigator
 Dr. Karen MacKinnon
 Lindsay Shaw, Research assistant
 Carol Gordon, Librarian

Project Advisory Group:

Sheila Best, MCFD
 Anne Clayton, MCFD
 Rachel Douthwaite, Vancouver Coastal Health Authority
 Anne Fuller, MCFD
 Annette Harding, MCFD
 Tracey Hulten, MCFD
 Dan Malone, Vancouver Island Foster Parent Support Services Society

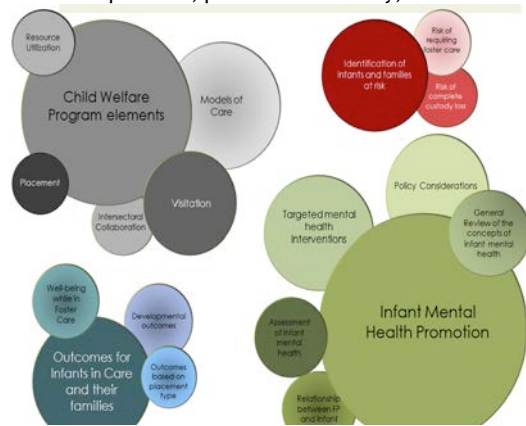
Key findings:

Characteristics of the literature included:

- Most sources were from the US (42)
- Over half were primary research articles (35)

4 key themes were identified:

- Infant mental health promotion – review, assessment, relationship, interventions, policy
- Child welfare program elements – visitation, placement, models of care, resource use
- Identification of infants requiring foster care – characteristics, screening tools, models
- Outcomes for infants in care and their families – developmental, placement stability, reunification



Implications for Practice:

- Provide services from a **developmental perspective**. For infants, this means focusing on social-emotional development (attachment, relationships, consistency)
- Collect **data** that can be used to plan programs
- Include birth families, foster care providers, and communities, including Indigenous communities, in **collaborative** planning for services.
- Continued education and **capacity building** for foster care providers
- Collaborative, interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral community based approaches to **supporting families** who are coping with multiple adversities

Implications for Research:

- Research needed in multiple areas including: descriptive and evaluative study of interventions and programs, experiences of families, epidemiology related to trends and patterns
- Research needed from Canadian context, in particular related to Indigenous infants in care.

Next Steps:

- Integrate into Safe Babies curriculum
- Link to Alberta FASD in care literature review (Badry)

For more information on this research please contact:

Dr. Lenora Marcellus, School of Nursing,
 University of Victoria
 lenoram@uvic.ca

Acknowledgements:

Project funding provided by the BC Ministry of Children and Development



University of Victoria