

# RESEARCH MONOGRAPH

## GROUP FOSTER HOME EVALUATION

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DEPARTMENT OF FLORIDA  
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND  
HUMAN SERVICES  
DIVISION OF YOUTH SERVICES

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Evaluation of  
Foster Group Home Program  
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The Foster Group Home (FGH) Program is a growing and important element of the diverse treatment program offered by Florida's Division of Youth Services. The FGH concept involves contracting a series of private homes in communities throughout the state to provide both a family residence and supportive supervision for youths whose families cannot meet this need. The program began with its focus on youths assigned to probation or Aftercare supervision, but has now expanded its scope to include committed youngsters as well. There are currently eleven Group Homes in this new program (the first FGH opened in June, 1972). In fiscal year 1974-75, the number of homes will be increased to thirty-eight, based on the indications of success and the vital need which this program meets for DYS youth.

Each Group Home houses an average of five DYS youths along with the Group Home Parents and their own family. An experienced Field Services counselor is assigned to each facility to serve as a treatment leader and family liaison as well as the representative of the juvenile justice system to the children. The purpose of the Group Homes is to temporarily provide needful young offenders with a warm family "give and take" situation within which they can be helped to establish new, acceptable behavior patterns in school, family, and community life. It is hoped that the adjustment which occurs in the homes will forestall further involvement with the juvenile justice system thereafter for the majority. The following paper is a report on the first evaluative study of this program.

Highlights of the Evaluation

The evaluation data presented in this paper indicates, overall, a very positive picture of the adjustment of children while in the Foster Group Homes. They tend to feel very positively about their placement and to improve in both attitudes and behavior. Academic performance is often better, behavior problems are reduced by more than half, and relationships with others go more smoothly. These positive experiences are reflected in heightened self-esteem.

The analysis of follow-up data on the twenty-five children who have been released from the Group Homes presents a less positive image. A third of this group was revoked from the FGH's, which indicates an immediate problem. These children tended to be difficult while in the home, and after leaving many remained entangled in the legal system. Of the non-revoked releases, 60% were still legal wards and only 7 youths could be considered "successes". Consideration of their traits and behavior would indicate that in order to be a successful releasee, a child should have stayed in the Group Home four months or more, ceased all acting out, improved his academic performance, gotten involved in extracurricular activities, and have a positive attitude toward both the FGH and his own parents. These traits, however, were more likely among children who had committed fewer offenses prior to entry in the FGH, and who had more actively concerned, caring parents. Thus many children would seem to have the probabilities stacked against them from the time they are first placed in the Group Homes.

It is important to realize the magnitude of the impact of the parental factor. It would be unrealistic to assume that a two month stay in even the best of family situations and treatment circumstances could undo all the psychological and behavior patterning set by the home environment.

Recommendations

In order to try to maximize the effect that the Group Homes can have, several recommendations will be made from the results of this study.

1. It seems that the average length of stay should be increased. The current average for all releasees was 2.6 months; twice this time would seem a more reasonable average, if the (largely indirect) effects of the overall situation are to have time to have an impact. The creation of trust is necessary in order for the child to utilize the support provided by the general FGH atmosphere in bringing about his psychological and behavioral changes. The length of this process will vary greatly, but by and large several months will probably be required. Future research can attempt to specify the optimal stay for children with varying characteristics.
2. A more active program of working with parents should be pursued. Parents should be encouraged to visit frequently. One factor, which is basic to the problems which cause a child to be placed in a Foster Group Home, and which seems to reduce the chances of his doing well when released, is that of his parents'

attitude and relationship to him. Most parents are concerned about their children, but many lack the ability to translate this concern into the kind of training and discipline which would direct the child into more acceptable behavior patterns. The importance of counseling parents should be emphasized, in order to help them learn to express their concern in more reasonable and useful ways. These efforts should assist toward building a relationship and a home situation to which the child can return comfortably.

3. An intensive follow-up program of some type to help children through the transition period immediately following their release seems to be needed. The high number of re-involvements with the legal system within a very short period of time might be reduced if these children and their families continued to receive counseling and guidance. Volunteer friends could perhaps be assigned to the furloughed children to provide a stable, concerned adult relationship. These volunteers would be a source of encouragement and help on schoolwork as well as personal adjustment problems. This relationship should help make the shift from the supportive family atmosphere of the Group Home back into the often-still-troubled home environment more smooth.

4. It is recommended that careful notice be taken of which homes have revocations, and what the reasons for these revocations are. An effort should be made to determine whether the problems have their source in the way the Group Home is structured or run,

in the personality or approach of the Group Home Parents or Counselor, or perhaps in a lack of sufficient training in ways of dealing with the problems of the youths.

Location of the difficulties is the first step toward overcoming them and thus improving the service to youth as well as the success record of the FGH's. The analyses should be viewed not as reprimands, but as constructive assistance in bettering the Group Home situations. For instance, if personality conflicts between Group Home Parents and the youths should prove to be a frequent problem, some system of interveiwis or trial placements might be experimented with to avoid this source of dissension.

It is quite possible that some of the revocations and other post-FGH adjustment difficulties are due to the fact that many of the Group Homes were recently opened. Start-up problems are to be expected in any operation, since it is impossible to anticipate and be prepared for all contingencies. New Group Home Parents who are just learning to cope with their expanded "family" and its unique characteristics and problems may often experience a rough adjustment period, even though they are basically well suited and trained for their responsibilities. More thorough briefing as to what to expect might help alleviate some of these problems.

5. The adequacy of the training received by Group Home Parents represents a whole facet of the FGH program which this evaluation did not explore. Future research should certainly consider this. This is one point at which DYS can exercise considerable control over input into the FGH system. The opportunity should be fully

utilized in order to maximize the ability to deal appropriately with FGH youth and thereby improve the success rate of the youngsters and the program.

6. Another factor to be considered in future evaluations of the Foster Group Home Program will be that of investigating the professional treatment provided for the youths by their Field Services Counselors. Experience in various States has shown that the more the counselor builds up the Group Home Parents, the more successful the home will be and the less the recidivism.

The amount of time spent in various types of counseling, group work, and contacts in behalf of the child should be surveyed. Also of interest would be the counselor's evaluation of the intensity and effectiveness of that work at different points during the treatment. Hopefully we can begin to develop criteria for release decisions.

The Foster Group Home Program has much to recommend it. It fills a great need for homes and relationships which many youngsters would otherwise fail to have. It provides the setting for many adjustments and improvements of behavior and attitude. Its "faults" seem to be more a matter of too little help coming somewhat late rather than any basic flaw in concept. We believe that with a longer period of time to work with the children in the FGH, more experience and supportive help for FGH Parents, and more emphasis on improving the own-home environment to which the children must return, this excellent program can become even better.

### The Evaluation Design

The information for this study was collected, beginning in May, 1973, by means of questionnaires mailed to DYS Counselors who had FGH children as a part of their caseload. The Counselors were required to report on the behavior and problems of the children before, during, and after placement in the Group Home. All of the data were supplied by the Counselors.

The data include records of offenses, reports on school performance, both academic and behavioral, attitudinal information as to how the children and their parents seem to feel about the FGH placement, as well as a follow-up study of those children who have terminated their FGH stay.

Seventy-one children had been placed in the Group Homes as of May, 1973 and twenty-five children had been terminated. The study is a complete population survey, including information on all of these wards.

### The Study Population

The children housed in the FGH's range in age from 9 to 18; the average age is 14. Of these youths, 49% are female, 51% are male; 41% are black, 59% are white. Eighty-six percent of the children are in school, most of them between the 7th and 10th grades.

The children averaged 4.02 referrals to DYS (with a range from 0-13) prior to placement in the Group Home. Approximately half of all referrals were for Children In Need of Supervision offenses - runaway, curfew violations, truancy, ungovernable behavior. The

sources of referral to the FGH are as follows: probation, 67%, parole from training schools or group treatment facilities, 29%, detention, 3%, and other temporary placement, 1%.

#### School Problems

Counselors were asked to consider a list of four school related problems and indicate for each child whether he had ever had this problem, and if so whether it had occurred before coming to the FGH, since placement, or both times. Table 1 shows a substantial decline in the number of children who exhibited each problem after placement in the Group Homes. The incidence of each problem had been cut by more than two-thirds. This is a strong indication that the experience in the FGH stimulated and reinforced more positive behavior.

TABLE I Percentage of FGH Children Who Had School Problems

School Problem	Percent Who had this problem before FGH	Percent Who continue problem while in FGH
1. Truant	75%	17%
2. Unruly in Classroom (including abusive language or actions)	49%	15%
3. Suspended	54%	12%
4. Low interest or motivation for schoolwork	73%	26%

The CHI square tests for correlated proportions show all differences significant at the .001 level. The  $\chi^2$  values for the four behaviors were 38.02, 19.36, 27.27 and 26.80 respectively.

#### Academic Progress and Extracurricular Involvement

Children who are placed in FGH's are often weak in academic skills and performance. Thirty percent have failed a grade (most often between the 7th and 10th grades); 6% have failed more than once. A review of school grades earned prior to FGH placement revealed that 25% of the children were known to be failing in school and another 17% were consistently below average (i.e., made D's or lower). Many of the children in the study had not been in the Group Home long enough to get grades. Where grades were available, there were no failing grades listed since FGH placement, and only 11% were still making consistently poor grades. Thus, many children were performing better in school since coming to the FGH, probably due to reduced truancy as well as improved motivation.

Counselors were asked to indicate their judgement of an "overall academic rating" of each child at the time of admission to the FGH, and, for those who had terminated their stay, at the time of release also. In order to present this comparative perspective, Table 2 shows the results only for those 20 children who have been released from the Group Home and who were in school during their stay. The trend is clearly in the direction of improved performance.

TABLE II Counselor's Overall Academic Rating of FGH Children at Time of Admission and Release

Time	Below Average	Average	Above Average
At Admission	80%	20%	0%
At Release	55%	30%	15%

(N = 20)

One important aspect of the FGH program is to get the children involved in appropriate activities and organizations within the school and community, in order to direct their interests and utilize their time in socially acceptable ways. Prior to Group Home placement, these children had an extremely limited involvement in such activities: only 3 of 71 were members of school organizations, 2 were members of other organizations and 7 listed some other extra-curricular activity (athletics, church, scouts). Since entering the Group Home, 62% have begun to participate in some extracurricular activity. Church attendance is the most frequently mentioned, with 34% of the children attending.

#### Behavior Problems

Counselors were asked to indicate which, from a list of nine, were problem behaviors engaged in by FGH children either before placement, since placement\*, or at both times. Table 3 gives three percentages relative to each problem. The first (A) indicates what proportion of the total population of children have ever engaged in that behavior. The B and C figures total to A, and show first (B) the percent whose behavior is still a problem on that item, and secondly (C), the percent whose behavior on that item has improved and is no longer a problem. The gains are impressive. In the case of most behaviors except drug-use, more than half of the children had ceased to have a problem with that behavior.

\*Very few new behavior problems emerged once the child was placed in the Group Home. Three children who had not previously been runaways ran from the Group Home. This was the only item which showed more than one child 'starting' a new type of behavior problem.

TABLE III

#### PERCENTAGE OF FGH CHILDREN WHO ENGAGED IN PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

Problem Behavior	(A)	(B)	(C)
	Percent for whom this was ever a problem	Percent who still have problem (i.e. before & since FGH)	Percent who had problem but not since FGH
1) Runaway	63%	23%	37%*
2) Abusive use of alcohol	16	--	16
3) Abusive use of drugs	28	14	14
4) Freq. abusive language	44	19	25
5) Abusive actions towards others	48	27*	20*
6) Freq. resistance of authority	65	20	45
7) Tells lies	69	31*	37*
8) Destructive of property	31	13	18
9) Listless, disinterested, uninvolved in activities at home or school	69	27	41

\*The difference between the two asterisked figures and the total equals the percentage of children who have engaged in that problem behavior only since coming to the FGH

The Chi square tests for correlated proportions show all differences are statistically significant. The  $\chi^2$  values were: 16.68, 9.09\*, 8.10\*, 16.05, 14.45, 30.03, 21.33, 11.07, and 24.30. The two starred figures were significant at  $p=.01$ ; the remaining seven differences were significant at the .0001 level.

As a separate measure of behavior problems, counselors were asked to judge whether there had been improvement in the children's interpersonal relationships during the time they had been in the Group Home. In terms of relationships with other children in the Group Home, 64% were reported to be getting along better, 5% showed no change, and only 6% got along worse; the question was judged irrelevant to the remaining 25%, for whom such relationships had never been a problem. Counselors were also asked how the children got along with their Group Home Parents; for 43% this relationship was never problematic, for 48% it improved, 6% showed no change, and 3% of the relationships deteriorated somewhat. Cooperation with FGH rules and responsibility assignments was judged to have improved for 67% of the children, remained the same for 9%, declined for 9%, and been non-problematic for 15%. A reflection of these improvements in interpersonal relations shows up in improved self-concept. Asked to evaluate how each child thought of himself since coming to the FGH, the counselors indicated there were no negative changes, a quarter were stable and fully two-thirds improved their self-concept. Only 5% of the children were seen as having no problems with low self esteem. Improvement in this negative view of oneself is a basic first step toward improving behavior. One must believe he is capable of doing well in order to be motivated to try, hence a feeling of self-worth is crucial to start this process.

#### Parents

Seventy-five percent of the children's parents were judged by the counselors to be quite positive toward the placement of their child

in the FGH, feeling that it would be helpful for him. Five percent, however, seemed to take a positive view of the placement simply because they wanted the child out of the home: 9% were totally unconcerned. No strong negative attitudes towards FGH placement were revealed by the survey. Despite this seemingly positive view, however, nearly half of the children were never visited by their parents or guardian, and slightly more than half of the parents never attended a Parents' Meeting.

As counselors viewed the parent-child relationship of those who did visit, the overall impression they conveyed was one of parents who were concerned about their children but weak in translating this concern into a reasonable, supportive system of expectations and norms. They rated 65% of the visiting parents as being at least somewhat affectionate toward their child, 73% as expressing acceptance of the child despite his problems, and 86% as expressing concern for the child and his problems. Only 28%, however, were thought to "express reasonable authority and use firm but not repressive discipline". The poor discipline and training given by parents and a lack of strong parent-child relationships is seen as an important variable in producing children who exhibit behavior problems. As will be noted in the follow-up data, it is also crucial in determining whether a child can successfully move away from a delinquent career with the assistance of a FGH.

#### Child's Attitudes

A majority (57%) of the children placed in the Foster Group Homes seemed to the counselors to be quite happy to be assigned there.



Another third expressed some negative feelings about their placement, ranging from a general apprehension (16%) to extreme displeasure (13%). Attitudes tended to become more positive after the child had been in the Group Home a while: 61% were seen as becoming more positive over time during their stay. Childrens' feelings about their placement were related to their parents' attitudes, but this relationship was a complex one. The child was positive about the Group Home 1) if his parents were positive, or 2) if his parents were totally out of the picture and not even consulted. In the latter case it is likely that the child was favorable to Group Home placement because he had no choice of another home.

Of those 38 children whose parents visited them at the Group Home (33 children's parents never visited) a majority reacted very positively to these visits. Nearly a third, however, were negative to parental visits; an indication of the tense parent-child relationships that make FGH's essential. The remaining children were either ambivalent about the visits or else felt positively about one parent but disliked visits by the other.

#### Follow-up Data

Twenty-five of the youths who have resided in Foster Group Homes have terminated their stays. Follow-up data on these children was collected in an attempt to determine whether and how they benefitted by their FGH experience.

Eight of the children who have left were revoked from the Group Home. Of these revocations, 4 children were removed for running away, two because of conflicts with the Group Home Parents or other residents.

and one was arrested for petit larceny. No information was provided on the remaining cases. The average length of stay in the FGH prior to revocation was 2.05 months.

The data reveals that the eight revocations came from only four Group Homes: there were two each from Broward and Ft. Walton Beach, three from Gainesville, and one from Jacksonville. Although this clustering may be purely chance, in that more difficult cases may have been assigned to these homes, multiple revocations would seem to warrant a close look at their operations. In the Gainesville home, for instance, two of the revocations were because of interpersonal conflicts and the third was a runaway. This could indicate a need for counseling or perhaps more training for the staff members to assist them in handling problem children.

Questionnaires from the revoked children were considered as a group, in order to try to draw out information which might be pertinent to explaining their difficulties in adjusting to the Group Home. Six of the children were probationers, and the other two had been in Group Treatment facilities. Their behavior problems prior to placement in the FGH ran the gamut: runaway, disruptive use of alcohol and drugs, abusive language and actions, resistance of authority, lying, lack of interest/involvement in school and home activities. In the case of all but one child, there were multiple behavior problems. In all but two cases there continued to be problems with one or more of these behaviors while the child was in the FGH.

There was generally thought to be some improvement in the ability

to get along with others while in the home. Attitudes of the children toward their Group Home assignment, however, tended to deteriorate, from a unanimously positive approach upon placement to 5 of the 8 becoming fairly negative prior to their revocation.

The parents of the revoked children tended to be little concerned about their offspring. In five cases the parents never visited the child in the FGH and another one visited only once. This indication of poor parent-child relationships must be viewed as a continuation of the difficulties out of which the child's legal entanglements arose, as well as the original reason for foster home placement. It is unlikely that it represents a new source of problem behavior.

The fate of the revoked children after leaving the FGH does not present an especially hopeful picture. One child is incarcerated, one is on parole, one on probation, and one in a local residential program. One is in the Job Corps, and one is neither working nor in school, though not currently a correctional ward. There were two youths whose location and status was unknown to the reporting counselors.

The seventeen non-revoked cases, who were furloughed from the Group Home on the decision of their DYS counselor, provide us with our main measure of how successfully FGH children can adjust when returned to their own home and community. The average length of stay for this group as a whole was 2.7 months. Most of the children had been out of the Group Home six months or less when we collected our follow-up data. In that brief time 5 had been incarcerated, 5 were on probation, and only 7 were in school and not involved with the juvenile

justice system. If we consider the in-school population our "successful" FGH graduates, what differentiates them from the less successful furloughs?

There was no substantial difference between the two groups in the ratio of CINS to delinquency cases, but there was an average of 5.6 referrals per child for the unsuccessful cases, compared to only 1.7 referrals for the successful children. Both groups displayed a wide range of behavior problems prior to entry into the FGH. Only two of the ten unsuccessful children had ceased all of these behaviors while in the Group Home. On the other hand only one of the seven successes still engaged in any of these acts and then only to occasionally resist authority or act disinterested in school or home activities.

The continuation of these behavioral problems in the Group Home could perhaps have been predicted by the more frequent problems (as indicated by referrals) prior to FGH entry. Still, one conclusion suggested by the major behavioral difference between the two groups is that possibly the decision to release the unsuccessful children was ill-advised or premature. The data do not enable us to determine whether these children would have adjusted better had they stayed in the FGH a few months longer (until they ceased their acting out behavior), or whether their behavioral patterns were already set in problematic ways so that they would continue to get in trouble whether in or out of the Group Home. Still, a less-than-three month average stay does not seem to give the FGH situation long to work on the problems.

The data from this study show that longer stays are correlated with a better adjustment after leaving the Group Home. The successful cases averaged a 4.01 month stay, compared to only 2.09 months for the unsuccessful children. Since this time factor does seem to have a positive impact, and it is one element of the situation that DYS can easily control, it would appear wise to move toward a somewhat longer average stay, rather than urging early releases. Future evaluations should be able to compare the relative benefits of four-, five-, and six-month stays for long term adjustment outside the Group Home.

In terms of academic performance, the unsuccessful group contained 7 children who were rated below average at both admission and release. One child did average work throughout and the other two were not in school. In the successful group, four children improved their performance from admission to release (two went from below-average to average, one from average to above-average, and one from below-average to above-average). The remaining three did consistently average work.

Children who adjusted successfully outside the FGH were more likely to have gotten involved in some extracurricular activity while in the Home. Only two of the successful cases did not take part in some church, school, or community activity, whereas seven of the ten unsuccessful cases were uninvolved. These activities are viewed as important because they expand the child's interests and involve his time in socially approved events. They thus provide more possibilities for positive reinforcement of behavior and favorable peer contacts.

An attitudinal difference between the two groups was evident. All seven of the successful children were seen by the counselors as feeling very positively about their placement in the FGH. Only four of the ten less successful cases were consistently positive; the others tended to become more negative and resentful during their stay or to indicate unhappiness by running away.

Information on parental attitudes and parent-child relationships appears to be our most powerful explanatory data in terms of analyzing the sociological causes of differential success for the two groups of children. The children who are now in school and not in trouble with the juvenile justice system are distinguished by having parents who are highly concerned about them. Their parents tended to be very positive to the child's placement in the FGH because they thought it could help him. They were very likely to visit frequently (five of seven visited weekly). The children who are now on probation or incarcerated by and large either had parents or a guardian who indicated very little concern for them. There were no visits by the parents of eight of these ten children. The difference between the kinds of home life and parent-child relationships this information reflects for the two groups of children is probably a crucial aspect of the differential success rates.

**END**