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Caring for foster infants: A scoping review of literature

What you need to know:

Some children in foster care are infants. The experience of foster care for infants is known as a risk factor for development. Infants also have the greatest capacity for overcoming early challenges.

What is this research about?

Infants are a key group of children in foster care. The experience of foster care itself for infants is known as a risk factor for development. They also have the greatest capacity for overcoming early challenges. Intervention during the early years can promote positive development and keep families together.

The BC Safe Babies Program foster parent training program, launched in 1996, delivers evidence-informed training that addresses knowledge, skills and attitudes that are required by foster care providers to provide optimal care to infants with prenatal substance exposure and their families. The program was last updated in 2009, and a third revision is being planned. This review provides a start for this revision.

This review found and described literature on the characteristics of programs that support the health and development of infants with prenatal substance exposure in foster care, foster care providers, and birth families.

The project advisory group included members from the BC [Ministry of Children and Family Development](#) (MCFD), [Vancouver Coastal Health Authority](#) and the Vancouver Island [Foster Parent Support Services Society](#) (FPSSS).

What did the researchers do?

The researchers performed a scoping review exploring the aspects of programs that support the health and development of infants with prenatal substance exposure in foster care. They examined literature from peer reviewed journals and policy documents published between 2006 and 2016.

The researchers used CINAHL, PsychInfo, and MEDLINE databases, and searched government and non-profit websites related to child welfare, health and early childhood. The researchers summarized the information, key themes and implications for practice and research.



UVic researchers scoured best practices to shine a light on helping babies with prenatal substance exposure through foster care (Photo credit: Markus Distelrath from [Pixabay](#)).



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What did the researchers find?

This review included 63 sources published in English. Characteristics of the literature included:

- location: USA (41), Canada (12), Australia (3), UK (2), Netherlands (2), and Finland (1)
- over half were primary research articles (35)

By categorizing each source, researchers found four key themes:

1. Infant mental health promotion
2. Child welfare program elements
3. Identification of infants requiring foster care
4. Outcomes for infants in care and their families

Recommendations for practice:

- Provide services from a developmental perspective. For infants, this means focusing on relationship stability and quality.
- Collect data that can be used to plan programs
- Include birth families, foster care providers, and communities, including Indigenous communities, in service planning
- Continue education and capacity building for foster care providers
- Collaborate and include community members with diverse knowledge to support families who are coping with difficulties

Recommendations for research:

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

How can you use this research?

This research will help practitioners, policymakers and other stakeholders integrate proven early intervention strategies into programs that support health and development for infants with prenatal

substance exposure in foster care, foster care providers, and birth families.

About the researchers

Lenora Marcellus, Principal Investigator, and Karen MacKinnon are Associate Professors in the UVic [School of Nursing](#). Lindsay Shaw, Research Assistant, recently completed a Master of Science in the UVic Social Dimensions of Health Program. Dr. Carol Gordon is a librarian with UVic Libraries.

Facilitated by UVic [Research Partnerships and Knowledge Mobilization](#), this research is a partnership between MCFD and UVic. This project was prepared on behalf of MCFD.

Keywords

Infant; Foster care; Out-of-home care; Substance exposure; Program evaluation; Intervention; Program; Evidence-based practice; Best practices.

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