Doctors Urged to Join Anti-Bullying Efforts

BY MELINDA TANZOLA Contributing Writer

PHILADELPHIA — A study assessing the impact of institutional living on Romanian children shows that foster care is effective at reversing some developmental delays, as well as decreasing rates of depression and anxiety. Charles A. Nelson III, Ph.D., said at the annual meeting of the Society for Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics.

In the 1960s, children abandoned became a national problem in Romania after the communist party instituted policies to increase population as a way to increase national production. Taxes were levied on families with fewer than five children, and the government outlawed contraception and abortion. Families unable to afford to care for their children were encouraged to turn them over to the state to be raised in government-run institutions. In the early 1990s, these institutions came under close scrutiny, revealing that children raised there were at increased risk for social and behavioral abnormalities.

These developmental problems probably result from deprivation inherent in the institutional system, said Dr. Nelson, director of research in the developmental medicine center at Children’s Hospital in Boston. Dr. Nelson and his colleagues wanted to look at whether removing these children from an institutional environment would improve social and behavioral problems.

In the mid-1990s, a program called the Bucharest Early Intervention Project, the researchers randomized 136 children between 6 and 31 months of age who had been institutionalized to remain in the institution or to move to foster care.

After a baseline assessment, 68 children were assigned to remain at their institutions and 68 were removed and placed in foster care. A control group of 72 children who had never been institutionalized was matched for age and gender. Because of dropouts and changes in status, only 17 children remained in the foster care system, and 46 never institutionalized children are still in the study.

The children were assessed at baseline, 9 months, 18 months, 36 months, 42 months, and most recently at 54 months of age. The researchers plan to assess the children again when they are 7-8 years old.

At the time of the study, Romania did not have a foster care system, so the researchers had to build a foster care program from scratch. To participate, the families could only accept one child in the home, and the provider had to stay home with the child. Foster families receive a stipend and have constant access to a pediatrician, but they are not allowed to put the children in day care full time. The children placed in foster care also have regular contact with project social workers, Dr. Nelson said.

He and his colleagues found that children placed in foster care were less likely to have an emotional disorder than were children who were institutionalized, but no significant differences were found between the prevalence of behavioral disorders between the two groups.

But when it came to emotional disorders such as depression and anxiety, foster care seemed to be making a difference, Dr. Nelson said. The children placed in foster care had 8.5% in the institutionalized children, compared with 3% among children in foster care. The prevalence of anxiety disorders in the institutionalized group was 44% when the children were 54 months old, compared with 20% among foster care children at the same age.

Foster Care Intervention May Lower Depression, Anxiety

BY MARY ELLEN SCHneider New York bureau

In this study of 15,686 children surveyed, those who reported being bullied weekly at school were about four times more likely to carry a weapon or bring a weapon to school (Arch. Pediatr. Adolesc. Med. 2003;157:348-53). The effects of bullying increased with the frequency of bullying. In this study of 15,686 children surveyed, those who reported being bullied weekly at school were about four times more likely to carry a weapon or bring a weapon to school (Arch. Pediatr. Adolesc. Med. 2003;157:348-53). The effects of bullying increased with the frequency of bullying.

These children were six times more likely than others to carry a weapon and five times more likely to bring a weapon to school. Bullying behaviors differ between the sexes. Studies show that boys are more likely to carry out direct or physical bullying (pushing, slapping, punching, spitting, or tripping), and girls are more likely to carry out indirect bullying (threats, teasing, rumors, stealing or extortion, or shunning). But Dr. Wright pointed out the disturbing trend that girls are now engaging in more physical bullying.

Being bullied carries long-term risks. According to a study of 4,811 children in the Netherlands, bullied children are more likely to have depression and suicidal ideation, and this association is stronger for indirect rather than direct bullying (Pediatrics 2003;111:1312-17).

Among girls, frequent direct bullying increased the risk of depression and suicidal ideation by 3.3-fold and 2.6-fold, respectively, while frequent indirect bullying reduced the risk by 8.9-fold and 1.6-fold, respectively.

Overall, 43% of all frequently bullied girls reported depression, compared with 6% of girls who were almost never directly bullied.

The effects of direct bullying on boys were not significant after controlling for confounding factors, although frequent indirect bullying in boys increased the risk of depression by 11-fold and the risk of suicidal ideation by 5.6-fold.

Dr. Wright urged physicians to engage with families of young children to help prevent the later development of bullying behavior.