

Social support and Young People's Psychological Functioning in Out-of-home Care

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Framework of the symposium

Decades of research proposes that positive, warm, and secure relationships are particularly protective for children and young people at risk and who are involved in the child protection system. Children and adolescents in out-of-home care have increased risk factors that may undermine their development, highlighting the need to uphold meaningful, protective, and supportive relationships. Entering in care is an impactful event that involves the separation of young people from their biological family as well as the need to adapt to a new developmental context (i.e., foster family or residential care setting). This transition might be helped by supportive relationships, which in turn may positively impact young people's psychological well-being. Having social support is even more important in the face of more stress and vulnerability, which is the case of young people while they are living in care, but also when they left this context.

This symposium is aligned with the thematic area of "Support regarding stakeholders", focusing on children and adolescents in care and includes 4 communications. These communications are focused on the role of different sources of social support in the

psychological functioning of children and young people in residential care. Given that in the Portuguese and Israeli contexts young people are placed more in residential care than in foster care, we will focus on studies including samples in residential care. However, we will discuss these findings bearing in mind the implications for the practice in the out-of-home care system in general, but also considering young people's needs in foster care.

The first two communications focus on the identification of different sources of social support and their effects on individual functioning, in two countries: Israel and Portugal. The following two communications focus on testing two specific models: a mediating model and another testing the moderating role of social support in the relationship between contextual and/or social dimensions (i.e., social images and organizational climate) and psychological functioning (i.e., psychopathology and self-representations).

1. Social Support by nuclear and extended family, peers and staff, of youth in residential care: Evidence from Israel

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Presentation	Shalhevet Attar-Schwartz, Adena-Hoffnung-Assouline

Objectives: Social support is a crucial factor promoting adolescents' resilience and is particularly important for vulnerable children, such as those living in residential care, far away from their families. Existing research often focuses mainly on their relationship with their parents (specifically, the mothers), while ignoring or downsizing the relationship with other possible sources of support. This communication presents a series of findings on social support of Israeli youth in residential care settings (RCS), supervised by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Security. Those studies, based mainly on the perspectives of the youth themselves, aim to map the perceived social support of youth in RCS from their parents, siblings, grandparents, peers and residential care staff and their overall level of perceived social

support sufficiency, taking into account various characteristics of the children and their families as well as contextual factors. In addition, we will review the study's findings on the relationship between social support and the youth's well-being and functioning.

Method: The findings are based on a quantitative large-scale study, based on a random cluster sampling including 1,400 adolescents (aged 14 to 21) from 16 RCSs for youth from underprivileged backgrounds. The analyses conducted include moderating models (by PROCESS) examining under which circumstances social support is more beneficial for youth in residential care.

Results: The findings show that while the mother is the greatest source of support for the children, the order for support levels from other sources varies according to the children's characteristics, such as, family type and gender (Pinchover & Attar-Schwartz, 2018). Grandparent, sibling, staff and parental support are all linked to better psychosocial functioning and life satisfaction among youth in residential care (Attar-Schwartz, 2019; Attar-Schwartz & Huri, 2019; Hoffnung-Assouline & Attar-Schwartz, 2020; Fridman-Teutsch & Attar-Schwartz, 2019; Attar-Schwartz & Fridman-Teutsch, 2018; Shalem & Attar-Schwartz, Under Review).

Takeaway points for the audience: There are certain circumstances under which supportive relationships are more beneficial. For example, among youth who stayed longer at the residential care setting, the relationship between staff support and fewer adjustment difficulties was stronger (Hoffnung-Assouline & Attar-Schwartz, 2020). In addition, among youth who reported on better perceived attitudes of the RCS staff towards their parents, the relationship between child attachment to parent and adolescent well-being was stronger (Shalem & Attar-Schwartz, Under Review). Such findings have implications for intervention programs enhancing support for children and youth in residential care.

2. Social support and young people's development outcomes in the Portuguese context: a review of empirical studies in residential care

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Presentation	Eunice Magalhães

Objectives: Social support has been described as a protective factor of child development. Exploring the role of social support on developmental outcomes of young people in residential care is even more critical. These young people must deal with a set of cumulative risk factors through their developmental trajectory (e.g., family separation, placement disruptions) (Bravo & Del Valle, 2003) and for that reason, supportive and secure relationships in care are even more important. Moreover, the Portuguese out-of-home care system is mainly based on residential care services, which calls for additional research efforts on how to make this context protective and therapeutic through supportive and warm relationships. The aim of this communication is to describe and discuss findings from a set of studies developed by the authors in the Portuguese context with adolescents in residential care. We will be able to discuss findings about main or moderating effects of social support considering different outcomes: psychopathology and well-being.

Method: the studies that were developed in the Portuguese context focused on social support in residential care will be reviewed regarding the main objectives, methods, and findings.

Results: our studies have provided evidence that greater social support as perceived by adolescents in residential care are associated with more positive outcomes (e.g., well-being) and less psychological difficulties (Ferreira et al., 2020; Magalhães & Calheiros, 2017). Looking at the moderator role of social support, supportive relationships in care may buffer the negative effect of stressful experiences on young people's outcomes (Ferreira et al., 2020; Magalhães et al., 2018; 2021). Also, some evidence was found

about the enhancer effect of social support on young people's outcomes, specifically lower psychological difficulties (Magalhães et al., 2021).

Takeaway points for the audience: A set of implications for professional practice in residential care will be identified, considering those different roles of social support in young people's developmental outcomes. Professionals in residential care play a chief role in providing supportive care which is vital to their well-functioning and recovery.

3. Social support as a mechanism explaining the association between organizational social context and youth's psychopathology

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Presentation	Cláudia Camilo

Objectives: Youth in residential care (RC) are a high-risk group for mental health problems, namely externalizing and internalizing problems, compared with those living with their families (e.g., Attar-Schwartz, 2008). This heighten vulnerability may be explained both by pre-care experiences (e.g., maltreatment) (e.g., Rodríguez, del Valle, & Arteaga, 2015) and by contextual factors of the RCS (e.g., multiple placements, repeated breakdowns, turnover of caregivers, other youth with mental health difficulties) (Lehmann, Havik, Havik, & Heiervang, 2013). Specifically, increasing attention is being given to the organizational social climate (OSC) of RC settings as a potential determinant of youth's mental health outcomes (Glisson & Green, 2011). Additionally, there is evidence that more supportive staff are associated with lower levels of adjustment problems among youth in RC (Pinchover & Attar-Schwartz, 2014). This calls for examining more complex relationships between those variables. Grounded on an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) with multiple informants (i.e., youth and staff), the present study fills this gap by testing a mediation model exploring the role

of quality of relationships between care-givers and youth in the relationship between the OSC of the residential facility and youth's psychopathology (i.e., internalizing and externalizing problems).

Method: this study included a sample of 378 youth (163 boys), 12-25 years old, and 54 caregivers (mostly female), 24-57 years old, from 71 RC settings in Portugal. Youth reported on the youth-caregiver relationship quality (i.e., the Support scale of the Network of Relationships Inventory – Social Provisions Version (NRI-SPV); Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) and caregivers reported on OSC (i.e., the Portuguese version of the OSC measurement system; Garrido et al., 2011; Glisson et al., 2008) and youth's internalizing and externalizing problems (i.e., Child Behavior Checklist; CBCL, Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001; Achenbach et al., 2014).

Results: Using multilevel modelling, results showed that higher levels of involvement, stress, and authority hierarchy were associated with higher levels of support the youth-caregiver relationship, which, in turn, was associated with lower levels of youth's externalizing problems.

Takeaway points for the audience: Results support the mediating role of youth-caregiver relationship quality in associations between different OSC dimensions and externalizing problems of youth in RC settings. Findings suggest that improving the OSC of RC settings could be an effective facilitator of higher quality youth-caregiver relationships, and therefore, contribute to prevent mental health difficulties among youth in RC. These findings will be discussed linking them with children and adolescents in foster care.

4. The moderating role of social support in the association between youth's perceptions of their social images and self-representations

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Presentation	Carla Silva

Objectives: Youth in residential care typically struggle to construct a positive identity, due to their complex and often traumatic life histories and to the stigmatization entailed in negative social images reflecting stereotypes held by the overall society about them. According to the symbolic interactionism theory, self-representations develop within individuals' social context, by reference to the self-relevant information available and transmitted in their social interactions with other people in general (i.e., the 'generalized other'). Following this approach, many classic perspectives assumed that individuals in stigmatized groups internalize the negative view of them held by society. Given the lack of research with youth in residential care focused on exploring the role of generalized others on their self-representation construction process, this study aimed to explore 1) the associations between the perceptions that these youth have about their social images (i.e., their perceptions of how other people in general perceive them) and their self-representations, and 2) the moderating role of social support from residential caregivers and friends in those associations, since such support may buffer the effect of negative (and potentiate the effect of positive) perceptions of social images on youth's self-representations.

Method: This study included a sample of 926 youths in residential care, aged between 12 and 25 years old, filled out self-report questionnaires tapping their perceptions of their social images (The questionnaire on youths' perceptions of their social images), self-representations (The Self-representation Questionnaire for Youth in Residential Care), and perceived social support (The Network of Relationships Inventory–Relationship Quality Version).

Results: Positive youths' perceptions of their social images were associated to youth's positive self-representations, and negative youths' perceptions of their social images dimensions were associated to youth's negative self-representation dimensions. Results also indicated that support from the main residential caregiver and friends moderated associations between youth's perceptions of their social images and self-representations, functioning as a protective factor.

Takeaway points for the audience: These findings underline the importance of youth's perceptions of their social images and the support from residential caregivers and friends for youth in residential care. Thus, interventions aimed at fostering the construction of positive self-representations in these youth should include residential caregivers as key agents.