Children’s Perspectives of Their Mental Health Services


This literature review attempted to summarize research examining foster children’s perspectives of child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). Given the dearth of information on this topic, the authors instead reviewed the literature on children’s and youth’s perspectives of mental health services.

Method

Articles were identified through literature, citation and reference searches. During the course of the search, no articles specifically addressing foster children were identified. As a result, the search was broadened to include articles in which any child’s perspectives on CAMHS were examined. Within some of these articles, the voices of children in foster care were included, but were never exclusive. All of the fourteen articles included in the review used qualitative methodology, as the authors believed that this was the only methodological strategy that could portray young persons’ experiences with accuracy and care. Thirty-nine studies were initially identified, but only fourteen met the inclusion criteria of providing a clear sample and “evidence that themes emerged from the data (rather than preconceptions)” (p. 27).

Results

In sum, the studies represented the views of 200 children. Seven of the articles included the perspectives of foster children. Overall, the literature demonstrated that the children participating in these studies were able to provide valuable and insightful information about the mental health services they received. Providing a balance of both positive and negative comments about their experiences with CAMHS helped establish the validity of the children’s responses.

Common themes were identified in the analysis of the articles. One of the most consistent findings across studies was the importance of relationships with individual adults whom they trusted. This finding cut across therapeutic orientation and intervention type. Children also articulated the importance of physical surroundings—cleanliness of environment, quality of play materials—as adding to or taking away from the quality of their care. Another theme noted was that although children generally reported overall outcomes positively, they especially appreciated meaningful involvement in their mental health services. Two of the recurring suggestions for improvement offered by the young participants were to give them more information about their mental health and to value their suggestions as to how to best serve them with respect and consideration.

Although no articles specifically focused on youth in the foster care system, two articles included the perspectives of more “vulnerable” children (i.e., those in the foster care system,
and/or adopted or abused children). These two articles represented the voices of twenty children. Common themes found in these two articles were the importance of non-verbal communication and the tension between wanting to talk to adults, but finding it difficult to do so; and, ambivalence towards professional interventions. Trust was seen by participants as an essential component to resolving these issues. This concept parallels the need for establishing trusting relationships found in the general articles on youth perspectives on their mental health care.

**Discussion & Conclusions**

The review attempted by Davies and Wright demonstrated that very little qualitative research is being conducted on children’s perspectives of their mental health services—and none has been published that focuses specifically on foster youth. Even though there has been a push towards youth-driven care, it appears that this philosophy of focusing on the importance of youth voice is not being carried into formal research on the effectiveness of CAMHS. Perhaps this will change as projects funded under such initiatives as Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families (RFA SM-07-016) get underway and publish results—which will ideally include the perspectives of youth. The little research that is available currently demonstrates that young persons are able to provide a balanced and insightful critique of their mental health services and that they are eager to be involved in their care. Youth also stressed the importance of their relationships with their providers regardless of the type of treatment they received; this may be especially true for foster children who often lack consistent and trusting relationships with adults. The authors note that the themes they identified should be interpreted with caution given the paucity of articles found and the limited number of young persons represented. Another limitation to this review is that it utilized only qualitative research, and therefore research conducted using quantitative methods such as satisfaction surveys is not represented. Future research should continue to address children’s perspectives of their mental health care and focus on different and often overlapping vulnerable populations, such as children in the foster care system and those with experiences in the juvenile justice system.