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What we know

In 2018, the United States Congress passed the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) – the largest child welfare reform in over a decade. The FFPSA provides new funding to states to help prevent children from entering foster care by offering additional services so children can stay safely in their own homes. Although it is traumatic for children to be placed into foster care, children who remain in-home following a Child Protection Services (CPS) investigation may still experience adversities that could harm their physical health and wellbeing. The problem is that we don't know how many adversities, which kinds, or how quickly these adversities accumulate over time for children left in-home. This study tracks the increase in the number of these adversities over a 3-year period of time.

What this study adds

There were 10 adversities measured in this study: physical abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect, psychological abuse, parental domestic violence, parental mental health problems, parental substance or alcohol abuse, parental separation or divorce, and parental incarceration. At each of the 3 years under study, parents of children who remained in-home following a CPS investigation reported how many and what kinds of adversities children experienced the previous year. Findings showed that these children encountered a steady increase in the number of adversities over time; the percentage of children experiencing 4 or more adversities increased from 13% to 63% within three years. Those children who had already accumulated 4 or more adversities at Year 1 added an average of 3 more adversities by Year 3. Children experiencing emotional neglect and psychological abuse accumulated the greatest number of adversities.

What this means for practice or policy

First, children are not only still experiencing adversities, but a growing number of adversities in a short period of time. So FFPSA funding is needed to not only reduce the number of children who are placed into foster care, but also to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children. Second, services need to be funneled to families of children who experience 4 or more adversities due to the amount of trauma they are experiencing, even if the trauma is not enough to require foster care. Third, because emotional neglect and psychological abuse were found to be a gateway for future adversities, screening tools for these two types of maltreatment should be used in child welfare practices to better identify this vulnerable group.

How do we know this is a good study

Data from three waves of the 2010 National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II) were used. NSCAW II sampled 5,873 children aged 0-17.5 from 83 US counties. Children were eligible if they had been the subject of a closed CPS investigation, and only children remaining in-home for all 3 waves following a CPS investigation were studied (n=1,909). ACE accrual over three years was traced as mean scores, discrete events, and compounding risk. OLS regression predicted accrual of ACEs over time controlling for important covariates.