For Children Without Parents, Developmental Risks Abound

For millions of children worldwide, living in orphanages or other institutions where they are deprived of the warmth and attention of caring adults is not a benign experience, a growing body of scientific evidence suggests.

Those studies report that spending as little as six months in an institution where the care is extremely substandard can have a lasting developmental impact on children, including problems forming healthy attachments and deficits in neurological and cognitive abilities and physical growth. The research also suggests that the children who are the most vulnerable tend to be those whose experience in institutions comes early in life.

Such findings have implications for a broad range of nations, including nations where children in institutions are rare, such as the United States. While the studies may focus on institutionalized children, the factor found to most influence whether they experience developmental deficits is common among all nations, affluent or otherwise. “It appears the quality of caregiver-child interactions is the most crucial,” said Robert McCall, Ph.D., codirector of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

Helping Children In Institutions
A Challenge For Many Nations

Research leaves little doubt that children living in orphanages and other institutions around the world are at higher risk of experiencing developmental setbacks that can have a lasting impact on their lives. The evidence is not lost on many of the nations that rely on orphanages to care for children without parents. But for them, it’s not a question of whether they should address the problem or even what can be done to solve it. What they struggle to answer is how to overcome challenges ranging from cultural to financial that stand in the way of implementing what science tells them will help improve the outcomes for millions of children in their orphanages.

“From a practice and policy standpoint, almost everybody agrees that the goal is to provide every child with a safe, loving, committed family. We also have evidence that improving the environment within institutions can improve the outcomes of the children who remain there,” said Christina Groark, Ph.D., codirector of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD). “The issue for many nations is how to get there from where they are now. Developing a system of family alternatives is not an easy task.”

Interest in the development of such children rose after the fall of Romanian strongman Nicholae Ceaucescu revealed the appalling conditions within the institutions where thou-
Vulnerable Kids continued from Page 1

(OCD). “And that can characterize children in all kinds of risk circumstances—from extreme poverty to neglectful and abusive families to homelessness.”

As many as 8 million children live in orphanages, hospitals or other residential institutions throughout the world. Although conditions vary from institution to institution and country to country, the quality of daily care many children receive is often less than sufficient in terms of promoting healthy development.

Several characteristics of institutions can affect the quality of care children receive. Among those most often found are high child-caregiver ratios, large group sizes, many different and changing caregivers, and the way caregivers perform their care-giving duties, which are often described as businesslike, perfunctory, and lacking the level of interaction, sensitivity and warmth a child would be expected to receive in a well-functioning family.

Developmental outcomes are also affected by other factors, including genetics, prenatal conditions, such as a mother’s drug or alcohol use, and low birth weight and other birth complications. Another factor can be children’s experience before they entered an institution, such as whether they were victims of abuse or neglect within their own family.

There is, however, substantial evidence to suggest that children’s experiences while in an institution significantly contribute to higher rates of developmental deficiencies. This evidence includes studies that show children improve in every domain after they leave an institution and are placed in some type of family care. Other studies, including OCD’s work in Russian orphanages, suggest that children’s development profoundly improves when interventions succeed in improving the institutional environment in which they live.

OCD and its international colleagues, with funding from the Society for Research in Child Development and Leiden University, convened 25 of the world’s leading experts on children deprived of permanent parents in a conference held at Leiden University, the Netherlands, in 2009. Publications that emerged from the project detail the developmental issues researchers have found among those children, particularly those who spend time in orphanages or other institutional environments.

Common issues

The past few decades have seen heightened interest in the development of children without permanent parents. Much of the research on developmental issues has involved institutionalized children, their development while in orphanages or institutions, as well as after they are removed from the institutions and placed with adoptive families and, in some cases, in foster care.

“This is an opportune topic. A fundamental question in research on child development is: What are the necessary and sufficient early experiences that children need to develop typically? And the other side of that is avoiding long-term developmental deficiencies.” Dr. McCall said.

“Most of the institutions in the world are not ideal environments for children. This represents a natural circumstance of children not getting what parent-reared children normally get and what the consequences of that are.”

Poor attachment is one of the most profound long-term developmental problems that have been found among some children who have spent time living in orphanages and other institutions around the world. Contributing to the problem is the fact that even in institutions that provide a relatively clean environment and adequate medical care and nutrition, children are exposed to many different caregivers who work rotating shifts and go about their duties in a businesslike manner that lacks the warmth, sensitivity, and attention a parent would be expected to provide—all of which makes forming stable child-caregiver relationships unlikely.

Three studies that assessed the attachment of institutionalized children to a favorite caregiver using the Strange Situation Procedure suggest that, on average, 73 percent of children exhibit insecure disorganized attachment behavior. In one study, OCD researchers and their St. Petersburg colleagues reported that as many as 85 percent of Russian orphanage children showed disorganized attachment behavior. Although interventions improved care and children’s outcomes, including attachment problems, 60 percent of the children were still classified as having attachment disorders.

Children in institutions are also more likely to show indiscriminately friendly behavior than children raised in families, who typically are apprehensive when they meet strangers. In some cases, institutionalized children who are later adopted continue to show indiscriminate friendliness toward strangers, even after they become attached to their adoptive parents.

The inadequate social-emotional and caregiver-child relationship environments often found in orphanages and other institutions around the world can also result in deficiencies in physical growth. Studies have found that institutionalized children tend to be undersized even when they are provided with adequate nutrition and medical care.

Research suggests, however, that their growth tends to improve markedly when they leave the institution, particularly if they are adopted or placed in foster care before they the age of 1 or 2 years. OCD and St. Petersburg researchers also report that the growth of institutionalized children in

Vulnerable Kids continued on Page 10
Children are also more likely to have long-term problems with behavior, executive function, and social skills if they are not able to leave the institution by a certain age. The age at which the “step” occurs varies depending on the severity of the orphanage experience and other factors. But studies suggest that when institutionalized children are adopted before the step occurs they tend to have rates of problems similar to children who have never lived in an institution.

In many countries, a child welfare system, and the professional infrastructure and family support that family alternatives to institutions require, either don’t exist or are underdeveloped. And in many cases, political, administrative, financial, and cultural challenges complicate the process of developing them.

Such factors make it difficult to recruit adoptive or foster parents. In some countries, for example, there is resistance among parents to raise someone else’s child based on religious beliefs, culture, social customs, or other factors. Also, financially strapped families are often less willing to adopt and many nations lack systems for providing them with financial assistance and other support that would encourage them to do so.

Most children in institutions throughout the world have at least one parent. There are many reasons why parents relinquish their children to institutions, including poverty, which plays a major role. Yet, many countries lack preventative interventions, such as basic services, assistance, and early family support programs, that could help reduce the number of families who give up their children to orphanages or other institutions.

Physical or mental disability also increases children’s likelihood of being institutionalized. In Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, for example, children with disabilities are 46 times more likely to end up in an institution than those without disabilities. And in most countries, parents willing to adopt strongly
favor typically functioning children, making it difficult to place institutionalized children with disabilities in alternative family settings.

The lack of professional services infrastructure to train, support, and provide services to families is yet another obstacle many countries face in trying to prevent children from entering orphanages or other institutions.

“One of the necessary components of having a comprehensive child welfare system is that you need a professional infrastructure,” Dr. Groark said. “You need social workers and psychologists who know how to deal with all of the risk factors that cause families in those countries to give up their children. Infrastructure like that isn’t developed overnight.”

There are signs of progress, however. For example, children are now adopted domestically at higher rates than in the past in some countries, such as Brazil and China. And in India, China, and a few other nations, more children who traditionally have been difficult to place are being taken into domestic family care.

Improving institutions
Wholesale child welfare reform takes time. And the inescapable reality is that millions of children remain in orphanages and other institutions throughout the world, even in nations that are making progress toward building a professional child welfare system of family care alternatives.

Ukraine, for example, had the political will to create a child welfare system of family care alternatives and invested considerable resources to build it. After five years, 5,000 children had been placed in foster care. But another 45,000 children remained in orphanages.

There is hope for such children, however. Studies suggest conditions within orphanages and other institutions can be substantially improved, resulting in better developmental outcomes for both typically functioning children and those with disabilities.

In St. Petersburg, Russia, for example, OCD and Russian researchers designed and implemented interventions and structural changes to create an environment of family-like care in Soviet-era orphanages, which for decades had emphasized conformity, discipline, and a business-like, perfunctory approach to care that lacked the warmth and sensitivity that children raised in a typical family would be expected to receive.

Caregivers were trained and encouraged to be more warm, sensitive, and responsive in their interactions with the children. They were taught how to position and interact with children in their care who had disabilities. For the first time, primary caregivers were designated and their schedules adjusted to give children consistency in who was caring for them.

Key structural changes were also made. For example, the groupings of children were made smaller, which enabled caregivers to spend more time with individual children. And the groups included children of different ages, as well as children with disabilities.

Conditions improved significantly and the interventions continue today with local funding. Most importantly, children show substantial improvement across all developmental domains, including sizable increases in their developmental quotients, and improvement in their behavioral development, their engagement with caregivers, and even their physical growth.

“They’ve maintained that intervention on their own budget for six years and it still works,” said OCD Codirector Robert McCall, Ph.D. “The care giving is better by measurement and the children’s development is still better by measurement.”

Free OCD Parenting Columns Well Suited For Newsletters
Dispensing parenting advice, long the domain of grandmothers and other family relations, is drawing more attention from policymakers and others looking for ways to strengthen families and communities—and for good reason. Studies show effective parenting improves a child’s chances of healthy development.

Sound parenting advice on more than 50 topics is now available free of charge in a series columns written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and former columnist for Parents magazine.

The columns, well-suited for newsletters and community newspapers, provide clear, concise and accurate information on topics such as dealing with a child’s lying, how to toilet train, what to do about nightmares, discipline and finicky eaters, and how to recognize and address grief in children.

OCD offers the columns free of charge as Microsoft Word documents. All columns are available on OCD website at: http://www.ocd.pitt.edu/Parenting-Columns/151/Default.aspx

The public service initiative is made possible by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education, whose contributions support production of the columns and other Office of Child Development projects.
Pathways To Homicide: Understanding Young Offenders And Victims

Boys who end up being convicted of homicide do not become killers by accident or as a result of a random set of circumstances. Instead, they follow developmental pathways that lead them to commit the ultimate crime, according to the latest research to emerge from the Pittsburgh Youth Study, which more than two decades ago began following the lives of 1,517 boys who attended Pittsburgh’s public schools.

Moreover, researchers identified certain negative early life experiences shared by the 37 boys who became convicted homicide offenders, which now makes it possible to predict those most likely to commit murder with greater accuracy than ever before. They also found that boys who fell victim to homicide and boys who were arrested on homicide charges, but not convicted, also tended to follow distinctive pathways to such outcomes.

Recent findings of the Pittsburgh Youth Study shed new light on how boys in urban settings become homicide offenders and murder victims, including influential risk factors, such as being raised in a broken home, having a young mother, living in a bad neighborhood, and committing serious delinquent acts at an early age—knowledge that can help determine who is most at risk and how best to intervene to divert them from the path that leads to murder.

The Pittsburgh Youth Study
The Pittsburgh Youth Study began in 1987 as a long-term examination of developmental pathways among at-risk boys and the roots of delinquency. It was one of three such projects started with funding from the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention. The other sites are in Denver, Colo. and Rochester, N.Y.

Each study is a longitudinal investigation involving repeated assessments with the same juveniles and their parents or primary caretakers throughout the boys’ developmental years and beyond. The approach allowed investigators to more accurately determine when a boy first engaged in disruptive behaviors and to examine the possible causes, frequency, severity, and other factors.

In Pittsburgh, investigators began by contacting more than 3,000 randomly selected boys in the Pittsburgh Public Schools who were enrolled in grades 1, 4 and 7. They used a screening assessment of each boy, his primary caretaker, and a teacher to gather retrospective data on the boys’ disruptive and delinquent behaviors. To increase the number of high-risk boys, the 30 percent who were determined to be the most antisocial were included in the study sample and another 30 percent were randomly selected from the remaining group. In all, 1,517 boys ranging in age from 7 to 13 years old were selected across the three grade cohorts to receive follow-up assessments.

More than 57 percent of the youngest and oldest boys in the study were African American, as were 56 percent of the middle-aged boys. The rest were Caucasian. The percentage of boys who had been held back in school ranged from 39.4 percent of the oldest cohort to 26.3 percent of the youngest at the beginning of the study. More than 95 percent of the youngest cohort of boys, 92.2 percent of the middle-aged boys, and 94 percent of the oldest cohort lived with their natural mother. The percentage of boys living in a household that included their natural father ranged from 37.1 percent to 41.5 percent.

Assessments were initially conducted in 6-month intervals. Later, they were done annually. Investigators to date have done an estimated 50,000 assessments, most of which were face-to-face interviews. Archival data from sources such as school and court records were also gathered.

Participation among the boys and their primary caretakers was high, ranging from 84 percent to 86 percent across the three grade cohorts.
Pathways To Violence
The Pittsburgh Youth Study and its sister studies in Denver and Rochester have produced a body of research that contributes substantially to the understanding of delinquent behavior, particularly the onset of delinquency and violence.

One of the most significant findings is that delinquency and violence are the result of a gradual developmental process that occurs over many years. Contrary to popular perceptions that serious criminal offenders are psychopaths who act unpredictably, the Pittsburgh Youth Study found that serious offending in some ways is predictable. Investigators reported that there are developmental pathways—remarkably orderly progressions—that tend to lead young boys to delinquency and violence.

The Pittsburgh Youth Study has presented evidence that there is not one, but three of these developmental pathways. Investigators defined, for example, what they call an Authority Conflict Pathway, which starts with stubborn behavior before age 12, progresses to defiance and then to authority avoidance, such as truancy. A second, Covert Pathway, is a step-by-step progression in which a boy begins with minor covert acts before age 15, moves to property damage, then to moderate delinquency and, finally, to serious delinquency.

A third, Overt Pathway, is particularly relevant to the recent research on young homicide offenders and their victims. Boys who follow this pathway start with acts of minor aggression, progress to gang fighting and physical fighting, then graduate to more severe acts of violence, including murder.

Young Homicide Offenders And Victims
Researchers did not intend to focus specifically on boys who become homicide offenders when the Pittsburgh Youth Study began. They did not, however, anticipate the scope of tragedy they would encounter while following 1,517 inner-city boys into early adulthood.

Over the course of more than two decades, 39 of the boys became victims of homicide, 37 were convicted of homicide, and another 33 were arrested for homicide, but not convicted.

“That was terribly unexpected. We had no idea that we would have so many killings,” said Pittsburgh Youth Study Principal Investigator Rolf Loeber, PhD, professor of psychiatry, psychology, and epidemiology at the University of Pittsburgh. “When the killings happened, we knew the individuals. We knew to what extent they had encountered difficulties in life, what kind of school career they had, their family background, their psychopathology. All of this information was collected without knowing that these individuals would kill or be killed.”

Having gathered data on the boys throughout their development was particularly important when examining the victims of homicide, Dr. Loeber said. “Most studies don’t have information on the background of the victims. To reconstruct their lives is very hard after they are killed. You have to rely on relatives, friends. But there are more than 50 risk and protective factors that predict violence. It is very difficult to reconstruct them by just talking to a relative.”

Researchers examined data on a wide range of factors gathered from interviews with the boys and their caretakers and from other sources. They examined three classifications of risk factors:

- Criminal risk factors, which included self-reported and court records of prior violent, property, drug and other offenses, such as robbery, aggravated assault, carrying a weapon, vehicle theft, receiving stolen property, selling drugs and minor fraud.
- Explanatory factors, which are factors that do not measure anti-social behavior. They include having a young mother, family on welfare, lack of guilt, a mother who is unemployed, living in a bad neighborhood, and being raised in a broken family.
- Behavioral risk factors, which are factors that reflect anti-social behavior. They include factors related to attitude, such as truancy, school suspension, having a positive attitude to delinquency, disruptive behavior disorder, and having delinquent peers.

Convicted Homicide Offenders
Researchers had a number of questions in mind when they set out to examine the data on boys who ended up being convicted of homicide. For example, to what extent did they engage in antisocial and delinquent behavior early in childhood? To what extent can convicted homicide offenders be predicted based on a combination of criminal, explanatory and behavioral risk factors? Is there a dose-response relationship between the number of risk factors experienced and the chances of becoming a convicted homicide offender?

Several studies suggest that most homicide offenders were violent early in life and committed many other crimes. The boys convicted of homicide who participated in the Pittsburgh Youth Study were no exception.

The strongest predictor of young homicide offenders was prior criminal or delinquent acts. Researchers examined both self-reported offenses and records of delinquency convictions up to age 14 and found that violent offenses were the most prevalent.

Among boys later convicted of homicide, 76 percent reported having carried a weapon and 62 percent reported participating in gang fighting, aggravated assault, or robbery. The study also found that being convicted of different
types of violent offenses, including aggravated assault and weapons charges, was a stronger predictor of later homicide offending than self-reported violence.

One unexpected finding was that several types of property crimes committed up to age 14 also strongly predicted later homicide conviction, which suggests the boys were already versatile criminal offenders who engaged in a variety of delinquent acts before they committed murder. Several types of self-reported substance use, such as hard drugs and alcohol, did not significantly predict a later homicide conviction—a finding that also ran contrary to expectations.

When criminal risk factors obtained from all sources were considered, arrests on simple assault and weapons charges, self-reported weapon carrying, conspiracy convictions (a rather larger category of offenses), and self-reported minor fraud emerged as significant independent predictors of later homicide conviction.

Researchers constructed a criminal risk score based on those risk factors and found that 59 percent of the boys later convicted of homicide had at least three of the five risk factors.

Among explanatory risk factors, nine were found to significantly predict convicted homicide offenders. Living in a broken home, for example, was the most prevalent with 89 percent of convicted homicide offenders having experienced a broken home, compared to 62 percent of the study controls. The study also reports that 71 percent of convicted homicide offenders were raised in a family on welfare, and 65 percent lived in a bad neighborhood. Other important explanatory risk factors were having a young mother, being old for their grade in school, having an unemployed mother, lack of guilt, low socioeconomic status, having a father with behavioral problems, and hyperactivity-impulsivity-attention deficit.

Researchers also measured 19 behavioral factors and found that 11 significantly predicted convicted homicide offenders. The strongest predictor was having been suspended from school. Among boys later convicted of homicide, 78 percent had at least one school suspension. Other behavioral risk factors experienced by more than half of the boys who became convicted homicide offenders were having a positive attitude toward delinquency, disruptive behavior disorder, and serious delinquency.

Predicting Convicted Offenders
Researchers analyzed all of the significant, independently predictive exploratory, behavioral, and criminal risk factors in a final exercise to predict convicted homicide offenders. The boys experienced all of the factors before they turned 14 years of age.

The best predictors were determined to be the following:
- Prior delinquent acts — specifically, a conspiracy conviction, simple assault arrest, and self-report weapons carrying.
- An attitude that favors delinquency.
- Having a young mother.
- Having been suspended from school.
- And living in a bad neighborhood as defined by U.S. Census data.

This integrated analysis presented further evidence that a range of risk factors best predicts boys who are most likely to commit murder and that the more risk factors a boy experiences, the greater the probability he will become a convicted homicide offender. For example, having at least four of the seven risk factors identified 62 percent of the boys convicted of homicide.

Researchers note the results may overestimate the true ability to predict homicide offenders largely because the risk scale was built and tested on the same participants. However, the findings suggest that determining whether boys have experienced four or more of the most-predictive risk factors might be a useful way to predict those well down the path to murder.

Race
Previous studies suggest that African American boys are more likely to be convicted of homicide than Caucasian boys. In the Pittsburgh Youth Study, 86 percent of the boys convicted of homicide were African American, while African American boys accounted for 54 percent of the study’s control sample.

Researchers found, however, that race itself did not predict convicted homicide offenders. Instead, the racial differences in the prevalence of convicted homicide offenders were largely the result of significant racial differences in early risk factors that predicted later homicide convictions. For example, 81 percent of the study’s African American boys lived in broken homes, compared to 42 percent of Caucasian boys. Being raised in a family on welfare was
an experience shared by 61 percent of African American boys, compared to 23 percent of Caucasian boys. And 65 percent of African American boys lived in a bad neighborhood, compared to 32 percent of Caucasian boys.

Homicide Victims
Boys who became victims of homicide resembled those who became convicted homicide offenders. The study reports that risk factors found to strongly predict homicide victims tend to be similar to those that strongly predict boys who became convicted homicide offenders.

Researchers found that of the significant risk factors that predicted convicted homicide offenders, 71 percent were also significant predictors of homicide victims. For example, early offending strongly predicted homicide victims, just as it did with convicted offenders. In the Pittsburgh study, 56 percent of homicide victims had been arrested and 44 percent had been convicted by age 14. The most common offenses committed early in the lives of those victims included vehicle theft, aggravated assault, receiving stolen property, drug offenses, and conspiracy.

The results showed other similarities. The study found that homicide offenders did not grow up more deprived or exposed to more risk factors than homicide victims, although certain explanatory factors were stronger predictors for one group than they were for the other. For example, the strongest predictors for convicted homicide offenders were mostly socioeconomic factors, such as a broken home and a family on welfare, while the strongest predictors for victims were mostly individual, including a lack of guilt, and school-related factors, such as low achievement, being old for their grade, and hyperactivity-impulsivity-attention deficit.

Another important conclusion about shared characteristics between homicide offenders and homicide victims was that violence appeared to evolve from disputes related to illegal activities, such as the drug trade, the trade in stolen goods, robbery to obtain drugs and/or money, or other illegal property transactions. The authors concluded that it is likely that reductions in these illegal activities may reduce conflict and ensuing violence and homicide.

The Pittsburgh Youth Study stands as the first prospective longitudinal study of homicide victims. Its limitations include the fact that the Pittsburgh numbers were modest and the Pittsburgh results may not be generalized to the nation. Nevertheless, researchers reported that the explanatory and behavioral risk factors they measured significantly predicted homicide victims up to 22 years later. And in most analyses, homicide victims were predicted just as accurately as convicted homicide offenders.

Implications For Interventions
The Pittsburgh Youth Study shows that homicide offenders and victims are the product of a series of causes that unfold over time and offers new insights into those causes that are useful in determining how best to intervene to prevent them from taking such a destructive course.

Research suggests, however, that preventive interventions do not guarantee success. In a study that involved Pittsburgh Youth Study participants, for example, researchers looked at whether homicide offenders used more mental health services or school services, such as special education and classes for behavioral problems, than violent offenders who crimes did not include murder. They found that about two-thirds of homicide offenders had received help for behavioral problems when they were young—a rate significantly greater than what was found among other violent offenders.

In that study, however, it was not possible to determine the precise nature of the services, or to assess the quality of services or whether they were based on empirically verified interventions.

Pittsburgh Youth Study researchers argue that empirical knowledge about what works, and knowledge of the causes of homicide offending, is necessary to determine the optimal timing and the effectiveness of preventive interventions and in providing the basis for screening young people to determine their risk of becoming homicide offender or victims.

In one exercise, they used the Pittsburgh Youth Study cohorts to examine the possible effects that changing one aspect of an individual’s problem behavior might have on the national male homicide rate. The exercise used data from the youngest and oldest cohorts of boys and was based on implementation of three well-evaluated early prevention interventions: the Olds Nurse Home Visitation Program, which provides in-home services to families around the birth of the child and during infancy; the Perry Preschool Program, which provides early childhood education to at-risk families; and multisystemic therapy (MST) for violent juvenile offenders, which works with adolescent offenders who have already shown evidence of delinquency.

The results suggest that effective intervention has the potential to save lives and reduce the financial costs associated
with homicide, such as the expense of imprisoning convicted offenders. For example, if implemented nationally:

- The Nurse Home Visitation program with at-risk families by itself might prevent nearly 22 percent of all homicides in the United States. In cost-savings alone, this would amount to some $3.5 billion.
- The Perry Preschool Program for preschoolers could potentially reduce homicides by up to 24 percent, saving about 3,000 lives a year and nearly $4 billion in incarceration costs.
- MST for juvenile delinquents by itself would reduce homicides, but only by 6 percent.

“One of the most significant findings [of the Pittsburgh Youth Study] is that the idea of developmental pathways from less problematic behavior to much more serious behavior is not random – that, for the majority of cases, it is systematic,” Dr. Loebner said. “The take-home message is: If we want to reduce the overall level of victimization in society, or a city like Pittsburgh, it is much more effective to start early in life rather than waiting for individuals to be violently victimized or killed.” At the same time, it is necessary to deal with the current generations of violent individuals and their potential victims. It seems probable that reducing illegal economic activities will reduce disputes and violent solutions.

References

This Special Report is based on the above-referenced publications. It is not intended to be an original work but a summary for the convenience of our readers. References noted in the text follow:

Announcement

Free Background Reports Cover Children’s Issues
University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development offers a recently-updated series of free background reports providing concise overviews of current topics important to children and families.

New topics in the series, Children, Youth & Family Background, include childhood obesity, foster care, early literacy, parent-teen relationships, and the trend among nonprofit agencies to help support their missions by starting money-generating social enterprises.

The reports, originally produced to keep journalists and policymakers up to date on children’s issues, are available free of charge to anyone interested in learning about the latest developments in areas ranging from education and child development to child welfare and juvenile crime. These reports are written, edited, and reviewed by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

All Children, Youth & Family Background reports are posted on the OCD website as portable document files (.pdf) for viewing and downloading at the following address: http://www.ocd.pitt.edu/Children-Youth-and-Family-Background-Report/49/Default.aspx ■
Another concern is brain development, which studies suggest can be affected by the kind of deprived environment found in many orphanages or other institutions. Researchers report there is less metabolic, physiological, and neuro-chemical activity in the brains of mid-childhood-aged children who have lived in a severely deficient institution compared to children raised in families.

Also seen is abnormal development of parts of the brain associated with higher cognitive functions, memory, and emotion. Some studies find that impulse control, attention and social relations are mildly impaired among institutionalized children who were later adopted or placed in some other family-care situation.

Deficiencies in brain development may also be related to problems seen among some formerly institutionalized children in areas such as emotional regulation and executive functioning, which is a set of cognitive processes that is important to performing activities ranging from planning and organizing to paying attention to details and remembering details.

There is some good news for children fortunate enough to be adopted by parents able to give them a typical family environment. After they leave orphanages or other institutions they tend to show significant improvement in terms of their physical growth, attachment and cognitive and behavioral development.

Children adopted at later ages do not always completely catch up, however. For example, even after living for several years with their adoptive parents, some children may still be slightly undersized, score slightly below expectations on general mental tests, have attachment difficulties, and problems with attention, rule following, planning and other activities related to executive functioning.

**Early years are critical**

Studies suggest that children are the most vulnerable to experiencing development problems if they are exposed to deprived environments in orphanages or other institutions during their first few years of life.

For example, the frequency of long-term problems among children who are adopted from institutions tends to be different. Those who are adopted earlier in life are less likely to exhibit problems than those who are adopted at a later age.

And several studies that looked at children adopted at different ages during the first three years of life report that there seems to be an age-related step at which point long-term problems with behavior, executive function, and social skills are triggered. The age at which the step occurs varies depending on the severity of the orphanage experience and other factors. Children adopted before the step generally have rates of problems similar to children who have never been institutionalized. The rates of problems increase significantly when the step occurs among children who are living in institutions. But the rates of problems tend not to rise beyond that point, regardless of how much longer a child stays in the institution.

“You would think that the longer a child is in an institution the worse the outcomes. For some outcomes, that may be true to a certain extent, especially social outcomes and language. But for behavior and executive functioning problems, there seems to be a step function,” said Dr. McCall.

It is clear that the earlier children can be placed in a family-care situation outside of an institution the better. Studies also suggest that interventions resulting in warmer, more responsive, and developmentally friendly care improve the outcomes of children who remain in institutions. But such steps are beyond the reach of many nations that have underdeveloped child welfare or lack adequate community-based resources to meet the complex needs of children without parents. “We know what works scientifically and from the standpoint of practice,” said OCD Codirector Christina Groark, Ph.D. “It’s implementing it that is a challenge.”
Family Support Conference To Be Held September 21 and 22, 2012

Play is a natural activity for children. Not only is it fun, it’s also important to development, providing children with an opportunity to experiment, explore, pretend, discover, and be physically active. It’s a chance for them to bond with their parents, caregivers, and teachers, as well as to acquire socialization and critical thinking skills important to success in school and in life.

The importance of play in children’s development will be explored at the 2012 Pittsburgh Association for the Education of Young Children (PAEYC) and Allegheny County Family Support Conference, which will be held September 21-22 at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center, Downtown.

“PLAY! Transforming Children, Families, Communities and Lives,” will feature sessions that enhance, advance and support the understanding that play is at the core of developmentally appropriate practice and is the foundation of development and learning.

Topics will include play in the lives of children, play therapy, ages and stages of play, play and interactive digital media, parenting and play, brain research and early learning, community development and urban planning of parks and safe play spaces, play and the Early Learning Standards, and the role of play in creativity, self-regulation, attachment, and social and emotional development.

Announcements

Save the Date!

2012 PAEYC & Allegheny County Family Support Conference

PLAY! Transforming Children, Families, Communities, And Lives

Friday, September 21 & Saturday, September 22, 2012,
David L. Lawrence Convention Center, Pittsburgh, PA

See page 11 for more information

Parenting Guide Series Available From OCD

The University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development is offering a series of easy-to-use parenting guides offering information and advice on 50 parenting topics. These guides are available free of charge to parents and organizations, agencies and professionals who work with children and families.

The You & Your Child parenting guide series, written and edited by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, covers topics ranging from how to deal with children’s fears, finicky eating habits, and aggressive behavior to getting a child ready to read, setting rules, and coping with grief.

Each guide is based on current parenting literature and has been reviewed by a panel of child development experts and practitioners. The series is made possible by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.

To receive a printed set of all 50 guides by mail, send a request along with your name, organization, mailing address and telephone number to:

Parenting Guides
University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development
400 North Lexington Street, LL104
Pittsburgh, PA 15208

The parenting guides are also available on the OCD website as portable document files at: http://www.ocd.pitt.edu/Parenting-Guides/61/Default.aspx