

PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN AT FOSTER CARE CENTERS IN SEMI URBAN AREA

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Abstract

Background: The physical, emotional, and social well-being of children in foster care centres in semi-urban areas is a critical area of study, and this research aims at investigating the social interaction among children, assessing nutritional status, and understanding emotional needs to provide insights into the challenges faced by children in foster care and identify areas for improvement in support systems and interventions. **Methodology:** This is a cross-sectional study, conducted among 160 children enrolled in foster homes in Chennai. A questionnaire comprising 32 closed-ended questions was administered to collect data on physical, emotional, and social well-being parameters. Statistical analysis was done using SPSS software. **Results:** Results indicate a gender disparity among participants, with more boys (64.2%) than girls (35.8%) in the study. Despite challenges, most children reported high levels of happiness (84%) and relied on friends (64.2%) for emotional support. Nutritional status was satisfactory, with a mix of vegetarian and non-vegetarian diets provided, supplemented by daily intake of nutritious fruits. Adequacy of sanitation facilities was reported by 96.2% of children, indicating good hygiene practices. Notably, awareness of medical emergencies (64.8%) and COVID-19 vaccination coverage (36.5%) were high. **Conclusion:** Fostering environments conducive to physical, emotional, and social well-being is essential for children's growth and development in foster care. Efforts to improve support systems, education, infrastructure, and emotional support are paramount. Further research across multiple centers is recommended to inform policy and practice improvements, to provide better care and support for children in foster care.

Keywords: Children, Emotional Well-Being, Foster Care, Physical Well-Being, Semi-Urban Areas, Social Well-Being.

INTRODUCTION

The most common reason children are sent to foster care home is due to inability/incapability of parenting or being a single parent. The constant quarrel among parents or absence of either of parent makes it difficult for them to concentrate on the wellbeing of their child. These scenarios tend to affect the mental health of children which results in lack of social interaction.

This solitary state of children affects the intellect of children which leads to lack of performance in school [1]. On the other hand, this leads to the poor nourishment of children and loss of interest in extracurricular activities and physical fitness. Physical fitness plays an important role in a child's life. It helps in the growth of a child both physically and mentally.

Physical fitness helps a child to pursue a healthy life. Lack of physical fitness leads to obesity and short stature and also an idle mind. These conditions paves way to undesirable health conditions in the future. Being obese may lead to ragging/harassment under several circumstances. As the proverb goes "An idle mind is a devil's workshop", a person must be active both physically and mentally to accomplish his/her goals in life.

Balanced diet is an important criterion in a child's life. Children who are brought up by their parents' experience varieties in food while at foster homes most foods are repeated over and over again. This tends to reduce the child's liking of food and leads to malnourishment. Food provided are more of a ration type hence the food provided may not provide adequate nourishment at foster homes. More than 60% of children in developing and underdeveloped countries suffer from malnutrition. Malnutrition is being seen as the second common cause of death in children next to dehydration. Malnutrition due to starvation is caused mostly due to low socio economic status or not enough care by the parents/guardians. Thus balanced diet is an important aspect in both a child and adult life.

Many statistics show that Foster care children are prone to be more affected than being raised by a single parent or a low-income household. This is due to the care and affection specifically towards their children which is seen lacking in foster homes. Children at foster home are also more susceptible/liable to ragging and bullying which further deteriorates the self-confidence and social interaction amongst children [2]. Harassment by the warden in foster homes is not common but also not left out. Harassment usually takes place when the child does not abide to the terms of the caretaker [3]. Thus the children end up running away from foster homes and become complete strays.

Social interaction develops to form bonds between people and peers. Thus, by this a child will have a companion who help them in taking important decisions in life. Thus social interaction helps to mould a child to know the ways of life. Children are also susceptible to many community acquired diseases such as pneumonia in foster homes. Hence a child has to be more self-sufficient and cautious till his stay in a foster home. Thus in this research, we will assess the physical, emotional and social well-being of children at foster home in semi urban areas.

This study aims to assess the physical, emotional and social well-being of children at foster care centres in semi urban areas. The study objectives include – (1) To study the social interaction among children at foster care Physical, emotional and social well-being of children at foster care centres in semi urban area. (2) To assess the nutritional status of children at foster care. (3) To understand the emotional needs of children at foster care.

METHODS

The current study is a cross sectional questionnaire based study conducted at Chennai among 160 children aged 10-18 years who were enrolled in foster homes, which included 102 boys and 52 girls. The questionnaire consists of 32 questions which are closed ended the same was approved by two individual professors. The total duration of study was 3 months. The questionnaire consists of questions which assesses the Physical, emotional and social wellbeing of the children admitted in the foster care.

The physical wellbeing is assessed by the parameters such as height, weight, performance in sports, Vaccinations provided, food offered, Medical and emergency facilities available. The emotional wellbeing is assessed by the parameters such as emotional support, visit by guardians/parents, sanitary facilities, excursions and cultural arranged, celebration of birthdays and other festival holidays.

The social wellbeing is assessed by facilities for sports, study facilities, school facilities, assistance in studying, any ragging or bullying in the foster homes. The children were given adequate time to read the questionnaire and were given time to ask for any doubts regarding the questions and are free to either accept to answer or to opt out of the study. The responses were collected in google forms. The study was conducted after getting approval from the Institutional Human Ethics Committee (IHEC).

Statistical analysis

The data was collected from 160 children in foster homes and the responses were compiled with simple pie chart and bar diagram. The statistical analysis and the significance of the results were done using the recent version of SPSS software (SPSS Statistics 28). Descriptive statistics were used for general parameters.

RESULTS

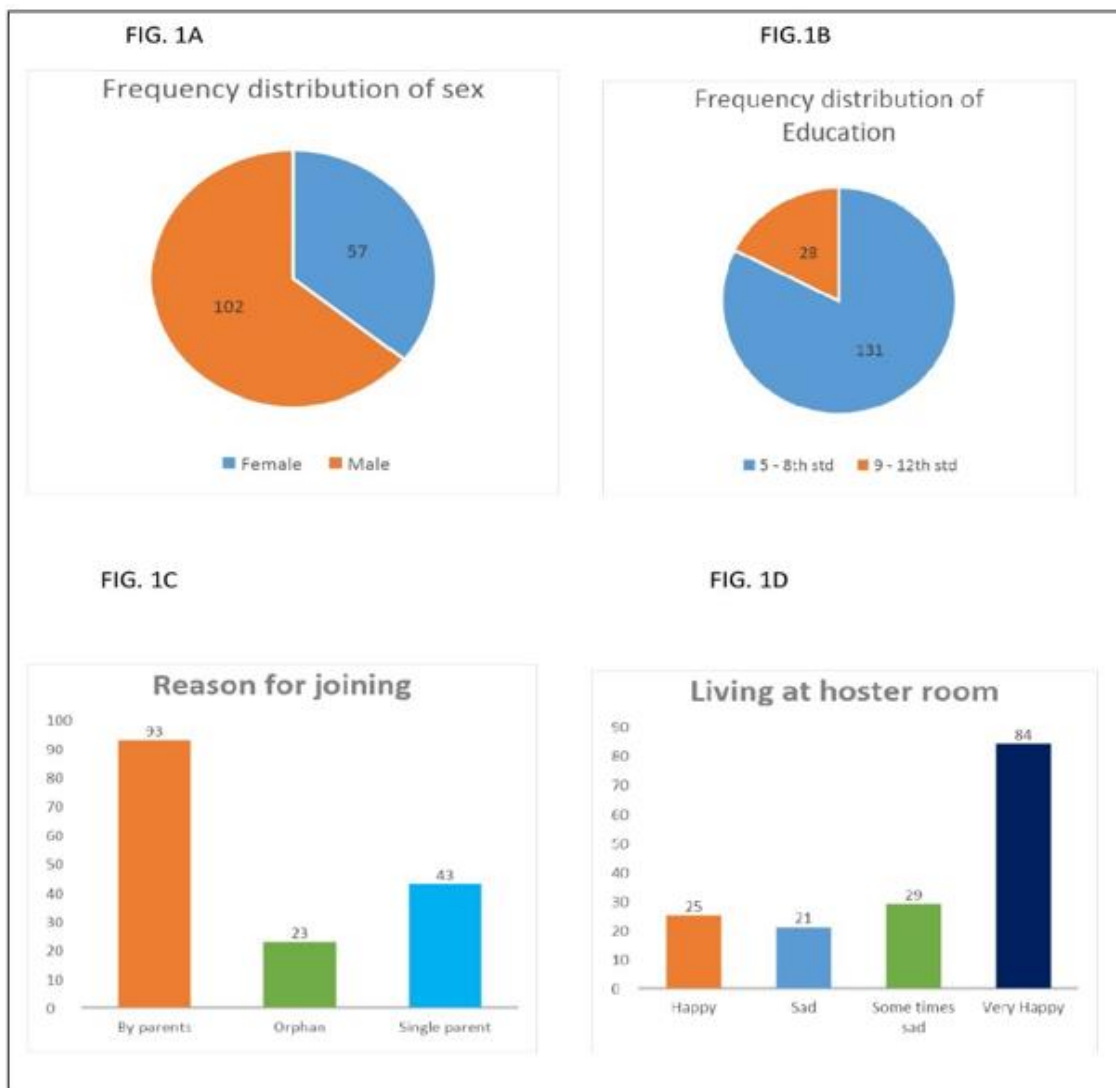


Figure 1: Pie chart regarding frequency distribution of sex, education, reason for joining and living in a hostel room

The results showed that more boys (64.2%) participated in the study compared to girls (35.8) as shown in Fig 1a. The education distribution showed that most of the participants are from 5th to 8th standard (82.4%) others are from 9th to 12th (17.6%) Fig 1b. The main reason the children have given as for joining the foster care is by parents (58.5%) and the second most common being by a single parent (27%) and the final reason being an orphan (14.5%) Fig 1c.

Most of the children living in foster care have given a response they are very happy (84%) with similar percent choosing other option Fig 1d. The visit from the parent or the guardian is usually once a month (40.3%) and the least being Twice a month (15.7%) as shown in Figure 2a. Most students have opted for friends as their emotional support for their personal problems as well as social problems (64.2%) with the warden being the next person to whom they go for support (21.4%) as shown in Figure 2b. The nutritional status shows a mixture of vegetarian as well as non-vegetarian diet with the children being provided nutritious fruits every day. The self-hygiene is also maintained by the children properly with very good being the most chosen option (47.2%) as shown in the Fig 2C.

The adequacy of toilets and the sanitary assessment is also adequate according to the kids with both showing (96.2%). Most of the kids are aware of the medical emergency and what has to be done during that time as shown by the response as yes (64.8%) in Fig 3a. The vaccination status has shown satisfactory out comes with all kids getting their First COVID 19 vaccination and those who got their second dose (36.5%).



Figure 2: Pie chart of visiting frequency, emotional support and maintaining self hygiene

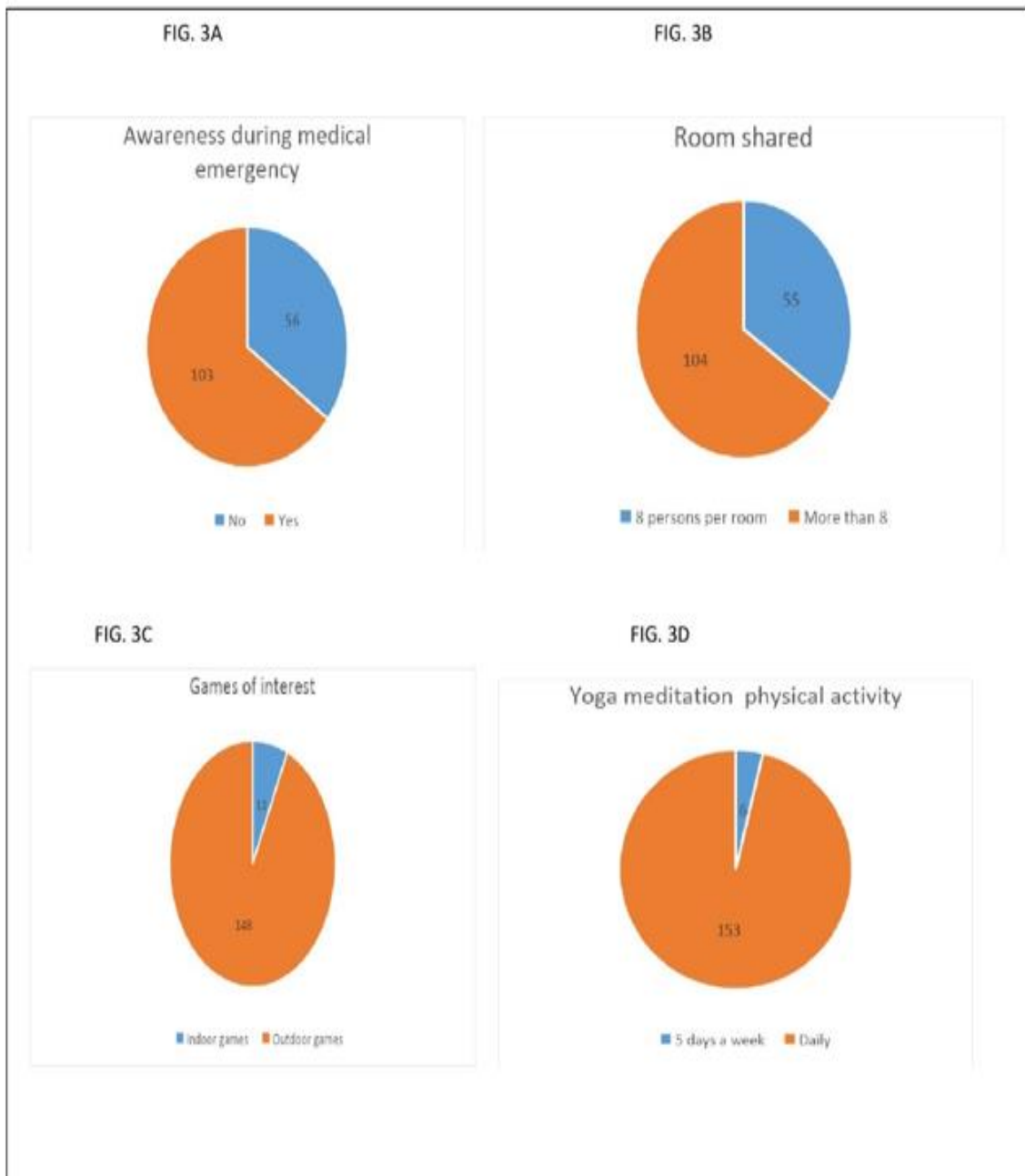


Figure 3: Pie chart regarding awareness during medical emergency, number of people in a room, games of interest and physical activity

The occupancy of rooms is not ideal according to the outcome on the question that nearly (65.4%) say that they share the room with more than 8 children as shown in Fig 3b. The children have a very health mix of both indoor and outdoor games with most children choosing outdoor games (93.1%) as shown in Fig 3c.

The emotional state of children are well maintained by the foster care as most of the children say they have regular meditation classes that are held daily (96.2%) as shown in Fig 3d.

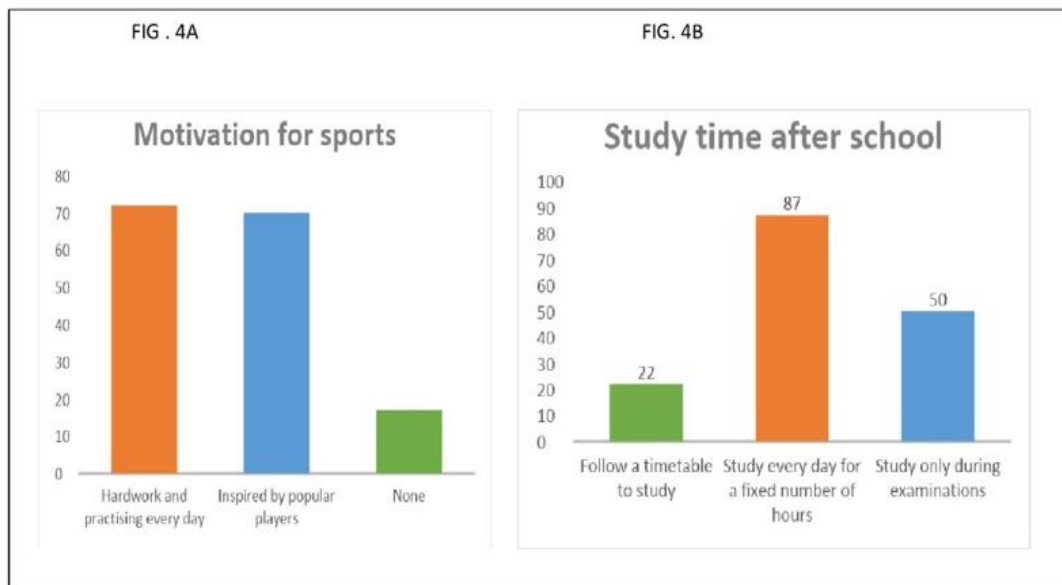


Figure 4: Pie chart regarding motivation for sports and study time after school.

The children are involved in a wide range of sporting activity with their main reason for indulging in sporting activity is to work hard and practice every day (45.3%) to keep themselves healthy physically as well as to play the sports with passion as shown in Fig 4a. The foster care not only provides nutritious food and sports activities they are also motivating the students to study well and perform well in school education by asking them to study a fixed number of hours in spite of other sports involvement (54.7) as shown in Fig 4b.

DISCUSSION

This study is aimed at studying the physical health and mental status of children in group-homes and to show how the foster care can influence the children in shaping their lives. The higher percentage of boys compared to girls in this study raises questions regarding potential gender biases or differences in access to foster care. The age at which the children have been enrolled in foster care is another factor to be considered as it can both positively or negatively impact the education, emotional support and behaviour of the children [4]. The support services need to be tailored according to individual needs of children. Understanding the primary reasons children enter foster care, such as parental issues or orphanhood, is necessary as children may have been subjected to traumatic life experiences from broken homes [5]. Such children will need counselling and therapy to overcome their past and to lead a better life. Ensuring a balanced diet, proper hygiene, and adequate sanitation facilities are essential for the overall well-being of children. Continuous monitoring of growth and development is pivotal in these children as these children are more prone for undernutrition. The high percentage of children aware of medical emergencies and vaccinated against COVID-19 reflects effective health education and intervention strategies within the foster care system. Sustaining this awareness and ensuring access to healthcare services are vital ongoing efforts. Overcrowding is another concern in foster care homes which can cause recurrent infections as well as hinder a conducive living environment for the children [6]. These children are deprived of love and affection which is essential in their physical, mental and emotional upbringing.

This can indirectly affect their growth and development and in shaping their lives. By affecting the mental health, feeling unheard or unseen can lead to anxiety, depression and other mood related disorders [7]. Physical health problems can be related to undernutrition and overcrowding in the form of recurrent respiratory tract infections, anaemia, urinary tract infections which necessitate the need for frequent inspection of foster homes to ensure good hygiene [8]. Developmental problems such as speech delay is commonly seen in these children [9]. These children are more prone to show behavioural disorders such as temper tantrums in toddler age group and anger issues in the adolescent age group which might need conditioning and behavioural therapy. [10] T Balancing indoor and outdoor activities, along with regular meditation classes, contribute to the holistic development of the child. Providing diverse opportunities for recreation and self-expression is also crucial for their overall growth. Encouraging academic excellence alongside sports participation is another factor in teaching children under foster care to strike a balance between academic requirements and extracurricular interests. By identifying the areas of strength and areas that need improvement, we will be able to provide the best possible care and support for children in need.

CONCLUSION

Even though there are foster care centres and other adoption agencies are trying their best to provide a fighting chance for the kids to be successful in their lives so that when they grow they can follow their dreams a provide a meaningful contribution not only to their own lives but also to other children like them to succeed [11]. They will not only be an inspiration but also be an example for the people who run the foster care that they are making a difference in the life of a kid. But there is a lot of limitation in the foster care centres mainly being financial these foster care centres not all will have adequate backing monetarily to provide basic amenities to the children [12]. The education provided to them may not be ideal for them to compete in the modern system of competitive environment. The education system of these foster care centres has to be revamped so that they have a fighting chance in succeeding the current competitive educational system [13]. Though importance to physical activities is being given they may not have the proper infrastructure or the financial backing to take up sports as their profession. The emotional support for the children in the foster care is also important. Regular visit by the parents/Guardians will improve not only their schooling activities but also will improve their mental health which in turn helps them to grow in extracurricular activity. Treating behavioural issues at an early age can help them grow to be better adults in the future [15]. An increased number of care episodes (four or more) is associated with a twofold increase the need for psychotropic medication [16] The foster care system though helpful has to undergo radical improvement. Though the current study captures the essence of the children in foster care more studies has to be done across multiple centres in the country to get a better understanding of the advantages and the place where the improvement has to be made.

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