

Infant development in the context of Malawian orphanages

Background and Aims: The present study describes relationships between the quality of the physical and psychosocial environment experienced by 6- to 30-month-old infants and toddlers in Malawian orphanages and their developmental outcomes. An assessment of the impact of the quality of infant homes on the children living in these institutions is critical in light of the growing number of orphaned infants and young children in sub-Saharan Africa [1]. Although orphanages are becoming increasingly common in Malawi and other countries in southern Africa as a way to deal with the orphan crisis [2-3], no research has investigated the quality of care nor the quality of the physical environment provided for these children.

Methods: Sixty 6- to 30-month-old bilingual Chichewa-English-speaking infants and toddlers living in two Malawian orphanages participated. Data from several existing measures of environmental quality were used to create five new scales (using item analysis) measuring relevant dimensions of the physical and psychosocial environment: Space and Furnishings, Learning Materials, Environmental Chaos, Interaction, and Listening and Talking. Infant health and motor, cognitive, language and socioemotional development were evaluated using standard measures. Associations between key dimensions of the environment and child outcomes were evaluated.

Results: None of the five environmental measures predicted infants' health. However, Space and Furnishings, Learning Materials, Environmental Chaos, and Listening and Talking each predicted infants' motor development. All five environmental measures together predicted cognitive and socioemotional development. In addition, Listening and Talking independently predicted motor development, $R^2 = 0.20$, $F(2, 56) = 7.16$, $p = 0.002$, Space and Furnishings independently predicted cognitive development, $R^2 = 0.31$, $F(1, 57) = 25.89$, $p = 0.001$, and Learning Materials independently predicted language development, $R^2 = 0.18$, $F(1, 57) = 12.45$, $p = 0.001$.

Conclusion: In this study, relationships between key dimensions of the environment of Malawian orphanages and infant developmental outcomes were successfully identified. This is the first comprehensive assessment of the relationship between specific dimensions of the physical and psychosocial environment and the health and motor, cognitive, language and socioemotional development of children living in African orphanages. Caution should be exercised in generalizing these findings to other African population [4]. Nevertheless, this research provides a foundation upon which future work assessing the relationships between environmental quality and the development of orphaned children in southern Africa can be built.

References

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