The longer children stay in foster care, the less likely they are to achieve permanency, according to new research. In “Risk of Long-Term Foster Care Placement among Children Involved with the Child Welfare System,” the Administration for Children and Families’ Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation reviewed the latest data to get a current picture of the risks to children of remaining in long-term foster care.

In addition to the link between length of stay and lack of permanency, other key findings were:

- Children who were 12 years or older when placed in foster care after a child maltreatment investigation had an especially high risk of living in long-term foster care.
- Permanency planning efforts are needed that target children at risk for long-term foster care placements, particularly teenagers.

The Study

The researchers used data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, a national longitudinal study of the well-being of 5,501 maltreated children age 14 years or younger who came in contact with the child welfare system within a 15-month period starting in October 1999. The study was based on five waves of data (baseline, 12 months, 18 months, 36 months, and 59-96 months) collected from 1999-2007. The data included information on children’s safety, permanency, well-being, and use of services. Information on children’s placement histories was also reviewed.

The researchers sought answers to two questions:

1. How does time in foster care affect a child’s chances of continuing to live in foster care?
**Findings:** The researchers found that children with longer continuous periods in foster care were more likely to have foster care as their last-known placement. Among children who spent 36 or more continuous months in foster care, 77% had foster care as their last known placement type. At around 12-18 months in foster care, the child’s chances of leaving foster care began to decrease rapidly. Researchers also noted that placement changes were more common among children who had spent 36 months or more continuously in foster care; these children averaged five placement changes compared to a median of three for children living in foster care less than 36 months.

2. **Is child age at the time of a maltreatment investigation related to the likelihood of remaining in foster care?**

**Findings:** The researchers found age is a risk factor for long-term foster care placement. Older children had a greater risk of long-term foster care, as 70.5% of children 12 years or older when placed in foster care remained in foster care by the study’s end. Further, children 12 years or older who continued to live in foster care after three years were almost certain to age out of foster care before finding a permanent living situation.

**Recommendations**

Drawing from their findings, the researchers offered these practice tips:

- Permanency planning efforts must target children at risk for long-term foster care placements and lack of permanent living situations by the time they must leave care.

- Providing these high-risk children services to ensure stable permanent outcomes must occur well before the child has spent three or more years in foster care.

- Interventions must address the specific needs of children who experience long foster care stays or who age out of the foster care system.