

Family Contact as a Catalyst for Life Skills Development Among Institutionalized Adolescents: Evidence from Indian Shelter Homes

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Abstract:

➤ *Background:*

Life skills development is crucial for adolescents residing in shelter homes, yet the influence of family contact on these competencies remains underexplored in the Indian context. Adolescents in shelter homes face unique challenges due to varied reasons for placement including being orphaned, rescued from abuse or abandonment, transferred from other institutions, or being at risk of child labor.

➤ *Objective:*

This study examined the relationship between family contact and life skills development among adolescents aged 12-17 years residing in shelter homes in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh.

➤ *Methods:*

A cross-sectional study was conducted with 120 adolescents (60 boys, 60 girls) selected from four shelter homes using multi-stage sampling. The Comprehensive Inventory for Life-Skills in Adolescents (CILSA) scale was developed and administered to assess ten life skills domains. Independent t-tests were performed to compare life skills between adolescents with and without family contact.

➤ *Results:*

Of the 120 participants, 69 (57.5%) maintained family contact while 51 (42.5%) had no family contact. Adolescents with family contact demonstrated significantly higher scores across nine of ten life skills domains: self-awareness (10.04±1.5 vs 8.22±2.92, $p<.001$), empathy (8.91±2.25 vs 7.75±2.00, $p=.004$), critical thinking (11.52±2.18 vs 10.41±3.34, $p=.030$), creative thinking (11.75±2.60 vs 9.63±3.53, $p<.001$), emotion management (11.39±2.78 vs 10.06±3.53, $p=.022$), stress coping (12.68±2.40 vs 10.71±3.70, $p=.001$), communication (11.62±2.49 vs 9.55±2.26, $p<.001$), interpersonal skills (9.55±2.26 vs 7.29±2.72, $p<.001$), and problem-solving (9.86±1.70 vs 8.43±2.41, $p<.001$). Total life skills scores were significantly higher among those with family contact (106.57±16.22 vs 90.24±25.08, $p<.001$).

➤ *Conclusions:*

Family contact significantly enhances life skills development across multiple domains among shelter home adolescents. These findings underscore the importance of facilitating safe family connections to promote optimal developmental outcomes in institutional care settings, while being sensitive to the complex circumstances that bring adolescents into care.

Keywords: Life Skills, Adolescents, Shelter Homes, Family Contact, Institutional Care, India.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Adolescents residing in shelter homes represent a vulnerable population facing unique developmental challenges while navigating the transition from childhood to adulthood within institutional care settings. These young individuals arrive at shelter homes through various pathways, each presenting distinct challenges for their development and well-being.

The circumstances leading to shelter home placement are diverse and complex. Some adolescents are orphans who have lost their primary caregivers and require institutional support. Others are rescued from various forms of adversity including abuse, abandonment, or exploitation such as child labor. Some are runaway children who have fled difficult home situations, while others are transferred from other institutional care facilities as part of their care journey. Additionally, some adolescents may be placed temporarily to learn essential skills including language acquisition, particularly in multicultural urban settings like Lucknow.

For rescued adolescents, the circumstances leading to their placement are particularly traumatic. Many have experienced abuse in various forms - physical, emotional, or sexual - which significantly impacts their ability to form trusting relationships and develop essential life skills. Abandoned children face the profound challenge of developing identity and self-worth without the foundational security of family relationships. Those rescued from child labor situations must overcome both educational deficits and the trauma of exploitation while learning to navigate normal developmental processes.

These varied pathways create a complex emotional landscape for adolescents. Many experience profound loneliness and emotional isolation, particularly when family contact is limited or non-existent. For orphaned adolescents, immediate family members such as grandparents, aunts, or uncles may exist but often fail to maintain regular contact, leaving these young people feeling forgotten and disconnected from their roots. Abandoned children typically have no family contact at all, creating a complete absence of familial connection during critical developmental years.

Life skills, defined as "the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life," also termed as psychosocial competency (World Health Organization, 1997), encompass cognitive, emotional, and social domains crucial for adaptive functioning. The World Health Organization identifies ten core life skills: self-awareness, empathy, critical thinking, creative thinking, decision making, problem solving, effective communication, interpersonal relationships, coping with stress, and managing emotions. For adolescents in institutional care, these competencies become particularly vital as they prepare for transition to independent living with limited or no family support systems.

However, the specific impact of maintaining family contact on life skills development among institutionalized adolescents remains understudied, particularly in the Indian context where family relationships hold profound cultural significance. The present study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between family contact and life skills development among adolescents residing in shelter homes in Lucknow, India.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theoretical Framework: Attachment Theory

Bowlby (1969/1982) viewed the attachment behavioral system as a product of human evolutionary history, making it cross-culturally universal. Ainsworth's (1967; Ainsworth et al., 1978) early studies in Uganda and the US provided empirical support for similar attachment processes in very different cultural contexts. Bowlby (1969/1982) subsequently described attachment as a unique relationship between an infant and his caregiver that is the foundation for further healthy development.

Attachment theory explains how humans form strong emotional bonds with key individuals, starting in childhood, to help manage stress, fear, and uncertainty. These bonds provide comfort and safety, shape how we see ourselves and others, and influence our relationships throughout life (Bowlby, 1988; Main, 1996). For adolescents in shelter homes, attachment relationships are often disrupted or damaged due to the circumstances that led to their placement. Understanding these disruptions is crucial for comprehending how family contact - when available and safe - might help repair or supplement attachment needs during this critical developmental period.

B. Life Skills Development in Adolescence

Adolescence represents a critical developmental period characterized by significant physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes. During this phase, young people develop essential competencies that will influence their success in adult roles and responsibilities. Life skills education is one of the intervention programmes designed to improve mental well-being and strengthen their ability to cope with the daily stresses of life (Nasir & Iqbal, 2019).

Since the beginning of this century, psychosocial competencies have been defined as the ability to develop positive mental health. Most individual or social mental health protection programs are related to psychosocial competencies. A majority of evidence-based programs that develop mental health focus on enhancing these competencies (Lambooy et al., 2022).

Recent research has demonstrated that life skills development plays a crucial role in empowering individuals for sustainable outcomes across multiple life domains (Singh & Agarwal, 2024). For adolescents in institutional care, life skills development becomes even more critical as these young people often lack the natural family scaffolding that typically supports skill acquisition.

C. Family Contact and Development in Institutional Care

A basic assumption of attachment theory is that "if an adult is providing regular physical and emotional care, then the child forms an attachment relationship" (Bowlby, 1969/82). The quality of care, including caregivers' availability, sensitivity, acceptance, and a sense of belonging, significantly influences developmental outcomes in institutional settings (Marshall & Schreiber, 2014).

Research has consistently shown that children who maintain contact with biological families while in care demonstrate better adjustment outcomes compared to those with limited or no family contact. However, the reality for many adolescents in shelter homes is that family contact is inconsistent or entirely absent, creating profound emotional consequences and impacting their ability to form trusting relationships and develop necessary social skills.

D. The Role of Family in Life Skills Development

Family environment serves as the primary context for life skills acquisition during adolescence. Dasgupta and Sain (2015) demonstrated that family environment dimensions, particularly cohesiveness, active recreational orientation, and organization, significantly predict life skills development in adolescent boys. Their study of 300 male adolescents revealed that supportive and organized family structures provide optimal conditions for competency development across multiple domains.

The quality of family relationships appears especially critical for social and emotional skills development. Bennett and Hay (2007) found that healthy family relationships, particularly high parental involvement, promote social skills development in children. Families characterized by cohesive and democratic styles significantly influence children's social competencies by providing supportive environments that facilitate skill acquisition. Similarly, Mossman and Cronin (2018) identified that parental praise and understanding serve as key contributors to life skills development, particularly for teamwork, goal setting, and leadership competencies.

Family involvement extends beyond direct interaction to program participation outcomes. Hodge et al. (2017) found that family involvement in structured programs supports both acquisition and application of life skills, with family presence providing crucial reinforcement for sustained behavioral changes. The researchers demonstrated that family members played active roles in life skills acquisition, with program benefits persisting through family support and reinforcement.

Research also highlights the variability in family functionality and its differential impacts on life skills development. Marín (2024) found that 23% of families demonstrated severe family dysfunction, with communication and stress management among the least developed life skills among adolescents. This underscores the importance of family quality rather than mere family presence in supporting adolescent development.

Family routines and structured environments further contribute to competency development. Yahya (2022) emphasized that family routines play a significant role in developing social skills in children, with this importance heightened during critical developmental stages. Similarly, Taylor (1981) demonstrated that family literacy patterns and personal experiences mediate children's development of literacy skills and values, indicating that multigenerational family approaches are crucial for developing individual competencies.

The therapeutic integration of family systems and life skills development has been explored by Schmidt et al. (1988), who highlighted similarities between life skills focus on coping strategies and family therapy's emphasis on understanding family dynamics. Edgar (1999) further emphasized families as crucibles of competence, discussing how changing family dynamics impact children's coping skills development within different social and cultural contexts.

Family-based interventions demonstrate potential for enhancing life skills across diverse populations. Al-Mushki and Homied (2024) found that conditional cash transfer programs significantly enhanced life skills among rural families, particularly in health and nutrition domains. Additionally, Rina and Karmila (2020) described how life skills education can be conducted within family settings through simple habituation activities such as learning discipline, independence, and creativity during early childhood development.

These findings collectively demonstrate that families facilitate life skills development through emotional support, behavioral modeling, structured interactions, and competency reinforcement. The quality of family relationships, communication patterns, and involvement levels significantly contribute to essential life skills that enable adolescents to navigate developmental challenges and prepare for independent living.

E. The Indian Context

In India, shelter homes serve as crucial safety nets for vulnerable children and adolescents, yet research on developmental outcomes in these settings remains limited. The Indian cultural context places extraordinary importance on family relationships, making the absence or limitation of family contact particularly challenging for adolescents in care. Traditional Indian society views family as the primary source of identity, support, and belonging, making the loss or absence of these connections especially traumatic for young people.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Study Design

This study employed a cross-sectional comparative design to examine the relationship between family contact and life skills development among adolescents residing in shelter homes. The research followed ethical guidelines and obtained necessary approvals from relevant authorities.

B. Study Setting and Sample

The study was geographically positioned in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, focusing on four shelter homes: two government-operated and two private/NGO-operated facilities. These homes were selected based on their accessibility and the administration's willingness to participate in the research. The study included a sample of 120 adolescents, with 30 participants selected from each of the four different shelter homes. The sample was balanced with 60 boys and 60 girls aged 12-17 years, all of whom had been residing in the shelter homes for at least six months to ensure adequate exposure to the institutional environment.

C. Sampling Design

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed:

➤ *Stage 1 - Snowball Sampling:*

This method was used to identify and select shelter homes through recommendations from local authorities and social service networks.

➤ *Stage 2 - Purposive Random Sampling:*

From the identified shelter homes, a sample of 120 adolescents was selected using purposive random sampling to ensure balanced representation across gender and age groups.

D. Research Phases

The study was conducted in three distinct phases. Phase I involved selecting suitable shelter homes in Lucknow, obtaining necessary permissions from the District Program Officer, and recruiting a representative sample of adolescents aged 12 to 17 years who had resided in these homes for at least six months.

Phase II focused on developing the Comprehensive Inventory for Life-Skills in Adolescents (CILSA) scale, including extensive pre-testing and standardization to ensure reliability and validity for use with adolescents in shelter home settings.

Phase III constituted the primary assessment phase, involving administration of the CILSA scale to all participants and collection of demographic information, including family contact status.

E. Instrument Development

The CILSA scale was specifically developed for this study to assess ten core life skills domains based on the World Health Organization's framework (WHO, 1997): Self-Awareness, Empathy, Critical Thinking, Creative Thinking, Decision Making, Problem Solving, Effective Communication, Interpersonal Relationships, Coping with Stress, Managing Emotions. The scale underwent rigorous development, pre-testing, and standardization procedures to ensure reliability and validity in the Indian context.

F. Data Collection and Statistical Analysis

Data collection was conducted through structured interviews using the CILSA scale. Family contact status was determined through direct questioning, with participants classified as either maintaining contact with family members or having no family contact. Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 25.0. Descriptive statistics were calculated for demographic variables and life skills scores. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare life skills domains between adolescents with and without family contact. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

IV. RESULTS

A. Demographic Characteristics

The study sample comprised 120 adolescents aged 12-17 years residing in shelter homes in Lucknow. The sample was equally distributed by gender (60 boys, 60 girls) and evenly distributed across four shelter homes (30 participants each).

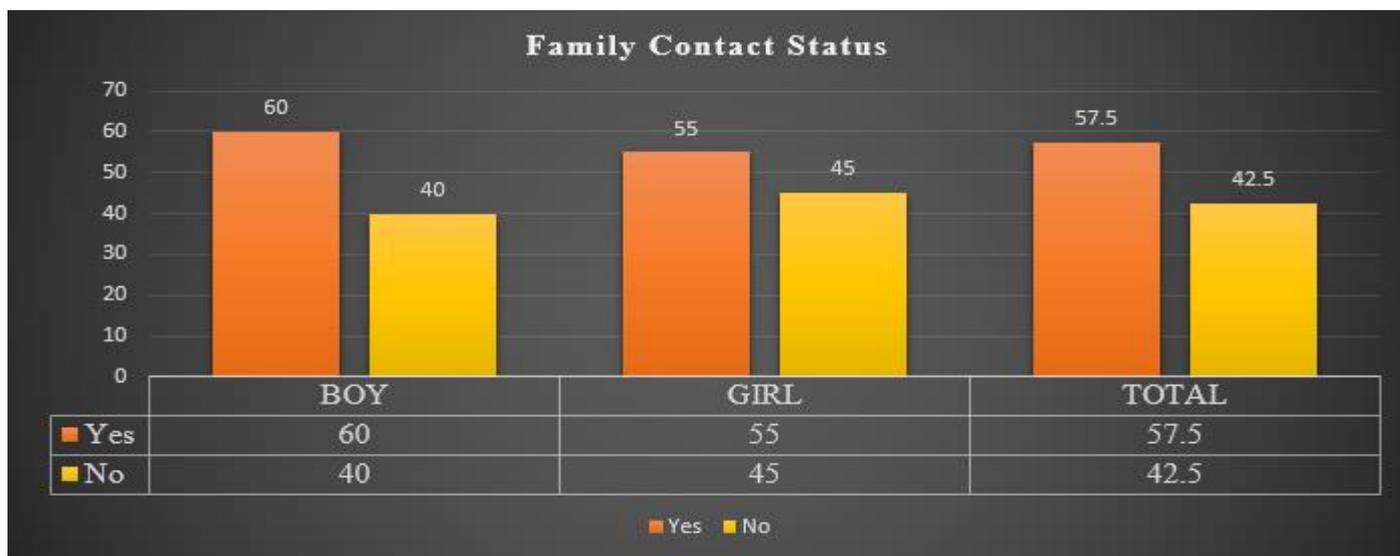


Fig 1 Distribution of Family Contact Status Among Respondents (Data in Percentage)

Fig 1 represents data Regarding family contact status, 69 participants (57.5%) maintained some form of contact with their families, while 51 participants (42.5%) had no family contact. Among boys, 36 (60.0%) maintained family contact and 24 (40.0%) had no contact. Among girls, 33

(55.0%) maintained family contact and 27 (45.0%) had no contact.

B. Life Skills Comparison Between Groups

Table 1 Comparison of Life Skills Domains Between Children with and Without Family Contact in Shelter Homes

Life Skills Domain	Family Contact - Yes (n=69)	Family Contact - No (n=51)	t-value	p-value
	Mean ± SD	Mean ± SD		
Self-Awareness	10.04 ± 1.50	8.22 ± 2.92	4.42	<.001
Empathy	8.91 ± 2.25	7.75 ± 2.00	2.94	.004
Critical Thinking	11.52 ± 2.18	10.41 ± 3.34	2.20	.030
Creative Thinking	11.75 ± 2.60	9.63 ± 3.53	3.79	<.001
Managing Emotion	11.39 ± 2.78	10.06 ± 3.53	2.32	.022
Coping Stress	12.68 ± 2.40	10.71 ± 3.70	3.54	.001
Communication	11.62 ± 2.49	9.55 ± 2.26	4.55	<.001
Interpersonal Skills	9.55 ± 2.26	7.29 ± 2.72	4.36	<.001
Problem Solving	9.86 ± 1.70	8.43 ± 2.41	3.80	<.001
Decision Making	9.23 ± 1.85	8.57 ± 2.39	1.72	.089
Total Life Skills	106.57 ± 16.22	90.24 ± 25.08	4.32	<.001

C. Domain-Specific Findings

The analysis revealed significant differences across multiple life skills domains between adolescents who maintained family contact and those who did not. The most pronounced differences emerged in self-awareness ($t = 4.42, p < .001$), where children with family contact scored substantially higher ($M = 10.04, SD = 1.50$) than those without ($M = 8.22, SD = 2.92$).

Communication skills and interpersonal skills demonstrated similarly strong effects. Communication skills showed significant differences ($t = 4.55, p < .001$) between children with family contact ($M = 11.62, SD = 2.49$) and those without ($M = 9.55, SD = 2.26$). Interpersonal skills revealed remarkable differences ($t = 4.36, p < .001$) between children who maintained family contact ($M = 9.55, SD = 2.26$) and those who did not ($M = 7.29, SD = 2.72$).

Cognitive domains also demonstrated significant benefits. Creative thinking showed highly significant differences ($t = 3.79, p < .001$) between children with family contact ($M = 11.75, SD = 2.60$) and those without ($M = 9.63, SD = 3.53$). Problem-solving abilities were significantly enhanced ($t = 3.80, p < .001$) among children with family contact ($M = 9.86, SD = 1.70$) compared to those without ($M = 8.43, SD = 2.41$).

Emotional regulation domains revealed particularly meaningful patterns. Stress coping demonstrated highly significant differences ($t = 3.54, p = .001$) between children with family contact ($M = 12.68, SD = 2.40$) and those without ($M = 10.71, SD = 3.70$). Notably, decision-making was the only domain that did not reach statistical significance ($t = 1.72, p = .089$), although children with family contact still demonstrated higher scores.

The comprehensive impact of family contact was most clearly demonstrated through total life skills scores, which exhibited highly significant differences ($t = 4.32, p < .001$) between children who maintained family contact ($M =$

$106.57, SD = 16.22$) and those who did not ($M = 90.24, SD = 25.08$).

V. DISCUSSION

A. Principal Findings

This study provides robust empirical evidence for the significant positive relationship between family contact and life skills development among adolescents residing in shelter homes. The findings reveal substantial and statistically significant differences across nine of ten life skills domains, indicating practically meaningful differences between groups.

The most pronounced differences were observed in interpersonal skills, communication skills, and self-awareness, suggesting that family connections particularly influence domains related to self-understanding and social competence. These findings align with theoretical frameworks emphasizing the role of family relationships in identity development and social skill acquisition.

B. Understanding the Context of Family Contact

The significance of these findings becomes even more profound when considered within the context of the complex circumstances that bring adolescents into shelter home care. For orphaned adolescents, the presence of extended family members who maintain contact provides crucial continuity with their pre-placement identity and family history. However, the reality for many orphaned children is that extended family members, despite their existence, often fail to maintain regular contact.

Abandoned children face perhaps the most challenging circumstances, with complete absence of family contact creating a void in identity formation and emotional support. These adolescents must navigate critical developmental tasks without any familial anchoring, making the development of self-awareness and interpersonal skills particularly challenging.

C. *The Emotional Landscape of Limited Family Contact*

The emotional consequences of limited or absent family contact permeate every aspect of these adolescents' lives. During data collection, many participants spontaneously shared experiences of loneliness, particularly during cultural festivals, birthdays, or other significant events when family presence is traditionally expected. This loneliness represents not merely the absence of companionship but a deeper existential isolation from their roots, heritage, and sense of belonging.

The impact of this emotional isolation on life skills development cannot be understated. Self-awareness requires not only internal reflection but also external validation and feedback that families typically provide. Without family contact, adolescents lack the mirroring and affirmation that helps young people understand their strengths, challenges, and evolving identity.

D. *Theoretical Implications*

The results strongly support attachment theory perspectives, which emphasize the enduring importance of family relationships in children's development. As predicted by Bowlby's (1969) theoretical framework, the maintenance of family connections appears to provide unique developmental resources that complement institutional care.

The comprehensive pattern of enhanced life skills among adolescents maintaining family contact suggests that families offer distinctive contributions to adolescent development that cannot be fully replaced by professional caregiving relationships. This finding supports the theoretical proposition that attachment relationships serve as templates for future social interactions and self-understanding.

E. *Legal Framework Supporting Findings*

➤ *The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015: Empowering Child Welfare Committees*

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 provides a comprehensive legal framework supporting family contact assessment for adolescents in institutional care. Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) are granted statutory authority under this Act to facilitate family interventions for children in need of care and protection (Government of India, 2015).

➤ *Statutory Powers for Family Assessment*

Under Section 29 of the JJ Act, 2015, CWCs possess comprehensive powers including: assessment of family suitability for child welfare, identification and verification of family members or guardians, ordering supervised family contact when beneficial, and making restoration decisions based on individual circumstances (Mittal, 2020). Section 30 further mandates CWCs to ensure restoration of lost or abandoned children to their families through due process and conduct inquiries for declaring fit persons for child care (Mittal, 2020).

➤ *Implications for Institutional Practice*

This statutory framework enables individualized assessment of each child's circumstances, flexible intervention approaches tailored to developmental needs, systematic family tracing processes, and evidence-based decision-making utilizing research findings on family contact benefits (BYJU'S, 2024). The Act's restoration mandate under Section 37 empowers CWCs to restore children to parents, guardians, or fit persons after credential verification (Samisti Legal, 2021).

➤ *Alignment with Research Evidence*

The JJ Act's provisions align with research evidence demonstrating that family contact significantly enhances life skills development across multiple domains. The statutory framework recognizes family relationships as crucial developmental resources complementing institutional care services. CWCs' authority to dispose of cases for child care, protection, treatment, development, and rehabilitation provides a legal pathway for implementing research-based recommendations regarding family connection maintenance for optimal developmental outcomes in shelter homes (Law Corner, 2021).

F. *Practical Implications*

The Findings have Significant Implications for child Welfare Policy and Practice:

- *Assessment and Care Planning:*

Child welfare systems should develop comprehensive assessment protocols that evaluate not only the safety of family contact but also its potential developmental benefits. This includes assessing the availability of extended family members for orphaned children, the appropriateness of contact with non-abusive family members for rescued children, and the potential for family reunification in cases of abandonment or family crisis.

- *Facilitating Safe Family Contact:*

For adolescents where family contact is deemed safe and beneficial, shelter homes should implement comprehensive programs that enable regular contact through technology, supervised visits, and family-inclusive interventions. The large effect sizes observed in this study suggest that such programs may yield substantial benefits for life skills development.

- *Addressing Loneliness and Emotional Isolation:*

Shelter homes should develop specific interventions to address the profound loneliness experienced by many residents, particularly those without family contact. This might include mentorship programs, group therapy focused on grief and loss, and community engagement initiatives that help adolescents develop alternative support networks.

- *Alternative Relationship Building:*

For adolescents with no possibility of family contact, shelter homes should prioritize the development of consistent, long-term relationships with caring adults who

can provide some of the developmental benefits typically associated with family relationships.

G. Cultural Considerations

In the Indian cultural context, where family relationships hold paramount importance, these findings may have particular relevance. The cultural emphasis on family connections may amplify the impact of family contact on developmental outcomes, making it especially crucial to maintain these relationships when safe and beneficial.

The profound loneliness reported by many adolescents in this study may be particularly acute in the Indian context, where individual identity is traditionally deeply intertwined with family identity. The absence of family connection may represent not only personal loss but also cultural disconnection, making the development of self-awareness and cultural identity particularly challenging.

H. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several important limitations. The cross-sectional design limits causal inferences about the relationship between family contact and life skills development. Family contact was measured as a binary variable, failing to capture quality, frequency, or emotional significance of interactions. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to establish causal relationships and examine developmental trajectories based on placement circumstances.

Research should develop comprehensive measurement tools for family contact quality and emotional significance, alongside systematic assessment of placement circumstances and trauma history. Investigating mediating mechanisms, particularly the roles of loneliness, grief, and identity formation, represents another crucial direction.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that family contact significantly enhances life skills development across cognitive, emotional, and social domains among adolescents in shelter homes. These benefits suggest that family contact serves as a powerful developmental resource that complements institutional care, particularly given the complex and traumatic circumstances leading to placement.

The findings have important implications for child welfare policy and practice. Safe family connections should be prioritized as a core component of care planning, with programs facilitating regular contact when appropriate. Equally important is developing targeted interventions for adolescents unable to maintain family contact, addressing their unique emotional and developmental needs through alternative support mechanisms.

The diversity of pathways into shelter care requires individualized approaches considering each adolescent's circumstances, trauma history, and family situation. When family contact is beneficial, it should be actively supported;

when impossible, alternative interventions must address developmental deficits arising from family disconnection.

Ultimately, institutional care should extend beyond providing safety and basic needs to actively promoting comprehensive life skills development for successful transition to independent living. Understanding and addressing the role of family connections, or their absence, is crucial to achieving this goal and supporting the holistic development of vulnerable adolescents in care.

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