

Boise State University

**ScholarWorks**

---

College of Health Sciences Poster  
Presentations

2010 Undergraduate Research and Scholarship  
Conference

---

4-12-2010

**The Growing Concern About Mental Health Services and  
Medications: A Comparison of Children on the Inside and the  
Outside of the Foster Care System.**

Meghan Cunningham

*Department of Nursing, Boise State University*

—

---

## The Growing Concern About Mental Health Services and Medications: A Comparison of Children on the Inside and the Outside of the Foster Care System.

### Abstract

Studies suggest a significantly higher use of psychotropic medications by children involved in foster care when compared to those children not in foster care. There are many unanswered questions about the mental health needs of the children in foster care, especially when looking at the much higher number of psychiatric diagnoses that this population has. In addition, there is a lack of consistent follow up mental health evaluations and consequently appropriate ongoing care. Financial factors in both biological and foster households often play a role in this. This may be due to the various professionals providing care for a child entering foster care, as well as a vague definition of which area of practice is responsible for ensuring follow up visits. This presentation will give a general overview of the collective mental health issues that plague children within the foster care system nationally while considering sociodemographic variables as well as placement histories. These findings will be compared to issues affecting the Treasure Valley foster care community. Finally, we will provide some insight as to what role nurses possess in encouraging ongoing evaluations and promoting overall wellness in foster care children.



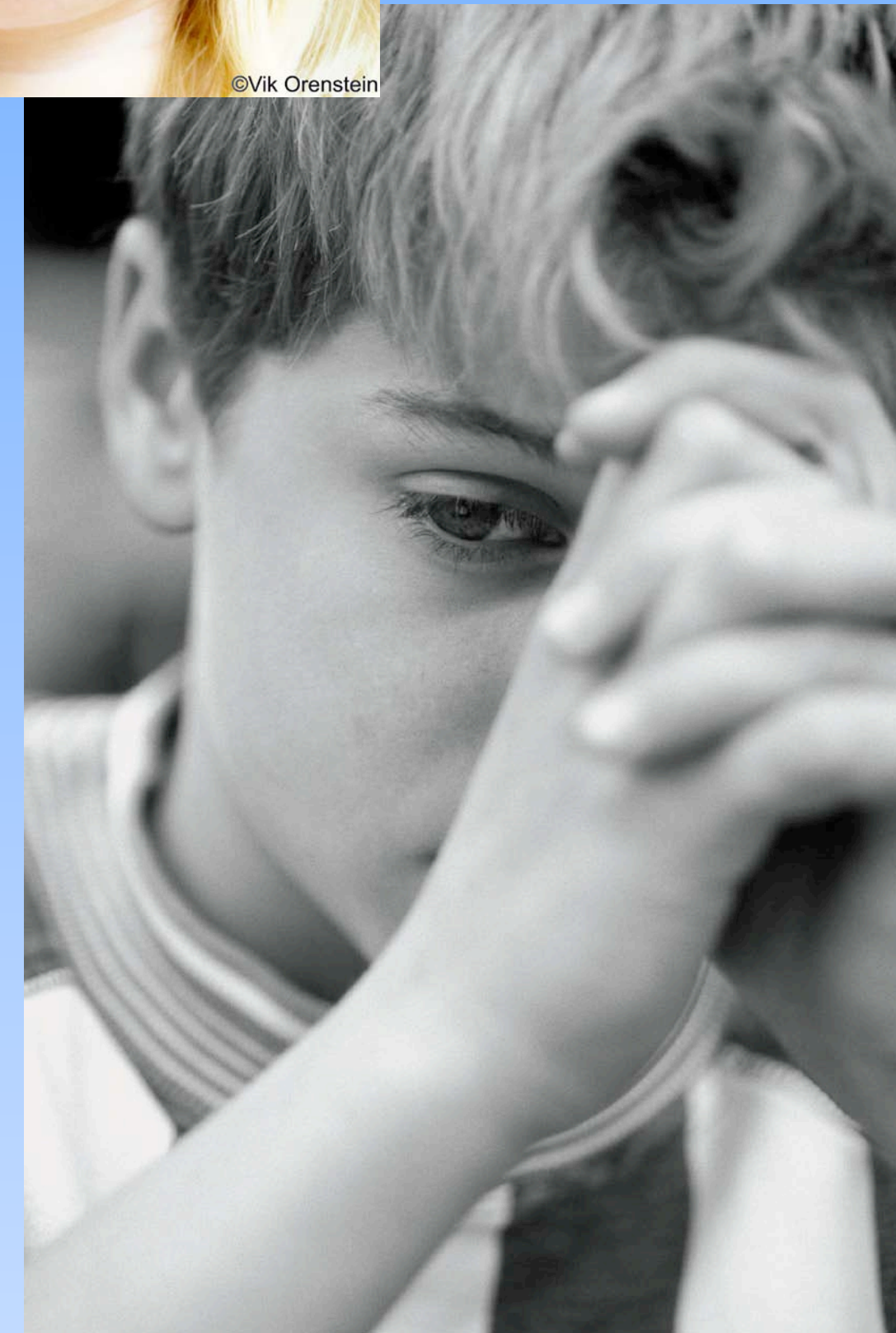
# The Growing Concern about Medications: A Comparison of Children within and outside of the Foster Care System

Meghan Cunningham, BSN Student  
Department of Nursing, Boise State University



## Concern

• Possible overuse of psychotropic medications in children in foster care has been raised as a significant problem, although the use of such medications in this population may actually be too low given the prevalence of mental health problems.<sup>4</sup>



## Mental Health Issues

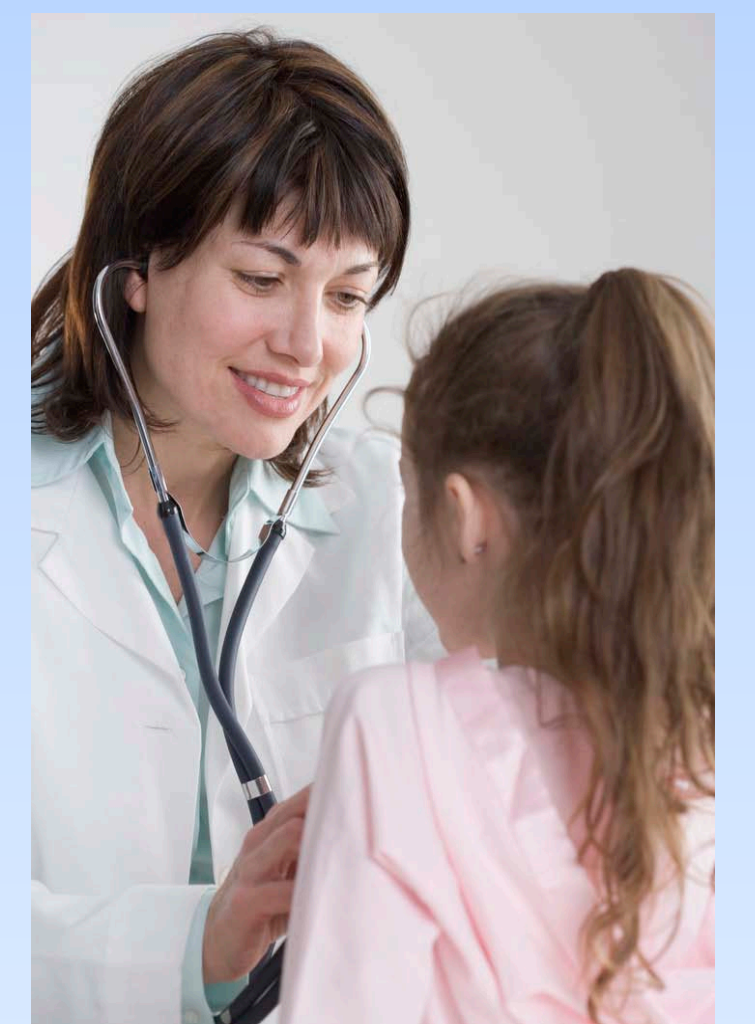
- Most youth in foster care have traumatic family histories and life experiences that result in an increased risk for mental health disorders.<sup>2</sup>
- The prevalence of mental health disorders with children in foster care are estimated as high as 80%.<sup>5</sup>
- These children are also 16 times more likely to have psychiatric diagnoses and 8 times more likely to be taking psychotropic medications.<sup>5</sup>
- Common psychiatric diagnoses:
  - Conduct and attention disorders, aggressive and self-destructive behaviors, depression, delinquency, autism, bipolar disorders, and impaired social relationships.<sup>5</sup>
- Concomitant psychotropic medication use is highly prevalent, with 41.3% of the youth receiving **≥3 psychotropic drugs**.<sup>7</sup>

## Sociodemographics

- Children in rural foster care have higher rates of behavioral disturbance.<sup>1</sup>
- Children in rural areas may enter foster care due to unmet treatment needs that their parents cannot satisfy.<sup>1</sup>
- Medicated youth are more likely to be white or Hispanic, male, and 10-14 years of age.<sup>7</sup>
- Race/ethnic psychotropic medication disparities are greater for African American than for Hispanic youth.<sup>7</sup>
- Boys receive more different classes of psychotropic medication than girls.<sup>7</sup>

## Nursing Implications

- Advanced Practice Nurses (APNs) continue to see children as they come into foster care; they continue to identify specific health or developmental problems within this group and make follow-up recommendations as indicated.
- APNs, such as nurse practitioners or psychiatric nurses, are ideal clinicians for rural community-based care where less treatment options are available, making treatment as the explicit goal for children in the foster care system.<sup>1</sup>
- Nurses are instrumental in encouraging ongoing evaluations and promoting overall wellness in foster care children.



## Summary

- Adolescents involved with foster care have numerous risk factors that precede their entry into foster care; foster care is a marker of adversity, rather than a cause of psychopathology.<sup>3</sup>
- These findings are not necessarily indicative of excessive use of psychotropic medication or inappropriate care, given the higher proportions of children with mental health diagnoses compared to those reported among school-aged children in community samples.<sup>6</sup>
- A need to increase coordination of services and ensure follow up care is vital to meet the mental health needs of all children in foster care.

### References

1. McGuinness, T.M. (2009). Almost invisible: Rural youth in foster care. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 22(2), 55-56.
2. Pecora, P.J., Jensen, P.S., Romanelli, L.H., Jackson, L.J., and Ortiz, A. (n.d.). Mental health services for children placed in foster care: An overview of current challenges. *Child Welfare*, 88(1), 5-25.
3. Pilowsky, D.J., and Wu, L.T. (2006). Psychiatric symptoms and substance use disorders in a nationally representative sample of American adolescents involved with foster care. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 38, 351-358.
4. Simms, M.D., Dubowitz, H., and Szilagyi, M.A. (2000). Health care needs of children in the foster care system. *Pediatrics*, 106(4), 909-918.
5. Villagrana, M. (2010). Mental health services for children and youth in the child welfare system: A focus on caregivers as gatekeepers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 1-7.
6. Zima, B.T., Bussing, R., Crecelius, G.M., Kaufman, A., and Belin, T.R. (1999). Psychotropic medication treatment patterns among school-aged children in foster care. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychopharmacology*, 9(3), 135-147.
7. Zito, J.M., Safer, D.J., Sai, D., Gardner, J.F., Thomas, D., Coombes, P., et al. (2008). Psychotropic medication patterns among youth in foster care. *Pediatrics*, 121(1), 157-163.

PLEASE SEE HANDOUT  
FOR MORE INFORMATION.