

## Abstract

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Psychological consequences of traumatic experiences in youth in foster care. The role of social support, prosocial behavior, and creativity

The number of children placed in foster care in Poland is high (75.3 thousand in 2023). These are children and adolescents aged 0 to 18 years who are fully or partially deprived of care from their biological families. Within this group, there are 17.2 thousand individuals who were placed in institutional foster care, most often in “children’s homes.” Children are referred to residential childcare facilities when their families fail to fulfil the obligation of providing proper care. Statistical data presented by the Polish Commissioner for Children’s Rights in 2016 (Szymańczak, 2016) suggest that children and adolescents residing in the foster care system frequently meet clinical criteria for the experience of complex trauma; however, to date, there are no unambiguous studies conducted in Poland in this area.

The aim of the study was to analyze the role of perceived social support, prosocial behaviors, and creativity in the relationship between complex trauma and the occurrence of psychopathological symptoms in a group of children and adolescents residing in residential childcare facilities. It was expected that perceived social support, prosocial behaviors, and creativity would play a mediating role in the relationship between complex trauma and the occurrence of psychopathological symptoms. Moreover, it was assumed that higher levels of perceived social support, prosocial behaviors, and creativity would be associated with a reduction in psychopathological symptoms. The existence of relationships between psychopathological symptoms and sociodemographic factors (gender, age, length of stay in institutional foster care, and receiving psychiatric or psychotherapeutic care) was also examined.

The study had a cross-sectional design. A total of 312 residents aged 8 to 18 years participated in the study; however, further analyses included data from 253 residents aged 11 to 18 years with intellectual development within the normative range ( $M = 14.5$ ;  $SD = 2.1$ ), including 122 boys and 131 girls.

The obtained results indicate a high prevalence of complex trauma in the group of adolescents staying in residential childcare facilities – 84.6% of residents of institutional foster care experienced at least three traumatic events. The results showed that complex trauma is associated with greater severity of overall psychopathological symptoms. Girls and older residents are in the group of increased risk for the occurrence of internalizing disorder symptoms. A longer stay in institutional foster care is associated with lower severity of PTSD symptoms (avoidance and hyperarousal) as well as with lower severity of negative emotional symptoms related to difficulties in functioning. The results of the own study emphasize the beneficial role of perceived social support for mental health. A mediating role of perceived family support was observed in the relationship between complex trauma and the occurrence of psychopathological symptoms. Prosocial behaviors are indirectly associated with lower severity of posttraumatic symptoms through perceived social support. The results suggest that everyday creativity may fulfil a protective function with regard to the severity of anxiety and depression symptoms as well as internalizing disorders. In contrast, artistic creativity appears to fulfil primarily an expressive function, which is not always associated with effective emotional regulation. At the same time, the obtained results indicate that a higher level of perceived social support and prosocial behaviors promotes the development of a creative orientation.

The results of this doctoral dissertation indicate that the effectiveness of provided support and the improvement of functioning of adolescents residing in residential childcare facilities require an understanding of the complexity of traumatic experiences, in-depth knowledge regarding the occurrence of posttraumatic symptoms in children and adolescents, and the role of protective and supportive factors in resilience processes. The obtained results may constitute essential support in planning therapeutic and specialist care aimed at early identification and appropriate response in cases of psychopathological symptoms. Moreover, taking into account the results of the study, the educational and specialist staff of residential childcare facilities may, in accordance with the needs of risk groups, plan and implement targeted preventive actions and activities.

**Keywords:** complex trauma, psychopathological symptoms, perceived social support, prosocial behaviors, creativity, adolescents residing in institutional foster care