



This is a printer friendly version of an article from the The Tennessean. To print this article open the file menu and choose Print

< < Back

## Study says families better than foster care for kids It analyzed cases with possible abuse, neglect

By WENDY KOCH  
*USA Today*  
and TIM GHIANNI  
*Staff Writer*

Published: Tuesday, 07/03/07

Children whose families are investigated for abuse or neglect are likely to do better in life if they stay with their families rather than go into foster care, a new study says.

The findings intensify a vigorous debate in child welfare: whether children are better protected with their families or away from them.

Kids who stayed with their families were less likely to become juvenile delinquents or teen mothers and more likely to hold jobs as young adults, according to the study by Joseph J. Doyle Jr., an economics professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management who studies social policy.

Two experts on the subject, a Green Hills psychologist and a Cumberland County lawman, disagreed with the results.

"We all hear every year about some child who was killed by his parents or her parents," said Kathryn Sherrod, of Counseling Associates in Green Hills.

Cumberland County Sheriff Butch Burgess disagrees even more vehemently. Not only has he witnessed the results of abuse and neglect in his county, but he and his wife, Vicki, have fostered more than 30 children in the past 16 years.

"The foster system's not perfect, but it's miles ahead of where they've been," he said.

### Studies' results vary

MIT's Doyle said his study, which tracked at least 15,000 kids from 1990 to 2002, is the largest to look at the effects of foster care. He studied children in Illinois because a database there links abuse investigations to other government records.

The National Science Foundation funded the study.

Other studies show that the 500,000 children in U.S. foster care are more likely than other kids to drop out of school, commit crimes, abuse drugs and become teen parents.

Doyle's study, however, provides "the first viable, empirical evidence" of the benefits of keeping kids with their families, said Gary Stangler, executive director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, a foundation for foster teens.

Smaller studies have found kids from abusive families do better in foster care.

### **Some foster kids thrive**

Psychologist Sherrod said "to make the overriding statement that all children should be home with their parents is to ignore the fact that some parents are horrendous in terms of providing nurture and care."

Burgess, who is on the foster care review board for the Department of Children's Services branch in Cumberland County, points to the case of his son, Nick, 8. He and his wife began fostering Nick when he was 3. A couple of years later, they adopted him.

"When we got him the first couple of weeks, he never spoke, he just screamed. He'd just basically been neglected," Burgess said.

The change has been dramatic: "He got the perfect attendance award, the A honor roll award, he was the best speller and best reader in second grade.

"That's thousands of miles from where he started out. We didn't do anything except give him a place where he's safe and loved."

Published: Tuesday, 07/03/07

---