

30 years later in Romania: What happened to the babies deprived of human contact?

In 1990, the outside world discovered [Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu's] network of “child gulags,” in which an estimated 170,000 abandoned infants, children, and teens were being raised.

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In the decade after the fall of Ceaușescu, the new Romanian government welcomed Western child-development experts to simultaneously help and study the tens of thousands of children still warehoused in state care. Researchers hoped to answer some long-standing questions: Are there sensitive periods in neural development, after which the brain of a deprived child cannot make full use of the mental, emotional, and physical stimulation later offered?

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Children taken out of orphanages before their second birthday were benefiting from being with families far more than those who stayed longer... When the children were reassessed in a “strange situation” playroom at age 3.5, the portion who displayed secure attachments climbed from the baseline of 3 percent to nearly 50 percent among the foster-care kids, but to only 18 percent among those who remained institutionalized—and, again, the children moved before their second birthday did best. “Timing is critical,” the researchers wrote.

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[Professor Charles] Nelson cautions that the door doesn’t “slam shut” for children left in institutions beyond 24 months of age. “But the longer you wait to get children into a family,” he says, “the harder it is to get them back on an even keel.”

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