

FOSTER PARENTING

Influences on the Decision to Become or Not Become a Foster Parent

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Abstract

This article describes influences on individuals' decision to become or not become a foster parent. Interviews were conducted with participants who had completed preservice training in preparation to become a foster parent. Participants described how training and other factors helped them decide whether or not to become foster parents. Implications for foster care professionals are related both to foster parent training and to foster parent recruitment.

EACH YEAR, THOUSANDS OF CHILDREN are removed from their biological families and placed in foster homes. In fact, at the end of 1994, an estimated 468,000 children were in foster homes, a dramatic increase from the approximately 262,000 children receiving foster care services at the end of 1982 (Congressional Research Service, 1997). Unfortunately, recent years have brought a continued decline in the overall well-being of families and children with an increase of reported cases of child abuse and neglect in the United States. Thus, predictions are that the number of children requiring out-of-home care will continue to soar into the 500,000s by the year 2000 (Carney, 1997).

Family foster care provides planned, time-limited, substitute family care for children who cannot be adequately cared for at home. Additionally, in an effort to help resolve the problems that led to the need for placement, foster care provides social services to these children and their families (Blumenthal, 1983). According to the National Commission on Family Foster Care, "The goal of family foster care is to provide opportunities for healing, growth, and development leading to healthier infants, children, youth, and families, with safe and nurturing relationships" (1991, p. 51).

Foster Children

Not only has the number of children needing foster care become overwhelming, but it has become difficult to find families equipped to meet the increasingly complex emotional, behavioral, psychological, and medical needs these children experience (Pasztor & Wynne,

1995; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1989; Woolf, 1990). Research has shown that foster children have up to seven times more emotional adjustment problems, developmental delays, and acute and chronic health problems than a comparative group of poor children (Rosenfeld et al., 1997).

Halfon, Mendonca, and Berkowitz (1995) found that 84% of their sample of foster children had emotional and developmental problems. "Younger children were more likely to have gross and fine motor problems. Language abnormalities were most frequently observed in children ages one to five. Cognitive problems affected approximately one third of the population under age five years and were detected in 52% of school-age children. Emotional, self-regulatory (coping and self-help), relational and behavioral abnormalities were most prevalent in school-age children" (p. 389).

This account does not include the thousands of adolescents in foster care who experience similar problems, but who are also facing the task of preparing for independent living after foster care. Preparation includes, among other things, job skill training, handling money, finding housing, learning parenting skills, and maintaining a household (Maluccio, Krieger, & Pine, 1990).

Motivations for Foster Parenting

Commonly expressed motivations for becoming a foster parent include fulfilling the need for foster homes in the community, enjoying and wanting to help children, providing a companion for an only child or for oneself, increasing family size, adoption, obtaining a

substitute for a child who has died or who has grown and left home, religious reasons, and supplementing family income (Denby & Rindfleisch, 1996). Situations also exist in which the child is known to the applicant, such as a the child of a close friend who is deceased or the friend of one's own child. Differences in motivations have been identified based on the age of foster children desired, ethnicity, geographic region of a state, agency with whom one is affiliated, length of time licensed, and number of children in placement (Iowa Foster Family Recruitment and Retention Project, 1994).

Successful Foster Family Placements

One of the major concerns when placing children in foster homes is the risk that the placement will not be successful (Stone & Stone, 1983). Due to the repeated separations this creates for children, foster home breakdowns or the unplanned removal of children from foster homes can be traumatic for children and may interfere with the child's later formation of intimate relationships (McGowan & Stutz, 1991; Rosenfeld et al., 1997; Stone & Stone, 1983). One study examined foster care case records and reported that nearly 50% of the cases ended with the child being removed from the foster home prior to the intended time (Stone & Stone, 1983).

In order to lessen the likelihood that these breakdowns will occur, children should be placed in what Daly and Dowd (1992) call a "harm-free, effective environment." This is an environment that "is not only free from abuse and neglect and in compliance with legal and licensing guidelines, but also promotes children's rights and offers children the opportunity to receive care and treatment that promote spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical growth" (Daly & Dowd, 1992, p. 489). Factors promoting this kind of environment include a clearly defined model of foster care, dedicated and skilled foster parents, an overall attitude that focuses on what children and caregivers do right rather than what they do wrong, adequate training, and program evaluation (Daly & Dowd, 1992). Additionally, it is important for foster parents to show respect to the children in their care, as well as to set clear limits and follow through with consequences. Morrisette (1994) suggests that "emotional stability, a genuine liking for children, and the ability to collaborate with professionals" (pp. 235–236) are important attributes of effective foster parents.

Not only do foster parents influence the potential success of the foster care placement, foster care professionals make a difference as well (Ray & Horner, 1990;

Stone & Stone, 1983). While foster parents provide the practical care of the child in their home, foster care caseworkers provide support and a perspective enhanced by case experience (Titterington, 1990). Increased involvement of the foster care caseworker has a strong influence on the success of the placement. Additionally, a high level of rapport between the foster care agency and the foster parent is important in promoting successful foster placements.

Finally, behavioral characteristics of the foster child also may have an impact on the success of foster care placements. Children who are more aggressive and are poorly socialized are more likely to experience unsuccessful placements. This is a particularly disturbing finding since many foster children experience emotional and behavioral difficulties (Stone & Stone, 1983).

Foster Parent Recruitment

Once children are identified as needing foster care, the problem of finding placement homes still remains. In recent years, there has been a decrease in the number of families able and willing to provide foster care. In particular, there is a significant need for urban foster families, minority foster families, and foster families to care for teenagers and children with special needs (Pasztor & Wynne, 1995). A lack of support for and positive recognition of foster parents may contribute to this shortage of foster families (Pasztor & Burgess, 1982; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1989). Examples include low foster parent reimbursement rates, a lack of respite care for foster families, insufficient training, and the unavailability of caseworkers (Pasztor & Wynne, 1995). Additional factors related to the shortage of foster parents are: (a) the poor public image of foster care; (b) a decrease in the pool of potential foster parents due to changes in society, such as an increase in dual-working families, higher divorce rates, and the high cost of housing (Pasztor & Burgess, 1982; Smith & Gutheil, 1988); and (c) greater difficulty in meeting the increasingly complex needs of today's foster children (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1989). In addition, Smith and Gutheil (1988) state that media representation of the foster care system has often been negative and discouraging. In light of these issues, foster parent recruitment has become a challenging yet important task. A report generated by James Bell Associates and Westat, Inc. states that "resolving the problems of shortages and maldistribution of foster family homes requires identifying current problems in both the recruitment and retention of foster parents" (U.S. De-

partment of Health and Human Services, 1993, p. iv).

Effective foster parent recruitment begins with the education of communities regarding not only the importance of foster parenting, but also providing a realistic picture of the complex nature of the task (Pasztor, 1985; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1989). Support and recognition from the community will aid in the development of support services necessary in not only the recruitment of foster parents, but in retention as well. This support may be improved by clarifying the foster parent role and compensating foster parents at a level commensurate with the skills, knowledge, and ability required to successfully fulfill this position (Pasztor & Wynne, 1995; Woolf, 1990). In addition, foster parent retention is important to recruitment efforts in that satisfied foster families are likely to tell others of their success, which is a strong form of recruitment (Pasztor & Wynne, 1995).

One of the most common models of foster parent recruitment employs a foster parent as a trainer of other potential foster parents. This practice is based on the premise that foster parents are effective as trainers not only because they can answer the questions of potential foster parents, but because they may also provide the most realistic and enthusiastic messages about foster parenting (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1989). A more recent trend in foster home recruitment is the market research approach (Coyne, 1986; Pasztor & Burgess, 1982; Smith & Gutheil, 1988), which is thought to be more effective than more traditional approaches (Moore, Grandpre, & Scoll, 1988). Marketing theory uses the notion that some groups of people are of interest for recruitment, while others are not. Thus, the marketing approach consists of first deciding which groups are of interest (e.g., extended family members) and designing persuasive recruitment strategies to reach these groups (Coyne, 1986). The marketing approach is based on the concept of exchange relationships, or “the offering of value to another party in exchange for value” (Coyne, 1986, pp. 30–31). Thus, recruitment will be more successful if both the agency and targeted prospective foster parents perceive that more is gained by the exchange than is lost.

Recruitment techniques seem to be most effective when they are realistic and positive. For example, an emphasis needs to be placed on the temporary nature of foster care, emphasizing the goal of the foster child’s reunification with his or her biological family. In addition, literature states that using recruiting strategies that target individuals who are motivated to rescue children or portray a desperate need for foster parents may not fit well

with the goals of the foster care system or may scare off potential families (Pasztor, 1985). By promoting the “rescuing” nature of foster care, recruiters may appeal to those who desire to save children from “bad” families. These settings are seldom likely to promote reunification with biological families and may actually discourage a child’s attachment to the biological family (Coyne, 1986).

Finally, because one-time recruitment activities are rarely effective, recruiting efforts need to be ongoing and persistent (Coyne, 1986; Moore et al., 1988; Rodwell & Biggerstaff, 1993). Pasztor and Burgess (1982) found that most potential foster parents consider the job of fostering for at least one year before they contact a foster parent agency. In addition, because providing a foster home affects the entire family, recruiting efforts need to be targeted at all members of prospective foster families (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1989). Efforts also need to be made to recruit foster homes that can accommodate the specific needs of the individual children in need of foster care. For example, there is a need for minority families to provide care, as well as families who are equipped to care for children who need specialized medical care. Finally, recruiters should have access to a support system consisting of regular peer contact and supportive supervisory personnel (Smith & Gutheil, 1988).

While specific recruitment strategies vary greatly, some common ways to recruit foster parents include using television, radio, newspaper, brochures, posters, church bulletins, information booths at fairs and other public events, and community forums. Combining these strategies with the use of well-trained and enthusiastic foster parents or others as recruiters can be very effective (Pasztor & Wynne, 1995). Overall, the most successful recruitment strategies attract and retain the various types of foster families that are needed and are targeted at families who are most likely to respond (Coyne, 1986).

Foster Parent Training

Preservice training is provided in an effort to prepare foster parents for their challenging task. The content of many foster parent training efforts is related to helping participants understand children’s development while preparing them for anticipated difficulties that may occur during their foster care situation. In order to increase placement stability, training also provides foster parents with orientation to the agency and support for the functioning of the foster family (Lee & Holland, 1991). Preservice training is not only designed to improve skills necessary for the provision of successful fos-

ter care, but as a tool to help potential foster parents make a decision regarding their own appropriateness for the task of foster parenting. In addition, training introduces participants to the idea of working as a team with agencies and other foster care professionals (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1989).

Based on these principles, foster parent preservice training appears to be a successful tool in preparing prospective foster parents (Boyd & Remy, 1978; Titterington, 1990). Studies have demonstrated that foster parent training increases positive placement outcomes, decreases the occurrence of failed placements, and increases the likelihood of foster parent retention (Boyd & Remy, 1978). Training can also lead to a greater communication between foster parents, with less reliance on social workers (Titterington, 1990).

Various training programs are implemented throughout the United States. An example of such a program is the Nova University model (NOVA). This model was developed in the mid-1970s under a research grant from the National Institute of Mental Health with matching funds from the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services. NOVA training is designed to “promote group development whereby social service agencies and foster parents can explore potential foster parents’ motivations for fostering, ability to work with others, attitudes toward discipline and birth parents, and their problem-solving abilities, flexibility, and sensitivity to foster care dynamics” (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1989, p. 33). This training uses activities that give participants experience with potential situations foster families may encounter. In addition to training, NOVA also screens foster parents. Not only does the training allow trainers the opportunity to evaluate a participant’s likelihood of success as a foster care provider, but participants also have the opportunity to consider how appropriate the task of foster parenting is for them personally. NOVA training generally consists of a 3-hour orientation followed by six 3-hour sessions, for a total of 21 hours (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1989).

Participants and Setting

The potential foster parents in this study were participating in Preparation for Fostering: Preservice Training for Foster Families (Iowa Department of Human Services, 1992) (see Table 1). This 12-hour training, required of all persons who desire to become foster parents in Iowa, was developed based on the NOVA Foster Parent Preservice Training Program (Nova University

Behavioral Science Center, 1992). The training occurred at area community college sites in Iowa. Training was conducted by a two-person team consisting of a social worker and a licensed foster parent. Preparation for Fostering has four goals: (1) education; (2) mutual assessment; (3) group process, and (4) teamwork. First, because of the critical nature of the tasks expected of foster parents, it is important that participants have a thorough understanding of the foster care system and its impact on children and their families, both biological and foster. The second goal of training involves mutual assessment. The agency wants to ensure that children placed in foster homes will be both physically and emotionally safe. It is also important that foster families make a commitment to develop a plan either to help the children return to their biological families or place them in another setting. The decision about the appropriateness of families to provide foster care cannot be the trainers’ alone; in addition to the expertise of the trainers, participants must evaluate their own appropriateness for the task. Therefore, as a joint effort a recommendation can be made regarding how suitable a family is for the task of fostering. The third goal, group process, relies on the belief that adults learn best through practice and group discussion. Therefore, training involves a variety of interaction activities such as discussion, role play, and written

Table 1. Sample Characteristics*

CHARACTERISTIC	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Age		
21–35	64	35.2%
36–45	77	42.3%
46–55	23	12.6%
56–73	11	6.0%
Gender		
Female	116	63.7%
Male	66	36.3%
Marital Status		
Married	144	79.1%
Unmarried	38	20.9%
Education		
Less than high school	18	9.9%
High school or GED	50	27.5%
Some college or technical training	67	36.8%
College graduate or professional degree	46	25.3%

* The total sample numbered 182; however, due to missing data, not all frequencies equal 182, nor do all percentages equal 100%.

exercises. Finally, since the foster care system is based on teamwork, a goal of training is to give participants opportunities to practice working as a team with the social worker in developing and implementing a case plan.

Procedure

The present study is part of a larger, one-year longitudinal study of potential foster parents who participated in the Preparation for Fostering training described previously. These potential foster parents were tested, interviewed, or surveyed at four different times during the year. Prior to training, 491 potential participants were asked to complete a pre-test (Time 1); 64% responded for a Time 1 sample of 313.

The pre-test consisted of seven parts: (1) background characteristics; (2) experience with foster care; (3) experience with other individuals and families; (4) motivations for foster parenting; (5) foster parenting attitudes; (6) knowledge of foster care; and (7) parenting attitudes.

Approximately 1 week following the completion of training, participants were asked to complete a post-test (Time 2) consisting of four parts: (1) foster parenting attitudes, (2) knowledge of foster care, (3) perception and overall rating of the training, and (4) parenting attitudes. Of the 313 from Time 1, 264 (84%) returned the test.

Approximately 6 months following the completion of training, participants were asked to voluntarily participate in a short telephone interview (Time 3) addressing the usefulness of training. Participants indicated their licensing status and were asked somewhat different questions in the interview depending on whether they (a) had become licensed foster parents (Form A), (b) were planning to become licensed (Form B), or (c) had decided not to become licensed (Form C). Approximately 58% ($n = 182$) of the original 313 (69% of the 264 participants at Time 2) completed the telephone interview.

Table 2. Summary of Responses to Question 1, “What about training helped you the most in making your decision to become (or not become) a foster parent?”

CATEGORY	FREQUENCY OF RESPONSES	
	PERCENTAGE	<i>n</i>
Methods	10.3%	18
Content	16.0%	28
Nothing about training	70.3%	123
Miscellaneous	3.4%	6

Note. There were 175 responses.

Finally, one year following the completion of training, participants were asked to complete a survey (Time 4) that assessed: (a) attitudes toward foster parenting, (b) satisfaction with the training, and (c) information regarding licensing status. The survey was completed by 122 participants (39% of the original 313).

Information gathered during the telephone interview (Time 3) was used in the current study. The two questions examined from the interview explored (1) characteristics about training that helped people in making their decision to become or not become licensed foster parents and (2) influences, other than training, that helped them in making their decision to become or not become licensed. Specifically, the questions are:

1. What about training helped you the most in making your decision to become (Forms A and B) or not become (Form C) a foster parent? Why?
2. What, other than training, helped you in making your decision to become (Forms A and B) or not become (Form C) a foster parent? Why?

Interviews were conducted by two interviewers and lasted 20–30 minutes. Interviewers made three attempts to reach each participant; if the person could not be reached, the participant was no longer in the study. Calls were made at varying times in the morning, afternoon, and evening and the interviewers made appointments with those who requested a more convenient time. In addition, efforts were made, through directory assistance, to contact those who had moved since the beginning of the study.

Initially, three researchers independently organized the responses to the telephone interviews into a coding system. This involved searching through the data for pat-

Table 3. Summary of Responses to Question 2, “What, other than training, helped you in making your decision to become (or not become) a foster parent?”

CATEGORY	FREQUENCY OF RESPONSES	
	PERCENTAGE	(<i>N</i>)
Media influence	3.9%	8
Work influence	3.9%	8
Personal motivations/experiences	14.6%	30
Family expansion	19.4%	40
Family/friends influence	20.9%	43
Response to need	30.6%	63
Miscellaneous	6.8%	14

Note. There were 206 responses to the question.

terns and regularities and writing down words and phrases to represent these topics and patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). After each researcher developed a set of categories, several meetings were held in order to reach an agreement on the overriding themes that emerged from the data and resolve any discrepancies in interpretation. This is similar to Guba's (1981) process of triangulation. Tables 2 and 3 provide a summary of the final categories agreed upon by the researchers. Tables 4 and 5 describe the responses grouped by licensing status.

Findings

Question 1: Influence of Training

When participants were asked to describe the ways in which training helped them decide to become or not become a foster parent, their answers typically fell into three major categories:

1. *Methods of training*
2. *Content of training*
3. *Nothing about training*

Methods of Training. When asked how training influenced their decision to become or not become a foster parent, 10.3% of the respondents stated that the methods used in conducting the training were influential in their decision. Most responses in this category identify group discussion and interaction, trainer attitude and abilities, or training activities and exercises as the aspect of training that helped them most in making their decision. Several participants discussed the importance of talking with others in the group, especially those with experience in the foster care system. Some also discussed the significance, both positive and negative, of personal characteristics and attitudes of trainers:

Talking to others in the group. Their comments helped me make my decision to become a foster parent. Listening to the positive and negative experiences.

The personal comments from the trainer and foster parent calmed my fears.

One of the facilitators was not a good speaker.

Others discussed the significance of specific activities or exercises used by the trainers. For example, one participant stated that an exercise in which they were asked to imagine leaving their own family and going to live with another family was "very powerful and helped [them] understand the child's viewpoint." Most of these responses indicate that the methods used in training influenced the participants to become ($n = 17$), rather than not become ($n = 1$), foster parents.

Content of Training. When asked the same question about influence on their decision, 16% of the responses fell into the category describing the content of the training. In this larger category of content, respondents stated that the information presented in training, as well as the recognition of the foster care need through training, was helpful. The responses indicated that training helped these participants recognize the need for foster care to a greater extent than they had previously done. In most cases, exposure to this information influenced them to

Table 4. Responses, Grouped by Licensing Status, to Question 1, "What about training helped you the most in making your decision to become or not become a foster parent? Why?"

CATEGORY	GROUP 1		GROUP 2	
	PERCENTAGE	<i>n</i>	PERCENTAGE	<i>n</i>
Methods of training	10.8%	17	5.6%	1
Content of training	14.6%	23	27.8%	5
Nothing about training	72.0%	113	55.6%	10
Miscellaneous	2.5%	4	11.1%	2

Note. Group 1 includes licensed foster parents (115 Responses) and those planning to become licensed (42 responses) (157 total responses). Group 2 includes those not licensed and not planning to become licensed (18 responses).

Table 5. Responses Grouped by Licensing Status to Question 2, "What, other than training, helped you the most in making your decision to become or not become a foster parent? Why?"

CATEGORY	GROUP 1		GROUP 2	
	PERCENTAGE	<i>n</i>	PERCENTAGE	<i>n</i>
Media influences	4.2%	8	0%	0
Work influences	4.2%	8	0%	0
Personal				
Motivations/experiences	14.3%	27	17.6%	3
Family expansion	19.6%	37	17.6%	3
Family/friends influence	22.2%	42	5.9%	1
Response to need	30.7%	58	29.4%	5
Miscellaneous	4.8%	9	29.4%	5

Note. Group 1 includes licensed foster parents (138 responses) or those planning to become licensed (51 responses) (189 total responses). Group 2 includes those not licensed and not planning to become licensed (17 responses).

become ($n = 23$), rather than not become ($n = 5$), foster parents. Many respondents discussed the significance of learning about the workings of the foster care system as well as those involved in the system:

It laid on the line about what types of children are out there in the foster care system, what their attitudes are, and what their experiences are.

Learning about the legality of the system and the responsibility of the foster parent. There is much more involved in the process than you'd think.

Several also discussed the significance of learning what to expect and how to handle certain situations, as well as the effects of foster care on both the biological and foster families:

When they were talking about keeping the biological families intact or together. It seemed like there was a lot of teamwork involved.

My husband didn't agree with 'sparing the rod' and he didn't agree with the guidelines that foster parents have to follow in discipline problems.

Nothing About Training. The overwhelming majority (70.3%) of the responses to this question stated that training did not influence their decision to become a foster parent. A large portion of these responses stated that the decision to become a foster parent was made prior to training; apparently training did not alter their decision. Some respondents stated that even though their decision to foster was made prior to training, the training served to reinforce their decision and strengthened their satisfaction with the decision.

A large portion of this category consists of responses stating that nothing about the training was helpful in making their decision or that the training had no influence. Very few, however, elaborated on this lack of influence. It is thus unclear if these responses are intended in a neutral way, making them similar to responses previously described (decision made prior to training) or if they were intended in a negative way meaning that training was not beneficial to their decision-making process.

Miscellaneous. In addition to the three major categories, a small portion of responses (3%) did not match any of the previously described categories or did not provide conclusive feedback about foster parent training. Most of these responses said simply that training was good or bad, or that it influenced their decision, but did not provide any specific information about training: "Training was good. I wanted to foster after training."

Question 2: Other Influences

When participants were asked to describe influences, other than training, that helped them decide to become or not become a foster parent, the majority of their responses fell into one or more of the following six categories:

1. *Media influences*
2. *Work influences*
3. *Personal motivations/experiences*
4. *Family expansion*
5. *Family/friends influence*
6. *Response to need*

Media Influences. In response to the question exploring influences, other than training, that contributed to participants' decision to become or not become a foster parent, 3.9% of the responses identified media as a contributing factor. The respondents discussed informational programs and commercials on radio and television, articles on foster care in newspapers and newsletters, and other types of print media as being influential:

The commercials about being foster parents got me interested and then we talked to a social worker.

In listening to the radio and hearing about there not being enough minority families available for foster care. We decided that we should do foster care since we are a minority.

Work Influences. An additional 3.9% of participants cited work experience as influential in the decision to become a foster parent. Many discussed learning of the need for foster care or becoming acquainted with children or families in need of care through such occupations as teaching or social work:

There was nowhere else for the child to go and I had been his teacher the year before, so I was asked to do foster care.

I work in a police department and see children who are in need.

Though the number of responses in the above two categories is small, all of the respondents in this area were influenced by media exposure or work to become, rather than not become, foster parents.

Personal Motivations/Experiences. When asked the same question, 14.6% of the respondents listed personal motivations and experiences as influencing their decision. For example, a few of the participants cited their feelings of moral and/or Christian duty as helpful in making their decision. Some of these respondents discussed their belief that it is the duty of a Christian to help others in this way or that God has blessed them and it is their responsibility to share that blessing with others: "We feel like the Lord gave us our health and we needed to share it by helping others."

In addition, this category consists of responses relating participants' personal experiences that have influenced their decision to become foster parents. Many participants have had previous experiences with foster care, such as previous opportunities to provide foster care, their own parents providing foster care to other children, or they had been foster children themselves. Other participants had worked with foster children in different capacities:

My parents had been foster parents for 26 years.

I was a foster child myself and know how important it is that siblings not be separated. We are willing to take care of all the siblings.

I am a social worker and have several years of experience working with foster children and talking with other social workers.

Finally, the majority of the responses in this category cited the participants' resources, time, energy, or other circumstances at home as helpful in making the decision to become foster parents. Several respondents stated having the proper attitude and ability to love and support, which are necessary when bringing children into the home. Several people also discussed the fact that they had adequate space and time to become foster parents:

I have a great interest in children and my husband and I have lots of room, resources, and energy for foster children.

I have heard about so many children being in the foster care system and felt that I could give them love and attention.

A few participants who decided to not become foster parents ($n = 3$) mentioned lack of space, time, home stability, or energy to share with a child as influences in their decision:

At my age I want to enjoy the time I have with myself.

It's not the right time and I don't have the space in my home.

Family Expansion. A slightly larger number of participants (19.4%) listed the desire to expand their family or have more children in the home as influential in making their decision to become a foster parent. Many of these participants spoke of an inability to have children of their own and a desire to utilize foster care as an alternative way of bringing children into their home: "I can't have children so I thought I would become a foster parent and try to make a difference in a child's life."

Others spoke of fostering in order to bring children into their home who might interact with their own children and serve as "siblings" to them. For example, one person who was interested in providing foster care with the eventual goal of adopting a child stated that they wanted to do so because their son was an only child.

A large part of this category consists of responses citing the desire to adopt as influential in deciding to become foster parents. Many respondents discussed being told that foster parenting is good preparation for caring for an adopted child, or that having provided foster care makes it easier to receive a child through adoption. Several mentioned that providing foster care for specific children was a first step toward adopting them:

We were seeking to adopt and were told that we should go through the foster parent training as a first step toward adoption.

We were trying to seek adoption of our three grandchildren and we needed to take NOVA training.

While the majority of these respondents were motivated to become foster parents by their desire to adopt ($n = 31$), this same desire motivated a few to not become foster parents ($n = 3$), simply because fostering was not their primary goal: "We were leaning more toward adoption, not toward foster parenting."

Family/Friends Influence. Another category that emerged from the responses (20.9%) consists of those stating that other people such as spouses, family members, and friends were influential to the participants' decision to become a foster parent. The majority of these responses stated that friends' positive experiences were a key component in helping them make the decision to become a foster parent. Additionally, the support and encouragement received from family members (e.g., their own children) and others in the community (e.g., child's teacher, social worker) were important:

I know a good friend who was a foster parent and through seeing how good her experience was, I decided to become one.

Our son's Tae Kwan Do instructor approached us about the idea of taking foster kids.

The social worker—I trusted her as a friend and she influenced me to become a foster parent.

Finally, some of the responses in this category cited spousal opinions or desires as influential in making their decision. Most of these respondents spoke of their spouse, usually the wife, as the partner with the idea to foster, and themselves as simply supporting or helping their spouse to fulfill that desire:

My wife is a foster parent and I am supporting her decision.

My husband wanted to pursue it.

The one respondent in this category who decided not to become a foster parent explained that it was due to her husband's influence: "My husband was skeptical about being a foster parent and after the training he didn't want to become a foster parent."

Response to Need. The final category of responses addressing this question is also the largest (30.6%). It consists of responses that cite participants' awareness of the need for foster care and their desire to alleviate some of that need as influential in making the decision to become a foster parent. The respondents in this category learned of the need for foster care in a variety of ways and were motivated to help by a variety of sources, but they all shared an understanding of the foster care need and a desire to act upon that understanding.

While most of the respondents discussed foster care need in general terms, such as, "there are a lot of kids

who need help," two of the respondents identified themselves as members of a minority group and discussed the need for minority foster parents:

We are African American and listen to a radio station that stresses the need for more African American foster parents.

We feel that children need good role models. We can do this because we feel we're good to our own children.

This category also consists of responses citing the desire to help a specific child or family as influential in making the decision to become or not become foster parents. Many of the respondents discussed being involved with a child in need of care and wanting to further help that child through fostering. Others mentioned wanting to help friends or acquaintances who were having family problems:

My grandsons called me up and asked me if I could take care of them. My daughter was on dope and was not taking good care of her children.

I taught a boy and knew he needed help so I am taking care of him until he can be on his own.

The majority of these participants were motivated to become foster parents. However, of those who did not become licensed ($n = 5$), several listed difficulties working with or receiving the specific child for whom they had entered the program:

We decided to back out of foster care for this certain boy we were taking care of because he was too difficult to care for.

We had relatives in foster care and we were going to try to get those kids, but it ended up causing too many disputes within the family.

Miscellaneous. As with Question 1, a small number of the responses to Question 2 (6.8%) did not fit into any of the previously described categories as illustrated by the following examples:

I like kids.

DHS denied me as a foster parent because of a child abuse charge.

Implications

These findings have implications for foster care professionals in two areas: training and recruitment.

Training

Several respondents spoke highly of the group processes used in foster parent preservice training. They were particularly interested in hearing the personal accounts of those having previous experience with foster care, suggesting that this is a crucial component of training. Responses in this category also stressed the importance of the trainers demonstrating a positive attitude, effective speaking skills, and the ability to facilitate group discussion.

In addition to the methods used in training, the content presented in training was viewed as useful in helping individuals decide whether or not to become foster parents. Several respondents stated that information regarding the foster care system such as the legal issues and teamwork involved in fostering was especially valued. Additionally, training prepared participants for situations they were likely to encounter, such as caring for children with special needs. Finally, participants were presented with information about the requirements or philosophy of foster care of which they may have been previously unaware. For example, some participants commented that they had not considered the potential impact that fostering could have on their biological children. Others realized that foster parenting is not limited to helping the child only but is designed to benefit the foster child's entire family. While this information served to clarify and prepare potential foster parents for the task, in some cases participants used the information to decide against pursuing foster parent licensure. Thus, training seems to be appropriately accomplishing its goal of mutual selection.

As discussed previously, the majority of responses fell into the category called Nothing About Training. Very few participants elaborated on their response, however, making it difficult to interpret this finding. This does not rule out the merits of training; it simply says that something else influenced their decision. It is possible that most participants have made a firm personal commitment to become a foster parent before attending training. Perhaps most of those who have taken the step of participating in training are no longer ambivalent about their decision, but are confident that they want to become foster parents. Pasztor and Burgess (1982) found that most potential foster parents consider the job of fos-

tering for at least one year before they contact a foster parent agency; this decision is not taken lightly. Due to the large number of responses in this category, it is necessary to explore the influences, other than training, that contribute to participants' decision-making process. If the decision is made prior to training, what else contributes to the decision?

Influences Other Than Training

In response to the question exploring influences other than training that contribute to individuals' decisions to become or not become a foster parent, a small number stated that the media were helpful in making their decision. The fact that this was such a small category is difficult to understand. It is possible that there is a need for an increase in the use of media designed to create awareness of the need for those willing to provide foster care. In several cases participants stated that media such as television, radio, and newspaper articles sparked their initial interest, prompting them to follow through by contacting a social worker. Perhaps others would be likely to pursue foster care if they had greater opportunity for similar exposure to information about foster care and the role it plays in our society.

Another possible explanation for the low number of responses in this category is simply that media did not play a significant role in the decision-making process of potential foster parents. This is a difficult position to support, however, due to the limited information gained from the responses surrounding the role of media. As stated previously, most of the responses in the category briefly stated that media sparked their initial interest, but few elaborated on aspects of the media campaign that were most influential or how much media exposure they had experienced before they began pursuing additional information about foster care. It is also possible that those who did not give a response in this category had experienced some form of media, but stated that other factors were more influential later on in making their final decision. While media may not help potential foster parents make their final decision, it is likely that it provides an impetus for many to further explore the possibility of providing foster care. Thus, it would be premature to conclude that media are not an important aspect of foster care recruitment.

A theme that emerged from individuals' responses relates to the important role played by family and friends when considering the job of foster parenting. The fact that many respondents stated that they received support from friends and families or observed others who had

positive foster care experiences has strong implications for recruitment. An effort should be made to encourage current foster parents to recruit those they believe would provide high quality foster care. It may also be helpful for agencies to target their recruitment campaigns at families and friends of those currently providing foster care. It is likely that these individuals have a more realistic picture of foster care, having observed the care situation as experienced by their acquaintances. While training models that include a licensed foster parent as a trainer provide participants with the perspective of a current foster parent, perhaps this perspective is even more meaningful when it comes from someone with whom the participant is acquainted and whose opinions are respected by the participant.

Since participants stated that exposure to the personal accounts of experienced foster parents enhanced the quality of preservice training, it is likely that this concept could be further expanded to benefit the entire recruitment process. As stated previously, individuals usually consider the decision of whether or not to become a foster parent for a lengthy period of time before they officially pursue licensure (Pasztor & Burgess, 1982).

In addition, the findings of this study suggest that people often make the decision to become a foster parent prior to their participation in preservice training. Therefore, it may be beneficial to involve experienced foster parents much earlier in the recruitment process than preservice training. Licensed foster parents could be involved in preliminary recruitment activities in several ways. For example, articles written by foster parents addressing issues such as why they chose to become foster parents, the benefits and challenges they face as foster care providers, and how to become involved in foster care should be written for a wide audience. In other words, these articles should be published in magazines, newsletters, etc. that target a wide readership of adults, not only those who have specifically expressed an interest in foster care.

While articles concerning foster care are not uncommon, it seems as though the majority are aimed at current foster parents in an effort to offer advice and share information that would be helpful in existing foster home situations. It is less common, however, that articles are written to spark individuals' initial interest in foster care, encouraging them to explore the possibility of becoming foster parents themselves. In addition to written materials, it may be equally beneficial to hold workshops, open houses, and information sessions led by currently licensed foster parents for groups of potential fos-

ter parents. Groups to target may include religious organizations, businesses/places of employment, philanthropic organizations, social clubs, etc. Furthermore, the Internet is currently a valuable medium for sharing information, thus it cannot be overlooked as a potentially powerful recruitment tool. Information concerning the fundamentals of foster care and the personal accounts of those who chose to provide foster care should be easily accessible and plentiful via the Internet. Perhaps it would aid individuals when deciding whether or not to become a foster parent if they could obtain information and answers to their questions in the convenience and anonymity of their own home.

The largest group of responses states that an awareness of the need for foster care was the most influential in helping participants make the decision of whether or not to become a foster parent. This finding emphasizes the importance of educating the community about the crucial need for foster homes. As suggested previously, current foster care providers can play an important role in the continued efforts to alert those who are simply unaware of the dire need for foster families who can care for children in need of a safe, stable, and caring environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important for foster care professionals to be aware of influences that potential foster parents consider helpful in making their decision of whether or not to become a foster parent. Not only does this article address aspects of training and recruiting efforts that participants found helpful in their decision-making process, but it also identifies influences beyond the realm of the social service system that impacted their decision. It sheds light on the diversity as well as the consistency of the influences. This research was originally designed to evaluate aspects of training in relation to the decision to become a foster parent, and the findings will assist professionals in conducting preservice training. However, the implications for recruiting prospective foster parents are the surprise outcome of this study.

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