

Research Abstract
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Summary of - The Relationship Between Foster Children and the Foster Parents' Own Children: A Unique Entity

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The objective of this study was to explore the relationship between foster children and foster parents' own children (FPOC) from the perspective of the FPOC. Eight families were included in this study and twelve FPOC were interviewed. All FPOC were between the ages of 12 and 18. The study was qualitative and exploratory in nature. Data was collected using open-ended interviews and analyzed using open and axial coding.

Four distinct relationship types were found. The first of these was entitled "the friendship relationship." Four FPOC fit into this category. These FPOC viewed their relationship with their foster siblings very positively and saw their foster sibling as a friend. They enjoyed spending time with their foster sibling and participating in many "with" activities, activities where they participated as equals. These FPOC felt that they "connected" with their foster sibling and as a result were able to understand them and communicate with them. All four "friendship" FPOC gained pleasure from spending time with their foster sibling and felt no sense or obligation to have a relationship with them. It was also important to these FPOC that the foster children be included in their concept of family, they were seen as brothers and sisters.

The second type of relationship found I entitled the "parentified relationship." Three FPOC fit into this category. This relationship resembled the relationship between a child and a parent. Like in the previous category, these FPOC rated their relationship positively, however they viewed their role in the foster child's life as a parental figure. Instead of "with" activities these FPOC participated mostly in "for" activities, where they did things "for" their foster sibling. The most important reason for spending time with their foster sibling was a desire to help these children and to allow them to feel part of the family. In these relationships there was often a large age gap. The foster children were young children and the FPOC teenagers.

The third type of relationship was the "relationship of indifference." The three FPOC included in this category viewed their relationship with a "take-it-or-leave-it" attitude. They viewed the relationship as neutral, neither good nor bad. These FPOC failed to feel a sense of connection with their foster sibling. They felt that they were too different to have a strong relationship. Although FPOC did not report gaining much pleasure from spending time with their foster sibling they tended to spend large amounts of time together. This time was spent engaged in activities

around the house and lacked quality communication, it was merely quantity time. Although these FPOC included foster children in their concept of family it was always with the clear condition that they were foster brothers and foster sisters.

The last relationship type was entitled the “mildly resentful relationship.” This was the only negative relationship type. Only two FPOC were included in this category. Although these FPOC participated in similar activities with their foster siblings, they were the only ones to express a desire to purposefully avoid spending time with their foster siblings. They often found their foster sibling behaved in ways which annoyed and frustrated them. Although not intense, resentment was an issue for these FPOC. They resented the time their parents had to invest in the foster child. They often felt obligated to interact with the foster child and never felt they gained anything from these interactions. They also were reluctant to include the foster child in their concept of family clearly identifying that the foster child was not their brother or sister.

The findings also suggested that there are properties that make the foster child/FPOC relationship unique from other sibling relationships. The first of these is the temporary nature of the foster placement. FPOC are often reluctant to invest in a relationship with their foster sibling since it could end at anytime. Secondly, foster children do not share a common past with the FPOC. This was an important difference for the FPOC. Being unable to understand the foster child’s often hurtful past made it difficult to become close. Although some FPOC felt that their relationship was close a limitation to closeness was apparent in all the relationships analyzed. The comfort and ease that is present between brothers and sisters was not present in these relationships. For example FPOC did not feel comfortable engaging in non-hurtful sibling rivalry with their foster sibling. Finally, FPOC understood that foster children are in their home because they are in need of care. They see themselves as part of this care and often viewed the foster child as “a project.”

After the findings were analyzed and organized I tried to understand what factors controlled the type of relationship which developed. Five factors were identified.

1. Age - When there was a large age gap between the foster child and the FPOC a parentified relationship was likely to develop. When the foster child was close in age to the FPOC resentment was much more likely to occur.
2. Gender - All of the friendship relationships occurred between members of the same sex. It is possible that individuals of the same gender are able to connect at a deeper level because of increased similarity and comfort with each other.
3. Personality of the FPOC and foster child - When the foster child and FPOC share personality traits they are more likely to develop a positive friendship relationship. Also when foster children are more open and friendly, the FPOC is more likely to pursue and invest in a relationship.
4. Length of Placement - Time can often eliminate initial resentment suggesting a longer placement will facilitate positive relationship development.
5. Family Functioning - The way the foster family functioned as a whole played a large role

in facilitating positive relationship development. When families possessed strong communication abilities and problem solving skills they were much better at adapting to the entrance of a new member to their family. This resulted in better relationships between the FPOC and foster children. It was also important that families maintain a family boundary that the foster child could not cross. This was done very sensitively and as such, most FPOC felt that their parents treated the foster children no differently than themselves. It was important that families clearly define the foster children as “foster.” Secondly, families who preserved family time better facilitated positive relationships. The final way was maintaining this boundary was to have a space where FPOC could go and not be bothered by the foster child, a “family space.”

Because this was a small study further research into this relationship is important. Based on this project I made three recommendations to child welfare professionals. These were:

1. The first pertains to matching foster children to appropriate homes. To facilitate positive relationship development and eliminate resentment on the part of the FPOC, it is advisable to avoid placing foster children who are in the same age bracket as the FPOC. If the foster parents' own children are teenagers placing young children in the home is recommended. It would be particularly inadvisable to place early adolescent foster children in a home where FPOC of the same age are present.
 2. Second, agencies should be careful when selecting families suitable for fostering. Evidence of strong communication and problem solving ability should be present in families if FPOC are going to accept the foster child and develop a relationship with him or her. FPOC should be included in the fostering process but a sense of obligation should not be placed on them.
 3. Third, foster care agencies should advise their foster parents about the importance of maintaining family boundaries. Although they should include the foster child as much as possible in order to avoid loss on the part of FPOC they must value and maintain family integrity. They can suggest protecting space, time and identity.
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