

## RESEARCH ABSTRACT

Foster Family-based Treatment Association's  
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### Foster Parents' Children: Their Thoughts on Fostering and the Role They Wish to Play.

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This research was conducted by the author in England, as part of her work for a Masters Degree. The researcher was interested in exploring the contributions that foster parents' own children made to placements and whether the children wish to be more involved in the process of fostering.

#### **Methodology:**

A literature review revealed very few published articles on this subject area, most of which were from the United Kingdom, many of which were practitioner research. The main findings are from the following: Part 1993, Pugh 1994, Ames 1997, Davies 1997, Spears and Cross 2003, and Twigg 2003).

To include as wide a source of information as possible it was determined to use questionnaires as the primary tool to collect data. Considerable care was taken to ensure that the questionnaires be as effective as possible (Fuller and Petch, p. 69). The format of the questionnaires was a mixture of Likert scale responses to statements, complimented by areas in which the respondent could make additional comments. These additional comments were systematically collated and coded in order to give them equal weight and then grouped into themes that emerged from the data.

The questionnaires were designed to have a core consistency for all groups of respondents, so that responses between the groups could be compared. The perspectives could then be analyzed to highlight similarities and differences in perception of children of foster parents. Family codes were created to identify members of the same. The children were mailed individual questionnaires within their families to enable them to have their own voice, rather than have their families respond on their behalf. In this way, informed consent for the minors to take part was believed to have been given by their parents, who were also taking part in the study (Greig and Taylor, 1999).

To devise child-friendly questionnaires, the researcher asked child readers to assist with reading the drafts and then their suggestions were incorporated into the final copy. These suggestions included using bright colored paper and having faces to color in for the Likert scale.

In an attempt to make the tool child-friendly, the layout and phrasing of the children's questionnaire needed to be easily understood, yet not patronizing (Sinclair and Franklin, 2000).

Questionnaires were sent to two Social Services Departments in England who provided most of their own foster placements. Some constraints were placed by the researcher. For example, they had to have been fostering for two years and the children had to be three years or older. All types of foster parents were included (short-term, long-term, intensive treatment), but kinship placements were excluded due to their different nature.

## Results:

The response rate was 20% (low, but typical), with 81 foster parents and children, and 14 social workers responding. Foster parents had been fostering for between two years to 19 years, with an average of 8 years. There was no upper age limit for the children and the responses were divided into Younger Children (3-10 years, 19 children responded) and Older Children (11-27 years, 33 children responded). The comments made by the older adult children were very insightful and added significant depth to the material. It was noted that for both groups of children, there were twice as many girls as boys that responded.

The vast majority of the children confirmed the previous research findings concerning what they liked about fostering, namely:

- They liked doing things with the foster child
- They felt more grown-up and mature
- They felt good about being able to help others
- They appreciated their family more
- They are more open-minded about people

The younger and older children almost unanimously agreed with these statements, (created from the past research), but their parents and the social workers consistently under-estimated the children's enjoyment of fostering. Their responses echo those obtained by previous small-scale research and are consistent across time.

Respondents were also asked about what the children did not like about fostering, namely:

- sharing their parents' time
- not involved in decision making
- no privacy or time alone
- felt undervalued by the social worker
- unsure how to treat the foster child

The children largely disagreed with the above statements (created from the past research). Only one-third agreed to the statements, although half felt undervalued by the social workers. Their parents and the social workers both thought that the children disliked fostering more than the children reported.

The additional comments section generated additional data. From the younger children, four volunteered that they felt considerable loss when the children left. Others did not like it when the child was nasty to their parents and when the foster child's parents came to their home. Other younger children didn't like the attention given to the foster child. The older children recorded similar loss at the child leaving and losing contact with them, and added that they did not like it when foster child ran away or stole things. Three respondents highlighted what they viewed as inequities in fostering and the disruption to family life that visits from professionals created, as well as the behavior from the foster child.

The foster parents also raised the issue of inequity; they were aware of the dilemma of raising their own children and the fostered child. One parent stated that the fostered child’s behavior embarrassed her child.

The respondents were then asked how they would like to be involved in fostering with the following suggestions, which were devised from the literature review:

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Care-givers N=37</b>	<b>Younger Children N=19</b>	<b>Older Children N=33</b>	<b>Supervising Social Workers N=14</b>
a. Would like to meet other children whose families foster	54%	47%	61%	N/A
b. Would like to be told more about the children before they arrive	68%	68%	64%	N/A
c. Would like to contribute to the yearly review	49%	N/A	52%	93%
d. Would like to be more involved in decisions made	43%	47%	55%	N/A

In the additional comments, both adults and children thought that meeting other children whose families provided foster care would give them an opportunity for support. One child wrote, “I will then have someone who understands to talk to about it.” One caregiver stated that she did not want this unless she met the other children and stated that, “We strive to be a normal family.” Seventeen teenage children wanted more information about the foster child, but only three of their parents’ responses correlated with them.

**Implications for Practice:**

1. This research supports the outcomes of previous, small-scale research completed in England, which supports that the vast majority of children of foster parents can identify positive aspects of fostering. The aspects that they enjoy appear consistent. Young adults, who have the maturity to reflect on their experiences support this.
2. There are a small minority of children who are unhappy that their family fosters children. Very often, their parents are unaware of this or the strength of their feelings and are, therefore, not able to take this into consideration. Many children felt undervalued by the social workers. Therefore, it is important for families to do what they can to help their children feel included in decisions.

3. The research repeatedly highlighted the communication gap that exists between adults and children. Best practices now include involving children in decision-making, but a commitment to this involves finding ways to communicate with children that are more effective. This confirms other studies, (Heidbuurt, 2004) who recommended caution for parents to assume they understand the reality of their own children.
4. Due to a gap in communication, adults must not assume that they know how the children feel or what they want. The children of the foster parents need to be consulted, given choices, and most importantly, their families must be encouraged to check-in with them regularly to ensure that their mental health is not jeopardized.
5. The hybrid nature of fostering (public accountability/private family) creates ongoing dilemmas for families that need to be resolved in every-day decisions. Families often strived to be 'normal' in their parenting decisions but there were some areas of tension that were mentioned by parents and children alike, such as allowances. While foster parents must operate within state parameters, agencies need to be sensitive to create policies that strengthen the family systems in place.
6. Children whose parents foster have unique insight and knowledge about the process. This is a resource that appears to be largely untapped by agencies and could be accessed in a variety of ways. For example, trainings could invite the children or young adults to talk about their experiences, or they could mentor/buddy other youth whose families foster. In addition, they could facilitate small groups to provide support to others.

Final words...all of the research in this area has been small-scale research, which if pieced together, have some common outcomes. What is needed is either a much larger piece of research to test the validity of these findings, or for a large foster care agency to put into practice some of the suggestions that have emerged from the research. The agency could then take part in follow-up studies to determine whether the suggestions implemented assisted in healthy family functioning for both the child of the foster parents and/or the placement.

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