

RESEARCH ABSTRACT

Foster Family-based Treatment Association's 17th Annual Conference on Treatment Foster Care July 2003

What About the Kids?? Looking at the Effects of Fostering on Foster Parents' Children

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POPULATION STUDIED

Foster care is, and has been for decades, the main form of out of home care for children and adolescents in North America. Every day thousands of children who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to live temporarily or permanently under their parents' care are placed in foster family homes. In spite of this continuing need for foster families and the constant question, "what will fostering do to my kids?" there is little known about how foster parents' children experience foster care. This presentation was based on a review of 7 studies which provide some indication of how foster parents' children experience fostering.

RESULTS OF RESEARCH

FAMILY BOUNDARIES

Judith Heidbuurt (1995) explored the question of how foster families viewed the foster child and his/her role in their family. She interviewed three females and one male adults, average age 25 at the time of the interviews, who had fostered while they grew up. She also interviewed three female and two male youth ranging in age from seven to seventeen who were fostering at the time of the interviews. The adults had from four to fifteen years experience in fostering, with an average of eight years; those fostering at the time of the interview had a range of three to seven years experience fostering, with an average of four. Five of the eight sets of parents of the interviewees also participated in a focus group, so their stories were included in the study.

This research indicated that there are three ways that foster families organized themselves for fostering; "open boundary," "solid nucleus" and "selective integration."

Open Boundary Model

Families working from this model indicated that their goal was to make the foster child feel a part of the family. These families put an emphasis on unconditional love and

giving the foster child a second chance. While several parents described their family model in this way, fewer of their children did and some of those indicated that even though they tried, they were unable to create a boundary that included the foster child as part of the family.

Partial Seclusion

Those foster parents' children who could not make the open boundary style work for them developed a relationship style Heidebuurt called "Partial Seclusion." Because they could not invest emotionally in the foster child as they were expected to they emotionally separated themselves from them. As the family expectation was to have an open boundary, these youth felt separated from their own family as well. Some said that the expectation to make the foster children part of the family left them feeling like their own needs and abilities were not being recognized by their parents.

This study indicated that the need for "Partial Seclusion" was most common when foster children were close in age to the foster parents' children as well as when there was an age gap of 4 years or more. Adolescents were more likely than younger children to adopt this style, thus its choice may in part be related to normal adolescent needs to begin to individuate from the family.

While our understanding of foster family dynamics is far from complete, the research cited below suggests that the open boundary is likely the family style that places the foster parents' children at greatest risk. Foster parents' children who have lived in open boundary homes, or at least in homes where their parents tried to establish and maintain open boundaries, are most likely to report being angry about their parents' decision to foster even after years of fostering experience, to feel neglected by their parents, to resent the foster children and to feel "lost in the shuffle". It would seem that it might be the family style that is most conducive to hurt for all members, including the foster child.

Solid Nucleus

Families using this fostering style make it very clear that the foster child is not a part of the family; opening their homes but not their family boundaries to foster children. Some foster parents indicated that they developed this style to protect their own children from the possible negative physical and psychological effects of having foster children living with them. In solid nucleus families, foster parents' children felt more confident in their relationships with their parents, feeling that they were special to their parents and that their needs took priority over the needs of the foster children.

The findings of this study suggest that families feeling burnt out and/or experiencing grief at the loss of a foster child tend to adapt this family style. Unfortunately the study did not answer the question of whether foster families adopt this style as a temporary or permanent response to grief and burnout.

Selective Integration

This family style is a blend of the open boundary and solid nucleus styles. The family keeps a clear boundary around itself as in the solid nucleus style. While maintaining this

boundary, the family selectively allows some foster children within the boundary. This pattern is most common in families that do long term fostering. The study indicated that, besides the length of time the foster child lived with the family, the decision of families to selectively integrate foster children depended on the personality of the foster child and his/her desire to identify with the family.

OTHER STUDIES

The remainder of the presentation was based on 6 studies (Twigg, R., 1993; Watson, A. and Jones, D., 2002; Norrington, Sharon, 2002 and Swan, T., 2000; Pugh, 1996; Ellis, 1972) that have interviewed in total about 200 foster parents' children, ranging in age from 7 to 31 at the time of the interview. Males and females have been about equally represented in the studies. The families interviewed have fostered from between 4 and 28 years. Two studies included other family members up to and including the whole family. One study involved treatment foster families. These studies have been carried out mainly in Canada, with one in Great Britain and one in the U.S. For the sake of brevity the results will be summarized rather than described individually.

Benefits of Fostering

All studies have shown that there are positive outcomes to growing up in a foster home. Most respondents said they had learned many things through the fostering experience and felt at they were more sensitive, caring people and more aware of social issues than they would have been had they not been part of a foster family. One of the most common responses was that they found some degree of satisfaction in watching foster children grow and develop while living with their families. No study has identified any respondent who could not say that at least some foster children who had been through their home had benefited by living with them.

Some respondents, as high as 1/3 in one study, indicated that they were considering either fostering at some point in their futures and/or pursuing a career in one of the helping professions. Although no study has reported numbers, all studies that have included adult children of foster caregivers have shown that some have actually followed through on this career path, fostering and/or entering one of the helping professions. Those who have done so have indicated that it was their fostering experience that led them to this career path.

Roll Loss

All studies show that foster parents' children feel that they either lose, or are at risk of losing, their own place in the family when a foster child enters. In some ways this role loss seems to be similar to the response of a child to the birth of a sibling. The new addition to the family forces a change in family roles and in family structure. In fostering these changes are more complex and recurring than would be the addition of a sibling as each foster child enters the home at a different developmental stage and is perhaps a different sex. Foster children also come and go, making this family reorganization an ongoing and constant process.

This sense of loss of role or place seems to be present regardless of the foster family style the family adopts.

Loss Of Parental Attention

An almost universal finding in these studies is that foster parents' children feel that they lose their parents' attention when the foster child enters. It is as if there is a finite amount of time and caring resources in a family and the addition of a new family member means a redistribution of this resource, with every member of the family getting less. Because foster children are both new to the family and come with a set of needs, foster parents' children feel that a disproportionate amount of parental time and energy goes to meeting the needs of the foster child.

Foster Parents' Children's Silence

Loss of parental attention is one of the foster care experiences that foster parents' children indicate they cannot share with their parents. There seem to be two reasons for this. First they feel selfish and guilty for even feeling such loss, recognizing that their parents are doing a good thing and that the foster child does need special attention and resources given his/her background.

Second, many report that their parents have rebuffed them when they have tried to raise this concern. Some parents have indicated that they didn't have time to listen to their child's concern, others have added to the guilt and selfish feelings their children were already struggling with by reminding them that they had always had a good family, were still in a good family and that the poor foster child hadn't been so lucky, or words to that effect. In short, foster parents' children report consistently that their parents do not hear them when they raise these concerns.

Those who have experienced this rebuff from their parents seem to be the angriest and their anger is most often directed at their parents. One young woman said "if parents wanted healthy relationships with their kids they would find out what is going on and do something about it."

One recent study presents different findings reporting that the children interviewed were on the whole, fine about sharing their parents' time. This study also reports that the more the foster children cause problems, putting the foster parents under stress, the more the foster carer's own children became irritated and resentful of the foster child. This report is one of two British studies included in this presentation. Similar positive findings can be found in studies done in the 1970's and earlier in North America, but research from the last decade usually report the kind of problems discussed in this abstract.

Early Maturation

One of the foci of interviews with youth who have fostered, and adults looking back on their fostering experiences is how fostering made the transition from adolescence to adulthood more of a challenge than it is in most families. The respondents in one study indicated that fostering had forced them to mature early. Whether "early" maturity is a good or bad thing can be debated, but of significance was the common statement that

fostering had caused “survival instincts to ignite” earlier than normal. None of the respondents to this study felt that maturing early had been a good thing for them.

Two reasons were given for this need to mature early, one was to deal with the foster children, either to be mature enough to be accepted by older foster kids or to be sufficiently more mature than the foster child to be able to take on a caregiving role; the other was because they lost so much of their parents' time and attention they had to mature early to take care of themselves.

This issue appears to be most significant when the young people reach adolescence. Because they have learned to take care of themselves and to become relatively independent of their parents at an early age, they do not have much of a base from which to launch into adulthood. Adolescents need a secure home base from which to launch into their role as adults. They need to know that there is a place for them in the family where they can return as they need to and that there is at least one parent who will be responsive to them at times when they need special care and attention as they try out new roles and experiment with independence. The realities of fostering make this secure base hard to find.

While the numbers in the studies that identify this issue are too small to generalize from, this may be especially a problem for adolescent women. In our culture males are expected to leave family and establish an independent lifestyle while females are expected to remain in a close relationship with their mother. Having a strained relationship at the time the female is engaged in working through her need to find the balance between independence from and closeness with her mother may be especially challenging for her.

Same Sex/Opposite Sex Placements

On the question of the sex of the foster child to be placed, studies show that opposite sex placements are less threatening to foster parents' children than same sex placements. Interviews with adolescent and adult children indicate that this question gets more complex in adolescence but, at least for younger children, opposite sex placements are viewed more positively.

The reason for this seems to be that foster parents' children find opposite sex foster children to be less of a threat to their place and role in the family than same sex children. There is less likelihood of sharing a room competition for toys or that the foster child will steal their possessions. Gender difference also provides a natural barrier to peer interactions in school and the community.

Aggression

Foster parents' children face at least the risk of being the recipient of aggressive acts from the foster child. These acts may involve rude and threatening behaviour; threatened, or actual, destruction of valued possessions; and physical aggression. Most, if not all, respondents in these studies have experienced violent outbursts by foster children in addition to overt and covert threats of violence.

While they are concerned about their own safety and the safety of their possessions, foster parents' children have a greater concern about the threat to their parents and especially to their mothers. They report fearing when their parents are alone with the foster child and express anger at the foster child for his or her aggressive treatment of their parents. Some of the older respondents report taking the foster child out, or in some way intervening, to defuse potential conflict situations.

Unclear Role

One area where the research consistently finds differing reports from parents and children is the question of how involved the children are in decisions regarding fostering. Most parents report that they involve the children in at least the most important decisions about fostering, the children rarely report the same.

Foster parents' children want to be recognized by the system. Most of them can describe social workers who recognized them and took an interest in them; all can describe social workers who totally ignored them. In one study several respondents who indicated that they had no desire to foster when they grew up cited criticism of the social workers as the main reason for this decision.

The older interview respondents expressed frustration that they were never involved in case planning. They reported that they often knew things about the foster child that no one else in the system knew because the foster child had confided those things in them. They also indicated that since this was a treatment venture and they were living in a treatment setting and involved with the subject of treatment on a 24/7 basis they should have known more about the issues the foster child was dealing with as well as been involved in the case planning. Some expressed embarrassment at having said and done things they wouldn't have had they known more about the foster child.

Age Difference

To date, research seems to indicate that the age range between the foster child and foster parents' child is significant, but exactly what the ideal age range is and why it would be ideal is unclear. All respondents in one study indicated that they were most comfortable when the foster children were several years younger than they were. There seemed to be three reasons for this:

1. They found the foster children to be immature and were embarrassed when they tried to join their groups of friends or were put in their classrooms.
2. They felt they were better able to share with their parents and engage in the caregiving process if the foster children were young enough that they could in some way take care of them.
3. It would seem that younger foster children were less of a threat to their position in the family.

The Heidbuurt study found that the best age range was not “close in age” but also not more than a four-year age difference. At least that was the age range, which foster parents children found it least necessary to use the partial seclusion technique.

Need To Grieve

One of the things seemingly unrecognized by the foster care system is that families experience a sense of loss when a foster child leaves the family. Sometimes this can be grief, as the child has at least somewhat become part of the family, sometimes it is a sense of failure. Whatever shape it takes, the family is experiencing a loss and needs a chance to grieve and to reunite as a family.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE TO TREATMENT FOSTER CARE PROFESSIONALS

The challenges facing the foster family are real and significant. Things that can be done to make fostering a more positive experience are simple and specific. Legislation and policy do not need to be changed, nor does the system need more money to make these changes possible. Legislative and policy change are needed to make fostering a better experience for all and, of course, the system is under funded across North America.

FOSTER PARENTS' CHILDREN

Foster parents’ children need to make sure their parents pay attention to them, that they hear them and their concerns. Parents are not perfect, neither are they all seeing and all knowing.

FOSTER PARENTS

Foster parents’ need to listen to their children and remember that they are their primary responsibility. Foster parents can expect that their children are struggling with the things discussed in this paper. Foster parents can do things to minimize their negative effects.

Foster parents need to make sure that fostering does not keep them from celebrating significant events in their children’s lives. They need to make sure they develop a plan for some form of regular family time, some time to be a family without the foster children’s presence.

SOCIAL WORKERS

Social workers must recognize foster parents' children; learn their names, ages, hobbies and interests and listen to their concerns about fostering. Explore the feasibility of including at least the older foster parents' children in the case planning process. They are part of the system and they do have a contribution to make.

Social workers need to recognize that they are working with a family unit. Whatever happens in the foster care experience affects all family members and will likely affect them all differently. Social workers need to understand the unique dynamics of each foster family and build on its strengths and to support it during difficult times.

AGENCIES

Foster families need to be seen as at least Para- professionals, not simply as volunteers. They have experience, training and skill that is being used to make a difference in a child's life. The other members of the system need to recognize this and to see one of their major roles as supporting the work foster families are doing.

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