

F F T A



Foster Family-based Treatment Association

Annotations of Research in Treatment Foster Care

Citation

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Keywords

Foster care, health services, mental health services, role of foster parents, perspective of foster parents

Research Questions

- What are foster parents' perspectives on health and mental health services for their foster children?
- What role do these parents play?

Methods

Subjects: Fifty-five foster parents participated in nine focus groups, ranging in experience from less than 5 years to more than 20 years. Participants were invited by sponsoring agencies by phone call or letter and were diverse in terms of ethnicity. The majority of the participants were foster mothers.

Design: These focus groups were formed from nine separate agencies as part of a larger national study on the developmental, health, and mental health needs of children in foster care.

Materials/Measures: Not applicable

Procedures: The focus group sessions were 90 minutes in length and held at the sponsoring agency. The same protocol was used for all nine groups and included the following: welcome and introductions, purpose of the study, informed consent, discussion of physical and mental health challenges of the children in participants' care, resources available to address those issues, agency policies on health and mental health screenings, assessment and ongoing treatment, information sharing including health passports, and overall impressions and recommendations. Patterns and themes were then identified using content analysis.

Results/Findings

Four major concerns were identified:

1. The developmental, health, and mental health needs of the children in participants' care
2. Access to health and mental health services for the children and continuity in service provision
3. Communication challenges with casework staff and other service providers
4. Limitations on foster parents' roles

Limitations

This study is limited by the small sample size and by the self-selection of participants who responded to an agency invitation.

Application to Practice

The perspectives provided by this study highlight the need for access to health and mental health services for foster children as well as an increase in the number of qualified casework staff and professional foster parents. Foster parents should be treated as active members of the child's team and should receive all known information and available documents regarding the child's health and mental health needs prior to placement. In addition, the availability of on-call professionals and a mental health assessment soon after placement would better ensure that foster parents are able to meet the needs of their foster children.

Application to Policy

With regard to policy reform, legislation can be created to designate more financial incentives for medical/mental health practitioners for foster care youth. Prior to entering foster families, youth should be designated a primary care physician in the community. This will help to avoid a disconnect in the continuity of care to foster youth. True promotion and adherence to the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 will not only place children in safe environments but ensure that all of their basic levels of needs are met including comprehensive medical/mental health care that is easily accessible and inexpensive. Increases in funding, training and support networks, including 24 hour medical/mental health care hotlines, will enhance the professionalism of foster parents and assist them with the day-to-day responsibilities of caring for foster youth.

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