

*The Challenge of Fostering*

*An Investigation of Factors Related to the  
Recruitment and Retention of Foster Families*

*In Nine Child Protection Agencies in  
Southwestern Ontario*

*Executive Summary*

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*Foster Families...*

*A personal investment in recruitment and retention project*  
of the nine children's aid societies in Ontario Southwest Region.

Bruce Children's Aid Society,  
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## *Executive Summary*

Foster care is a critical part of the child welfare residential system. It provides for the safety and programming for children who are at risk if allowed to remain within their primary families. Over the past decade the number of children and families referred to children's aid societies in Ontario has increased dramatically, placing increasing pressure on the limited resources of the children's aid societies (CASs) generally, and the foster care system in particular (Leschied, Whitehead, Hurley & Chiodo 2003).

The purpose of this study was to solicit the views of foster parents in nine child protection agencies in Southwestern Ontario on issues related to the retention and recruitment of foster parents and their families. Factors related to the retention and recruitment of foster parents including the motivation to foster, relationship to the CAS and their workers, types of training provided and the need for external support were investigated.

This study of foster care support activities related to recruitment and retention activities within nine participating children's aid societies in Southwestern Ontario was informed by an extensive review of the literature, consultation with a Steering Committee (comprised of foster parents and foster home support staff) and discussions with researchers in the child protection field. These initiatives yielded the basis for a survey on which the attitudes and opinions of foster parents were solicited.

Using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, six hundred and fifty-two foster parents of a possible 1283 foster parents (51%) participated in the completion of a survey which included 140 questions. Fifty-four foster parents participated in focus groups to discuss their experiences, what they need and what works in terms of recruitment and retention of foster families. The research provided information on the following

1. What services are provided to foster families by CAS
2. How foster parents became aware of the fostering opportunity
3. What qualities foster parents believe makes for an effective foster parent
4. What motivates families to foster
5. Considerations for withdrawing from fostering
6. Benefits and sustaining factors of fostering
7. Issues related to stress, role clarity and role conflict
8. Communications with staff
9. What factors encourage foster family satisfaction
10. Attitudes of foster families towards training
11. Suggestions for improving foster family recruitment
12. Suggestions for improving foster family retention
13. Foster families and front-line workers working together

## *Key Findings*

Previous experience with fostering, be it from previous family or through friends, is the primary means by which individuals are introduced to the idea of becoming a foster parent. The degree of satisfaction that foster parents experience and communicate to others will have a profound effect on the recruitment of future foster parents. If adequate support is not provided to the current generation of foster parents, the impact may be an increased challenge in recruiting the next generation as well. CASs may want to consider a more comprehensive approach to conveying to the public the need for fostering through the media along with involving foster parents recruiting other foster parents.

The foster families in this study choose to foster out of a belief that they can make a difference in the lives of children at risk. The families view their strengths as parents as essential to who they are as people. For some, the importance is magnified as they enter a period in life when their own children have grown and moved away from home. This is an important understanding because this group of “experienced” parents may be underutilized as foster parents and could be more directly recruited for their contributions to the fostering of children.

For most foster families, external factors such as increasing family income is not a primary reason to foster, however, adequate economic support is critical if children are to be provided with the basics of food and clothing. Problems will arise if a family’s foster child is not able to have clothing or participate in community activities to the same extent as the biological children within the same family. Such inadequacies set foster children apart from other children and unfairly stigmatize them. It is important also, that foster children do not have greater privileges than the biological children. This also leads to conflict between the biological children in the foster family and foster children.

Supporting foster families and reducing the rate of withdrawal is the most beneficial to the Agency. Experienced foster parents represent an investment of time and training from the agency; they hold the expertise that an agency requires to assist in the management of challenging children and to help train new foster parents.

In order to provide the most appropriate care and support to the child, the foster parent needs as much information as possible about the child placed in their home. One of the major criticisms conveyed by foster parents of Agency workers was their inability or unwillingness to be forthcoming regarding information. The relationship that child protection workers have with the foster parent is critical in creating a positive and supportive atmosphere within which the foster parent provides their service.

Staff need to provide feedback to foster parents in terms of the importance and value of their involvement with the CAS. Foster parents expressed a desire to be considered more a part of the child protection team in planning for the child’s care, future placement and long term planning.

Training is an important ingredient in the retention of foster parents. The critical issues are appropriateness and relevance of training and scheduling and provision of child care so that foster families can attend the sessions.

## ***Recommendations***

The information and data derived from this research provides significant information and direction for future study, discussion and recommendations at a regional and local level. The following list of recommendations was informed not only from the results of this study, but also from responses to discussion of the data with both the Steering Committee to the Project and the Executive Directors and Resource Managers in each of the CASs involved in the research.

### ***Communication and role clarity***

- CAS staff must communicate in a timely and respectful manner with foster parents
- Communication must be clear and in line with the foster family's experience, needs and comfort level
- As much information that is available about the child and his/her needs must be provided at the time of admission and then updated as information becomes available

### ***The importance of the foster parent/worker relationship***

- CASs must highlight the importance of this relationship in the care and protection of the child
- CASs should review current role descriptions and expectations of workers and foster families to make sure that they are clear, efficient and in the best interests of the child
- The role of the foster home support worker, the child in care worker and the foster family needs to be clarified at the beginning of each new placement

### ***Fostering connections with the agency***

- Where possible, the foster family should be included in all communications and meetings related to the health and well-being of the child (case conferences, plan of care meetings, educational conferences, medical appointments, court hearings etc.)
- Foster families should be encouraged to participate in formal and informal activities and meetings that enhance the care and protection of the child and the support and caring that they can provide to the child
- CASs should advocate for revised staffing benchmarks to promote/allow necessary levels of support

### ***Formal and informal support systems***

- The Agency should provide opportunities for information sharing, support services and education both in formal and informal settings
- The Agency should encourage the development of Foster Parent Associations, Cluster Groups, Support Groups, Communications Circles etc. to encourage mutual support of foster families
- The Agency should provide staff and resources to encourage these activities

### ***Involving all parts of the fostering family***

- The needs of the biological children in the foster family needs to be taken into consideration in decisions related to the foster child
- The Agency should include all parts of the fostering family when considering the plan of care, the activities that the child participates in and the relief needs of the foster family; support of the extended fostering family needs to be taken into consideration when planning for the child
- Children of foster families should be involved and recognized as part of the foster family and supports to the foster child

### ***Training***

- Joint training should be delivered by CAS staff and foster parents in a flexible timetable
- The involvement of youth in care, foster parents, and children of foster parents in the delivery of training must be explored
- Training on communications and the relationship with foster families should be provided to all service staff in the agency
- Staff and foster families should participate in joint training initiatives to encourage communication, understanding and good working relationships

### ***Compensation***

- The Ministry should review the real costs of caring for children when determining the foster care boarding rate benchmarks

### ***Information***

- Information about the child, the plans for the child and the developments with the child's family is critical to the success of the foster placement and the commitment of the foster family—comprehensive information must be provided in a timely manner

### ***Research***

- CASs need to utilize this research and other recently published research on the increasing complexity of children's needs to advocate for improved supports, training etc. to enable foster parents to care for them

### ***Involving foster parents in recruitment and retention activities***

- CASs need to review and encourage the continued participation of Volunteer Outreach Foster Parents in recruitment and retention activities
- CASs need to provide the financial, human and other resources to continue this program

If there are three fundamental beliefs about fostering that could be summarized from this research:

- *Foster families represent the core part of the residential system of child welfare*
- *Foster families are the best ambassadors for fostering; they are instrumental in the recruitment of the next generation of foster families*
- *If foster families are satisfied with their role and relationship with the CAS, their experiences and satisfaction will encourage others to consider fostering*

# FOSTER FAMILIES

Where would we  
be without you?

