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Bridget Conway
Perspectives of Foster
Parents: What Influences
Their Motivation to Become
and Continue to be Foster
Parents?

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the experiences of current foster parents. The purposes of this study were to 1) identify motivation for fostering; 2) identify foster parents' supports; 3) learn of foster parent's motivation to continue fostering; 4) assess foster parents' needs; 5) create recommendations to further support and encourage our foster parents. Nine foster parents from eight different US states participated in one-hour phone interviews to provide the data for this research. The results of this research are consistent with previous research about factors contributing to the retention rates of foster parents. Findings demonstrate that successful fostering includes teamwork, communication, cooperation, and support from foster family networks and foster agencies.

**PERSPECTIVES OF FOSTER PARENTS:
WHAT INFLUENCES THEIR MOTIVATION TO BECOME AND CONTINUE TO BE
FOSTER PARENTS?**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2012

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Currently, there are more than 400,000 children living in foster care nationwide (The Adoption and Foster Care Adoption Reporting Systems, 2011). The National Foster Parent Association defines foster care as "... the temporary placement of children and youth with families outside of their own home due to child abuse or neglect. The goal is to provide a safe, stable, and nurturing environment. Although the length of fostering is not the only goal for foster parents, preventing the unnecessary loss of qualified foster parents would significantly enhance the child welfare systems' ability to enhance the safety, permanency, and well being for children in their care (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007). When placements are disrupted, the children always lose. It would benefit foster care agencies to review their foster family support services in order to determine if their caregivers are getting their needs met and receiving enough support from the agency in order to adequately meet the needs of the children. Gathering a better understanding of foster parents' longevity and which agency and outside supports help to motivate foster parents to continue to foster is an essential first step towards enhancing the child welfare system.

The intention of this qualitative research is to investigate the question. "What influences their motivation to become and continue to be foster parents?" The purposes of this study are to identify motivations for fostering, identify foster parents' supports, assess for the current needs of foster families, and to create a list of recommendations to further support and encourage our foster parents. A better understanding of this topic will be informative to foster care agencies trying to develop a more comprehensive system to ensure higher retention rates of foster parents.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

There are over 423,000 children in foster care in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). “Foster care is the temporary placement of children and youth with families outside of their own home due to child abuse or neglect. The goal is to provide a safe, stable, and nurturing environment.” This is the definition provided by the National Foster Parent Association. The purpose of the following literature review is to provide background information to support the notion that foster parent retention rates are influenced by agency trainings and ongoing supports. The following sections detail research that has been conducted to examine foster parent trainings, retention rates of foster families, and finally, ideas of what is needed for the successful fostering of youth.

Training

Federal policy requires that prospective foster parents receive appropriate knowledge and skills in training in order to meet the needs of the children coming into their homes and, if necessary, that the parents continue training after placement (Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, H.R. 3443). However, this policy only provides a general guideline for training content and does not specify the implementation procedures. Nationwide, the type of pre-service training offered, duration of training, and requirements for continued training varies (Grimm,

2003). Jantz et al (2002) indicated that only fifteen U.S. states required kinship care providers to meet the same licensing requirements as nonkinship.

Christenson and McMurtry (2007) evaluated the effectiveness of the Foster PRIDE/ Adopt PRIDE (Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education) pre-service training and resource family development program. Prior research indicated that trainings and support for kinship and nonkinship foster parents showed higher permanency outcomes. Christenson and McMurtry found that it is important for the foster families to be partners with the child welfare system rather than just working for them. Issues arise when foster families were working with children without full disclosure, such as a lack of communication with the agency and lack of home visitations. The training consisted of nine three-hour sessions within a two and a half month period. Trainings focused on the protecting and nurturing of children; meeting children's developmental needs and addressing developmental delays; supporting relationships between children and their families; connecting children to safe, nurturing relationships intended to last a lifetime; and working as members of a professional team (Christenson & McMurtry, 2007). The final evaluation sought to measure the increase in competency for kinship and nonkinship participants. In addition, the findings did include the necessity of agencies to provide resources and support to kinship and nonkinship foster/adoptive parents in order to increase the retention of these caregivers.

The research conducted by Cuttleback and Orme (2002) demonstrated that adequate training for foster parents is connected to better outcomes, fewer placement disruptions, better foster parenting, and better retention of foster families. Their research findings validate prior knowledge suggesting that nonkinship foster parents are currently receiving less than adequate

training and support services and that kinship foster parents generally receive even less than nonkinship.

The work completed by Cuttleback and Orme (2002) and Christenson and McMurtry (2007) reaffirms that foster parents and foster children would benefit from more quality trainings and ongoing support from the child welfare system. Understanding that training programs such as Foster PRIDE/ Adopt PRIDE can be valuable, however, they may not be accessible to everyone. Generally speaking, training programs need funding and time, for both workers and caregivers. Pacifici et al (2005) examined the effectiveness of two online courses available to foster, adoptive, and kinship parents looking for trainings on lying and sexualized behavior problems. They discovered significant gains in parent knowledge for both courses. The significance is that it shows web-based trainings are available and can help bridge the gap in adequate and inadequate trainings for nonkinship and kinship foster parents.

Retention

Although the length of fostering is not the only goal for foster parents, preventing the unnecessary loss of qualified foster parents would significantly enhance the child welfare systems' ability to enhance the safety, permanency, and well being for children in their care (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007). When placements are disrupted, the children always lose. They lose the opportunity to form bonds with adults, maintain school placement, or develop healthy coping skills (Crum, 2010). It would benefit foster care agencies to review their foster family support services in order to determine if their caregivers are getting their needs met and receiving enough support from the agency. Gathering a better understanding of foster parents' longevity and why some decide to leave is an essential first step towards enhancing the child welfare system.

From a review of the literature, it is clear that adequate support and training for foster parents is related to better retention rates (MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006; Rhodes, Orme, Cox, Buehler, 2003; Crum, 2010; Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; Christenson & McMurtry 2007 & 2009; Cuttleback & Orme, 2002). According to MacGregor et al (2006), “When foster parents believe that they are receiving adequate preparation and training, respite, timely crisis intervention, and a sense of being valued and respected by the agency, they are more likely to continue to foster” (p. 354).

According to a study completed by Pacifici, Delaney, White, Cummings, and Nelson (2005), up to forty percent of new foster parents drop out of the system during their first year. Some agencies lose between fifteen and thirty percent of their foster parents each year (Christian, 2002). Rhodes et al (2003) conducted a longitudinal study examining the effect of family resources and psychosocial problems on retention of foster families. They found that fifty percent of prospective foster parents did not complete the preservice training. Of those that did complete, forty-six percent discontinued or planned to discontinue after the first six months. The researchers found that families with more resources, especially income, were more likely to continue fostering. Characteristics of foster families that continued to provide care were caregivers having a higher education, higher income, were married, have time for fostering, have parenting experience, have fostering experience, belong to a place of worship, have social support from family, have social support from friends, and work in a helping profession. However, the only statistically significant predictor of a foster family continuing to foster after six months was income (Rhodes et al, 2003).

It seems that the most important aspects of foster parent retention is the quality of training and ongoing support for the fostering of these children. Hunter College School of Social

Work of the City University of New York published a semi-annual newsletter (2000) discussing foster and adoptive parent resources. In their research, they found three crucial reasons foster parents give up: 1) confusion of the foster parent's role in relationship to the agency; 2) Feeling inadequately prepared in the pre-service orientation to the job of fostering and not having relevant ongoing training; 3) Concern over the lack of support from the worker/agency.

Triseliotis, Borland, and Hill (1998) found that foster parents quit because they are dissatisfied with agency relationships, have poor communication with caseworkers, perceive caseworkers as unresponsive, and receive inadequate training and support. Brown and Bednar (2006) found that the top reasons for foster caregivers to end foster parenting included: the child being a danger to the family; child not adapting to the home or caregivers could not handle the child's behavior; complex health needs of the foster child; problems dealing with the foster agency; several unsuccessful attempts to make placement work; change in personal circumstances; caregiver's own health is deteriorating; or lack of appropriate external support. Each of these reports support the theory that adequate training and relevant ongoing support from the agency can assist with the retention of foster parents and therefore positively influence the permanency of foster youth.

Gibbs and Wildfire (2007) researched the lengths of services for foster parents. They found that the foster caregivers with greater length tended to be older, live in urban areas, care for more than one child at a time, and care for more infants, adolescents, or children with special needs. The study was conducted across three states, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Oregon, and they found that twenty percent of the foster parent population provides sixty to eighty percent of all foster care. This study correlates with a previous one conducted by Martin, Altemeier, Hickson, Davis, and Glascoe (1992), who found that twenty-three percent of foster parents cared for over half of the children in care at that time. Gibbs and Wildfire (2007) conclude, "These

foster parents may represent a core group of active and experienced foster parents who are willing to accept a variety of placements because their long tenure equips them with practice expertise in caring for the children in need of placements, child welfare workers are likely to feel confident placing children in these homes, and therefore these homes carry a major portion of the workload“(p. 597). Although there is no research linking child outcomes to foster parent length of fostering, there is an implicit assumption that experienced foster parents are better equipped to respond to the complex needs of the foster youth (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007).

Successful Fostering

The two most commonly used training programs nationwide are the MAPP (Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting) and PRIDE (Parent Resource Information Development Education) foundations, which have cited twelve domains of competency as principles for successful fostering. These areas include: providing a safe and secure environment, providing a nurturing environment, promoting educational attainment and success, meeting physical and mental healthcare needs, promoting social and emotional development, supporting diversity and children’s cultural needs, supporting permanency planning, managing ambiguity and loss for the foster child and family, growing as a foster parent, managing the demands of fostering on personal and familial wellbeing, supporting relationships between children and their families, and working as a team member.

Some research has been conducted to gather information from foster youth and foster/adoptive parents to learn what they want professionals to know about their experiences. Mitchell, Kucznski, Tubbs, and Ross (2010) interviewed foster youth and asked what advice they would like to give to agency workers. Responses included adequate clothing, food, and

accommodations for the foster youth. The interviewees also stressed the need for compassion and social support during home transfer. Mooradian, Hock, Jackson, and Timm (2011) reported on interviews with couples that have adopted children from the child welfare system. In their interviews, adoptive parents recommended that professionals address the impact of fostering and adopting on marital relationships with couples before placement. They also reported a need for marital relationship support groups for people who have adopted from the system as well as other forms of social support networks. Brown (2008) reported on foster parents' perceptions of factors needed for successful placements. Responses included the need for the right personality and skills, information about the foster child prior to placement; a good relationship with the fostering agency, individualized services such as crisis intervention and services for children with special needs, community support, linkages to other foster families, supportive immediate and extended families, as well as self-care skills, treatment by professionals, and a need for formal foster parent organizations. Foster parents emphasized the importance of role clarity and good relationships with others professionally involved with foster youth. The participants in the Brown (2008) and Mitchell et al. (2010) studies both stated a wish to be an active participant in their placements and case planning with the professionals.

Coakley, Cuddback, Buehler, and Cox (2007) conducted a study regarding kinship foster parents' ideas of what promotes or inhibits successful fostering. Characteristics found to promote successful fostering included the support of family, commitment to children, faith, good parenting abilities, church involvement, flexibility, and adequate resources. Characteristics found to inhibit fostering included strained relations with the birth family, poor discipline strategies, inability to deal with the system, lack of resources, and inability to deal with the children's emotional, behavioral, and physical problems. Unlike nonkinship placements, kinship

foster parents usually do not plan to foster but do so after a family crisis has occurred. Therefore the research suggests that there is a need for special trainings and support services for kinship foster families that addresses family dynamics. According to Coakley et al. (2006), seeking help from counselors was a theme unique to nonkinship caregivers; kinship foster families are less likely to tell their caseworkers about their child's behavior and emotional problems or follow through with psychological services than nonkinship caregivers. Since sudden placements are unavoidable, the authors have recommended that support services and trainings be front loaded to help stabilize these imminent kinship placements.

With over 423,000 U.S. children living with foster families, it is important to evaluate the ways in which the child welfare system functions and serves its children and families. The literature above has demonstrated that successful fostering begins with adequate training and ongoing relevant support services. Common themes found throughout the literature included a need for foster parents to have access to social support networks and educational resources post-placement. Other issues identified in several of the articles was the wish for foster parents as well as foster youth to participate in the placement and case planning discussions, for everyone's role to be clearly defined, and for there to be some sort of network of foster families to come together for support and for the children to have chances to meet with other youth who are also involved with the foster system. Information of foster parents needs to be consistently gathered in order to gain an even better understanding of foster parents' retention rates and what makes for a successful placement in order to enhance the child welfare system.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This study is an investigation into the perspectives of foster parents on what influences their motivation to become and continue to be foster parents. The purposes of this study are to identify motivations for fostering, foster parents agency and non-agency supports, assess current foster parents' needs, and create a list of recommendations to further support and encourage foster parents.

Sample

Nine current foster parents participated in qualitative interviews that were designed by the researcher to elicit information related to their decision to become and remain foster parents. Participants were recruited for this study through the online forum Foster Care and Adoption Forum (www.adoption.com). Participants volunteered to be interviewed by emailing the researcher in response to flyers and forum posts (see appendix D for flyer). In order to be interviewed, participants had to speak English, be a current foster parent in the United States, and hold a foster parent license for at least one year. Due to the high rate of foster parent drop out within the first six months to a year, the researcher selected only participants who had been involved with the system and stayed with it for a minimum of one year.

In order to begin the process of recruitment, approval from the Smith's College Human Subjects Review was needed (see appendix B HSR approval letter). After four months of changes and resubmissions to the research proposal, I was left with just four weeks to recruit,

screen potential interviewees, gather consent forms, interview, and transcribe sessions. Nine of the fourteen foster parents that volunteered for the study met the criteria and had available time to be interviewed.

Demographics:

Participant's Current Licensure State	Number of Placements up until the interview	Years of Fostering
NC	6	8
MA	2	1.5
FL	3	4
AZ	11	3.5
CA	1	1
CA	87	33
WA	19	10
CO	3	16
IA	8	4

Data Collection

The foster parents first contacted the researcher through email to show their interest in participating in the hour-long interview. The researcher then emailed the participant back with further details of the study and attached or mailed (depending on the potential interviewee's preference) the informed consent form to the participant and waited for a signed copy to be returned. Interviewee's signed informed consent forms were placed in a secure and locked drawer and were numbered. Interviews were scheduled through email at the mutually agreed upon date and time. Taped interviews and transcriptions were labeled by number in order to protect each participant's identity. Each foster parent participated in a one-time phone interview with the researcher. Interviews were conducted using a speaker phone and were recorded the program GarageBand on a computer. Interviews were then transcribed by the researcher. Data was collected through eight open ended questions, such as "What ongoing services are available

to you, your family, and your foster youth through your agency?” (see Appendix B for full list of interview questions).

Data Analysis

Data collected from the interviews were analyzed using theme and content analysis. The procedures used began with each interview being separated by question. Then each question was read through with the eight responses to each question. The researcher recognized and organized the responses by the themes that had developed. Responses were then categorized by themes to organize the findings. Some responses, like those from the questions about motivations for fostering, ideas on why foster parents quit, and helpful supports were kept together. The themes are the researcher’s interpretation of the data. In an effort to address bias, the interviewee’s words are used in the discussion of the findings in order to maintain the interviewee’s meanings. In using the direct quotations from the participants’ for presenting the data, what they specifically said, the themes, and the similarities between the responses will maintain their intention. Themes and quotations can be found in the findings chapter.

Due to the voluntary nature of this study and the small number of participants from all over the country, the data is limited and further study is needed to generalize the findings. If resources such as money and time were available, I would have provided more time for interested participants to return informed consents and offer some financial incentive. However, since all the participants have the experience of working within the foster care system for at least one year and are from different parts of the country, the similarities in their current needs and recommendations to the systems show a commonality that needs to be further assessed and addressed.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The information gathered for this research is informative to foster care agencies trying to develop a more comprehensive system to ensure higher retention rates of foster parents. The findings of this study identify motivations for fostering, identify foster parents' supports, assess for the current needs of foster families, and creates a list of recommendations to further support and encourage our foster parents. Nine foster parents participated in the research of this study. Experience as a foster parent ranged from one year to forty years, with two to eighty seven placements of foster youth in their homes. Participants were affiliated with both private and public agencies and lived in the northeast, east coast, southeast, northwest, west coast, and the Midwest. The data is organized in the following order: 1) motivations and supports, 2) training, 3) placements, 4) retention, and 5) recommendations.

Motivations and Supports

When asked about their motivation to begin as foster parents the responses varied. Five participants (56%) responded that they first became foster parents because they wanted children. One foster parent reported, "Well my goal originally was in hopes to adopt." Most of the interviewed foster parents (78%) were licensed as foster-to-adopt and were approved as pre-adoptive placements for children whom the agency decided were likely to have the parental rights terminated. One foster parent responded, "I thought about going adoption only but then

you get a call and they don't have a home for a kid, and you don't want to say no. So I'm still foster to adopt.”

Two participants (22%) stated that they had grown up wanting to someday be foster parents like one person's mother and the other's neighbor. Both stated that they waited until they were financially secure and the time was right in their family situation to be able to bring children into their home.

Two foster parents (22%) identified the need for more foster homes as their motivation to foster. When asked what motivated her to foster, one participant stated the following:

Need. Because it was needed. I mean I didn't wake up one morning and say that I want to have 87 kids. I have extra bedrooms in the house and they (my kids) weren't sleeping in them and somebody can use it. For me it's an easy question for me to answer but it's a difficult answer for people to understand. That there is a need.

Another foster parent expressed her motivation to continue fostering, "...knowing how many kids are out there and if we could prevent from one more being in the situation he is (adoptive son)...if we could prevent one more child by just meeting their basic needs.”

Foster parents were asked about what supports enable them to continue to foster. Responses included supportive spouses, church, families, friends, coworkers, mental health specialists, foster parent support groups, and a love for the children. “Well I love the girls...I have a place to provide for them and so I want to give them the most that I can until there's some permanency and a better situation for them comes along.”

Training

In the interview, participants were asked to reflect upon their own foster parent training experience, both the initial training and ongoing yearly trainings to keep up their state licensure. Initial trainings for licensure varied from 16 hours to 40 hours and foster parents needed to meet a certain number of hours of training annually to keep up their license, ranging from six to twelve hours per year.

In every interview (100%), foster parent support groups came up, some saying that it was their primary support and others saying that they wished for a local foster parent support group. In some of the participants' trainings, current foster parents were invited to speak. "When they came and talked about the realities of the kids you'd be working with because a lot of it was theoretical so you actually have someone to apply it to, so that was helpful." Another participant stated that for one of the training nights, they had to attend a foster parent support group, and that:

It was great to hear from other parents about their stories and the frustrations they had with court dates and parents at the visits and different health concerns like addictions and dealing with all of that stuff...it was real, I'd like to see more of that included in trainings.

In sharing their experiences of the initial foster parent training, six participants (67%) stated that they learned the most from other foster parents, either in the formal setting of the initial trainings or informal meetings with foster parents and online forums. Five foster parents (56%) stated that they participated in the PS-MAPP training and found the most helpful information was from talking about the process, how the system works, the honeymoon phase and reactions, and racial differences. One interviewee stated, "learning about how to take care of

hair, bathing, different aged kids come into puberty in different racial groups, stuff like that. Things that I didn't really know growing up but needed to know about." One participant responded saying the most interesting part of the training was role playing.

...So we got a better idea of what it was like from their (foster child) point of view. It wasn't this 'Oh, I have this wonderful new home with new clothes and lots of food to eat.' It was, I miss my mom and dad. Why am I here? And I don't care about all this stuff.

Other responses about the most helpful and useful knowledge gained from the initial trainings was about court, what to expect at court, the possibilities of the children's behaviors, behavior management, how to parent a sexually abused child, and how to manage button pushing.

Learning about certain disorders such as oppositional defiant disorder, attachment disorder, and fetal alcohol syndrome provided parents with some knowledge for understanding a child when they first came into a new placement. One foster parent shared in detail how she appreciated meeting people who worked in the different departments within the system; someone who removes the children, someone who works the hotline, someone who works with biological parents, someone who works with foster parents, and learning how they all work together.

When reflecting on her own training, one participant shared what she had most appreciated from the training, "they supported what we had done prior (raising own biological children), so it gave us confidence that what we did, we did well. And what we did wrong, how to build on it. Giving us different options as parents to parenting."

When asked what was missing, in their opinion from initial trainings, four (44%) participants reported feeling that the training was "sugar coated" or "fluffy" and not as in depth as they needed. One participant recalled her initial training, "it was basically, love the kids and

everything will be alright.” When asked what they would have liked to see more of, responses included hard statistics of the demographics of children in care and videos showing different parenting techniques to show to do work with difficult behaviors such as tantrums. One interviewee also shared her wish for a discussion focused around the expectations of the foster parents, “...about how much involvement you really have with the (biological) family and overall expectations, they don’t tell you that you’ll be the one doing most of the transportation and that sort of thing.” Other suggestions to be included in initial trainings were: what behaviors to look for in abused children, safety training, and how to protect yourself. One participant spoke to the feeling of not being prepared enough to meet the expectations of the foster care agencies.

Participants were asked to speak about their experiences with keeping up licensure and completing the specific number of hours of training their state required. Every participant (100%) stated that there were more than enough opportunities to get the hours required, however, if there were problems attending the trainings, it was due to the location, time, and/or lack of childcare at the training event. Three participants (33%) reported driving forty-five minutes to an hour and a half to get to the meetings, which are usually held in larger cities. One commented, “And I wish there was more online classes that you could read and answer questions rather than sitting in a four to eight hour class on the weekend.” Four of the interviewees (44%) reported that they participate in foster parent support groups and all stated that the hours spent at the support groups count towards the training hours. These meetings were preferred to the trainings because they were able to vent about their own situations, gain advice from other foster parents, and sometimes, childcare was provided at the location of the event.

For ongoing trainings, foster parents are able to select which trainings to attend based on their interests and needs. In the interview, parents were asked about training topics and what trainings they would like to have that have not been made available. Possible topics included birth parent relationships, discipline, and teenagers.

The last training I went to focused on babies and attachment...thinking about that and my current placement, I would like something (a training) about attachment disorder and RAD, not so much on the younger kids but as teenagers and how that is manifested and ways to help when somebody is older.

Placements

During the interviews, participants opened up about their placement experiences, the good matches, the not-so-well matched placements, and the initial transition period. Interviewees discussed facing many obstacles in first few days or weeks, as far as receiving the proper documentation for the children and locating services that were required immediately, such as evaluations and school enrollment. Five participants (56%) voiced their concerns that the caseworkers are so overwhelmed that placements are not matched appropriately, one participant shared that she was matched with a child who had a severe allergy to cats, but the foster parent cared for several cats. Others reported issues with age, being matched with foster youth who were outside the ages the foster parent was licensed and trained to care for or being asked to take in another child when the house was already filled to the limit. The foster parents with more experience stated that once you have had several placements, you begin to learn what questions are important to ask before accepting a placement.

Despite all the laws, we are not given all the information. (I was at the hospital with one placement) the county actually accused me of being the problem, saying there had never been a prior problem (with this child), they said the child came to me with no behavioral problems, slight mental retardation, and slight neurological brain damage. And it turns out that the child had been diagnosed with a personality disorder with psychotic tendencies and there was a well-documented history of the child and birth family. And I was told this child was homeschooled, well no; it turns out this child was homebound because it was determined that it was not safe for this child to be on school premises. So the foster parents don't always get enough information.

When asked what makes for a successful placement, one participant stated, "Knowing what you want and being properly matched. You can ask more questions and you can say no." Another foster parent spoke in detail about her experience of not getting enough information from the beginning of placement:

We need more truthful information about the kids, a more detailed intake meeting about the kids, especially teenagers, we get no information about the kids at all. I have got kids who come in who take psychotic medications and I knew nothing about it until the social worker comes in one day and hands it over. One time I had staff from the hospital come to visit and said they needed to talk with one of the kids. When I asked what's this about, they say, "Oh we've decided that this is a private situation because she was over 16, we want her (the foster youth) to tell you what her problem is" and that lasted like a snowball in hell. And I don't, I still don't know what she was hospitalized for, they know why but they can't tell me because of confidentiality... The kids are here twenty-four seven and I take care of them and I am responsible for them and if something happens here I get in

trouble for it...I have to be able to know what is the complete story not only to protect myself but to protect the other kids in the household as well as protect the child.

Those interviewed for this research live in eight different states all across the country. Agency services varied greatly, however almost all participants spoke to the difficulty of initially locating health and mental health care services that were local and accepted by insurance of the foster youth. One interviewee stated, “They should have this in trainings to teach us how to access services because when you first come out you don’t know anything.” In locating doctors, some said it was easy, because they were able to keep the child’s old primary care physician. Others, particularly those in more rural towns, had a difficult time locating a doctor who would accept Medicaid. However, overall, specialty doctors seemed to be the most difficult to access.

And the dental care is probably the worst, it is so hard to find one that accepts Medicaid, and even harder to find one that will work with a child with special needs. I once had two kids who had rotten teeth, their teeth actually needed to be taken out and I had to drive an hour and a half just to get a dentist to take a look inside their mouth.

Another participant had a similar experience with locating a dentist and shared her frustrations with the quality of service:

The problem is especially with the dentists, there are so many dentists that don’t accept (state Medicaid) anymore. I have had a lot of dentist tell me oh Ms. we don’t take it anymore because they pay too slow or they don’t pay enough and we lose money. And then I get turned off when I call the dental office and get, uh “medicaid hours are this time” and the kids feel very unhappy, it’s a sense of segregating the paying customer from the medicaid. And then I stopped going to one dentist because the

receptionist said, “are you a medicaid customer” and was not discrete about it. And the kids get very, very upset that feeling that they are different.

As for locating mental health services, the responses varied. Some were part of agencies that had their own staff that came to the home for in-home therapy. One participant stated that her agency provides counseling for anyone in the home who needs it, even the non-foster youth and the foster parents.

So for instance we have four boys now and the county has three of the boys seen every other week by the counselor. She comes on Sundays, because between all the schedules of school and sports, it makes it so much easier for everyone, you can’t get much better than that.

It seemed that for most foster families, locating a mental health professional that would accept the Medicaid was fairly easy. However, the issue was when foster parents were looking for therapists with specific expertise or experience, such as working with foster youth or children with special needs.

Placing the foster youth into new schools came with mixed experiences as well. Some said they were able to get their new foster youth into school within a week, which was made possible by a caseworker having all the proper documents available at the beginning of placement, while for others it took up to two or even three weeks. One foster parent reported, “Within the first couple of weeks you are required to take them in and I didn’t have all the forms in place. I waited, I waited for them to provide me with phone numbers.” During placements, asking for help and knowing where to get it seemed to be another common theme between interviewees. One participant stated,

You have to ask. They don't shout it out, like hey there's a grant here, you have to know. I just asked, what can you do, can you do anything here, and ask other foster parents. I have a big mouth so I get what I need.

It seems that for those foster parents who advocate for their foster youth and create contacts within their foster parent network and maintain relationships with the agency workers, they are more likely to get involved with additional agency supports and services. Some of the assistance foster parents received when they asked for it included: \$50 voucher for book and school supplies; picnic trips; fishing trips; free prom dresses; strollers; free shopping by appointment; suitcases; and toys. Several participants in this research stated that on their own they located organizations in their cities that provided extra supports and services that were not affiliated with their fostering agency.

Retention

Participating foster parents were asked what makes for a successful placement and what causes foster parents to quit fostering. Responses for successful fostering included teamwork, communication, and cooperation. "The cooperation of everyone involved, the CPS worker, licensing worker, giving foster families a realistic picture of what the expectations are." Another foster mother reported, "When everybody is on the same page and communicating...Like if you don't communicate, then nobody can help you. And the child won't be successful if you don't get them in services they need." A number of foster parents emphasized the importance of maintaining a good relationship with the caseworker, some noting that it is not always easy due to the high turnover rates of foster care caseworkers.

It's a job and it makes things so much better when you have a full circle, so the children can talk to us and or the caseworker. Notwithstanding confidentiality, but working together. And also, I need to be supported by the caseworker and if I'm not, if what I'm doing is wrong, tell me. But not to undermined me in front of the child because that never works.

The foster parents that were most satisfied with their agency discussed in detail the support they have from their caseworkers. Some keep in contact through email or text message and have their caseworker's number on speed dial. The agencies have caseworkers on call for 24 hours a day and are available for any emergencies. One participant spoke about a friend's caseworker:

Both of their children are reactive towards touch...because of their behaviors, which are pretty wild, the social worker every morning that's possible, goes out and helps get the kids ready for school.

Another foster mother mentioned her agency team as one of her biggest helps and supports. "My placement team is wonderful, when I'm really having a hard time they'll do whatever they can to try to get me some time to rest." One foster parent spoke about the aging out classes available for teenagers in care and how her agency sends the teacher out to their small town to teach the students who will soon age out rather than having all fifteen kids get driven to the larger city by the foster parents. It's the caseworkers making these extra efforts, getting to know the foster parents and their needs, and doing something about it that really makes a difference in the experience of the foster parents. They feel more support, and in turn the children benefit.

Along with the team approach to maintaining a successful and supportive placement, many foster parents mentioned the importance of supporting the goal of reunification. One foster

parent wished that relationships with biological parents were encouraged more and a bigger part of the training experience.

Every year we request birth parent relationships, more and more shared parenting has become the focus and its not really trained. They tell you to go out and for example, I'll tell you there was this beautiful article written and said invite the birth parent into your home and cook and show them around. But they don't really explain to you how do you do that when your foster child's parent is an accused rapist, they don't tell you how to deal with that. When they are high on drugs. And especially new foster parents make so many mistakes ranging from either treating the birth family like they are monsters or getting all buddy-buddy.

Three interviewees (33%) described the importance and results of having a good relationship with the biological families, stating that it is what is best for the child when it comes to transitioning home.

Because what kids do is they glorify their families when they are away from them, they forget all the things that happened to them. So for a successful placement- make sure the families are a part of the kids' upbringing. You have to be very accepting of the family and then when the kids will be able to intelligently decide 'okay this is something that I can accept.'

Another foster parent stated, "Whether a person can raise that child and parent that child, doesn't matter. There is still that connection (between mother and child) that needs to be addressed and needs to be respected."

Participating foster parents were asked for their opinions on why foster parents quit fostering. Responses included a lack of training (22%), poor relationship with the foster agency

(78%), emotionally draining (67%), confusion of roles and expectations (44%), and a lack of control or involvement with the agency's goal for placements (67%). One foster parent spoke about fostering as a professional job that is under-resourced and underappreciated:

There's that middle patch where social workers are trained where foster parents aren't.

We are expected to be professional parents, yet we aren't given that professional level of training. I think that part of it is what causes a lot of foster parents to burn out.

Seven interviewees (78%) spoke about poor relationships with the foster agency as the reason that they would quit fostering or have heard why other foster parents have quit. These stories centered around restrictions and rules on caring for the children (in terms of where they can go, haircuts, vacations), foster parents not being a priority or respected, and overburdened caseworkers who cannot provide the agency support that is needed.

Six foster parents (67%) reported that fostering can be emotionally draining and contribute to burn out. Responses included: "Because its exhausting", "feeling guilty for taking breaks", and "feeling alone." One foster parent told a story about the heartbreak she felt when the foster son she was hoping to adopt was reunified with his biological mother. He was soon after removed and placed in care, then reunified, then put back in care. This was not the only foster parent to talk about this heart wrenching back and forth of foster youth that takes a toll on the emotions of the foster parents, who want what is best for the child. One foster parent stated:

And the frustration is just overwhelming, we care so much about these kids, we love them unconditionally and they are our kids while they're here, but they're not our kids.

And that's another thing that frustrates me, they are our children, but then they're not.

We have no control at all.

A lack of control or involvement with the agency's goal for placements was identified as a reason why some foster parents may quit by six of the interviewees (67%). "They can handle the kids but the system and the back and forth and all the uncertainty, people can't deal with it- its hard." Four foster parents (44%) discussed their frustrations with court. One participant shared:

The way things happen in court, it just doesn't make sense. And you think, "Are we even doing any good? Are we even helping?" Because a lot of things happen in court and it could be frustrating and could just tear you apart. I mean you see a lot of good and not so good.

Four participants (44%) talked about the confusion of roles and expectations as additional contributions to burn out. Responses included: "unreasonable expectations of foster parents," difficulty locating support and available resources, and differing goals between the agency and the foster parents (reunification vs. adoption).

Recommendations

At the conclusion of each interview, the participants were asked, "Do you have any recommendations for foster parent trainings and/or ongoing services?" Responses varied from birth parent relationships (22%), to childcare at evening and weekend trainings (44%), to be provided with a list of experienced health and mental healthcare providers at the beginning of placement (33%), to more large-scale state-level recommendations (44%). As previously stated, foster parents have stated a want and need to learn how to better navigate birth parent relationships. One foster parent recommended that the transition period home be lengthened for younger kids to allow for some co-parenting between foster parent and biological parent and to

better encourage the bond between biological parent and foster child. Also previously stated, foster parents identified access to experienced medical and mental health professionals needs to be more available and maybe a list of nearby providers should be given to foster parents the first day of placement.

In discussing trainings, foster parents (44%) recommended that trainings be available online, on weekends, during evening weekend hours, and provide childcare. Another foster parent recommended that foster youth (or young people who were once involved in the system) be invited to speak at initial foster parent trainings in order for potential foster parents to hear their perspectives and experiences.

Other recommendations were on a larger scale. One foster parent spoke about her ideal vision for placement. She spoke about empowering teenage foster youth and the social worker by having a team of people (the youth, the social worker, a supervisor, and the foster parent) to meet at the potential foster home for a “team meeting in the house where the kid is going to be (present) and have them look at their space that they’re going to be sleeping in. And then make the decision if they want to do that.” Another foster parent stated that we must refocus our attention to the youth; that the system needs to focus first and foremost on the safety of children and rehabilitating families and enable reunification. “The concentration should be on the kids and not on the foster parents or the birth parents, but on what’s best for the kids and what the kids need at every moment of their life. (Foster care should) not just be a holding pattern until the court decides where the child goes. Another recommendation was for there to be an annual conference for foster care agencies to come together as a community and talk about their differences and how to do things better together. “To think about what we need now in these troubled times to make the foster care system a better place for kids.”

One foster parent recommended that foster parenting be considered a profession. “Like a job that you love, sometimes I’m uncomfortable with the expectations that you love a child like they’re a member of your family and then turn around and send them back to a situation that you know is not the greatest.” She spoke about the expectations being greater if fostering was considered a profession rather than volunteering and being provided with a minimal stipend. She asks, “Why not put foster parents in the position to be a stay at home mom and get paid a monthly salary to provide care?” For people to take on the profession of fostering (not to adopt), they would care for children for the year or so, “prepping him up to return him to the family and it would be much more effective if actually they (foster parent) were trained and expected to handle this like a job.” She spoke about homes for people with different disabilities and wondered why we are not doing the same for our youth. Foster parents are the ones who are there twenty-four hours a day- seven days a week doing the hard work with minimal resources and essentially are expected to be professional parents while neither treated as professionals nor trained adequately.

The information gathered for this research is informative to foster care agencies trying to develop a more comprehensive system to ensure higher retention rates of foster parents. The findings identified foster parent initial and continued motivation to foster, the experiences of initial and ongoing trainings, and working as a team player within the foster care system. The next chapter will analyze the findings and previous research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The objective of this qualitative research is to investigate the question, “Perspectives of foster parents: What influences their motivation to become and continue to be foster parents?” Nine current foster parents from across the United States were interviewed to identify motivations for fostering, identify foster parents’ supports, assess for the current needs of foster families, and to ask for recommendations to further support and encourage our foster parents. This chapter reviews the findings in the following order: 1) key findings, 2) strengths and limitations; and 3) implications and conclusion.

Key Findings

The research completed by Cuttleback and Orme (2002) and Christenson and McMurtry (2007) affirms that foster families would benefit from more quality training and ongoing support from the fostering agencies. During the interviews conducted for this research, all participants (100%) spoke about what additional services they feel their foster youth need and what they wish to be included in the initial and ongoing trainings. Every participant reported that foster parent support groups were either their primary place of support or that they wished they could be a part of a support group. In addition to foster family support groups, six participants (67%) stated that they learned the most from other foster parents during formal and informal trainings. It appears that if agencies could invite current foster parents to initial foster parent trainings and hold regular meetings or support groups for foster parents to attend (with childcare provided) that

foster parents would feel more supported and gain greater knowledge on how to work within the system and best care for their foster youth.

One foster parent spoke about her wish that there be more online classes that a parent could choose from and take based on the needs of their foster children, rather than taking time away from the family to attend four to six hour trainings held on nights and weekends. Pacifici et al (2005) examined the effectiveness of two online courses available to foster, adoptive, and kinship parents. Their findings showed significant gains in parent knowledge. This research is significant and demonstrates that online courses could be a way to bridge the gap in adequate and inadequate trainings for foster parents. In conducting this research, foster parents opened up about wanting specific trainings that addressed the specific needs and behaviors of their foster youth. Often these trainings are not available and one foster parent stated that her agency asks for suggestions for future trainings, and every year they ask for the topic of birth parent relationships, but they never get it. It seems that if more web-based trainings were accessible to all foster parents, that parents could choose trainings that are most applicable to their living situation and family dynamics. Addressing problem behaviors or “how-to’s” could be searched for on an online, state-wide training database and be resolved, rather than waiting 6 months and an hour long drive for the training to take place.

As stated in the literature, adequate support and training for foster parents is related to better retention rates (MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006; Rhodes, Orme, Cox, Buehler, 2003; Crum , 2010; Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; Christenson & McMurtry 2007 & 2009; Cuttleback & Orme, 2002). In the research published by the Hunter College School of Social Work of the City University of New York semi-annual newsletter (2000) three crucial reasons were identified for why foster parents give up: 1) confusion of the foster parent’s role in

relationship to the agency; 2) Feeling inadequately prepared in the pre-service orientation to the job of fostering and not having relevant ongoing training; 3) Concern over the lack of support from the worker/agency. Triseliotis, Borland, and Hill (1998) found that foster parents quit because they are dissatisfied with agency relationships, have poor communication with caseworkers, perceive caseworkers as unresponsive, and receive inadequate training and support. This research supports the previous research and literature about factors contributing to the retention rates of foster parents. It appears that the participants of this study have also felt that successful fostering includes teamwork, communication, cooperation, and support from all parties. Interviewed foster parents identified a lack of training (22%), poor relationship with the foster agency (78%), emotionally draining (67%), confusion of roles and expectations (44%), and a lack of control or involvement with the agency's goal for placements (67%) to be the contributing factors for foster parents to quit fostering.

Christenson and McMurtry (2007) found that it is important for the foster families to be partners with the child welfare system rather than just working for them. They found that issues arise when foster families were working with children without full disclosure and when there is a lack of communication with the fostering agency. This literature supports the findings within this research, in which foster parents discussed their obstacles with successful foster placements. Three participants (33%) shared stories about their experience of having a foster child in their home without full knowledge of the child's background and the issues that developed. Brown (2008) reported on foster parents' perceptions of successful placements and found that foster parents needed (1) information about the foster child prior to placement, (2) a good relationship with the fostering agency, (3) individualized services such as crisis intervention and services for children with special needs, (4) community support, (5) linkages to other foster families, (6)

supportive family, (7) self care skills, and (8) formal foster parent organizations. Each of these points can also be found within the responses of the nine individuals interviewed for this research. Interviewees stated that they wanted to feel more like a team player within their role at the agency, not only working for the system but with them. As previously reported, interviewed foster parents also emphasized the importance of foster parent support groups and receiving as much information as possible about a foster youth prior to or at the time of placement. Like the participants in the Brown (2008) and Mitchell et al. (2010) studies, the participants involved with this study stated a wish to be an active participant in their placements and case planning with the professionals.

Strengths and Limitations

Due to the voluntary nature of this study and the small number of participants from all over the country, the data is limited and further study is needed to generalize the findings. The limitations of this research were that: the sample size was small (9 participants) and that the participants were from eight different states, each with different laws and agencies. Due to the limited amount of time to conduct the research and no incentives for participants, the research was only able to interview nine foster parents. Additional foster parents were recruited, however due to time constraints the researcher could no longer remind and wait for consent forms to be returned and scheduling interview times.

The interview questions were designed by the researcher and were very broad in context, which resulted in the open-ended responses varying greatly. However, since all the participants have the experience of working within the foster care system for at least one year and are from

different parts of the country, the similarities in their responses about their current needs and recommendations demonstrate certain similarities that are important to acknowledge.

Implications and Conclusion

Currently, there are more than 400,000 children living in foster care nationwide (The Adoption and Foster Care Adoption Reporting Systems, 2011). Preventing the unnecessary loss of qualified foster parents would significantly enhance the child welfare systems' ability to enhance the safety, permanency, and wellbeing for children in their care (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007). Gathering a better understanding of foster parents' longevity and which agency and outside supports help to motivate foster parents to continue to foster is an essential first step towards enhancing the child welfare system. Implications of this study include ways in which foster care agencies can improve the supports for foster families and ultimately enhance the safety, permanency, and well being of children in foster care. A better understanding of this topic will be informative to foster care agencies trying to develop a more comprehensive system to ensure higher retention rates of foster parents.

The purpose of this research was to gain insight into the experiences of foster parents and evaluate what supports help them continue supporting foster youth and what is still needed. Although this study had a small number of participants, it is important to note that although from different parts of the country and involved with different agencies, much of what they had to say was the same. In terms of support, foster parent support groups is a valuable way foster parents a place to come together to gain knowledge of resources and gain support and validation from each other. It is critical to create an alliance with the foster caseworker and agency for the benefit of the child, to support that child in his/her development and prepare them for reunification or

adoption. Needs within the child welfare system will always be changing, but it is so important that the foster care community provides constant updates and advances its services and trainings to meet the ever-changing needs of those that care for and support these children, they are counting on us.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

I am a Masters in Social Work student at Smith College School for Social Work, in Northampton, MA and I am conducting a study to investigate the question, “Perspectives of foster parents: What influences their motivation to become and continue to be foster parents?” The purposes of this study are to identify motivations for fostering, identify foster parents’ supports, and create a list of recommendations to further support and training for foster parents. A better understanding of this topic may be informative to foster care agencies trying to develop a more comprehensive system to ensure higher retention rates of foster parents.

You are being asked to join in this research by participating in a one hour interview to provide information on your experience of foster parent trainings and the available ongoing support services for foster parents. Inclusion criteria consists of your role serving as a foster parent for one year and fluency in the English language.

Minimal risk from participation is anticipated. Interviews will take place in person or by phone and will be audio recorded. The information gathered from the interviews will be presented as a group and any sources of quotes will be disguised. I will make every effort to make your information anonymous in the presentation of this study by disguising personal information that is used in quotes. Data collected in the interview will be used in my thesis and in possible future presentations or publications. A possible benefit of your involvement is that you will get a chance to reflect on your experience and training.

Collected data will be kept in a secure place for the duration of the study. My research advisor will have access to my data, but will not have access to the identities of participants. All data will be kept protected for a period of three years as required by Federal guidelines after which time they will be destroyed. Should I need the materials beyond the three year period, they will continue to be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed when no longer needed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question. If you would like to withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you may do so before April 25th, 2012 and all information pertaining to you will be immediately destroyed. To withdraw, please email or call me using the information below. There is no penalty for withdrawal from the study. You may contact me at the email or phone number listed below for questions or concerns about this study, before or after the data collection. You may also call the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee for any concerns about your rights or this study at (413) 585- 7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Appendix B



School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

March 8, 2012

Bridget Conway

Dear Bridget,

Very nice job and I thank you for making the requested changes. Your project is now officially approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Best of luck with your project!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David L. Burton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Colette Duciaume-Wright, Research Advisor

Appendix C

Questions for foster parents:

- 1) How was the training program experience, how many hours did you complete, what was helpful, what would you have liked more of?
- 2) What services and trainings are available to you, your family, and your foster children from your agencies?
- 3) Why did you become a foster parent?
- 4) Why do you think foster parents quit?
- 5) What should all foster parents know before becoming a foster parent?
- 6) What makes for a successful foster placement?
- 7) What supports help you continue to be a foster parent?
- 8) Do you have any recommendations for foster parent trainings and/or ongoing services?

Appendix D

Recruitment Flyer

Foster Parents Needed!

Seeking adults who have been foster parents for a minimum of one year for a Smith College School for Social Work thesis research study on the motivations, training and supports of foster parents.

WHAT: Perspectives of foster parents: What influences their motivation to become and continue to be foster parents?

WHEN: At your convenience!

WHERE: At a mutually agreed upon location or over the phone.

**Bridget Conway, MSW student
Smith College School for Social Work
Research Study**