



# Challenges and strengths in parenting foster-to-adopt children: Perspectives of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual foster-to-adopt parents

This study was funded by grants from the American Psychological Foundation and the National Institutes of Health, awarded to the fourth author.

April M. Moyer, Lori A. Kinkler, Hannah B. Richardson, & Abbie E. Goldberg

## Abstract

This study examined the perceptions of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual foster-to-adopt parents. Participants were interviewed 3-4 months post-adoptive placement about the challenging and positive aspects of their children's backgrounds and personalities. Thematic analysis was used to qualitatively analyze the data. Parents expressed challenges associated with their children that included: a history of neglect and abuse, emotional/behavioral problems, medical concerns, and homophobic attitudes. Parents also highlighted positive qualities of their children, including: being healthier than expected, their pleasant personalities, and their openness to same-sex couples. Findings are useful to adoption professionals who provide pre- and post-adoption support services.

## Introduction

Foster children enter the public system for various reasons, including abuse, neglect, and abandonment (U.S. DHHS, 2010). In part reflecting the difficult nature of their early circumstances, children adopted from foster care often exhibit problem behaviors that may be difficult for foster-to-adopt parents to cope with (Vandivere & McKlindon, 2010). Foster-to-adopt parents purposefully seek to adopt children through the child welfare system but must foster their children for a period of time before they can legally adopt them (Edelstein, Burge, & Waterman, 2002).

The current study qualitatively examines the perspectives of foster-to-adopt parents regarding the challenging characteristics and strengths of their foster-to-adopt children. We examine these perspectives through a family stress lens (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Because foster-to-adopt parents must interact with several systems (i.e., legal system, social service agency, birth family), we posit that foster-to-adopt parents are particularly vulnerable to stressors, and that these stressors may be reflected in foster-to-adopt parents' perceptions of their children. We also seek to examine what, if any, unique perspectives same-sex couples may hold about their children, since foster children, who are typically adopted at older ages, may have been exposed to homophobic attitudes.

### Research Questions

1. What do foster-to-adopt parents perceive as *challenging* characteristics of their children, early in their transition to parenthood?
2. What do foster-to-adopt parents perceive as *positive* qualities of their children?

## Method

### Participants

This study utilized data from an ongoing longitudinal study on the transition to adoptive parenthood. The current sample consisted of 84 foster-to-adopt parents (members of 17 lesbian couples, 13 gay couples, and 12 heterosexual couples). Participants were 38.58 years old, on average ( $SD = 6.20$ ) and had been in their current relationships for a mean of 7.87 years ( $SD = 3.80$ ). Eighty-eight percent of the sample was White; the remainder was Latino ( $n = 3$ ), African American ( $n = 2$ ), Asian ( $n = 2$ ), and multiracial ( $n = 1$ ). Participants lived in diverse regions across North America (Table 1).

Table 1. Geographical Distribution

Northeast	50%
West	28%
Midwest	10%
South	10%
Canada	2%

Couples waited a mean of 16.8 months for a child placement (median = 12,  $SD = 16.66$ ). The mean age of the children was 4.63 years (median = 2.5 years,  $SD = 6$  years, range: 1 day old to 16 years old). Half of the children were racial/ethnic minorities (Table 2).

Table 2. Race/Ethnicity of Child

Caucasian/White	50%
Multiracial	30%
Latino	10%
African American	10%

The majority of children had at least one prior placement (Table 3). Three of the 42 placements examined in the study (two lesbian couples, one gay male couple) eventually disrupted.

Table 3. Children's Prior Placements

1	50%
2-4	30%
5-10	10%
11-30	10%
0	5%

### Procedure

Interviews took place 3-4 months post-adoptive placement. Participants were interviewed separately from their partners for approximately 60-90 minutes over the telephone. The interview data were analyzed qualitatively by all of the authors using thematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

## Results

Results indicate that the majority of participants perceived challenges related to characteristics of their children. Parents described challenges in the following domains: previous neglect or abuse of the child, the child's emotional and behavioral problems, and the child's significant medical history (Table 4). In addition, some same-sex couples in this study expressed that their child's homophobic attitudes were a challenge to overcome. Notably, many participants also described their perception that children possessed positive qualities, such as the child's lack of medical problems, pleasant personality, and openness to same-sex couples.

### Challenges

Table 4. Challenging Characteristics of Children

Challenge	Lesbian	Gay	Heterosexual	Total
Neglect/Abuse	25	19	14	58 (69%)
Emotional/Behavioral Problems	21	12	13	46 (55%)
Medical History				
Birth Complications	8	12	7	27 (32%)
Chronic Conditions	12	5	7	24 (29%)
Homophobic Attitudes	5	0	0	5 (17% of same-sex participants)

**Neglect and Abuse.** Sixty-nine percent of the sample indicated that their children had experienced neglect and/or abuse. Neglect was more commonly mentioned ( $n = 49$ ) than physical ( $n = 17$ ) and sexual ( $n = 9$ ) abuse. Most of the foster-to-adopt parents in this sample cited their children's neglect and abuse history as the reason they were placed in the child welfare system. Some parents expressed that the neglect and abuse were from birth family members, while others described neglectful and abusive foster care environments that their children endured. For these families, the trauma from prior neglectful and abusive environments continued to impact the child, despite the current adoptive placement. This was described as distressing for foster-to-adopt parents. For example, Corey, a gay father expressed:

**He was picked up, thrown across the room, his head was split open, he had to have stitches. He constantly talks about how horrible that was . . . the poor little thing, it breaks my heart sometimes . . . he loves his mom and dad. He really does, but he also knows that the circumstances that he was living in . . . the physical abuse just wasn't good.**

**Emotional and Behavioral Problems.** Fifty-five percent of the sample perceived their child's behavioral and emotional problems as a challenge. Specifically, 34 parents (40%) indicated that their children were experiencing general **attachment difficulties**, and nine of them mentioned that their children were struggling with feelings of attachment to their birth or foster parents in particular. Such struggles were explained by Jane, a lesbian mom:

**Actually [our child] called [his foster mother] "Mom" until he moved in with us . . . and the kids have a picture book that [their foster mother] made them. It was hard to see them sad and hard to know what to do to help them. We knew eventually that it would stop. But it kept going and kept going and they still talk about [their foster mother] and we're wondering when will it stop, or will it?**

In addition, 23 parents (27%) reported that their children were **"acting out" or engaging in violent behaviors** (e.g., physical altercations with peers and family, breaking objects, tantrums). Some parents expressed significant distress related to their child's aggressive behaviors. For instance, Sherry, a lesbian mom said:

**She had a few meltdowns in the beginning that scared me to death, because I just didn't want to deal with it . . . I expected so many different behaviors, that when we got this one, I was like, "Well that's not the one I prepared for."**

At times, parents attempted to explain and understand their child's misbehavior; thereby softening their own distress over such behaviors. Nick, a gay father, stated:

**I'm sure he was acting out because he does have ADD and then his mother abused him, which was really a problem; and then he lived with a foster family for two years . . . and his behavior got completely out of control.**

On the other hand, some parents did not understand why their children were behaving with such aggression, and therefore perceived such behaviors as distressing. These parents expressed notions such as "it was simply something I did not expect".

**Medical History.** Children's presentations were also often complicated by a problematic medical history, as reported by their foster-to-adopt parents: Thirty-two percent of participants' children were born **addicted to drugs**, had **fetal alcohol syndrome**, or had other **birth complications**. Furthermore, twenty-four participants (29%) noted **chronic health issues** stemming from a range of conditions (e.g., **hepatitis, asthma**). Medical conditions were perceived as challenges by foster-to-adopters, who had to schedule, and accompany their children to, appointments.

**Homophobic Attitudes.** Five lesbian participants noted specific challenges related to their children's homophobic attitudes and/or use of homophobic language, which children had typically learned prior to the placement in their current family. Kate described a situation in which her child had a negative reaction to learning that her lesbian parents were married:

**She was at the dinner table one night and [my partner] said that we were married and she said, "Ew, that's wrong." You know, we had to have a conversation with her around it's not wrong for two women to be married. She said, "Somebody in school told me this is wrong." We said this is not wrong. We were like, this is what it means to be a family . . .**

### Positive Characteristics

In addition to challenging aspects of their children's history and presentation, participants also described *positive* aspects of their children (Table 5).

Table 5. Positive Characteristics of Children

Characteristic	Lesbian	Gay	Heterosexual	Total
Healthy	3	2	4	9 (11%)
Pleasant Personality	4	3	2	9 (11%)
Openness to Same-Sex Couples	2	0	0	2 (6% of same-sex participants)

**Healthy.** Eleven percent of participants indicated that their children were much healthier than they expected. Because they were adopting from the child welfare system, these parents thought their children would be afflicted by health problems. Gary, a gay father, noted: **"The two boys that we got are healthy; no drug or alcohol issues, no impairments. It's a little bit like adopting a unicorn. We got very lucky."** Similarly, Tara, a heterosexual mother, expressed disbelief over her child's good health: **"I can't even believe we have such a healthy, happy boy."**

**Pleasant Personality.** Additionally, 11% of participants discussed their children's likeable personality and temperament. They noted that their children were a "delight", "fun" and "easy". Andrea, a heterosexual mother, described her nurturing daughter:

**If someone cries in the house she'll go up to them and hug them. She'll like step back and look at you and if you're still crying, she'll keep hugging you, and repeating that until you stop crying. It's just is so sweet.**

**Openness to Same-Sex Couples.** Lastly, two lesbian participants described their children as being immediately accepting of same-sex couples, which was perceived as an unexpected positive experience of parenting foster-to-adopt children. Anna understood her daughter's open outlook on her parents' relationship in the following way:

**I think the fact that she has memories of a different family and things that she's gone through is useful for her. It gives her kind of a sense of global perspective—she's had a number of different parenting experiences and this is just one among them.**

Thus, in the midst of challenges during the first months of parenting, many participants also perceived strengths associated with their children and reported positive bonding experiences as they worked together to form a family.

## Conclusion

This study highlights some of the salient perceived challenges – and positive experiences – that a sample of foster-to-adopt parents (who are rarely the focus of research) encountered during the early stages of parenting. Our findings have implications for professionals who prepare foster-to-adopt parents for some of the experiences they may face post-placement. While it is clear that parents who adopt from the foster care system may perceive challenges associated with their children's complex physical, emotional, and behavioral difficulties, they often also interpret positive aspects of their children, which may contribute to positive perceptions of parenting overall and ultimately, less distress.

## References

- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Edelstein, S., Burge, D., & Waterman, J. (2002). Older children in preadoptive homes: Issues before termination of parental rights. *Child Welfare, 81*, 101-121.
- McCubbin, H., & Patterson, J. (1983). The family stress process: The double ABCX Model of adjustment and adaptation. In H. McCubbin, M. Sussman, & J. Patterson (Eds.), *Social stress and the family* (pp. 7-39). Binghamton, NY: Haworth.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2010). *The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2009 Estimates as of July 2010*. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb>
- Vandivere, S., & McKlindon, A. (2010). The well-being of U.S. children adopted from foster care, privately from the United States and internationally. *Adoption Quarterly, 13*, 157-184.