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THE LEVEL OF FOSTER PARENT SATISFACTION WITH THE
DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Tracy Paille McCuskey

September 2001

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September 2001

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ABSTRACT

This research project surveyed San Bernardino County non-relative licensed foster parents to assess their level of satisfaction with the Department of Children's Services. This research also explored factors related to communication and feelings of support and determined their impact on overall feelings of satisfaction with the agency.

The data was analyzed utilizing both quantitative and qualitative procedures. Results indicated equal numbers of foster parents were satisfied with the agency as were those who were dissatisfied. For foster parents there was a strong positive correlation between communication, feelings of support and overall satisfaction.

This research has provided the foster parents with a forum to express their feelings and concerns about the agency. The research results if implemented have the potential to improve overall satisfaction, specifically in the areas of communication and feelings of support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT..... iii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

 Problem Statement..... 1

 Problem Focus..... 4

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

 The Foster Care System..... 7

 Research Related to Foster Parent Satisfaction..... 10

 Communication and its Impact on Foster Parents..... 16

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

 Study Purpose..... 19

 Research Design..... 19

 Sampling..... 20

 Data Collection and Instrument..... 21

 Procedure..... 22

 Protection of Human Subjects..... 22

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

 Data Analysis..... 24

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

 Implications for the Agency..... 32

 Implications for Social Work Practice..... 36

APPENDIX A: SURVEY..... 38

APPENDIX B:	INFORMED CONSENT FORM.....	41
APPENDIX C:	DEBRIEFING STATEMENT.....	43
APPENDIX D:	SUMMARY OF MEAN RESPONSES	45
APPENDIX E:	SUMMARY OF OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH THE AGENCY.....	47
REFERENCES		49

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Each year many children come into the care of child protective services as a result of abuse or neglect. In recent years there have been substantial growth in the number of children in need of foster care, as well as a shortage of available and qualified foster homes. San Bernardino County Department of Children's Services, like all child welfare agencies must cope with the ramifications of this issue.

The current foster care population is younger than in previous generations, with an average age of eight years old (Barth, 1995). Since 1983, the proportion of children under the age of six has grown steadily and now exceeds 50 percent; of these children more than half are placed as infants and half of these infants are placed within the first two weeks of life (Barth, 1995). Of the children who enter the foster care system, minorities continue to be over represented. In California children typically remain in foster care for an average of 21 months and usually experience two placements (Needell, B. et al., 1994). Of the children who remain in placement for two years, overall, 48 percent are reunified, 3 percent adopted and 49 percent remain in care. After four years 59 percent have

been reunified, 10 percent adopted and 31 percent remain in care. Of children who have been in placement six years, 61 percent have reunited, 14 percent adopted and 25 percent remain in care (Needall, Et al., 1994).

A combination of philosophy and law determine where a child who comes into the child welfare system will be placed. A growing number of lawsuits and consent decrees have influenced child protective services to increase the use of relatives as a placement option (Glesson, 1995). However, not all children who enter the system have family. Of those who do have family these relatives are sometimes not willing or able to care for them. As a result there still remains a critical need for non-relative foster parents.

When determining placement of a dependent child, policy dictates children should be placed in the least restrictive environment. In child protective services the least restrictive environment is considered to be the most family like setting. It is assumed that a less restrictive and more family-like setting is likely to provide more potential for continuity of care while keeping the child safe (California Out of Home Placement Services for Child Welfare, 1996). Child protective services have a variety of possible placement options. These options in order of the least restrictive to the most restrictive are relative

placements, county licensed foster homes, county licensed small family homes, foster family agency certified homes, group homes and treatment facilities.

With the increasing number of children entering the child welfare system combined with ever-present budget constraints the cost of placement is a significant issue. When a child is placed in non-relative foster care, funding is provided to the foster parent to meet the child's basic needs. The following information is based on figures obtained from the County of San Bernardino as of July 2000. In San Bernardino County foster care payments range from \$405 to \$569 per month, per child based on the child's age. In contrast, agency placements are compensated at a rate from \$1496 to \$1759 per month, per child based on age. Group home placements can reach as high as \$6,076 per month per child based on the child's needs.

The combination of cost and philosophy deem it necessary to recruit and retain county licensed foster parents who can provide an appropriate home for dependent children. Because these foster parents are licensed directly through the county it is important to review their feelings and attitudes toward the licensing agency. It is reasonable to assume that those foster parents who have a more positive experience with the agency and their staff will be more likely to continue to provide foster care. In

view of this assumption it would be beneficial to assess the level of satisfaction of San Bernardino County licensed foster parents with the Department of Children's Services and to receive feedback from these foster parents. It is also reasonable to assume that feedback received, if implemented could improve agency performance. Therefore this study has used information obtained from the foster parents to examine the level of satisfaction of non-relative licensed foster parents in San Bernardino County with the Department of Children's Services. This study explored factors related to communication and feelings of support that may influence the foster parents level of satisfaction. This study also included two open-ended questions that provided an opportunity for foster parents to specifically express their concerns and suggestions.

Problem Focus

The current foster parent shortage combined with the existence of attrition within existing foster homes indicates a need to examine factors which may deter individuals from becoming foster parents and to review the factors which could impact existing foster parents decision to continue to provide foster care. Criticisms of the foster care system are rampant and of especial concern are children who enter the system and experience multiple moves

creating a sense of increased instability. Improved communication may provide an opportunity for intervention prior to the disruption of a placement, resulting in reduced trauma to the child. Additionally, a positive working relationship between the foster parent and the Department of Children's Services could provide the necessary incentive for the foster family to work through a crisis that may arise, salvaging the placement and again leading to increased stability for the child.

There continues to be an ever-increasing debate over what is in the best interests of the children who enter the foster care system. Topics such as the increased need for permanency, incentives for adoption, and reduction in the amount of time allowed for possible reunification are just some of the issues affecting the child welfare system. Despite these debates, it remains a reality that many children who enter this system will likely spend a significant portion of their time living with foster parents. Because foster parents are an integral and necessary component of the child welfare system it would appear beneficial for the Department of Children's Services to be concerned with their perception of the agency's performance. One way to ensure this is to examine this relationship from the vantage point of the foster parent.

The population this study has surveyed are San Bernardino County non-relative licensed foster parents. The research consisted of a mail-in survey designed to assess both the level of foster parent satisfaction with the agency and the factors related to communication and feelings of support which impact satisfaction. The survey also allowed the foster parents an opportunity to express their opinions.

The following research questions were posed. What is the level of satisfaction of non-relative licensed foster parents in San Bernardino County with the Department of Children's Services? What are some of the factors that influence these foster parents level of satisfaction? When assessing the factors, which influence level of satisfaction, this research focused on communication and feelings of support.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Foster Care System

The foster care system remains a poorly understood social service program with multiple critics. The system is overburdened, with agency workers often carrying high caseloads. What media attention the foster care system does manage to attract is often directed at the tragic failures of the system to protect and provide for its young recipients (Courtney, 1995). One such example is the November 2000 article in Time magazine entitled "The Shame of Foster Care". This article provided an expose of the often-tragic failure of the child protection system. It describes this system as an overburdened bureaucracy in a state of crisis. Within the article are examples of the often tragic failures of the system to protect the children who come into its' care. Within the article three states are identified as examples of the severity of the crisis. These states are Georgia, Alabama and California. Within child protective services funding practices are often inadequate and subject to the whims of the political climate. In the midst of political debate regarding welfare reform, foster care expenditures were largely overlooked; yet much of the federal funding for the program

is closely linked to the public welfare system (Courtney, 1995). Added to the financial and administrative concerns related to foster care is the reported increase in the special needs of foster children. Recent studies suggest up to 60 percent of foster children experience moderate to severe mental health problems and approximately 40 percent have physical health problems (Courtney, 1995). Additional research indicates children in foster care have a higher incidence of learning disabilities and neuromuscular disorders (Weather & Gregory, 1995).

Working within this context is no easy task. In view of these factors it would be of interest to note what influences a person to become a foster parent. The debate continues, with two primary schools of thought. The first views foster parents as caring for the children who enter the system for the financial incentives. Barth (2001) indicates in "Policy implications of Foster Family Characteristics" that the increased costs of living, as well as shortages in affordable housing result in traditional foster care reimbursements rates not being a financial gain for any except the poorest single earner households. In contrast agency reimbursements are provided as a higher rate, which could substitute for a second wage earner within a family or provide a moderate wage for a single wage household.

In recent years there has been a large increase in the foster family agency setting. These agencies for a much larger fee, approximately \$1500 to \$1700 per month per child, agree to provide a higher level of care for the children placed in their homes. In an attempt to identify foster parenting as a profession the agency hires foster parents who are paid at a higher rate than traditional foster parents. In addition the agency provides a combination of additional services to the children placed in their care (Testa & Rolock, 1999).

The second perspective related to why foster parents provide care equates foster care provision with high levels of altruism by the foster parents. This perspective relates foster care performance with the willingness of the foster parents to invest themselves in the care of other people's children (Testa & Rolock, 1999). Some religious organizations are also working within the system to promote the care of foster children for primarily altruistic reasons. Research indicates both individuals who provide foster and adoptive homes tend to have a high degree of religiosity (Moore, 1998).

Of the two options for providing foster care, research demonstrates similar levels of performance between both agency and direct placements. Thus, the options are to provide foster parents with additional compensation or to

recruit foster parents with greater levels of altruism (Testa & Rolock, 1999). There is a disparity in costs to fund the two types of placement, approximately \$400 to \$569 per month per child for county licensed foster homes versus approximately \$1500 to \$1750 per month per child for foster family agency homes. As with nearly all social services agencies, most child welfare agencies experience consistent budget constraints. Therefore it would appear to necessitate child welfare agencies devote considerable energy to maintaining positive relationships with those foster parents who are willing to provide direct foster care to the county.

Research Related to Foster Parent Satisfaction

A wide array of literature and research exists related to child welfare and the subject of foster care, much of it critical of the system and its performance. Many studies compare relative and non-relative foster care providers and the characteristics, which comprise each category. Unfortunately, research directly related to foster parenting from the foster parent perspective is somewhat limited. Even more limited is research directly related to foster parent satisfaction with the child welfare system or the factors, which directly relate to foster parent satisfaction. Of the research that does exist there is

support for the position that the relationship between the foster parents and the agency has a direct impact on the foster parent's feelings of satisfaction and ultimately the quality and stability of the placement. The studies generally support the need for clear effective communication and a positive working relationship between the foster parent and the child welfare agency.

Rhodes, Orme and Buehler (2001) in the article "A Comparison of Family Foster Parents who Quit, Consider Quitting, and Plan to Continue Fostering" identify five main themes which were reasons for foster home closure. These themes are as follows: (1) normal life changes in family circumstances, (2) dissatisfaction with the agency relationships which included poor communication, unresponsiveness of caseworkers and inadequate services, (3) foster parents were not being prepared to foster, (4) the stresses associated with providing foster care and (5) foster parents discontinued providing foster care due to conflicts between the foster children and the foster parent's biological children. Within this same article the authors discuss additional research they conducted related to this topic. The authors used a nationally selected sample of current and former foster homes to assess why some foster parents continue to provide care while others do not. The data for the research study was gathered from

a 1991 National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents referred to as NSC&FFP. The study used a case control design. The data was collected from foster parents who lived in 27 counties within nine states. The data was collected from 1048 current foster homes and 265 former foster homes. Findings of the study indicate foster parents who plan to discontinue providing care would benefit from improved communication and from supportive services that would help address boundary ambiguity, loss, working with birth families, and children's behavior problems.

Research conducted by Rindfleisch, Denby, and Bean (1998) examined issues related to foster parents continuing to provide care. This research was conducted by completion of a survey of 720 former foster homes and 804 current foster homes. The researcher's reviewed factors, which contribute to foster parents no longer providing foster care. Three of the critical issues that emerged were the agency "red tape", feeling that the agency social worker did not reach out to the foster parent, and being unclear of the agency social worker's expectations. The findings of this research study support the importance of clear communication and the need of foster parents to feel supported.

Additional research conducted by Denby, Rindfleisch and Bean (1999) examined factors which contributed to foster parent satisfaction. This research was conducted in eight urban counties within the state of Ohio using a mail in survey. The sample consisted of 539 foster parents, which represented a 68 percent return rate. The questionnaire focused on identifying factors which predict foster parent satisfaction. The instrument was divided into four categories, licensing of the home, experiences with the agency, stress and feelings of support, and demographic characteristics. The results indicated that the most critical factors identified by the foster parents were feeling competent to handle the children who were placed in their care; wanting to provide a home for children in need of loving parents; and the agency social worker providing information and expressing their approval of good job performance. This research indicated positive feeling in these areas led to higher levels of satisfaction and an increased desire to continue providing foster care. This study provides yet another example of the importance of the relationship between the foster parent and the child welfare agency.

Research conducted by Jason Brown and Peter Calder (2000) described the needs of foster parents from their perspective. Participants were selected from the Alberta

Foster Parent Association. Data was collected via a telephone interview conducted with Forty-nine foster parents from thirty foster families. The respondents were asked, "What do you need to be a good foster parent?" The responses indicated five themes: good work relationships, cultural sensitivity, harmonious and stable family relationships, adequate compensation for services, and a range of personality characteristics and parenting skills.

Previous research also conducted by Brown and Calder (1999) asked foster parents to provide a response to the question, "What would make you stop fostering?" Two of the themes that emerged were challenges foster parents faced when working with the Department of Child Welfare and its staff, and the negative indications foster parents received about the value of the service they were providing. Once again this research supports the importance of the foster parents' perceptions and the need for a positive working relationship between the foster parent and the child welfare agency.

Chamberlain and Moreland (1992) conducted a study in Oregon with 72 children who entered the child welfare system between 1988 and 1990. The goal of the study was to determine if increased support and training would influence foster parent retention. Subjects within three counties were randomly assigned to one of three groups. In the

first group the foster parents were given an increased payment to participate in the enhanced services. Enhanced services consisted of weekly group sessions and telephone contact with the agency staff. The second group received a \$70.00 per month increase in funding. The third group served as a control and did not receive either the extra compensation or services. The results of the research study indicated each of the two groups who received extra services or compensation had substantially fewer dropouts. The two group's dropout rate was nearly two thirds less than the control group. This study provided support for the use of additional services and funding to enhance foster parent retention.

In "The Challenges of Raising One's Nonbiological Children," Lisa Schwartz (1994) looks at the challenges, risks and directions faced by those fulfilling this role. She recommends all nonbiological caregivers develop a strong support system. In addition, she acknowledges the additional stresses resulting from supervision by social welfare agencies and the courts. These factors also indicate the need for a positive supportive relationship between the agency staff and the foster parents, recognizing that both individuals coexist within a stressful environment.

This body of research supports the premise that communication and feelings of support are important variables when predicting for foster parent satisfaction and longevity of the foster care provider.

Communication and its Impact on Foster Parents

The professional relationship between the foster parent and the Department of Children's Services relies heavily on interpersonal communication. Communication like any form of behavior can vary from situation to situation and can range from highly effective to virtually ineffective. There are three major characteristics of interpersonal communication. The first is communication will occur whether we want it to or not, we cannot not communicate. Information is communicated nonverbally through body language and facial expressions as well as verbally. Secondly, communication cannot be reversed; once something has been received it cannot be erased from the receiver's memory. Thirdly, messages communicate both content and the relationship between the source and the receiver (DeVito, 1990).

Communication is not as simple as one might initially think; DeVito (1990) has identified 10 interrelated factors that facilitate communication, examples include openness, empathy, supportiveness, equality, and other orientation.

In contrast Devito (1990) has also identified seven factors which can confound the process, these include polarization, intentional orientation or the tendency to view people through their labels, bypassing or failing to communicate the intended meaning, and indiscrimination which occurs when we focus on groups or classes of individuals and fail to recognize each individual as unique. When assessing foster parent's satisfaction with the agency it is important to be mindful of these factors that enhance or impede effective interpersonal communication. It is also important to use these contentions to evaluate and determine if these factors are perceived to be present in the agencies relationship with foster parents.

Hasenfeld in "Understanding Human Service Organizations" (1983) describes the client worker relationship in a human service agency as the core of the organization. Although foster parents are technically not clients per se, their relationship with the organization has many similarities. Aspects of the relationship that are similar include having continuous contact with the agency, investing considerable time towards their efforts, the interpersonal relationship is the primary mode of intervention, and the stakes of their intervention are high. Hasenfeld contends that when any of these conditions prevail, the effectiveness of the relationship hinges on

the ability to generate cooperation. This concept is based on the contention the best form of cooperation has a foundation of trust. The article goes on to describe morally decent trust and to state it is based on the notion that knowing each others motives for participating in the relationship will strengthen the entrusting qualities of the relationship. This trust occurs when there is mutual respect, a common bond, genuine listening and openness.

As this research clearly indicates there are many issues potentially affecting both the child welfare agency and those providing foster parent services to the agency. Clearly the research indicates the need for a positive professional relationship between both parties. By using effective communication methods and the avoidance of barriers to effective communication both individuals can go far to better serve the needs of the children entrusted to their care. Also it would appear child welfare agencies could make progress in the attraction and retention of county licensed foster parents by being appropriate and supportive of the difficult service they continue to provide for the agency and more importantly for the children in their care.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Study Purpose

The purpose of this research study is to measure the level of overall satisfaction of San Bernardino County licensed foster parents with the Department of Children's Services. This research assessed foster parents perceptions related to communication and feelings of support, provided foster parents with an opportunity to state the area where the agency needed improvement, and offered an opportunity to suggest ways to improve satisfaction. It is hoped that this study will provide beneficial information to facilitate an increase in effectiveness and communication for the Department of Children's Services and other agencies like it. The research results if implemented will convey the agency's interest in foster parent opinions and may have the potential to influence the retention and or recruitment of additional foster parents, a necessary task given existing shortages.

Research Design

The research design is a combination of quantitative and qualitative survey methods. The data has been collected by the use of a mail-in survey (See Appendix A).

The mail-in survey allowed for anonymous feedback, which should allow the participants to answer honestly without fear of reprisal. This method also allowed access to a large sample.

The following are the research questions that have been posed. What is the level of satisfaction of non-relative licensed foster parents in San Bernardino County with The Department of Children's Services? What are some of the factors related to communication and feelings of support, which influence these foster parents level of satisfaction?

Sampling

The population for this research project is non-relative licensed foster parents in San Bernardino County. These foster parents are not affiliated with foster family agencies; instead they provide services directly to the Department of Children's Services in San Bernardino County. The total population of 594 licensed foster parents was mailed a survey. Twelve surveys could not be used in this study, nine were returned undeliverable as addressed, and three were not completed because the foster parent did not have children placed in their home. The sample was made up

of 134 individuals, which represents 23 percent of the total non-relative licensed foster parent population.

Data Collection and Instrument

The survey consists of an array of objective and subjective questions developed specifically for this research project. Objective demographic data (marital status, ethnicity and gender) was collected and measured at a nominal level. Two additional demographic questions were age and amount of time as a foster parent. Survey questions six through ten were designed to obtain foster parents opinions on issues related to communication with the agency. Survey questions eleven through fifteen were designed to obtain foster parents opinions on issues related to feelings of support by the agency. Survey question sixteen was designed to measure the foster parents overall satisfaction with the Department of Children's Services. These questions were constructed using a five point Likert scale. The survey concluded with two open-ended questions designed to obtain foster parent input on the area the agency most needs to improve as well as an opportunity to express ways to improve satisfaction. These data were analyzed using a qualitative approach.

Procedure

The survey was mailed directly to all San Bernardino County licensed foster parents, a population of 594. The names and addresses were provided by the San Bernardino County Department of Children's Services. The survey did not contain any identifying information and respondents were instructed to provide an "X" rather than a signature on the informed consent. Each survey also included a self addressed stamped envelope. Respondents were instructed to complete the survey and mail it to the post office box obtained specifically for this research project. The data was gathered exclusively by the researcher. Surveys were mailed to subjects on April 30, 2001 and a time frame of three weeks was allowed for individuals to respond.

The benefits of using a mail-in survey include the opportunity for respondents to take as much time as needed to complete the questionnaire and the increased perception of anonymity. Thereby reducing the potential confound of social desirability.

Protection of Human Subjects

The confidentiality and anonymity of the respondent has been protected because the survey does not have any identifying marks and was returned anonymously. The research has been gathered and processed exclusively by the researcher and has not been handled by anyone other than

their research advisor. The individual responses will not be made available for review. Instead it is the consensus of the group response that has been analyzed and made available as part of the research results. Informed consent and debriefing statements are attached as Appendices B and C respectively.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed utilizing both quantitative and qualitative procedures. Survey items one through 16 utilized a quantitative approach and survey items 17 and 18 utilized a qualitative approach.

The demographic data included in the survey was analyzed using univariate statistics to measure the central tendency and dispersion for the variables age, ethnicity, gender, marital status, and years as a foster parent. The purpose of these analyses was to determine the demographic makeup of those individuals who responded to the survey, as well as to view how those responses broke down by category based on this information. Surveys were mailed to all San Bernardino County licensed foster parents. Twenty-three percent of the surveys were completed and returned. Of those who responded 90 percent were female, eight percent were male and two percent did not provide an answer to this question. Of the respondents 73 percent were married, 12 percent were single, 8 percent divorced, six percent widowed and one percent did not respond to this question.

The ethnic breakdown of the respondents were 59 percent Caucasian, 24 percent African American, 13 percent Hispanic, three percent other, one percent Asian, and one percent did not provide a response. The respondents ranged in age from 27 years old to 71 years old with a mean age of 46.28. Years of experience as a foster parent ranged from .4 years to 33 years with the mean years of experience at 6.8.

Each of the questions, six through sixteen in the survey, was measured using univariate statistics to determine the frequency, mean, and dispersion of responses. The purpose of this analysis was to determine the distribution of responses for each question, thereby determining if any particular areas needed to be addressed. Appendix D contains a summary of mean values for each question. Responses were fairly evenly distributed for each question except number eight. Question number eight states "I am receiving all necessary information when a child is placed with me". Of the responses 56.4 percent indicated "strongly disagree" or "somewhat disagree". In contrast 32.8 percent responded "somewhat agree" and "strongly agree". These results indicate a need for improvement in this area.

The variable "overall satisfaction" was measured using univariate statistics to determine the frequency, mean and dispersion of responses. The purpose of this analysis was to determine the overall level of satisfaction of the respondents with the agency and to further identify the breakdown of responses by category. The following statement was posed: "Overall I feel very satisfied with the Department of Children's Services". A five point Likert scale beginning with one, "strongly disagree" and ending with five, "strongly agree" was provided for a response. Results indicate a mean satisfaction level of 2.96. Indicating overall equal numbers of foster parents who responded to the survey were satisfied with the agency, as were those who were dissatisfied. Of the responses 40.6 percent fell in the "strongly disagree" and "somewhat disagree" categories, while 43.6 percent of the responses were in the "somewhat agree" and "strongly agree" categories. A summary table of these findings is included as Appendix E.

Two additional variables were constructed: Questions six through ten on the survey identified issues related to communication with the agency. These responses were combined and a new variable labeled COMM was created,

signifying communication. Similarly, questions 11 through 15 relate to feelings of support by the agency. These responses were also combined to create the new variable labeled SUPP signifying support. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) with an alpha level of .05 was used to determine if there was a significant relationship between demographic information and the cumulative variables identified as communication with the agency and feelings of support from the agency. In addition the ANOVA was used to determine if there was a relationship between demographic information and the variable overall satisfaction with the agency. Independent ANOVAs were computed on COMM and SUPP using each demographic variable, age, ethnicity, gender, marital status, and years as a foster parent. The only significant differences were for the variable SUPP, a mean difference existed between married 17.44 and divorced 13.00, with a significance level of .019. With married people indicating feeling higher levels of support with the agency than those who are divorced. In the area of communication older individuals demonstrated higher mean values for the variable communication, than did younger respondents. Aside from these two differences the results indicate there are no significant differences based on demographic data

with foster parents perceptions of communication, feelings of support, and overall satisfaction with the agency.

Linear regression was used to analyze the relationship between communication, feelings of support and overall satisfaction with the agency. Results for the variables COMM and SUPP indicate $r = .873$ with a significance level of $.001$. These results indicate a strong positive correlation between the variables communication and support, thus indicating they can mutually predict one another. Linear regression was also used to analyze the variables COMM and overall satisfaction. Results indicated $r = .846$ with a significance level of $.001$. These findings indicate a strong positive correlation between communication and overall satisfaction. Linear regression was once again used to predict the relationship between the variables SUPP and overall satisfaction. The results were $r = .865$ with a significance level of $.001$. These results indicate a strong correlation between feelings of support from the agency and overall satisfaction with the agency. Based on these findings it is possible to predict if communication and or feelings of support can be improved, overall satisfaction would also be improved.

The survey concludes with two general open-ended subjective questions. These questions have been analyzed quantitatively. The purpose of this analysis is to determine trends or themes, which may emerge within the responses. The two questions used in the survey were: (1) The area where I feel the agency most needs to improve in working with foster parents is and (2) What would you do to improve satisfaction or any part of the agency? Of the 134 surveys used in this research 83.5 percent of the individuals provided a response to these two questions. Of the 16.5 percent who did not respond to these questions, all except two indicated high levels of satisfaction with the agency. Of the 112 responses received several themes emerged. The most predominant theme was the need for improved communication with the agency. Thirty-six percent, of the respondents identified communication as an area in need of improvement. The suggestions on ways to improve the agency also related to ways to improve communication. These suggestions included more frequent contact with someone from the agency, listening to foster parent concerns, providing answers to foster parent questions, informing foster parents of changes when they occur and, improved methods of contacting the agency.

Suggestions included having voicemail, a 24-hour telephone number and more timely return of telephone calls. The second theme to emerge identified foster parents as feeling as if they were not valued, respected or supported.

Twenty-two percent identified this as an area in need of improvement. Suggestions to rectify this problem included valuing foster parents opinions, including foster parents in planning for the children in their care, treating foster parents with more respect, not being condescending towards foster parents, increasing trust and confidence between foster parents and agency staff. The third theme, which emerged identified not receiving the necessary information and or paperwork for children, placed in their care.

Seventeen percent identified this as an area in need of improvement. Suggestions to improve this area included being honest with foster parents at the time of placement, providing medical cards and immunization records in a timelier manner, and informing foster parents of the medical needs of the children placed in their care.

Various other topics included streamlining paperwork, offering more training opportunities, providing more information about available resources, providing increased financial reimbursement, and assistance in dealing with

parental visits. Overall the foster parents responses to these questions demonstrated a desire to provide constructive criticism as well as viable suggestions for improvement.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Implications for the Agency

The overall objective of foster care is to provide foster children with a safe nurturing environment until they can either be returned to their biological family or a more permanent plan can be developed. Because foster parents are an integral part of this process it is reasonable to assert that if there is a satisfactory relationship between the Department of Children's Services and the foster parent an overall positive atmosphere will be created resulting in a more positive environment for the foster children placed in their care. This could then lead to improved quality of care and possibly fewer placement disruptions. Additional benefits of a more satisfied foster parent population include, a more positive working relationship between the foster parents and the agency staff, and more efficient functioning of the agency overall.

The respondents in this research study were split nearly evenly between those who feel satisfied overall and those who feel dissatisfied overall. These results

indicate a need for further exploration to determine the differences between the two groups. If it could be determined what factors could improve communication and feelings of support these could then be implemented with the individuals who are dissatisfied to create a more positive working relationship.

Findings also indicate a large number of foster parents, 56.4 percent, feel they are not receiving the necessary information about the children when they are placed in their care. Concerns related to this topic include necessary documentation such as medical cards and immunization records, as well as background or historical information about the children. These results warrant further exploration and indicate a need to improve this aspect of the placement process.

Positive aspects of the findings of this research study are the overall indication of no significant differences in responses to communication, feelings of support, or overall satisfaction based on demographic factors. Thus any improvements made by the agency in these areas would likely be beneficial to all individuals not just those within a certain demographic category.

The responses to the open ended questions demonstrated the foster parents desire to offer constructive input about both areas the agency needs to improve as well as ways to improve. These responses indicated a desire of the foster parents to be included as part of the child welfare team. Several of the respondents expressed a desire to discuss ways to improve satisfaction in more detail if this would be beneficial, indicating a desire of the foster parents to be a part of implementing positive changes.

The results of this research indicate that for foster parents, communication and feelings of support directly correlate with overall satisfaction with the agency. These findings support previously referenced research studies conducted by Rhodes, Orme and Buehler (2001) and Denby, Rindfleisch and Bean (1999) which identified poor communication and unresponsiveness of the agency as reasons for foster home closure. Both articles identify improved communication and supportiveness as ways to improve foster parent retention.

The implications of these results are the ability to improve retention rates and possibly to recruit additional foster parents. If existing foster parents feel positive about communication and feel supported by the agency it is

reasonable to assume they will continue to provide care and are more likely to recommend the agency to others who are considering fostering. Improving foster parent retention and recruitment allows for more placement options for children who enter the child welfare system. These improvements could then allow for a better match between the children and the foster homes, allowing for a more goodness of fit between the two.

There are several potential limitations to this research. One limitation is not addressing all areas that impact satisfaction, thereby focusing more attention on some factors that may not be as relevant as others. A second possible limitation is the likelihood that respondents will base their assessment on their most recent experiences rather than their overall experiences with the Agency. A third potential limitation is the willingness of the agency to be receptive to possible negative feedback from the respondents, thus creating an atmosphere for increased levels of dissatisfaction.

This research study provides valuable information that if implemented by the Department of Children's Services could improve the level of foster parent satisfaction with the agency. Included in the findings are specific areas

related to communication and feelings of support which have been evaluated, and if implemented could improve foster parent's overall satisfaction with the agency.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Social workers are faced with the task of determining placement for dependent children on a regular basis. If more foster parents are recruited and retained more placement options will exist. Increases in placement options allow social workers to be more selective when finding a home for a child, resulting in the ability to find a more appropriate match. When children and foster homes are appropriately matched placement disruptions are reduced resulting in more stability for the child and the foster family.

Improved communication also reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings and lack of necessary information, making both the social worker and foster parents jobs more efficient. People who lack necessary information to perform their role adequately become confused, confusion can lead to frustration, and frustration can lead to potentially misplaced anger. All are negative implications that are not conducive to the well being of the children

placed in this environment. Improved communication and feelings of support could also reduce some of the stresses faced by social workers and foster parents alike. The findings of this research indicate areas where improvement could be made and provide suggestions for implementation. If used they could improve the overall functioning of the agency, increasing efficiency and possibly leading to increased job satisfaction. All factors that in turn could have positive ramifications for the children placed in the care of the Department of Children's Services.

APPENDIX A

SURVEY

SURVEY

**FOSTER PARENT LEVEL OF SATISFACTION
WITH THE
DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

Demographic Information

1. AGE: _____
2. ETHNICITY: Caucasian Hispanic African American Asian Other
3. GENDER: Female Male
4. MARITAL STATUS: Single Married Divorced Widowed
5. YEARS AS A FOSTER PARENT: _____

For the following questions, please circle one number for each question.

6. The agency maintains open communication with foster parents.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		No opinion		Strongly Agree
7. My calls to the agency are returned within one work day.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		No Opinion		Strongly Agree
8. I am receiving all necessary information when a child is placed with me.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		No Opinion		Strongly Agree
9. The agency staff is responsive to the needs of the children placed in my care.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		No Opinion		Strongly Agree

10. Foster parents have appropriate opportunities to express their opinions to the agency staff.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		No Opinion		Strongly Agree

11. I feel the agency social worker values my opinion.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		No Opinion		Strongly Agree

12. Social workers treat me with respect.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		No Opinion		Strongly Agree

13. I feel the agency values foster parents.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		No Opinion		Strongly Agree

14. I feel the agency is supportive of foster parents.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		No Opinion		Strongly Agree

15. The agency is responsive to my requests for services to meet the needs of my foster child.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		No Opinion		Strongly Agree

16. Overall I feel very satisfied with the Department of Children's Services.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree		No Opinion		Strongly Agree

17. The area where I feel the agency most needs to improve in working with foster parents is.

18. What would you do to improve satisfaction or any part of the agency?

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent

I, Tracy Paille McCuskey, am a MSW Student at California State University, San Bernardino. I am conducting a research study for my master's project. The intent of the study is to explore San Bernardino County non-relative licensed foster parent satisfaction with the Department of Children's Services. The information will be gathered by completion of a questionnaire. The questionnaire takes approximately fifteen minutes to complete and examines themes related to communication and perceived attitude of support and appreciation. The questionnaire does not contain any identifying marks and all responses will be anonymous. The survey is purely for the purpose of measuring group response and will not identify you individually.

Your Participation in this study is totally voluntary. If you choose to participate in this study, or not, it will not in any way affect your status as a foster parent. My research advisor and myself will review the completed questionnaires. If you should have any questions regarding the study you may contact my research advisor, Herschel Knapp, MSSW, Research Advisor, at hknapp@ucla.edu. This research project has been approved by the Department of Social Work Sub-Committee of the CSUSB Institutional Review Board.

My mark ("X") below indicates that I understand the nature of the study and I volunteer to participate.

Date _____

APPENDIX C
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

100% COTTON FIBER
PARCHEMENT DEED
SOUTHWORTH

Debriefing Statement

Thank you for participating in this research project.

The study in which you have just participated will explore San Bernardino County non-relative foster parent satisfaction with the Department of Children's Services. The responses will provide important feedback to the agency regarding level of satisfaction as well as factors that contribute to level of satisfaction.

Please feel free to express any feelings or concerns you may have about participating in this study. Your feedback will be held in the strictest confidence.

Copies of the outcome of this study, titled "The Level of Foster Parent Satisfaction with San Bernardino County Department of Children's Services," will be available on the first floor of the CSUSB Pfau Library, after June 2001. Consult with the research librarian for the exact location.

If you should have any questions or concerns about this research project you may contact my research advisor Herschel Knapp, MSSW, at hknapp@ucla.edu.

APPENDIX D
SUMMARY OF MEAN RESPONSES

Summary of Mean Responses

<u>Survey Questions</u>	<u>Mean responses</u>
The agency maintains open communication with foster parents.	3.10
My calls to the agency are returned within one day.	3.00
I am receiving all necessary information when a child is placed with me.	2.62
The agency staff is responsive to the needs Of the children placed in my care.	3.19
Foster parents have appropriate opportunities to express their opinions to the agency staff.	3.24
I feel the agency social worker values my opinion.	3.29
Social workers treat me with respect.	3.74
I feel the agency values foster parents.	3.38
I feel the agency is supportive of foster parents	3.18
The agency is responsive to my requests for Services to meet the needs of my foster child.	3.17
Overall I feel very satisfied with the Department Of Children's Services.	2.96

APPENDIX E
SUMMARY OF OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH THE AGENCY

SUMMARY OF

OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH THE AGENCY

Overall I feel very satisfied with the Department of Children's Services.

<u>RESPONSE</u>	<u>FREQUENCY</u>	<u>PERCENTAGE</u>
Strongly Disagree	26	19.4
Somewhat Disagree	30	22.4
No Opinion	11	8.2
Somewhat Agree	35	26.1
Strongly Agree	30	22.4
<i>TOTAL RESPONSES</i>	132	98.5
<i>NO RESPONSE</i>	2	1.5
TOTAL	134	100.0

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