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THE EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER PARENTS AND HOW
IT CAN BENEFIT FUTURE FOSTER CHILDREN

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
Arthur Hiro Natsume

June 2010

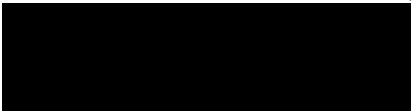
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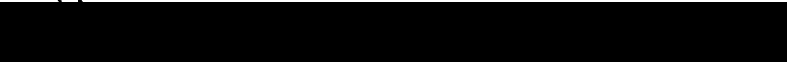
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ABSTRACT

Every year, there are a growing number of children that enter the foster care system due to some type of crisis in their family life. As a society, we need to do the best we can to make sure that they have a stable transition into adulthood. The purpose of the study was to examine how the reported experiences of foster parents might benefit future foster parents in raising a foster child. Ten interviews with current and former foster parents were conducted. All of the participants in the study reported that they would raise another foster child if they were young because it leads to positive outcomes. Limitations of the study, implications for social work practice, and recommendations for future research were discussed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my research advisor, Dr. Carolyn McAllister for her feedback and support through this process. I would not have completed this project without her help. I want to thank all of the faculty members in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino. They all contributed to my success in both this research project and the Master of Social Work Program. I want to thank everyone in my life that has supported and encouraged me to complete this program.

DEDICATION

I would like to personally dedicate this research project and my success at California State University, San Bernardino to my future wife, Tammy. She has been there for me when no one else was. She is the most important person in my life. I love you.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

There are a large number of children that are in the foster care system. This number appears to be growing every year. There are over a half million kids that were officially part of the foster care system in the United States in 2004 (National Foster Parent Association, 2006). There are many more children that are in the foster care system, but are not part of the official system. Children are generally in foster care for a number of reasons. For the most part, children are in foster care due to neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, death of a parent or parents, or some other type of crisis that affects a family. These children tend to be left with emotional and sometimes physical scars that are very difficult to deal with. The existing literature shows that children that come from a difficult background are going to likely have a tough time adjusting to adulthood. Charles and Matheson (1991) did a study that examined the prevention and intervention of suicide in children in foster care. Another study was done by

Pecora, Jensen, Romanelli, Jackson, and Ortiz (2009) talks about how foster care youth have high rates of emotional and behavioral disorders. The study talks about how there is a great need to be able identify this population in order to get them better care. It is quite hard to deal with children that have this type of background (Schneiderman, Connors, Fribourg, Gries, & Gonzales, 1998). This is why foster parents can play such a pivotal role in the future of some of these children that are in the foster care system, however it is very difficult for child welfare agencies to match these kids with good foster parents (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992).

Social workers are already directly working with a lot of these kids by way of group homes, child protective services or juvenile halls (Ackerson, 2003). They are doing their best to help these kids, but it is very difficult. This not only a problem in the United States, but this is a global problem. All people are affected by this either directly or indirectly. We all pay taxes and money eventually goes to pay for social services and all other aspects of life that affected by kids that come

from a difficult background. We as social workers should do everything possible to deal with this situation.

Given this, it would be important to study the foster care system to see where improvements can be made. There needs to be more research done on the foster care system. There are a limited number of studies that have been done in terms of what happens to children that age out of the system. If society is not aware of what happens to these kids in the long run, then we will not really know how to go about trying to make changes for the better. Most likely, the end result on society is not going to be a positive one because we will all pay the price in some capacity or another. It will not just cost all of us financially, but in some cases it will affect people directly. For example, a child that does not get some help early on might end up with some behavioral issues as an adult that could result in violence against an innocent person. The more that we understand what happens with troubled kids in the long run then we can trace things back to make better interventions in order to try and solve problems before they occur in the first place. With regards to the foster care system, if we can improve the situation of kids in a foster home, then it

would most likely help make the transition out of foster care and into adulthood a more positive one. The foster care system can be an effective intervention if it is working the way it was intended to. If a child has a good experience in foster care, then it is possible that they will become positive and productive members of our society.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate how a foster parent's experiences of having a foster child can help develop skills for other foster parents that are having difficulty with adjusting to having a foster child. For a child that is in the foster care system, it is easy to envision that going into a new home with people that you do not know would be quite difficult. It would not be hard to imagine that it would be a frightening experience especially with the background that these children would be coming from. This is a tough situation for both the potential foster parents and the kids. Given that these are children that we are discussing, the onus is on the foster parent or parents to offer more understanding and to teach these children

to have a better life no matter how difficult it can become. This would be a tough task for anyone. Once a child has been placed in a foster family for a period of time, it would be beneficial to understand how the foster parents see the adjustment period for the child because it would help them better deal with the child and it might also help other parents in the same situation. By developing certain strategies, it could benefit these foster families and therefore help the overall foster care system.

It would be helpful to understand certain dynamics of potential foster parents and foster children in order to make the best match possible. For example, a foster family might have a child that is a seven-year-old male and would like to foster a young boy around the same age. They are obviously looking for a particular child in order to suit their needs. Bear in mind, it is not this simple because there are so many factors that go into matching foster children with potential foster families. Both sides of this equation have different needs that have to be addressed. This is where the initial challenge is at. It is imperative that a foster care agency do the best possible job of gathering information and doing a

thorough screening of potential foster families and foster children in order to make the best possible match. The potential for disastrous results is significant. Most agencies do the best that they can to find a good match, however one cannot predict the future. Even with all of the work that goes into finding a good situation for the child and potential family, it is not going to necessarily guarantee a good result. After all, we are talking about human beings. One can only do the best that they can and hope for the best. The upside of this experience can be great for both sides. A child can have a positive experience that can lead to a good life and the parents can relish in the knowledge that they helped raise a child in a positive way and it created a good influence on their own family in the process. By understanding a parent's perspective on this kind of experience, it can only help understand some things that worked for them and other aspects that might need improvement.

A qualitative research method involving face-to-face interviews was used in order to obtain the results of this study. The participants were contacted by the interviewer in order to set up the interviews. The

interviews were conducted at the homes of the foster parents. All responses were strictly voluntary without any penalty for withdrawing from the process. The interviews were recorded to ensure the most accurate information possible.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

This study is needed because it is significant to understanding the experiences of foster parents in order to understand what parts of their experiences are working and which ones are not working. By understanding what kinds of things are not working, future research can focus on developing methods that can benefit other foster families. This is important for social work practice because social workers are going to be heavily involved with this population in some capacity so if there is a greater understanding of what is involved with the foster care system, then they would be better suited to help foster parents by showing them some different techniques that could work in dealing with their foster children. This research will attempt to increase the understanding of the foster care experience to aid social workers in assessing what the needs are for future foster children.

Once they understand what is needed to help the parents then they can form a plan. Once there is a plan then they can assist in putting the plan in action. After which, the social worker can evaluate whether or not the current plan is being effective. If the plan is not working, then they can terminate the plan. If the plan is working, then they can identify other aspects of the situation and try to address those needs by developing other plans of action. This research will help identify strategies that can benefit these foster families. With the knowledge that is gained from the research, new strategies can be developed to help other foster parents that are having difficulty with their new foster children. This study examined how the perceptions of foster parents on their foster care experiences impact their foster children. The findings of this study will help contribute to social work policy and research because if more and better intervention techniques are developed for dealing with foster children, then it should help reduce the amount of children that end up as homeless, in hospitals or some other type of social service agency.

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will look at the literature that is relevant to this study. The first section will discuss the experiences of foster care from all angles. Secondly, there will be a section on possible interventions and methods that can help improve the foster care situation for both parents and the children. Finally, there is a section on long and short-term effects of the children in foster care.

The Experiences of Foster Care
from Different Perspectives

An individual's perception of a situation is vital to understanding their experience of that situation. This is especially true in regards to foster care. Let us begin by reviewing the research on the experiences of foster children. A study by Kufeldt, Armstrong, and Dorosh (1995) examined what children think of their own family and their foster family. This study used the Family Assessment Measure (FAM) as their instrument to test their research. They tested 40 children that ranged

in age from 9 to 15 years old. The findings indicated that the children seemed to feel the same about both their own biological parents as well as their foster parents. There was one key component to the situation. It seemed as though the amount of contact from their biological parents played a role in how the kids felt about their parents. Of the kids that had limited or no contact with their parents, the positive view of their parents was significantly lower. The results of this study are difficult to generalize due to size of the population and the age of the children. It also did not mention gender, which would be an important piece of this kind of a study. It definitely raised an interesting question though in that contact played a major role in the perception of how the kids view their relationship with their parents. It did not fluctuate with regards to the foster parents perhaps because of the constant contact with them as opposed to the biological parents (Kufeldt et al., 1995).

Wilson, Fyson, and Newstone (2007) studied the foster father's experience in fostering children. The perspective of the father is an understudied, but important aspect that probably needs more research. Most

studies that are done on foster parents tend to be focused on mothers. It seems that this is due to the fact that mothers tend to be the immediate caregivers in most family situations. This is what prompted this article to look at the perspective of the father. The study used both quantitative and qualitative methods to conduct their research. The authors sent out a survey to 118 foster fathers and at the end they were asked if they would participate in an interview. Sixty-nine of the surveys were returned and interviewed. The quantitative aspect of the study examined demographic information like ethnicity and income. As far as the qualitative part, there were questions regarding why they chose to foster, their roles, and the tasks in the home. The research did reveal that father's played an active role in choosing to foster. The perception seemed to be that the father went along with the mother's decision to foster a child. There needs to be more research as to why a father would want to foster. The reasons for this are not addressed in this study. The article also seemed to provide some evidence that the contributions of the father in their foster child's life are important. There needs to be more research as to how and why fathers are involved in their

foster child's life in order to better understand the significance of their contributions. The study did not address the gender of children studied and what differences that could have made. The study did seem to show that the potential role of a father in fostering a well-adjusted child can be significant (Wilson et al., 2007). Hampson and Tavormina (1980) examined the good and bad of being a foster mom. The authors interviewed thirty-four foster mothers on their perceptions of fostering children. The study revealed that the mothers seemed to feel that they were not properly informed enough and did not have the support when they encountered any problems. Another significant aspect was that almost half of the mothers had issues with their caseworkers because they stated that they did not feel that they had enough say in the decision making process regarding the child. The study is limited in that the study sample consisted of only Caucasian and African American women. Also, sample size was a potential issue. The research did raise interesting questions in that some of these women seemed to feel that they were not properly equipped to handle potential issues. It also suggests that these women did not feel that they were supported or had a

voice in regards to their foster child (Hampson & Tavormina, 1980).

Potential Resources for Foster Parents

This section examines some possible resources for future foster parents. Cherry, Orme, and Rhodes, (2009) looked at the significance of available time as a measurement of effective fostering. The article surveyed 304 mothers to see how much time that they were able to make available to their foster children. The findings indicate that the availability of time for fostering activities was related to meeting the needs of their foster children. The study is important because it appears that parents need to be cognizant of making time for their children in order to meet their needs effectively. There needs to be further research as time is a factor, but not the answer to having a well adjusted foster child (Cherry et al., 2009). A study done by Swick (2007) looked at developing strategies to try and create a caring environment for foster kids. These children tend to come from traumatic backgrounds, so by showing them a caring and nurturing environment, it can help have a caring relationship with their kids. This study discusses

strategies like modeling, caring rituals, and teaching caring as a means to achieve a nurturing and caring home for their foster children (Swick, 2007). Chamberlain, Moreland, and Reid (1992) tried to show that the benefits of providing services and stipends to foster parents would tend to keep them in foster care. There were seventy-two children ranging in age from four to seven years of age that participated in the study. The findings revealed that the parents would stay in foster care by increasing services and stipends to the foster parents. The evidence indicates by providing support and stipends it increased the likelihood that parents would stay in foster care. The study showed that by working with foster families they might engage in the process and not drop out. The down side of the research is whether the system would be increasing quantity over quality. More research needs to be done to see what reasons are involved in whether families stay in foster care and whether they should still be in it.

The Short and Long Term Effects of Children in Foster Care

This section looks at how children can be impacted from being in the foster care system. Courtney and

Dworsky (2006) looked at the outcomes of kids that age out of the foster care system. In their longitudinal study, the authors looked at education, living situation, employment, medical and mental health services, violent behaviors, and sexual behaviors. The study interviewed 732 individuals that were seventeen or eighteen years of age. A year later they were able to interview 386 of those original 732 people to see what happened to them. The results of the study were not good. The overall findings showed that few moved on with their education, more of them were in less than adequate living situations, more unemployment if any, more medical and emotional problems, an increase in behaviors that led to incarcerations and greater risk for STD's and pregnancies. The research seems to indicate that these young people need help in their transition to adulthood because it is hard enough as it is, but when one is starting out with a difficult situation and there is not some decent intervention, then the likelihood of a positive outcome is very challenging. The findings indicate that these kids do not appear ready for adulthood simply because they turn the chronological age of 19 (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Is society sure that

they are emotionally ready and equipped with the means to enter adulthood?

An article by Simmel, Barth, and Brooks (2007) examined adopted youth in a longitudinal study of psychosocial functioning. The authors compared 293 adopted foster youth and 318 non-adopted foster youth. They used children ranging from two to eighteen years of age and followed them from two to four to eight years following the initial collection of data. They used the Behavioral Problems Inventory. The results indicated an increase in behavioral problems based on parental reports. The findings suggest that there is a need for adoptive parents to have help available to them in order to help diffuse some of these problems. There also seems to be a component of early behavioral issues that appear to follow the young children throughout their adoptive life. The study seems to show that there is a need for more and early intervention with foster children (Simmel et al., 2007). There was another longitudinal study by Andersson (2005) that looked at family relations and adjustment in regards to attachment theory. The study followed twenty-six kids that were initially less than four years of age and were followed for five, ten,

fifteen, and twenty years. The results indicated that several of the children that had formed attachments to their foster parents would tend to look at them as their family. It indicates that having a good attachment with a positive relationship can make a huge difference in how one develops and maintains relationships. This is an important study because it shows the power of having a good relationship even if it is not one's biological parents (Andersson, 2005).

Research done by Barber and Delafabbro (2003) took a look at the first four months in a new foster placement and how the child adjusts to it. The study was done on 235 children who ranged in age from four to seventeen years of age. The results of the study indicated improved behavior at school, emotional problems, conduct disorder, and hyperactivity. The problem with the results is that when they are compared to a normative sample of the general population, then the majority of these children fall way out of expectations. The study does demonstrate that the foster care system does appear to make a difference because without it who knows what the results would be when foster children are compared with a normative population in most studies (Barber &

Delafabbro, 2003). There was another study by Frey, Cushing, Freundlich, and Brenner (2008) that examined achieving permanency in foster care. For most kids, the security of knowing that their time with a foster family is permanent can be a tremendous factor in how well they adjust. This study used the Belonging and Emotional Security Tool (BEST). The study discovered that when using this method, it indicated that there were advanced and meaningful conversations about permanency. This research showed the commitment by both foster parents and foster children when the conditions were right for permanency. The cases in this study indicated that there were conversations about permanency because of attachment and emotional security. This study will need more research into the applicability of (BEST) on a broader scale (Frey et al., 2008). Research completed by Rushton and Dance (2003) reviewed the importance of trying to achieve permanency whether it is through long term fostering or adoption. The study used sixty-three children that ranged in age from five to eleven years of age. The findings indicate that moving from placement to placement was identified as a problem in achieving permanency. The paper also associates preferential

rejection by the birth parents in which one child has been rejected while siblings are accepted as another potential problem with achieving permanency. Part of the problem might be the fear of getting emotionally rejected as a reason why they might be with a foster family for a short period of time (Rushton & Dance, 2003).

It seems that there are many areas that are in need to be researched in regards to foster care. As many studies indicate, there seems to be an overall benefit in the foster care process when it is done with consideration for the needs of both the foster parents and the foster children. Most of the children in foster care are already at a disadvantage and they need to catch a break. Sometimes all it takes is someone that cares enough to give them a chance and to show them that life could be good. The benefits and upside to this process are immeasurable. By addressing the needs of the foster parents and giving them the resources that they need will help them become better foster parents and thus provide a better home for their foster children.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Given that the foster care population is comprised of children, it stands to reason that what happens with children directly or indirectly affects society as a whole. The systems model allows social workers to see human behavior through a broad spectrum that allows for an assessment of clients across human conditions (Lesser & Pope, 2007). Foster care children are an example of how social workers see foster kids because their experiences have affected the way they live and who they are. Social Learning Theory by Bandura (1977) is a theory that fits well in dealing with foster children because they tend to learn from what they see and what types of behaviors are modeled for them. For example, a child that has a history of being in foster care because their biological parents have neglected or abused them will most likely have multiple behavior issues because of what they have learned from their parents. By having an understanding of where foster children come from, it should help social workers deal with these kids because it appears to be a continuous problem.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This section involved a more detailed description of the design and process of gathering data for the study. It described what procedures were used to gather the data. The procedures were designed to ensure that no harm was brought to any of the subjects that were involved in the study.

Study Design

The purpose of the study was to explore foster parents' experiences, challenges, and their unmet needs in order to aid foster parents in dealing with the difficult periods of adjustment with foster children. The literature indicated a need for better and more extensive methods of interventions to help foster parents with trying to meet the ever-changing needs of foster children (Andersson, 2005). This research showed that there is a great need for more research to help understand foster youth in order to help families attempt to reduce the long term effects that seem to go with foster children

that are not having their needs met (Simmel et al., 2007).

This study used a qualitative method of face-to-face interviews with the mothers, fathers, or both from ten different foster families. This population came from a foster care agency in Riverside County. The use of interviews was the most effective way of gathering data because human responses could not be measured in numbers like quantitative research (Grinnell & Unrau, 2005). The questions were administered in a way, which allowed for the most forthcoming and honest responses possible. A possible limitation of using qualitative research was that because the researcher was the research process any personal biases might have influenced the research process (Grinnell & Unrau, 2005). The research provided an in depth understanding of a limited amount of individuals (Grinnell & Unrau, 2005).

Sampling

The sample of this study consisted of the parents of ten different foster families. These families were recruited from the foster care agency. Due to the structuring of the sample size, the participants were

selected based on convenience. The interviewer was given a list of fifteen foster families in which all fifteen were contacted. Due to scheduling issues and the inability to make contact, ten foster families were chosen. The foster parents included mothers, fathers, or both parents. Due to time and limited resources, this was how the number of participants was arrived at. The agency does not have a human subject review process and there were not any direct dealing with any vulnerable populations. Even though questions will be concerning children, there was no direct contact made with these children for the purposes of the study.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data from the study was obtained from face to face interviews with the parents of the foster families. Participants in the study were asked fourteen questions that were recorded. Prior permission of the participants was given before the interview process. The questions were open ended in order to get as much information as the interviewees wanted to relinquish. The questions were asked to gain demographic information. The remaining

questions were not asked in any particular order so as to not illicit any certain response.

Procedures

The interviewer was given a list of potential foster parents to interview. The interviewer phoned each potential participant and set up an interview which was conducted at the home of the participants with their permission. The interviewer discussed with the foster parents about the procedures of informed consent. The interviewer explained what the purpose of the study was. Next, there was a brief description of how the process took place. The parents were informed that their participation was strictly voluntary and that they could discontinue the process at any time without any penalty. They were told about how the audiotapes would be stored and that there was no identifying information involved in any way to protect their anonymity. The interviewer discussed the length of time that the process took and whether there were any risks or benefits to the study. Finally, there was contact information given in the event of any questions or concerns that they might have had later. A time and day was set up to administer the

interview. Per the foster care agency, authorization was given to conduct the interviews at the homes of the participants with their approval.

Protection of Human Subjects

All feasible measures were taken to protect the rights and privacy of all research participants. The participants were advised of their right to back out of the interview at any time or choose not to answer any question without any impact on themselves, or the study. They were informed that the audio recordings of the interview occurred with their permission and were kept by the interviewer in a safe that is under lock and key. After the project was completed, the recordings would be destroyed unless requested by the participants. The human subjects were informed of what the purpose of the study was, their voluntary participation, their rights to confidentiality, and whether there were any foreseeable risks or benefits to the study. The demographic information was anonymous and used strictly for the purposes of statistical information. The participants were given upon request a copy of a debriefing statement as well the informed consent form.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this research project was administered using qualitative data analysis techniques. The information that was gained from the interviews was interpreted by the interviewer by authorized use of the taped recordings of the conducted interviews. The research questions that guided the analysis included the following: The experiences of these foster parents were used to possibly develop some techniques that could benefit other foster families that might be struggling with having a new foster child. It is believed that based on the answers that were given, the researcher might be able to identify certain strengths and weaknesses based on reported experiences to aid in the adjustment of the relationships between foster parents and their foster children.

Summary

This section was used to present the method in which this research project was conducted. It discussed the design of the study, full disclosure on how the study was administered to ensure to the best of our ability that the participant's confidentiality and protection was held

with the utmost regard. The section also disclosed how the information was gathered and interpreted for analysis. It discussed the face-to-face interview process in depth.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The data used for this study was analyzed by qualitative procedures. This research is reporting the findings of this research by individual question from the interview guide, which is in the appendix section of this research project. There were four demographic questions used simply to identify individuals as being an appropriate part of the study. There were a total of ten individuals that participated in the study. All of the participants were middle aged with the exception of one. The ages ranged from 41-58, with the other individual being 29 years of age. The participants were all female with the exception of one. There were six Caucasians including the one male, three Hispanics, and one African American female. The occupations of the people in the study varied from stay at home mothers to two individuals in the customer service industry and three of the participants in professional occupations. The remainder of the results were analyzed by using the constant comparison method with theoretical sampling constitute

the essence of qualitative analysis (Boeije, 2002). The results were broken down into categories in order to compare the results.

Family Structure

When the foster parents were asked about how many foster children that they had, all but one was currently fostering a child. The foster children were both male and female and the number of foster children the parents had currently ranged from one to four with ages varying from one month to 13 years of age. It was discovered that all ten of the foster parents had biological children of their own in addition to having the foster children.

Family Dynamics

When asked the about the nature of the relationship between the foster children and their biological children, it was reported that they got along well. The only reported issue was one in which the older biological child was "bossy towards the foster kids" (Anonymous, personal interview, March 8, 2010). The next question involved the foster parent's communication with the foster children. It was reported that all of the foster parents with younger foster children communicated well

both verbally and non-verbally. In four of the interviews where older foster youth were involved, the foster parents reported having difficulty communicating with the foster children. One parent said, "He is defiant most of the time and doesn't listen" (Anonymous, personal interview, March 10, 2010). One of the parents reported that their foster child was suicidal at times.

Experiences with the Foster Children

In five of the interviews, the foster parents reported that they had good experiences with going places and participating in family activities. For example, one foster parent said, "The kids had a lot fun when they went to Disneyland. It seemed like the kids felt like that were part of the family" (Anonymous, personal interview, March 2, 2010). In seven of the interviews, it was reported that the foster parents benefited from having previous experience with raising their own biological children and having had previous foster children. For example, one parent stated that "I learned what to do in certain situations because I had been down this road before" (Anonymous, personal interview, February 25, 2010). A few of the foster parents reported

that they had experienced difficulties with the biological parents of the foster kids. One parent reported, "She is flaky because she never shows up on time if she shows up at all to visit her child, and then I have to deal with the behaviors afterward" (Anonymous, personal interview, March 11, 2010).

Discipline

In all of the interviews where the foster parents had young foster children, they reported that timeouts and the taking away of privileges were effective means of discipline. With regards to the older foster children, the foster parents reported that nothing worked well because the children did not listen or were defiant. For example, one parent reported, "all I asked her to do was to clean her room and she told me that she was not going to do it and that I can't make her" (Anonymous, personal interview, March 17, 2010).

Future Foster Parenting

It was reported by all ten participants that they would foster another child. The majority of the foster parents reported that it had been a rewarding experience and that they would love the chance to raise another foster

child. It was reported by the majority of foster parents especially those that had previous experience with older foster kids that they would not raise an older foster child. One parent said, "They are just too hard because you can't control them and they come with so many problems already where the young ones I can work with" (Anonymous, personal interview, March 22, 2010).

Conclusion

It was interesting to learn that all of the participants had biological children of their own and everyone reported that they would raise a foster child again. Even those that faced some challenges appeared to find that the positives outweighed the negatives. It is also worth mentioning that all of the foster parents did not want to raise an older foster child in the future. There appears to be a definite issue in regards to behavior with older foster children. It is worth noting that only one of the interviewees was a male. Perhaps, the overall responses might have been different from the experiences of more male participants.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This last chapter will discuss in greater detail the findings of this research and how it relates to previous research done with regards to foster care. The strengths and limitations of this study will be discussed. Based on the findings of this study, recommendations for future research will be given.

The question was asked of each participant whether they had biological children of their own. The participants of the study reported that they all had biological children of their own. This implies that all of the people in the study have had parenting experience. This could be significant because these parents might be using some of their previous parenting skills on the foster children. Someone that is raising a foster child without any previous parenting abilities would most likely be making some basic mistakes with raising a child.

The next question asked what the relationship was like between their biological children and the foster

children. The experiences reported were mostly positive, however a couple of parents stated that at times there was some competition over attention. It appears that since it was not a big concern raised, perhaps it is simply a case of natural competition for limited resources. The other interesting finding to talk about was that some of the biological children were reportedly protective over the foster children. Perhaps, this is due to a significant age difference. Some of the biological children are in their twenties and thirties where the majority of the foster children in this study are as young as infants. Recently, it was found in another study that one-third of children entering foster care were two years old or younger (Pecora, White, Jackson, & Wiggins, 2009).

The next question was regarding the communication between the foster parents and the foster children. Overall, the verbal and non-verbal type of communication was reportedly positive between the foster parents and their younger foster children. In regards to the older foster children, the communication was apparently difficult. The older children that were defiant or uncooperative might have been in foster care for a long

time and are having a difficult time adjusting. Foster care families that can provide a secure base and long term commitment to foster children seem to help these children transition from youth into adulthood (Schofield & Beck, 2008).

The next question was about what some of the experiences that the foster parents had with foster children. For the most part, they involved social activities that were reportedly positive. With regards to the older children that presented behavioral problems, some of the parents reported that there were difficulties especially with older male foster children. Based on their past experiences, these foster children might not have had many positive male role models. The role of the foster father in raising a foster child can have a significant impact on the life of that foster child (Wilson, Fryson, & Newstone, 2006).

The following question was about whether the experiences of raising foster children helped or did not help these foster parents in their relationship with the foster children. Experience in raising their own biological children was reportedly an overwhelming benefit to raising their foster children. The support of

the foster care agency was an important part in helping the foster parents with any issues that might arise. Dealing with the biological parents was reportedly challenging and difficult for the foster parents due to the biological parents not keeping their appointments and exhibiting inappropriate behaviors with their children during visitation.

The question regarding disciplinary actions that the foster parents reported were effective was the use of timeouts and the taking away of privileges. These forms of discipline were effective due to the youth of the foster children. With regards to the older children, the foster parents were frustrated and had difficulties disciplining the foster children to the point that some of the foster parents reported that they will no longer foster children that are older. Research being done to try to understand how to deal with teenage foster children has been completed, which may be able to help foster parents in these situations (Gilbertson & Barber, 2003).

The final question is about whether these foster parents would raise another child based on the experiences that they have had. Every participant

reported that they would raise another foster child due to their positive experiences, but none of the foster parents would raise an older foster child due to the likelihood of too many behavioral issues. Perhaps, if these foster parents were given some tools to deal with the behaviors of older foster children, they might feel differently. As foster children get older and have been in the foster care system longer, they tend to have developed some behavioral difficulties and it makes it hard to parent them, but a study was done to try and develop skills and strategies to deal with adolescents that are in this situation (Lipscombe, Farmer, & Moyers, 2003).

Strengths and Limitations

One of the strengths of using qualitative research is that the researcher can get more in depth information and then there is the human experience which cannot be measured like quantitative research (Grinnell & Unrau, 2005). A possible strength of this study is that all of the participants have biological children and that means that they have some parenting experience even though there is no previous research about this. Their answers

were more about actual experiences, which is one of the goals in conducting this type of research. Based on the experiences of these foster parents, the results of this study appear to support that having early interventions with foster children is an important component to successfully raising a foster care child especially those that might have behavioral or mental health issues (Stahmer et al., 2005). The continuum of care for foster children is an important part of them having any future success in life. It should be noted that some of the foster parents reported that they still hear from and are a means of support in the lives of their past foster children. The parental nurturing and positive experiences that most of these foster children had due to their foster families seems to have had a positive impact on their lives.

A limitation of this study is that with qualitative research, the researcher may have personal biases and the information reported is not something that can be measured or proved like quantitative research (Grinnell & Unrau, 2005). An additional limitation of this study is that the size of population studied was low. Another limitation of the study is that the results cannot be

generalized. A possible limitation of this study is parental experience. All of the participants in this study were older parents that had raised many children including foster children except one individual that was approximately thirty years old. The foster parents reported that they had an idea of what they were looking for in a foster child based on reported past experiences. Another limitation of this study is that these foster parents did not have foster children that had any severe or persistent mental health issues (Taylor, 1998).

Implications for Social Work Practice

As social workers, this is a population that will need to be addressed. Social workers in family and social services are going to have to deal with foster children and their parents (Mahoney & Wiggers, 2007). According to federal estimates, there are over a half million children in foster care in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). This implies that social workers are going to be greatly affected by there being so many foster children in the system and based on the statistics there is no reason for the amount of future foster children to decrease. Child welfare

agencies and the caseworkers for these children are trying to come up with ways to improve parent involvement in foster care. They are trying to help reunify parents and their children in order to reduce the amount of foster children in the system (Alpert & Britner, 2009).

Conclusions and Future Research

The results of this study show that with early interventions such as good foster care placement at a young age can go a long way towards increasing the future success of a foster child. In a broader sense, if more parents became involved in fostering children, the future could be bright for a majority of current and future foster children. Even with a positive upside to this research, there needs to be more research done with how to teach foster parents to deal with older foster children that come with behavioral and mental health problems. There also needs to be more research done with first time foster parents and potential foster parents that have no biological children of their own. These potential foster parents could be a new resource because many parents might not be able to have biological children of their own. If their experience is positive,

they might even adopt a foster child that they foster which is a positive for the world as a whole. Overall, even though there has been a lot of research done on many aspects of the foster care system as a whole, there is such a large problem that it calls for additional research especially to help social workers who are . dealing with these issues every day.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

A study of self-report among foster parents and the adjustments they face with their foster children.

- 1) What is your age?
- 2) What is your gender?
- 3) What is your ethnicity?
- 4) What is your occupation?
- 5) How many foster children do you have?
- 6) How long have you had your foster child or children?
- 7) Do you have children of your own?
- 8) Do you have children of your own and if so, can you describe the nature of the relationship between them and your foster child?
- 9) Describe as best as you can how well you communicate with your foster child?
- 10) Can you tell me about some of your experiences with your foster child?
- 11) Based on those experiences, what do you feel helped you and what did not help you in your relationship with your foster child?
- 12) Can you tell me what type of disciplinary actions were effective and which were not effective with your foster child?
- 13) If you were to raise another foster child, what if anything do you believe you would do differently?

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to investigate understanding of the adjustments that occur with a child that has been raised in foster care. This study is being conducted by Mr. Arthur Natsume, a Master of Social Work student under the supervision of Assistant Professor Carolyn McAllister, School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. This study has been approved by the Social Work Human Subjects Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to identify foster parents' experiences, challenges, and their unmet needs in order to improve the relationship between the foster child and his or her foster caregivers.

DESCRIPTION: You are being asked to take part in a face-to-face interview. You will be asked a few questions about your experiences raising a foster child.

PARTICIPATION: Participation is totally voluntary and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All audio tapes recorded during the interview will be kept under lock and key by the interviewer. There will be no identifying information on any written material in order to maintain the confidentiality of all participants in the study.

DURATION: The interview will take approximately 30 minutes.

RISKS: There are no foreseeable risks to your participation in the research.

BENEFITS: A benefit in taking part of this study will be to have a role in formulating or improving the transition of children that are raised in the foster care system as a whole.

VIDEO/AUDIO/PHOTOGRAPH: I understand that this research will be audio recorded. Initials and data from the recording will be used to develop the results of this study _____.

CONTACT: If you have questions about this project, please contact my research supervisor, Dr. Carolyn McAllister, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407, cmcallis@csusb.edu, 909-537-5559.

RESULTS: The results of this study will be available at the Pfau Library, California State University, San Bernardino after September 2010.

_____ Date _____
Place a check mark here

APPENDIX C
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

The purpose of the study is to identify foster parents' experiences, challenges, and their unmet needs in order to improve the relationship between the foster child and his or her foster caregivers. There is no deception involved in conducting this study. All responses by the participants of the study are strictly voluntary without any penalty for withdrawing from the study or not wanting to answer any particular question. There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this study. This research project is being conducted in order to help better understand how to aid parents in dealing with their new foster children. The results of the study can be obtained after September 2010 at the Pfau Library located at California State University, San Bernardino. Any questions or concerns can be answered by Dr. Carolyn McAllister, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, California 92407, cmcallis@csusb.edu, (909) 537-5559.

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