Addressing the Impact of Foster Care on Biological Children and Their Families

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This study explores from a dual perspective the impact of the fostering process on biological children in the home. Ten foster parents and their biological children were interviewed separately. The impact of foster care on the psychological, educational, and social well-being of biological children and their relationship with parents and siblings were examined. The exploration reveals a paradoxical and life-changing process as seen through the eyes of biological children and their parents.

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The need for foster families in the United States is well-documented in the literature (Cox, Buehler, & Orme, 2002; Baum, Crase, & Crase, 2001; Brown & Calder, 2000; Hudson & Lévesque, 2002; Barton, 1999; Barbell & Wright, 1999; Hegar & Scannapieco, 1999) and has remained of great importance for the past two decades (Pasztor & Burgess, 1982; National Commission on Family Foster Care, 1991). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHSS), as of 1999 568,000 children lived in foster care in the United States (U.S. DHHS, 2001). This is a substantial increase from the 262,000 children in foster care in 1982 (Congressional Research Service, 1997). While the number of children needing care continues to rise, the number of families willing to foster remains insufficient. The decision to become a foster parent is not an easy one, as potential foster parents must determine whether their families possess the necessary commitment, dedication, time, economic stability, and parenting skills to care for vulnerable children. Families may be interested in fostering, but fear the negative consequences it may have on their biological children. Although states provide foster care training programs and the literature addresses the challenges facing foster families, such coverage is inadequate, unavailable, or not accessed by prospective foster families seeking to make an informed decision related to fostering.

Literature Review

Children are often placed in foster care due to chaotic home environments, abuse, and neglect (Isomyki, 2002; Barton, 1999). As cited by Barton (1999), DHHS reported a 50% increase in the number of child abuse and neglect cases between 1985 and 1997, resulting in a higher number of children requiring care outside the home. Despite this increase, the number of foster families recruited and retained remains insufficient, with agencies reportedly losing as many as 30-50% of family foster homes each year (Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001; Pasztor & Wynne, 1995). This chronic shortage

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impacts the children in need of homes (Rhodes et al., 2001; Cox et al., 2002) when the overcrowding of foster homes and mismatching of children and families jeopardizes the quality of care and frustrates foster families. Limited state and federal funding available for child welfare services further exasperates agencies forced to rely heavily on existing foster families (Rhodes et al., 2001).

Foster children have a wide range of mental health needs and up to seven times more emotional, developmental, and chronic health problems as compared to other groups of poor children (Rosenfeld et al., 1997). A large percentage of these children had been abused (Rosenfeld et al. 1997, Cuddeback & Orme, 2002), feel unimportant, and blame themselves for what happened to them (Rosenfeld et al., 1997). Many demonstrate diminished self-esteem and are often impulsive, violent, and explosive. The grief they experience due to the loss of family and familiar surroundings leads to emotional and behavioral problems that can be difficult for all to contend with (Edelstein, Burge, & Waterman, 2001). Additionally, many of these children are faced with frequent moves between foster homes, preventing the stability they seek. Foster children with just one placement compared to ten are considerably more likely to graduate from high school, have a job, abstain from illegal drugs, and stay out of trouble with the law (Barton, 1999). Frequent movement in and out of foster homes also becomes "a continual source of stress for the foster family" (Poland & Groze 1993, p. 154).

Prospective foster parents must consider the potential challenges that foster children bring into their homes and whether they want their biological children exposed to potentially troublesome behaviors. The traumatic events that the foster child has experienced can challenge the foster parents' view of the world and cause them to feel powerless and frustrated (Edelstein et al., 2001). A study of foster parents who had either quit or were planning to quit fostering indicates that 36% quit because of problem behaviors in foster children (Rhodes et al., 2001).

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Other reasons for quitting include lack of agency support, insufficient training, difficult children with complex needs, changes in family structure, and low reimbursement (Hudson & Levasseur, 2002; Baum et al., 2001; Chamberlain & Moreland, 1992). Considerable evidence indicates that foster parents do not receive adequate training to prepare them for fostering (Cuddeback & Orme, 2002; Baum et al., 2001; Chamberlain & Moreland, 1992; Hudson & Levasseur, 2002; Rhodes et al., 2001). Rhodes et al (2001) found that 46.3% of foster parents reported that the training they received failed to adequately prepare them for the effects of foster care on the existing family, a situation that contributes greatly to the high turnover rate of foster parents and the frequent relocation of foster children.

Adjusting to incoming foster children can be difficult for biological children. The adjustment to the presence of foster children and the resulting changes in the relationship between foster parents and their children leads to behavioral changes in biological children (Wilkes, 1974). Hojer (2004) who surveyed 366 foster parents and interviewed 17 foster families in Sweden found that biological children had decreased time and attention from their parents as the needs of foster children consumed much of parents’ time and energy. Lemieux (1984) and Poland and Groze (1993) both describe the resentment that can result from the biological children’s feeling that too much attention is being given to a foster child. These feelings of resentment can produce guilt in children who may feel pressured to accept and love the foster child.

Foster families struggle to find a balance between loving foster children enough that they feel at home and included in the family yet not becoming so attached that separation is too difficult (Eastman, 1979). As foster parents tend to become stricter with their own children and set higher expectations for them (Lemieux, 1984), they find themselves unprepared to address their children’s reaction and adjustment to fostering.

Berrick, Frasch, and Fox (2000) stress the importance of considering the viewpoint of foster children involved in the child welfare system. They assert, “Children are the primary clients of the child welfare system, yet their voices are muffled by an array of difficult
impediments” (p. 127). The voices of biological children seem to be just as muffled, if not absent from the literature addressing foster care and more generally child welfare. Yet, they are directly involved in the foster care system and impacted by its success or failure through their parents’ commitment to provide care. Lemieux (1984) reports a correlation between the satisfaction of biological children with fostering and their parents’ fostering decisions; therefore, it is important for the child welfare system to attend to the needs of biological children as well. Poland and Groze (1993) stated, “Efforts that had been made to prepare the biological children and help them adjust were not sufficient and needed to be supplemented, perhaps by pre-training sessions for the biological children” (p.162). They also indicated that more involvement on the part of the foster care worker with the biological children would be beneficial.

It is the intent of this research to explore the impact of fostering on biological children from the perspectives of foster parents and their children. The study assesses the children’s reaction and adjustment to fostering; its impact on their psychological, educational, and social well-being; and effects of fostering on their relationships with parents and siblings. The outcome will fill a gap in the literature and provide prospective foster families with critical information that will enable them to make informed decisions related to fostering and to realize the impact that such a commitment could have on the family. While foster care training programs in some states address the fostering impact on foster family and biological children, the literature is deficient if not lacking information about the consistency and adequacy of such coverage nationwide and the degree that it addresses or involves biological children.

Methodology

A qualitative design was used so that participating foster parents and their biological children could provide an inductive, in-depth recounting of the impact of fostering on their lives. The focus is on biological children and their parents who experienced the social phenomenon of fostering within their homes. While maintaining this focus on the children and giving voice to their experiences was
primary, seeking their parents’ perspectives of those experiences enriched the outcome and allowed cross-checking of the information from more than one source. Consistent with qualitative methodology, the intent of this research is not to generalize findings, but to gain insight into the fostering process and its impact on biological children. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with foster parents and their children in the families’ homes. Interviews were audiotaped and responses were recorded in writing by one of the researchers conducting the interview. The data collected included the answers that foster parents and their children provided in response to the research questions, as well as stories they shared about their experiences in providing foster care. Research questions and data collection focused on the fostering process rather than outcome. Each family received a numerical code and the responses of parents and children were then separated. Data gathered in response to each question was compiled as the children’s responses were compared to each other and then to those of their parents. Likewise, compiled responses from each set of foster parents were compared to responses of other foster parents and then to their children’s. This allowed the data to unfold in an inductive fashion revealing research themes about the ways that foster parents and their children engaged in the fostering process and made sense of it. This qualitative inductive approach promoted the detailed construction of a subjective social reality from the points of view of participants (Grinnell, 2001). What emerged is a dramatic, richly woven contextual description of a life-changing process and its consequences on biological children and their families.

The Institutional Review Board of a Midwestern state university approved the study and the researchers were provided with a modest summer research grant to defray research expenses. Additionally, the Policy Cabinet of Health and Human Services Systems (HHSS) in the state approved the study and an agreement was reached with the state’s HHSS whereby foster care workers in three rural counties provided the names and phone numbers of current and past parents who fostered while raising their biological children at home. Since the list of names was fairly short, all
the families whose name was forwarded by the workers were contacted by phone and invited to participate voluntarily in the study. From a total of twenty-one names given to researchers, ten agreed to participate. Of the remaining families who did not participate, three did not want themselves or their children to be interviewed, five reported not having sufficient time to be interviewed, one was in the process of moving out of the area, and the last two families could not be reached despite repeated attempts.

Nonprobability convenience and purposive sampling was used to locate foster parents and their children fitting the research criteria within a three-county radius in the central part of the state. Since the sampling pool was smaller than originally anticipated, the researchers reassessed the situation and the focus of qualitative research as being “aimed at an in-depth understanding of a few cases rather than a general understanding of many cases or people” (Grinnell, 2001, 109). Based on this focus, the small sample size was considered acceptable and allowed the researchers to delve with more depth into the exploration of the fostering experience. Given the small sample size, the following strategies were used to ensure the validity of results: low inference descriptors such as direct quotations, triangulation by cross-checking information from multiple sources such as parents and children, and the use of multiple investigators to collect and interpret data.

The profile of foster parents participating in the study shows that the average age of foster parents ranges from the mid-thirties to late-fifties. All families reported Caucasian middle-class backgrounds and two parent households. The size of foster families, excluding foster children, ranged from 1 to 7 children who also ranged from age 1 to 36. Biological children over the age of eight were allowed to participate in the study; younger children could not be relied upon to provide information with sufficient depth and insight. The total number of biological children in foster families was twenty-nine, however sixteen of them participated in the study. The remaining thirteen children were either too young to interview, not living at home when the family began fostering, or unavailable or unwilling to participate in the study. Two of the
families participating in the study were no longer fostering; one fostered for one year and terminated due to negative impact on the biological child, and the second fostered for fourteen years and terminated due to age and health concerns. Of the remaining families, the length of time fostering ranged from one to six years with all continuing to foster children. All foster parents except one graduated from high school, with the majority having some college experience. Their career paths varied from homemaking to professional positions, with average incomes ranging from less than ten thousand to more than fifty thousand dollars.

Procedure

Foster parents and their children were interviewed separately in their homes, with each interviewed as a group in the absence of the other. Parents and children were interviewed during the same scheduled visit beginning with one of the researchers explaining the study, providing consent information, and having the foster parents complete a demographic questionnaire related to their profile as well as the decisionmaking process and training they received prior to become foster parents. In order to maintain confidentiality, all families received a numerical code and no identifying information was used in the study. Foster parents and their children responded to the same set of questions related to the fostering experience and its impact on the children. With the exception of two foster fathers unable to attend the interview due to work commitments, all interviews with foster parents included both parents and lasted approximately one hour. Families were told to plan approximately two and one half hours for the interview, and a decision was made to interview both parents together in consideration of their time and convenience. Each parent had the opportunity to respond to all questions within the interview or to elaborate on his or her partner’s responses. The length of interview time with the children was approximately one hour, but younger children tended to respond with less depth. Following the interviews, foster parents and their biological children were given movie tickets and a ten-dollar voucher as a gesture of gratitude.
The interview questions were aimed at examining and comparing the perspectives of foster parents and their children about the impact on the biological children of providing foster care in the home. Since the researchers' goal was to gain a multidimensional and holistic understanding of the process, the following aspects were explored: reaction and adjustment of biological children to incoming foster children; the impact of foster care on biological children's psychological, educational, and social well-being; reaction and adjustment of biological children to the termination of the foster child's stay in the home; the impact of foster care on the relationship of biological children with their parents and siblings; and the impact of foster care on the biological child's role in the family.

Results

Data gathered from the interviews with foster parents and their biological children were compiled separately for each group and examined for themes, then responses of parents were compared with those of their children. The data were categorized to reflect the fostering process, beginning with the decision to foster and ending with termination.

Fostering Decision and Preparation

All foster parents and their children participating in the study reported having a discussion about the fostering decision prior to the arrival of foster children. All children interviewed reported their parents having a discussion with them about bringing foster children into the home. They were informed of incoming foster children, their need for a home, and some of the difficulties that might arise once they arrive. While discussions about fostering took place, the decision seemed to be mostly made by the parents who shared that the extent of feedback sought from the children seemed to vary with age. Parents reported that their younger children were less involved in the decision. Despite their efforts, foster parents reported varied results about the effectiveness of the preparation they provided their children. One parent shared that "the reality was a shock at first. I don't think we could have ever truly pre-
pared them because we didn’t know what was coming.” This is consistent with the children’s feedback when they stated that the reality was quite different from the preparation they received. Children stated, “You don’t know what it is like until you do it,” or, “It was scary,” and, “I didn’t realize all that would happen.” Others remarked, “They didn’t tell me how it really would be,” and, “I didn’t know it would be such a crazy house after they came.”

Reaction and Adjustment to Fostering

The feeling of being torn between needing to make a difference in the lives of the vulnerable children that came into the home while responding to their biological children’s needs was a major challenge reported by foster parents. While parents and their children reported the initial reaction to be one of excitement, issues of jealousy, competition, fear, and anxiety also surfaced. One family reported their child withdrawing; others shared their children’s “wait and see attitude,” feeling uncertain and “leery” as new kids joined the family. The children reported feeling “uncomfortable,” “awkward,” and “scared.” One child noted that “the feeling of being uncomfortable in my own home.” Another stated that “it was weird having them in the house all the time.” Several biological children reported fears of not being liked by the foster children.

However difficult the initial jolt, adjustment was gradual as reported by most participants. Parents reported that their children “learned how to deal with things,” “had to get used to not having much attention,” and “had no choice but to try to get along.” Some of the children commented that “after a while I forgot what it was like not to have them around,” “I just learned to get used to it and spent time in my room a lot,” and “I never really got used to it.”

A major challenge reported by many parents and their children involved the necessity of the biological children’s sharing their time, home, and parents with foster children. Hearing foster children call their parents “Mom” and “Dad,” observing the negative manner in which foster children treated their parents, and the parental stress resulting from fostering troubled biological children. One child recalled, “I wanted to yell at them and say you
don’t know how good you have it here.” Another noted, “The girls needed a lot of attention and I wasn’t getting any,” and “It’s like strangers in my own house, you can’t get away from them.” With the exception of one family, which terminated fostering due to their child’s reaction, most children adjusted to the reduced parental attention and learned to get along.

**Impact on Biological Children**

Embracing the new domestic reality of having foster children integrated into the family leads to changes in the personalities of biological children. Parents reported observing their children becoming “more inquisitive,” “more outgoing,” “more caring,” “more loving,” “more willing to help these kids,” “more responsible,” and setting a “good example” for foster children. However, eight of the ten foster parents interviewed observed their children also becoming “more quiet,” “withdrawn,” “angry,” “jealous,” “quick-tempered” or “more stubborn.” They indicated that foster children the same age or younger than their children were easier for their children to cope with. Regardless of the age of the children involved, foster parents cautioned that biological children learn new behaviors from foster children. One parent summed it up nicely by stating, “It is really easy for your kids to pick up bad habits from the foster children. You have to be careful and set good rules and boundaries.” Examples of bad habits that foster parents noted their children picking up included “how to be obnoxious,” becoming less obedient, “more stubborn,” and “lazier,” One family reported that their daughter became “bossier, tended to emulate the older girls, and tried to be like them.”

Some of the foster parents interviewed reported serious acting-out behaviors on their children’s part. One family reported their child became increasingly stressed, angry, and susceptible to hives. Another reported that the biological child began to pull his hair out. Another observed their child becoming resentful, defiant, and indicated that he “wants his old family back.” The biological children participating in the study seemed to echo their parents’ observations of both positive and negative behaviors. They reported becoming “more outgoing,” “more patient,” “more responsi-
ble,” “getting along better with people,” showing “a better attitude,” and feeling more comfortable around new people. Some of the positive outcomes were actually mixed blessings, such as increased sociability being counterbalanced by greater withdrawal at home, and a growing awareness of the bad things that can happen in life making some children “less trusting.” Most the children reported feeling jealousy, anger, “pushed aside,” and unimportant. Some noted, “I just turned more selfish,” “I became more attention seeking,” or “more easily annoyed,” and “got wild all of a sudden.” One child recalled feeling engaged in a “constant race for attention,” another feeling “possessive of our parents.” Yet another felt “crowded” and sought a break from the tension by sneaking outside and climbing up high in a tree “just to be alone.”

Interestingly, all parents, except for one who had no children at school, reported either no change in their children’s educational performance or an actual improvement in their grades. The children confirmed their parents’ information, adding that having the foster children made them work harder either to set a good example or because they didn’t want homework.

Impact of Fostering on Relationships

While seven of the ten parents interviewed observed no change in their children’s relationship with their peers, one stated that their child spent less time with friends because of the desire to help out at home, and two observed more conflict as peers either teased them about the foster children or questioned their loyalties. Children in seven families reported no change in their relationship with their peers; however, one reported that friends “didn’t come to my house as much” due to the presence of foster children. Of the two remaining, one child felt conflict due to having to defend foster children from teasing friends, while the other noted a difference in peer relationships only if the foster child was of the opposite sex.

Time, or lack of it when it came to the relationship between biological children and their parents, was a theme mentioned by every child and parent interviewed. Constant interruptions, lack of special parent-child time, and lack of privacy were cited frequently as con-
cerns. Parents acknowledged working harder to plan family time and setting aside a special time for their children. While parents focused mostly on the time issue, children emphasized the stricter rules set by their parents and the expectation for them to be positive role models for foster children. One child shared feeling “like an angel, good child, compared to the kids living at my house,” becoming less dependent on parents and “more productive.” Some children reported a change in their parents’ personality, especially the mother’s. One indicated, “Mom didn’t seem like my normal mom. She seemed like she was trying to be the perfect mother, she changed.” This led to feelings of anger as the child stated, “I liked her the way she was, didn’t want her to change.” Another reported that although her parents are “loonier than they used to be,” she felt a sense of pride in her mother and liked receiving compliments related to “how special Mom is” and how she “has a place in heaven.” Despite the mixed feeling that children demonstrate toward their parents’ commitment to fostering, some older children who participated in the study reported having a close relationship with their parents and appreciating their efforts now that they (the children) are older.

Biological children reported an impact on their relationships with their siblings. In two families, the biological children were only children; the remaining biological children interviewed had siblings and were split in their responses. Three reported no change in their relationship, while one reported increased closeness “not much but a little because we talked about how we didn’t like the situation.” Children in the four remaining families reported a change in relationship among siblings. Children in one family noted increased friction among them due to conflicting perceptions of foster children and having to defend them against their siblings. One told of fights among siblings as one gets angry with the foster kids and the other feels the need to “stick up for them.” Children in two families shared the following related to loss of closeness with siblings, “we don’t play games or talk as much because the foster kids are around,” “my sister likes them and they are her friends so we don’t talk as much,” and “we don’t see each other and play with each other as much because the foster kids are around to play with more.”
Shifting Family Structure, Roles, and Expectations

The structure, roles, and expectations of the family shifted with the entry of foster children into the home. Parents expected fewer chores of their children, but also expected them to set a "good example," "be perfect," "be more understanding and patient," "nicer to foster children" and "show what a normal family could be." Parental roles shifted as caring for foster children became more of a full-time job, and one mother quit her job outside the home to become a full-time parent. While some parents observed anger, rebellion, and defiance on their children's part, others reported that their children gradually coped with the change. Only two of the ten parents interviewed reported discussing the family changes with their children. Common responses were "[I] just expected them to know," or "They knew I needed help and they were okay with it," and "I have always expected them to do what they are told."

Children interviewed affirmed their parents' comments about the shifting family environment. Children in five of the families interviewed experienced a sense of displacement when they were no longer the youngest or oldest in the family. This was troubling to some children, as they liked their original birth order. One child shared that his parents "expected me to be the leader and foster kids the followers," and another felt "like Mom wanted the family to be perfect." Most children interviewed seemed to accept those expectations although a few found them burdensome, one noting the difficulty of "having to set a good example. I don't like to have to be good and don't want to be good sometimes." Parents conceded that while discussion related to shifting roles and expectations may have been inadequate, they did emphasize the need for their children to empathize with foster children and serve as good role models.

Impact of Loss and Separation

All parents and children interviewed consistently shared that the removal of foster children from the foster family was the most difficult part of the process leading their families to experience loss and sadness. Removal decisions are made within the child welfare system
with focus on the best interests of foster children; such considerations do not typically involve biological children or address the impact on their families. Most foster parents reported talking to their children about the removal of foster children from the home and indicated that their children’s feelings “ranged from relief to sorrow,” and that the removal was “sad, very emotional.” The former foster parents “worried about them a lot, didn’t understand why their parents couldn’t treat them better.” One said, “Sometimes I don’t think we have good closure.” Children recalled that the removal “was like losing a sister.” “It shook up the family,” and “made things in the family irregular.” The foster siblings “are part of your family and it feels like your family has been taken away.” They reported worrying about the well-being of foster children; one said, “I worried about them not being taken care of the right way.” Children coped by spending time alone, talking to family, and allowing the bad feelings to linger. They reported “achy feelings” and taking time to let things “sink in.” The parents recounted more dramatic images of their children’s efforts to cope with the loss. Some shared that children experienced “lots of tears and days of moping around,” and that “At first it was almost like a death in the family.” In the midst of sadness, the loss presented an opportunity for the family to recuperate and return to some normalcy, even if short-lived until the entry of the next foster child. More than one family reported that the time between foster children is “almost like a vacation” and that their children take full advantage of not having foster siblings around. This meant more quality time and attention to biological children, a sense of control over their house, and a brief return to the family structure they enjoyed before the entry of foster children into their home. Comments such as “We can be a normal family for a while until the next one comes,” and “Enjoy time with family” were common.

**Overall Impact of Fostering Care**

All foster parents interviewed reported the overall impact of fostering on their family to be positive. Even the family that terminated fostering due to concerns for the well-being of their child indicated that the overall experience was positive and helped their
son to have a better “understanding of children with hardships”. However, they believed that their son “had to give up too much” and was hurt emotionally. The nine remaining foster parents participating in the study asserted that sharing their home with defenseless children made their own children appreciate them, their home, and life itself to a greater degree. They believed that fostering made their children better people who “learned about different races and cultures,” “became more aware of society and open to kids and people of all backgrounds,” and “taught our children more about life than we could have ever taught them.” Parents witnessed their children becoming “more compassionate,” as well as “accepting, loving, giving to people in need” and more likely to “see positives in people.” Most parents also reported a positive impact on the family as a whole. One parent stated, “We are definitely better parents and a better functioning family.” Yet the negatives were not overlooked by parents who indicated that their children “had to give up too much,” and “had to see the ugly side of human nature.” Many admitted not really knowing the long-term impact on their children but hoped their children would utilize their experience with fostering to become better people.

Children interviewed cited positive outcomes such as learning about people, becoming more independent, making friends, and appreciating their families. Comments included, “It opened my eyes to the real world,” and “It taught me so much about life and how fortunate I was growing up.” Every child interviewed also shared some negatives outcomes of fostering, including lack of parental attention, financial strain on the family, “a lot of stress,” and “not as much time alone.”

Conclusion and Study Implications

The results reveal the intensity of the fostering process on biological children and their families. While children may have provided input into the fostering decision, ultimately that decision was made by their parents and imposed upon the rest of the family. Fostering altered the children’s relationships, family structure, personality, and view of the world. The fostering process is bitter-
sweet and challenges the strengths of foster families and their biological children. Prospective foster parents have no simple formula they can use in making their decision; instead, families must anticipate a multifaceted picture of what they might encounter in the fostering process. The fostering decision needs be weighed carefully and in light of their family’s developmental phase, their resources, and most importantly, their biological children’s needs.

Potential foster parents need to know that their family life and children’s reality will be greatly altered. Fostering is challenging and stressful, but it yields many rewards. All children interviewed, including the ones that acted out, indicated that despite the traumatic process, fostering made them better people and expanded their understanding of the complexities of life. Fostering enriched their lives and taught them a deeper appreciation of their parents. Foster parents and their children advise prospective foster parents to consider the age of their biological children and the foster children placed within their home. Both parents and children believe that training must better address the needs of biological children and help foster parents to prepare them for the fostering process. They would like to see children involved in the training and to have the opportunity to learn about the experiences of other biological children with fostering.

The biological children interviewed went beyond their parents’ recommendations by underscoring the importance of having parents involve their children in the fostering decision. They recommended that parents talk openly with their children, help them to understand the reasons for foster care and why foster children need homes, “tell them exactly what would happen,” “let them know there will be good and bad days,” and “tell your kids that you love them.” Biological children especially emphasized open family communication and the need for foster parents to spend time with their children and reaffirm their love for them. They believe that biological children should get involved in their parent’s fostering decision and in caring for foster children who enter their home. Communicating with parents, spending time alone with them, and supporting the fostering process are elements noted as helpful for biological children in foster homes.
Study Limitations

While valuable, this study has limitations. That such a small number of families in a three-county rural area met the study's criteria was surprising. The lack of diversity within the sample is another concern, although it represents the demographics of this area of the state. All families were white, middle-class, two-parent households, and resided in communities with population of less than 30,000 surrounded by rural communities. While qualitative studies are less concerned with sample size, a larger and more diverse sample would have enriched the outcome. Resource constraints of time and funds made it unfeasible to expand the geographic area to increase the potential pool of participants.

Conclusion

Future studies should examine the extent of concern for the biological children as a deterrent to fostering. Exploring the recommendations that foster parents and their children offer to prospective foster parents, trainers, and foster care workers is also important. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term impact of fostering on biological children, as none seem to exist.

The outcome of the study has practice implications that child welfare agencies, caseworkers, and policymakers must consider. The impact of fostering on the family unit and children must be addressed as part of the recruitment and training process. Regardless of existing variations in foster parent training models among states, addressing the needs of biological children and including them in training programs is critical to the retention rates and success of foster care. The fostering process alters their lives permanently; so it seems only fair to consider their need for permanence and stability. It is important that foster families are paired with competent caseworkers available to provide support and consultation as needed. While some states are instituting effective foster parent mentoring programs, the role of caseworkers in providing crisis intervention and guidance to foster parents is essential to the success foster care.
Most significantly, policymakers seem to recognize the crisis of foster care but continue to underestimate the immense sacrifice that foster parents provide in caring for vulnerable children. The authors assert that foster parents are compensated minimally for the valuable services they provide. An incentive system such as the one used for promoting adopting children in the state system would serve to recognize foster parents' valuable contributions while compensating them through reduced taxation. Social service cuts impacting staffing, worker caseloads, and turnover undermine the success of foster care and the provision of supportive services to foster families. Policy changes are needed to ensure that supportive services to foster families are awarded the same degree of attention and resources involved in recruiting foster parents. Acknowledging the vital role of foster families by providing child welfare services; supporting their commitment to make a difference in the lives of vulnerable children; and ensuring that all children in and out of the system are properly tended to would serve to highlight the ideals of a more equitable and inclusive society.

References


