

Western Foster Parent Project

Report of Findings

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Dr. Alan Leschied

Dr. Susan Rodger

Dr. Jason Brown

Melanie-Anne Atkins

Laurel Pickel

Nadine Bilawski

Laura Bonnell

Part One: The Canadian Context

Foster parents play a critical role in child wellbeing in Canada. Children entering the child welfare system arrive on the doorsteps of these carers carrying a multitude of past experiences with them. Canadian data from Trocmé et al (2010), indicated that 46% of child welfare cases from 2008 exhibited at least one child functioning concern. These concerns ranged from most commonly, academic struggles at 23%, followed by depression/anxiety/withdrawal (19%), aggression (15%), and attachment issues (14%) (Trocmé et al., 2010). The challenges experienced by these children coming into care pose as risk factors in the way of a healthy developmental trajectory. Longitudinal support has indicated that early experiences of poor caregiving can result in later emotional and behavioural anomalies (Lessard & Moretti, 1998; Warren et al., 1997; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1998).

Furthermore, challenges in securing a placement for foster children can jeopardize the healing process. As such, a number of risk factors for these children exist in the absence of a timely placement, including less than ideal matching, increased risk of placement breakdown, and more (Aitken, 2002). These findings emphasize all the more, the importance of care provided by foster parents. Attachment theory highlights the importance of a consistent, attentive, and nurturing presence or 'secure base' for the optimal progression of children in their development (Ainsworth, 1984). Children thrive and grow in consistent, predictable environments where they are able to form an attachment bond with a warm and responsive caregiver.

In a study by Dozier et al. (2009), the researchers reported that with training, foster parents can assist foster children in developing trusting relationships with their new caregivers. This training targeted three issues: helping caregivers learn to re-interpret children's alienating behaviours, helping caregivers override their own issues that prevented nurturing care, and helping caregivers provide an environment that helps children develop regulatory capabilities. These trusting relationships help the children to establish a secure base from which they can grow and develop.

The Problem

As has been highlighted in the literature above, foster parents play an important role in not only providing a safe environment, but in forming a trusting and nurturing relationship for the hurting children that enter their homes. However, a startling trend has become apparent within Canada and many other developed nations regarding this critical resource. Concern has been expressed for securing an adequate number of foster homes in light of the consistent rise in the need for care and the disproportionate lack of availability for that care (Aitken, 2002; Denby et al., 1999). And, while challenges in recruiting new foster parents have presented themselves to child welfare organizations over the past few decades, Matheson (2011) concluded that this crisis is now particularly acute.

In 2005, The Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) reported the disproportionate rise in the number of children in need of homes compared to the number of homes available. The OACAS predicted an increase in the number of children in care by 46% (12,911 to 18,879) between the years 1998 and 2005, compared to a forecasted rise in foster placements by only 41%. This

growing gap is of critical importance as we develop projections for the future needs for out-of-home care placements for children and their complex needs.

The findings reported here are part of a larger project that has been underway between the researchers and the Child Welfare League of Canada. This partnership was originally formed with the common goal of exploring the foster parent experience in Canada. More specifically, we set out to explore the challenges that lead foster parents to feeling overwhelmed and ultimately, looking to resign their roles as carers. The second part of our study as elaborated on here, took the insights that we gathered from part one to create an online support focusing on foster parents' needs and wellbeing. The ultimate goal here was to provide them with some support tools to prevent burnout and enhance their fostering experience through enhanced wellbeing.

Methodology: Part One

In total, 941 foster families across Canada participated in this first phase of our study. The majority of these foster parents were of European-Canadian descent, with at least one caregiver working outside of the home. Each participant was then asked to complete a survey related to their experiences as foster parents.

Measures

Foster parents who consented to participate in the study were asked to complete the *Canadian Foster Parent Survey (CFPS)* beginning in May 2012 to the final day of data collection in October 2013. Foster parents had the option of completing an electronic or paper copy of the survey, which was returned to the research team upon completion. The content of this 91 question survey was largely adapted from Denby and colleagues' *Foster Parent Satisfaction Survey (FPSS; 1999)*. Based on this past work, the CFPS has evolved to include four sections: *Your Home and Family; You as a Foster Parent; Your Family; Your Experience of Fostering*.

Results

The results from the first part this project indicated that many foster parents across Canada are at risk of leaving their role. Most of the foster parents who completed the survey indicated that they were low to moderately satisfied in this role. Furthermore, two thirds of these foster parents have considered quitting at some point. With regards to this, the most frequent reasons identified involved the challenges in dealing with agency red tape, seeing a child returned to a bad situation, lack of support services such as respite care, dealing with a child's difficult behaviour, and conflict with child's worker.

A thematic analysis was further carried out on the qualitative responses that foster parents provided us with regarding their fostering experiences and struggles. From this, it was apparent that foster parents were telling us that they would like access to practical supports that would assist them in the areas of building successful and healthy relationships, avoiding burnout and feelings of helplessness, breaking isolation and feelings of aloneness, and strategies for taking care of themselves as carers.

At the same time that we were collecting foster parent data from across the country, we were also reviewing the literature to determine what other child welfare agencies around the world were implementing to help support their carers. It became apparent to us that many foster parents were

finding that having access to online platforms was helpful, not only in terms of on-going training opportunities, but also in terms of connecting with local fostering supports. As such, our goal for the second part of this project was to take the learnings that we had gathered from the results of the survey data in part one of the project, and use this as a basis to construct an online resource that would be supportive to the needs of Canadian foster parents.

From here, the research team took both the quantitative and qualitative results reflecting foster parents' greatest struggles and began to develop four, online modules that would best address the support needs as expressed by our sample of 941 Canadian foster parents. The intent was to listen to the voices of our sample of foster parents in providing them with an accessible online tool that could provide relevant and practical strategies regarding their needs and wellbeing.

The focus of this program is unique in that it focuses specifically on the wellbeing needs of foster parents. Much of the training that carers receive is child-focused, preparing them to address the needs of the children coming into their homes, while little in comparison is spent addressing the impacts that fostering while inevitably have on foster parents themselves. As such, our team saw it as important to listen to the voices of these carers regarding their needs and experiences, and from there, constructing a resource specifically designed for them. With this in mind, the four modules developed included:

- Module 1: Back to Basics – Laying a Foundation for Children in Care
- Module 2: Four Tools for Conflict Resolution
- Module 3: Unpacking Behaviour
- Module 4: Dealing with Grief and Loss

Methodology: Part 2

Participants

In the second phase of this project, 30 foster parents were recruited to participate in this pilot phase for the online modules. The research team approached local agencies in Southwestern Ontario to recruit foster parent participants to complete the modules and provide feedback from the Fall of 2014 to March of 2015.

Materials

Foster parents were provided with a URL link to access the modules directly from Western University's Faculty of Education website. They could then progress through the modules in an asynchronous fashion, on their own time and initiative.

The narrated modules were designed to be interactive and engaging, often presenting the key concepts in the form of a relatable story, as taken from another foster parent's blog, teaching resources, or news article. Following that, foster parents were asked to complete an activity that was meant to drive home key concepts. Also, at various points throughout the modules, foster parents were asked to consider the following questions:

1. "Before doing any viewing of the materials or assigned reading, what do you know, about the content of this module?"

At the end of each module, foster parents were informed that they would see a final page that had four more questions to answer:

2. "After watching, listening and reading, what turned out to be true?"
3. "What misconceptions have you identified?"
4. "What did you learn that was new?"
5. "What are you left wondering about?"

These answers came to the researchers via email, and were documented as participants completed the course.

Once foster parents were finished the course, a member of the research team followed up with them to complete a telephone interview. The purpose of the interview was to allow them to expand on their experience with the course and provide feedback information to improve any of the modules, and the overall course delivery.

Results

The following six categories reflect themes that came from both the course and telephone interview feedback sources.

(i) General Course Feedback

Overwhelmingly, the vast majority of foster parents provided positive feedback about the modules. There was indeed a theme that foster parents are or have felt overwhelmed in this role, and that seeking support can be challenging, as expressed by this foster parent:

"Everybody stresses the importance of a good support system and getting help when needed and stuff, and I think that's maybe something foster parents struggle with, 'cause that's hard to, it's hard to ask for help 'cause then you're admitting that you can't do it alone, right?"

While many carers commented that the modules were likely most helpful for newer foster parents, most noted that it was at least a good refresher, or that there was some element of the course that was helpful to see in a new way:

"I think it would depend upon your level of experience. Some things were completely, you know, old hat to me, but one or two things, whilst not completely new, were explained in a slightly better way—"

Some foster parents noted that this training wasn't as applicable to them based on the type of foster care they provide (ex. fostering with the intention to adopt), as well as the age group that they foster (ex. infants).

Over all however, most feedback was positive:

"Those are the topics that everybody has either issues with or concerns with. I loved the topics. I think they were perfect, bang on."

“Actually, I gotta be honest. I loved the training. I wish I could take it to all my foster parents here.”

(ii) Implementation Style

Once again, the vast majority of foster parents found the asynchronous online format to be preferred due to its flexibility and numerous applications:

“Well, online course, you just fit them in as and when you want. It is just far more convenient. They don’t clash with your schedule. I mean, you can sit down in the evening or I do it, in many cases, first thing in the morning when I get up. I get up early, I’m an early riser and then I can spend half an hour or an hour doing that. So, yeah. It’s considerably better. And it is probably a better learning experience, anyway, in most cases.”

Many foster parents also commented on how this format of training was more helpful in terms of retaining the content information:

“I find for myself a lot of times I retain a lot more by doing it online because you’re, basically you’re like a one-on-one. You’re one-on-one with your computer, and you’re not, you don’t have all the surrounding things and, you know, in a classroom that are happening and other people and you’re able to, for me, I’m able to more focus more by doing it online.”

However, many foster parents did experience technical difficulties with the online format with regards to compatibility issues (Mac computers, tablets, etc.), copy and pasting, going back through the modules, downloading documents, and accessing links. This will be further discussed under the “suggestions” theme.

(iii) Module-Specific Themes

Foster parents were asked to reflect while completing the module, and in the phone interview after all 4 modules were completed to highlight anything that they took away from the module, or anything that stood out to them. Below we have listed the most common insights shared by foster parents for each module.

(a) Back to Basics – Laying a Foundation for Children in Care

In the phone interviews, foster parents frequently commented on how helpful it was for them to have a reminder of Maslow’s Hierarchy. They spoke that often times children show up at their home with so many needs that it can often be overwhelming to know where to start. While many foster parents had heard about this hierarchy, they noted that it was a good reminder; a reminder both in terms of prioritizing children’s needs, and also in reading a story about another foster parent who also has struggled with this:

“That was a good module. It was true. Think of meeting the children’s needs first, their basic needs before getting into all the in-depth needs of loss and change and possibly abuse and stuff.”

They also commented on some of the practical implications of this:

“I just loved the practical suggestions. So when a child comes in, show them around, show them where they’re going to sleep. Like, that never really dawned on me.”

With regards to their submitted responses within the module, foster parents most frequently commented on what they *can* do to support their foster children in the present, rather than focusing on the long-term ideal of “saving” a child:

“No matter how little time a child spends in your home, it does matter. Whether it be a week, month or years, the kindness you show these children will not be lost. They will remember someone cared enough to help them when they needed it most.”

“What we can do in sometimes even a short period of time can have long term effects in a child.”

“I think it is a common misconception to want to ‘save’ a child, rather than to focusing on equipping them for success in the future. The reality is, the time we have with our foster children is often short, and empowering the children to recognize their self-worth and efficacy is much more effective in the long term than trying to hover protectively over them while they are in our care.”

(b) Four Tools for Conflict Resolution

Overwhelmingly, the vast majority of foster parents commented on the communication tool of ‘empathy’ and how this has helped them better understand and approach communication:

“Oh, [the part on empathy] was really enlightening, because I see things from a foster parent’s perspective and I’ve never been in those other roles in the child welfare system, so it was just so good to see the struggles that each of those people face, and just how it’s not easy for anybody, you know. Like, a child who comes into care is a sad situation for everyone involved, and it’s not the way, from my perspective, how God planned children to be raised, but then all these people come at it with different purposes and involvement, so, I don’t know. It was really good just to see how each person is affected when trying to care for a child at risk.”

Foster parents also commented on the tool of empathy and how they would like others to use that tool towards them in helping them to have a voice and be better included in the child’s care team:

"I think it is important for them to learn about, because quite often foster parents even get a stigma. There's a stigma with just Children's Aid and then there's a stigma with foster parents, as we've encountered with different teachers and professionals that almost don't support our role as a foster parent as like a total team player where, you know, we're kind of sometimes overlooked, and a lot of those outside professionals would rather just speak to workers about the children instead of, you know, firsthand knowledge from the foster parents."

"I think, get the feeling that it's them and us, and the foster parents are pretty much at the bottom of the food chain, and really, they're the most important element in the whole thing, apart from adopted parents."

"I think all the agencies need to know the valued experience that we have. We have a lot of experience; I believe we're not being utilized...We have, we have hands-on. We're here 24 hours. We know the child better. We've learned from experience from past placements. They could involve us more."

(c) Unpacking Behaviour

With regards to this module, many foster parents commented on how helpful the "jigsaw puzzle" story was, with helping them to understand the "age" of their child(ren) with respect to many different factors:

"I liked the jigsaw puzzle. I liked the way that that was laid out because you can see it right there in black and white that chronological age doesn't always match, you know, where they're academically or emotionally or anything else like that, and that they all do come with baggage or a backpack, and you need to kind of work through that and figure out, and with the first one, figure out that back to basics, each kid is different and they come with different things."

"I enjoyed the jigsaw puzzle. It was very informative and made me wonder about the children in my home. I believe if everyone who parented could look at this model they might be far more understanding. Especially teachers who teach foster children who are unaware of the child's history. I also learned that the deficit-based and strength-based language could mean many different things. You could use the same word in many instances."

Foster parents also commented on how refreshing and helpful it was to take a strengths-based perspective when approaching their child's behaviour via the positive parenting strategies:

"We have a manual from the local CAS, and I have no idea if you've read that manual, but they give it to foster parents. You go through it sometime, and you look to see how many items in there are positive things to do. They're virtually all negatives. Don't do this. Don't do that. You must have the—And it's just totally descriptive and not at all helpful and useful, and it's too big, and most foster parents—Any every time something goes wrong, they write another little regulation to cover it. And, you know, and it just isn't the way, that isn't, just not the way to deal with the situation."

(d) Dealing with Grief and Loss

Many foster parents spoke about a common misinterpretation that society holds regarding them; that they are somehow “hardened” as they know foster children will come and go from their lives and thus, they can only expect to experience loss over and over. Many simply feel that this isn’t true, and this module helped them to accept that it’s normal to grieve as a foster parent despite knowing that loss will occur:

“It was freeing to see it acknowledged that what we experience is not less intense because we “choose” to enter into a situation that will most likely involving grieving at some point. I liked that one lady’s response that when people say that they could never do it, it is a choice not an indication that somehow we are less caring or loving or...”

“One of the main misconceptions I noticed were when people say that we as foster parents know what’s to be expected. Yes in theory we do know what to expect. What we don’t expect is how whole heartedly we completely fall in love with these children. How we have to deal with our own heart breaking at the same time as putting on a brave face for the child.”

“Misconceptions are that foster parents hearts are made of steel. We feel sadness and pain when a child moves on, it is not something we wish for, but it is part of our role. We do it for the kids and when a child arrives we all know deep down that one day will have to leave. When this happens, we grieve.”

“The acceptance in experiencing grief despite the fact that reunification is usually the goal of foster care. We tend to feel guilty for grieving when a child leaves our home because we know our role is temporary and reunification is “success”.”

Also, while many parents mentioned that they were familiar with the stages of grief, they found this module reassuring in the emphasizing some practical take-away messages in terms of support:

- To be mindful of grief ‘triggers’ and prepare for those times (ex. birthdays, anniversaries, etc.)
- To build up and reach out to a strong support network, particularly other foster parents who have shared similar experiences

(iv) Suggestions for Improvement

Foster parents provided us with some excellent feedback regarding ways that the course could be improved. These focused most commonly on four areas:

(a) An opportunity for discussion

Foster parents overwhelmingly indicated that they appreciated the online format of the course. However, many reported that they would like to have the opportunity for

discussion with other foster parents regarding the concepts that were presented in the modules. In terms of the format of this, carers mentioned that anything from online chats or discussion boards, to phone calls with a 'buddy', to bi-weekly group drop-ins were suggested. One foster parent in particular mentioned a system that they created:

“Another foster home and I actually got on the phone and we did it together... And then what we found is when we were talking about something, it helped. So you were asking is there any negatives of the online, I would say that would be the only part. I would like to discuss some of the things that were stated.”

(b) Materials for Future Reference

Foster parents also mentioned that the course experience could be made better if they could have a take-away resource that would help them refer to module concepts in the future. Because foster parents were asked to email their notes and reflections into us, they didn't have a record of these learnings. Also, they found it difficult to go back through the modules once they were started.

(c) Applicability of Training

Many foster parents reported that the training may be more applicable to newer foster parents, or foster parents who are fostering children beyond the infant and toddler stage. Thus, they suggested that fostering agencies perhaps screen who would best benefit from taking this module.

On the other hand, many foster parents also indicated they were aware of much of this information, as they had been fostering for many years and much of it was covered in their PRIDE training. However, they did indicate that it was a good refresher. As such, more experienced foster parents suggested that the modules focus less on theory and contextual information, and focus more on practical strategies.

(d) Focus Scope

Many parents noted that the modules focused on the foster parents much more than their actual foster children. We absolutely acknowledge the needs of the foster children and that this is an important area for foster parents to grow and develop in. However, much of the training that is available today focuses on the children, while very little exists for the needs of the foster parents themselves. We all have needs and it is important to make sure that our needs as carers are being met so that we can stay healthy and care for our children in the best way possible. It is very difficult to care for others, when we are feeling burnt out and thus, not able to take care of ourselves first. It also models healthy behaviour to our children by sending them the message that they need to focus on keeping themselves healthy rather than putting themselves and their own needs last. Because our initial study results found that foster parents were stressed

and burnt out, we decided to focus the scope of this course on the needs of foster parents themselves.

Conclusions

Previous research has indicated that there is a shortage of foster parents throughout Canada. Positive developmental outcomes have been observed for foster children placed in the care of these parents. Our findings from the first phase of this project indicate that many Canadian foster parents are feeling stressed in their roles as carers, and have thought about resigning. We set out to build on these learnings to develop a resource that can focus specifically on the needs of foster parents, and as such, support them in this important role.

Foster parents across southwestern Ontario took the time to complete our pilot phase of this four-module online course. During this time they completed modules on building strong fostering foundations, mastering effective communication strategies, unpacking their children's behaviour, and processing foster parent grief and loss. During completion of these modules, parents provided us with notes on their learning and reflections. A member of the research team also followed up with parents via telephone to expand further on their impressions of the course and thoughts on feedback.

Overall, feedback was very positive with almost all parents taking something helpful away from the course. Some parents indicated this course would be more beneficial for beginner foster parents, or parents who foster children older than the infant and toddler stage. However, they still found it to be a good 'refresher'. Also, some parents indicated that they would like the opportunity to debrief about their thoughts from the modules, whether that is in the form of an online discussion forum, or meeting with an in-person, drop in group from time to time.

As can be seen from the feedback shared in this report, foster parents have provided us with some very valuable information regarding the online modules. Our research team is very appreciative of the time that they have taken to complete the modules and provide us with this feedback. We will be incorporating these insights to the best of our ability to make this resource into something that can be even more helpful to the health and wellbeing of these valued carers.

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