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# Recognising Birth Children as Social Actors in the Foster-Care Process: Retrospective Accounts from Biological Children of Foster-Carers in Ireland

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## Abstract

While a wealth of literature exists on the topic of fostering, limited research has been published on the experiences of the biological children of foster-carers (Younes and Harp, 2007; Sutton and Stack, 2013). Literature that exists identifies increased recognition of the importance of birth children's contribution to successful foster-care placements and the prevention of placement breakdown (Kalland and Sinkkonen, 2001; Hojer *et al.*, 2013). This paper reports findings from an interpretivist study that explored the retrospective experiences of fifteen adult birth children of foster-carers (aged between eighteen and twenty-eight years) in Ireland. Using semi-structured interviews, birth children's experiences of fostering processes and their interactions with fostering professionals are explored. Findings indicate that birth children are not passive observers in how fostering influences their daily lives. Instead they use strategies to influence fostering processes, in particular to protect their parents and birth siblings, while also having feelings of responsibility for their foster siblings. Findings suggest that, despite the complexity of the fostering task, professionals should recognise and acknowledge the input of birth children to fostering. The study also suggests the value of training that encourages foster-carers to continually include the opinions of their own children in fostering decisions.

**Keywords:** foster-care, birth children of foster-carers, agency, social work, recognition

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## Introduction

Ireland has witnessed a 35.8 per cent increase in the use of foster-care placements over the last fifteen years. In 2000, there were 5,517 children in state care, with 66.3 per cent (3,657) of those being placed in foster-care. By 2014, the number of children in foster-care rose to 5,998, representing 92.8 per cent of children in state care (Tusla, 2014). This increased preference for foster-care over residential care in Irish child-care policy can be attributed to a number of factors, including increased scandals surrounding residential care services, higher costs associated with the provision of residential care and increased preference for the use of substitute family care as more nurturing placements for children (McHugh and Meenan, 2013).

Although research on the topic of fostering has grown in recent years, particularly in relation to the experiences of foster-carers (Hojer, 2004; Staines *et al.*, 2011) and foster children (Selwyn *et al.*, 2010; Goodyer, 2011), in comparison, relatively little is known about the experiences of the birth children in foster families (Sutton and Stack, 2013). Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs (2005, p. 7) identify foster-care as a complex and diverse activity involving 'families of different culture composition, commitment and skills delivering care to children who vary in background, age, temperament and willingness to be fostered'. This complexity is heightened by the fact that fostering involves the interests of a number of different stakeholders. Although the research reported in this paper focuses primarily on the views of birth children about their experiences of fostering, it must be acknowledged that there are other parties involved in the process, namely foster children, foster-carers and social workers, who may hold different perspectives and experiences.

## Literature review

Initial literature capturing the experiences of the birth children in foster families can be traced to the early 1970s with the works of Ellis (1972) and Wilkes (1974). However, their research was from the perspective of foster-carers, exploring their views on the impact of fostering on the lives of their own children.

Later studies conducted in the 1990s and 2000s explored the perspectives of the biological children directly (Part, 1993; Pugh, 1996; Watson and Jones, 2002). This growth in research involving the birth children can be traced to increased recognition of their contribution to the fostering process (Hojer, 2007; Thompson and McPherson, 2011). Research also suggests that foster-carers hold concerns about the effects of fostering on

their own children (Poland and Groze, 1993; Hojer *et al.*, 2013), with judgement of negative impacts leading to an increased risk of placement breakdown (Quinton *et al.*, 1998; Kalland and Sinkonnen, 2001).

Martin (1993) and Hojer (2007) stress the importance of hearing the voices of birth children, as it is the family who fosters, not just foster-carers. Hojer *et al.* (2013) also argue that allowing birth children opportunities to share their viewpoints helps them adapt to the changes that fostering brings to their lives, as well as helping them understand some of the challenges related to fostering, such as foster children displaying difficult behaviour (Spears and Cross, 2003). Having such information helps birth children understand the causes of such behaviour and subsequently they may build better relationships with foster children (Hojer and Nordenfors, 2004; Younes and Harp, 2007).

Twigg and Swan (2007) highlight the relevance of the fostering agency, recognising the role played by biological children as well as the relationship of birth children with social workers as impacting on the birth children's experiences. However, Hojer (2007) suggests that social workers tend not to pay too much attention to birth children, as foster-carers tend to be recognised as reliable and skilled parents, thus it is assumed that their children will be capable of coping with the demands of fostering. Twigg and Swan (2007), in their review of the literature, consider two key topics of relevance when analysing birth children's experiences of fostering professionals, namely the nature of the relationship of birth children with social workers and the fostering agency's recognition of the role played by the biological children in fostering.

## Relationship with social workers

Focusing on foster-carers' own children, Nuske (2004) discovered that, of the twenty-two birth children she interviewed, eighteen never had contact with social workers. Of the 122 respondents in Watson and Jones's (2002) survey, only thirty-seven identified social workers who had engaged with them and taken their views into account. From interviews with twenty birth children of foster-carers aged between eight and eighteen years, Spears and Cross (2003) concluded that many of the negative experiences revealed by the birth children in foster families could be minimised by the introduction of better preparation, support and communication between the foster family and the foster-care agency. Philpot (2002) emphasises the need for open communication between all parties in the foster-care process, as it helps birth children cope with some of the demands of fostering such as having to share parental time and attention (Watson and Jones, 2002).

The issue of communication is also raised in research examining foster children and foster parents' experiences of the care system. Randle

(2013, p. 10), in her Australian study of eleven ex-foster children aged between eighteen and twenty-eight years, found that participants emphasised the importance of being listened to by their carers and caseworkers and ‘that they had some say in decisions affecting their lives’. Other research emphasises the importance of foster children feeling a sense of belonging and being included in the daily practices of the foster family (Goodyer, 2011; Biehal, 2014). Foster-carers in Irwin’s (2009) Irish study expressed frustration at the poor communication between themselves and social workers, particularly in matters related to information sharing and care planning. Murray, Tarren-Sweeney and Frances (2011), in their interviews with seventeen foster-carers in New Zealand, also found that foster-carers’ engagement with social workers was impeded by communication difficulties and exclusion of carers from the decision-making process. However, the complexity of the social work task, which involves a duty of care not only to the children in foster-care, but also to the foster-carers who provide the day-to-day care to foster children (Cosis Brown *et al.*, 2014), must be recognised as well as the risk or stress and burnout (Arrington, 2008; Travis *et al.*, 2016).

### Lack of recognition by the foster-care system

Corresponding with the lack of recognition by social workers are birth children’s beliefs that the foster-care agency does not recognise their inputs, who perhaps expect that this contribution will be acknowledged by their parents. Twigg and Swan (2007) contend that birth children of foster-carers wish not only to have their contribution recognised within the foster-care system, but to be valued as important elements of caring teams for foster children.

Walsh and Campbell (2010, p. 13) argue that voices of birth children are often left unheard due to the limited reference made to the needs of birth children in policy documents and, when mentioned, it is ‘often implicitly in language such as foster family’. For the birth children of fostering families, an important wish is for fostering agencies to recognise fostering as including the foster family, not just foster parents (Twigg and Swan, 2007). This lack of recognition of the birth children of foster-carers might be attributed in part to the fact that young people are seen as part of the family and not as individuals in their own right (Brannen *et al.*, 2000).

### Summary

Literature identifies foster-care as a diverse process which involves differing and sometimes competing needs for the key parties involved. Foster-carers often seem frustrated by the lack of communication with

social workers who themselves are under considerable pressure to ensure secure and stable placements for children amidst large caseloads. It is significant that both foster children and birth children of foster-carers highlight the importance of being listened to and acknowledged by carers and professionals in decisions that affect their lives.

While existing research documenting the experiences of birth children in foster families has tended to focus on the impact of fostering on the lives of foster-carers' own children, little is known about birth children's views on how they are consulted and included by fostering professionals in decisions related to fostering or, in turn, how birth children attempt to influence fostering processes.

The findings reported in this paper are part of a larger doctoral study that examined other factors, such as the influence of foster-care on the lives of birth children in foster families, as well as an exploration of their training and support needs. This paper focuses on the findings related to two research questions:

1. What are birth children's experiences of being included and consulted by fostering professionals in relation to the fostering task? In the interviews, participants were first asked an open-ended question: 'Can you tell me about your experiences of fostering professionals since your families began fostering?' The interviewees were then asked to discuss their experiences of being included by fostering professionals on issues related to their families fostering. Participants were not prompted other than to clarify points in order to capture their experiences of being recognised and included by fostering professionals.
2. How do birth children attempt to influence and impact upon the foster-care process? The interviewees were also asked to describe how they expressed their opinions about fostering decisions that occurred in their families. Again, the participants were not prompted only to clarify points in order to capture the ways used by birth children to influence fostering decisions and processes.

## **Method**

### **Design**

As the aim was to capture the experiences of participants, an interpretivist approach was used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen adult birth children of foster-carers (twelve females and three males). This data collection method was used as it allowed flexibility in exploring the participants' experiences, but at the same time provided a degree of structure to generate data to address the research questions

**Table 1** Profile of research participants

Interviewees	Age	Age of interviewees when families began fostering	Approximate number of children fostered by family
Interviewee 1	22	13	15
Interviewee 2	24	14	1
Interviewee 3	19	11	25
Interviewee 4	23	Fostering before interviewee was born	60
Interviewee 5	28	8	30
Interviewee 6	18	13	3
Interviewee 7	27	7	15
Interviewee 8	21	5	46
Interviewee 9	26	10	35
Interviewee 10	27	13	13
Interviewee 11	18	9	13
Interviewee 12	23	12	9
Interviewee 13	24	8	19
Interviewee 14	27	7	24
Interviewee 15	23	12	46

The pseudonyms assigned to participants in the findings section have not been included here, for anonymity purposes.

stated above. The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed for thematic analysis.

## Participants

The age criteria set for the study was between eighteen and thirty years to ensure that participants' experiences were relatively recent; however, as can be seen from [Table 1](#), the participants who volunteered for the study were aged between eighteen and twenty-eight years, with a mean age of 23.33 years and standard deviation of 3.31 years. An advertisement inviting eligible participants to volunteer for the study was displayed through a variety of avenues to access a relevant sample, such as in a newsletter published by the Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA is a representative body that promotes the use of foster-care as the best form of substitute care for children in Ireland) and an annual conference organised by the IFCA. Participants were also recruited through professional acquaintances known to the researcher. Sixteen participants initially volunteered but one withdrew prior to data collection for personal reasons.

## A retrospective study

Adopting a retrospective approach was based on several factors, primarily the concern that interviewing children under the age of eighteen still

involved in their family fostering might upset the family dynamic. The researcher was also conscious that interviewing participants under eighteen years of age would require the receipt of consent from their parents, which may have influenced the interviewees' ability or willingness to speak openly about their experiences. As a retrospective study, participants were being interviewed on past experiences and thus were being asked to share their perspective based on reflection and memory recall. Therefore, it is possible that participants' perspectives were influenced by subsequent learning, as they reflected on their childhood experiences with a degree of maturity that they may not have had as children.

It is also important to acknowledge that, in some cases, there was a ten-year age gap between individuals, thus some participants were reflecting on experiences over a greater time period than others. From the analysis of data, the age range of the participants did not seem to influence the findings, although younger participants placed more emphasis on the importance of being acknowledged for the contribution they make to fostering while older participants placed importance on birth children being included in decision-making processes related to fostering. In the interpretation of the findings, this perhaps indicates that older participants may have been reflecting on their experiences from their current viewpoint. However, in line with the interpretivist research approach adopted for this study, the views of the participants were accepted as being real to them (Bryman, 2012).

## Ethics

The study received ethical approval from the Social Research Ethics Committee at University College Cork. Upon contacting the researcher, participants were given further details of the study through an information sheet and a consent form. At the interview, the information sheet and consent form were revisited with each participant, reminding them of their right to confidentiality and anonymity. Full interview transcripts were seen only by the researcher and the interviewees were provided with pseudonyms for anonymity purposes. The interviewees were offered a copy of their transcript and informed they could delete anything they did not want included in the analysis. Seven of the participants requested copies of their transcripts but none requested deletions.

## Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis was used. This involved the researcher firstly becoming familiar with the data through reading and re-reading the data and noting down initial ideas.



Initial codes were then generated across the data-set and then collated into potential themes. Themes were then reviewed in relation to the coded extracts to generate a map of the themes. Finally, through further analysis, themes were refined and named, with extract examples being analysed in relation to the research questions and existing literature. For example, after multiple readings, data codes were generated across the data-set in relation to participants' contact with social workers. The codes were then collated into potential themes. These themes were subsequently refined, named and further analysed in relation to existing literature and the key research questions posed by the study. This led to the identification of three key themes relevant to this study, namely acknowledgement of birth children by social workers, consultation with birth children in foster families, and birth children as advocates and support figures. As the findings presented here were part of a doctoral study, data analysis was done solely by the researcher but was discussed in great detail throughout the process with the researcher's two doctoral supervisors.

## **Findings**

The findings reported here focus on the participants' experiences of being included and consulted by fostering professionals in the fostering decision-making process and how birth children attempt to influence fostering practices and processes.

### **Acknowledgement of birth children by social workers**

All the birth children identified themselves as active participants in the fostering process, as they undertook a number of duties in caring for foster children, including babysitting, changing nappies and accompanying foster children to school or family access visits. Twelve of the interviewees identified themselves as not being acknowledged or recognised for the contribution they made to the foster-care task by fostering social workers or the fostering agency.

Rebecca explained that, in her experience, the views and needs of birth children in foster families were not on the radar of social workers: 'I mean the social worker comes and she speaks to my Mam and she leaves. I'd be surprised if she even knew how old I was. She is just so unaware of me and my siblings.'

Several participants expressed frustration that social workers did not even remember their names during social work visits to their families:

At one stage, the fostering social worker called to the door and I answered and she went 'Oh hello (looked down at her page and read my

name), [name of interviewee]'. She was working it out from her notes who I was. She didn't know who I was. I think for her, there was not a value in what I did or what I had to offer (Tracey).

Avril also stated that social workers did not include her in the fostering element of her family's life and suggested this was because of resource issues, as 'social workers are expected to focus on the foster child and the foster parents'. A minority of participants, however, described more positive experiences of being acknowledged and consulted by social workers:

Our family had a social worker. I found her to be really helpful and when we first started she would come over and talk and I used to look forward to talking to her. Then it got less and less as time went on, I didn't need it as much (Keith).

Many of the participants in this study referred to what they viewed as a 'good social worker' and what they viewed as a 'poor social worker'. Common traits attributed to 'good social workers' included those who were available, particularly in a crisis, were able to relate well to both adults and children, were approachable and took time to get to know the birth children of foster-carers: 'Two social workers really stood out as good because, they would always have a chat with you and ask how's it going? Even if they saw you down the street they would say hello' (Martina).

This indicates the importance to birth children of fostering social workers acknowledging the role played by all family members in the fostering task, not just foster parents. It was also evident from the data that some birth children wished not only to be acknowledged for their contributions to fostering, but also to be consulted about fostering decisions.

## Consultation with birth children in foster families

Interviewees stressed the importance of social workers taking the time to create opportunities to talk to the birth children, as they can provide insight into the experiences and needs of foster children:

Social workers should be conscious that the biological children have a voice and they sometimes know more of what is going on with the foster kids than the foster parents. You're a similar age to them so they might talk to you, listen and realise that birth children know a lot more than they let on (Tony).

Six participants discussed incidents when foster children had disclosed that they had been physically and/or sexually abused before moving to foster-care. This happened during play times and is indicative of the significant role played by birth children to fostering. Interviewees believed that foster children disclosed these experiences as it is often easier for children to speak to other children. The participants explained that social workers did not discuss this matter with the birth children themselves and managed the issue through liaising with foster parents.

This supports the argument of [Walsh and Campbell \(2010\)](#), who attributed the lack of recognition of the birth children of foster-carers to the fact that they were seen as a part of the family and not as individuals in their own right. A number of participants reiterated this, stating that, as birth children in foster families, they had no rights or no voice. Other interviewees, however, had a different perspective, as they believed that social workers were under pressure due to their high caseloads. Some suggested that heavy caseloads and large volumes of report writing meant that social workers did not have time to appreciate the contribution birth children made towards the fostering task. However, the frustration at not being included results in birth children identifying social workers as an unreliable avenue to access information or support:

I wouldn't have known who the best person to talk to was. It would have helped if you could ring up and ask a simple question about fostering or talk to someone. The social worker's case load is too big and they don't have the time (Karen).

Participants showed appreciation of the complexity of some of the issues arising from fostering, such as matters related to disclosures of abuse, and were aware that they were not the primary foster-carer:

I think there is a delicate line because I'm not promoting that young people become professional foster carers. But the needs and opinions of children who foster should be on the radar of professionals and it should be emphasised to the professionals (Tracey).

[Watson and Jones \(2002\)](#) and [Walsh and Campbell \(2010\)](#) have previously reported on the frustrations felt by older birth children at not being afforded the opportunity to have their opinions or perspectives heard at case reviews. This resonates with the viewpoints of the majority of participants interviewed in this study. A finding that is absent from existing literature was the role played by older birth children in foster families in advocating for their parents, particularly in relation to dealings with social workers.

## Birth children as advocates and support figures

Birth children spoke about their attempts to influence foster-care policy and practice in order to protect and advocate for their parents and, in some cases, their birth siblings. Interviewees explained that, as they became older teenagers, they were frustrated at decisions made by social workers and the lack of support given to their parents, in particular their mothers, and their distrust that social workers had the best interests of the family in mind:

I don't trust social workers. They only tell you enough to get a placement. Their only interest is in the foster child and not in what it

could do to the family. I wanted to be at meetings to be a support for my Mam (Avril).

Several mentioned that social workers arranged meetings or reviews during the day so foster fathers were usually in work and could not attend. This meant foster mothers took the primary role in relation to fostering. Martina revealed that, as an older teenager, she took more interest in the fostering task in order 'to be a support to Mam because Dad was at work'.

The importance of advocating for parents was spoken about in relation to their parents' viewing the social workers as the professionals and being fearful of the consequences of refusing their requests. As birth children, the participants felt that the social workers had no power over them. These interviewees explained that social workers did not seem pleased that they requested to attend meetings with their mothers. Martina recalled the first time she attended a meeting with her mother and a social worker, when a foster child was bullying her younger birth sibling, leading to her birth sibling moving to a relative's house for a period of time:

The social worker asked what I was doing there and said that I could go now 'I just want to talk to your Mam. It's private information, we're going to be talking about your sister and the foster child'. I said 'I live in this house and I have been living with this issue for the last six years, so I think I have the right to be here' (Martina).

When asked why they thought social workers were reluctant to have them sit in on meetings, two suggestions were proposed. Some believed that social workers did not like it when birth children were standing up for their mothers in meetings:

Even sitting in a care plan and you'd say something, but your opinion wouldn't matter. But because of college I have the theoretical knowledge, I went, 'hold on there' and pointed out things they weren't doing. You kind of feel they don't want to know who you are, you're not heard. So many times I've been told 'it's none of your business' (Gwen).

Alternatively, Winnie suggested that social workers were reluctant to let her attend meetings and case reviews because it was a new request and a bit 'outside the box'. She felt that social workers were so focused on following procedures that 'they're not very open minded or flexible to new situations'.

As well as supporting their parents, several participants highlighted how they provided support to their younger birth siblings. Their willingness to do this was explained as being due to the ability to empathise, as they understood the impact of fostering demands: 'Sometimes I take my younger birth sister to McDonalds just to give her space to talk about some of the issues arising for her from fostering' (Greta).

As foster children could come and go, many participants emphasised the importance of their families having private time for themselves to protect their family bond:

I'd come home from school, a kid would be gone and a new one would be there. That happened several times, I went on holiday once when I was 15, one of my foster sisters left and we had a new kid in the house. I was like to Mam, 'who's the stranger in the house?' and she was like, 'oh ye the other kid we had left, and a new girl came' (Rebecca).

Participants stressed the importance for families being given some time to heal and recover, particularly after difficult placement breakdowns. Mary stated: 'I think after a tough time or placement, take a break for yourselves, I think just talk about it.' Keith explained he had disagreements with his parents, as he felt they were taking on too much in providing a placement for another foster child: 'I remember saying on a few occasions when my Mam wanted to take another foster child "this is a bad idea, you're not going to be able for this". It was taking a toll on my mother'.

This was an issue raised by other participants, who felt that social workers were just focused on finding placements for foster children. Greta proposed that social workers became too focused on finding placements for foster children and forgot about the demands on foster families. This was reiterated by John, who stated that, despite the challenging behaviour presented by some of the foster children who lived in his parent's house, 'social workers just keeping bringing kids in'.

Rather than expressing jealousy of their foster siblings, some participants expressed a significant responsibility towards them, particularly as their parents aged: 'At that stage [twenty-one years old] I was thinking, Mum is getting old and I should think about training as a foster carer in case anything should ever happen to her.'

Seven interviewees spoke about uneasiness for the well-being of their parents as they aged. They explained that their parents were aged in their late fifties and sixties and yet were caring for young children who displayed challenging behaviour. This indicated the sense of responsibility felt by some birth children to both foster children and their parents after they have left the family home. Previous research and literature (Swan, 2002; Twigg and Swan, 2007; Thompson and McPherson, 2011; Sutton and Stack, 2013) have outlined the sense of responsibility felt by birth children in caring for both foster children and their parents. This research reveals that this sense of responsibility continued even after birth children have grown up and often moved out of the family home.

In conclusion, the participants presented themselves as active in the fostering process, both in the direct care of their foster siblings and as a support and advocate for their parents. Due to their position, they expressed the need for them to be at least acknowledged by fostering professionals,

if not consulted. Poor relationships with social workers leading to mistrust of them as sources of information and support as well as perceptions of social workers holding power over their parents are of particular concern. This poses questions with regard to how a fostering placement can function in the best interest of the foster child if key parties involved in the process interact with each other with a degree of fear or mistrust. This study also highlights that social workers may struggle to recognise and integrate the views and opinions of birth children due to the diversity of the process or guidelines and policies.

## Limitations

This paper highlights the value of gathering the perspectives of adult birth children of foster-carers; however, the possible limitations of the data sample should be acknowledged. The participants' interviews were based on past experiences and thus they were asked to reflect and call upon memories of particular events as the birth children of foster-carers. Therefore, it is possible that the participants' views were influenced by their subsequent experiences or learning. The sample is a volunteer sample and, hence, susceptible to sample bias, with some participants possibly volunteering to partake in the study to voice their frustrations with the foster-care system. However, as mentioned previously, the findings presented here were part of a broader study exploring the experiences of foster-carers' own children and it should be noted that participants also discussed positive elements of fostering, such as it making them more caring and non-judgemental individuals as they grew into adulthood.

The sample size must also be considered. However, while the findings cannot be deemed to be representative of the wider population of birth children of foster-carers, there is evident similarity between the findings with those of other studies.

## Discussion

As highlighted by the findings here and in other literature (Twigg and Swan, 2007; Hojer *et al.*, 2013), birth children are potential active caregivers so, for placements to be successful, birth children must feel included and informed. However, participants' accounts indicate that there was little formal recognition of their contribution from practitioners and agencies in the fostering system. The findings could be considered to go beyond Berridge's (1997, p. 65) argument that 'children and young people are important members of successful caring teams and their contribution and experiences should be more formally acknowledged', as the birth children interviewed also saw their role as advocating for birth

siblings, foster children and foster parents. Moreover, some participants argued that birth children should be more central to the decision-making process, as they perform an important role within the foster-care process.

As mentioned previously, foster-care is a complex task, with the management of placements often being a careful negotiation between the needs of different stakeholders. Therefore, including birth children more formally in decision making may be somewhat unrealistic. Placing an excessive burden on children who may not be able for or wish for such an inclusion as well as the pressure under which social workers already work must be considered. Notwithstanding this, the findings here send a clear message to social workers and social work managers that helping birth children feel included in the fostering process need not be resource-intensive. For example, simple things like noting birth children's names and taking the time to talk to them could make a difference to birth children not only feeling appreciated, but trusting the social workers as partners in the fostering process.

When birth children do not get the support they need, it can be a contributory factor to the breakdown of foster placements and, in some families, ceasing fostering altogether (Quinton *et al.*, 1998; Triseliotis *et al.*, 1998; Kalland and Sinkonnen, 2001). This in turn leads to more instability for fostered children. As indicated in the findings, birth children may be the recipients of foster children's disclosures about abuse in their past. When this is considered in tandem with birth children's desire to protect their parents, it could suggest that an open and trusting relationship with social workers is essential so this information is passed on.

The findings highlight that biological children play an important role in the delivery of foster-care services, as they can influence both family and professional practices. The most common area in which the birth children attempted to influence family practices in reconfiguring private family time to protect the essence and integrity of their family. This desire for protecting family time was particularly related to periods after difficult placements had ended by birth children requesting their parents not accept new foster children immediately. These requests were motivated by birth children's wishes to protect their parents after witnessing the challenges they had faced during difficult placements and to allow the family time recuperate before accepting a new foster child.

It should be acknowledged that the issue of protected family time is complicated given the needs of all parties involved in fostering. As pointed out by Goodyer (2011) and Randle (2013), a key issue for foster children is feeling a sense of belonging in the foster family. This proposes the importance of foster-carers being cognisant of balancing their parenting time and considering the views of their own children

before agreeing to new placements, particularly if the family have experienced a previously difficult placement ending with a foster child.

## Conclusion

Foster-care is a diverse activity involving efforts from a range of parties. This study highlights the active role birth children play in the fostering task through both undertaking practical duties in caring for foster children and acting as an important form of support to their parents and younger birth siblings. The importance of birth children being recognised and acknowledged for the contribution they make to their families fostering is evident. In particular is the need for professionals to appreciate the importance of open communication and developing a trusting relationship with all parties involved in the fostering process.

However, it is also important to ensure that birth children are not over-burdened with fostering duties and adult responsibility. Birth children in foster families may not wish to have the powers or responsibilities of foster-carers, but yet to be appreciated for the part they play. While the high caseloads already placed on social workers undoubtedly limit the amount of support they can directly provide to birth children, social workers can acknowledge birth children's input to their families' fostering in less resource-intensive ways.

The findings of this study and other research (Swan, 2002; Hojer *et al.*, 2013) also suggest the importance of foster-carers frequently linking in with their own children, in relation to how fostering decisions are impacting upon their lives throughout the fostering process. Foster-carers should be reminded, in their assessment and training, of the need to be continually aware of the needs of all the children in the family and not just assume that their own children will be content with decisions being made. The benefits for the family to sometimes have a break from fostering, particularly after difficult placements, should also be emphasised during training.

Other initiatives that openly recognise the contribution made by foster-carers' own children to fostering might also be explored within the Irish foster-care system. For example, in the UK, the Fostering Network has initiated an event called 'A Sons and Daughters Week', which celebrates the role played by birth children in the foster-care process. This could be a valuable initiative if employed within the Irish context by fostering agencies or an organisation such as the IFCA.



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