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Deborah C. Browne
University of Leicester

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An Evaluation of Foster Parents' Attitudes Towards Birth Parents

Dr. Deborah C. Browne,

Centre for Applied Psychology (Forensic Section), 6 University Road,

University of Leicester, Leicester LE1 7RB, UK.

e-mail: dcb11@le.ac.uk

Abstract:

Although foster care involves many different relationships that have been examined for many years, few researchers have paid attention to the relationship that must inevitably develop between the foster parents and the child's birth parents. Foster parents have, nonetheless, been noted to express negative feelings about the behaviour of the foster child's natural family. This may have negative effects on the development of the child's self esteem and on the outcome of the entire placement.

The current paper illustrates how the foster parents of 127 placements in Cork city described the birth parents of their foster children. Although 38% of placements were with parents who expressed some degree of sympathy for the birth parents, the attitude was generally more negative. This was true even of foster parents who never met the child. Parents also reported that they experienced various problems with the natural parents. These included concerns over the care that was taken of the child, that the natural parents were untrustworthy, and that the child would not be released for adoption. Examples of the statements that were made are offered, and some cases are described to help illustrate the frustration that some foster parents felt. It was found that one of the most emotive issues was that of adoption. Many foster parents felt upset when the birth parents refused to release the foster child for adoption. The implications of these poor relationships are discussed in relation to the need for more resources for health boards, and more support for foster parents and natural parents.

Keywords: Foster parent, birth parents, foster care, adoption.

Introduction

Foster care can often be a difficult process, as it involves so many dynamic interactions between various individuals. These interactions have been given a certain amount of interest over the years by child-care researchers, but one relationship has not been given the precedence it perhaps deserves. This relationship is the one that exists between the child's birth parents and his or her foster family. Despite the deficiency of attention this remains an important relationship, and the success of a placement may even depend on how both sets of parents conduct themselves. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to contribute further to the existing literature by looking at the problem in more detail.

On balance, it is not difficult to understand why the relationship between foster parents and natural parents is a fractious one. Foster parents may easily develop negative feelings about birth parents, who are seen as intrusive or even abusive (e.g. Corser and Furnell, 1992; Kufeldt and Allison, 1990; Triseliotis, 1989). Very often hostile feelings develop after the foster parents become quite fond of their foster child, to whom they feel the natural parents have been cruel or unjust. Similarly, natural parents can feel hostile and jealous of the relationship forged between their child and the host family. These feelings of hostility can have serious consequences on a placement. Baxter (1989), for example, found that one breakdown (out of a total of 24) in his study was directly attributed to a disagreement between foster parents and natural parents, and in at least 3 more cases a bad parent/foster parent relationship was a contributing factor (Baxter, 1989, p.11).

Poor relationships between foster parents and natural parents may affect the nature of contact between the child and his or her natural family (Oyserman and Benbeishty, 1992). On occasion children may be expected to meet their parents only at certain times or in certain places because of the uneasy affiliation that exists between their respective caretakers. Sometimes, however, contact visits themselves shape the attitudes of the foster family. Quinton, Ruston, Dance and Mayes (1998), for instance, found that foster parents reported that contact and/ or information from birth parents could be unsettling for the children. They also expressed concern about unrealistic promises that the parents made, and the distress experienced by children who did not receive anticipated visits. In many cases it may well be that incidences like these make foster parents more reluctant to encourage extra contact in the future.

The problem is quite complex, and there are many reasons why foster parents might develop negative attitudes towards their foster child's birth parents. This paper describes an Irish study that examined the attitudes of foster parents to the natural parents of their foster children. By asking parents to give accounts of their experiences, a rich

description of the emotions and concerns of the foster families emerged. These descriptions were analysed qualitatively to provide descriptive categories of the foster parents' attitudes and concerns.

Methodology

A number of foster parents from the Cork city region of Southern Health Board were approached to participate in a questionnaire study on various aspects of the time each child spent in their care. The only criterion for inclusion was that the families had fostered within a specified three-year period. To give due consideration to external validity it was important to try and ensure that the sample was representative of the population in general (Fernandez, 1996). The sample made up two community-care teams and one fostering project in Cork city. This ensured a wider spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds, as each area has a different economic emphasis. Every attempt was made to ensure that the eventual numbers from each community care area were as similar as possible. A small number of Irish health boards had attempted specialised fostering projects at the time of the study, and so including the project ensured representation of this aspect also.

Although the study was by postal questionnaire, foster parents were also given the opportunity to meet the researcher and to complete the questionnaire by interview if they wanted. A small number of families requested such a meeting. Replies were eventually received for well over 130 placements (response rate of nearly 60%), but a small number were omitted because of insufficient data. Data was eventually analysed for 127 foster placements, fostered by 78 families. The children in these placements ranged from birth to twenty years of age.

The questionnaire itself was designed to examine a variety of psychological issues that affect foster children. Questions, or derivations of them, that had been used in previous studies were included where possible (for example, Baxter, 1989; George, 1970; Johnson Mann, 1981). This procedure also served to enhance consensual validity (Fernandez, 1996, p.73). In answer to these questions, foster parents gave accounts of the issues that arose during the placement. These accounts were then analysed qualitatively.

Results

The information that foster parents offered was divided into meaningful segments of information, which were then grouped into conceptually similar categories. At this point every attempt was made to follow fairly closely the coding process described by Miles and Hubberman (1994). After the categories had been generated and named, each

questionnaire was assessed again in order to record on a data sheet whether the category was present or not. The reliability of the categories was tested using an independent assessor, who also coded each questionnaire. Unreliable categories (inter-rater score of less than 85%) were dropped from the study. The categories that related to the relationship with the natural parents of the child are discussed in this paper.

Attitudes towards the Natural Parents

Foster parents in this study had quite varying attitudes towards the natural parents. Although foster parents of children from 61 of the 127 placements had never met one or either of their foster child's birth parents, many of these also managed to develop feelings about them. The four main attitudes that were identified by the analysis are listed here (please note that these categories are *not* mutually exclusive. Any time a category appeared it was recorded, regardless of whether or not another attitudes had also been recorded).

1. Negative

Many foster parents seem to adopt a negative perception of the natural parents. Their reaction to them is disapproving and maybe even hostile. This was noticed even when they have never met any birth family members. Examples of statements that made up this category include:

"From what we have been told we don't think a whole pile of them."

"I feel angered by the fact that her mother has made no attempt to keep in contact with her."

"I don't know much about (child)'s parents, but from what little I do know I feel angry at the way they have abandoned their child."

"We also felt bitter towards them."

2. Indifferent

An apathetic and distant attitude was noted in some cases. For example:

"I don't have any real feelings for her."

"No feelings."

"I don't feel much for them."

3. Sympathetic

Some foster parents were very sympathetic to the situation that the natural parents found themselves in. Many expressed appreciation of the effort that the parents did make under difficult circumstances:

"We can understand how they were not able to cope with having a child with a disability as some people are not able to cope with this."

"We feel that his parents had a lot to cope with because there is a big family there...I understand it must be very painful and hurtful to put your own children into care."

4. Difficult to Relate to

Foster parents sometimes found the attitudes of the natural parents so different to their own that they found them difficult to understand and to talk to. This was sometimes expressed even when they were sympathetic to the natural parent's situation. These foster parents felt that the natural parents had such different lifestyles or such a different outlook that they had little in common with their own expectations for the child and the child's behaviour. For instance, one parent wrote:

"Father has different attitude towards goals for daughter."

In general it appeared that the attitude to the natural parents was less than positive. Foster parents found behaviour of natural parents objectionable in many cases, and had developed negative attitudes to them. These negative attitudes ranged from resentment to bitterness, but the most common sentiment seemed to be anger at the way their foster child had been treated when s/he was living with the natural family. Some of the negative attitudes may have been based on prejudice, though, which was pointed out by a number of social workers (e.g. one social worker commented that a foster mother *"holds a lot of prejudice towards travellers"*).

Table 1. Content Analysis Summary Table of Foster Parents' Attitude towards the Natural Parents.

Attitude	No. Cases Reported	% Cases Reported
Negative	53	42%
Indifferent	10	8%
Sympathetic	48	38%
Difficult to Relate to	17	13%

Table 1 highlights how frequently each category was noted. The highest frequency of response was for *Negative* attitudes. 53, or 42% of foster placements were with parents who had some negative feelings for their foster child's natural parents. Some of these

parents never met the birth parents, but they had formed negative opinions based on what they had been told, usually by the social worker (e.g.. *"We never met them, but from what we have been told we don't think a whole pile of them"*). 13% of placements were with foster parents who found the natural parents *Difficult to Relate to*. Only 10 parents indicated that they felt indifferent towards the birth parents.

A large number of foster parents (N=48) indicated that they felt sympathetic of the natural parents. Many of these also recognised that the natural parents were making an effort to get their lives together, or that they were trying to cope under very difficult circumstances.

Problems with the Natural Family During the Placement

Although the attitudes of foster parents was often preconceived and based on information obtained from the social worker or the child, many parents had various problems with the natural family that may possibly have shaped their opinions. These problems varied from foster parents who became extremely frustrated by natural parents who could not make up their mind about having the child adopted and annoyance at lavish gifts bestowed on the child during access visits. The problems were categorised as follows.

1. Unreliable/ Untrustworthy

Some foster parents felt that the natural parents could not be trusted or relied upon. Parents complained:

"The father was lying to (child) of his intentions of providing a home."

"They don't turn up when they say they will."

"I resent every time she promises him she's going to court to get custody of him, knowing it will never happen."

2. Insufficient care of Child

A number of parents expressed fears that the natural parents were not taking sufficient care of the child during access visits. For example a comment that appeared in various guises was:

"When they return from a visit they are filthy."

3. *Won't release Child for Adoption*

Some parents were annoyed that the natural family refused to release the child for adoption. Although not a very frequently occurring situation, this particular issue raised a lot of emotion. For example some parents wrote:

“I will never forget that day. We thought we might be getting him for adoption instead he was been taken away from us.”

“Just wish they would finalise the forms for the adoption.”

4. *Religion*

This category reflects a grievance that the natural family refused to allow the child to change to the same religion as the foster family.

“We are Church of Ireland and the mother insists that (child) remains Catholic.”

Some of the problems were aired over relatively minor issues, such as, for instance, when a natural parent returned or collected the child later than the agreed time during access, and so affected the routine of the foster family. Other grievances were more severe. One family had to have their phone number changed because of constant harassment; another felt the natural mother of her foster child followed the family to various venues such as to church or the doctor.

Table 2. Content Analysis Summary Table of Problems with Natural Family.

Problem	No. Cases Reported	% Cases Reported
Unreliable/ Untrustworthy	26	21%
Insufficient Care of Child	23	18%
Won't release Child for Adoption	12	10%
Religion	1	0.8%

Table 2 shows how often these categories were reported.

The category *Unreliable/ Untrustworthy* was reported more often than each of the others, by 21% of foster placements. Many foster families (18%) were also quite frustrated with the inadequate levels of care that some natural parents took of their children. 12 families found the wait for the child's release for adoption problematic,

which is a large enough number when it is remembered that the children were supposed to be in temporary care with these families. Only one family found the refusal to let the child change religion frustrating enough to become a problematic issue. This family, however, found this issue more frustrating than anything else, including the child's rather reclusive behaviour. The child in question was released for adoption and the foster parents had been approved as adoptive parents. On more than one occasion the child's religion caused them to postpone the adoption procedure.

The category that seemed to cause the most anguish, however, was *Won't Release Child for Adoption*. In this particular sample of children, 7 had been placed in foster care because the natural parents refused to allow adoption, and in another 4 cases an underage mother was having difficulties deciding whether to give the child up for adoption or not. There were many cases, therefore, where the foster parents could potentially become long-term adoptive parents. While it can be argued that placing such a child with prospective adoptive parents is really not in the child's best interest, these issues are nonetheless consequential to the foster families

Despite all these problems it must also be noted that many parents did not complain about problems or concerns they had about the natural family. Some of these did not have any contact with the natural family, but others may have been perfectly happy with the arrangement. It should be noted, however, that the categories are based on information given in accounts where the foster parent was asked to describe problems as they occurred to him/her. It would be interesting to see how many parents felt they had problems with these issues if they were suggested to them.

Discussion

The research described in the previous section revealed many important issues. This section will discuss these in more detail.

Attitudes and Concerns

While 38% of placements made comments that were sympathetic, most foster parents were not as tolerant. It may be necessary to counsel foster parents on the difficulties that the natural parents have undergone, or at the very least on the possible negative consequences of speaking in a derogatory manner about the natural parents. It should be remembered that Bowlby (1965) noted that children could passionately defend parents that other adults condemn. Removal from an offending parent may actually lead to romantic idealisation of the parent and Bowlby (1965) reckoned the only way of adequately dealing with the problem was to talk to the child and let the child express unvented feelings in relation to how s/he had been treated. The child must realise that

s/he will not be condemned for loving his or her mother and that s/he does not need to defend the parent(s) from other people. It is unlikely that these foster parents received much guidance on these issues, which could be potentially damaging. It will be recalled that the category 'Negative Attitude' consisted of many different emotions including bitterness, anger and scorn. It must be difficult for any parent to disguise these emotions, especially without the benefit of regular support.

Additionally when older children come into foster care it is likely that they will have developed strong ties to their birth parents. It is generally considered to be important that these children continue to maintain contact with their parents, especially if it is planned that they should return to them. Contact can be inhibited by the foster parents, who are often concerned about some aspects of the experience (e.g. Quinton et al, 1998). In the current study it was revealed that these concerns may relate to how the child was treated, unrealistic promises that were made to the child, and when parents failed to turn up at visits. These are very similar to the problems reported in previous studies (e.g. Quinton et al, 1998). Ideally each of these problems would be carefully monitored by the family's social worker, who would be in a position to offer advice and support when it is needed. The reality is, however, that social workers have such heavy caseloads (especially here in Ireland) that this is an unrealistic expectation. Because social workers are difficult to get in contact with, foster parents are too often left in a position where they are coping by themselves or with minimal support. Policy makers need to realise that providing the resources to deal with small issues at this point may very well lead to bigger savings later on, with fewer breakdowns and failed placements.

Adoption

One of the most emotive issues that foster parents raised was their frustration with the natural parents who would not release their children for adoption. Unfortunately many parents seemed to feel that because they had been passed for adoption they had more rights to the child than the natural parents (e.g. *"I pray that she would get the courage to give him up for adoption and we would get him then because we were passed for adoption"*). These situations are notoriously difficult. It is probably impossible to expect foster parents *not* to become attached to their small charges, but allowing them to think that foster care can be used as a back door to adoption (as is actually advocated by Davenport, 1989, who is herself a foster parent who has adopted children) can probably lead to stressful and frustrating situations for all involved.

A very distressing example in the present study involved a family who could not have children of their own. Although they had been passed for adoption, they had a long wait because of the shortage of babies becoming available in recent years. In the interim they

decided to foster. One of their first foster children was baby "Roy" (name and minor details changed for anonymity), who was only a couple of months old when he was first placed in care. Roy's natural mother was very young, single and very confused about what she wanted for herself and her child. She continued to be involved in his life, despite the growing resentment of the foster parents, who had begun to hope he would be released for adoption. To the parents' delight Roy's mother eventually agreed to release Roy for adoption. At the last minute, however, she changed her mind and left the foster parents feeling devastated. The foster mother explained, "*I will never forget that day...we thought we might be getting him for adoption, instead he was being taken away from us... At this stage he knew us as Mommy and Daddy... we were at our wits end...*". This account is heartbreaking, but by no means unique. There were at least two other accounts in the study that compared very closely to this example. Davenport (1989, pp 178-181) also described a similar case involving "Sharon" and her foster mother "Mrs. B". Again, a baby who was originally fostered as a temporary arrangement was left with the family longer than anticipated, and a strong attachment was formed. Bureaucracy, however, prevented the family from adopting the child, and Mrs. B commented "*...We love Sharon. Can't they see that? We want to adopt her now so she won't have any changes, any upsets, and will carry on with us as her family. But they won't let us*" (Davenport, 1989, p.179).

There are, I believe, ethical issues that need to be considered in relation to placing a baby with a childless couple for an indefinite period. Bowlby (1965, p.152) noted "childless couples are not usually very well suited to be temporary foster-parents, as they are likely to become too possessive." He also noted that motives for fostering are not generally the same as adoption; one is a temporary arrangement where visiting from natural parents is encouraged, the other a permanent commitment. Unfortunately many fostering agencies are desperately short of foster parents, and are only too happy to agree to allow caring couples, who have been approved by adoption panels, to foster while they wait for a permanent arrangement. The change in the nature of the placement (foster care rather than the desired permanency of adoption), may not change the nature of the couple's caregiving needs, and upsetting situations like those described can result. This is an area in need of urgent psychological research and input.

Working with Natural Parents

Despite all of these issues, Rosenfeld et al (1997) pointed out that biological parents rarely get a fair deal when it comes to the fostering situation. They are not included in the fostering plans; rather they are "told what they must do to get their children back" (Rosenfeld et al, 1997, p.452). Treatment for their problems is not regularly offered. As well as this, visitation arrangements are often made by the agency in impersonal and

public environments (e.g. agency offices or restaurants) that are not conducive to improvement of the relationship between them and their children (Rosenfeld et al, 1997, p.452). This need not be the case, but lack of resources (adequate meeting environments, personnel, money) often results in these issues being overlooked. This is, unfortunately, particularly pertinent to the Irish situation, where health boards continue to be poorly resourced.

As the foster parents often bear the brunt of problems with the natural family, a system that prepared and rewarded them for their work here would be especially beneficial. It is possible to develop a practice whereby it is part of the foster parents' duty to spend some time working to help the foster child's family. The FCRP (Steinhauer et al, 1988; Steinhauer, Johnston, Hornick, Barker, Snowden, Santa-Barbara, and Kane, 1989) encouraged close work between natural and foster parents. Results showed that foster parents in the group support model "developed empathy for and worked surprisingly well with natural parents" (Steinhauer et al, 1988). Other projects have also used a 'helping' model – the more developed of these are probably the 'fostering families' (e.g. Kufeldt and Allison, 1990) or the 'partnership parenting' (e.g. Burton and Showell, 1997) models, where the foster family takes some responsibility for advising and supporting the child's parents for a period of time.

Conclusions

Most social workers who have spent any amount of time working with foster families will already be aware of the difficulties inherent in developing host family – birth family relationships. Nonetheless there is a surprisingly sparse body of literature built up on the subject. It would appear that, while it is generally accepted that these relationships are difficult, few people have bothered to look closely at the reasons *why* they are difficult.

The present study approached the question by asking foster parents about their attitudes towards foster parents, and about the problems that developed because of the birth family. It emerged that sometimes the types of problems that arose influenced their attitudes. For instance one issue that caused a lot of heightened emotions was when there was a delay in releasing the child for adoption. It has been suggested that prospective adoptive parents might not be suitable as foster parents for this reason. Perhaps this is something that needs to be considered more carefully by fostering agencies and the health boards. It would appear that there is a need for further research into the area of foster parent/ birth family relationships.

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