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*Exploring the Unique Experiences of
Biological Children in a Foster Family*

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Abstract: The purpose of the following research was to identify the experiences and needs of biological children in a foster family. An online survey was sent to licensed foster families from a private agency. The survey included questions about the experiences, both positive and negative, of biological children before foster youth enter the home, during their stay, and after they exit the home. Analysis of 21 survey answers and thorough review of literature indicated significant lack of available resources for foster parents to utilize when preparing their biological children for this family change. Results also showed that children held damaging misconceptions about foster care previous to foster children entering the home. Survey results mirror various findings from research and have strong implications for foster care agencies and practice. The research prompted the creation of a curriculum for children before the family becomes licensed to foster. This exploratory research is not generalizable but concludes that future research should explore the needs of biological children in more depth. Future research and policy should also work to establish new placement procedures, family assessment criteria, and pre training classes for both foster parents and their children.

Keywords: *foster care, biological children, social worker, transition*

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I. Introduction

When social workers enter the home of a foster family, they typically must complete an assessment of the family dynamic and the wellbeing of the foster child in the home. In completing this task, the biological child(ren) within the home may be unintentionally disregarded by the worker whose primary focus is the foster child. This happens many times with even the child's own parents. A new foster child has many mental and physical health appointments, family visits, caseworker meetings, and more that has to be completed within a timely manner. Biological children in the home may feel overruled or overwhelmed by these tasks and by the foster child's behaviors. After experiencing various forms of trauma, foster children coming into a new home may be withdrawn or they may behave disrespectfully and in ways that warrant foster parent intervention and take away from that may typically be spent as a family (Younes, 2007) This is not the case with all families and is not fault to the families, but it is evident that more attention should be paid and more research put forth in regards to unique needs of the biological children within a foster family.

II. Literature Review

When a family decides to foster, the decision may or may not be discussed with input from the children in the home, especially if the children are young at the time. Best practices based on research suggests that preparing children the right way for fostering will have a great impact on how they respond to having a foster child in the home and how well the foster child placement will be maintained. Children who are able to be involved in the entire process of fostering, from the first conversation to the end of the placement, will have a sense of ownership and understanding in the process (Poland, 1993). Research demonstrates that biological children in foster families may have mistaken ideas of foster care or foster children if it is not properly

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discussed with them (Kaplan, 1988), which has implications for their behavior and emotional and psychological wellbeing. Many children in Kaplan's study responded with ideas that children in care were abandoned because they were bad or disliked by their mothers. As a result, many of these young children also had concerns for their own security in that they may someday be abandoned by their parents as well (Kaplan, 1988). This finding indicates the need for children to be correctly informed of what foster care is, who the children in care are, and how they became "foster kids."

According to most research findings, the very first reaction of many children when they meet their new foster siblings is one of excitement. Eventually issues of jealousy, anxiety, fear, and competing for attention and resources surface as the children interact (Younes, 2007).

Experiences such as the children worrying about their parents, having to share a room opening their home to a child they have only just met, having caseworkers in and out of the home, a constantly changing family system, and role confusion or displacement are just some of the challenges that children will experience with the presence of a foster sibling (Sutton, 2013). It is crucial that children of foster parents are well equipped to deal with this issues and develop an understanding and empathy towards the child in care. Children who are not able to fully grasp why the child is in their home will have an even more difficult time being willing to share resources and time with him/her. Additionally, children may have many questions about the foster child's behaviors as they may have been sheltered from the negative behavioral issues up until this point. It is crucial that parents and service providers are able to properly and age appropriately explain to the child what is going on.

In addition to witnessing negative behaviors, biological children in a foster family may begin to display behavioral and emotional changes themselves. A 2007 study on the topic showed that

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during the fostering experience many children began to demonstrate increased attachment to their parents and voiced concern about safety or wellbeing of their parents (Younes, 2007). Much of this is due to the way a family dynamic changes with the introduction of either a younger or older child. A 2013 study by Louise Sutton revealed that most children prefer foster siblings who are the same age or younger than them. Much of this is due to the child feeling threatened by an older child taking their place in the family. If a foster child is the same age as a biological child, they will more simply form a friendship on the basis of common interest and development. On the other hand, if the foster child is younger than the biological child, the biological child is able to take on a caretaker like role for the child which will contribute to feelings of competency and validation in the biological child (Hojer, 2013).

Biological children may also feel threatened by the foster child's presence if it causes a strained or differential relationship with their parents. Children in care often require a lot of attention and care as a result of various needs and impact of trauma. Upon the first month of placement, the child will also be required to attend many medical, emotional, caseworker appointments. The foster parent will need to be present to transport and be present at these appointments which often results in less quality time and attention with the biological child in the home. Depending on the age and understanding of the biological child, he/she may begin to feel ignored or not as important as the foster child. This can result in feelings of displacement and role confusion within the family system (Poland, 1993). Further insecurity and even anger can result if the foster child is young and begins to refer to his/her foster parents as mom and dad. While some biological children will have the maturity level and understanding to be content with this, other children will become possessive and may attempt to shun the foster child out to demonstrate that they are not truly a part of the biological family system.

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Research by Sutton also revealed that much of this insecurity is due to the fact that foster families are constantly changing in dynamic, size, and culture. As new children come and go, there is a constant need for both parents and children to re-establish roles and boundaries. The constant changes, along with the children witnesses other children entering and exiting their home, may lead to the biological child(ren) feeling that their role in the family is not very permanent either. This anxiety may cause children to be defensive and angry about the way foster children treat their parents, the things the foster children say about their parents, and if the foster children refer to the parents as “mom” and “dad” (Sebinski, 2011). Nearly every study performed on this topic recounts how many children often feel that they are held to higher standards and expected to help out more when foster children are in the home. This added sense of responsibility may be a positive or a negative for the child based on how it is delivered

Both parents and children often report that the most difficult part of fostering is the removal or departure of a foster child. Children typically report, depending on the length of placement, that the process feels like losing a sibling (Sutton, 2013). When a foster child’s placement in the home ends, whether to be reunified with family, to move to an adoptive home, or as a result of conflict, the biological children and the family may feel a combination of relief and sorrow (Younes, 2007). Relief comes from the opportunity for a family to regroup and have some time together before another foster youth enters the home. At the same time, sorrow results from bonds that have formed with the child over time as well as uncertainties that may come with removal.

Among the challenges and unique experiences there are many positives for children who grow up with foster siblings. These children develop the ability to cope with and adapt to many changing situations (Sebinski, 2011). Additionally, many foster parents report seeing that their

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children become more outgoing, caring, loving, inquisitive, and willing to help and be responsible. Many children also report that the experience of fostering taught them a lot about different cultures, traditions, ways of thinking, and life in general. Biological children also state that having a foster sibling makes them thankful for their family and even grants a sense of pride if the placement was a positive one (Younes, 2007).

These studies greatly imply the need for training that incorporates biological children in a foster family. Pre-training classes for children to be able to ask difficult questions in a safe environment and be assured of their role in fostering will improve placement stabilities (Poland, 1993). Better education to foster parents, caseworkers, and children about what to expect in terms of adjustment for the biological children will ensure that all parties are best prepared and that fostering can be a positive experience for all involved.

III. Research Study

The following exploratory study examines the effect of fostering on the lives of biological children in a home. The study seeks to examine the amount of input children had in the decision to foster, the physical, emotional, and psychological effects of fostering on biological child, and the benefits associated. Additionally, the study utilized one question to inquire of the resources available to foster parents in order to prepare their child for the arrival of a foster youth into the home.

Procedure

The study took the form of a survey emailed to foster parents licensed through a private agency in North West Ohio. The survey was available from February 23rd until March 13th of 2016 and included 26 questions both multiple choice and open ended. Four demographic questions were asked in regards to demographics (age, gender, education, and ethnicity) of the

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respondents. This study received the approval of the Human Subjects Review Board from Bowling Green State University. The survey was initially sent to 42 email addresses which were assessed and found to be families whom had fostered and had biological children in the home simultaneously. Of those who received the survey, 22 responded. One response stated that the family did not in fact have biological children in the home at the same time; this survey response was discarded as it did not meet the requirements. The remaining usable 21 survey results were analyzed resulting in a 50% usable response rate.

Sample

Those surveyed were foster families licensed through the private agency. This convenience sample is comprised of 19 females and 1 male. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 56 years old with an average age of 39. In regards to education level, 1 respondent indicated their highest level of education as high school, 8 participants (40%) had attended some college, 7 had a bachelor's degree (35%), 2 had a graduate degree, 2 had a postgraduate degree. Sixteen participants (80%) were white, 2 were African American, 1 was Hispanic, and 1 indicated "other" in regards to this question. 19 participants indicated that they were in a "dual parent home," while 2 reported being single parents. The participants indicated that they had between 1 and 4 biological children in the home, with a fairly equal distribution among each variable. 76% of participants also indicated that the most foster children they had in their home at one time was 2 to 4.

Results/discussion

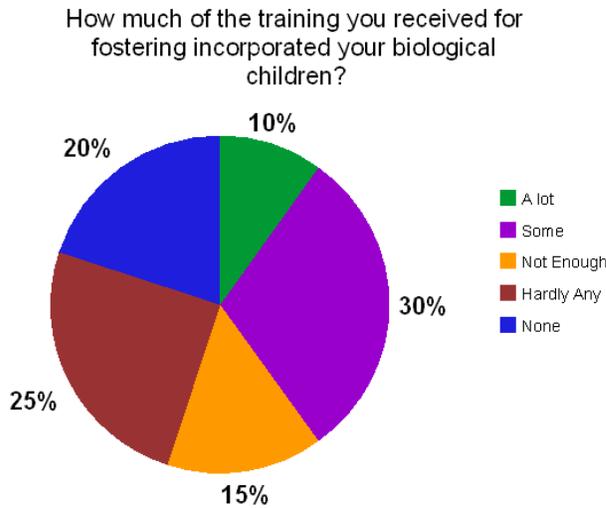
Survey questions were asked about experiences between parents and children before, during, and after fostering. Analysis of survey answers revealed that, prior to fostering, all survey participants made the decision to foster with their biological children in mind (67% strongly

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agreed, 33%, agreed). While making this decision, all except for 1 participant indicated that their children were actually included in the decision to foster. It is unknown if the children in this home were of proper age to be included in the process.

When asked how parent's prepared their children for fostering, the answers varied. Many stated that they simply spoke to their children about what it meant and had an open discussion about it. Others stated that they had various family meetings and even watched some movies about foster care. A few parents stated that they described to their children some of the sacrifices that would have to be made and how to handle children from a different home. In many answers parents spoke about their own trainings and described how they brought home the things they learned and taught their children. Similarly, one family stated that they did role plays with their children and brought back the training they had received. From this information, it was interesting to see the results of a question asking how well prepared parents felt their children were for the experience of foster; 18 either strongly agreed or just agreed that their children were well prepared, and 3 disagreed or strongly disagreed. It was interesting to compare this data to answers to the question "How much of the training you received for fostering incorporated your biological children." The graphic below demonstrates just how split the answers were for this questions. "Some," "Hardly Any," and "None" were the highest percentages chosen.

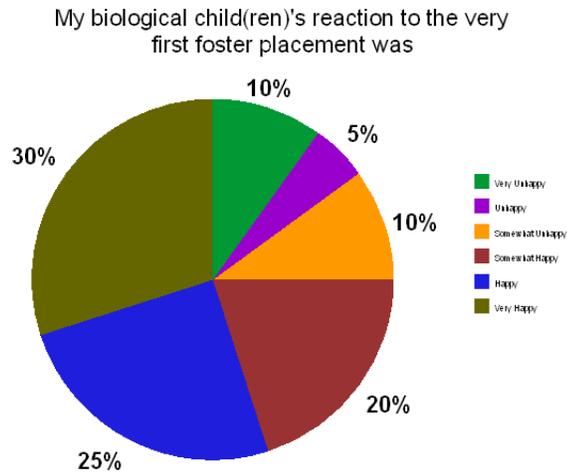
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This result indicates that there are not many trainings that incorporate biological children into their foster training, but parents are able to utilize the trainings they have received to teach their children what they need to know about fostering. In another question, 25% of participants indicated that they were unaware of the full impact that fostering would have on their biological children.

Questions were then asked to explore how biological children coped during the fostering experience. Many of these questions were descriptive asking parents to describe their child's physical and emotional reaction to placements and other observable changes and any special circumstances that were present. In the following depiction it is clear to see that children had different reactions to the first foster placement in the home with 75% of parents indicating that their child was somewhat happy, happy, or very happy, and 25% stating their child was somewhat unhappy, unhappy, or very unhappy.

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In descriptive answers to questions regarding children's physical and emotion reactions to the foster child in the home, many described excitement, joy, and happiness that was later overshadowed by frustration in regards to behaviors of the child or having to share. A parent commented about the families first placement that:

“They [the children] were overjoyed and excited to love the little boy in our home. The crazy excitement wore off as more placements occurred, but they were still excited to meet new children and make them feel welcome. The youngest was the opposite of that -- didn't understand it well at the time of the first placement and didn't like sharing, but has gotten better with each placement”

Another example is described by a surveyed parent who stated:

“Initially, she [our daughter] was very excited to have a sister. As the foster child became more comfortable and revealed other behaviors, she strongly disliked her and just wanted her to leave. She became angry that the foster child was 'ruining' everything. She was also very frustrated with herself for not liking the sister she'd waited so long to get.”

Many children have idealized hopes and dreams in their mind about what fostering will be like and what the child will be like. When the foster child does not live up to preconceived

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expectations, children may feel betrayed or insecure in not knowing what to expect. Other children may experience confusion when they expected the foster child to be just like them or just like their best friend and come to find the opposite to be true.

In analyzing the lasting/ongoing effects of fostering on biological children, questions about the negative aspects of fostering, the positive experiences, and what agencies could do to improve these experiences for the children of foster caregivers. Qualitative answers included the positive lessons children learned, how they impressed their parents by wanting to help many others, and how the children of foster caregivers get to see a piece of the world that many never will. One parent stated that thought the experience of fostering,

“They [My Children] have shared/given of their possessions, realizing that not all children are as fortunate. They have picked up extra slack around the house when they realize that things are a bit overwhelming. They simply realize that they are blessed and that not every family lives a nice little suburban life. There is a lot of suffering out there and now they realize that.”

Similarly, another parent described the greatest part of fostering was,

“[The children] learning that the world does not revolve around them. And that helping people doesn't always need to be nice, neat, and easy. My oldest said during a conversation one day "sometimes you need take risks to love people." She is getting it and that's a huge reward within this experience of fostering.”

While the cumulative effects of fostering appear to be very positive for the biological children in the home and the potential for growth and learning, the day to day experiences can be difficult. When asked what the most difficult part of fostering was for a biological child, many parents stated that their children struggled the most with sharing. Whether it was sharing a

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bedroom, sharing toys, and simply sharing a home, it seemed that having to give 24/7 to a child who is not a sibling was very taxing on many biological children. Another strong theme throughout this part of the research was the children's struggle with behaviors in the home. Many parents described their child being angry or confused when their foster sibling would become volatile or refuse to do what was asked of them. One parent explained the tough times by saying,

“They [our children] have seen the immense damage that abuse can cause for a child -- and the ways in which that damage is displayed. It can be scary and they are very aware of that.”

Still, another parent stated the following,

“There have been many trials. I don't think we will know the full effects until they are able to process their childhood. They are currently 10, 8, and 2. There have been feelings of anger and bitterness. We messed with birth order and that gets tough a lot of days. We have 3 first born in our home”

While not all of these negative factors that biological children experience in the home are avoidable, some can be buffered with understanding, education, and maintaining realistic expectations.

IV. Limitations

The sample size of this research should be considered a limitation. Additionally, since the sample was taken from foster parents from the same private agency, it is possible that influences from the particular agency may have skewed some results. For these reasons, the research is not generalizable.

V. Implications: Curriculum development/available resources

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In recognizing that little to no tools currently exist to train the biological children of foster caregivers, this research informed the creation of a five lesson curriculum. The curriculum is geared toward children ages 8-13 whose parents are also enrolled in preservice training classes through a licensing foster care agency. Since many parents return home after these classes and pass the knowledge onto their children anyway, this curriculum would remove the full responsibility of this from the parents. The foster care agency, whom is interested in the success of foster placements, should also take responsibility in fully preparing not only foster parents, but their children, for the changes that are to come. The curriculum covers the topics of: what is foster care, what to expect, your role in fostering, how to handle the hard times, and ends with an open forum. The final lesson, an open forum, is optional and dependent on time. There would be many ways to implement an open forum with the children and it is up to agency discretion to do this. Included in the curriculum is a sample permission letter to parents/caregivers, a letter to instructors of the curriculum, and a thorough lesson plan stating the goals and objectives of each lesson.

VI. Conclusion

Though not much research is currently available, the biological children in a foster family are a population that should be studied more in order to fully assess their needs and experiences. Social workers in the foster care profession should be attentive to the family dynamic as a whole when completing important home visits. In conclusion of the previously mentioned research and review of literature it was found that biological children respond best to fostering children younger than themselves. It also became apparent that children need to have a proper understanding of what foster care is, what their role in the home is, the ways the home may

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change and the ways it will stay the same. Further research is needed to further explore these topics.

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Appendix A

the following survey was distributed to foster parents:

Your age:

Your gender:

Education:

- No HS (1)
- Some HS (2)
- HS Diploma/GED (3)
- Some College (4)
- BA/BS (5)
- Graduate (6)
- Post Graduate (7)

Your Race/Ethnicity

- Black, non-Hispanic (1)
- Hispanic (2)
- Black-Hispanic (3)
- White (4)
- Asian (5)
- Native American/Native Alaskan (6)
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (7)
- Other (8)

1 How many biological children do you have?

2 Please describe your biological children's gender and age during fostering. For example: Child 1: age, gender Child 2: age, gender

3 Maximum number of foster children in the home at one time

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4 My home is

- A single parent household (1)
- A dual parent household (2)

5 The decision to foster was made with my biological child(ren) in mind

- Strongly Agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Strongly Disagree (4)

6 My biological child(ren) were well prepared for the experience of fostering

- Strongly Agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Strongly Disagree (4)

7 If applicable, please describe the ways you prepared your biological child(ren) for fostering

8 My biological child(ren)'s reaction to the very first foster placement in the home was

- Very Unhappy (1)
- Unhappy (2)
- Somewhat Unhappy (3)
- Somewhat Happy (4)
- Happy (5)
- Very Happy (6)

9 Please describe your biological child(ren)'s EMOTIONAL response(s) to fostering

10 Please describe your biological child(ren)'s PHYSICAL response(s) to fostering

11 If applicable, please describe any other observable changes in your biological child(ren) during the first foster placement

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12 My biological child(ren) felt threatened or uneasy having foster children in the home

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Somewhat Disagree (3)
- Somewhat Agree (4)
- Agree (5)
- Strongly Agree (6)

13 In regards to the previous question, please describe any circumstances that you recall related to when your biological felt threatened or uneasy having foster children in the home

14 My biological child(ren) seem to respond most positively to foster children who are

- Younger than my child(ren) (1)
- The same age as my child(ren) (2)
- Older than my child(ren) (3)
- Unknown (4)

15 My biological child(ren) took part in caring for the foster child(ren)

- Strongly Agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Strongly Disagree (4)

16 Please list any POSITIVE qualities/experiences that your biological child(ren) obtained as a result of fostering

17 Please list any NEGATIVE qualities/experiences that your biological child(ren) obtained as a result of fostering

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18 How much of the training you received for fostering incorporated your biological children?

- A lot (1)
- Some (2)
- Not Enough (3)
- Hardly any (4)
- None (5)

19 I was well aware of the impact (positive or negative) fostering would have on my biological child(ren)

- Strongly Agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Strongly Disagree (4)

20 In terms of tools/supports for my biological child(ren) during the foster experience

- There are more than enough (1)
- There are enough (2)
- There are not enough (3)
- There are none that I know of (4)
- They are not needed (5)

21 My biological children were included in the decision to foster

- Strongly Agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Strongly Disagree (4)

22 Overall, my biological child(ren) benefited from the experience of fostering

- Strongly Agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Strongly Disagree (4)

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23 There are differences in the way I disciplined my biological child(ren) and the foster child(ren) in my home

- Strongly Agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Disagree (3)
- Strongly Disagree (4)

24 The most difficult part of fostering for my biological child(ren)

25 The greatest part of fostering for my biological child(ren)

26 What could foster care and other social services agencies do to improve the experience of fostering for biological children in the home?