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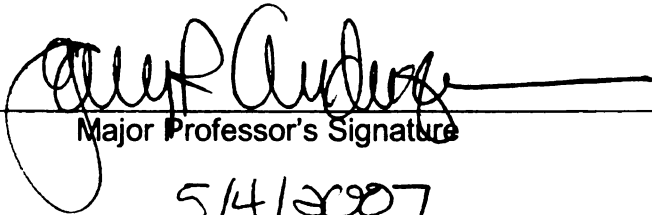
A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF THE PERCEIVED  
IMPACT OF FOSTER CARE ON BIOLOGICAL CHILDREN  
OF FOSTER PARENTS:  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

presented by

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has been accepted towards fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

Ph.D. degree in Social Work

  
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CARE ON BIOLOGICAL CHILDREN OF FOSTER PARENTS:  
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By

Stephene A. Diepstra

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Social Work

2007



## ABSTRACT

### A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF THE PERCEIVED IMPACT OF FOSTER CARE ON BIOLOGICAL CHILDREN OF FOSTER PARENTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

By

Stephene A. Diepstra

Using a semi-structured interviewing format, the author examines how biological children of foster parents perceive the foster care experience to impact them. Given the limited amount of research in this area, the author's study is exploratory and descriptive in nature. The sample consists of 21 biological children of foster parents from a total of 11 foster families. The subjects were drawn from foster families who had been providing foster care for four or more years. The qualitative data collected from the interviews reveals that the biological children have generally found the experience, although difficult, to have had a positive impact on their social and emotional development. Many of the children have maintained close relationships with their parents and would consider becoming foster parents themselves as adults. Knowledge gleaned from the study has potential benefit in the recruitment, training, and support of current and future foster families.

I dedicate this endeavor to all the foster families who made my data sing and to my family who inspired and nurtured my interest in this topic.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the immense contributions that Dr. Rena Harold and Dr. Gary Anderson have made to not only the completion of this dissertation but to my doctoral education as a whole. They have contributed to making the obtainment of my PhD an intellectually stimulating experience as well as an enjoyable journey. The School of Social Work is blessed to have you both.

I would also like to thank Dr. Seita and Dr. Keith who served on my committee and helped bring the final product to fruition. Additional thanks go to all my committee members for their willingness to accommodate fast turn-around times, especially as I have neared the home-stretch.

I could not have completed this doctoral endeavor without the never-wavering support and encouragement of my husband, Jim. He was an amazing cheerleader and was always willing to make time for me to work towards my PhD even when it meant extra responsibilities for him. You are wonderful!

My children deserve special recognition for their willingness to accommodate and love a mom who sometimes had too much going on at once and for their acceptance and embracing of all the foster children that have been a part of our family.

Lastly, I thank God for the nudging to pursue what is right and for the blessing of peace of mind and spirit at times when I wavered.

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## INTRODUCTION

Foster care has become an institutionalized social program in the United States which has an impact on not only foster children themselves but foster parents and their biological children as well. While there has been a commitment to researching the experiences of foster children and more recently that of foster parents, very little attention has been given to the experiences of the biological children of foster parents. The absence of the biological children's experiences within foster care research minimizes these children's contributions to foster care delivery and potentially detracts from the overall effectiveness of our foster care system.

Within the United States, over one-half million children are served by the foster care system each year (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). The need for ongoing recruitment of foster families has been persistent (Crosson-Tower, 2004). Although its form has changed, the practice of foster care has a long history dating back to antiquity (Kadushin & Martin, 1988). Early Jewish practice required family members to provide care for children who became parentless. The Elizabethan Poor Laws implemented a form of indenture where children in need of care were placed in families in exchange for work. Thurston (as cited in Kadushin & Martin) describes indenture as a "business deal from which the person accepting a poor child on indenture

was expected to receive from the child, a full equivalent in work for the expenses of his support, care, and teaching” (p. 346). While Kadushin notes that the indenture system provided children with “a family life and at least minimal care” (p. 346), the practice began to decline when slavery was abolished in the United States as it seemed inconsistent to be promoting the freedom of all races while maintaining the servitude of children.

In the United States, a significant change in foster care occurred in 1853 when the Reverend Charles Loring Brace established the New York Children’s Aid Society. Brace founded this group in response to the growing number of immigrant children who were abandoned and left to wander the streets of New York City. His group responded by developing the Orphan Trains which were used to transport large numbers of orphaned and destitute children, ages 2-14, out of the city into homes further west. Families agreed to take in these children free of charge for various reasons, including inability to have biological children, needing extra help on the farm or in the house, and a desire to reach out to children in need. These children were often not formally adopted into these families, and some have criticized that the practice constituted a form of indenture, especially for the older children who were placed in homes primarily to work. Between the years 1854-1929, it is estimated that the Orphan Trains placed about 150,000 children into families (Martin, 2000). Other criticisms of the Orphan Trains included the following: parents were coerced into releasing their children, there was little oversight of the placements, and religious diversity was ignored.

As the use of the Orphan Trains began to decline, individual states were forced to address the continued need for placements for orphaned and destitute youth. Many of these states began establishing agencies to assist with these placement endeavors. The agencies relied on foster families as well as orphanages to care for the youth. Debate ensued about the optimal placement for children being in foster family homes or in institutions. By the early 1900's, foster family care obtained clear governmental sanction when the First White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children "stated that 'the carefully selected foster home is, for the normal child, the best substitute for the natural home'" (Martin, 2000, p. 20). Pelton (1989) describes the consequent results of this endorsement as the sole major reform in modern child welfare practice. In 1912, the federal government solidified its commitment to the welfare of children by establishing a national bureau whose sole focus was children: the Children's Bureau.

Over time, society as a whole has begun to exhibit more concern for the welfare of children (Popple & Leighninger, 1999), and foster care services have evolved accordingly. Currently, it is widely accepted that when a child must be removed from his/her family's care and a relative placement is not available, placement with a foster family is preferable to a residential or group home placement (Martin, 2000). The home environment provides the child with the least restrictive environment, and costs associated with foster care are considerably less than the costs of residential care. In addition, foster care is no longer viewed as a final or permanent destination for children. Policy and



practice have both shifted to encourage timely reunification of foster children with biological parents or placement of the foster children into adoptive families.

As practiced today the provision of foster care is described by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA, 2005) as follows:

Family foster care should be a planned, goal-directed service in which the temporary protection and nurturing of children take place in the homes of agency-approved foster families. Family foster care is an essential child welfare service for children and their parents who must live apart from each other for a temporary period because of physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, or special circumstances necessitating out-of-home care.

Blair summarizes the role of foster parents with a quote from Pasztor, Smith, Burgess, Fields, and Salazar, "Foster parenting, then is not a lifetime commitment to a child/adolescent, but a commitment to be meaningful to a child/adolescent's lifetime" (1989, p. 29-30).

According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, the number of children in the United States who were abused and neglected in 2005 was approximately 899,000. This computed to a maltreatment rate of 12.1 per 1000 children in the population for 2005. The types of maltreatment experienced by these children follow: 63% neglect; 17% physical abuse; 9% sexual abuse; 7% emotional maltreatment; 2% medical neglect; 14% "other" types of maltreatment, based on specific state laws and policies (Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, 2005). Many of these children and families received services in their homes that prevented out-of-home placements as child

welfare services have expanded to include family preservation programs aimed at preventing removal of children from their biological families. These services reduced the number of children who were actually removed from their biological families to about 22% of the total number of maltreated children (Administration for Children and Families, 2007).

An estimated 311,000 children entered foster care in fiscal year 2005 (Children's Bureau, 2006). Combined with the number of children already in foster care from previous years, the most recent national estimates indicate that the number of children in foster care during 2005 was approximately 513,000 (Children's Bureau, 2006). The mean age of the children in foster care during this period was 10.0 years, and the mean length of stay was 28.6 months. However, the impact of outliers on the mean length of stay should be noted as the median length of stay is reduced to 15.5 months (Children's Bureau, 2006). In contrast for the year 2002, there was only an estimated 170,000 licensed kinship and non-relative foster homes nationwide (Child Welfare League of America, 2005). While many of these homes are equipped and willing to take more than one foster child, a discrepancy between the number of available foster homes and the children in need of these homes remains.

Recruitment campaigns for foster parents have been launched at local, state, and national levels in an effort to increase the available pool of foster parents. In addition to recruiting adults who do not already have children, child welfare advocates also have focused recruitment efforts on adults who are already parents. These parents are equipped with parenting experience that can

help them address the challenges presented to them by foster children (Cautley & Aldridge, 1975). However, little has been included in these recruitment campaigns to address parents' concerns about the possible effects of the experience on their biological children. Ensuring the success of these foster home placements is vital if the well-being and safety of maltreated children is to be promoted (Barth, 2002; Casey Family Programs, 2005; McDonald, Allen, Weserfelt, & Piliauin, 1996).

As structured within the United States, the child welfare system depends upon the willingness of families to provide care and shelter for the abused and neglected children who enter foster care each year. Successful placement in an appropriate foster home is an essential component of the treatment plan for these children and their parents. However, the ongoing shortage of foster families has resulted in some children being placed in group homes, residential settings, and homes that are less than ideal (Barth, 2002). The shortage of foster families is increasingly becoming an area of concern among child welfare agencies (Crosson-Tower, 2004; Gibbs, 2005). Upon removal from an abusive and/or neglectful home, the children's need for placement in a nurturing and stable family environment is paramount (Casey Family Programs, 2005). However, the shortage of foster families hinders the ability of child welfare workers to routinely place abused and/or neglected children in the most appropriate homes (Martin, 2000).

A variety of reasons exist for the shortage of foster families. Although a lack of awareness on the part of many about the need for more foster families

exists, attrition rates remain high even among those who express an initial interest in providing foster care (Gibbs, 2005; Pasztor & Wynne, 1995). A possible explanation is that individuals and families may become apprehensive about providing foster care upon discovering what it entails. Another possible reason for the shortage of foster families may stem from the growing number of females entering the workforce. Fewer women are staying home as “career parents,” and many are choosing to have smaller families (Martin, 2000).

Retaining foster parents who actually follow through on becoming licensed foster parents is another area of challenge for child welfare professionals who are working to expand the number of foster families. Foster parents often cite a lack of support and appreciation from the foster care agency and financial burdens in caring for foster children as reasons why they cease fostering (Department of Health & Human Services, 2002). Other research (James Bell Associates, 1993) has reported foster parents’ discontent with systemic issues related to foster care as a primary reason why they discontinue fostering. The identified systemic concerns expand on those previously stated above to include: lack of agency responsiveness, communication, and support; insufficient emergency, weekend, or vacation respite; inadequate consultation and support from social workers; poor agency response to crisis situations; disrespect for foster parents as partners and team members; difficulty obtaining liability insurance to protect them in the event that children in their care caused harm to their or others' property; inadequate training; and few opportunities to provide

input into training or services for foster parents (Barbell & Freundlich, 2001; National Commission on Family Foster Care, 1991).

Policy shifts which changed from discouraging foster parent adoption to encouraging foster parent adoption have also impacted the number of available foster parents. When parental rights are terminated, foster parents can now become adoptive parents to their foster children. In FY 2005, foster parents were responsible for 60% of the total number of adoptions of children leaving foster care (Children's Bureau, 2006). The adverse impact that this has on the foster parent population is that some foster parents do not continue to provide foster care after adopting children which results in a smaller pool of available foster parents (Gibbs, 2005).

An additional stressor on the foster parent population is that foster families receive minimal financial compensation for the level of care they are asked to provide. There may be legitimate concern among some parents about their ability to financially meet the needs of the foster children. Martin (2000) cited a number of studies which suggested that foster parents often have not attended schooling beyond high school and were financially among the working-class or lower-middle-class population. These families may be unable to sustain fostering for long periods of time due to the financial constraints it places on them and their incapacity to utilize personal income to offset the costs of raising additional children. Potential foster families also may choose to avoid fostering due to apprehension about attachment issues as foster children come and go from the home, often without much forewarning.

When considering the contributing factors to this foster parent shortage, the potential foster parents' concerns about the possible effects of the experience on their biological children must also be examined. At present, little data exist that evaluate the short- and long-term effects of the foster care experience on the biological children in the home (Biggs, Kline, & Szatkiewicz, 1988; Kaplan, 1988; Poland & Groze, 1993; Twigg, 1994;). More research examining the effects of the foster care experience on the biological children would be beneficial in providing child welfare workers with useful data for recruiting potential foster families and in training and supporting current foster families. Specifically, there is no published research on how biological children of long-term foster parents are affected by the foster care experience. As the average length of foster care service given by foster parents may be between 8 to 14 months (Gibbs, 2005), the author defines long-term as those foster families who have been providing foster care for four or more years.

The Casey Foundation, the Pew Foundation, and the Children's Bureau have pledged significant support to promote and assist with foster parent recruitment. Knowledge of the effects of the experience on biological children would aid these recruitment endeavors as a study by Poland and Groze (1993) found that 77% of foster parents were concerned about the effects of the foster care experience on their biological children. Additionally, increased knowledge in this area could promote retention of foster parents and minimize placement disruptions for foster children. According to Twigg, "Real or perceived conflict

between foster child and FPOC [foster parents' own children] is a major reason for foster placement breakdowns" (1993, p. 187).

Cautley's (1980) research suggested that if the foster mother perceived that the experience was upsetting to her biological children, she was more likely to discontinue providing foster care. Moreover, Lemieux (1984) found that the families who asked for foster children to be removed from their homes during the course of her research reported the reason to be that the foster children were having adverse emotional and/or behavioral effects on their biological children. Lemieux also identified that in many of the instances of removal, the biological children had expressed dissatisfaction with the experience and had asked their parents to have the children removed. While the above studies (Cautley, 1980; Lemieux, 1984; & Twigg, 1993) highlighted issues related to the biological children's dissatisfaction with the foster care experience, the research did not explicitly explore how the biological children adapted to the experience over a longer period of time.

In an attempt to broaden the knowledge base of foster care's effect on biological children of long-term foster parents, the author's study utilizes a semi-structured interview format with the biological children and their parents and relies on a qualitative inductive method of analysis. The study is exploratory in nature, and in essence asks the question of what is it like for biological children of long-term foster parents to live with foster children in their homes. This general research question led to more specific research questions that were influential in developing the child and parent interview guides (see Appendixes A

and B) used in this exploratory study. The study's formative questions are identified as follows:

1. How do biological children of long-term foster parents perceive the foster care experience impacts them as individuals?
2. How does having foster children in the home impact the relationship between the biological children and their parents?
3. What aspects of the foster care experience do biological children view as positive and negative, and how do these relate to each other?
4. How does relative age and gender of the foster and biological children impact biological children's perceptions about the experience?
5. How can the biological children's perceptions be incorporated into training, recruiting, supporting, and retaining foster families?

Upon final analysis, it is hoped that the author's research broadens our understanding of how the foster care experience impacts the biological children of foster parents. If incorporated into strategic foster family recruitment and retention plans, the perspectives shared by the biological children of foster parents could prove informative in the recruitment of potential foster parents, in supporting and training current and potential foster families, in equipping parents to respond appropriately to the needs of their biological children, in minimizing the number of foster care placements that are disrupted, in the placement of foster children in homes that are most compatible to the needs of all involved, and in educating foster care staff about the unique needs of the biological children of foster parents.



## CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

The research literature on the effects of foster care on biological children of foster parents is quite limited (Biggs, Kline, & Szatkiewicz, 1988; Kaplan, 1988; Poland & Groze, 1993; Twigg, 1993). The author has located and reviewed eleven studies that have specifically explored this topic (Biggs, et al.; Blair, 1989; Bova, 1994; Ellis, 1972; Gwynne, 1984; Kaplan; Kraemer, 1999; Lemieux, 1984; Mauro, 1985; Poland & Groze; Twigg). Seven of the eleven studies were undertaken for the purposes of dissertation or master thesis completion (Blair; Bova; Gwynne; Kraemer; Lemieux; Mauro; Twigg). Many of the studies involved samples of ten or less (Biggs, et al.; Ellis; Gwynne; Kraemer; Lemieux; Twigg). Poland and Groze who utilized a mailed questionnaire obtained the largest sample with 51 biological children from 34 foster families responding. Mauro had 25 families in her sample, but she was only able to interview six children from these families. Bova's study included 13 children from 22 foster families.

To obtain data on the experiences of biological children of foster parents, some of the studies utilized interviews with the biological children (Ellis; Kaplan; Kraemer; Mauro; Twigg); others conducted standardized testing on the biological children and/or their parents (Blair, Bova, Gwynne); still others employed mailed questionnaires (Biggs, et al.; Poland & Groze). Findings of these studies will be synthesized and reviewed according to topic.

To date, none of the studies on biological children of foster parents have specifically examined the perceptions of the biological children of long-term foster parents as defined by the author (i.e., foster parents with four or more years of foster care experience). Only four of the studies (Bova, 1994; Lemieux, 1984; Mauro, 1985; Twigg, 1993) specifically addressed length of time fostering, and three of them (Bova, 1994; Lemieux, 1984; Mauro, 1985) specifically restricted their samples to new foster parents. Twigg (1993) focused on foster parents who had been fostering more than three years.

#### *Term Definition*

The author has chosen to use the term “biological children” to describe the children of interest to this study because the sample will be limited to only children biologically born to the foster parents. This terminology and exclusion of adopted children is similar to Blair's (1989) classification. Lemieux (1984) utilized the term “biological children” in her research, but within this term she included children who had been adopted into the family more than five years ago and stepchildren. Other researchers have employed different terms. Bova (1994) selected the term “natural children” and included both adopted and biological children in the family. The author opted against this term as it could seem to imply that foster children in the home are in some way “unnatural”. From the author's perspective, this seemed to carry a greater negative connotation than being “non-biologically” related to the foster parents. Twigg (1993) used the term “foster parents' own children (FPOC)”. Similarly, Biggs, et al. (1988) used the term “own children”. The author avoided use of this term as foster parents who

have adopted children would likely consider these children as their “own children” as well. In sum, the term biological children of foster parents seemed to most accurately and sensitively describe the children of interest to this study. However, the author does want to note that her use of this term is not meant to convey that the foster children are in any way “less biological” in nature rather that they are simply not biologically related to their foster parents.

### *Foster Family Demographics*

To help ensure that foster children are placed in safe, suitable, and loving homes, individual states have developed licensing criteria for foster parents. The requirements of licensure vary state to state somewhat but typically include home studies by a social worker, criminal background checks of adults residing in the home, and completion of foster parent training. “The whole process is designed to assure foster children of a safe environment and concerned capable caregivers. The process also encourages the truly committed and discourages those who are uncertain or ambivalent” (Blair, 1989, p. 24-25). The extent to which the process discourages the “uncertain or ambivalent” is not entirely clear. However, a large discrepancy does exist between the number of families that express an interest in foster care and the number of families that actually become licensed as foster parents. In fact, Martin stated that “studies of the outcome of foster care recruitment show a high attrition rate among the families that express initial interest. Usually, less than 10 percent of the original group are licensed and very rarely more than 20 percent” (2000, p. 50).

While the components of the licensing process deliberately help prepare parents for the foster care experience, typically the process does not explicitly address the preparation of the biological children in the home. The biological children's preparation is largely up to the discretion of the parents. A search by the author did not uncover any states that explicitly require orientation and/or training for the biological children of foster parents. While *Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education* (PRIDE) and *Massachusetts Approach to Partnerships in Parenting* (MAPP), foster and adoptive parent training curricula, do devote a session or part of a session to the changes that fostering may bring to the foster family, these training programs do not provide specific training sessions for the children themselves. Foster parents are largely responsible for assuring their biological children are properly prepared for the fostering experience.

National demographic data related to foster parents are not readily available; however, some studies have attempted to describe the demographics of foster families based on local or state data. Martin (2000) reported that foster parents often are from lower to middle socioeconomic groups and typically have lower educational attainments than the population average. Gibbs (2005) indicated that foster parents with higher levels of employment and income were more likely to discontinue foster parenting. A possible explanation she offered for this was that these foster parents may be less dependent upon foster care as a source of income and can cease fostering without any financial hardship to the family. The extent to which foster care financially supports the foster family,

however, is unclear as in most cases the foster care reimbursements rates should simply meet the basic expenses of the foster child and in some cases may not even be sufficient to do that.

Mauro (1985) found that most foster families in her study who have been fostering between six months to three years did not begin fostering early in the family life cycle. In fact, 21 out of the 23 families had adolescent or adult children. She proposed that pursuing foster parenting later in the family life cycle allowed parents the opportunity to continue to satisfy parental role needs even as their biological children aged. A theoretical orientation that pathologizes this motivation would imply that the foster parents' interest in fostering is simply a way for them to avoid adjusting to their children leaving the home.

Carter and McGoldrick (1980) developed a family life cycle model which suggests that families should progress through developmental stages in a systematic and organized manner. Application of this theory would imply that foster parenting often disrupts this order and that prolonging the parenting role is not necessarily in the family's best interests. However, Gibbs (2005) stated that in the studies she reviewed, older foster parents tended to continue fostering longer than younger foster parents. This finding may suggest that the understanding and parenting experience these families bring to fostering is a benefit rather than a detriment to their overall foster care experience.

### *Foster Family Role*

While the intent of foster care is for foster children to be provided with a nurturing home and caregivers, the time-limited nature of foster care can

introduce challenges to this mandate. Blair identified that a unique aspect of families is their sharing of a past, present, and future. She attempted to distinguish the experience of foster children and foster families by stating:

Foster children although they are supposed to be part of the family are not really part of the family's past nor are they expected to share much of its future. It is the impermanent nature of the experience that is hypothesized to be difficult for both the individual child and the family. The task of the family is to define a role for the foster child, communicate the role, acceptance and control, while remaining aware that these adjustments are temporary. (Blair, 1989, p. 23)

While the author concedes that recognition of the foster care arrangement as temporary is important, clearly structuring roles for the foster children based on their temporary status in the family could be problematic and potentially harmful to the foster children. Blair stated that the foster parents should define roles that "suit both the parent and the family" (1989, p. 33); one would hope that these role definitions are beneficial to the individual children as well.

#### *Foster Parent Research*

The reasons foster parents give for wanting to provide foster care are varied and include a love for children, a desire to make the world a better place, and wanting another child in the home (Martin, 2000). While ideally one would want all foster parent motivations to be altruistic and based on the needs of the children, recognizing that foster parenting can be based on the needs of the

foster parents as well is important. Martin summarized her description of foster parents' motivation as follows:

Their wishes are to help children, to serve society, and to meet some personal needs of their own. It is the task of the assessment process to help them understand how their parenting role will be different with foster children than with their own birth children and to learn to use agency services to enhance their caretaking role. (2000, p. 49)

Although one would hope it not to be the case, there may be some foster parents who are financially motivated to be foster parents. A financial motivation for fostering seems especially problematic and could influence how the foster child is accepted into the family. As the reimbursement for foster care is intended to meet the basic needs of the foster child, foster parents who are financially driven to be foster parents are very likely not meeting the foster children's basic needs.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimated that in 2004, the annual cost of raising a child was \$7,040 for a lower-income family and \$14,620 for a higher-income family (USDA, 2005). These amounts fluctuated somewhat depending upon size of the family and geographic location of the family. In contrast, foster care reimbursement rates in Michigan, for example, are \$14.24/day for children ages 0-12 and \$17.59/day for children ages 13-18. This translates to an annual reimbursement of \$5,197 and \$6,420, respectively. These amounts fall below even the lowest USDA estimated costs of raising a child. Foster care reimbursement rates do vary between states; however, only a few states have adjusted their foster care reimbursement rates to match the

USDA estimated cost of raising a child. Based on these estimated costs and reimbursement rates, one could deduce that if foster parents are financially motivated to be foster parents, they may likely be overlooking the varied needs of their foster children.

Another focus of foster parent research has been on the challenges facing foster parents. Wilkes (1974) identified four stressors facing foster parents. These stressors associated with foster child placement in the home included: 1) disruption of family equilibrium within the foster family; 2) foster parent's difficulty coping with foster child issues; 3) foster parents having to navigate a variety of agency interactions; and 4) foster parents maintaining unrealistic expectations about the placement. Through interviews with foster mothers, Hampson and Tavormina (1980) identified difficulty adjusting to the placement of a foster child and agency frustration as being two specific areas of aggravation to foster parents. Lemieux (1984) also found that foster mothers often report feeling guilty because the intense behavioral demands of foster children frequently take time away from their biological children who the mothers then perceive as being neglected.

Factors that contribute to the success of foster parents have been studied as well. Cautley (1980) suggested that foster parent effectiveness is influenced by the foster parent's previous experience caring for other non-biological children, the foster parent's overall parenting skills, the foster father's willingness to work with the foster care agency, the foster father's sensitivity to children, and the foster parents having good role models in their families of origin. In addition,



Cautley found the foster parent's ability to cooperate in decision-making was associated with increased stability of placements.

When studying the effects of foster care, most researchers have used the foster mothers as the primary sources for data. Reasons for this include easier accessibility to the mothers and the mothers' role in many of the foster homes as primary caretaker. Lemieux (1987) found that when reporting on children's behavior "mothers tend to be more consistent in their responses over time than fathers" (p. 53), and that the parents' reports of their children's behavior showed "relatively low levels of agreement" (p. 75). She further questioned:

If parents base their decisions about fostering, at least in part, on their perceptions of their own children's behavior, and if mothers and fathers disagree to a large extent on their perceptions, then the question arises of whose perceptions and feelings will carry more weight in the decision making process regarding foster children. (p. 75)

However, she later stated that the mothers' reports have a greater reliability than the fathers' reports which could support the use of mothers as data sources during research endeavors. Twigg (1993) countered this assertion by noting that mothers may also tend to romanticize their biological children's experience with foster care and present an unrealistically positive picture of the foster care undertaking.

Further highlighting the mothers' roles in the fostering experience, Lemieux (1987) reported that five of the six families in her study began fostering at the mother's suggestion, and that initially in four of these five families, the

fathers were “dead set against it” (p. 82). Fathers in her study continued to be opposed to fostering and expressed “more annoyance with the lack of order and extra responsibilities” (p. 91) as a result of the fostering. The mothers in her study did not resent the adjustments fostering required as much as the fathers or the children did.

Interestingly, Lemieux (1987) found that foster mothers and their biological children initially had somewhat idealistic perceptions about the foster care experience. Hence, she postulated that the “honeymoon period” may not be entirely attributable to the functioning of the foster child, but may be influenced by the foster family’s optimism about the experience as well. “The idealization phase appears to result, in part, from the hopes, expectations and excitement that foster family members bring to the new situation...mild behavior problems were tolerated or ignored by family members during the idealization period” (p. 88). The foster mothers and their biological children appeared to enter the fostering experience with both excitement and hope.

#### *Research on Foster Children*

Extensive research has been done on foster children (McDonald, Allen, Weserfelt, & Piliauin, 1996), and a comprehensive review of that literature is beyond the scope of the author’s current research. However, it is important to note that advances in prevention and family preservation programs have changed the demographics of children who are entering care. These children often have longer histories of abuse and neglect. As a result, the behaviors they display in the foster home may be more severe, thereby increasing the demands

and stress placed on the foster families. Littner (1978) even suggested that in an effort to restore normalcy the foster children may attempt to recreate their biological families' dysfunction in the foster families. A safe assumption on the part of foster parents would be that the foster children very likely could and will present some challenging behaviors in the foster home.

### *Systems Theory Application*

The idea that the foster care experience must impact the foster family as a whole as well as the individuals within the family is not difficult to embrace as the concept has a significant amount of face validity. Systems theory as developed and explained by Bronfenbrenner (2004) essentially asserts that a change in one system will impact the other systems with which the system is involved. In the context of the family, adding a member to the family will prompt change in the family system and also in the individuals within the family (i.e. subsystems) as the homeostasis within the family is altered. Ironically, Lemieux noted that while many of the families in her study approached fostering as a way to "balance their own families' needs in some way," fostering was actually a disruption to family functioning (1984, p. 116).

A central concept within systems theory is that of boundary maintenance which in effect affirms that systems attempt to maintain boundaries which help protect the integrity of what and who the systems are. Fostering can obscure family boundaries as foster children come and go, and members may not be clear about who is in the family and who is not. Adjusting the family's boundary

to accommodate the introduction of foster children requires effort and can potentially be problematic for the family.

Illustrating the perceived importance of a defined family boundary, a subject in Twigg's (1993) research recommended "that foster families take long breaks from fostering (up to a year) so they could find out what it is like to be a family" (p. 101-102). Another way that this subject's family maintained the family boundary was by taking vacations without the foster children and by reinforcing the concept of fostering as a job. In fact, the biological children in this family were paid a per diem from their parents to compensate them for their efforts related to fostering.

Another subject in Twigg's (1993) study viewed fostering as his parents' job and wished his parents were not fostering. The parents were not otherwise employed and maintained clear boundary markers between foster children and biological children. Twigg noted that in his study a total of six of the eight families studied "had taken steps to keep the foster children outside the family boundary." (p. 124). Twigg also reported that "treating the foster children as objects was one way to maintain the family boundary" (p. 143). While this attitude may serve to reinforce the family boundary, the author questioned the effect it has on the foster children as well as the impact it had on promoting an empathetic character within the biological children in the home.

Twigg (1993) noted that while one subject in his study did resent the time the foster kids took from parents, he still felt that they should be included in family activities. This family attempted to take time when the foster children were away

for special family activities. Twigg stated that the “FPOC in those families who attempted to make the foster child a part of the family seemed to be the most negatively effected by the foster care experience” (p. 164). However, he did not corroborate this statement by specifically clarifying how or why they were the most negatively effected.

Twigg later justified the apparent exclusion of the foster children from the family boundary by stating that “few, if any, foster children wanted to become part of their family regardless of their [the family’s] efforts to include them” (1993, p. 197). These claims lay in contrast to findings by McDonald et al. (1996) who illustrated that achieving feelings of belonging and acceptance in the foster family are paramount for foster children. Twigg’s last statement could provide a dangerous and potentially hurtful license for exclusion of the foster children from the foster family.

The changes within the family system induced from fostering extend to interactions with outside systems as well. The placement of a foster child in the home potentially introduces the family to connections with schools, child welfare agencies, child care providers, biological parents of foster children, social workers, and many others. Lemieux summarized:

Both the foster parents and their biological children may experience changes in status, responsibility and autonomy of functioning. The foster parents, as well as coping with the special needs of the foster child, must develop a working alliance with the child welfare system in which their respective functions and roles are clarified. (1984, p. 14)

Systems theory does support the concept that biological children of foster parents will experience a multitude of adjustments during the foster care experience. However, the theory does not necessitate that these adjustments and/or changes will be specifically positive or negative for the biological children individually or the foster family as a whole.

### *Congruence between Parent and Child Perceptions*

While anecdotal and conventional wisdom would suggest that parents are interested in knowing the actual impact of the foster care experience on their biological children, some researchers have found that foster parents may actually misperceive how their children feel about the experience. Early research indicated that foster mothers view the foster care experience for their biological children as unrealistically positive (Charnley, 1955; Kaplan, 1988; Mauro, 1985; Shaw & Lebens, 1977). Charnley and Mauro, in separate reports, both suggested that the mothers' accounts may minimize the actual difficulties their children encounter through the fostering experience. Based on these reports, Twigg (1993) questioned the validity of using mothers as the source for information about how the children are actually coping with the experience.

The congruence between the parent's and child's perceptions about fostering could also be impacted by the level of communication between the parent and child. Twigg (1993) observed that none of the children in his study "were able to talk to their parents in any depth about their own foster care experiences" (p. 146). However, there is some disparity in the research findings

in this area as a study by Gottesfeld (1970) documented a greater congruence between the mother's and child's perceptions of the fostering experience.

*Relevance for Recruitment, Placement, and Retention*

The importance of supporting each person involved with foster care experience is congruent with competent social work practice which emphasizes the importance of concern for the well-being of all individuals. Blair articulated this:

To help one child at the expense of another is contrary to good social work practice. Social workers and parents believe that foster care will not harm biological children. Many believe that foster care benefits all involved.

Although social workers prepare parents in a structured manner for foster care, they do little to prepare the biological child. (1989, p. 49-50)

Understanding how the experience impacts biological children of foster parents is necessary if social workers intend to prepare them adequately for the experience.

A component of preparing the biological children for the experience is attempting to ensure that the match between foster children and the biological children is a good one. Researchers have attempted to explore what constitutes a good match and conversely what are risk factors for placement. Blair (1989) cited research which advised having the foster child be the youngest in the family, having only one preschool child per foster family, and if the foster child was oldest having at least a three year age separation between the foster child and the biological child(ren).

When making placements in new foster homes, Lemieux (1984) recommended avoiding placing multiple children, highly disturbed children, children who have had multiple prior placements, and children who are within three years of age to the biological children in the home. The importance of the biological children's satisfaction with the foster care experience is also emphasized by Lemieux who suggested that dissatisfaction with a foster child in the foster home was "usually voiced first by the biological child and was often followed by the foster child's removal" (p. 115). This finding further validates the need for the perspectives of the biological children to be integrated into placement decisions.

### *Preparation*

Foster parents understand the importance of preparing their biological children for the entrance of foster children into the family (Biggs et al., 1988; Poland & Groze, 1993). In fact, Poland and Groze (1993) reported that 90% of the parents in their study attested to discussing foster care with biological children prior to beginning foster care. The remaining 10% of the parents did not discuss it because of their children's young age at the time. A majority of the parents (54%) reported that their children's responses to becoming foster families were positive. Most of the remaining parents (40%) felt their children's responses were both positive and negative. This mixed response seems appropriate and realistic as the children were likely to experience both positive and negative aspects related to being a foster family.



At the family level, Biggs et al. (1988) found that a majority of children in their study felt included in the family decision to foster. Additionally, the biological children in Lemieux's (1987) study were initially favorable to the idea of becoming a foster family. While the parents seem to recognize the importance of preparing their children for the foster care experience, foster care training programs (i.e., PRIDE, MAPP, and the author's local fostering agencies) are less consistent in their recognition of this. The author's review of these foster care training programs revealed that most programs, while they include information about the possible changes that will occur in the family as a result of fostering, do not include a specific training component for the biological children in the foster homes.

### *Impact of Age*

Several researchers who examined the effects of foster care on biological children of foster parents have suggested that the age of the biological children may be a factor to consider when making placements (Biggs et al., 1988; Ellis, 1972; Kaplan, 1988; Lemieux, 1984; Twigg, 1993). While some researchers (Ellis; Kaplan) have identified a particular age range for the biological children that may be the most difficult age period for successful adjustment, other researchers (Biggs et al.; Ellis; Lemieux; Twigg) have suggested that the correlation between the age of the biological children and the age of the foster children is a more important consideration.

Ellis (1972) stated that biological children between the ages of 7-13 years were most negatively impacted by the foster care experience. Kaplan (1988)

indicated that in her research younger children, between the ages of 6-8 years, were more negatively impacted by the experience. In contrast, Blair (1989) did not find that younger children were more distressed or anxious about the experience than were older children, and Bova's (1994) research did not find any pre- to post-test differences based on age.

When considering the biological child's age in relation to the foster child's age, Ellis (1972) found placements most difficult when kids were the same age. Biggs et al. (1988) indicated that more fighting occurred between biological children and foster children when they were the same age. Similarly, Lemieux (1984) suggested that avoiding close age proximity between foster children and biological children could be advantageous as she noted that more problems were experienced when the foster and biological children were close in age. She also reported that when the foster child was older than the biological child, reports of the biological child picking up bad habits from the foster child increased. Biggs et al. also suggested that when the foster children were older than the biological children, the relationship between them improved as the placement continued. In contrast, when the foster children were younger than the biological children positive relationships tended to be formed more quickly and usually continued throughout the placement.

Twigg (1993) confirmed the benefit of an age difference between foster children and biological children as it "helped protect their [biological children's] place in the family". He also noted that most of the biological children in his

sample preferred younger foster children. Three reasons for this preference were given:

First, younger foster children do not challenge the FPOC's place in the family hierarchy. Second, FPOC view foster children as being immature and socially inept. Such perceived immaturity could be tolerated in younger foster children, but not in age-mates. Finally, having younger foster children made it easier for the FPOC to identify with their parents and take an active role in fostering." (p. 131)

Twigg further asserted, "Foster children who are close in age and the same sex as the FPOC are the biggest threat to the FPOC because they perceive more of a need to compete with such foster children for things like toys and clothes" (1993, p. 180).

### *Impact of Gender*

In comparison to age as a factor in placement, gender has received less attention. Twigg (1993) advocated for having a foster child be the opposite gender of the biological child. He stated, "Seven of the eight FPOC felt their place in the family was less threatened by opposite sex foster children (1993, p. 131). However, as many foster families may have both male and female biological children living in the home, placing opposite gender foster children in the home becomes impossible for at least one of the biological children in the home.

Some research has explored gender as a variable in how male and female biological children cope differently with the foster care experience. Bova (1994)

reported using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBC) as a post-test measure. She found that following foster child placements in the home, male biological children had higher levels of withdrawal at both the two and six-month follow-ups. In contrast, females showed higher scores related to social competence at the six-month follow-up testing. However, as with the other studies noted, her sample size prevents generalization of her findings as her sample was small including only fourteen females and eight males.

Twigg (1993) also suggested that female biological children may adapt more easily to the experience. He wrote, "Female FPOC are more able to become involved in fostering; they want to be seen as part of the treatment team. Male FPOC are more interested in remaining separate from the process" (p. 193). However, one should note that in Twigg's study a majority of the foster children were male, and if same-sex adaptation is more difficult, this could explain his finding.

In contrast, Blair (1989) found that adaptation for females may be slightly more problematic. The experimental girls in her study had higher scores than the boys on the clinical scales of the Roberts Apperception Test for Children (RATC). The rejection scores for the girls were also clinically elevated (although not statistically significant). She suggested a possible reason for this could be that girls need mothers for processing of anxiety, and mothers may be less available to them as they are busy tending to the foster children.

### *Negative Effect*

The potential for the foster care experience to have a negative effect on the biological children in the home has been addressed in each of the studies the author reviewed (Biggs, et al., 1988; Blair, 1989; Bova, 1994; Ellis, 1972; Gwynne, 1984; Kaplan, 1988; Kraemer, 1999; Lemieux, 1984; Mauro, 1985; Twigg, 1993). Poland and Groze (1993) summarized parental concerns about the experience as including: biological children feeling left out of family, biological children's resentment of the foster children, biological children acquiring bad behavior of foster children, biological children having difficulty adjusting to foster children leaving, and abuse of a biological child by a foster child.

Twigg asserted that adapting to the foster care experience can be quite problematic for the biological children. He stated:

FPOC can have as much difficulty adjusting to the foster care experience as the foster child, making the FPOC at times appear to be more disturbed than the foster child. If the FPOC cannot adjust to the foster care experience and accept the required changes in her/his lifestyle s/he may begin to act out. In doing so, s/he may create enough stress in the family, the school, and the neighbourhood that the parents are unable to deal with the foster child's special needs. (1993, p. 43-44)

Blair portrayed encountering the child welfare system at an early age as a negative experience for the biological children. "The biological child in the foster care family will be exposed to both the instability of the child welfare system, and to a foster child who has probably lived in a deprived environment and may now

be handicapped” (Blair, 1989, p. 13). While the young children may not have fully comprehended the realities of the child welfare system, Blair did not clarify how an early awareness of the social need for such a system proved or would prove problematic for the biological children. Additionally, portraying exposure to a “foster child who has probably lived in a deprived environment and may now be handicapped” as a negative experience appears fundamentally flawed to the author. Exposure to this type of diversity at an early age and in the context of a family that is willing to discuss the child’s questions and concerns would seem to the author as having the potential to be a very beneficial experience for the child and ultimately for society.

Experiencing physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse by a foster child living in the home are perils that the biological child may encounter. Blair (1989) cautioned that encountering an emotionally traumatic experience was a real risk for the biological children. For example, in her study, one biological child was sexually fondled and emotionally abused by an older foster child in the home, and another child was exposed to a foster child with a high level of suicidal ideation which resulted in the biological child developing persistent suicidal thoughts. The author was unable to locate data on the actual number of incidents where biological children have been abused by foster children in the home, but the potential for this to occur remains a risk that must be acknowledged.

A common concern expressed by biological children in studies exploring the effects of the foster care experience on them is the difficulty adjusting to the

resource changes that occur as a result of the family providing foster care. Blair (1989) suggested that the financial impact of providing foster care may increase resentment on the part of the biological children as the family may have to adjust their standard of living. While the foster care maintenance payments may offset the financial burden associated with foster care, most foster parents in her study concluded that the maintenance payments were insufficient to meet all the expenses of the foster children. Kraemer (1999) mentioned that the biological children may, in fact, feel jealous of the foster children as the foster children may receive items (i.e., clothes, special outings) from the foster care agency and/or the foster children's biological parents. The biological children also noted the appearance of a double standard as the foster children were allowed to "get away with more" (Kraemer, 1999).

Lemieux (1987) found that biological children were concerned about "losing time, attention and material things from their parents. Some children, particularly the boys, were not happy about having to share a bedroom and giving up privacy." (p. 84). Similar concerns were expressed by the children in Mauro's (1985) study. She found that space and financial sacrifices were burdensome to the children. The children also identified more chores, more fighting, less time with parents, competition with friends, and increased busyness at home as concerns.

Mauro (1985) noted that the parents in her study tended to normalize some of their biological children's experiences. However, she suggested that the parents may have been overlooking their children's concerns as "they repeatedly

mentioned that jealousy, competition, and feelings about sharing parental time and extra chores were normal among siblings, and they view the foster children as additional siblings to their children" (1985, p. 69). Although the research did note that the biological children may have disliked sharing time and resources with the foster children in their homes, it was not specific on how this necessarily computed to a negative effect for the biological children (Ellis, 1972; Gwynne, 1984; Kaplan, 1988; Kraemer, 1999; Lemieux, 1984; Mauro, 1985; Twigg, 1993).

An additional concern noted in the research centers on the temporary nature of foster care (Kraemer, 1999; Lemieux, 1987; Poland & Groze, 1993; Twigg, 1993). As foster children come and go from the home, the biological children in the home must cycle through feelings of attachment, separation, and loss. Both parents and children in Lemieux's study expressed concern about "getting along with someone new and about eventual issues of separation and loss" (1987, p. 84). The families underwent a number of adjustments to assimilate the foster children into their homes, and ultimately these adjustments happened again when the foster children left. In fact, the biological children were often not sufficiently prepared for the departure of the foster children from the home (Kraemer, 1999). Mauro (1985) stated that families described adaptation of foster children into the home as "easy," yet she believed subsequent statements contradict these reports (p. 64).

Witnessing the nature of foster care where children come and go from the home may also create personal turmoil for the biological children. Twigg (1993) theorized that not only do the biological children have to adjust to changes within



the family system; they may also experience a heightened fear of being taken away from their parents and placed in foster care themselves. Twigg reported that the biological children in his study all expressed the feeling that “they had matured more quickly than their peers” (1993, p. 175). This reported early maturity was the result of wanting to be accepted by older foster children and needing to take care of their own needs because their parents did not have enough time for them due to the increased time demands of the foster children.

A further consideration is that the stress encountered by the foster parents may influence their perceptions of their biological children’s behavior. Lemieux (1987) found that four months post-placement mothers reported less satisfaction with their biological children’s good behavior. However, one should be cautious in interpreting these results as the data she collected at one, two, and three month post-placement did not show similar decline. As she did not collect data beyond the four-month-mark, it is uncertain if these reports of decreased satisfaction would have continued.

### *Positive Effect*

While the above-mentioned research highlights the negative aspects of foster care for the biological children, some researchers (Biggs et al., 1988; Blair, 1989; Bova, 1994; Lemieux, 1987; Mauro, 1985; Poland & Groze, 1993) have noted positive effects as well. Poland and Groze reported that 57% of the parents in their study indicated that the effects of the foster care experience were positive, and that 70% of the children in their study reported that they liked having foster siblings. Biggs et al. suggested that over time adapting to the

foster care experience became easier for the biological children. Their research stated that the biological children found the relationship with the first foster children to enter their homes as most difficult and that adjusting to the experience got easier with subsequent foster children. "Overall, the majority of own children rated their foster care experience as good or very good. They additionally felt that the experience had changed them for the better" (Biggs et al., p. 5).

While not specifying the positive effect, Bova's (1994) research suggested that biological children of foster parents are not negatively impacted by the foster care experience. A variable in her study, however, was that the foster care program the families in her study were involved with provided "ongoing parenting training and weekly meetings with social workers who were trained to assist them in maintaining stability within their families" (p. 110). This level of consistent and ongoing support for the entire family is not necessarily reflective of the typical level of support given to foster families and may have contributed to the positive effects perceived by the biological children.

Blair's (1989) research suggested that the positive effect involves the opportunity for biological children to:

...make an important social contribution at a young age. Helping another less fortunate child could lead to heightened sensitivity and concern about the needs of others. Observing one's parents modeling helpfulness might lead to the incorporation of these important values and emulation of these prosocial behaviors." (p. 39)

This recognition fits within social modeling theory which would suggest that the children are incorporating the behavior and attitudes they observe from their parents (Bandura, 1977). While foster care may not be the only avenue for teaching one's children prosocial behavior, it certainly does afford the opportunity for parents to model this behavior to their children. However, one should also note that this theory could be applied to explain the negative effects listed above, where the biological children may also model the negative behavior exhibited by the foster children.

Open communication between parents and biological children was noted as a factor that can contribute to a positive experience as well (Blair, 1989). Blair suggested that foster families "with high levels of communication should have biological children who understand the need for foster care and are more likely to benefit from the experience" (1989, p. 45). Lemieux (1984) further described the positive effects by noting that parents in her study indicated that their biological children "had internalized parental values, had become more appreciative of the things they had and were willing to share more with others" (p. 93). Additionally, she stated that many of the biological and foster children in her study freely engaged with each other and seemed to enjoy each other's company. Further, the presence of foster children in the family seemed to reduce the number of fights between the biological children in the home as their alliance was strengthened.

A final benefit noted by Lemieux (1984) was that parents reported that their children demonstrated greater responsibility and maturity due to the

fostering experience. Kraemer (1999) also noted the potential for heightened maturity as older biological children may assume somewhat of a caretaking role for the foster children. She further specified that the biological children seemed to like being able to have some sense of control by explaining house rules and norms to the foster children.

Mauro (1985) theorized that the teenagers in her study who were only children benefited from the foster care experience. In her sample, a significant age difference of seven to ten years existed between the teens and the foster children. She suggested that the experience did not interfere significantly with their lives as they were beginning the individuation process and becoming less emotionally dependent upon parents. The foster children provided parents with an outlet for their time and attention at a time when their biological children were less demanding of this. Mauro (1985) noted that the younger children in her study enjoyed having additional children to play with. Kraemer (1999) also supported this benefit by highlighting the positive role of companionship. In particular, younger children in her study seemed to appreciate the playmate aspect of foster care.

The biological children's greater appreciation for the family as a unit was an effect noted by Poland and Groze (1993). Specifically, 65% of the parents reported that their biological children appreciated their own families more. Highlighting the complexity of the biological children's responses to the experience, Biggs et al (1988) found that most biological children in their study reported the foster care experience as positive. However, most were not sure

they would become foster parents as adults or that they would recommend foster care to their friends.

As research on the effects of foster care on biological children of foster parents has established the presence of both positive and negative effects, it is important to recognize the reality that the experience is likely both positive and negative for these children. Biggs et al. (1988) took care to note that most biological children in their study felt both positive feelings (i.e., happiness, affection, love) and negative feelings (i.e., resentment, anger). Recognizing that complex emotional responses characterize much of our interactions with people, we understand that these feelings and responses do not need to be mutually exclusive. Hence, our understanding of the experiences of the biological children of foster parents should not be limited to an either all good or all bad conceptualization.

### *Coping Strategies*

A few researchers have attempted to identify the ways in which the biological children have coped with the experience. Blair (1989) suggested that increased experience with foster care helps the biological children to better define their roles and function effectively within their families. Essentially, the longer the foster parents foster, the easier it becomes for the biological children to cope with the experience.

Twigg specifically identified coping strategies he believed the biological children used. He wrote:

All FPOC used a variation of one of three coping styles to deal with the foster care experience; most used them in combination. These coping styles were to 1) focus on the needs of the foster child 2) isolate themselves from the foster care experience 3) objectify the foster child. (1993, p. 168)

While all but his first coping style appear to be maladaptive, he later contextualized even this style as being such. He classified focusing on the needs of the foster child as a psychoanalytically based reaction formation and that the “need to use such a strategy shows the strength of their anger at the foster care experience” (1993, p. 169). Supporting Twigg’s (1993) second identified coping mechanism, Lemieux (1984) found that withdrawal from the family was a coping method used by biological children who were struggling with the increased stress in the home which resulted from providing foster care.

### *Support*

Consideration of what helps support foster families was given attention in many of the research studies (Blair, 1989; Kraemer, 1999; Lemieux, 1984; Mauro, 1985; Poland & Groze, 1993; Twigg, 1993). One specific avenue for receiving support that the researchers found to be important was support via the foster care agency and the foster care worker. Twigg (1993) noted that the biological children in his study all expressed an interest and desire for agency support of their roles in the foster care experience. Specifically, the youth were interested in a support group exclusively for biological children living in families with foster children. Kraemer (1999) also found that biological children in her

study favorably responded to the role of being consulted about issues related to the placement of foster children in the home.

Lemieux (1984) commented that a positive caseworker-family relationship was critical and was perhaps even the single most important issue to the foster parents. Families in her study reported the foster care experience to be more favorable when they had established good rapport with the caseworker. Mauro (1985) indicated that the foster parents in her study often did not find the advice of caseworkers realistic. "Repeatedly they mentioned that the social workers have theoretical but not practical knowledge and that they do not really know the children and what it is like to live with them" (p. 83). The parents suggested that other foster parents who have practical experience would perhaps be better positioned to offer preparation and support to the families for the foster care experience. Mauro highlighted that many of the foster parents were experienced parents, and they were simply in need of practical and specific advice on how to parent difficult children.

Common frustrations the foster families expressed included lack of contact with the agency, lack of information sharing, and feeling unappreciated by the foster care agency and worker (Lemieux, 1984). Parents also felt that the role their biological children played in the foster care experience was not acknowledged sufficiently. Specifically, she stated:

Biological children rarely had contact with caseworkers. In all of the families, the children's only preparation for foster care came from their parents. Several children in the study complained about not having

casework contact, however, and stated that they would have liked to have been able to share their feelings with caseworkers. (Lemieux, 1984, p. 108)

Further describing the lack of agency attention the biological children received, Blair reported that a “primary emotional concern of biological children is exclusion” (1989, p. 121). Agencies often actively excluded biological children as the children were not specifically invited to foster family training or recognition programs. In fact, often the children were specifically excluded from these programs as they were “for adults only”. Blair (1989) indicated that children in her study who received recognition (e.g., certificate, inclusion in training) reported positive feelings about this. Other ideas for inclusion of the biological children included specific training for them, support groups for biological children, newsletter recognition, peer tutoring, etc.

Poland and Groze (1993) indicated that a majority of foster parents in their study would have found pre-training sessions for biological children, opportunities for biological children to talk with other biological children in foster homes, and social work sessions with the entire family prior to beginning foster care as helpful. The parents also thought that discussing the sharing of parental attention, what being a foster child means, the biological child's role in the family, discipline differences between foster and biological children, and grief when a foster child leaves were important topics for the children to explore prior to the family beginning to provide foster care.



While support from the foster care agencies and foster care workers was important, families also mentioned the importance of support from friends and families (Lemieux, 1984; Mauro, 1985). Lemieux reported that “foster families typically received little support for their decision to foster. Friends and outside family members provided cautious support, at best, and often expressed very negative reactions to the families’ decisions to foster” (1984, p. 85). In contrast, Mauro (1985) stated that with two exceptions, extended families of her subjects were supportive of the families’ decisions to foster.

### *Summary*

As highlighted by the above literature review, the experience of biological children of foster parents has been given minimal research attention. However, each of the studies that did explore the nature of the experience for these children noted the importance of these children in the foster care delivery system as well as the need for ongoing and continued research in this area. The author’s research expands on the current research and explores an area that has previously been overlooked: the effect of the foster care experience on biological children of long-term foster parents. Studying this population of children of long-term foster parents could prove extremely valuable as the length of time these children have been involved in foster care has no doubt exposed them to a varied spectrum of circumstances related to being a foster family. These children have likely endured some of the negative aspects of living in a foster family, yet the family has not ceased fostering.

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

As the author's intent was to "attempt to make sense of the meanings" (Grinnell, 1997, p. 107) that biological children have given to their experiences of having foster children in their homes, the author elected to conduct a qualitative study. The author's aim was to "seek to understand the experiences of selected individuals—not to test hypotheses so much as to explore the question: What is it like?" (Royse, 1999, p. 279). According to Grinnell (1997), components of qualitative research studies include:

1. Research conducted in natural settings
2. Research where the variables are not controlled or experimentally manipulated
3. Research where the questions are not always "completely conceptualized and operationally defined at the outset"
4. Research where the data collected "are heavily influenced by the experiences and priorities of the research participants"
5. Research where "meanings are drawn from the data...using processes that are more natural and familiar" than quantitative approaches (p. 107).

The author's project contained each of the components of Grinnell's (1997) classification and therefore met the broad definition of a qualitative study. Specifically, the author met with the families in their homes which constitute natural settings. The author did not attempt to experimentally manipulate the

variables, and the questions of interest to the study evolved as the research progressed. The experiences and perspectives of the interviewees were paramount to the study. Finally, the analysis of the data involved an interactive unfolding of insight as the author repeatedly engaged with the individual stories of the participants and then ultimately weaved these together to tell their collective story (Warren & Karner, 2005).

The author decided to utilize a semi-structured interview guide to obtain the narratives of both the biological children of foster parents and the parents themselves (See Appendices A & B, respectively). This format allowed for flexibility while also providing direction to the interviews. Throughout the interviews, the author maintained the approach that the participants were the “experts on their experiences” (Royce, 1999). The author conducted a pilot interview with a biological child of foster parents who was no longer residing in her parents’ home as a means to field test the interview guide. Adaptations were then made to the interview guide to improve flow as well as clarity of question probes.

During the course of the interviews, follow-up probes were utilized differently depending upon information shared by the interviewees. These probes allowed for the interviewees to tell their stories and not just provide “headlines” (Weiss, 1994, p. 13). All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Participants were asked at the outset of the interviews if they were comfortable with the discussions being audio-recorded, and all participants consented to this. The recording device was quite small and unobtrusive and did

not seem to detract from or inhibit the interviews in any way. The author did not take field notes during the course of the interviews as during the pilot test this seemed to present a distraction to the interviewee who would often pause or lean forward when the author began to write notes to herself. The author found that not taking field notes during the course of the interviews afforded the benefit of a fuller engagement with the individual participant. Immediately after the interviews, the author was able to write down any observations or thoughts generated during the interviews. The author then completely and personally transcribed each of the interviews so that narrative analysis of the interviews could occur. Grinnell (1997) attested to the benefits of the researcher personally transcribing the interviews, “we become more thoroughly acquainted with the content of the interviews...and transcribing provides an additional opportunity to ‘review and connect’ with the data” (p. 505).

Repeated review of the transcriptions allowed the author the opportunity to analyze the narratives for themes and to tell the “collective story” of biological children of foster parents. Warren and Karner (2005) describe the collective story as seeking “to understand the individual’s experiences within a coherent social context” (p. 243). Additionally, “the common elements from each individual’s story are used to frame the collaborative, joint accounting” (Warren & Karner, p. 244). Utilization of narrative analysis allowed the author to code the data relative to respective themes that emerged from the interviews.

The author used the interview guide as an initial frame working tool to code the data. Specifically, the questions in the interviewing guide that related to

the following areas were paramount in the coding process: 1) the parents' motivation for fostering; 2) scaling of the foster care experience; 3) the best part of having foster kids; 4) the worst part of having foster kids; 5) given the opportunity to change one thing, what would they change; 6) the effect of fostering on parental relationships; 7) how would their families be different if parents did not foster; 8) the impact of relative age and gender on their fostering experience; 9) advice to a best friend; and 10) would they foster as parents. An additional theme that emerged that was not specifically included in the interview guide was that of the grief and loss associated with foster care. This theme was salient in many of the interviews so the author included this as an additional theme to explore in the transcriptions.

The author utilized a color coding system whereby each subject's transcription was typed in a different color. The author then used a word-processing program to group together all the excerpts from each of the interviews that related to the above mentioned themes. While a variety of qualitative software programs exist which can assist the researcher in coding and grouping data, after exploring these, the author opted to rely on her personal analysis of the data as it afforded her the benefit of remaining more intimately connected to the data and less reliant on identifying themes simply based on particular word usage.

After grouping all the excerpts related to a particular theme, the author then hand-coded these excerpts for sub-themes. To uncover the sub-themes the author re-read the themed excerpts and made notations about what each child's

overall message in the excerpt was. Following this, the author analyzed all the notations to decipher if any common themes were present in the excerpts. It was from this level of analysis that the results of the study were drawn.

### *Subjects*

Purposive sampling was used to select study participants from three foster care agencies from a county in Midwest Michigan. The county has four primary traditional foster care agencies. The author attempted to include the fourth local foster care agency in the county; however, due to recent staffing changes, the agency opted not to participate in the study. The three participating agencies were all non-profit agencies that were contracted through the county to provide foster care services for children within the county. Two of the agencies had explicit religious affiliations and all three of the agencies provided additional child and family services including adoption, counseling, and family preservation programs. All three agencies have been actively involved in providing child and family services in the community between 60 to over 100 years.

To obtain the study's sample, the author met with the foster care licensing director of each agency to review the project's sampling criteria. The licensing directors then reviewed their lists of licensed foster families and identified families who have been licensed as foster parents for four or more years and have biological children residing in their homes. Families that had less than four years experience doing foster care, did not have biological children residing in the home, had never had foster children leave the home, and/or were providing kinship care were excluded from the study.

Letters introducing the project were sent to each of the families that met the above criteria. These letters consisted of a cover letter from the licensing supervisor (see Appendix C) and an introductory letter from the author on university letterhead (see Appendix D) that explained the project and requested their participation. The author's original research proposal to the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposed a passive consent process where families could return a stamped postcard if they did not wish for the author to contact them about participating in the project. However, the IRB required that families would need to return a postcard to the author if they were willing to be contacted by the author. This form of active consent may have produced a lower response rate than a passive consent approach would have (Cone & Foster, 1993).

The three agencies that were willing to participate in the study had a total of 43 families that met the sampling criteria. Introductory letters were sent to each of these 43 foster families from the three agencies. Agency A mailed 26 letters; Agency B mailed 14 letters; Agency C mailed 3 letters. From these first mailings seven families from Agency A responded; zero families from Agency B responded; one family from Agency C responded.

A follow-up letter (see Appendix E) and response postcard were sent to the families who did not respond to the first mailing. From the second mailing, three families from Agency A responded; four families from Agency B responded; zero families from Agency C responded. After the second mailing the number of families who responded was 15. Agency A had 10 families; Agency B had four;

Agency C had one. The total response rate was 35%. The individual agency response rates were 38%, 29%, and 33%, respectively.

Of the 15 families that responded, four of the families were excluded from the study. Two of the families no longer had biological children living in the home; one of the families had adopted children and not biological children living in the home; one family was not home for the scheduled interview and did not return phone calls to reschedule the interview. A total of 11 families participated in the study.

Within the 11 participating families, the author interviewed all the biological children that resided in the homes amounting to a total of 22 children being interviewed for the study. The demographics of the sample were: 12 female, 10 male, 18 Caucasian, 3 Hispanic/Caucasian, and 1 African-American. The mean age of participants was 13.8 years; the median age was 13.5 years; the age mode was 14 years; the youngest participant was 7 years old and the oldest participant was 21 years old. Socioeconomic information was not collected from the parents.

The mean age of foster care experience for the families was 8.8 years while the median was 6 years. The mode was four and six years as three families had each been providing foster care for that length of time. The longest length of foster care service was nineteen years and the shortest was four years. See Appendix F for subject codes and a summary of these demographics based on each individual participant.



All of the foster families in the study were two-parent families. Five of the families had only one biological child participate in the study; two families had two children participate in the study; three families had three children participate in the study, and one family had four children participate in the study. Some of these families had additional biological children who were no longer residing in the home, and these children were not included in the study. Additionally, one family had a disabled child who resided in the home but was physically unable to participate in an interview, and another family had a two-year-old child who was too young to participate in an interview. Three of the families had only one biological child, but each of these families had expanded their families through adoption of foster children. A total of eight of the families had adopted former foster children.

### *Setting*

Participants were invited to complete the interviews at their homes or at locations convenient to them. All of the participants opted to complete the interviews in their homes. This setting for the interviews was ideal as it allowed the author the opportunity to engage with the families in their own environments. The author was able to observe how members of the family interacted with each other as well as obtain a sense of the family's climate. After being introduced to the family, the author met privately with the parent(s) to conduct the parent interview. Following the parent interview, the author met privately with each biological child in the home. In all but two of the interviews, the author was able to meet with the child in an uninterrupted location. Two of the interviews were

interrupted by family members coming in and out of the room. However, these interruptions did not seem to have considerable impact on the data collected as the interviewees continued talking despite the interruptions.

### *Procedure*

After obtaining the foster parents' response postcards indicating their consent for the author to contact them, the author telephoned each family. The telephone conversation included a brief introduction to the study and the author, inquiry about the names and ages of the biological children in the home, and opportunity for the foster parents to ask any questions they had about the project. Furthermore, the interviews were scheduled during this conversation.

Upon arriving at the homes, the author briefly met all the family members in an attempt to establish early rapport, and then met with the parent(s) to obtain their informed consent for study participation (see Appendix G). In all of the interviews except one, the parent interview was conducted with the mother as she was identified by the family as the primary caretaker. In one of the interviews, both parents opted to participate in the interview. The author's reliance on the foster mothers as a primary source of family information fits with earlier research which also indicated mothers were the primary data source (Lemieux, 1987). Due to scheduling preferences on the part of the foster families, most of the interviews were scheduled during the day when the father was away at work. For the purposes of this study, the author did not utilize these parental narratives in the analysis of the children's experiences and therefore reliance on the mothers for family data is not seen to have significant impact on

the present study. The parent interview followed a semi-structured interview format. The interview guide (see Appendix B) provided the basis for these interviews and data collected from these interviews will be the basis for a future research project.

After completing the parent interview, the author met with the biological children who were living in the home. Prior to beginning the interviews, the author reviewed the child informed consent document (see Appendix H) with each child and answered any questions they had about the project. Conversation was also initiated by the author in an attempt to build rapport with the child. This conversation often included information about summer events, hobbies, school, etc. A semi-structured interview format utilizing an interview guide (see Appendix A) was used for these interviews as well. The parent and child(ren) interviews were completed on the same day and lasted between one to three hours.

All of the parent and child interviews were completed during a three month period in the summer. The timing of the interviews throughout the summer maximized child participation as children were home from school and had additional time during the day to complete the interviews. The author personally conducted all of the parent and child interviews. The combined number of parent and child interviews was 33. The individual child interviews ranged in time from 15 minutes to 50 minutes while the parent interviews ranged in time from 30 minutes to 75 minutes. Upon completion of the interviews, the children were

encouraged to discuss any current or future thoughts and feelings about their foster care experience with a parent and/or agency social worker.

### *Ethical Issues*

Risks of participation were clearly explained to all study participants. Specifically, children were informed that talking about their experiences related to having foster children in their homes could arouse difficult feelings for them. Parents were also informed of a similar risk and were encouraged to talk with the agency social worker should this occur. Parents and children were explicitly informed that participation was voluntary and would in no way impact their relationship with the foster care agency. Children were also instructed that they did not have to talk with the interviewer if they did not want to. Care was also taken to emphasize that there were no “right” or “wrong” answers, and that the author was simply interested in hearing the child’s thoughts and feelings about the experience.

The clearest benefit to participating in the study was contributing to our understanding of what it is like for biological children to have foster children reside in their homes. Parents were informed that their agencies would be disseminating the findings of the study to them through a presentation by the author and/or a written summary of the project. Additionally, participating in the study validated participants’ experiences by allowing them to give voice to how having foster children in their home impacted them. The author did not provide payment to participants. Weiss states, “Payment doesn’t seem to make a difference in respondent’s willingness to participate. If the interview goes well,

payment is largely irrelevant to the respondent's experience....if it doesn't go well; payment won't make the experience better." (1994, p. 58). To express my gratitude for their participation, the author did send thank you notes to each of the families following the interviews.

A relevant factor to the study is the author's own experience as a biological child of foster parents and as a foster parent herself. This personal connection with the foster care experience largely motivated the author's interest in this topic. Warren and Karner (2005) acknowledge this as legitimate and state that by studying others with similar experiences we can come to a greater understanding of our own biographies.

Throughout the research process, the author was intentional about processing her own experiences while at the same time allowing the individual stories of the participants to be told. The author deliberately communicated her foster care experience to the participants. Weiss (1994) suggested that an advantage to this compatibility with respondents is that it likely leads to greater acceptance of the interviewer and a greater likelihood that the interviewer will understand what the respondents are communicating. Ultimately, both of these factors can serve to strengthen the research partnership between interviewer and respondent (Weiss).

Confidentiality of participants was secured throughout the project. The agencies mailed the initial contact letters to the foster parents, and the response postcards were sent directly to the author. The agencies do not have knowledge of which families elected to participate in the project. All data collected during the

course of the research has been kept securely in the author's office and identifying information has been concealed. Additionally, the author modified any references in the transcripts to actual people by changing the names and/or identifying information. Each study participant has been given an alphabetical code which is used in the following sections to identify participants prior to any inclusion of their narrative accounts in the text. Appendix F provides a listing of these codes and related demographics.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESULTS

The narratives generated from the author's interviews with 22 biological children of long-term foster parents contained rich accountings of how these individuals perceived their experiences. When analyzing the transcripts of their accounts, the author was able to identify several categories of responses that were paramount in answering the study's seminal question: what is it like for biological children of long-term foster parents to live with foster children in their homes? These categories which were then evaluated for themes included 1) the parents' motivation for fostering; 2) scaling of the foster care experience; 3) the best part of having foster kids; 4) the worst part of having foster kids; 5) given the opportunity to change one thing, what would they change; 6) the effect of fostering on parental relationships; 7) how would their families be different if parents did not foster; 8) the impact of relative age and gender on fostering experience; 9) advice to a best friend; 10) would they foster as parents; and 11) foster care as loss. In reading excerpts from the narrative accounts in this section, the reader can refer to Appendix F for a listing of participants, their ages, gender, years fostering, and sibling connections.

#### *Parents' Motivation for Fostering*

When asked to explain why their parents decided to become foster parents, all but one of the participants (U) had an explanation. Most of the children's answers focused on one of three reasons: 1) their parents liked

children and wanted to help them; 2) their parents wanted more children; and/or 3) their parents had personal experiences as children that motivated them to reach out to others. Some of the children's responses touched on more than one of the above themes. The most common response given by 14 of the participants was related to number one above: the children believed that their parents had a general liking of children and a desire to help children in need.

Representative responses from a few of these individuals follow:

**E:** My dad has a huge caring heart. It's another way for him to do something to make a difference in someone's life.

**K:** They just love kids and wanted to help people out.

**L:** My mom and dad are very kind people and like to help everyone else out and make the world a better place.

The second most frequent response centered on the children's belief that their parents wanted more children. In all, seven of the children's responses fit under this criteria. Four of the seven children did have parents who acknowledged to the author that fertility difficulties were an impetus for them becoming foster and eventually adoptive parents. Responses from these children reflected their awareness of their parents' desire for more children:

**C:** My mom couldn't have another child, and she wanted another boy or girl.

**G:** They wanted more kids, and wanted me to be happy. Probably they didn't know I was happy like I was back then. I'm still happy, but sometimes I want to be the only child.



**J:** They wanted more brothers and sisters for us because it was kind of boring with just three kids.

The final area that was a significant theme in several of the children's responses addressed their parents' experiences as children. Three siblings had a mother who was the biological child of foster parents, and they each expressed the belief that her prior experience with fostering motivated her to become a foster parent herself. Three other respondents each from different families expressed an awareness of a difficult experience their parent(s) had endured that motivated them to become foster parents. Two of the children had mothers who had experienced abuse as children; and one of the children had parents who suffered the death of a child. Two of their responses read:

**D:** I know my mother had different things when she was growing up, and she looked at it that she didn't want other kids to go through that....I think it's I want to help you because I wish I had help.

**E:** My mom when she was younger went through some times of abuse, just really nasty dark family secrets. She herself has experienced it, and she has the knowledge and experience to help these kids that are coming from these sorts of families that are broken and really have some issues. For her it was the knowledge that she's been through it, and she could help them and give them the love and support they need.

A final response given by one individual to the question of why his parents decided to become foster parents indicated that he believed they wanted to teach children about God.

## *Scaling*

One of the questions included in the interview guide utilized a versatile scaling technique borrowed from solution-focused interviewing (DeJong & Berg, 1998). The scaling technique essentially asks individuals to rate their experience on a scale of 1 to 10. Once they have identified a particular rating, the interviewer can explore for times when their ratings may have been higher and/or lower and for what factors would contribute to making their ratings higher and/or lower. DeJong and Berg noted that "Scaling is a useful technique for making complex aspects of the client's life more concrete and accessible to both practitioner and client" (p. 99).

During the course of the interviews, the author asked each child to rate his/her experience with fostering on a scale of 1 to 10 with one being absolutely hate it/awful and 10 being absolutely love it/wonderful. Some of the children benefited from a visual example of a rating scale which the author then drew on paper for them. This technique was beneficial in the child interviews as it allowed the children the opportunity to rate their experiences while at the same time contextualizing what the meaning behind their ratings was.

When analyzing the interview transcripts for responses connected to this question, three themes became apparent. The first theme was that most of the biological children found the fostering experience to be a positive undertaking. The second theme was that particular foster children and relative ages of the foster children could make the experience better or worse for the biological

children. A third theme was that over time the experience got both better and worse for some biological children.

A simple review of the specific numbers given to the experience by the biological children suggests an overall positive experience for them. Applying a quantitative review of just the number rankings given by the children, produces a mean ranking of 8.02, a median of 8.5, and a mode of 10. In all, the most frequent response given was a 10 as five of the children rated the experience in this way. The second most common rating was "between an eight and a nine" with four respondents selecting this. All of the other selected ratings either had one or two children choosing them. A rating of five was the lowest rating given by any of the children, and two children selected this.

A sampling of the responses from individuals rating the experience as a 10 include the following:

**B:** Definitely a 10. I don't think there are near enough good foster parents out there. I think we still need to get more. I'm glad my parents do it. We have the finances and room to do it so why not. Like I said, it's hard but there are still little kids out there who need a place to go. It irritates me that they need to come into foster care, but it makes me happy that there are families like ours to take them in and show them this is how it should be. It's not always so bad.

**H:** Definitely a 10, it's always exciting especially because you get to help out kids who don't have good families, most of their stories are really sad and it's just so much fun to get to help them....I like the way I can help

them it's not just my parents. The way they grow to love you back when you love them. It feels like an achievement for me and not only an achievement just for me it makes me proud of my family that they all work together to help them.

**S:** I think it was always a 10. I really enjoy it.

Other positive comments from individuals who rated the experience include:

**D:** I would say 8. The reason why is I like the fact that we got to get to know so many different people. It wasn't just getting to know them and their lives, but we got to see other ways of life through those kids. Some people never get the chance to see the person who lives on the other side and how they live and people who had to overcome things. I really liked it because of that. We really got to get in these kids lives and be friends with them. A lot of them made some really positive changes and we were part of it....There's not too much negative. Overall it's been a positive experience.

**L:** ...probably like an eight or nine because it's not 10 because it's not always perfect and you don't always get along with everyone. The kids can be naughty, but I like doing it; it's fun. My friend is an only child and she wishes she had siblings. To have younger brothers and sisters look up to you and want to be like you and admire you is nice.

Two respondents found the experience to be overall positive, but they found the busyness related to having more kids to be difficult.

**P:** It's a nine because it's fun having kids around to play with them and why it's a nine and not a 10 is because it's busier.

**T:** ...seven or eight; there are lot of kids around and it gets hectic once in a while.

Of the five respondents who rated the experience the lowest (i.e. below a seven), a full review of the transcripts suggested that three of the five individuals had overall positive feelings toward the experience. The individuals with the three lowest ratings were all males and were chronologically the youngest children in the sample. Two of these males had an overall unfavorable perception of the experience. Both of these two were only children in the family prior to the parents fostering and adopting. The reasons given for their unfavorable perceptions of the experience include frustration with the “bugging” and the “meanness”. When prompted by the interviewer to describe the “meanness”, one child offered the following response:

**G:** Like when we want to watch a movie and someone else wants to watch a different movie. We can't agree and then dad says we have to go to bed.

The age and the particular characteristics of the foster children influenced the ranking that fourteen of the biological children gave to the experience. Seven of the fourteen participants indicated that having children who were younger than they were made the experience more positive for them. One respondent believed having an age-mate would make the experience more favorable, and one other child felt having older children would make the experience more

positive. Summary responses from the children preferring younger children include the following:

**M:** Most of the foster kids we have are around my age. They don't like to get along with me. They like to fight with me a lot. They love to make me mad, and then I start crying and have to go in my room to calm down.... Younger kids don't bother me much unless they get really hyper and get into stuff.

**R:** I like having the little kids around to play with....I like to take care of them a lot...I sometimes pull them on the wagon.

Four of these seven individuals who believed that having younger children contributed to a more positive fostering experience specifically expressed an enjoyment related to caring for an infant.

The individual who believed having older children would make the experience more positive indicated a frustration with the additional work associated with younger children. She summarizes her experience as follows:

**E:** ...especially with having younger kids, it takes a whole lot of time. My mom has a lot of meetings, yard work, and things. That leaves a lot of the babysitting, housework, cooking, and responsibility to me and my sister. Sometimes that's a pain in the butt.

The child who found the experience to be more enjoyable when the foster child was close in age to him indicated that this allowed him a playmate who enjoyed the same activities he did.

Responses on how the overall fostering experience was impacted by the particular foster child included the following:

**J:** ...not all foster kids are like really good but some of them are....five because sometimes you like it and sometimes you don't.

**I:** Sometimes it can be a five because you get really really frustrated and some of them throw fits and stuff and then you have to get after them.

**H:** Normally it starts at about a six or seven but it works up the scale and I'm always satisfied at the end. Sometimes we have foster children, Abby and Shanda. Abby drove me crazy. Her attitude wasn't my favorite. It was her I loved, just not her attitude. Even if I graded her attitude as a seven, I still loved them as a 10. It would go up and down depending on who it was and how they acted, but normally it would stay a 10.

**E:** Generally speaking, it depends on who is placed with us. We had two boys who both had severe developmental and emotional issues. They were very difficult to deal with. That put a lot of stress on us as individuals and as a family. We were tired and stressed out and snapping at each other all the time.

**D:** It's hard to make this person your sibling if they don't want to. We've had both extremes where they don't even want to live here and where they're calling us brother and sister to their friends. It's been different with every kid....when you get a new kid they either adjust to it and like it or they don't. Their attitudes depend on how they evolve into the house. If we had a kid who was super defiant, I wouldn't like that. I want them to

respect my parents. Each kid is different and there are ups and downs. It changes with each kid that comes in.

The final theme that was apparent in the individual and collective responses to the scaling question was that of the experience getting better or worse over time. Six respondents specifically addressed the changing nature of their perspective on the experience. Four of the six found themselves viewing the experience more positively over time, while two of the six found their perspective on the experience to be increasingly negative.

The two individuals who over time were viewing their experience less favorably were the two youngest participants. Both were male and were only children prior to adopting and fostering. One of the respondents indicated that at first having other kids in the house was “all the way to 10”, but then the “bugging started and then it started going down, down, down”. Both children expressed difficulty in adjusting to the sharing of parental attention as well as personal belongings.

In contrast, the four individuals whose perceptions of the experience became more favorable over time indicated that initially they had difficulty adjusting to the need to share parental time and family belongings, but found that over time and with maturity this became easier. Three of these respondents were adolescent females, and one was a 10 year-old male. The adolescent females specifically addressed how the experience was more difficult for them when they were younger due to a lack of awareness about the needs of the foster children and a greater level of personal egocentrism. Maturity proved



favorable to their perspectives on the experience as the following quotes

illustrate:

**L:** I used to kind of think a five, but my mom talked to me about what they've been through why they act like that. Sometimes they just need attention. When I was younger it was lower, but now it's an eight or nine.

**O:** When I was younger, probably a three or four, but as I got older it became an eight or nine. When I was younger it was horrible. It's always the parents' attention. Their (i.e., foster children) needs always had to come first. We knew we were loved by my parents, but if I wanted my mom's attention I would have to wait. The foster kids always had more doctor appointments and stuff than we did. Parental attention was a major thing. I was my mom's kid. I should come first. It was always like they came first and I came 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> or whatever depending on how many kids we had. Most of the foster kids were younger and I was usually the oldest so I had to take care of myself. When I was younger it was really hard. I liked being the oldest, but at times it was hard. When kids came I would have to help them and their needs had to come first....

**Interviewer:** Tell me more about how it transitioned from a three-four to an eight-nine.

**O:** I think it was just getting older and realizing that my parents love me no matter what and these kids just need it more...I feel like I just got to put their needs before mine.

**Interviewer:** What brought that understanding?

**O:** Just growing up, and my mom kept telling me I'll always love you it's just these kids need it right now. And doing it myself, showing affection for them, and then realizing it gives me a good feeling just saying I love you....Slowly over time, I just realized it. You grow up and you stop putting yourself first and you put others first. I realized I had it pretty nice....It's just realizing that I shouldn't be so selfish.

### *Best Part*

When considering the best part of having foster children in the family, four main themes emerged from the interviews: having more kids to play with, being able to benefit someone else, gaining parenting and social skills, and getting the opportunity to adopt the foster children. While some of the interviewees identified more than one theme in their responses, at least one of the above themes was identifiable in each of the interviews.

The majority of interviewees, 12 of the 22 participants, reported that the best part of having foster children in the family was having more kids to play with. This was particularly true for the male participants as seven out of the ten males indicated this to be the best part as did two of the three participants who were the only biological children in the family. Characteristic responses from the entire sample include:

**A:** The best thing is probably having someone to play with.

**C:** ...having more people in the house. It's better to have four or five people to have a snowball fight than one or two. It's better with numbers.

**P:** ...having them live at our house and playing with them during the day

or going outside.

**T:** ...having someone to play with and have fun with.

**U:** ...having someone about your age that you can play with.

The second most common theme related to the best part of fostering centered on the feeling of altruism that it provided the interviewees with. Five of the 22 participants had responses that fit under this theme. Each of the five respondents was female and all of them but one were over eighteen years of age. Their responses spoke to the enjoyment they felt knowing that they had helped someone else.

**B:** To watch them have fun and have them see life is not so bad. Best part for me is seeing the best parts for them.

**E:** Best Part: Best part of having foster kids is seeing the kids change while they're here....when the kids come here they've been through horrible things and when they come here and have some stability and unconditional love. It's really cool to see how they change and blossom. Their personalities come out. It's really neat to see them change like that....I don't know if there are too many personal benefits beside the personal satisfaction of seeing these kids change and stabilize.

**K:** ...probably seeing them happy again. How they act around my brothers and sisters and just being happy again and being able to laugh. When we first get the kids they're so sad and depressed. At night we always give hugs to each other and the kids wouldn't even want a hug. Seeing the change is very rewarding.

**M:** Knowing that some of them are going home because their parents worked it out and like knowing they're going to be OK once they come out of our house.

**O:** Seeing how their face can light up when you help them. I can help someone change. We had foster boys who came back and said, "Do you know what a difference you made in my life?" You really thought about it; I can make a difference in someone's life. I was shown something different. It may not seem like much to us, because they weren't with us for very long, but it made a difference. We can show them there is more than living on the street or what they're used to. It always makes me happy to find that I did something to change someone.

A third theme related to the best part of fostering was the perceived benefit it had on the parenting and social skill development of the respondents. Five of the respondents believed that being part of a foster family helped them know how to get along better with others, to understand and appreciate individual and group differences, and to be a parent themselves one day. Characteristic responses follow:

**D:** Having different people in your home, it really does more than you think it does....we had so many different types of kids here. When I worked at camp, it helped me with that because we had some kids who were good at sports some that didn't like sports, some good at school and some not. I think the best part is you learn how to be friends with

someone who is totally different. Some people don't realize how to do this.

**E:** I've got the mommy role down. I'm good to go on that.

**F:** ...being able to love them I guess and over time realizing that's what you feel towards them.

**H:** I think the best part is just the love because you can feel the love in our house. When they first come it's like they're friends or pen pals. You've heard about them. People tell you about them before they come and you're anxious about them coming. Then you get to know them and they become like your best friends even if they're babies and then you love them and they love you back. That's my favorite part knowing you love them and they love you back.

**O:** I think just the perspective--the whole naïve thing. When I was younger I thought everyone had a mom and dad with lots of love. I would never know what I know now. It changed my perspective. I like to know about people and it's really interesting to see how people live differently than I do.

The last emergent theme related to the best part of fostering was the opportunity to adopt the foster children. Two male respondents identified this as the best part. One of the males is the only biological child in the family, and his family has already adopted foster children. The other male has biological and adopted siblings in the family. Both respondents were very brief and direct in their responses:

**N:** (pause...) getting the chance to keep them.

**V:** Well, if it doesn't work out with their family you get to keep them.

### *Worst Part*

Upon probing about the worst part of the foster care experience, all but two of interviewees responded in one of three general areas. These areas included: 1) foster child behaviors and/or characteristics; 2) foster children leaving the foster home; and 3) higher levels of personal responsibility required from the biological children. Although two of the responses did not fit under any of these general themes, they are worth mentioning as they do provide insight into the experience of the biological child of foster parents. One of these responses specifically identified dealing with the negative perceptions and lack of awareness others have about fostering as being the worst part:

**D:** ...school made some of it bad because you end up being the 'foster family' who always has new kids. You have to deal with the stereotype that foster parents just do it for money. Not many people around here do foster care, so we became 'that family'. Your house becomes the charity case house. That was the worst part. You have to explain to everyone because a lot of people don't know what foster care is so you have to be the educator which isn't bad, but when you're younger you don't want to do that.

The second respondent, a 14 year-old male, identified the house being "a lot more crowded" as the worst part of fostering. Similarly, his later response to

what he would change about the experience of fostering addressed the very practical issue that the house is often “too noisy”.

The most frequent response (i.e., eleven children addressed this) to what the worst part of fostering is centered on issues related to foster children's behaviors and/or characteristics. Six of these respondents also indicated later in the interviews that if they could change one thing about the fostering experience they would change the negative behaviors of the foster children. Two of the 11 children whose responses fit under this theme identified having a foster child near the same age as them was the worst part. This was true of B, a 19 year-old female, who found “girls around my age” to be difficult and for M, a 13 year-old female, who expressed that “people around my age...push my buttons because they like to see me get mad.”

The remaining nine respondents spoke more to the annoying and defiant behaviors of the foster children as being the worst part. A few of these responses from individuals of varying age and gender follow:

**C:** They always seem to be messy; they always seem to be disrespectful.

**H:** I can get frustrated really bad and it's really hard to hold it back without screaming at them. It ruins my day and I hate that because then I'm mad at everybody.

**J:** ...the fits and that stuff.

**L:** ...when you get kids that steal from you or really bad kids that act out and are naughty, mainly stealing from you or my family....I'll start to love her (i.e. foster child) and she just betrayed us. She turned on us, and it

made me really mad to think that she would do that. We opened our house to her and bought her food and clothes, and she just treated us like she didn't care.

**Q:** ...she (i.e. foster child) would follow me everywhere. I like having kids around, but she wouldn't even let me go to the bathroom alone. Looking back on it, it wasn't bad, but at the moment you like to have a little space. She would like to get into stuff. Little things can be annoying. Every kid does it.

**U:** Having them wake you up early in the morning or keeping me up at night.

The second most prominent response to what the worst part of fostering is focused on the difficulty of foster children leaving the home. Five respondents from five different families addressed this as being a challenge. Illustrative responses include:

**F:** It's hard. Before Madison came I was still crying about other kids that left. It's hard. I don't really cope with it. I just stop thinking about it. It's really hard when they leave. They become your brothers and sisters and then they get taken away from you and you don't get to see them anymore

**N:** Having them taken away.

**O:** I think the hardest is seeing them go. We had kids leave. We see them grow up and go to school for the first time. They grow up before our eyes and then we see them go. You build a relationship with them so it's hard when they go.



In two of the responses the children address their grief in seeing the children leave as well as a sense of futility about the experience:

**B:** ...seeing the baby leave. We saw her grow up. She said her first words here, walked here. We learned to take care of her and she just up and left. It's kind of like for what.

**K:** ...when you know you can't help them and there's nothing you can do and they have to go somewhere else to a residential home. When you know they're going to be in a whole bunch of trouble someday and be in and out of juvey.

The final major theme in the responses to the worst part of fostering addressed the biological children's awareness that they have to shoulder additional household and childcare responsibilities as a result of fostering. The four respondents who addressed this come from three different families and are both males and females of varying ages. Two male children provided very direct responses:

**P:** ... taking care of them when you don't want to.

**V:** I have to babysit them.

One of the female respondents provided a more reflective summary of what the fostering experience entails for her:

**E:** ...the time and energy that it takes. It takes a lot of time and a lot of patience especially with little kids. It takes a lot of time and time away from doing anything by yourself. I don't get to hang out with friends and my boyfriend as much as I'd like, and I don't get too much 'me time'.

There's a lot of kid care a lot of cooking and cleaning trying to keep up with the kids. It takes a lot of time and energy. Anything we do has to be child oriented or we have to find a babysitter, or pack up all the kid stuff.

Interviewer: What stops you from doing 'me' things?

**E:** Sometimes, it's that my parents say flat out no we need your help here and other times I just see they need my help. The house gets to be a mess, dinner needs to get made, someone needs to get cleaned up or picked up. There's so much to do sometimes I can't even think about getting away it's just not possible.

### *Change One Thing*

The reflections that the children offered on what the worst part of fostering was led to the next area of exploration in the interviews which was if they had the ability to change one thing about fostering what would they change. Upon being prompted to identify one thing they would change about the foster care experience, most of the interviewees (i.e., 19 out of 22) provided responses that fit under three main categories: 1) child specific changes, 2) no changes at all, and 3) adjustments related to kids coming and going from the home. The three remaining individual responses that did not fit under any of these general themes addressed: the age the child was when her parents started fostering, the space limitations in the home, and the child welfare system as a whole. In this response area, there were not any salient connections between the interviewees' responses and the demographics of the sample (i.e., age, gender, siblings).

Changing issues associated with particular children placed in the home was a prominent theme for 11 of the interviewees. Specifically, many of the participants wished that the typical sibling arguing, bugging, and annoying could be stopped. When prompted, most respondents indicated that they felt similar irritations toward their biological siblings. Two of the interviewees wished they could change the age of the foster children. One respondent wished the foster children could be the same age as him, and the other respondent preferred younger children who were not as “scarred” and were more susceptible to “molding.” Two other respondents indicated that they wished for better behavior from the foster children, but they viewed that as somewhat unrealistic and therefore did not wish to change anything about the experience. The following is one of those responses:

**E:** ...make them all perfect little angels, no behavior problems. Honestly, I don't think I'd change anything. I don't think I could change anything without making it too different.

The following responses are illustrative of the broader theme related to changing foster children's behavior:

**A:** I would change Sam bugging me; the copying me, the following...

**G:** Could I change one kid for another kid? ...sometimes the kids are mean to me and pick on me and I don't really like that so when they go I don't really care. I'm kind of happy, but kind of sad too.

**H:** The attitude like I wouldn't want the kids to be so annoying and frustrating. I guess I choose to be frustrated but I wouldn't want them to

be so annoying to where it tempted me to be frustrated with them. It would make my life a little easier.

Interviewer Question: Is it the same as with biological siblings?

**H:** Pretty much, actually I get a little more frustrated with my biological siblings....It doesn't so much frustrate me that they get more attention than me. It's the noise and bugging that bothers me.

**I:** Stop the arguing so much because sometimes they're minds are different than ours so it's hard not to argue because a lot of times they disagree with you.

**T:** How noisy they get.

There were seven interviewees who responded that they would not change anything about the foster care experience. Two additional respondents said they would not change anything after ruling out that changing individual children was not possible. The following two responses are characteristic of the general theme of not wanting to change anything:

**S:** That's a hard question. I don't know if I'd change anything. I just love it. It's like having little brothers or sisters.

**V:** I don't know, it seems to be fine.

The nature of foster care involves somewhat of a revolving door where children come and go from the home. Three of the respondents wished they could change this. Two of the children found the leaving most difficult. One of the children who had teenage foster children staying with the family describes her experience as follows:

**D:** I guess I would change the fact that some of them left on their own. It makes the situation awkward because it's weird because they still call. I want to ask them, "Why did you leave if you like it here?" I would change the way that some of them left because some left in not such good circumstances. You wonder, what did we do, did we do something? We've talked with Tony and he said it's not us he just wanted to get with his family. I tell myself that's why they do that, but I would change how some of them left. That makes it easier, but I wish they wouldn't have left like that.

The other child who expressed a desire to change the leaving process indicated that there were times when he wished the family could have adopted the foster children, but they were reunited with their birth families. The individual who wanted to change how new kids came into the home stated:

**L:** ...when they come into our house that they could feel comfortable right away to call us brothers and sisters and mom and dad. It usually takes a while. It's just kind of weird when they first come.

The three additional responses to what they would change were varied. One respondent wanted a bigger home so everyone could have their own bedroom. Another interviewee wished she was a little older before her parents started doing foster care. She felt that she would have gotten more attention then as well as be better prepared to address the needs of the foster children. Part of her response follows:

F: I wasn't exactly mature enough then. With the kids we had then I wish I could have done better and been more mature with them. When I would baby sit I wasn't as open to what they wanted to do. We only had little kids when we first started and I wasn't mature enough to handle that.

The final response addressed a desire to change the child welfare system as a whole. In particular, the interviewee expressed a frustration with the time process involved with foster care and that sometimes parents get too much time to make changes.

### *Impact on Parental Relationship*

During the course of the interviews, almost all of the children indicated that they have what they consider to be close relationships with their parents. Most of them believed they could openly communicate with their parents about personal issues as well as their perspectives on the fostering experience. Only three participants, males who were 13 years of age or younger, indicated that they did not really talk with their parents about the fostering experience. Three other individuals professed to have a close relationship with their parents, but they acknowledged that they have at times withheld their feelings about fostering out of fear that if their parents knew how they felt about it, they might stop fostering. The following two quotes highlight this tension:

E: If I feel a placement isn't working for our family, I'd zip my lips and put up with it because that's what it takes sometimes.

F: I guess I'm scared that if I share some of the feelings that I have they would want to stop because they don't want me to feel that way and get

hurt again. I can share some of things, but I don't know if I could be completely honest because I know they'd stop if I told them some of the things I feel, and I don't want them to do that.

When considering the impact that fostering has had on their relationships with their parents, seven children expressed a belief that fostering had affected their relationships with their parents. Four of them found it to be a positive effect while the three others found it be a negative effect. Representative sentiments of the children noting a positive effect are reflected below:

**D:** Fostering brought us closer because it gave us one more thing to discuss. It has unconsciously made us way more thankful for our parents and everything they've done....seeing what some kids have and the situations they've been in, it makes me want to get closer to my parents and know them better. You don't realize how good you have it until you see other people.

**L:** I can talk with my mom and dad about anything. We're really close, and it helps having foster kids because it gives us more opportunity to talk about more stuff.

**O:** It made me wonder if we didn't have foster kids, would I be close with my parents. I think it's made my relationship stronger. I could show kids how to talk to my mom about how they were feeling.

In contrast, the three respondents who felt the experience had a negative impact on their relationships with their parents expressed a belief that the time that it took to care for the foster children took time away from time that they could have

had with their parents. However, one of these respondents also expressed a belief that in some ways “welcoming all these children” brought them “closer together as a family”.

*What would be Different?*

In reply to probing about how things would be different for them as individuals and as families if their parents were to stop doing foster care, the majority of participants responded in one of four ways: 1) they would lose and miss the relationships formed with foster siblings; 2) they would be less busy but bored; 3) they would be less mature; and 4) they were unsure of what the change would be. An additional response by two respondents indicated that their families would have more freedom and money to do things if they were not providing foster care. Seven respondents addressed how specifically their parents would be bored and/or sad if they were no longer providing foster care. Responses reflecting the children’s concern about their parents’ reactions to the cessation of foster care include the following:

**B:** My parents would be sad. They’ve always wanted a big family and after my brother, my mom couldn’t have more kids. So they never would have gotten more kids. The chance to expand their family and make a difference in kids lives, they wouldn’t have gotten to do. They would have been sad.

**D:** I think they would be bored, honestly....They’d be looking for something to do. There would be nothing to go to.



**E:** ...a lot different. They'd hang out more with other couples, and be able to get out more. More time for the two of them. But I don't think they would have liked that because they get more satisfaction out of this than they would have out of that.

**O:** I think my mom would be really sad because she's really connected to them. My dad wouldn't be too different because he works all the time so he's hardly here. My parents think about the empty nest, but I don't know if my mom could do it. She needs something to do. It keeps her on her toes, and she really pours her heart into it.

Specific concern about the loss of relationships developed with former foster children, adopted siblings, and future foster children was expressed by eight of the interviewees when asked about what would be different if their parents were not foster parents. These eight respondents included both males and females and represented various ages. Characteristic responses to what would be different included the following:

**D:** It would be really different because I'm used to having kids be here. It would take the whole big sister thing away. It would be weird because I've been the older sibling now and it would take that away.

**H:** I wouldn't have as many people to play with. I wouldn't have as many chances to teach little kids or when I'm older have the chance to have them come over to my house.

**J:** It would be boring because I'd only have sisters. I'd be the only person to pass on the family name. With foster caring it's a lot funner because you don't have the same people everyday.

An additional seven respondents acknowledged that the family would be less busy, but they also indicated a greater likelihood of feeling bored. Many of the children were able to express that having foster children involved a great deal of effort on the part of the entire family, but the family had become accustomed to the added responsibilities and many of them enjoyed these responsibilities.

Illustrative responses include the following:

**F:** Our house would be quiet. Before foster care life was normal in some sense, but when they're here it's different. We'd be lonely. We have a lot of things, but the kids occupy a lot of our time. It would be too different. I wouldn't be able to cope with the change that quickly.

**K:** It would be quiet. It would be extremely different because there is always someone new in the house. That would be hard because there wouldn't be anything to do. I help with the kids a lot, doing homework, making food, playing outside. It would just be weird because there wouldn't be anything to do.

**L:** It would be weird because we would have a lot smaller schedule. We have a lot of appointments. I don't think me and my siblings would get as much out of life. We've gotten so much out of the kids that have come.

**M:** It'd be really quiet and less hectic. Kids wouldn't be running around all the time.

**Interviewer:** Would you like that?

**M:** No, I'm kind of used to it being really loud. It would be boring.

Four respondents from two different families expressed a specific belief that foster care contributed to making them a more mature, socially aware, and/or grateful individual and that had they not been part of a foster family this would not have occurred. These individuals included three females and one male all of whom were over the age of 14. Their reflective responses summarize their sentiments:

**B:** I bet I'd take more for granted. Knowing I'm not going to come home to a dad who beats me. Just the knowledge I've gained from watching these kids come in and out. I wouldn't have that.

**C:** We would have been more spoiled....we've grown up knowing we have to work for things. We are very good getting along with other people. We're easygoing and I think that comes from the stress and the relationships we've had to grow up with people coming in the house. If we hadn't had that we wouldn't be quite how we are now.

**E:** I've had foster kids my entire high school. I would have hung out with friends a lot more. I would have more fun with that. I definitely wouldn't be the person I am today. I'd be a lot more immature. I'd be a lot more naïve. I probably wouldn't want to be a social worker if we didn't do this. That would be really different though and that's hard to imagine. Having these kids come into our home has made me want to keep helping these

kids even when I'm not at home, and social work is a way I feel like I can continue to do that.

**F:** I know that one of my teachers told me he'd seen me become more mature and that I'm more mature than other kids in his class. I wouldn't have as much knowledge. I'd be more nervous about having kids of my own, but I've had a lot of training. I wouldn't be the person I am now is all I can basically say.

### *Age and Gender Thoughts*

When the author explored the interviews for themes related to the relative age and gender of the foster children, age was a much more salient issue for the biological children than gender was. The biological children had various feelings related to being older than the foster children in the home, being younger than the foster children in the home, and being the same age as the foster children in the home. Only four of the biological children addressed gender as an issue. Two males (C & J, ages 17 and 9 years, respectively) identified having a male the same age as preferential:

**C:** It would be easier to have a same age boy. Boys like to get out and be outside. Girls like to stay inside. With a boy, I can throw a football, go for a bike ride...

The other two respondents who addressed gender as a placement issue were females who specifically found having other females the same age as them to be the most problematic placement. The following response from a 19 year-old female is representative of their concerns:

**B:** Having girls around my age was difficult. It's like having a girl you don't like at school living in your house and that's rough.

**Interviewer prompt:** Tell me more about that.

**B:** It's a constant conflict because the only place you can get away is your room, and we've had times where we had to share rooms. We have a big house, but it's not that big. You have it with friends too where in the small town you have to share friends too and then you're in competition.

A much more pervasive theme in the interviews centered on the relative age of the foster child. A common preference among the biological children was to have foster children that were younger than they were. In fact, 18 out of the 22 participants specified a preference to have the foster children be younger than they were. Of the four respondents who did not specify this preference, one (A) made no comment at all about age preferences, two others (C & E, 17- and 18-year-olds, respectively) indicated that younger children can be more work and can get "underfoot", and the final participant (J, age 9 years) stated a preference for older children because "they could help me with my homework if I had a question."

The remaining 18 participants spoke very preferentially about having foster children who were younger than they were. The two main themes related to why they preferred this were that younger children were more fun and that they enjoyed the responsibilities and status that came with being an older sibling. Responses that reflect the "fun" aspect of caring for younger children include:

**L:** If it's a younger kid, it's fun to have a little kid or baby in the house.

**N:** ...with younger kids it's a lot more fun.

**P:** It's fun having little kids around.

Illustrative comments from individuals who preferred younger children because they enjoyed the status and responsibility of being an older sibling are as follows:

**D:** I think I like the younger ones because I was older and could help them more. It was cool to be the older sibling because I'd never been that before. I kind of like that a little better....with my personality, I act like everyone's mom, even my older brother.

**G:** I want to be older than everyone. I want to be the big brother because I get to watch them, and I get to be in charge.

**U:** Foster care is actually quite fun, because I used to be the youngest in our family and now I'm not.

**Interviewer:** What do you like about not being youngest?

**U:** I get to be in charge.

Not only did most of the biological children express a preference for younger children, eight of them also specified a preference against having foster children who were older than they were living in the home. Five of the eight had actually experienced this and found it unfavorable. Examples of their responses follow:

**C:** If they're older they come in the house and think they can boss you around.

**K:** I don't like older. It's harder because they've been through so much. You don't really know everything they've been through.

**N:** We were taking in juvenile teens and I was always the youngest. I don't like it when we have those older kids.

The remaining three who preferred not having foster children who were older than they were but had not experienced that type of placement had differing reasons for this preference. One of the three was the oldest child in the family and preferred to keep this position in the family hierarchy. The remaining two had concerns about the more negative behaviors that older children would have and an inability to discipline them. One of these responses from a 10-year-old female follows:

**I:** If they're older you can't really punish them, and they could hate you and hurt you bad, but younger kids you can have them sit on their bed.

One respondent, a 21-year-old female, who had experienced having older foster children in the home was more ambivalent about her experience. She summarizes:

**O:** I liked having an older sister. It was nice to have someone to look up to, but it still sucked at the same time.

On the issue of having foster children the same age as they were, the biological children had more divergent responses. Four participants (B: 19-year-old, D: 21-year-old, M: 13-year-old, & Q: 16-year-old) thought that having a foster child their same age would be or had been less than ideal for them. Three of the four participants had experienced this type of placement and found it to be difficult. As identified earlier, two of them particularly found girls of their same age to be most difficult. The other two respondents expressed difficulties related

to attending the same school/classes as the foster children and having to share more things with the foster children who were their age.

In contrast, there were six participants (C, H, I, J, L, & N), ranging in age from 9-17 years, who believed having a foster child their same age would be a positive experience. Of the six, only one of them (L) had actually experienced having a foster child her same age stay in the home, and she indicated that it was fun having “someone to hang out with”. The other five participants all aged 12 years or under except one, expressed a belief that it would be like having a best friend live with the family. Examples of their responses to the question of: If you could pick an age for the foster children to be, what age would you pick?

**J (nine-year-old male):** probably 9 or 10, and I'd like it to be a boy because they'd like to play the same stuff I do.

**I:** I'd like to have someone my age to talk with and play with and ride bikes with.

### *Foster Care as Loss*

While the author did not specifically or intentionally plan to explore the biological children's feelings of loss related to foster care. The issue became a theme in several of the narratives. The biological children felt loss in a variety of ways: when foster children left the home as expected, when foster children left the home due to their unmanageable behaviors, when expected adoptions did not occur, when correspondence with former foster children went unanswered. Some of the biological children acknowledged that seeing some children leave



was harder than seeing others leave. A sampling of their sentiments related to loss follow:

**B:** Sometimes it's harder than others. It's sad when they leave.

Everyone takes it different. Some kids I could really care less if they leave or not. I know this sounds awful. Some kids you cry when they leave and some years later you're still getting over it. It varies person to person and foster kid to foster kid. I still think of one girl quite frequently. One kid endangered my brother, and I'm glad he left....You know when they come that they're not all going to be able to stay. We know that when they come....Sometimes when they leave it's hard and you're ready to call it quits too, but there are more kids out there and you're thinking we still have room so you keep going.

**C:** Sometimes we'd think children would be staying permanent in the house, that we'd be adopting them, and then they'd just leave. I got really good bonds with them, and it was hard to not see them everyday. Sometimes, letting that bond go and knowing you won't ever see them again is really hard, and you don't want it to happen.

**E:** A lot of them I wish they wouldn't have left because that's the hardest part of having them....It's so hard when they leave getting over them. A lot of these kids, I wish they could never leave and have stayed....Sometimes, I can't wait for Morgan to leave but then when I think about her leaving I just want to cry. The emotional part outweighs the annoying part.

**I:** It's kind of happy and kind of sad too because when they leave you get really emotional and stuff and sad. If you adopt them you're really happy. It's kind of like having another biological kid because they become part of your family too.

**J:** We cry sometimes when they leave because we know them, and they just leave and we've never seen them again.

**S:** We had a girl Kate, and she was frustrating and nerve-racking. She could get on your nerves a lot. After she was gone, I wished I was with her more than I was. I missed her a lot when she was gone. It's hard because it's like part of you is missing.

**U:** When you have a kid who has been here a long time and they leave, you don't like that. Usually, I send them a card. But Tim wasn't really a writer so he didn't send one back, and it's been like two years. He probably did get it though.

### *Best Friend Advice*

One of the questions in the interview guide was developed in an attempt to gain insight into the biological children's perspective on the experience by asking them to imagine that their best friend recently informed them that he/she was going to have foster children in his/her family. This was followed up with a question about what advice they would then want to give to their friend and if they thought this would be a positive experience for their friend. Framing the question in this way allowed the children to discuss their thoughts about the experience from a third-person perspective.

Responses to whether or not it would be a positive experience for their friend were almost unanimously positive. Only 2 (A & G) out of 22 interviewees expressed negative reactions to their friends having foster children in their families. These two individuals were both males who were chronologically the youngest study participants and were also the respondents with two of the three lowest ratings on the scaling question discussed earlier. In response to the best friend question, one of the respondents (A) stated that he would tell his friend, "Congratulations, he could have mine". He also indicated that as the friend's family already had two children having more kids would be "too hard for his mom". The other respondent (G) indicated that he would tell his friend the experience is "wild". Additionally, the following response by him expresses why he would not be excited for his friend:

**G:** If they hang out with him too much I wouldn't get to play with him as much.

The remaining 20 respondents all expressed a positive regard to the idea of their best friend having foster children in his/her family. Their corresponding advice to their best friends revolved around three main areas: 1) be prepared for various experiences/foster care is not for everyone; 2) be open and welcoming to the experience and to the kids that come; and 3) stay focused on the outcome. In their advice some of the children addressed more than one of the above themes.

A total of nine respondents addressed the issue of preparation.

Characteristic responses from this “be prepared: foster care is not for everyone” category include the following:

**B:** I'd say it's a very good idea. They should look into it and ask if they're emotionally ready. You can't just jump into foster care and think everything is going to be peachy because it's not. If they're ready and serious about it, I'd tell them it's a good idea and to go for it.

**D:** It's not as bad as people make it seem. We get long reports of some kids, and they get here and end up doing fine. A lot of times it depends on how your house is....keeping structured works better than being all over the place. If you try to help too much, it can be a problem. If they come into the structured house, and you keep things how it is that helps.

**L:** Just prepare! You might think it's scary, but it's a lot of fun to have more brothers and sisters. I'd be excited for her.

**O:** Take a deep breath, and enjoy the ride. Since we're older, I'd tell her it's really trying, and it is not for everyone. It definitely takes a lot of your time and can definitely be a stressor.

**V:** Get ready for some change with lots of new kids. Be prepared for taking care of them and changes.

In their responses, eight children mentioned the importance of being welcoming and open to the foster children. Samplings of their responses include:

**I:** I'd want to tell them that they would probably want to be on their best behavior so the kids would not be so scared of them.

**M:** Don't be mean to them because the way they act. They don't know any better. Try to boost them up, and be nice and help them. Even if they bug you, try to be nice and ignore it.

**N:** Try to act like they're your brother or sister. Try not to yell at them just be nice to them and help out with them. That's all I can really say.

**O:** I think you have to realize that there are other people who have really hard times. You can't be closed-minded.

**T:** Don't worry about it too much; just accept them because they're different, and get used to sharing your stuff.

One of the respondents also mentioned wishing she had been more accepting and open to various foster children when her parents first started fostering. She advised:

**F:** Be open to the kids that come in, and don't try to shelter yourself against them and to be open to loving them faster than I was. A lot of them I just wanted to go away and for her to not be as quick to judge them as I was with some of these kids. With the 15 year-old we had, she had a baby with some crack-head and I was like stay away from me. I wish I would have gotten to know her faster. Once I did, she was nice and funny and loving. I wish I was more open to her and not looked at what she had done but who she was.

The final general theme in the responses to the best friend inquiry was an encouragement for their friends to stay focused on the outcomes and purpose of

foster care, especially during difficult and frustrating times. Three individuals had advice for their friends regarding this:

**E:** I would definitely tell her when you get difficult placements, because you're going to get those, you have to focus on the goal or the outcome as opposed to the daily ups and downs of dealing with such a difficult child. You have to focus on what you want that child to be able to become. You have to focus on the outcome you really do because it's too difficult to focus on the process.

**H:** At times it can be frustrating and hard, but in the end it almost always turns out really good, better than when it started.

**O:** ...but to see the smile on the kids face, that's what really counts.

#### *Foster Care as Parents?*

An additional question that was used to explore the biological children's perspectives on the fostering experience was asking them if they would want to be foster parents later in their own lives. In response to this question, 16 out of the 22 participants indicated affirmatively that they would eventually want to become foster parents; 3 out of the 22 expressed that they might become foster parents; and the three remaining respondents indicated that they would not want to become foster parents. The three individuals (R, V, U) who were not sure whether or not they would become foster parents expressed concern about having to learn how to take care of children first and about probably wanting a small family. All three of these individuals came from large families with at least four biological children in addition to foster and adopted children.

Of the three individuals (A, E, G) who indicated a definite belief that they would not become foster parents, two (A & G) out of the three had unfavorable opinions about their own experiences being biological children in foster families. These two respondents also had negative views of their best friends' families becoming foster families. As stated earlier, these two males were the youngest study participants and had been only children in the family prior to their parents fostering and adopting. Both of them in their responses to becoming foster parents as adults also indicated that they would likely only want one biological child. Their responses follow:

**A:** No, I don't really want foster kids.

**Interviewer:** Do you want to have birth kids?

**A:** Maybe only one, but not foster kids.

**G:** No, unless my kid wants them then I would. If I don't get a kid, I would probably still be happy. I would probably only plan on having one kid because two kids would probably want to do two things with me and probably if I have to go somewhere sometime, it would be like breaking a promise, and they would be sad.

The third participant who indicated that she would not become a foster parent found the foster care experience to be personally beneficial, but she expressed concern about the impact it would have on her biological children and her relationship with them. This is evidenced by her reflective and somewhat conflicted response as follows:

**E:** I just don't think I would (pause) just (pause) not, put my kids through that. I don't know that's a good question, but I don't think I would....I don't know if I want them to know everything I know at my age. Not that that's a bad thing or that it has made me a worse person. I just want them to be able to be kids while they're kids and maybe not have to know so much about responsibility at such a young age....I just don't want them to feel any resentment towards me as a parent or for them to feel like they've been replaced. Not that it has been detrimental to me in any way. Maybe when they're out of the house, but I just want to be able to spend time with my kids.

The remaining 16 participants all indicated a definite belief that they would want to be a foster parent as an adult. Their reasons for wanting to be a foster parent had three common themes. First, the majority of them expressed a desire to help others and believed fostering was a way they could do that. Second, they thought the fostering experience was fun. Third, they believed fostering would be beneficial to their own biological children. A sampling of responses from the eight individuals who indicated a desire to help others as a motivation to be foster parents follows:

**B:** I would definitely. You're welcoming kids into your home and helping them when they need it. If we make a difference in one kid's life, then we've done our job.



**F:** Definitely, I know my family has changed a lot of these kids' lives.

These kids have had experiences they'd never have had, and someday I'd like to do that on my own just keep helping these kids.

**H:** I'd love to help out kids who don't have a chance for a fair life. Some of them start out in a home that's horrible. Some of them aren't loved. I'd like to help them out. Some foster homes aren't that great. They just take in kids for the money. I could take them, and that's one less child who'd have to go to a bad foster home or stay in their home.

A response from one of the three individuals who thought fostering would be fun as an adult follows:

**L:** I think I would because I've grown up my whole life with foster kids, and I love the environment of having foster kids. It makes it a lot more fun.

Two individuals (D & L) specifically acknowledged a belief that being part of a foster family would be of benefit to their future biological children. Both were females from families that had been fostering for 15 or more years. Their responses illustrate their sentiments:

**D:** I grew up with foster kids and saw what it did for me, and I think it would be great for my kids to grow up with that. Maybe then they'd want to help someone too.

**L:** It would be fun for my kids and for me. You can have your own kid and set them off on the right track and help them grow better. I would want to do it.

As illustrated by the narrative accounts of all 22 biological children included in this study, fostering has impacted these children's lives in multiple ways. A discussion and interpretation of these results ensues in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR DISCUSSION

The narrative accountings of the biological children of long-term foster parents are beneficial in helping the author come to a better understanding of possible answers to the formative questions related to the study. Specifically, these questions include: 1) How do biological children of long-term foster parents perceive the foster care experience impacts them as individuals?; 2) How does having foster children in the home impact the relationship between the biological children and their parents?; 3) What aspects of the foster care experience do biological children view as positive and negative, and how do these relate to each other?; 4) How does relative age and gender of the foster and biological children impact biological children's perceptions about the experience?; and 5) How can the biological children's perceptions be incorporated into training, recruiting, supporting, and retaining foster families? The discussion below shares what insight the author gleans from the study related to these questions.

### *A Difficult but Worthwhile Endeavor*

An overarching theme that becomes very apparent to the author is that the biological children of long-term foster parents find the experience to be challenging but also rewarding. Evidence for the rewarding nature of the experience can be found in the high number of children who attest to a willingness to become foster parents themselves and to have their best friends'

families begin fostering, the high scaling numbers that the children give to the experience, and their overall enthusiasm for the experience which they express throughout most of the interviews. The participants' discussions of the worst parts of fostering as well as general themes throughout the interviews related to the personal sacrifices and adjustments the children make convey the challenge and difficulty of the fostering experience.

The reality that fostering proves to be a difficult but rewarding experience for the biological children mirrors other life experiences. For example, the process of reaching out to another person in an intimate manner often involves risk and effort, but the benefits that can come from this relationship can make the effort worthwhile. The biological children in this study generally find that to be true with fostering. Several areas of consideration to the study are nuanced by this juxtaposition of difficult and worthwhile. Some of the areas participants found rewarding are also sources of difficulty. Similarly, some of the most difficult experiences have perceived positive benefit for them.

Several of the participants speak to the personal sacrifices they make (i.e., sharing a bedroom, moving bedrooms, loss of parental time and attention, increased household and childcare responsibilities, perceived chaos in the home, negative perceptions of others, sharing belongings, having personal items stolen and/or broken, adapting to children coming and going from the home, etc.). These findings mirror frustrations presented in prior studies (Ellis, 1972; Gwynne, 1984; Kaplan, 1988; Kraemer, 1999; Lemieux, 1984; Mauro, 1985; Twigg, 1993). However, many of the children in this study also attest to the fact that these

sacrifices have positive components as they produce greater levels of maturity and thankfulness in them. While Twigg (1993) presented this increased maturity as a negative effect of foster care, the author finds it had positive components for the biological children as well. One could hypothesize that encountering these adjustments as children could better prepare these children to live as adults who are accustomed to sharing and who are able to be flexible in the face of required adaptation.

Evidence for the higher level of maturity that the experience generates for the participants is found in several accounts of participants. This apparent maturity seems to manifest in their lives in a variety of ways including: 1) greater sense of empathy for others; 2) eagerness and willingness to help others; 3) more appreciation and respect for diversity; 4) assuming high levels of personal responsibility; 5) profound willingness to do what is right in the face of hardship and even perceived futility; and 6) realistic understandings of the challenges and rewards of parenting in general and foster parenting in particular. Each of these themes is apparent in multiple narratives. While some might argue that this level of maturity is not unusual, the study participants themselves often expressed awareness of maturity differences between themselves and their peers and some even remarked about these beliefs being affirmed to them by teachers and peers. As a clinician who has worked with children of various ages, the author anecdotally confirms this high level of maturity evidenced by many of the participants throughout the interviews. A poignant illustration of this is offered by

a 10 year-old male (N) when he states, "I'd like to have my own room, but I'd rather have a foster kid that's less fortunate than me."

Another area that presents a paradox of positive and negative experience is the busyness associated with fostering additional children. Some of the children acknowledge a frustration that things at home can be quite hectic as the family adjusts to incorporating the schedules and needs of the foster children. However, many of these same children admit to enjoying the fast pace of their family life and imagine that things at home would be "boring" if the family was not fostering. Many of the children equate the activity of fostering as contributing to the "fun" of the family.

A further apparent contradiction in the children's experience is that some of the children find that the fostering experience has a negative effect on their relationship with their parents while others believe the experience has brought them closer to their parents. The children that find the effect to be negative feel that they do not get as much attention from their parents and/or resent their parents for the increased demands fostering places on them. This is similar to the findings of Lemieux (1987) and Mauro (1985).

Despite the children's acknowledgement of this perceived negative effect, most of the children in the present study communicate a high level of respect and admiration for their parents' willingness to be foster parents, which is similar to findings by Poland and Groze (1993). All of these children also express a general pattern of open communication with their parents. Nevertheless, two of the children admit to occasionally withholding their negative thoughts about the

experience from their parents out of fear that their parents would stop fostering. This awareness on part of the children accentuates their perceptions that their parents seriously consider how the fostering experience is impacting them and have not lost sight of the children's personal needs. This finding is in line with Lemieux (1984) who reported that removal of foster children from the foster home often followed the biological children's expression of dissatisfaction with the placements.

### *Demographic Disconnect*

While previous studies have explored demographics related to foster families, some of the findings of these studies do not readily parallel with the families in the author's study. An obvious reason for this apparent disconnect is the specific sampling that the author utilized to only include foster families who have been fostering for four or more years. This length of service is in stark contrast to the median length of foster care service reported by Gibbs (2005) of only 8 to 14 months.

One can make an inference that families fostering for four or more years are highly committed to the experience and have developed coping strategies that have helped facilitate their longevity related to fostering. This, in turn, could lead to a greater acceptance and appreciation of the experience on the part of the biological children. The stability of the foster families in this study is important to note. In all the years of combined foster care experience that the families have, there were very few placement disruptions. This suggests an extremely high level of commitment on the part of the foster parents as traditional

foster care can often involve frequent placement disruptions. A further illustration of their commitment to the foster children is that all but three of the families have adopted one or more of their former foster children.

The high level of commitment the foster parents show could contribute to the children's commitment to the experience as well. If the parents have communicated a sense of "this child may be showing extremely negative behavior, but we are willing to see him/her through it," the children may internalize a more steadfast attitude to the experience. Hence, the children in this study do not seem ready to discontinue fostering even in spite of the difficulties. This lends support to Blair's (1989) hypothesis that, "Observing one's parents modeling helpfulness might lead to the incorporation of these important values and emulation of these prosocial behaviors" (p. 39) on the part of the biological children.

While adapting the prosocial behaviors of the parents highlights the positive side of social-modeling theory, the alternative negative side could suggest that the biological children may be more apt to assume the negative behaviors of the foster children. While the author's study does not explore this explicitly, the narratives from the participants seem to suggest that this does not usually occur. Most of the children seem to have a fairly strong internalized sense of right and wrong. When they discuss the negative behaviors of foster children, most of the biological children present these behaviors in the context of not being pleased with the behaviors, wanting to help change the behavior,



and/or compassion for the experiences that may have contributed to the foster child acting in this negative manner.

An additional area of contrast relative to the author's sample and the general population of foster parents is socioeconomic variance. While the author did not collect socioeconomic information from the families, based on visits to their homes and neighborhoods, the author found most of the families appear to be living middle-class lifestyles (i.e. multi-bedroom homes, ample furnishings, variety of toys/activities, etc). This is in contrast to Martin (2000) who reports that many foster parents are financially among the working-class or lower-middle-class population.

Earlier findings (Blair, 1989; Mauro, 1985; Lemieux, 1987) note that adjusting to the financial burden of caring for foster children is a source of difficulty for the biological children. Some of the children in the author's study express similar sentiments by noting that they have had to give up certain material items and/or endeavors (i.e., vacations, new clothes, going to movies, eating out, etc.) because of financial constraints placed on the family as a result of fostering. However, one participant whose family had adopted a former foster child indicates that in some ways fostering is better than adopting because once you adopt the child you have "to use your money to buy them clothes and food." The financial effects of fostering may be minimized in the author's study due to the higher representation of middle-class families. Many of these families may be able to financially offset the financial burden of fostering with personal income.

### *Research Correlations and Departures*

The recognition that fostering can have a positive effect on the biological children of foster parents is not new. Earlier findings (Biggs et al., 1988; Blair, 1989; Bova, 1994; Lemieux, 1987; Mauro, 1985; Poland & Groze, 1993) also acknowledge the potential benefits to biological children of foster parents. Specific correlations between the author's present findings and this prior research include: the biological children enjoy the experience, fostering gets better with time, and the experience has changed them for the better.

The implication of a systems theory application suggests that the frequent arrival and departure of individuals into the family system could be problematic for the family. However, most of the families in this study maintain a fairly cohesive sense of family identity. The children that seem to have the most difficulty integrating foster children into the family boundary are both males ages seven and eight years. Both children were only children prior to their parents' decision to foster and eventually adopt. Additionally, they are both chronologically the youngest study participants. Inferring why they feel the most negative about fostering is mired by these compounding variables. However, a possible theory is that as only children in the family, they have to accommodate the greatest shift in family position. When you are an only child receiving 100% of your parents' child care attention, any disruption would be significant, whereas children who already have biological siblings might not experience this change as acutely.

Another possible explanation is that as the youngest study participants, these two individuals have simply not reached the maturity level that the other participants have and therefore have not been able to move past a very concrete frustration with the experience. Incidentally, they are also the only two participants who identify that the fostering experience has been getting worse over time for them. Assuming their parents continue to foster, a potentially interesting area of follow-up study would be to interview these individuals six years from now and explore if and how their perspectives have changed.

The current research presents a departure from Twigg's (1993) research which identifies foster families as taking steps to keep foster children out of the family boundary. In contrast, most of the children in this study successfully take specific and thoughtful steps to include the foster children into the family's boundary and avoid treating them as "objects". This is in contrast to Twigg's analysis of the foster families in his study where he states that the "FPOC in those families who attempted to make the foster child a part of the family seemed to be the most negatively effected by the foster care experience" (1993, p. 164). The author's findings do not lend support to this finding as the families in this study seem to feel positive about the steps they have taken to include foster children into the family system. One could hypothesize that the intentional efforts aimed at inclusion and welcoming of foster children has helped these children adapt as positively as they have to the experience.

A correlation that the author discovered with Lemieux's (1987) findings is that many of the children do have very optimistic views and expectations for the

placement of new foster children in the home. However, a point of departure in this study is that an excitement towards welcoming foster children continues past the first foster child placed with the family to the new arrival of subsequent foster children as well. Several children in the study comment about being very eager for new foster children to come. These optimistic outlooks are notable as all of the children have experienced difficult behaviors of previous foster children yet they remain sanguine about the arrival of new foster children to the home.

In regards to prior research which explored how the relative ages of foster children to biological children in the home impacted foster care placements, the author's findings seem to concur with Blair's (1989) finding that having foster children younger than the biological children seems to be preferential. Having the foster children be younger than the biological children seems to produce a greater sense of empathy and desire to help in the biological children. This finding correlates with Kraemer (1999). While they do acknowledge that the increased child care responsibilities associated with younger children are taxing, several of the children express great joy and satisfaction about their beliefs that they contribute to making a difference in the children's lives.

Other findings related to age that are worth considering are the predominately negative perspectives the children hold to having a foster child who is older than they are reside in the home as well as their mixed responses about having a foster child who is their same age live in the home. Given that all but one of the respondents who address having an older foster child in the home feel negatively about the experience, an obvious practice implication is that these

types of placements should be avoided if possible. The author finds the perceptions of the children related to this to be worth considering as although some of the children are hypothesizing that this experience would be negative, several of the children have in fact experienced having older foster children in the home and still feel unfavorably towards it.

Responses related to having a foster child the same age as the biological child are more mixed. Some children feel this type of placement would be ideal while others feel it is extremely difficult. The children who have negative perceptions of this type of placement have all experienced it at one point and find it to involve a more problematic adjustment for them than having younger children. In contrast, the individuals who speak favorably about this type of placement have not yet experienced it. One can hypothesize that their positive sentiments toward the experience are somewhat unrealistic as many of them imagine having a "best friend" who enjoys the same things they do. In reality, when the child comes this may not be the case and issues of competition could also become more paramount. Based on these preliminary findings and prior research (Biggs et al., 1988; Ellis, 1972; Lemieux, 1984), the author suggests caution when placing foster children in families that have biological children of the same age, especially if they are of the same gender.

Prior research (Charnley, 1955; Kaplan, 1988; Mauro, 1985; Shaw & Lebens, 1977) which examines the congruence between parent and child perceptions finds incongruence between the two. The author's current research does not specifically explore perceptual congruence. However, it is worth noting

that most of the children do report that they feel their parents understand how they feel about fostering.

A clear correlation between the author's findings and prior research relates to parental motivation for fostering. Martin (2000) notes that the reasons foster parents give for fostering include a love for children, a desire to make the world a better place, and wanting another child in the home. The author finds all three of these motivators represented in the children's understandings of why their parents decided to foster. The author combined the first two as one theme, as the children often articulate these points jointly as a love for children and wanting to help children rather than wanting to "make the world a better place" per se. An additional motivator this study finds, but not mentioned by Martin is the parents' various personal experiences which made them decide to foster.

While Blair (1989) finds that early involvement with the child welfare system and exposure to children who "probably lived in a deprived environment and may now be handicapped" could be problematic, the author's results suggest findings to the contrary. Most of the children favorably speak about their perceived greater level of awareness of the child welfare system. Additionally, they have positive regard for how their fostering experience has raised their level of consciousness for the needs and experiences of children who enter the foster care system. In fact, four of the participants express a belief that having foster children in their homes has influenced their future career paths as they intend to pursue careers in social work and healthcare because of the awareness of need being part of a foster family creates in them.

The present study appears to affirm earlier findings (Kraemer, 1999; Lemieux, 1987; Poland & Groze, 1993; Twigg, 1993) which suggest that fostering involves emotional challenges for the biological children as they experience frequent loss as foster children come and go from the home. Several of the children do speak to feeling emotional distress when children leave the home. In particular, some of the children find saying goodbyes to certain foster children especially difficult. Once again, this does seem to mirror the emotions associated with real-life socio-emotional connections. As individuals we do not all connect as readily and intimately with all people or with the same people. The children do seem to have greater levels of attachment to some children than others.

### *Summary*

In relation to the original questions of interest to the current study, the findings from the author's study do provide new and affirming insight into the experience of biological children of foster parents. Specifically, the findings afford understanding to the study's first question: How do biological children of long-term foster parents perceive the foster care experience impacts them as individuals? In short, the children believe the experience challenges them, and that it is a difficult endeavor. However, they also acknowledge that it can produce growth and maturity beyond that of their peers. Many of the children regard themselves as thoughtful and empathic individuals who understand complexities of human nature due to their experiences with fostering.

The findings of the study also pertain to the second question of interest: How does having foster children in the home impact the relationship between the biological children and their parents? While the children often wish for more time with their parents, many of them also believe that fostering brings them closer to their parents and that they have a greater appreciation for their parents because of their example as foster parents. Most of the children express an ability to talk with their parents about the fostering experience and believe their parents value their input.

The study's findings also address the third question of interest: What aspects of the foster care experience do biological children view as positive and negative, and how do these relate to each other? In general, the biological children are frustrated by material sacrifices (sharing rooms and space, having things broken and stolen, giving up costly leisure activities, etc.). They dislike the acting-out behaviors of certain children, and they finding certain ages of foster children more difficult than others. In contrast, the biological children seem to enjoy the feelings of self-efficacy produced by reaching out to the foster children in the home. They appreciate seeing foster children make positive changes as well as knowing that they have found stable placements upon leaving foster care. The positive and negative aspects of the experience are intimately related and often go hand-in-hand. Awareness of this apparent paradox has not been lost on the biological children as they often express a desire for things to be different along with an acknowledgement that things could not be different and still produce the same positive results.



The fourth question of interest to the study is: How does relative age and gender of the foster and biological children impact biological children's perceptions about the experience? The study's findings also provide insight into this question. In sum, most biological children prefer having younger foster children; yet, some fantasize about having a same-age playmate. Those children who experienced having a same-age foster child find the experience particularly challenging. Gender does not seem to be as paramount in the children's perceptions of the experience.

The study's findings also have relevance for the fifth and final question of interest: How can the biological children's perceptions be incorporated into training, recruiting, supporting, and retaining foster families? The biological children are important participants in the family foster care experience. Understanding how they perceive the experience should influence how foster families are recruited, trained, supported, and retained. They are willing and eager to share their experiences, but they have often not been provided a platform to do so. More specific suggestions related to this question of interest are incorporated in the implication section which follows this chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSION

### *Limitations*

When considering limitations of the study, sample size must be considered and broad generalizations of the findings to the experiences of all biological children of foster parents should be avoided. The study relies on the narrative stories of 22 biological children of foster parents from 11 different families. While the nature of the qualitative methods used in the study do not necessitate a larger sample size, having additional subjects may have provided additional insight into the analysis.

The actual population of foster families that met the sampling criteria from the three participating agencies is fairly small so future studies would likely have to expand into broader geographic regions in order to increase sample sizes. The overall response rate of 35% that the study obtained is respectable. The author believes that the IRB requirement for active consent potentially lowered the level of participation. A passive consent process could have been an effective method of expanding the sample size.

An additional limitation is that the subjects were fairly homogenous in regards to race (18 Caucasian, 3 Hispanic/Caucasian, and 1 African-American) and parental marital status (all came from two-parent homes). A more representative sample may have provided additional areas for analyses.

Moreover, the homogenous nature of the sample further limits the extent to which the findings of the study can be generalized.

Although steps were taken to avoid this, potential bias on the part of the researcher must also be acknowledged given the interpretative nature of the study and the author's own personal experiences with fostering. The author's own experience as a foster parent as well as a biological child of foster parents may have contributed to a greater level of rapport with responders, but it may have also unintentionally influenced their responses as well as the author's interpretation of and follow-up to their responses. Although the researcher intentionally tried to explore both the positive and negative aspects of fostering, the participants may have provided a more positive perspective on the experience as they consciously and/or unconsciously responded in a perceived socially favorable manner.

When examining the validity of the study, one must consider the extent to which the children were accurate in their accounts of their experiences. While the author did not directly explore this data for the purposes of this study, the author did utilize the parent interviews as a means to triangulate the children's responses. Based on this review, the author believes that the children were truthful in their responses. A greater concern to the study's validity is the extent to which the children may omit portions of their experience from their narrative accounts. As with any qualitative study, the possibility remains that the participants present their experiences in a manner that positively reflects on

them. Additionally, the children in this study may have been concerned about presenting their parents to the interviewer in a positive light as well.

An additional limitation to the reliability of the study is that the information from participants was collected during only one interview session. Conducting multiple interviews with participants could have strengthened the reliability of the findings as the interviewer could explore their feelings about the fostering experience on various days. Readers of this study should be aware that the thoughts and feelings expressed by the children may be more closely connected to their thoughts and feelings about the experience on the particular day of the interview rather than to their overall thoughts and feelings on the experience of fostering.

An obvious point that must be considered is that the foster parents in the study are all highly committed foster parents who are enthusiastic and interested in the current research findings. Quite likely, they provide their children with a very positive home-life and parenting model. While the study appears to show that the biological children perceive fostering has a positive effect on them, the study in no way can infer causation. Compounding family factors and positive parental relationships are likely both intimately involved in their positive perceptions of the experience as well.

Selection bias is an important issue to consider as well. Parents who chose to respond to the mailings may be over representative of foster families and children who are adapting well to the experience. Foster parents who have children who may not be adapting as positively to the experience might have

been less likely to return the response postcards as having their children share their negative perceptions about the experience could appear to the parents to reflect poorly on their parenting.

### *Practice Implications*

The findings from this study provide insight that could have potential practical impact on the foster care system, foster families, biological children of foster parents, and foster children themselves. In recruitment, licensing, and supporting of foster families, agency staff should educate parents about the positive effects that fostering can have on their biological children as well as provide a realistic picture of what some of the potential struggles are that they may encounter.

The study seems to affirm the old adage that there is indeed “growth in the suffering”. Communicating this message to parents is critical but not without obstacle. Most parents would not knowingly expose their children to personal difficulty just to see them grow. This dilemma is presented in the dialogue of one of the female participants when she reflects on being a foster parent herself and the potential effects on her biological children:

**E:** I don't know if I want them to know everything I know at my age. Not that that's a bad thing or that it has made me a worse person. I just want them to be able to be kids while they're kids.

Parents must be convinced that the ultimate greater good for society, the foster child, and their biological children can be worth the effort. From the perspectives of most of the individuals in this study, that does hold true. However, the

experience is not without risk, and parents must be fully informed if they are to proactively help their children navigate the fostering experience.

The nuance related to the fostering experience being a difficult but worthwhile endeavor, which several of the interviewees addressed, must also be considered as an area of implication. Many of the children have been affirmed by their parents that what they are doing has value and potential long-term impact. If foster parents undertake fostering without being aware of how important this message is to their children, there is potential that the biological children would be more easily disparaging about the fostering endeavor and less able to perceive the potential benefit. Foster parents and foster care workers should intentionally inform the biological children of both the short-term and long-term impact they have had and will have on the lives of the foster children in their homes.

Recognition of the apparent paradox related to the experience entailing both cost and reward, or more simply good and bad, highlights an additional implication worth considering. The children in the study often directly spoke to or alluded to the increased levels of responsibilities they have as a result of fostering. While many of them could identify this as producing positive virtues in them, it is likely a tenuous balance at times. Having additional chores and child care responsibilities is not inherently detrimental to the children; however, foster parents should consider if and at what point the biological children are being asked to sacrifice too much. Occasional babysitting on the weekend would certainly seem acceptable and appropriate, yet requiring a child to routinely

sacrifice outings with friends in order to care for the foster children would seem to have potential for damage. Foster parents would be wise to be intentional about these decisions as a fine line may exist between how much is too much to expect from their biological children.

A further implication is that agencies must be conscientious and deliberate in their efforts to include biological children of foster parents in the fostering process. These children have such an important role in the overall fostering experience; their efforts must be acknowledged. Including these children in foster parent training sessions and support groups could be valuable.

Developers of foster care training curricula would be wise to specifically incorporate these children into their training programs as well as provide more explicit information to parents about how the experience may impact their children. Additionally, recognition ceremonies and/or events for the biological children of foster parents could be beneficial. Sending a child a "Super Sibling Award" and a coupon for a free ice cream cone would not entail huge organizational and/or financial resources on the part of the foster care agency, but it could likely be affirming to the biological children.

Additionally, the children in this study were eager and willing to share their experiences during the course of the interviews. Foster care workers should regularly solicit these children's perspectives during home visits in an effort to affirm the biological children's roles in the fostering endeavor. These children could also participate in panel discussions during foster parent trainings and/or recruitment events.

When making placement decisions, foster parents and foster care staff should give consideration to the relative ages of the foster children and biological children. Based on the author's findings as well as previous studies, placing foster children who are younger than the biological children in the home appears preferential. Additionally, while biological children may fantasize about having a "best friend" in a same-age foster child, most respondents who experienced this did not find it to be a positive experience. Therefore, if making a same-age placement, workers and parents are encouraged to be cautious and proactive in supporting the age-mates to help make the placement successful.

An additional practice implication that should be considered relates to the attachment and loss the biological children experience with foster children coming and going from their homes. The fostering system ought to in some way honor the relational experiences of the biological children. While ensuring follow-up contact between the foster children and the biological children after adoptive placement or reunification with birth parents is not always feasible, it should at a minimum be considered. Even if a physical encounter between the children is not a viable option, foster care workers could work to facilitate at least one occurrence of written communication between the parties.

Other potential ways that the foster care system could honor the relationship between the biological children and foster children would be to send a letter to the biological children which acknowledges their loss, to fund a "going-away outing" for the family prior to the foster child leaving, and/or to provide the child with a framed picture of the foster child and him/her together. While dealing



with loss is a real component of the fostering experience for the biological children, the foster care system seems to overlook this. When feasible, foster parents could also help to facilitate ongoing contact between the biological children and foster children by developing relationships with the foster children's birth or adoptive parents.

Given their professed interest in becoming foster parents, foster care recruiters would be wise to nurture relationships with these individuals and periodically follow-up on their interest at later points in their lives. Given their experience with fostering, empathy for others, and current interest in fostering, they would potentially make an excellent foster parent recruiting pool.

When considering the implications of the research, the author elected not to specifically incorporate policy implications for a variety of reasons. Foremost, given the limited amount of attention given to biological children of foster parents by trained and practicing social workers, the author is not convinced that drafting policy to require contact and support for these children would be feasible and/or realistic. Certainly, within social work education and agency-based training, one would hope that foster care workers are being informed about the value of acknowledging the biological children as significant members of the family system. However, this may not be occurring as uniformly as would be ideal.

While it may not be realistic to suggest that social work courses (i.e., Child Welfare, Human Behavior and the Social Environment, Interpersonal Practice) should incorporate content specifically related to the sub-group of biological children of foster parents, it would be appropriate for emphasis to be placed on

the importance of acknowledging all members of a family system when working with families. Additionally, field supervisors should monitor interns who are practicing with families and help foster family practice skills that could transcend agency settings. Not every foster care worker must have had previous experience with foster care; however, any exposure to family practice that encourages recognition of the entire family system should lead them to a greater sensitivity to the biological children of foster parents. Assuming that many instructors do place emphasis on this best practice approach, speculating why child welfare workers often ignore this sub-group leads to a few hypotheses: workers may simply be too busy to devote any additional time to the biological children, workers may not have had any practice experience with incorporating all members of a family system, agency supervisors may not be emphasizing the importance of recognizing the biological children, and agency directors may be unwilling or unable to devote resources to recognizing this sub-group. Advocates for foster families must step forward to address each of these possibilities and to encourage recognition of the biological children of foster parents.

Rather than developing federal, state, local, and/or agency policies which require certain levels of contact, training, and/or support for the biological children, efforts should be placed on educating foster care workers and agencies about the vital role that these children have in the fostering experience. Potential risks associated with legislating required contact, training, and/or support for these children are that foster parents may be concerned about requiring their children to meet certain policy requirements. Rather than seeing this as a

positive benefit for their children, they could interpret it as an additional burden associated with fostering. In contrast, spontaneous conversations, notes, and/or recognition of the children by considerate foster care workers would likely be welcomed and appreciated by both the children and parents.

### *Research Implications*

Future research that expands on the current study could examine the long-term effects of the experience on the biological children. There is currently no longitudinal study that explores the effects of fostering on biological children of foster parents. An interesting area of exploration would be to look at career paths of these youth and whether or not they do eventually become foster parents themselves.

A future research design could also incorporate multiple interviews with participants. Interviewing the biological children on multiple occasions could improve the reliability of the study as the researcher would be able to examine the consistency of the children's reports on various days and over time. Multiple interviews could also potentially strengthen the bond with the interviewer and thereby facilitate a greater level of self-disclosure on the children's part about the negative aspects of fostering. However, there is also risk that a closer relationship with the interviewer could influence the children to respond in more socially perceived positive manner. Future research could examine the methodological implications related to these various research designs.

Additionally, future research might consider separating the biological children into age cohorts. Given their ages, the younger children in this study

seem less mature and at very different places developmentally than the older children appear to be. Having a larger group of younger children may have allowed for a better examination of the impact of the biological children's age on their perspectives of the experience.

Given the lack of participation of the foster fathers in this study, future research could develop a research design that intentionally and explicitly explores the foster fathers' perspectives on the fostering experience and its impact on their children. The current study did not do that, and the author's literature review did not reveal any prior studies that specifically incorporated this research agenda. Exploring how the father's role in fostering and parenting impacts how his biological children adapt to the fostering experience would be an interesting area of exploration.

Another area of potential research would be to specifically examine the demands and responsibilities placed on the biological children as a result of fostering. While the children in this study acknowledge greater responsibilities, it is not clear exactly how pervasive these demands are and if and when these may become detrimental to the biological children. While the children in this study were generally able to contextualize these increased demands as having positive benefits, specifically exploring the extent to which this is true for other biological children of foster parents and the point at which this may become harmful would be a relevant area of discovery.

## *Conclusion*

A resounding theme throughout the interviews is that many of the children believe fostering is not only the work of their parents, but that they as children are fully involved in the experience as well. In many ways, fostering is a family mission that both the children and the parents have a high level of commitment to pursuing. This commitment is particularly remarkable given that these children and families have experienced the full range of the fostering experience—good and bad. While the participants acknowledge that helping others is personally affirming for them, their real life experiences with fostering are not always ideal. Yet, remarkably, most of the biological children enjoy the experience, find benefit in it, believe they are making a difference in someone's life, wish their friends could experience it, and have visions of becoming foster parents themselves. Truly remarkable!

The following remarks from some of the biological children represent their responses when the author inquired about what parting summary sentiments they want to make sure other people know about their experience. Their reflections offer a more insightful, powerful, and persuasive conclusion than any that the author could attempt to craft. In their own words:

**B:** I think both non foster and foster families all go through good and bad. Foster families have the harder part because you have to adapt to kids that come in....I definitely think foster families have it harder, but they have that much more reward in the end.

**C:** I hope people think about this. My parents were always making sure it was OK with us and were considerate of our feelings. I want to make sure if I can help people know what they're getting into. They can't just do this to redeem their sins. It takes a lot of time and compassion, and you just have to be a very easygoing person. If you're very high strung and like to be by yourself you can't do it. To be a foster parent, you need to be able to put a lot of time into it because the children that come into care need a lot of help and a good role model and good people around them to show them that what their parents did was wrong.

**I:** It's really fun to have foster kids because there is a lot of humor in our house and before it was just like a normal family but now we are a really big family, and it's a lot nicer.

**L:** Foster caring is really fun, and if I was ever asked if someone should do foster care I would say they should because it's a really cool experience and is fun, and it can change your life. It's very special when you help someone get adopted or you adopt them and change their life. It makes you feel so good inside. It's fun to help them.

**Q:** You have to put a lot of energy into it, but I enjoy it.

**R:** I enjoy having them. I always ask to have them.

**T:** I have been very pleased when we get a little kid. I love to have them when we do have them. There's nothing wrong with it. I've enjoyed every part of it. (pause) I know I have actually.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A: CHILD INTERVIEW GUIDE

My name is Stephene Diepstra, and I'm talking with foster parents and kids about what it's like having foster children live in their houses. I'd like to talk with you about what that is like for you. I have some questions I'd like to ask you, and you can choose to answer or not answer any of the questions. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. If you have any questions while we are talking, you can stop and ask them at any time.

To help me remember what we talk about, I have a tape recorder and would like to record our conversation. If you decide you want me to turn the tape recorder off at some point, all you need to do is ask me, and I will turn it off. Do you understand what I want to talk to you about? Do you have any questions?

1. While we're talking, I'd like you to draw me a picture of your family. Would you like to do that?
2. On a scale of 1-10, how do you feel about having foster kids in your home? (1: hate it; 10: love it). Has this changed over time? What has made it change? What tells you that it's this #?
3. Tell me more about what it is like having foster kids in your home?
4. What has been the best part of having foster children in your home?
5. What has been the worst part of having foster children in your home?
6. Suppose your parents were to stop doing foster care tomorrow, how would things be different? What would you notice?
7. What would be different for the following people?

You—

Siblings—

Parents—



Foster siblings--

8. Suppose you could change one thing about having foster kids in your home, what would you change? What difference would that make for you?
9. What or who helped you prepare to have foster kids move in to your home?
10. Suppose your parents were here and I was to ask them about how you feel about having foster kids in your home, what do you think they would say?  
Have you talked with your parents about how you feel about foster care?
11. Has your relationship with your parents changed since you've had foster kids in your home? If so, how is it different?
12. Imagine your parents were here, and we were to ask them why they decided to do foster care, what do you think they would say?
13. Suppose you were a parent, would you want to have foster kids in your home? What do you think you would like? What would be difficult?
14. Imagine you were talking to other kids whose parents were thinking about doing foster care, now that you've had all this experience with foster care, what would you want to tell them about what it is like?
15. Is there anything else I should know about having foster children live in your home?

*APPENDIX B: PARENT INTERVIEW GUIDE*

Interviewee\_\_\_\_\_

Family Name \_\_\_\_\_

Family Members (Name/age):

Primary Caretaker:

Occupation\_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity:\_\_\_\_\_

Religious Orientation:

Impact on decision to foster (scale 1/no-10/large) \_\_\_\_\_

Foster Care Experience:

Years\_\_\_\_\_

Number of Kids\_\_\_\_\_

Age\_\_\_\_\_

Gender\_\_\_\_\_

Special Needs\_\_\_\_\_

Length of Stays\_\_\_\_\_

Reasons for Departure\_\_\_\_\_

Motivation to become a foster parent:

What motivated you to become a foster parent?

What has motivated you to continue as foster parents?

Do you have any friends or family who are foster parents?

Criteria for Foster Children:

What types of foster children do you accept?

Have you ever had a foster child leave your home at your request? Tell me more.

How were your biological children prepared for the foster children coming into the home?

Have your biological children benefited from having foster children in the home? If so, how?

What could be done or has been done by the foster care agency to help your biological children adapt to the experience?

Have your biological children been negatively impacted from having foster children in the home? If so, how?

Has your relationship with your children been impacted by having foster children in the home? If so, how?

How is raising foster children different from raising biological children?

Do you think your children will become foster parents? Would you want them to?

Do you have anything else you would like to share with me about the effects of foster care on your biological children?

*APPENDIX C: AGENCY LETTER*

Dear Foster Parent,

Enclosed with this letter you will find an information letter from Stephene Diepstra. She is conducting research to explore how being part of a foster family impacts the biological children in the home. As we believe this is important information for our agency and our foster parents, our agency has agreed to partner with her in this research. The enclosed letter provides additional information about the project. You are under no obligation to participate in the project. However, your child's perspective and your perspective would be valuable contributions to the research project. Please note that your confidentiality will be secured and that Ms. Diepstra will not be discussing individual responses with our agency.

If you are willing to participate and/or have additional questions about the project, please return the enclosed self-addressed postcard. This postcard will provide Ms. Diepstra with the necessary information to contact you directly about the project.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Agency Licensing Supervisor

#### *APPENDIX D: INFORMATION LETTER*

Dear Foster Parent,

My name is Stephene Diepstra, and similar to you, I am a foster parent. I am currently completing my PhD in Social Work at Michigan State University. I am studying what it is like for biological children of foster parents to have foster children in the home. Although we know a lot about the effects of foster care on foster children, we do not know as much about how the foster parents' biological children are impacted by the experience. As a foster parent and a parent of biological children, I am sure you know how important a role your biological children have in your fostering experience.

With your permission, I would like to meet with you and your biological child/ren to discuss how the foster care experience has impacted them, both positively and negatively. The meeting could be scheduled at a convenient time and location for you and would last for approximately one hour. During this meeting, I will ask your biological child questions about his/her thoughts and feelings about having foster siblings. I will also meet separately with you to ask about your thoughts on how the experience has impacted your child/ren. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions I will be asking.

Participating in this study is voluntary, and you can change your mind at any time. I will protect your privacy, and no identifying information will be included in my report. While I would very much value your involvement, not participating in this study will in no way impact your status as a foster family or your involvement with the agency.

Your participation will help us better understand the impact of foster care on biological children, and when completed I would be delighted to inform you of the results of the study. In order to answer any questions you may have and discuss your willingness to participate in this study, I will be contacting you by phone within the next two weeks. I would greatly appreciate your participation in this study, and I thank you for your willingness to consider this request. I am looking forward to talking with you soon.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the investigator, Stephene Diepstra. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact - anonymously, if you wish - Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D., Chair of the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

(UCRIHS) by phone: (517) 355-2180, fax: (517) 432-4503, email address: [ucrihs@msu.edu](mailto:ucrihs@msu.edu), or regular mail: 202 Olds Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Sincerely,

Stephene Diepstra

## *APPENDIX E: FOLLOW-UP LETTER*

Dear Foster Parent,

A few weeks ago, you should have received the enclosed letter asking for your participation in a study regarding how foster care impacts biological children in the foster home. If you have already responded to that letter by returning the response postcard, please disregard this letter. However, if you have not yet responded, your participation would be valuable to the research. Enclosed with this letter you will find an information letter from Stephene Diepstra which describes the project and a response postcard.

As we believe this is important information for our agency and our foster parents, our agency has agreed to partner with Ms. Diepstra in this research. You are under no obligation to participate in the project. However, your child's perspective and your perspective would be valuable contributions to the research project. Please note that your confidentiality will be secured and that Ms. Diepstra will not be discussing individual responses with our agency.

If you are willing to participate and/or have additional questions about the project, please return the enclosed self-addressed postcard. This postcard will provide Ms. Diepstra with the necessary information to contact you directly about the project.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Agency Licensing Supervisor

**APPENDIX F: SUBJECT CODES AND DEMOGRAPHICS**

<b>Subject Code</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b># of Biological Siblings</b>	<b>Siblings with:</b>	<b>Years of Foster Care Experience</b>
<b>A</b>	7	M	0		4
<b>B</b>	19	F	1	C	12
<b>C</b>	17	M	1	B	12
<b>D</b>	21	F	1		16
<b>E</b>	18	F	2	F	4
<b>F</b>	14	F	2	E	4
<b>G</b>	8	M	0		6
<b>H</b>	12	F	2	I, J	6
<b>I</b>	10	F	2	H, J	6
<b>J</b>	9	M	2	H, I	6
<b>K</b>	18	F	4	L, M	15
<b>L</b>	14	F	4	K, M	15
<b>M</b>	13	F	4	K, L	15
<b>N</b>	10	M	0		5
<b>O</b>	21	F	1		19
<b>P</b>	13	F	3	T, U, V	6
<b>Q</b>	16	F	7	R, S	4
<b>R</b>	13	M	7	Q, S	4
<b>S</b>	11	M	7	Q, R	4
<b>T</b>	14	M	3	P, U, V	6
<b>U</b>	10	M	3	P, T, V	6
<b>V</b>	16	M	3	P, T, U	6



## *APPENDIX G: PARENT INFORMED CONSENT*

I have discussed this project with Stephene Diepstra and understand its scope and purpose, Specifically, that this project will be studying what it is like for children to have foster children live with their families. There will be about 20-30 children who will be interviewed prior to the project's completion. I can ask any questions I have about the project at any time.

Participation in the project is voluntary, and I can withdraw at any time. Withdrawing from the project will in no way impact my relationship with the foster care agency. Participating in the project will take about 2-3 hours of my and my child's time.

By participating in this project I and/or my child may be discussing difficult feelings and that discussing these feelings may be emotionally and/or psychologically difficult for me and/or my child. I and my child will be receiving no direct benefit from participating in this project, but the information shared will contribute to our understanding of what it is like for biological children to live with foster siblings.

Any information I or my child share will be kept confidential, and no identifying information will be included in the report. In addition, all information collected during the interviews will be stored in the interviewer's office in a locked cabinet until the report is finalized at which time the data will be shredded. This information may be kept for up to one year. My privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

In the interviews, I do not have to answer any question I am uncomfortable with. I understand that the interview will be audio taped to assure accuracy in how the information is reported. I can request that the audiotape not be used at any time.

The results of the study will be shared with me at my request.

Should a child report any previously unreported abuse and/or neglect, by law Stephene Diepstra would need to report this to Child Protective Services.

I consent for myself and my child/ren to participate in this study.

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Parent Signature

---

Date

#### *APPENDIX H: CHILD INFORMED CONSENT*

The questions I will be asked are about what it is like for me to have foster children living in my home. There are no right or wrong answers, and I do not have to answer any question I am uncomfortable with.

Stephene Diepstra has talked with my mom or dad about this interview and gotten his or her permission for me to speak with you, but I do not have to if I do not want to.

The interview will be tape recorded to make sure Stephene remembers what I am saying, but I can ask for this to be turned off at any time. What I say during the interview will not be shared with others, unless I give permission and/or Stephene Diepstra is concerned about my safety or the safety of others.

Participating in this study could help us understand what it is like for kids to have foster children live in their homes.

I may be talking about difficult feelings and/or experiences during these interviews. After the interviews are finished, I may want to talk more with the social worker from the foster care agency and/or my parents.

When all the interviews are finished, I can ask to find out what was learned about what it is like for kids to have foster children live in their homes. It may take up to a year for this information to be ready.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness

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