
Understanding Foster Families

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Foster placement is the most frequently recommended treatment for abused children and adolescents. Although the data may differ slightly in each state, it is generally recognized that a high percentage of abused and neglected children and adolescents will require some period of temporary foster home placement. In the cadres of services provided by an agency, foster care is significant in the overall treatment and prevention of maltreatment to children and adolescents.

Not all professionals feel comfortable in placing children and adolescents in temporary foster placements. The picture of loving adults opening their homes and hearts to abandoned and traumatized children, receiving them with the good intent of helping them grow in a safe environment is not the reality for many foster children. Harsh and abusive parenting practices similar to the ones they experienced at home with their birth parent, and for which they subsequently had been removed from for protection, leave the children, adolescents, birth parents and agency staff with feelings of anger, confusion and futility.

Although screening of prospective foster parents occurs, the system for selecting foster parents is not fool proof, nor does it address many of the issues that ultimately will concur an individual's ability to be a healthy, nurturing foster parent. Current screening in most agencies recruiting foster parents includes a face-to-face interview primarily designed to meet the candidates and explain the requirements and responsibilities of being foster parents, and to complete an application. A background check of the applicants is conducted to identify any previous reported abusive or criminal histories. Income generated by the family and steady employment are additional issues checked. The applicant is often requested to provide three letters of reference from individuals outside their family to support their desire to become foster parents. In most instances, a visit to the home is conducted to check out the living conditions.

In very few agencies does a systematic examination of the applicants' parenting beliefs, attitudes and practices occur. The very issues for the placement get the least attention.

Children Placed in Foster Care

The children placed in foster care present a special demand on the adults who choose to become foster families. Children and adolescents who have been abused, neglected, isolated, or abandoned; children and adolescents with special needs such as mental illness, and/or retardation; or those in trouble with the law make a demand on parents that takes tremendous skills, knowledge, and empathy. Based on the previous history of maltreatment, and in combination with their special needs, many foster children and adolescents view the world through the eyes of victimization. Foster children who perceive themselves as victims challenge responses of trust, security, and caring, yet seek those qualities and responses because of the void in their lives. Victims either tend to seek out perpetrators to maintain their identity as victims, or take on the role of the perpetrators themselves to compensate for their own victimization. Foster parents who have not fully negotiated their own childhood victimization perceive the actions of foster children as provocative to them personally, as faint or vivid memories and feelings of past hurts are brought to a conscious level. The reciprocal nature of the parent-child relationship is then based on a victim-perpetrator basis which reinforces the foster child's low self-esteem and

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low self-concept. Foster children and adolescents who bring out the feeling of “perpetrator or victim” in their foster parents are very high risk for continued maltreatment.

The ideal is to develop a positive reciprocal relationship between foster parents and foster children to break the cycle of victimization. To accomplish this task, adults with childhood experiences in nurturing are best equipped. Since the field of foster parenthood attracts people with a variety of interests, backgrounds, and motivation, the need to offer a family-based comprehensive program to teach nurturing parenting is critical.

Foster Parenthood as Career

In our work training foster parents to increase their nurturing parenting skills, a frequently discussed issue is why adults choose foster parenthood as a profession. Although the data may not be generalized to all foster parents, the responses we have gathered do provide some insight into reasons why adults choose to become foster parents. These rationale are not offered in any particular sequence:

1. **Empty Nest Syndrome.** Some parents suffer major feelings of loss when their birth children grow up and move out of the home. Having spent most of their adult life raising children, foster children become the substitute for the birth children who moved out. Since raising children may be the thing some adults do best, having foster children is a way to enhance their feelings of self.
2. **Additional Income.** Most foster parents are quick to note that the amount of money they make is not nearly sufficient to provide for the proper care of their foster children. The fact is that some unscrupulous adults take the additional income received per foster child and utilize the money for other means. Having five to seven foster children at one time can generate money that a family didn't have prior to being a foster family.
3. **The Need to Feel Wanted.** Being a parent is one way for adults to get their dependency needs met and to feel wanted. Similar to the “empty nest syndrome,” having foster children helps some adults feel better about themselves as men and women. When taken to the extreme, foster children become “objects for gratification” whose primary individual value is based on what they can provide to the foster parents.
4. **The Desire to Help Others.** Lost in all the questionable rationale for becoming a foster parent is the fact that many parents choose foster parenthood because of their strong desire to help others. This desire to help others is generated from a strong individual sense of caring and empathy developed from early childhood.
5. **Playmates for Birth Children.** Parents with one child who cannot afford to have another or who do not wish to go through the birth process may seek foster parenthood as a way of providing their birth child with playmates. Such motivation is often recognized when foster parents make strong requests for a particular age or sex of a child.
6. **Adoption.** The single largest pool of adoptive parents is generated from foster parents. More foster parents adopt children than any other population. Since the

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waiting list to adopt children may extend three to five years, becoming a foster parent provides access to more children with less of a waiting time period.

7. **Sterility Problems.** Adults who are unable to bear children may choose foster parenthood as a means of having adult-child relationships. Sterility is also a major motivation for adopting children.
8. **Religious Motivation.** Some adults choose to become foster parents based on their religious convictions. Some view foster parenthood as their mission from God, the "good Christian thing to do," or a way of "paying back" less fortunate children for the goodness they (the adults) have been blessed with throughout their life. Fundamentalist views of the scriptures, proverbs and other religious writings are often the basis for their parenting attitudes, techniques, and beliefs.
9. **Abusive History.** Foster parenthood, for some, becomes a mechanism for working through the past pain, hurts, and abuse of their own early childhood. Based on the conviction that they want to create a better life for other abused children, the process of identification with the maltreatment of others is the driving force in becoming foster parents. The outcome is usually predictable. Unless the foster parents work through their own past hurts and trauma, their efforts in becoming a nurturing foster parent will fail. Not having firsthand experience with caring, despite beliefs to the contrary, the practices that they ultimately will display are the ones of maltreatment; the ones they know best.
10. **Sexual Gratification.** Sexual gratification is perhaps the single most frightening unconscious/conscious motivation for becoming a foster parent. Agency staff responsible for screening foster parent applicants is constantly reminded by the daily news of the number of children sexually abused in foster care. Criminal background checks provide only limited information. Unless the applicant has a known history of sexual abuse to children, there is little likelihood pedophilic tendencies will be picked up in the application process.
11. **Children With Handicaps.** Foster children can become the "dream child" the birth parents didn't have. Children born with handicaps are symbols to many parents of their own genetic deficiencies, birth difficulties, use of drugs during pregnancy, etc. Not wanting to risk having two children with handicaps, foster children become a viable substitute for the loss of a "normal" child.

A Study of the Parenting Attitudes of Foster Parents

A study was conducted in Wisconsin by the authors to explore the similarities and differences in the parenting attitudes of abusive, nurturing and foster parents using the AAPI (Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory). The AAPI was administered to 97 parents identified by Child Protective Services (CPS) as having abused their children, to 99 foster parents, and to 107 parents in the general population (identified by preschool teachers as non-abusive and having no history with CPS).

The data indicated a large commonality of beliefs among foster parents regarding the parenting and rearing of foster children. A sizeable portion of this population of foster parents were apt to place inappropriate demands on their foster children, express less empathy towards foster children's needs, use corporal punishment, and demand that foster

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children meet their (the foster parents') needs. As a population, foster parents were significantly more abusive than non-abusive biological parents in all four areas measured by the AAPI. However, in comparison to known child abusers, foster parents expressed greater empathy and were less apt to reverse parent-child roles.

In essence, the overall parenting attitudes of foster parents were found to be less nurturing than the biological parents in the general population (non-abusers). However, though they had strong beliefs similar to known child abusers in the areas of corporal punishment and developmental expectations, the foster parents were overall more empathic and nurturing than known child abusers.

Implications for Foster Placement

The findings of the study have several implications for placing abused and neglected children in foster care and in preventing the recurrence of abuse and neglect. Initially, the belief that foster placements most closely approximate normal, nurturing home environments has to be qualified. In comparison to the standard called "non-abuse," exemplified by nurturing biological families, foster placements appear to fall quite short. However, in comparison to the standard called "abusive," exemplified by known child abusers, abused and neglected children in foster care will often find more consistently caring, nurturing adults interested in creating healthy temporary home environments. However, the continued use of corporal punishment in foster care and the inappropriate, excessive demands placed on foster children by their foster parents will do little to change the development of healthy parenting attitudes. The use of corporal punishment by more empathic foster parents only tends to reinforce the concept that children should be hit, and adults have that right. The sanctioned use of corporal punishment in foster care and the inappropriate expectations placed on foster children further reinforces feelings of helplessness, rebelliousness, low self-esteem, and poor self-concept in the child initiated in the prior abusive environment.

The assessed attitudes of foster parents may come as little surprise to professionals working with foster parents. Traditionally, the selection process of adults for foster parenthood has focused little attention on parenting attitudes. Steady income, a perceived stable home environment, lack of a known criminal record, letters of reference attesting to the applicant's willingness on the part of the prospective foster parents to be generally available to shelter all children, regardless of race, age, sex or developmental history have been set as standards for foster parenthood. Little to no emphasis is placed on assessment of parenting attitudes or child-rearing practices. In the light of study data, it appears that screening prospective foster parent applicants with regard to their parenting and child-rearing attitudes may do much to prevent the occurrence of the re-abuse and neglect of foster children.

Foster placements are a vital intervention strategy for abused children and abusive parents. Every care should be taken to ensure abused children grow up in an environment which models appropriate adult-child interactions.