Anne M. Lenzi

April 3, 2013

Committee for General Government,
Consumer and Small Business Protection
Senator Chip Shields, Chair

**Re: SB 570**

Dear Members of the Committee:

Attached please find the following documentation to support my testimony this afternoon regarding Senate Bill 570:

1. Personal e-mail to DHS regarding my resignation as a foster parent dated July 29, 2012; and

2. Significant stress and real rewards: The ecological and ambiguous experiences of foster parents Jason Whiting and Paul (Relational Child & Youth Care Practice. Summer 2007, Vol. 20 Issue 2, p9-20. 12p. 2); and

3. Tables 1 & 2 of Significant stress and real rewards: The ecological and ambiguous experiences of foster parents Jason Whiting and Paul (Relational Child & Youth Care Practice. Summer 2007, Vol. 20 Issue 2, p9-20. 12p. 2).

Thank you,

Anne Lenzi

Gmail by Google

Anne Lenzi

Guppy [redacted] and Small Fry [redacted]

3 messages

**Anne Lenzi** <weavingfire@gmail.com> Sun, Jul 29, 2012 at 7:22 PM
To: [redacted]@state.or.us>

Dear [redacted],

I hope Guppy [redacted] and Small Fry [redacted] are settling in to their new foster home, and conversely, that the certification of their great-grandmother goes well.

I will return the car seat on Thursday, when the foster closet opens again. If you need it before then, please let me know and I'll see what I can do. I would also like to give Guppy [redacted] some train set equipment at that time, since trains are his favorite thing in the world. Small Fry [redacted] also has a few receiving blankets and clothing items that were in the wash, so I'll give those as well.

I also wanted to let you know that as of July 29, 2012, we have officially resigned as Foster Parents.

If Small Fry [redacted] and Guppy [redacted] become available for adoption, we would like to be considered as an adoptive family for Guppy [redacted]. We feel for SMALL FRY [redacted], but unless there is a drastic change in our family circumstances (i.e. in our income or housing), we do not have the resources to raise four children.

It is our strong belief that Mother [redacted], who was clearly back with Father [redacted] and deceiving everyone since at least a year ago, will again go through the motions to regain custody of her children. It is also our belief that this will only lead to Guppy [redacted] and SMALL FRY [redacted] returning to foster care in two or three years, possibly with another sibling, after having endured additional time witnessing domestic violence, drug abuse and will in all likelihood become the victims of abuse themselves. We cannot participate in that plan.

For Guppy's [redacted] entire life, he has been put last. He was put last because his parents have a violent and unpredictable relationship, put last because DHS resources do not allow any type of follow up on closed cases and now he is put last because he has a baby brother.

This is not an indictment of your actions, or even of the County's actions, but merely a reflection of the poor policy set at the State and Federal level that fails again and again to protect at-risk children.

peer reviewed

# Significant stress and real rewards: The ecological and ambiguous experiences of foster parents

**Jason B. Whiting PhD and Paul T. Huber MA**

*Abstract*

*To obtain an insider's perspective of the unique dynamics and needs of foster parents, surveys and interviews were conducted using human ecology and ambiguous loss as a guiding framework. The resulting qualitative and quantitative data show significant and distinctive stressors for foster parents. These include challenges with agency staff and procedures and ambiguous situations. However, these parents generally found meaning and satisfaction in service and coped with the help of informal and formal supports.*

*Key Words: Foster care, foster parents, stress, support*

The removal of children from birth parents is often traumatic, and subsequent adjustments are difficult for everyone, including the foster parents (Buehler, Cox & Cuddeback, 2003). For example, new foster parents are often surprised by the intensity of foster children's behaviors and emotional outbursts (McFadden, 1996; Whiting & Lee, 2003). Also, foster parents may have conflicting feelings about their role, such as when the children need continuity and reassurance, but the parents need respite. Foster parents often grieve when foster children are removed, but they may also feel guilty for being relieved (McFadden, 1996). Despite these unique challenges, many foster parents cope well and find rewards in their relationships with these children (Buehler et al., 2003).

It is critical for child welfare professionals to understand the distinctive dynamics and character of foster parents. Despite the important service that foster parents provide, they are not always well supported, and are sometimes scorned or labeled as saints or martyrs (Molin, 1994). Hearing directly from foster parents can correct misconceptions by providing a realistic and complete picture of their experiences. This can inform the decisions of practitioners and policy-makers who work with them.

Foster parents interact with individuals within various systems, including the birth family, agency, other foster parents, and professionals from educational, medical, and legal settings (Lee & Lynch, 1998).

Often, decisions affecting the foster parents and foster children are made at the state or agency level and are motivated more by funding concerns rather than the interests of the families (Curtis, 1999). Foster parents are rarely afforded an opportunity to give formal feedback to those who direct the policies and procedures of the system (Rindfleisch, Bean, & Denby, 1998). Until recently research on foster parent perspectives has been scant (e.g., Brown & Calder, 2000; Buehler et al., 2003), although one large-scale study of U.S. foster parent characteristics and recruitment was done in the early 90s (Administration on Children Youth and Families, 1993).

The purpose of this study was primarily exploratory in nature, with the objective of articulating and describing aspects of foster parents' lives. The goals of the study were twofold: first, to understand more clearly the interactions that foster parents have with other systems, including the agency. Of interest was how the context supported or constrained foster parents. The second goal was to gain an insider's perspective of the inner experience of foster parents, including how they make sense of ambiguous situations, challenges and loss, as well as their motivations, rewards and strengths.

## Theoretical Framework

Due to the complexity of the foster care environment, human ecology, with its focus on individuals in interaction with multiple systems has been identified as a useful framework for understanding foster care (Lee & Lynch, 1998; Whiting & Lee, 2003). Such a framework presumes that in order to best serve the children, all levels must be interacting openly and functioning with purpose (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The "[ecological] framework provides interpretive power in terms of contextualizing the experience" of individuals, including understanding how interacting systems shape behavior and inner experience (Arditti, 2005, p. 252). For example, a foster parent may grieve or become frustrated (inner experience) when the agency (ecological system) chooses to remove a foster child or withhold information about a placement.

The theory of ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999; 2004) is well-suited for understanding the uncertainty, instability and losses that foster parents experience. Although foster children and birth families experience ambiguous losses, so do foster parents. These include losing temporary family members, and living with the ambiguity of trying to help foster children while maintaining their personal or familial well-being. According to ambiguous loss theory, two situations are considered to be especially stressful, and both apply to the experience of foster parents. The first is when individuals are physically absent but are kept psychologically present, which is how birth parents and agency workers may be experienced by the foster family. The second circumstance occurs when individuals are physically present but psychologically absent. This is illustrated by a foster child who is overwhelmed with grief or previous trauma, and is therefore emotionally preoccupied (Briere & Armstrong, in press; Davies, in press).

The two theories complement each other to create a helpful framework for exploring foster parents' experience. The ecological framework highlights the complexity and pervasiveness of the systemic interactions between child, foster parents, birth parents, and agency, and the lens of ambiguous loss focuses on how foster parents experience these unstable and challenging environments and situations. Ecological theory emphasizes interactions with external systems, and ambiguous loss looks at the twofold unit of analysis of family and individual (Boss, 2004). In this study, the unit of analysis is the foster parent, with an emphasis on the interactions that these parents have with their environment.

## ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT: SUPPORTS AND CONSTRAINTS OF FOSTER PARENTS

The combination of high expectations with uncertain rewards or supports can make foster parenting a daunting prospect. Agencies expect foster parents not only to be "good parents" but also have the skills to help children deal with losses, trauma, and split loyalties (McFadden, 1996). Foster parents must balance the needs of biological and foster children, cooperate with the agency workers, and access needed medical and psychological resources. To succeed, foster parents need to find supports.

One support for foster parents is preservice training. Years ago Boyd and Remy (1978) asked: is foster parent training worthwhile? They,

and others since, have generally agreed that it is (e.g., Baum, Crase & Crase, 2001; Rosenfeld et al., 1997). Preservice training can weed out those who are not ready while providing skills and confidence for those who are (Fees, Stockdale, Crase, Riggins-Caspers, Yates, Lekies & Arnold, 1998). Training can provide knowledge as well as a supportive cohort of other foster parents, which increases placement stability and retention (Burry, 1999; Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Cook & Fletcher, 2002; Titterington, 1990). Training can decrease the uncertainties felt by new foster parents and help minimize multiple placements of foster children. One U.S. government study found that improvements in training led foster parents to feel more personally empowered and less likely to discontinue (ACYF, 1993).

## INNER EXPERIENCE: AMBIGUITIES, LOSSES AND COPING

It is important to identify how supports affect the inner experience of foster parents, because a significant challenge for the future of foster care is retaining high-quality caregivers (Barbell & Wright, 1999; Cox, Buehler, & Orme, 2002). The loss of foster parents is a serious problem. From the mid-1980s until the late 1990s, the number of children entering foster care increased 74%, while the number of foster families declined by a third (Burry, 1999). This has resulted in overcrowded placements and overwhelmed caregivers who may be asked to function beyond their level of preparation.

Research has suggested that foster parents need to have positive values, high energy, resilience, and good judgment (Daly & Dowd, 1992). It is likely that these types of personal characteristics help foster parents cope with the challenges of the work. These attributes are different than skills or knowledge that can be taught. Rather, these may include virtues or character strengths that increase resilience and perseverance (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For example, the reasons for becoming and remaining a foster parent are often related to personal values and character strengths (Baum et al., 2001).

### Research Questions

Several research questions were used to guide the project. These questions align with the research goals of exploring the ecological context of foster parents and the influence this has on their inner experiences. These questions included: (1a) What aspects of foster parents' environment and interactions are most stressful? (1b) What ecological influences are found to be most helpful in supporting foster parents? (2a) How do foster parents process stressful situations, and how do they become overwhelmed? (2b) What inner attributes or strengths help foster parents succeed and continue as foster parents?

## METHOD

In order to explore the experience of foster parents from multiple angles a mixed methods approach was selected, in which both survey and interview data were gathered. These data were analyzed using quantitative survey techniques and ethnographic methods (Tedlock, 2000). Combining methods is an effective way to explore a topic in greater depth, especially from an insider's perspective (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## SAMPLE & PROCEDURE

Agency contact persons in six U.S. states, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Wisconsin, were sent packets of surveys that they distributed. The agency contacts chose to distribute the surveys by various means, such as mailing or handing out to foster parents at the agency. Due to confidentiality restrictions regarding foster parent identities, the researchers were unable to monitor the distribution of surveys. Exceptions to this were Kentucky and Michigan, which allowed the researchers to randomly choose 75 addresses from each state list of active foster parents. Packets for each foster parent included a cover letter inviting them to participate, a survey, a card that could be returned to be entered in a drawing for a restaurant gift certificate, and a stamped return envelope. Due to the confidential nature of the distributions, follow-up reminders were not sent. The 450 surveys were evenly divided among the states (75 each). The final return rate was 33.6% ($n = 151$). Of the survey respondents, three-quarters (75%) were female, 13% were single, 78% married, and 9% were divorced or widowed. Over 60% had some college experience or a degree, and 11% had done graduate work. The

sample was 78% Caucasian, 14% African American, 1% Native American, and 7% unidentified. The age of respondents ranged from 26 to 76, with a mean of 48 ($SD$ = 11). Over the course of their tenure as foster parents, participants reported that they had foster children in their homes from a few months to 37 years, with a mean of 8.1 ($SD$ = 7.6) years. For parents who had fostered for many years, these lengths likely reflect numerous placements. The response rate was similar across states.

The qualitative sample was obtained by a combination of convenience sampling (interviewing those whom the researchers knew), and snowball sampling (asking participants for referrals), (n = 9). There were 6 female participants and 3 males, and foster children had been present in their homes from 1 year to a total of 7.5 years.

The interview narratives complemented and deepened the survey data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The interview participants heard a scripted explanation of the project, were assured of confidentiality and then confirmed their willingness to share information. A semi-structured interview guide was used that contained questions about the foster parents' ecological interactions, training, challenges and rewards. Interviews were led by one of the authors. After each interview the recorded content was transcribed and analyzed using ethnographic methods (Tedlock, 2000). Software was used to assist in coding, organizing, and synthesizing the data (QSR NVivo, 2000).

## Instruments

A foster parent questionnaire was developed that addressed a number of content areas, including: (a) a checklist of reasons that they had chosen to become foster parents, with space to list other reasons; (b) five general questions about how prepared and satisfied they were with the experience of foster parenting; (c) seven questions about satisfaction with preservice and ongoing training; (d) eight questions related to stress; (e) a list of topics to be ranked on how adequately they were covered in training; (f) a checklist of types of continuing training they had used; and (g) a checklist of reasons that they believed foster parents discontinued foster parenting.

The first, sixth and seventh sections were checklists of items that could be marked or left blank. The other items on the questionnaire were responded to using a 5 point Likert-type scale asking respondents to rate how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement or topic. The instrument was developed by the authors from the research questions and existing literature. It was refined in a process of having experts, including foster parent trainers and current foster parents, review it to suggest modifications.

## Data Analysis

The survey data were primarily analyzed and summarized using descriptive statistics. Tables of items were generated that showed categories of responses and their relative importance to these foster parents.

The qualitative analysis began with the initial interviews. These were guided by an ethnographic semi-structured interview guide (Fetterman, 1989). The analytic process proceeded using a reciprocal procedure between data collection and analysis known as the constant comparative process. Interviews were transcribed, reviewed and then loaded into the software. The authors and a graduate assistant examined the transcripts line by line and electronically labeled them according to conceptual categories in a process of open coding (Tedlock, 2000). This proceeded in an organic fashion, with some categories becoming more prominent and others remaining undeveloped. This was followed by axial coding, which was the examining of these themes for logical and conceptual relationships (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Validity, or trustworthiness, was strengthened by the use of multiple reviewers and coders who both independently and jointly analyzed the data (Tedlock, 2000). Memos were kept within the software to reflect thoughts about the research

process of coding and analyzing. These were included in the data analysis.

## RESULTS

The results are organized according to the research questions, with both survey content and ethnographic themes illustrating the findings. Within each of the broader research question categories, independent ethnographic themes were identified and labeled. These themes reflect foster parent topic areas that were relevant to the research goals and that emerged across multiple interviews. These themes will be identified in the text by italics (e.g., *conflicting roles*), and discussed in context of the research category reflected by the heading.

### 1a Ecological Constraints

Both the survey and the interviews yielded considerable information relative to the foster parent's experiences with external systems, especially the agency. The ethnographic content from the interviews indicated that many foster parents had strong reactions to their experiences with their agency personnel. For example, one recurring theme related to *poor communication* with the agency. One foster father said, "they weren't always prompt in answering your questions or getting back with you or even finishing the process of the home study." Another said, "I would leave a message for them to call me and then two days later I still hadn't gotten a call, so I would call and leave a message again and a lot of times that call wouldn't be returned." "I know that they have a heavy case load," one mother said, "but we have responsibilities [that] we are supposed to do, and can't do it. We took from April to June or July to get a consent [form] signed to see a doctor." Other remarks included: "That level of support that you were trained to expect wasn't there," and another said, "it is hard to do your job when they are not responding, not working with you." One was concerned about the "lack of information ... [about] the biological parents and the ... plan for permanency."

Other agency themes related to the foster parent feeling *devalued* by agency members. Two parents felt that the workers favored the birth parents and were suspicious of them: "You always feel like you're on the defensive." One woman had her foster child repeatedly returned to her birth parents despite her recommendations to the agency: "[she] kept going home and coming back with injuries . . . like cigarette burns, [and we ended up taking] her to the hospital." This foster parent said that she had "the police come and document photos, but [the team] kept sending her home and it got to the point where we called the 1-800 abuse number and reported the team."

There were others who found *training inadequacies*. One felt that the time was not worth it: "For the hours you put into it, I don't know that it was a whole lot of a benefit." Two people mentioned the hassle of continuing training although another mentioned its importance. Several mentioned certain parts of training that were helpful, but these were different for each foster parent. One foster mother of an infant did not feel that discipline was a helpful topic, but other parents wished for more training in that area.

The survey asked respondents to rate a series of 32 topics on whether they were covered adequately in their preservice training. These topics were chosen from a review of several common training programs (Huber, Whiting, & Koech, 2007). Responses varied widely (range of 1-5 on every item), which may reflect a diversity of training programs, but also the respondents' opinions and experiences with their specific children.

The five items that respondents felt were *least* adequately covered were: (1) Suicide; (2) Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Conduct Disorder; (3) Aging out of Foster Care; (4) Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder; and (5) Handling the stresses of foster parenting. A follow-up question asked respondents to list topics that they felt were not adequately covered, but needed. Over half (54%) of the respondents listed additional comments in this section. These included variations on listed topics as well as frustrations or satisfactions with their training. Several mentioned needing more information about the logistics of getting medical or dental care for their foster children, and several wrote of struggles with the agency. Many had frustrations regarding visits with or lack of information about the biological family. Topics that were mentioned by several included: Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), stress on family

members, behavior management, and more realistic appraisal of what is involved in foster parenting – what one person called "expectations training." One wrote: "a lot was covered, but nothing can prepare you for the things you have to go through!"

## 1b Ecological Supports

Ecological themes that were positive included *supportive agency workers*, and these sometimes coincided with negative experiences from the same agency: One father said: "We've heard horror stories of caseworkers and we have amazing caseworkers." Other comments included: "She is very professional and right on top of things and that's been great." "I think she does a great job. She's been doing it for twenty or thirty years ... she answers my calls immediately. She gets the information that I need quickly." Others appreciated monthly visits from their caseworker and another foster parent mentioned that she visited her caseworker weekly, commenting: "We are pleased with her." Foster parents also found benefit from seeking other *informal and formal supports*. These included family, friends, church, agency or other foster parents.

Supportive themes that emerged relative to the training included *realistic expectations*. Many mentioned that training helped them know what to expect regarding foster parenting: "They [helped you] imagine how ... foster parents and children feel, the things they go through" another said: "the training gives ... some reality of the system. I think our trainers were very frank."

Table 1

| Reasons for Discontinuing to Foster | % Checked |
|---|---|
| Negative experiences with agency caseworkers/staff | 71.7 |
| Too stressful | 63.8 |
| Too many behavioral problems with foster children | 59.2 |
| Too hard on biological children | 42.1 |
| Too difficult to have foster children removed from our home | 36.8 |
| Lack of support from others | 34.9 |
| Not enough extra time | 32.9 |
| Personal problems | 30.9 |
| Too difficult financially | 24.3 |
| Caused marital/partner stress | 23.7 |
| Other reasons | 21.1 |

Another mentioned, "[the training] depends on the quality of the teacher. And I think we had three good teachers in our training period and our needs were pretty well met." One said, "We went into it thinking, 'oh, we want to get a child' and we came out of it going, 'we understand the foster process.'"

The survey indicated that these parents had participated in a variety of *ongoing* training during their service, including: on-site training (84%); reading materials such as books, manuals, or handouts (66%); or Internet/CD-ROM materials (34%). Other methods noted were variations of on-site training (e.g., state workshops), or learning from foster parent groups, therapists, TV programs, church groups, or personal experience.

## 2a Ambiguities, Losses and Stress

The interviews yielded specific qualitative categories related to stress and challenges, including *emotional ambiguities*, as described by a parent's experience with "the rollercoaster of going each week [for visitation], because we would love to adopt him, yet we really try to maintain a distance ... really believing that the best is being with his ... birth parents." Another said: "The hard part is, of course, you get attached to the children when they are in your home for a long time and then knowing some of the circumstances they go back to." Another discussed the ambiguity that comes with not knowing their future with the child: "when he graduates or gets married, are we going to be a part of that?" One mother recalled the initial ambiguity of becoming a foster parent:

"[Getting our first foster child] happened very quickly. After things had gotten settled down and we had gotten him to bed, we were just sitting up talking, thinking 'wow, now it has started ...' At that same moment, somewhere else, there was a mother and a father who were very upset and very sad about what had happened that night. The connection we now have to these, otherwise complete strangers is not really something I thought through or really prepared for ... and it is different than we

thought it would be."

Other foster parents struggled with *conflicting roles* related to these ambiguities, such as trying not to resent the birth parents for mistreating their own children, "we don't want to help them, but we know that we need to."

Another stressor was related to feeling *defensive* from being accused or attacked. This came from feeling mistreated by the agency and the birth parents. One parent felt that the biological family perceived her as the "enemy" and directed anger at her instead of the workers. Some felt *powerless*, having heavy responsibility, but little authority to make decisions for the child. One mother described this: "Birth parents have the rights but we are advocates for these children." Some felt trapped by scrutiny of their parenting with limits in how they could intervene: "they don't give you any choices except time out or taking away privileges and for some kids that doesn't work." Most of these parents agreed that there were stressful things about the foster children themselves, citing *behavior or health problems*. Hyperactivity, defiance, and other behavioral problems were mentioned, in addition to discipline ineffectiveness. Others mentioned challenging child characteristics including medical issues, developmental delays or depression.

The survey section that asked parents why they believed most foster parents discontinued fostering reflected both systemic and individual factors. As Table 1 shows, their reasons reflect opinions about agency and individual stressors. The top reasons that were identified included: bad experiences with agency personnel (71.7%), general stresses (63.8%), and behavior problems (59.2%). Of the 21% who offered further commentary, some elaborated on checked items "not being taken seriously by the professional team" or "false promises" or "lack of information from the agency." Others offered: "inexperienced caseworkers", "no time off" or a "lack of guidelines."

The qualitative data confirmed these reasons, with many offering ideas on what causes *burnout*, such as too many "headaches and disappointments." Other reasons parents gave for discontinuing were often related to the stressors already examined, such as the agency or the children. One mother reported that at her foster parent group meetings, the number one reason foster parents quit was to "get rid of the social workers." Others talked of being worn out by the foster children, and the negative effects on biological children and the family. Others mentioned discontinuing due to adoption of the children or retiring due to normal life course events.

## 2b Satisfactions & Strengths

Despite the challenges, many parents enlist to take foster children into their home, and some do so for years. These parents discussed why they chose fostering, what positive experiences they had, as well as their personal attributes that related to their longevity. The survey asked foster parents to indicate what had led them to fostering. Table 2 shows the categories most often checked, with the primary reasons being "desire to help" (85.4%), and "desired the emotional rewards of making a difference" (51%). Some expanded on these reasons listed, or wrote others, including fostering for spiritual or religious reasons, and having a strong love of children. Ethnographic themes added further perspective on the personal reasons for fostering. These included *finding meaning* in serving. One said: "Foster parenting exists for the child, it doesn't exist for you. And if you

**Table 2**

| Reasons for becoming a foster parent | % Checked |
|---|---|
| Desire to help less-fortunate children | 85.5 |
| Desired the emotional rewards of making a difference | 51.3 |
| Hoped to eventually adopt children | 30.3 |
| Could not have children (or as many children as we wanted) | 25.2 |
| Knew specific children who needed out-of-home placement | 23.0 |
| Was asked to by a relative/friend | 13.2 |
| Inspired by a media or print story about foster parenting | 10.5 |
| Financial benefit of fostering | 4.6 |
| Had been in a foster home myself as a child | 4.6 |
| Other reasons | 30.3 |

want to make a difference in the life of a child, then you continue." One couple "felt that God wanted us to get involved." Others mentioned a *desire to parent*, sometimes because they were unable to have children. Several mentioned an interest in adoption. Many had multiple reasons for fostering, such as one mother who wanted take medically fragile children so that she could make a difference by using her nursing skills while staying home with her other children.

Other themes illustrated the coping methods and supports that keep people involved. These included taking *time away* (from fostering, or having children in a day care), *diversions* (having hobbies), and *creating structure* (having routines and expectations). Some discussed *attributes or virtues* that foster parents would need in order to be successful. These included characteristics such as being "patient, extremely patient, disciplined, [with] consistency, and a lot of love." Others mentioned the need to be unselfish, child-focused, flexible, and able to handle chaos.

The rewards of fostering were varied, and sometimes difficult to describe. Some talked of *love*, "we just try to do the best we can while we have them, and as far as knowing whether you have done them much good, I think it is hard to tell. But, enjoying them is certainly a joy." Another agreed that "the reward is having the children, they are a blessing." Other comments included: "When you open up the front door and you come home and they come running and grab you and they go, 'Mommy it's you! I miss you so much!'" Another agreed, "the biggest reward is that it changes your life."

Some talked of the satisfaction of bringing *new members into the family*, getting "two wonderful little boys that we are going to be adopting," and others mentioned the satisfaction of *making a difference* for the child, including saving the life of one medically fragile infant. "The fact that he's gone from nothing to something . . . at least now he has a chance he didn't have before." Another parent felt similarly: "It has been a wonderful experience to have a child in the home . . . to see [him] grow and learn."

## DISCUSSION

### Implications for Practice

It is important for agencies to examine their own policies and assess where communication gaps exist. Consistent communication from the agency helps foster parents feel appreciated (Crenshaw, 2004), as many of these parents confirmed. This can begin during the initial placement of the child. Foster parents want detailed information regarding the child's background, especially when there are potential risks for family members. This may include being apprised of dangerous behaviors such as aggression or fire starting, or knowing that the child has accused other foster families of abuse. It is also important to know of past maltreatment to avoid situations that may inadvertently retraumatize children (McFadden, 1996). Workers may need incentives to communicate this information to foster parents. They may hesitate to share needed information with the foster parents because they are concerned with finding a willing home, rather than finding the best fit for the child (Goerge, Wulczyn, & Harden, 1999).

Several of these parents felt disconnected from the agency in regard to what was happening with the biological family or the permanency plan. Also, it appears that better information is often needed regarding practical matters, such as having dental forms signed or getting reimbursement. Giving foster parents the chance to provide feedback through a phone survey or "how are we doing?" questionnaire may help them feel heard, even if not all of their requests are feasible. It may also be a useful way to ascertain if parents are becoming burned out or likely to discontinue. This can provide an opportunity to intervene before foster parents become completely disengaged. Also, better information for foster parents helps them to be frank and appropriate in their discussions with their foster children. This is important because lack of information can leave foster children vulnerable to self-blame and prevent them from grieving and working through loss (Boss, 2004; Folman, 1998; Whiting & Lee, 2003).

Most of these parents agreed that training was an important part of their preparation for receiving children, but there was disagreement on what constituted the best training. Former studies have shown that many foster parents think that their training is

insufficient, and this still seems to be the case for many (ACYF, 1993). This is relevant because foster parents who are not well prepared are not only more likely to discontinue, but are more likely to rely on heavy handed control techniques with the children, such as excessive time outs or restraint (Daly & Dowd, 1992). Additionally, most foster parents want more support than they receive (ACYF, 1993), and ongoing training and agency support has been shown to reduce foster parent drop-out (Chamberlain et al., 1992).

Better tailoring of content and skills for foster parents could improve the training that foster parents receive (Cox et al., 2002). Topics that have historically been suggested for training programs include: "attachment and loss, legal issues, the special needs of children in care, assertive communication, family adaptation to fostering roles, positive discipline, and protecting the foster family from allegations of abuse" (McFadden, 1996, p. 552). From our findings it appears that it might also be helpful to spend time on suicide, aging out of foster care, handling stress and grief as a foster family, and ADHD. Also, parents need more training on agency-specific policies as well as what to expect regarding communication with the agency personnel. Another way to target parent needs is to have a second tier of training that is structured toward the age level of the children that the foster parents will receive. A family licensed for babies and preschoolers will not deal with the same issues as will those who take teens. This second tier could be online or in agency-prepared manuals for easy access and review.

Ecological interventions must address systemic and contextual issues, not just individual problems (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). Ecological supports that exist for foster parents include formal groups and mentor programs, which are used in some states but not others. These can strengthen foster parents, especially during the initial transition into fostering. Providing targeted follow-up training or caseworker contact during early placement makes it more likely that foster parents will continue and have realistic expectations of the process (ACYF, 1993; McFadden, 1996). Other support strategies to help parents deal with ambiguities and losses include: gathering information, talking with others regarding losses, not blaming one's self, and reaching out (Boss, 2004).

It would be helpful for agency workers to view the process of placement and its subsequent adjustments with an ambiguous loss framework. This includes recognizing that each time a family is disrupted through the entry or exit of its members, uncertainties follow that may involve guilt, feelings of failure, anger, adjustment or demoralization (Brown & Calder, 2000). As these parents discussed, losses and stresses are experienced differently by each family member, with foster mothers typically most central to the process. These parents mentioned that the strains on marriage and children were common reasons for discontinuing fostering. Although individual therapy is one of the most common supports provided by agencies (ACYF, 1993), family therapy may be better suited to address the systemic and relational issues that are common in foster families (Lee & Whiting, in press). Typical presenting problems that could be treated in family therapy may include parent adjustment issues, marital stress, child jealousy, ambivalence, divided loyalties, changing roles, and grieving. For example, it would be typical for the birth children to feel angry with foster siblings for making life difficult, but also feel loyalty toward the parent's decision to foster. These biological children may struggle with ambivalence, embarrassment about foster siblings' misbehavior, or a sense of unfairness due to different standards applied to them and their foster siblings.

*"... a second tier of training that is structured toward the age level of the children that the foster parents will receive. A family licensed for babies and preschoolers will not deal with the same issues as will those who take teens."*

Family therapy may also help with addressing foster parents' anger at the biological parents for past maltreatment, as well as normalizing the rivalry between foster and biological parents. Therapists could also help address some of the more serious problems that these foster parents missed in training, such as suicide, attachment disorders, or grief. Therapy is a good place to address problematic systemic issues as well as individual experiences with ambivalence and loss (Boss, 1999).

## Implications for Research

This study has added to the discussion of the challenges of recruiting and retaining foster parents by sharing insiders' perspectives on these problems. Further scholarship on recruitment and support of foster parents could address questions such as these: What characteristics of the parents, children, and context are associated with more successful placements? What parental styles, virtues, or character strengths are associated with foster parent resilience (e.g., Hart, Newell, & Olson, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004)? What types of training are most helpful for specific foster parent challenges?

Other questions that could be pursued relative to understanding foster parent challenges and burnout could include the following: How does the grieving process affect foster parent's ability to continue fostering? How do foster parent challenges relate to agency challenges? Do different types of agencies (e.g., public or private) have different levels of support? How does the match between the foster parents' goals and resulting experience of fostering affect their willingness to continue? For instance, a parent hoping to eventually adopt a baby girl has very different expectations than a parent who wants to help troubled teens get back to their family. It is likely that more congruent placements will be more successful for the foster children and foster parents.

## Limitations

The sample in this study was limited in that the survey distribution was only to parents in five U.S. states. These findings may differ from those of foster parents in other countries or other U. S. states, as training programs and agency styles vary widely. Additionally, the ethnographic interviews added deep, but not broad, content. The participants in the interviews were of a homogenous group, and different foster parents may have emphasized other aspects of fostering. It is also important to clarify that these foster parents worked with public foster care agencies. It is possible that those parents working with private agencies would have different degrees of difficulties or supports from their agencies. The agency context will affect the support of foster parents. Agencies face difficult work, lack of funding, case overload, and high turnover of staff (Goerge et al., 1999), and often feel public scrutiny that has resulted from highly visible deficiencies as portrayed in the media (e.g., Sieg, 1998; Smalley & Braiker, 2003). Strained agency workers will likely be less available for the foster parents.

It is also difficult to account for the many ecological factors that influence foster parents (Lee & Lynch, 1998). These include agency or funding types, state regulations, agency policies, community characteristics, and workplace culture. Any of these factors could influence the amount of support from the agency or other family members. Another important ecological consideration is culture and race. While there was ethnic diversity in the survey sample, there was little in the interview participants. This is especially relevant for foster care populations, where children of color are disproportionately represented in care (DHHS, 2004). A more representative sample would be preferable.

## Conclusion

This research helps to clear up misconceptions about foster parenting, such as their motivation being "in it for the money" (Molin, 1994). Only 4.6% of these foster parents mentioned financial considerations as a motivator to foster. These parents discussed multiple reasons for fostering, suggesting that there are many types and motivations for taking children (Schatz & Horesji, 1996). Most of these parents took in children to make a difference, and nearly all of them said that they would do it again.

In the survey and interviews, these foster parents expressed strong feelings and reactions. They generally appreciated the opportunity to speak out, which is not surprising given that a frequent complaint of foster parents is not being heard. This data can help practitioners and researchers

better understand the issues that are important to these parents, both contextually and individually. This can help improve the lives of the foster parents, children, and families who are involved in the foster care system.

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**Jason Whiting** *is an assistant professor in the Marriage and Family Therapy program at Texas Tech University.*

**Paul Huber** *is a doctoral student in the Department of Family Studies at the University of Kentucky.*

TABLE 2

| Reasons for becoming a foster parent | % Checked |
|---|---|
| Desire to help less-fortunate children | 85.5 |
| Desired the emotional rewards of making a difference | 51.3 |
| Hoped to eventually adopt children | 30.3 |
| Could not have children (or as many children as we wanted) | 25.2 |
| Knew specific children who needed out-of-home placement | 23.0 |
| Was asked to by a relative/friend | 13.2 |
| Inspired by a media or print story about foster parenting | 10.5 |
| Financial benefit of fostering | 4.6 |
| Had been in a foster home myself as a child | 4.6 |
| Other reasons | 30.3 |

TABLE 1

| Reasons for Discontinuing to Foster | % Checked |
|---|---|
| Negative experiences with agency caseworkers/staff | 71.7 |
| Too stressful | 63.8 |
| Too many behavioral problems with foster children | 59.2 |
| Too hard on biological children | 42.1 |
| Too difficult to have foster children removed from our home | 36.8 |
| Lack of support from others | 34.9 |
| Not enough extra time | 32.9 |
| Personal problems | 30.9 |
| Too difficult financially | 24.3 |
| Caused marital/partner stress | 23.7 |
| Other reasons | 21.1 |