

10-2-2008

Investigation of Motivations and Supports for Continued Foster Parenting

Rebekah Cline

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Investigation of Motivations and Supports for Continued Foster Parenting

by

Rebekah Cline

Presented to the Faculty of the
Graduate Department of Clinical Psychology

George Fox University

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Psychology

in Clinical Psychology

Newberg, Oregon

October 2, 2008

Investigation of Motivations and Supports for Continued Foster Parenting

by

Rebekah Cline

has been approved

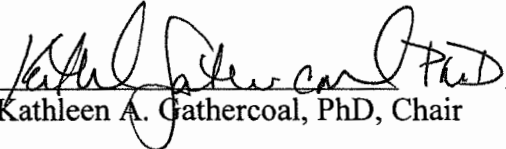
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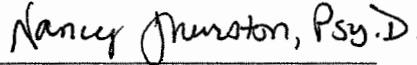
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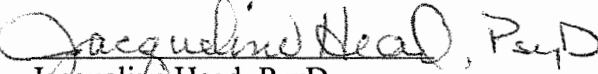
as a Dissertation for the PsyD degree

Signatures:


Kathleen A. Gathercoal, PhD, Chair

Members:


Nancy Thurston, PsyD


Jacqueline Head, PsyD

Date: 10/2/08

Investigation of Motivations and Supports for Continued Foster Parenting

Rebekah Cline

Graduate Student of Clinical Psychology at

George Fox University

Newberg, Oregon

Abstract

Recent research notes that foster parents, particularly in Oregon, are difficult to retain past a period of eight months. Further, the average stay in the foster care system for a child in Oregon is fourteen months, necessitating an average of two moves during that time for the majority of foster children. Despite this concern, there remains a limited body of literature addressing the problem of increasing foster parents' tenure. The literature that is available notes that the more frequently a child has to move foster homes the greater the likelihood that they will develop mental illnesses such as PTSD. In general the literature about the foster family system tends to focus on the problems that prevent foster parents from continuing to foster, instead of the factors that might support them and help them continue to foster children. This study sought to discover reasons that long-term foster parents offer to explain why they continue to foster children for longer than the state average of 8 months. The study assumes a positive psychological approach. Twelve foster parents were asked to respond to the question "What motivates you to continue

fostering children?” The majority of these participants were Caucasian and female, with a minority representation of Hispanics and Pacific islanders. These twelve long-term foster parents (all had over two years of experience) described why they have continued to foster children. These statements were then sorted into categories by four groups of two participants and four participants who worked alone, resulting in eight sorts of rank-ordered categories and statements within those categories. Through quantitative data analyses, six major themes were identified which motivate these foster parents to continue fostering. The identified themes were commitment to foster children, support systems, agency specific support, personal calling, personal characteristics, and respite care. These themes are discussed in light of the possibility of developing a survey to provide a broader understanding of the importance of these themes. Financial support was not an identified theme among participants, but is discussed for the lack of endorsement. Further, the application of these results to current recruitment and retention efforts as well as to current policy and practice are discussed.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The foster care system within the United States is designed “as a system of supports...to promote the safety and well being of each child in care” (Office of the Inspector General [DHHS-OIG], 2002, n.p.). Similarly, the mission of the Department of Health and Human Services in Oregon is “Assisting people to become independent, healthy and safe” (DHHS, 2008, n.p.). A major part of both of these agencies is overseeing child welfare and the foster care system. Today this system is supposed to provide the basics of care along with a myriad of other services while also experiencing a decrease in the number of available foster homes (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 2002) and an unprecedented increase in the number of children in their care (DHHS-OIG, 2002).

The Foster Care System

In Oregon approximately 5,000 children enter the foster care system every year, while about 4,500 children leave that same foster care system, resulting in an average of 6,824 children in foster care on a daily basis. At this same time there are more than 4,830 licensed foster homes across the state of Oregon (OR-DHHS, 2003). Many of the licensed foster care homes (24% nationally; DHHS-OIG, 2002) are only licensed as “kinship” homes, meaning that they are in some way biologically related to the child in question, but often indicates that they receive less training and support services, and that they may not undergo the rigorous licensing process (Schlonsky & Berrick, 2001) that non kinship homes go through. About 30% of children in the

foster care system are placed in kinship foster homes (Cole, 2006; OR-DHHS, 2003) It is notable to add that as many as 35% of licensed foster homes have been found without any children in them at the time of a survey. These childless foster homes were more likely to be non-urban (rural) and consisting of Caucasian foster parents (Gibbs & Radel, 2005). This may be because of the family's unwillingness to take children of certain ages or with certain backgrounds, which makes matching them with typical foster children difficult. In the same study, conducted in New Mexico, Washington and Oregon, 24% of homes in New Mexico never had any children placed in them during the entire period of licensure, approximately 866 homes. Further, about 23% of all licensed foster homes have been found to care for over 50% of the children in care at any given time (as cited in DHHS-OIG, 2002).

Foster Children

Children entering the foster care system in Oregon may be of any age, any race and any family background. In 2004 38% were under age 5, while 33% were between the ages of 6 and 12, and approximately 29% were older than 13 years of age (DHHS, 2005). Nationally, children of ethnic minority backgrounds are over represented within the system of care, however within Oregon the majority of children in foster care are of European American descent (DHHS, 2005).

In order for a child to be removed from their home, someone must make a report of suspected abuse or neglect. Once that report is substantiated, through a process that can take weeks, the child is removed. The most recent data show that the top three reasons children enter the foster care system are physical abuse (72.3%), parental drug abuse (71.2%), and parental alcohol abuse (67.7%) with 53% of children having at least four reasons for removal (DHHS, 2005). This is frequently a traumatic experience for these children as they are often removed in the presence of police, with their parents protesting, and usually do not get to bring anything with

them, not even a favorite toy or special blanket. Pets are also left behind which can be traumatic in itself. Next they are taken to an emergency foster care home, given “parents” they don’t know, new “brothers and sisters” who have their own problems, and expected to learn the new rules of that family. They will probably stay here for two or three days, until a longer term placement is arranged. The child is then picked up once again by police or by a social worker, given some clothes (often from a garbage bag) and taken to another home, with more people they don’t know and a whole new set of rules, different from either their own family or the emergency family they were just starting to get to know. Due to the short life span of foster parents in Oregon this scenario is likely to be repeated a minimum of one more time during the child’s stay in the foster care system, but frequently this occurs much more often. These multiple abrupt, unplanned, and unprepared-for changes in living situation have the potential to induce many psychological illnesses in the children concerned, in addition to whatever abuse, neglect or trauma they might have experienced in their original homes. One study found that 32% of children in foster care placements in Washington and Oregon had eight or more placements, with an overall average of 6 placements (Pecora et al., 2005). A child involved in this system may only be separated from their biological family for a few days, but more typically the separation is longer than a year. Within Oregon, children remain in the foster care system for an average of 14 months (Gibbs & Radel, 2005). Outcome studies show that of children in the foster care system, 63% have one or more documented psychiatric illnesses, and as many as 41% meet criteria for needing special education services (Kerman et al., 2001). One foster child who moved repeatedly stated “You always feel like its going to break down. You expect the bomb to drop” (as cited in Kerman et al., 2001).

Research has suggested that the more often a child is moved the greater the likelihood that they will develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which then induces further problems in relationships, school performance and attendance, and emotional stability (Douglass, Chambers, & Lacey, 2005; Pasztor & Wynne, 1995; Pecora et al., 2005). In Washington and Oregon these children have been shown to experience twice the rate of PTSD as veterans returning from war (Douglass et al., 2005). Similar studies of foster care alumni found that in children with no placement disruptions, no incidents where the child has run away from their placement, and no reunification failures there was a 22% decrease in negative mental health outcomes (Pecora, et al., 2005). This same study found that one out of every five foster care alumni had been diagnosed with PTSD at some time in their lives, and that 54% had dealt with mental illness in the twelve months preceding the study.

Foster Parents

A foster parent is someone who is certified and licensed by the state to provide a family setting for children who have been removed from their biological homes. In Oregon, foster parents remain primarily European American with the majority of foster mothers employed half-time or less (Gibbs & Radcliff, 2005). Foster parents willingly take on the challenge of working with a child who has been abused, neglected, or traumatized in some other way and attempt to provide them with a stable living environment while they cannot be with their parents. Some foster parents choose to be a short-term home (also called 'shelter care'), which means children may be placed with them for as little as a few days, while other parents choose to foster a child for months and sometimes even years. They are required to meet the child's physical needs, such as food and clothing, as well as to comply with a myriad of appointments and regulations that govern what they can and cannot do. They are under constant supervision, and with high

risk children live with the possibility that they will be falsely accused of abuse, and have all of their foster children removed from their care. Occasionally when a child is placed in a foster home, and their biological parents' rights later become terminated, the child will be adopted by their foster parents, a phenomenon that may be partly responsible for the attrition rate of foster parents in general. The chronic shortage of foster parents across the United States (Rhodes, Orme, Cox, & Buehler, 2003) is no less true in Oregon. As noted above, the average amount of time a licensed foster family fosters children in Oregon is only eight months, while the average time a child spends in the foster care system is 14 months.

Foster Family Retention

The research available pertaining to retention of foster families has largely centered on why foster families quit fostering (e.g., Rhodes et al., 2003), an approach that focuses on the negative aspects of foster parenting. Factors that have been shown to influence a foster parents discontinuing fostering include the stress it puts on their biological children, the difficulty of navigating the social service system, and the lack of input into what happens to the child they are fostering after they leave their home (Christian, 2002; Rindfleisch, Bean, & Denby, 1998). In addition many foster parents report difficulties with the social workers assigned to their foster children, a lack of respite and child care (Christian, 2002; OIG, 2002,) and a lack of financial and community support (OIG, 2002).

There has been some investigation into which families continue to foster for the longest periods of time, though this research is limited and the studies are quantitative in nature rather than qualitative. It seems that those with the most resources, both internal and external, especially financial, continue to foster long after many others have ceased (Rhodes et al., 2003). For example, families with mothers who are European American, employed less than half time,

and have some form of higher education seem to do better at navigating the foster care system and experience less frustration with the way things which pertain to the children in their care are handled. They may be better equipped to negotiate the system, or advocate for the children in their care due to having more flexibility in their schedules and more time to devote to those issues. Nevertheless, only a small percentage of all agency-recruited foster parents actually complete the process, obtain their license and foster children (Rhodes et al., 2003). Some agencies report attrition rates of 30-50% per year (as cited in Christian, 2002). While many other certified foster families cease to foster within one year of licensure (as cited in Cox, Buehler, & Orme, 2002). Thus, the problem of retention and utilization of certified foster homes has become paramount.

“What can be done?”

How can the longevity of foster families be improved? This is a question that has been asked by many individuals and agencies over the years and yet there is a continuing shortage of research investigating all the aspects of child welfare and particularly the foster care system. Recently there has been an increase in the amount of attention being given to these issues (e.g., Brown & Calder, 2000; Cox et al., 2002; DHHS-OIG, 2002; etc.), particularly in Oregon (Cole, 2006). However, this has only brought to light a few ideas about how to improve the system and even these have not been adequately implemented in many cases (see DHHS-OIG, 2002). Further the research has not been focused on the positive aspects of foster parenting and child welfare, but only on the negative outcomes.

Although child welfare agencies are motivated to improve their office processes to better support foster families, they may not know what changes will actually result in improved retention. Foster parents report that they believe that the directors of child welfare agencies often

have little or no understanding of what challenges they actually face (DHHS-OIG, 2002). For example, foster agency directors rated a list of possible issues nearly opposite to the ratings of the same list by current foster parents. Specifically, only 6 of 41 foster agency directors thought that lack of financial support was a reason that foster parents might stop fostering although this was one of the top reasons cited by former foster parents for resigning (Rhodes et al., 2003). Thus, recruitment and retention efforts become entirely misdirected and, are less than successful (OIG, 2002).

It is also important to note that, even as this research has been undertaken, there have been few discussions either by agency directors or researchers of the reasons why foster parents who have been active for a substantial period of time, continue to foster children in their homes. It is our belief that there are factors, motivations and supports, which influence whether or not a family continues to foster children past the average of 8 months. Instead of focusing on what keeps foster parents from continuing we are taking a qualitative, positive psychological approach (Wallis, 2005), and focusing on the beliefs, motivations, supports, etc., that keep a foster parent going. This approach allows for the voices of current, successful, long-term foster parents to be heard, and may open the door to further research that will improve foster family retention, and thereby improve the quality of life for these, our society's most desperate children.

Chapter 2

Method

Participants

Working with a list of active, licensed, non-kinship foster families from Washington County Department of Human services, 110 possible subjects were identified, who met the criteria of having been the head of a licensed foster home for a period of more than two years. These families were contacted via e-mail by the researcher and the Hillsboro, Oregon, Foster Parent Association to request their participation. This was necessary due to state limitations on who can have access to names of current foster parents, as some of them foster children in need of protection from their biological parents. Of those contacted, 12 consented to participate, which resulted in a 10.9% response rate.

This response rate was lower than expected, and may in part be explained by the criteria, that participants must have been active (meaning have children in their homes) for over two years, which was set forth in the request for participants. As noted above many foster parents are licensed for a period of time and never have children placed with them, in some cases as many as 35%, which would necessarily prevent them from participating. Further, the original request for participation mentioned “focus groups” which would have required more time and effort from the foster parents in question, than the research did in reality due to adjusting the design to allow for meeting individually or in groups of two. Thus some foster parents may not have indicated interest in participation due to their already busy schedules.

Of the twelve foster parents who participated in this research, 75% were female, 25% were male. Forty-two percent of these foster families had biological children, while 25% had adopted children in their home. Seventy-five percent of these families cared for children with special needs including those who were born drug addicted, who have severe behavioral difficulties, or those who are medically fragile. One foster parent identified him or herself as Hispanic, two as Asian American/Pacific Islander, and nine as European American/Caucasian. Additional demographic information is summarized in Table 1. It is interesting to note that there is a large standard deviation in the number of children fostered. The average among participants was 45, with a standard deviation of 69. This indicates that some successful foster families are called upon to care for large numbers of children in the foster care system. This is consistent with the previous research finding that 25% of licensed foster families care for over 50% of the children in the system.

Materials

A basic demographic datasheet was generated and each participant was asked to fill it out at the beginning of each initial interview, along with informed consent documents and contact information for the researchers. Participants were each provided with a pad of Post-It notes, and pens.

Procedure

Subjects were contacted by an email signed by both the principle researcher and the local Foster Parent Association to initiate the research process. They were asked to participate in a focus group with multiple foster parents at a central location. Of those who responded, many were unable to attend group meetings and thus individual interviews were conducted with

Table 1

Description of the Fostering Experiences of the Study Participants

Demographic	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Age	48.8 years	8.4 years	38 years	67 years
Age of spouse	49.9 years	8.8 years	38 years	57 years
How long have you been a foster parent?	8.2 years	6.2 years	2 years	20 years
Total number of children you have fostered?	45	69	2	250
How many children have been in your home at one time?	6	3	2	10

four participants. Of the other eight participants interviews were conducted in pairs, and the two participants worked together to sort and categorize their statements.

The interviews consisted of gathering basic demographic data and informed consent to participate in the research followed by the open ended question “What motivates you to continue fostering children?” Since this is a very open-ended question and might not result in the required number of responses further questions were developed from the list of top reasons why foster parents quit (see Appendix A), reversing them into “How are you able to overcome [this difficulty] when so many other families do not?” (see Appendix B). These responses were collected separately from the demographic data so that no one participant’s answers could be singled out from any other participant’s answers.

Participants were asked to generate as many reasons as they could think of for continuing to foster children. Each individual reason was written on a Post-It note and combined with the answers of the other participant in the pair when possible. Then, the participants, working alone or in pairs,

sorted these statements or 'reasons' into categories, placing statements that seemed related to each other into a themed group, and naming that group. Once all the statements were sorted into theme, they were rank-ordered within the themed group by the participant(s) in order of importance.

Finally, the larger themed groups were then organized hierarchically in order of importance from most important to least important, creating a detailed, multi-layered, hierarchy of statements and categories in order of importance to the participant(s). This process was completed by eight participants working in pairs and four working individually (i.e. a total of eight groups), and from here forward will be referred to as "sorts."

Chapter 3

Results

Identifying Themes

Data analysis was conducted using grounded theory analysis in the tradition of the constant comparative method of Glaser and Strauss (1967). The data from this study offers insight into the experiences and meaning-making found among experienced foster parents. The analysis process, conducted by the principal researcher, yielded six themes related to participants' motivation to continue fostering children. These include: commitment to the children in the foster system, support systems, agency support, sense of personal calling, foster parents' personal characteristics, and respite care.

Commitment to Foster Children. Within the completed sorts every foster parent who has been active for a minimum of two years expressed a commitment to the welfare of foster children. This commitment was expressed in numerous statements ranging from "loyalty to child's needs" to "receiving a hug from a child who came to you full of anger" and expressed a level of empathy and understanding for the experiences and welfare of children in the foster system. One foster parent also noted that this included the possibility of seeing the children in their care returned to their biological parents in a successful reunification. Additional responses in this category included "being the parent when other parents have failed," being willing to expect the unexpected from a child," and "the possibility that justice will happen for the kids." Perhaps the most emotionally salient response in this category was "Because I haven't met my whole family yet."

Support Systems. Effective and pervasive support systems were identified as an important contributor to the maintenance of foster parenting. These included spiritual and community supports, with agency-specific supports grouped into their own category. Seven of the eight sorts included support systems as important to the continuing to foster children. These support systems include local community-based foster parent groups as well as family and faith-based support services, such as parenting, church, and play oriented groups. Participants identified these as crucial in their continuance by including such statements as “Other foster parent’s advice relevant to your kiddos” and “trusting God for what is best for each child.” The latter statement was emphasized as important when decisions were made regarding children in their care without considering the perspective of the foster parent, i.e. when the child was returned to their biological family prematurely. Additional statements include “family support to meet our needs” and “knowing you are not alone.”

Agency Specific Support. Agency supports were identified as necessary and helpful in six of the eight sorts. When foster parents considered agency supports they included such statements as “understanding the system” and “not being afraid of the agency” as important in maintaining their involvement. They also suggested that “having a good team,” the “ability to advocate for children,” and “support from caseworkers” were essential. This is consistent with the literature in that many (37%) foster parents cited “agency related issues” as their primary reason for discontinuing foster care. It is interesting to note that while the mean rank of agency specific support was fourth, 30% of the total number of 210 statements were related to support services provided by the agency. To us this indicates the great deal of importance that needs to be placed on quality of interactions between case workers, multidisciplinary teams, foster parents, and foster children in order to keep those relationships positive and ongoing.

Personal Calling. Six of the eight sorts included statements regarding the importance of foster parents having a personal calling on their lives to serve children in the foster care system. In this case 'calling' seems best defined as a sense of purpose, a sense of meeting a need in their community, or a spiritual call they feel has been made of them by God. Three of these six sorts were related to a personal faith that they felt was strengthened through their service to foster children. Statements here included "caring for widows and orphans," "knowing you are building God's kingdom," and "doing what God wants me to do." Three of the sorts included statements regarding personal growth as a motivating factor. For example, statements such as "it keeps me young" and "finding personal strengths and weaknesses" were given as both a result and motivation of their continued work with the foster children in their care.

Personal Characteristics. Five of the eight sorts included categories related to personal characteristics. Statements such as "having what the kids need," "love," and "education" were present within five of the sorts. This suggests that some specific personal characteristics are desirable in those who are recruited to be foster parents, and may prove to be indicators of the length of service they provide. Other participants listed "compassion," "being addicted to kids," and "not taking everything that happens personally" as important qualities in being able to foster children for a longer period of time.

Respite Care. The literature currently suggests that improvement in respite care programs is necessary for foster parent retention (Christian, 2000; DHHS-OIG, 2002). However, according to the long-term foster parents in this study it is perhaps one of the least important factors; only two of the eight sorts included categories related to respite care as being essential to the continuance of foster care. These statements were "use of a mentor," and "family and friends who baby sit."

Financial support. Financial support was not identified as a super ordinate category but was included in two sorts under several of the other categories as a minor motivator to continued foster parenting. While the general belief is that this is a major reason that people choose to foster children, it appears that while it is a practical factor in being able to care for the children it may not be as essential as usually thought. This result is consistent with that obtained in the National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents which noted that only 8% of those participants indicated that lack of financial remuneration kept them from continuing to foster children (see Appendix A). In contrast however, one study found that among its respondents lack of financial support was a primary reason for ceasing to foster children (Rhodes et al., 2003). This area would bear further exploration as to its relation to retention among different groups of foster parents.

Concept Ranks

While six super-ordinate categories were identified by participants it is interesting to note the placement of these categories within each sort. These statements occupied varying ranks in importance. For three of the eight sorts “the kids” were listed as their primary reason for continuing to foster children, while others ranked it as their third or fourth motivator. Similar results of differing ranks was found for the other super-ordinate categories, which would be interesting to further investigate, as it may be that, in truth, all of the categories are equally important, but due to the use of a forced-choice method, where the participants were forced to rank-order their motivators, they were placed at different levels of significance.

Chapter 4

Discussion

Findings from this study are generally consistent with current literature. In some ways this study provides a first look into what keeps a foster family going, from their perspective rather than what pushes them out of foster parenting. This is in line with the current trend towards positive psychological approaches to research (Wallis, 2005). It also opens the door to further investigations of the six areas defined as important in retaining foster parents. These results also support the need for some additional research that highlights the limits of financial support in retaining foster parents.

This study poses an interesting question regarding the usefulness of respite care. In this study, the availability and use of respite care was not highlighted as a major factor in whether or not a family continues to foster children. Previous research has suggested otherwise and noted that respite care services need to be increased in order to prevent burnout in foster families. There are several possibilities as to why this study was not consistent with others in regards to respite care. One possibility is that we simply do not have enough data to determine the efficacy of respite care programs. Alternatively, it is also possible that there are simply not enough respite care providers thus few foster parents actually have access to respite care and are not aware of how helpful it could be. It is important to note that this is a sample of foster parents who have already been successful, in many cases, without the benefit of respite care. Respite care may indeed be an important factor in retaining foster parents who might not otherwise stay in the system long-term. In either case, further research is warranted in order to determine the true relevance of respite care to foster parents.

Implications for Policy and Practice

What this research indicates for child welfare agencies and foster care organizations is that there is a subset of “right” people for foster parenting among the general population. Recruitment efforts could be aimed at finding and recruiting this group rather than at efforts to recruit from a general population. For example, the majority of our participants were female Caucasians, who, research indicates appear to be better able to navigate the social services system and meet the needs of the children in their care. Statistical analyses of the demographic information gathered also indicated that people who foster children for more than two years are more likely to be individuals and couples that are in the mid to late years of life, after they have had their own family. This may be because they are more likely to be retired, and have the necessary time and energy to devote to the high level of need in foster children. This may suggest that the majority of recruitment efforts be aimed at this population in an effort to recruit to most long-term foster parents. Further, a majority of these participants noted faith-based reasons to continue to foster children, including “church support” and “building God’s kingdom.” Further research into this area may find that faith-based foster care groups are more likely to produce quality, long-term foster parents than other community based groups. In particular it would be interesting to perform a similar study separating the faith-based foster parents (e.g., those recruited from a church) from those who are recruited in other social settings such as schools and social agencies to determine if there is a critical difference between these groups that could be used to enhance retention. It is also important to note that the foster parents in this study were interested in participating in this research. They were motivated to give their opinions and ideas, and to be involved in something larger than their own foster family.

Limitations & Recommendations for Further Research

The interpretation of this study is necessarily limited by the relatively small number of foster parents who participated. What it does provide however is a narrow, in depth examination of this small group that may be expanded to include a larger group of respondents through a survey. For example, the areas that motivate this group of foster parents could be translated into a survey of how important these areas are to foster parents at a broader level. This could be accomplished with the use of a Likert scale to explore the different rankings found in this study, as we used a forced-choice method. A survey could reach a broader base of respondents with relative ease and cost-effectiveness in a way that required little time or effort on the part of these very busy parents.

The research presented herein provides a glimpse of what keeps long-term foster parents going. What is needed now is a broader base of research participants, which is the next step in further clarifying why certain foster parents stay and enhancing those qualities in order to maintain foster parents long enough to provide a stable home environment for children in the system.

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Appendix A

Top Reasons Why Foster Parents Cease Fostering

(adapted from the National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents)

Top Reasons Why Foster Parents Cease Fostering

(adapted from the National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents)

- 37%* of Foster parents cite agency related issues as the reason they stopped fostering
- 29% stated that personal problems, including marital crises, age, and the foster parent's health caused them to stop fostering
- 28% chose to leave the foster parenting system because they planned to adopt
- 24% said there were too many problems related with the children they were fostering
- 8% indicated that the low levels of financial support kept them from continuing.

* Foster parents could indicate more than one reason for leaving the foster parent pool, thus any combination of these reasons are possible causes for their ceasing to foster.

Appendix B

List of Actual Questions Posed to Study Participants

Appendix B: List of Questions Posed to study Participants:

1. What motivates you to continue fostering children? (This question was asked of all participants. On two occasions, further questions from this list were provided when participants had difficulty defining what helps them continue fostering.)
2. What specific things have helped you to continue in the face of so many agency related problems?
3. What specific factors have helped keep your personal life crisis-free in the process of fostering?
4. What has kept you fostering children rather than adopting them?
5. What factors have helped you overcome the many problems children in foster care have?
6. How have you been able to overcome the low levels of financial support you receive for the children in your care?