

FOSTERING SUPPORT: AN INVESTIGATION OF SUPPORT SEEKING AND
RECEIVING OF FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

by

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ABSTRACT

FOSTERING SUPPORT: AN INVESTIGATION OF SUPPORT SEEKING AND RECEIVING OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

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This thesis explores the experiences of foster children with support seeking and receiving in the context of their biological families, foster families, and from members outside their home(s). Guided by sensitive interaction systems theory, semi-structured interviews were conducted and thematic analysis was employed to investigate the supportive communication experiences of children in foster care. Themes that arose included the varietal experience of those seeking support, the reasons behind the choices to seek from certain biological family members, foster family members, and support workers or other members outside the home, the commonality of both indirect support seeking and direct seeking in certain instances, and the broad array of types of support sought and received. This study expands upon the importance of indirect, nonverbal, and behavioral signals of support seeking. These data also suggest the need to consider new types of support—such as cultural and love support. Theoretical and practical implications of support seeking by foster children are discussed.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Positionality.....	3
Family and Foster Care.....	3
Supportive Communication.....	7
Support and Foster Children.....	8
Support Seeking and Foster Children.....	11
Sensitive Interaction Systems Theory.....	11
Types of Support Sought.....	13
Types of Support Received.....	15
Methodology.....	17
Participants.....	17
Recruitment.....	18
Procedure.....	19
Data Analysis.....	20
Findings.....	22
From Whom Do Foster Children (Not) Seek Support?	22
Biological Family Members.....	22
Foster Family Members.....	26
Individuals Outside the Home.....	29
How Do Foster Children (Not) Seek Support?	34
Biological Family Members.....	34
Foster Family Members.....	37
Individuals Outside the Home.....	43
Which Support Types Comprise Interactions?	46
Biological Family Members.....	46
Foster Family Members.....	51
Individuals Outside the Home.....	53
Discussion.....	57
Practical Implications.....	64
Limitations.....	65
Future Directions.....	67

Conclusion.....	69
References.....	70
Appendix A: Recruitment Message.....	80
Appendix B: Interview Guide.....	82
Appendix C: Example Thank You + Resource Message.....	86
Appendix D: Participants.....	87

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cares deeply for all people, including children. I believe God is saddened by the brokenness of the world and the pain that each of the participants in this study shared. I am thankful that God is “our strength and comfort, an ever-present help in times of trouble” (Psalm 46).

Introduction

The communication we engage in as adults is often indicative of the communication we experience in our childhood. Family communication refers to the broad field of communication in familial units (Bochner, 1989). As the study of communication has advanced, the concept of “family” has evolved as well. Families can take all sorts of forms, such as nuclear families, adoptive families, step-families, and foster families, to name a few (Sánchez-Sandoval et al., 2020). Regardless of how someone conceptualizes “family,” families are an important social group that people lean on in times of need. In fact, research shows that perceived familial support is positively related to emotional, social, and psychological well-being (An et al., 2024). Support is consequential to the life of an individual, making support a valuable family resource. Thus, the messages people share to seek support, the messages they receive from others in response, and how these messages interact in the context of conversations and relationships are all essential to family functioning. One theory that offers insight into supportive communication in interpersonal interactions is sensitive interaction systems theory (SIST; Barbee et al., 1998). Essentially, this theory asserts that there are specific behaviors and strategies people use to both seek and provide support, often categorized into distinct types. Guided by sensitive interaction systems theory, this study utilizes qualitative thematic analysis to explore the process of support seeking and receiving in the context of former foster youth, an understudied population.

In 2022, there were 368,000 children in foster care in the United States (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2024). Seven thousand of these children are in foster care in Wisconsin (Children’s Wisconsin, 2025). Each child is unique, but one thing is true of all children experiencing foster care: their social network is layered. Generally, foster children are initially born into their biological family, including parents, siblings, and extended family. Then,

as they enter the foster care system for one reason or another, they gain a foster family. This family includes at least one parental figure but could include a second parent and/or siblings, as well as the extended family of the foster parent(s). Lastly, the foster child has a network of individuals outside their home, primarily the state-ordained social worker and case worker, and others such as teachers, friends, coaches, coworkers, etc. This four-prong network has typically been referred to as the “foster square” (Nelson, 2017; Thomas, 2015; Thomas, 2024). Although the presence of *potential* supporters is clear by nature of this network, this study aims to understand whether and how foster youth actually experience social support in each context.

Although some research exists about the experiences of foster care givers, less exists to represent those of foster children (Shdaimah & Rosen, 2020). This is surprising because, in some ways, the experiences foster children undergo have been shown to be even more challenging than those of foster care givers (Piel et al., 2017). To address this research gap, I situate the phenomenon of supportive communication within the larger context of family communication and contextualize it within the unique experience of those in foster care to arrive at the inquiry of this study. Guided by SIST, which emphasizes how specific types and distinct behaviors of support seeking/provision drive supportive communication, this project takes an inductive, qualitative approach to better understand the nature of support seeking and reception in the context of foster care. Much of the literature exploring SIST in the context of support is rooted in quantitative, post-positivist approaches (Barbee et al., 1998; High & Scharp, 2015). To date, little inductive, qualitative research has explored the actual strategies people use when seeking support in the context of close relationships and how (if at all) these strategies align with those outlined in SIST. To deepen an already robust theory, this study provides a much needed qualitative, thematic analysis approach study in the context of former foster youth. Beyond

theory, this study seeks to empower a marginalized population by listening to the voices of former foster youth.

Positionality

As the eldest of three girls growing up in a US American family, I have seen the importance of support within a family system firsthand. One of the most impactful experiences my family and I have undergone is the adoption of my youngest sister. At the age of four years old, I was made aware of the uniqueness of family and the vastness of the world when my parents told us we were adopting a baby girl from China. She came home on a May afternoon four years later, and my life has forever been changed. Support was relevant on many levels throughout this experience. My parents needed both tangible and emotional support through this journey, and my biological sister and I needed both of these as well. But nothing compares to the level of support that my baby sister required in that early stage of her life, and even now. As an infant, she was already reliant upon the physical support of the adults around her, and the developmental delay she had as a result of being neglected for the first seven months of her life magnified these needs. As she grew up and understood the heartache of being separated from the family she never knew, she required new levels and displays of support. While all members of any family require support from time to time, my sister, as an international adoptee, had her fair share of immense support needs. I can only imagine, and thus begin to research, supportive communication within the foster family context.

Family and Foster Care

Family has been conceptualized, theorized, and generalized in a plethora of ways. Throughout communication research, however, the nuclear family has come to allude to a group of people characterized by co-residence, heterosexual marriage, and shared genes (Baxter, 2014).

Although normalized, these are not requirements in the constitution of a family. A multitude of “other” constructions of family exist. For example, almost half of Americans have been touched by adoption in some way (Baxter, 2014), a type of family characterized by an absence of shared genes. Another existence of family beyond shared genes is the foster family. Although research acknowledges and includes non-traditional family types, there is still an underlying discourse of biological normativity (Suter et al., 2014). In essence, this discourse emphasizes a societal preference for blood related families. In part because of this prejudicial discourse, and in part because the majority population of “families” do fit into the mold of biologically related and heteronormative, most research collects data on these types of families specifically (Baxter, 2014). To combat this narrative, it is of utter significance to study and learn about families of all variations.

A helpful psychological model that has been developed to understand the child’s position in a family is the ecological systems theory. In this theory by Bronfenbrenner (1994), a child’s development is explained through the systems and environments around them. Five systems comprise the model: the microsystem (immediate environment), mesosystem (linkage between microsystems, ex: home and school), exosystem (link between a child’s system and an outer system, ex: parent’s workplace), macrosystem (culture, society), and chronosystem (where a child is in time). Applied to the context of foster care, the three most relevant systems include the microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem. The biological family and foster family oscillate between being the microsystem or mesosystem depending on where a child is living and their access to individuals outside the home. The macrosystem is broad and ever changing as a foster child moves across county lines, school district zones, and through various court systems. In Bronfenbrenner’s model, all the systems of a child’s life are interconnected, but also fixed. The

way the child is always positioned as the center of these systems that act as fixed rings limits their ability to actively pursue community, relationship, and support from systems outside of their microsystem. Because this model was crafted upon assumptions of what a typical child's environment may look like, it will be helpful to reimagine this for a child whose biological home has experienced upheaval and may not experience the closeness with their microsystem that this model suggests.

The foster square (Nelson, 2017) creates new grounds with which to study the microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem using terms specific to a foster child. The term foster square was first coined by Nelson (2017) as a means to conceptualize the various social systems within a foster child's life as a square with four prongs, including their biological family, their foster family, the state, and the child themselves (Nelson, 2017; Thomas, 2015; Thomas, 2024). There are some parallels with Bronfenbrenner's model as a biological family can be considered a microsystem, the foster family can serve as a mesosystem, and the outside of the home sphere is similar to the macrosystem. However, while the ecological systems theory positions the child in a fixed inner circle, the foster square model spatially shows how the foster child has equal access and ability to interact with each of the corners individually. The displacement from home to home and the varied levels of support foster children experience are best represented by the foster square model. Importantly, although the foster square model limits the fourth prong to only include the state, the importance of friendship and the presence of supportive adults in a child's life make it vital to expand the fourth prong to consider all social resources "outside the home" to encompass other non-familial relationships as well as state workers (Hoferichter et al., 2021).

To date, much research that exists on foster families and parenting is in the social work discipline. For example, one study looks at how understanding the combination of two families' functions should be incorporated in foster family training (Julien-Chinn et al., 2017). Other scholarship shows the significance of social workers in a child's well-being (Fernandez, 2007; Hiller et al., 2020). Communication-specific research on foster care includes many studies on foster children and their understanding of both their own and their family identity. Discourses about family are a continuous point of study (Nelson et al., 2017). In one study, individuals were interviewed about the meaning of home and identified their consideration of home as a place, their family, and even themselves (Nelson & Thomas, 2022). Other studies looking exclusively at foster parents show that the discourse of family for foster parents includes both blood-relatedness and constitutive kinning, or creating family meaning, which is different from some of the definitions of family for non-foster parents (Suter et al., 2014). Thomas and Scharp (2017) considered what discourses constitute an "ideal" situation for adoptive families, finding that the idea of "forever family" is discursively significant as it pushes against traditional biological limitations of family. However, there is a missing link in much of this research about how families interact on a practical level. What does communication look like between foster children and their families, aside from the thematic, birds-eye view understandings of discourse and identity?

The stimulant to force a child into foster care is severe (Lorio et al., 2023). For a child to be displaced from their home and enter a new home is no small challenge. As many foster children make sense of their identity, Thomas (2014) highlights they often identify as victims, survivors, and victors. These identities are by no means trivial. As if navigating their own identity is not challenging enough (Thomas, 2014), a foster child is generally involved in

communication with their various resources, ranging from birth and foster families to external resources like social workers and teachers (Nelson & Colaner, 2020). In line with the idea that the four corners of the foster square interact, other studies show how the communication between foster parents and birth parents is essential to a foster child's positive experience (Millet-Ott, 2017; Nelson, 2017). Foster families are also directly responsible for the portrayal and identity maintenance of the foster family identity as well (Miller-Ott, 2017). The many elements of communication within a birth family, communication within a foster family, and communication outside a family about a person's familial experiences are significant. How this communication occurs plays a role in how a foster child will experience their life (Nelson, 2016), making it vital to better understand the communication processes that occur between foster children and their various social networks (Thomas & Scharp, 2020). In conceptualizing foster family communication, Thomas (2024) explicitly calls for future research to consider other types of resources beyond immediate biological or foster parents, including other members of these families, such as biological siblings and adoptive siblings, and those outside the home like state workers. By better understanding the communication processes foster children experience both inside and outside their home, this project will continue to deepen the discipline's knowledge of foster family communication, which can then be used to improve the experiences of foster children allowing them to thrive as a result.

Supportive Communication

Social support is part of the human experience. Supportive communication, at its most basic level, can be distinguished as either sought support or received support (MacGeorge et al., 2011). It can also be classified as objective and subjective, as many messages are objectively supportive, but may be experienced as a support seeker as subjectively supportive or not.

Individuals may seek support from others close to them, such as friends and romantic partners (Brisini & Wang, 2024) and may receive support from various sources across their social network, including family (An et al., 2024; Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). For a child in foster care, where social networks are layered and complex (Nelson & Colaner, 2020), supportive communication may be even more complicated.

Support and Foster Children

Historically, children are better equipped to handle stress if their family is supportive (Wills et al., 1996). For instance, a study of 279 families revealed that there is a negative correlation between parent-child support and psychosocial risk, or likelihood of experiencing poor mental health conditions (Marta, 2002). Evidently, the relationship between a parent and their child is significant. Interestingly, mothers are the preferred support figure when an adolescent experiences emotional pain, and fathers are the preferred support figure when an adolescent experiences family conflict (de Jonge et al., 2022). However, not every child may boast of a supportive relationship with their parents. A foster child, especially, is placed into the system for the explicit reason that their parent was unfit to parent them at that time (Boyle, 2017). Boyle (2017) discovered that the effects of foster children communicating with their birth families while in foster care were quite mixed. One potential reality for a foster child is having an incarcerated parent. The relationship between a mother and child is a significant part of the microsystem, but when you add the element of incarceration, the state, and thus macrosystem, becomes involved. In fact, Rudd et al. (2019) examined mother-child conflict when the mother was incarcerated, affirming that extenuating circumstances affect communication within both the microsystem (mother/child relationship) and macrosystem (jail/mother/child relationship) of a child. Communication with birth families was most beneficial for a child in foster care when

foster parents and birth parents collaborated together, and least beneficial when the birth parents continually mistreated the child (Boyle, 2017). Therefore, communication with birth parents is most definitely a relevant part of the equation for foster children, yet little research has explored the extent to which this corner of the foster square engages in supportive communication.

Within a birth family, beyond parents, there are other familial relationships that can be sources of support. In family circles, there is a role entitled the “kinkeeper”. This person is responsible for much of the communication and social support between family members. According to Leach and Braithwaite (1996), kinkeepers are shown to be available to the foster child for support. Although this study alludes to the fact that not all families may have an obvious kinkeeper, the role of providing familial support is occupied by extended family members in a multitude of ways. As I attempt to look into the support or lack thereof for former foster youth from their biological families, this concept of kinkeeper may become relevant as foster children mention uncles or grandmothers, rather than mothers and fathers. Adjacent to the idea of a kinkeeper is a biological sibling (Nelson, 2016). It is to be discovered through this study if social support is provided to foster youth by their biological siblings. With each of these family members, though their presence may be inevitable, the foster child’s choice to seek from them is still to be explored.

In addition to the birth family, foster children are unique because they are a part of their foster family as well. As the name mandates, any foster child has been in at least one foster placement. However, many have had multiple foster homes and replacements. As some individuals recalled their time in various foster homes, they inevitably addressed their relationship with their foster parents (Unrau et al., 2008). The transition to a new foster home is innately an experience of loss—loss of friends and family, loss of normalcy, loss of belonging,

and even loss of self-esteem (Unrau et al., 2008). This situation appears to be a situation in which one would need support. However, the complexity of these replacements often makes it difficult for foster children to turn to their foster parents, as they battle feelings of loyalty to their birth parents and lack of trust of new people (Unrau et al., 2008). Other research highlights a different reality. A qualitative study of 59 foster adolescents looked at relationships foster children have with their birth parents and foster parents, reporting that children with a stronger attachment toward their foster families had higher well-being (Maaskant et al., 2016). These findings allude to the significance of relationships between a child and their foster parents, but they do not reveal the extent to which foster children actually turn to or seek support from their foster family.

Beyond the home, foster children have other significant relationships as well, such as school teachers, coaches, and counselors (Morton, 2015). Interestingly, research shows that it is not just one of these individuals who can provide support for a child, but it is the combination of various community members involved in a child's life that results in increased well-being and even increased academic achievement (Mirkovic et al., 2024; Morton, 2015). Indeed, foster children specifically often have relationships with support workers, such as social workers, case workers, or child protective service employees. Support workers usually interact with and provide support to parents, but evidence suggests they are available to support foster children in several ways like providing a change of environment, and offering emotional support, but often must be sought (Fernandez, 2007). Foster children are unique in their access to outside support workers because the nature of being a foster child elicits the need for non-familial support workers. Thus, community members that a child may have access to, such as teachers and school counselors, in addition to foster care-specific support workers, such as social workers, together make up the network of individuals "outside the home."

Guided by the foster square, the above review offers insight into the network of supportive resources of foster children and who they may turn to for support; however, relatively little is known about the qualitative “who” is being turned to for support. Foster children exist within their biological family, their foster family, and their greater community, and research shows that children often seek support from families, parents, and community members (Wills et al., 1996; Morton, 2015). However, there is little research on the support seeking of foster children in particular. Although foster children typically have access to parental figures, both birth and foster, and supportive resources outside the home, who do they actually turn to for support? To answer this question, I ask:

RQ1: From whom do foster children (not) seek support (a) in their biological family, (b) in their foster family, (c) and outside the home?

Support Seeking and Foster Children

The first step of supportive communication is support seeking (Barbee & Cuninghame, 1995; Goldsmith, 1995). In regard to how support is sought, different relational characteristics, such as family communication patterns, directly affect how a person chooses to seek support (High & Scharp, 2015). People have a variety of individuals from whom they seek support (friends, family etc.), and the ways in which they seek support varies (Goldsmith, 1995). Importantly, support seeking is just the *first* step of a supportive interaction (MacGeorge et al., 2011), and once an individual chooses to seek support, they must then decide *how* to seek support. As individuals reveal times they did seek support, and the behaviors they engaged in to ultimately alert a provider of their need for support, the sequence of supportive exchanges are observable (Gulley, 1993).

Sensitive Interaction Systems Theory

One theory that allows a better understanding of the supportive communication process is the sensitive interaction systems theory (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). SIST is primarily founded upon the understanding that how an individual seeks support directly affects how a support provider chooses to respond. In other words, the sensitive interaction systems theory is called a theory of interactive coping, alluding to the fact that both the communicated messages from a seeker and provider are involved in the supportive communication processes (Barbee et al., 1998).

How an individual seeks support varies along two dimensions of communication: direct/indirect and verbal/nonverbal. The SIST model, developed by Barbee and Cunningham (1995), provides a framework of the various support seeking techniques that lead to an assortment of support activation behaviors, including support seeking that is verbal/direct (*ask*), nonverbal/direct (*cry*), verbal/indirect (*hint*), nonverbal/indirect (*sigh*). Generally, research shows that specific strategies are more beneficial and elicit more quality support. For instance, direct support seeking is most often associated with receiving supportive messages of higher quality in the United States (Williams & Mickelson, 2008; Youngvorst & High, 2018). Other research suggests that part of what makes a strategy appealing to a support seeker is if it has minimal psychological costs, such as harm to one's perception of themselves (Lim et al., 2013).

To better understand the variety of support seeking strategies that exist, and to expand upon the four basic dimensions, Barbee and Cunningham (1995) provide a detailed coding system of support-seeking behaviors. Direct/verbal behaviors include behaviors such as telling the problem or asking for help. Direct/nonverbal behaviors include crying and showing anger. Indirect/verbal behaviors include speaking hypothetically and being vague. Lastly, indirect/nonverbal behaviors include staring into space and moving away (Barbee &

Cunningham, 1995). While this typology is extremely helpful, it is also limited. It is beneficial to use a coding method like this for quantitative studies to keep a record of specific instances that fall into these categories; however, qualitative studies allow more nuanced data to be uncovered through stories. Humans produce many verbal and nonverbal communicative messages, and this qualitative study will likely uncover seeking strategies beyond those listed by Barbee & Cunningham (1995), something suggested by past scholars (Goldsmith, 1995)

As established, children seek support from their families (Ishikawa et al., 2023). Yet, De Jonge (2022) asserts that though we know the importance of a parent's support, we do not have plentiful research conducted to reveal *how* children seek support from their families. High and Scharp (2015) highlighted a direct link between family environment and type of support seeking an individual employs, showing how one's family's communication patterns directly predicted people's own motivation to seek support and enact (in)direct support-seeking behaviors. In particular, people who reported their family as open and conversational were more likely to engage in *direct* support-seeking behaviors. Although not specific to children or foster youth, this research highlights that family environments can influence support-seeking. Importantly, more research is needed to explore these connections from the perspective of (foster) children.

Mirroring the logic of the foster square, this project is driven to understand the strategies foster children use to seek support across their various networks. SIST suggests that support seeking strategies may vary as a function of relationship qualities, making it important to consider support seeking strategies uniquely across the social context of foster children. Toward understanding the significance of how foster children seek support, I pose the following:

RQ2: How do foster children (not) seek support (a) in their biological family, (b) in their foster family, (c) and outside the home?

Types of Support Sought

Support can take a variety of forms, or types, often categorized into two broad groups: emotion-focused or nurturant support and problem-focused or action support (Moisio & Beruchashvili, 2023). Emotion-focused support includes emotional, esteem, and network support. Emotional support is a commonly noted type of support (Burleson, 2008). It refers to expressions of comfort and security (Russell et al., 2015). Esteem support includes messages that enhance or improve how a person feels about themselves and their characteristics or achievements. Network support regards messages that connect a distressed individual to people or resources that could help them feel better or manage their stressor. Now, even “being there” support is also acknowledged as a type of emotion-focused support (High & Crowley, 2018; Teo et al., 2020). A study examining adolescents with cancer and their need for support revealed a common desire for adolescents to have someone who will just “be there” (Woodgate, 2006). On the problem-focused or action support side of the typology lie informational and tangible support. Informational support refers to messages of advice (Russell et al., 2015). Tangible support refers to the messages a person communicates, or aid they provide, to practically help solve a problem. Sometimes a person is seeking a specific type of support, and other times they are simply displaying support seeking behaviors but may not know exactly what they need (Crowley & High, 2020).

There is no doubt that the children who experience foster care will and do seek support as a result of intense life change, physical and relational displacement, and overall attachment disruption (Taylor & McQuillan, 2014). In a foster family setting, foster children may seek a variety of types of support from both their foster family and biological family. Traditionally, children seek all types of support from their mother and father (de Jonge et al., 2022). Logically,

a parent provides the tangible support that a child seeks such as food and shelter. As adolescents grow older, they may also seek advice and esteem support from their parents (Hoferichter, 2021). For children in general, it is shown that adolescents may seek esteem support, advice support, and emotional support from non-familial adults, such as teachers, coaches, and therapists (Hoferichter, 2021). In this study, research hopes to reveal which of these types of support foster children primarily seek in the context of family. Research reveals their relationships and social systems and what theoretical support they have access to, but what types of support a foster child is seeking when they turn to these various individuals in their lives are largely left unstudied. As human beings, one form of support is rarely sufficient to meet all needs. Therefore, this study hopes to shed light on a variety of types of support being sought by foster children.

Types of Support Received

The primary consequence of support seeking is support receiving, which refers to the communicative messages people receive in response to support seeking. Support receiving refers to the subprocess of supportive communication where a provider produces a message in response to a support seeker's communicated need. SIST provides a foundation for understanding support provision as well. Similarly to the categorization of support seeking behaviors into direct/indirect and verbal/nonverbal dimensions, SIST categorizes support provision behaviors as being somewhere along the spectrum of approach or avoidant and being emotion-focused or problem-focused (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Approach behaviors engage a distressed individual's feelings and problem whereas avoidance behaviors ignore and offer limited energy toward helping the support seeker. Relatedly, emotion-focused support provision signifies the supportive communicative message that is specifically intended to provide emotional, esteem, or network support. Problem-focused support provision signifies the supportive communicative message that

is specifically intended to provide tangible or advice support. Thus, according to SIST, the responses foster children receive when seeking support can vary in ways that warrant further study.

Children receive virtually all types of support from their parents (de Jonge et al., 2022; Fernandez, 2007). Studies on families have revealed that parents provide emotional support, esteem support, advice support, and tangible support throughout different stages and situations in a child's life (An et al., 2024). For foster children, tangible support is often provided by foster homes as a necessary means of supporting the child (Lorio et al., 2023). A quick google search will reveal that there are plentiful resources for foster parents to learn *how* to emotionally support their foster children. Additionally, children also receive support from outside their familial units. Specifically in the context of schools, counselors, teachers, and peers, have been shown to meet the supportive needs in children's lives. Especially during adolescence, this support is received and surely benefits the support seeker and their well-being (Hoferichter et al., 2021). Most evidently in the context of foster care, foster children receive tangible assistance, and other problem-focused support, from social workers and even law professionals as they seek support for their situational problems (Lorio et al., 2023).

But do foster children actually receive each of these types of support from their various social resources? Limited research exists to confidently affirm this. One study found that foster children do receive emotional support from foster families (Hiller et al., 2020), but as established, studies like these are few and far between. Aside from receiving emotional support from their foster parents, there is even less information about if children receive types of support from their biological families. There is also a gap in research regarding support foster children receive from outside their families. Problem-focused support can be the easiest to infer, as the

nature of a foster child signifies their physical need for a home and receipt of tangible aid of a home by their foster family. Emotion-focused support is again, largely left untouched (Julien-Chinn et al., 2017). Relying on the foster square and SIST, this project aims to reveal the types of support that comprise interactions between foster children and their various networks.

Accordingly, I ask:

RQ3: What types of support comprise interactions between foster children and (a) their biological family, (b) their foster family, (c) and those outside the home?

Methodology

This study is a qualitative research endeavor. In general, research on supportive communication uses quantitative means to do so (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Kam et al., 2020; Youngvorst & High, 2018; Zou & Zhang, 2024). There has been some critique of this as studies that use SIST have specific limitations. For instance, SIST boasts of a set categorization of seeking behaviors and elicited responses (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995), leaving little to no freedom for other behaviors to be noted (Goldsmith, 1995). Qualitative research allows information to be uncovered with depth and contextual significance (Tracy, 2020). Approaching SIST from a qualitative lens will allow a broader picture of the information being sought to be portrayed. Although many studies offer support for the SIST typology (Kam et al., 2020; Youngvorst & High, 2018; Zou & Zhang, 2024), others challenge the structure and assumptions of SIST (Goldsmith, 1995). Accordingly, guided by SIST, qualitative research will be used to inductively investigate the communicative dynamics of support seeking and receiving among former foster youth.

Participants

The population that this study sought to understand is children who were in foster care in Wisconsin. The actual participants of this study were former foster youth, or adults who were in foster care during some point in their childhood. So, for this study, participants were not currently children but rather were adults, who were formerly fostered, reflecting on their experiences while in foster care. Past research shows that the way formerly fostered adults make sense of the system as a whole reveals much about the experience that person had while in care (Thomas & Scharp, 2020). Further, qualitative research gives participants a voice (Tracy, 2020). For the marginalized population of former foster youth, like the participants of this study, providing personal life stories and making their experiences known gives power and agency, thus making interviews appropriate for this study.

The goal was to include between 10 and 20 participants in the study. According to Tracy and Hinrichs (2017), the amount of data needed for a qualitative study is as much as is needed to achieve rich rigor. Tracy and Hinrichs say this specific amount is whatever amount provides grounds for and supports meaningful claims. In the end, I interviewed 12 former foster youth. The claims that arose in response to the research questions were significant and meaningful, suggesting enough participants had been interviewed to achieve richness and rigor.

Recruitment

Former foster children were identified through convenience sampling on social networking sites, through emailing local non-profits, and through contacting social workers/independent living coordinators/other state workers (Appendix A includes the recruitment material that was used). I initially relied on social networking sites like Facebook to recruit former foster youth. To do this, I posted a general advertisement explaining the study and inviting volunteer participation in several foster care specific groups. Unfortunately, recruitment

via social media had no success. As a researcher, I learned that pivoting and thinking creatively about sampling is a crucial part of the research process, so I instead contacted several local nonprofits related to foster care. In addition to emailing local nonprofits, I emailed every independent living coordinator in the state, every county transitional resource aid provider, and many social workers in various Wisconsin counties. To qualify as a participant of the study, individuals were required to be over 18 years old, have resided in the Wisconsin foster care system at age 10 or older and be able to recall that time in their life. There was no restriction for how long a child was in foster care because it is evident in the research that the act of being removed from your home and forced to live in another is challenging and requires support no matter how long or short (Piel et al., 2017). Additionally, the minimum age requirement was implemented because much of the research regarding supportive communication and children classifies and discusses children who are able to recall their childhood at age 10 or older (Wells et al., 1996; Moisio & Beruchashvili, 2023). After finding and emailing over 80 individuals, participants began self-identifying and opting to be contacted for an interview. Appendix D displays a table with all participants.

Procedure

Recruiting and data collection began upon approval from the UWM Institutional Review Board (UWM #25.104). Interviews were utilized in this study. Interviews allow participants to answer questions and engage in research that is self-reflective (Spradley, 1979). To protect the autonomy of each participant, I gained consent and encouraged participants to share as much or as little as they wanted to because it is crucial to ensure participants are protected and are being treated with integrity (Brinkman & Kvale, 2018). All interviews were conducted via Zoom, a video-conferencing platform that allows transcription and video-/audio-recording. I first gained

verbal consent from the interviewee. Because participants were recruited virtually, a virtual interview setting allowed people located in a wider range of geographical regions to be included, as opposed to limiting participants to residents of one particular city. I recorded the interviews using Zoom and have maintained these recorded interviews on a secure platform. Only my faculty advisor and I have access.

For the interview, questions were selected using a semi-structured interview guide (See Appendix B for the full interview guide). Any information a participant shared was voluntary, and they were able to abstain from answering a question at any time due to the sensitive nature of the topic of family (Brinkman & Kvale, 2018). To fully understand a participant's responses, I asked follow-up questions when clarification was required (Tracy, 2020). After the interviews were conducted, they were saved and stored securely through the university OneDrive account where they are again accessible only to the research team. Following the Zoom interview, the participants received a supportive thank you email within a week of their interview date. This email included a message from me expressing gratitude for their participation, as well as links to emotional support resources, including mental health helplines and free counseling websites (See Appendix C). This was done to mitigate any emotional stress that the interview amplified or uncovered (Brinkman & Kvale, 2018).

Data Analysis

In order to produce trustworthy results, an audit trail was kept (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This means I kept a record of each document and file I created for this project. Beginning with Zoom interview recordings, each video file, transcript, and notes I took on a document during the interview were saved in a Google Drive folder. After saving each transcript, I annotated each interview for patterns between interviews, created each code using multiple participants'

responses, and developed all themes using these data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure the trustworthiness of my findings, I conducted data conferences and facilitated member reflections with collaborators, sharing de-identified excerpts to confirm that my coding accurately represented the emerging themes.

To sort the qualitative data effectively, thematic analysis was employed (Braun & Clarke, 2012). First, I listened to each interview to verify the transcript and de-identify any proper nouns. Then, I noted patterns throughout interviews and made a list of open codes (e.g., “isolation”) and closed codes (e.g., “trust”). Combining various codes, I created specific categories based on frequency and strength of response. Then, to develop themes, codes that were similar to each other and specifically answered the research questions were developed into coherent themes (e.g., “trauma speaks—or seeks—for itself”). Then, to provide exemplary evidence for each theme, quotations and anecdotes were highlighted in the findings section, ensuring the reader can easily understand what each theme means verbally, and how it looks experientially.

Findings

RQ1: a) From whom do foster children (not) seek support in their biological family?

A notable observation that must be made before sharing the results is that my original research question asked: from whom do foster children seek support? While that is still the question being asked, the results will have a slight variation. An undeniable finding in all interviews was the lack of support seeking by foster children, or at least the lack of conscious support seeking. Thus, many of the thematic findings for research question one will highlight the *who* that foster children sought support from, but also the *who* that was available to them, even if they did not seek support from that person. This deepens our understanding of the supportive experience of lack thereof, for foster youth. The experiences of foster children are so unique and even within those that have experienced foster care, no two experiences are alike. Therefore, to fully reflect the lived experiences of former foster youth interviewed for this project, RQ1 will include both who people sought support from and who was generally available as a potential supportive resource to the foster child.

Data analyses revealed three main themes regarding who foster children seek support from in their biological family. These are seeking from the default, seeking from the inhibited, and the notion that some were forcibly unavailable.

Seeking from the Default

Foster youth seek from birth family members as the default. Within the birth family, three subcategories arose, these being: birth parents, extended family members, and biological siblings.

Birth Parents. No matter the circumstances that have led to a child being displaced from their biological family, participants often expressed that there was still a tie between them

and their birth parents. In fact, several participants stated that seeking support from parents was the default response. In light of the difficulty and seeming impossibility of his situation, Keondre said “the only thing to do was reach out and call mom.” In a situation of despair or confusion, the default response was simply to “call mom.” His mom, no matter the reason she was unfit to parent him at the time, was the person he automatically chose to reach out to. Another participant, Kyra, mentioned seeking support from her biological father, saying “the only times I ever reached out to him were when I needed financial help”. Although Kyra knew her father could not provide all the things she needed, she still chose to seek support from him occasionally due to the default nature of turning to parents for help.

Extended Family Members. In addition to birth parents, there is a default warrant for support seeking from extended members of one’s birth family. One participant, Micah, said their “auntie” was who they “always” sought support from when they “got into it” with their foster dad. Tragically, this auntie was physically abusive, yet the adolescent still sought support from her. Though it may seem counterintuitive to seek support from an abusive person, the default choice for a foster child to seek support from their birth family remains. Similarly, Jazmine noted seeking support from her grandparents on various occasions. Another former foster youth named Audrey said upon seeking help, her grandparents took her in for several months. Micah, Jazmine, and Audrey all sought from their extended family as a default response to the turmoil they were experiencing in foster care.

Biological Siblings. Most consistently, former foster youth expressed frequently seeking support from their biological siblings. The biological sibling relationship was the most notably positive relationship mentioned in all interviews. For example, Kyra, whose older sister was licensed and became her foster mother, sought support mostly from her biological sister:

By far the person I lean on the most is my sister... And so whenever I have any issue, I text my sister first because she's lived through things before I have. But also, I think it's kind of funny because I never know whether I'm going to get lectured or [get] a best friend or the exact response I'm giving. She switches in between the modes depending on how she's feeling. She's been through a lot too... I think we kind of lean on each other.

Kyra's default was to text or talk with her older sister. Though her sister was married, and Kyra subsequently had a foster father, she never mentioned seeking support from him. The default desire for a foster child to seek support from their biological family maintained this avenue of support seeking. When asked if Jazmine ever reached out to her birth mother or father, she vigorously shook her head in denial, but then stilled and said "I did talk to my brothers on a regular basis, though. We even snap back and forth." Jazmine's default was to seek support from her biological brothers.

Seeking from the Inhibited

A second theme that became apparent was the foster child's choice to seek from inhibited biological family member. Specifically, former foster youth frequently recognized the limitations of their birth family yet would often reach out to them for support anyway. Some former foster youth explained that their biological parents were mentally/cognitively impaired. One woman, Elsie, mentioned seeking support from her mother who was mentally ill, saying "my mother was always there for me... she had her own issues, but I still called her." She unpacks these "issues" later by explaining her mother's mental health disorder. Yet, by default, Elsie called her. Further, one son, Keondre, said his father, who he previously labeled as an alcoholic, "knows I coulda used his help. I told it to him. Like, he said he knows it, but he

just... I don't think he's in the right headspace." Whether due to the alcoholism or his "headspace," Keondre knew his father was inhibited as a support provider, yet, he reached out with verbal words and "told it to him" when he needed help. Elsie's mother and Keondre's father both had their own set of struggles, but Elsie and Keondre both sought support from them regardless. Seeking from an inhibited support provider in their birth family was an element of the default experience for foster youth seeking support.

Seeking from the Unavailable

The third category in regard to support seeking from birth family members is the idea that many biological family members are unavailable and thus foster youth do not seek from them. While the hope is that individuals have choice and freedom in who they choose to seek support from, that choice is not always available. This forcible unavailability is caused by a variety of reasons. To be frank, the most common response to the question, "can you recall a time you reached out to your birth family for support" was a short "no" (Micah, Leah, James, Keondre, Aaron, and William). William specifically said, "I don't even remember a time I wanted to reach out from my birth family." His lack of desire immediately ended his support seeking. Others simply were unable to seek support from their biological parents due to extenuating circumstances. Audrey said of her mother,

She just didn't want to. She was tired of supporting me and so like she just opted not to. So it's like, it was kind of more this ongoing thing where she knew that I needed support and connection, but just decided to burn the bridge instead... I wish she stayed in contact. I feel like there's a lot of things that happened pre-entering care, like she cut off everyone, like I was already isolated when I entered foster care from my entire

family. That was super hard. I wish we had phone calls more and that she just tried to engage as a parent but instead she did the opposite.

Here, a birth parent's lack of desire caused them to be unavailable for the foster youth. In this case, the forced prevention of contact was initiated by the youth's birth mother.

In other cases, there was an outside force that created this dynamic of a forcibly unavailable birth family member. For some participants, they were not allowed to seek support from biological family members legally. For example, the government prohibited Leah from contacting her birth parents. She said her relationship with her birth parents was "non-existent... my mom took off... [my dad] was told he couldn't have any contact with us." Similarly, another participant, James, said when asked if he reached out to his birth father, "no, he had a restraining order." His father was completely unavailable.

Additionally, the element of death changed the support seeking dynamic for some, as Leah, Audrey, and Elsie eventually had no option to reach out to their deceased biological mother and/or father. The common thread in many former foster youth stories is that seeking support from birth family was absolutely not an option, making support seeking forcibly unavailable to these foster youth.

RQ1: b) From whom do foster children (not) seek support in their foster family?

In response to this question, data reveals two categories. First, within a foster family setting, children do choose to seek support from foster parents who are understanding. Similar to seeking support from biological family, a lack of support-seeking was again noted in the context of foster family. The second category is that support seeking is impeded often due to two main reasons: distrust and lack of belonging. I explore these further below.

Good Foster Parent Relationships

In instances where a foster parent proved themselves to have character traits such as kindness or compassion, a foster youth acknowledged feeling a gained ability to trust them which led to support seeking. One participant, Tatum, recalls fondly the ability she had to seek support from her foster mom, noting that she specifically chose to seek support from her because “she’s a bit more understanding and willing to learn [than my biological mother].” It is evident that this participant’s foster mother proved her character and that has given her the green light to seek support.

Interestingly, in the case of birth parents, the interviews revealed that support seeking was default, and foster children engage in that until they can’t—either forcibly or by choice. In the case of foster parents, on the other hand, it seems that seeking support is avoided, and foster children do not engage in that until their foster parents prove that their character is trustworthy. In a moment of extreme significance in their life, Tatum sought support from both their birth mother and foster mother, and responses were extremely different. Tatum came out as bisexual to their birth mother and was met with “you are the devil.” They came out as bisexual to their foster mom and was met with comfort. Understandably, the character differences in that moment shaped the seeking choices this individual made from then on. The understanding nature of the foster mother seemed to be an important foundation for a foster youth’s choice in who to seek support from. Similarly, when asked if they recalled a time when she reached out to her foster family for support, Sage said, “Actually, yeah, living with them... they were actually nice. So I was able to do so.” Sage’s response indicates that because her parents were “nice”, she reached out to them for support.

Poor Foster Parent Relationships

Foster child support seeking was impeded by their perception of foster family members as untrustworthy and by their lack of belonging. First, if a parent could not be trusted, a foster youth did not seek support from them. Second, if a foster child felt like they did not belong, they were less likely to seek support.

Lack of Trust. One impediment to support seeking that arose in interviews was a lack of trust for foster parents. One participant, Micah, said,

I don't want to sound like unappreciative but I was not really seeking much support in the house I was living in. Because my foster parent, he was like, this guy, he was a pastor and he owned houses, and he didn't have a wife. He was always moving and on the go and you know like we never actually even sat down and just like talked and had conversations like that... I didn't even know he cared. Like, I thought he was doing it for the money.

For Micah, his foster dad was simply a stranger who chose to foster him for unknown and possibly selfish reasons. His description of his foster father as not being present and having questionable motives demonstrates a lack of trust. Thus, he did not choose to seek support from him.

In another case, Leah recalls her foster mother as an abusive alcoholic. She notes instances where her foster mother would steal her babysitting money or make fun of her for wetting the bed. Leah contemplated, "how they were cleared to be foster parents I will never know." In her mind, she had little choice but to refrain from seeking support. Based on their hurtful actions in the past, trust was broken. Soberingly, she recalled, "I kept to myself to try and stay safe." The track record of her "bad" foster parent squelched Leah's interest in seeking support.

However, a foster parent does not need to do something blatantly wrong to still be regarded by foster youth as difficult to trust, thus preventing them from seeking support. Elsie recalls that “my foster parents were amazing, but I couldn’t trust it... I thought they didn’t care about me.” As she looked back, she noted that it was hard for her to directly reach out for support seeking from these foster parents. As an adult now looking back on her experiences, Elsie wisely articulated that “though my foster parents were amazing and my home was great, I had still experienced so much trauma.” Lack of trust was an impediment to support seeking.

Lack of Belonging. Lacking a sense of belonging also impeded a child’s choice of seeking support from foster family members. Without a sense of belonging, some foster youth recalled not being able to seek support. Keondre recounted that “I didn’t feel like I belonged, so I didn’t reach out.” He directly equates not belonging with not reaching out. Similarly, Audrey said “I felt so irrelevant, why even bother asking for help?” To belong is to be deeply relevant to a group of people, and when this relevance is not felt, how could a child feel belonging? For Audrey, her feeling of irrelevance or being out of place prevented her from reaching out and seeking support. Especially in foster home cases, where a child is placed in a brand-new home, the ability to trust and a sense of belonging are both important foundations that encourage support seeking.

RQ1: c) From whom do foster children (not) seek support outside the home?

Outside of the home, three categories arose regarding from whom foster youth seek support. First, former foster youth frequently reported seeking support from people whose job it was to help, namely social workers and school employees (professional supporters). Second, maternal figures were repeatedly the choice recipient of a foster child’s support seeking. Third,

participants shared their ability to seek support from friends, who were their supporters by choice.

Professional Supporters

Outside of the home, individuals that were paid to provide support tended to be common recipients of foster youth support seeking. Though Audrey mentioned many staff in her group home who did not get along with her or even gossiped about her, she did recall one staff member who felt like her older sister and was “so sweet and supportive.” This support worker turned out to be the person she sought out in a time of crisis.

Social Workers. A specific category of support workers that foster youth communicate with is social workers. Jazmine recalled reaching out to her social worker often, noting that she was “the sweetest social worker ever in my life.” Where familial relationships are often developed over hours and hours of time in the same home, relationships with social workers do not have the same sort of nurturing. To become a relationship worth pursuing for support, foster youth specifically emphasized personality traits such as kindness, loyalty, and understanding. These traits aid in increasing the likelihood of foster youth directly seeking support from social workers. Leah said her social worker “was amazing. I would just give her a call and ask her if she had time to talk. But she’d actually listen... she became a close friend.” In Leah’s case, her closeness with her social worker is noted as a precursor to her continued decision to seek support from them. When a social worker and foster youth do have a good relationship, it serves as a support lifeline.

The challenging thing about social workers is often they have limited ability to be present in a child’s life. As some participants noted, many social workers view their role as “just a job”, when in reality, they are holding the life and future of a kid in their hands (Sage).

Individuals who had poor relationships or views of their social workers did not mention reaching out to them for support, and understandably so. Tatum said,

I would have a new social worker like every six months because the field is so like, I don't know, just draining and the people don't want to do this anymore. But then it can kind of just take an emotional toll on you sometimes because you know, you're just meeting new people and telling them about your trauma. Eventually I just stopped showing them how I felt.

For Tatum, the emotional toll of having to see someone new so often and share the traumatizing parts of their life made it extremely unappealing to seek support from social workers. Further, social workers often make decisions about the child's living situation, which can make some resistant to turning to them for help when in distress. For instance, Elsie said she "could never bring myself to reach out" to a social worker because in her mind "they take kids from good parents and leave them with bad parents, and these mistakes are costing a child's life." While some foster youth sought support from social workers, others, like Elsie, did not.

Support Workers: Teachers & Therapists. Besides group home workers and social workers, some youth sought support from other people who were in paid roles that provide children with support. For example, Micah remembered his basketball coach vividly. As a member of a sports team, he spent many hours with his coach. Also in the school setting, teachers and academic support staff are present in children's lives and have the potential to be significant to a foster child. Tatum had an individualized education program (IEP) plan at school. This meant they immediately had additional staff support and teacher check-ins. For Tatum, these paid school employees were easily accessible and became frequent sources of their support seeking. Lastly, the role of a therapist was noted by a few different individuals. In

fact, the therapist/foster child relationship was never spoken of negatively. In all interviews, when a therapist was mentioned, it was with positive regard and fond memory. Leah noted her therapist as an extremely significant source of support seeking for her. Audrey said she enjoyed talking with her therapist. One individual did note difficulty and discomfort with his therapist. William said meeting with a therapist was “like a forced setting,” but once there, “it helped me so much. I saw him for seven or eight years... it was a way to sort things out.” Though the act of therapy can be uncomfortable, the therapist is often a child’s choice of support seeking.

Maternal Figures

As foster youth survey the individuals in their life, there is a common thread of choosing to seek support from individuals who took on motherly roles. One individual, Kyra, said her 9th grade English teacher was her “school mom.” She mentions this woman as someone she regularly went to for support and built a relationship with, saying “I ate lunch in her room every day and just talked and talked and talked.” The maternal role that Kyra was met with created a foundation for her to actively seek support from her. While already noted that social workers can be both a significantly positive resource or significantly negative resource in a child’s life, nothing compares to the significance of a social worker who also takes on a motherly role. James said his social worker “was like a mother to me.” He noted that “I emailed her, called her, and she would visit me—even on her off days.” He knew this ability to gladly seek support from a social worker was unique. In James’ words, “half of social workers never leave the office. They look at papers and make a decision. The other half—the better half—are in the community.” For a foster child who may know the pain of a complicated relationship with their birth mother and/or foster mother, those outside of their home who act as mothers are significant. Thus, foster youth seek support from these maternal figures.

Supportive Friendships

Outside of the home, a foster youth, like any child, has the potential to make friends. Friendships were especially noted in interviews as places where foster youth sought support. Seeking support from a friend is especially unique because a friend is one of the only relationships that a foster youth chooses. Micah mentioned a friend he met at a sports camp. In friendships, character seems to be a crucial factor in a foster youth choosing to seek support from someone. The friend Micah talks about is “like really, really supportive, like the most supportive person I ever met in my life.” Due to the supportive character of this friend, he was able to note instances where he chose to reach out to him. Similarly, Kyra noted one friend whom she sought support from often. This best friend was “supportive and available,” and Kyra mentioned specifically seeking support by “texting [this friend] all the time.” Audrey also mentioned friends as significant people for her, noting her ability and desire to reach out for support via social media.

Keondre shared a unique experience of being able to seek support from friends and friends’ parents. He described his gratitude for these friendships by saying,

I was really close with my high school friends. I had a very core friend group that I would lean on, just distract myself from my situation which is very nice. But their parents as well were very aware of my situation. They were super supportive which was— I don’t think I would have done as well as I did in foster care without them, which was super nice. And I’m sure those parents are still there for me to this day if I needed it.

He noted that most people knew of his situation, and he was glad because it took the pressure off of him having to tell people so often. In this case, the group of people that made up the

community and friend group chosen by Keondre were the direct recipients of his indirect displays of his situation. Similarly, romantic relationships are a type of friendship that are completely driven by choice. For Keondre, a romantic partner became “the first time I reached out to someone for emotional support”. Aaron also mentioned seeking much support from his partner as he was aging out of foster care. The ultimate example of a chosen relationship is who someone decides to be with romantically. Thus, it is logical that once that partner is chosen, an individual seeks support from them. In all these instances, supportive friendships are a source of support seeking for foster youth.

RQ2: a) How do foster children (not) seek support in their biological family?

Three categories arose regarding how foster children seek, or don’t seek, support from their biological family members, including (a) “reaching out”, (b) emotional displays, and (c) support is assumed, not sought.

“Reaching Out”: Verbal Efforts to Seek Support

Some participants used the phrase “reaching out” to signal times where they made it extremely clear to their birth family that they needed something. In conversational terms, this most often refers to seeking support with words. Keondre remembered seeking support from his mother while she was in jail and said “I definitely reached out to like complain maybe or just ask some advice on what I should do in the house... I would use verbal words over the phone, yeah.” Other foster youth used direct and verbal support seeking strategies as well. For example, Kyra remembered asking her birth father, “Hey, can you come fix my car?” and “Hey, can I have money?” Similarly, Micah said “I would reach out, like, hey, I’m struggling with this, this, or that.” This occurred for Tatum as well, who recalled “reaching out to my biological mother” with phone calls and texts. Often on these calls, “I would just talk to her about

situations that were going on in the house, like if me and my foster siblings got into an argument, kind of just ranting about it honestly. Like I would just gossip with her.” Thus, using words to communicate support needs directly emerged as a dominant strategy foster children use to seek support from their birth family.

Emotional Displays as Support Seeking

While foster youth do use direct, verbal means of support seeking, that is not the only manner of support seeking in which they engage. Second, displaying emotion was a common way for foster children to seek support from their birth family. As mentioned, phone calls are a primary way for children to remain in contact with their birth family members while in foster care. Kyra looked back on phone calls with her birth father. She said “I would get like visibly upset, but also audibly upset. Like you could hear my voice change, and he just had no reaction ever. He would just continue to get mad.” As heartbreaking as it is to hear that her father would respond to her upset emotion with anger, it is important to see that she still took the liberty to display this emotion. For instance, on one occasion, Kyra said,

He was trying to do something with my little sister and my little sister wasn't there, and he got all mad at me and I was like “I'm your kid too. You can still do things with me.”

Except my voice started breaking because I was upset, and he just hung up on me.

The emotion Kyra shared was real and vulnerable, illustrating a strategy of seeking support nonverbally.

Foster youth noted being comfortable showing emotion to their biological family members. Sometimes that was momentary, such as the vocal emotion Kyra expressed, and sometimes it was described as a pattern of behaviors that a family member could notice over time. This pattern of displaying emotion to indirectly seek support was also mentioned by

William. William recalled a time period in his life where “I wasn’t sure what to say, but I remember just feeling like I needed someone. I was dealing with a lot emotionally, even health-wise... I was clearly not okay—quiet, anxious, maybe even angry—but I don’t think they picked up on it.” Displaying emotions, and thus seeking support indirectly, was one way foster children sought support from their birth family.

Support Assumed, Not Sought

Although reaching out and displaying emotion are both strategies used to seek support, there is another phenomenon that is descriptive of the support seeking that foster children engage in from their birth families, and that is the lack of seeking due to the implied assumption of their need. In other words, some foster youth did not seek support, because they assumed their birth family knew. Jazmine said her biological parents “100% should have known I was struggling with depression...” She did not have an answer to a time she reached out to her mother for emotional support. Instead, she assumed her mother knew. Similarly, Audrey noted that her known mental health struggles were seeking in and of itself, noting that “[my mother] knew I was struggling a lot with like mental health things.” In both of these cases, foster children were struggling emotionally and mentally and, in their perspectives, their birth parents either definitely knew, or definitely should have known, so they did not seek support.

In a slightly different light of this reality, some foster youth operated on the belief that their birth parents should have known they needed support just by the nature of their situation. Being forcibly removed from a home is by nature traumatic. When asked if Aaron could remember a time he reached out to his birth mother, Aaron reflected on his relationship with his biological mother saying, “she literally abandoned me after I had faced a series of abuse from

her.” This deep traumatic experience of abandonment completely prevented him from actively seeking out to his birth mother. This dictation of his reality was clearly known by his mother. For Aaron, the need he had should have been assumed. In his mind, a foster child should not have to reach out for their birth parents or family members to know what they have gone through is innately difficult. He did not choose to reach out to her, and ultimately by the time he entered his second foster home, he cut off all contact with her. This reality prevented him from seeking support from his birth family. Instead the situation speaks for itself.

There was an expectation that their birth parents *should just know*. A child may choose to actively not reach out, not show emotion, not even contact their birth family, because in their mind, their situation is obvious. Thus, support is assumed and not sought.

RQ2: b) How do foster children (not) seek support in their foster family?

Foster children's support seeking from their foster family members can be categorized into four themes. These methods of seeking or not seeking are (a) isolation, (b) seeking support indirectly, (c) trauma speaks—or seeks—for itself, and (d) foster children engaging in extreme behaviors.

Isolation: Seeking without Seeking

The most common pattern of support seeking for foster youth was isolation. Part of the nature of isolation is that it does not require direct seeking. Former foster youth mentioned often not wanting to engage in direct support seeking behaviors and isolating instead. Many of the findings to follow are in response to the question, “What things did you say or do so that your foster family knew you needed support?” Their responses are revealing.

Physical Isolation. Directly vocalizing this idea of physical isolation, William said, “I think I isolated a lot. I didn’t want to be around anyone... I felt the most comfortable alone.” For

William, isolation felt the most comfortable and, in a situation where he may have had supportive need, he chose to isolate. This being his response of how he thought his foster family knew he needed support shows that in his mind it was a very passive way to seek support.

Foster youth isolated in a variety of ways. Jazmine said, "I wouldn't want to see friends." She said her foster family "would notice" her choice to stay in her room and not spend time with friends. Leah said, "I kept to myself to try and stay safe." A desire for safety caused her to actively isolate, instead of seek support in various other, more direct, ways. Again, all of these were responses to the question, "how did your foster family know you needed support?" Audrey remembered that she "was very isolated, and I wasn't bringing friends home." This isolation and lack of spending time with others was seeking in its own way. Keondre says he "isolated a lot." In foster homes, where foster parents were still practically strangers, physical isolation was a common way for foster children to indirectly signal their need without risking the emotional pain of having to verbalize it.

Emotional Isolation. Another type of isolation is the emotional isolation that foster youth may engage in. Essentially, when a child refuses to display emotion, does not express their supportive needs, or refrains from opening up with their foster parents, they are engaging in a type of emotional isolation. Leah said she "never cried." Though she shared the feeling of sadness was very real to her, she did not share this through tears with her foster family. In hindsight, this lack of emotional display, or emotional isolation, signaled Leah's supportive need to her foster family. One foster youth actually idealized this pattern of emotional isolation. James said advice he would give to a foster youth in his situation is to "keep a heart of steel like superman." Comparing a steel or emotionless heart to a cartoon superhero paints a sobering picture. This reality of experiencing trauma and then teaching yourself to not feel or express

emotions to the very people who are meant to support you in that situation is extremely isolating. Yet, isolation was practiced by foster youth in their foster homes and may be the most self-protective way to seek support without seeking support, as it does not require relationship or vulnerability or honesty.

Seeking Support Indirectly

As mentioned earlier, the most common response when asked if they recall a time they reached out to their foster family was “never.” However, when people said never sought support, they often meant that they never directly sought support. This reluctance to reach out can be based on a variety of reasons. Tatum said they “didn’t want to ask for too much,” signaling a reluctance to share their supportive need directly/ask. The reality remained that reaching out directly and verbally from foster parents was rare. Foster youth were reluctant to directly seek support from their foster family, so they instead sought support indirectly.

While it was difficult for many foster children to be verbal and direct with their foster family, there was mention of using indirect verbal means to seek support. Jazmine remembered often telling her foster mother things like, “I don’t understand why people don’t wanna be my friend,” “I can’t make friends,” “I’m not interested in that,” “I don’t know what to do,” and “I don’t know what to tell you.” Indirect verbal support seeking usually looks like saying things that don’t directly ask for help but should signal some sort of need. Another example of indirect seeking is in James’s story. James recalled using interrogative statements to indirectly seek support. He remembered saying specifically: “Hey, what are you guys doing at this time?” and “Do you have plans for dinner?” as an indirect way to really say: “I need someone to spend time with me right now” and “I want to eat dinner with you.” In the mind of a child

experiencing foster care, it seemed often easier to speak indirectly than to directly state needs and desires.

The things children say are important. Often, though words may not explicitly signal a desire for support, the intention behind it does. For example, Elsie recalled a very specific time in her life, saying “When my mom died, I wanted to be pregnant so bad... I would tell people I was pregnant.” This sentence and repeated declaration of pregnancy may seem odd or childish to a listener, but the reality is it was a deeply emotionally charged sentiment dictated with hopes to receive intense emotional support. Elsie self-reflected and acknowledged that this behavior was “attention-seeking” as a child. This desire for attention or desire to say things that garner a reaction is simply an indirect way of saying, support me. Help me.

Trauma Speaks—and Seeks—for Itself

As mentioned, in relationships between foster children and their birth family, there is a desire to not have to engage in support seeking because their support needs should be assumed. This same assumptive situation is seen in foster child and foster family dynamics. All participants used the word trauma at some point in their interview, and the underlying theme is that trauma seeks support in and of itself. Instead of asking her foster family for emotional support, Jazmine said “as much as you want to avoid it, I was a traumatized kid. I should have had a counselor.” To her, the need is obvious, so the seeking should be optional. In a similar experience, Aaron remembered his first few months in a foster placement. He knew he “couldn’t overcome deep childhood trauma... when I got to the new foster home, no one checked to see if I had gotten over my abuse.” He wished someone would have. He believed someone should have. For many foster children, William’s words ring true: “Losing relationships and losing people is something I dealt with my whole life.” In the eyes of a child,

their foster family should know that they need support. Foster children know the pain of their situation. They know that it is not the “normal” kid experience. There is a deep hope and assumption that foster parents should support them because of this obvious need for support that they bring when they enter a foster home. Relying on trauma to speak for itself, foster youth did not seek support.

Behaving in Extreme Ways

Seeking support via direct verbal means and indirect verbal means did occur, but the most drastic support seeking behaviors were noted in individual’s support seeking through extreme behaviors. This category is broad, as it looked different for many foster children. In essence, the extreme behaviors of a child signaled their need for support to their foster parents. First, expressing anger through a raised voice or physical action can be a foster child’s way of seeking support. Micah said:

I yelled out of rage. It was actually me saying everything that I was tired of. Everything I was fed up with... it made me even more mad. I got to calling him by his name. I was calling him “B” words, all kind of stuff, and I told him I’d beat him up... I would lash out.

This sort of expression demonstrates a dislike or discontentment with something—whether that be the foster child’s situation, circumstance, or relational reality. His extreme behavior was an attempt to seek support.

Another extreme behavioral cue that foster children use was self-harm. Jazmine remembered periods of time where she would not eat for a few days. The choice to not eat is not a response to not being hungry. It is a deeply emotional decision, consciously or subconsciously, to deny oneself of their basic needs. Another way foster youth could engage in

self-harm is through physical bodily harm, such as cutting. Tatum said, “my cutting was a visible sign of my internal state.” An individual wounding themselves is a drastic and significant support seeking behavior. Heartbreakingly, these participants knew no other way to get help than to display it physically.

The final category of extreme behaviors that signal support seeking is disobedient behaviors. These included underage smoking and drinking and running away. Micah and Elsie both mentioned patterns such as smoking and drinking in their foster home, when they were not permitted to do so. It is not accurate to say that all instances of substance use were efforts to seek support, but for some they were. Elsie talked about her discontentment in her childhood saying “it was horrible... I was smoking, I was drinking, and I ran away from there.” For Elsie, the response to her need for support in her home was to use substances and eventually run away. This was her nonverbal and indirect way to signal a cry for help. Running away in particular is a disobedient act that is a significant indicator of need for support. Audrey also mentioned her experience running away, saying “I did run away for a couple hours. I just needed to get away.” Running away may very well be the absolute, most active way to *avoid* direct support seeking. However, it is one of the clearest signals in these interviews of a need for support. Though the action itself is antithetical to seeking support, the reality is that running away is practically shouting “someone, please support me.”

Elsie summed up the reason that foster youth engage in these extreme behaviors eloquently. She said: “That goes for all ages, whether it’s 1 to 18, people will act out and show you in different ways what they’re not getting out through word of mouth, you know what I mean?”

RQ2: c) How do foster children (not) seek support outside the home?

Outside of the birth and foster family, foster children seek support outside the home. Three support seeking categories arose from the interviews regarding this question. First, foster youth engage in direct seeking from people of their choosing. Secondly, concerning behaviors at school are a means of support seeking. Third, some foster youth became the support they sought.

Seeking Support Directly

As mentioned, foster youth often seek support from individuals specifically equipped to support them. In the interviews, there was a clear link between reaching out to support workers and a foster child's decision to engage in direct seeking behaviors. An example of this is the direct emotional support seeking that occurs between foster children and their therapists or counselors. Aaron said he would share emotions with his counselor. William also remembered talking about his feelings with his counselor. These participants used direct and verbal support seeking strategies to communicate with their therapists/counselors.

Along with counselors, social workers are an available supportive resource for foster youth. Again, this does not look the same for all foster youth, but for many, reaching directly out came naturally. Jazmine said she would tell her social worker whatever she needed to:

I was reaching out to her whenever I needed something, you know, especially, like between ages eight and thirteen. She would come to the house once a month. If I was ever having any issues like with my friends or the house I was in or I got in a fight or something like that, I would always tell her.

This ability to tell someone when a moment of need arises is a beautiful display of support seeking in the time of crisis. James also mentioned his ability to reach out to his social worker

often. For him, an email was his preferred way to reach out, as “I could write down my thoughts before sending them.”

Teachers, though not unique to a foster child, can still be easy to access via direct support seeking. Kyra mentioned seeking support from her teacher specifically:

My English teacher in ninth grade. I originally like told her flat out like all the stuff that had been going on because I was failing her class. And so I was like, here’s what’s going on. And she basically stuck with me from that time until I graduated high school.

Direct seeking also occurs in the context of friendship. Kyra chose to directly seek support from friends, especially via text. Micah cried and shared his grief in front of his camp friend, Caleb. It was the first time he had cried in front of someone ever. These are significant and clear displays of support seeking.

Displaying Concerning Behaviors

In the foster home, extreme behaviors are a significant indicator of support seeking, though they do not necessarily require direct seeking of the foster child. That is true outside of the home as well. Concerning behaviors/signals at school signified supportive need. Micah recounted getting in “altercations” with his foster siblings in his home. One day, he went to school and in his words, “this was really the only time that anybody knew about my situation. But I had went to school with a black eye.” Immediately his basketball coach noticed and inquired about it. Again, before Micah spoke a word that day, his face signaled a deep supportive need. This is an example of the way that a concerning behavior/condition seeks support though the foster child themselves is not engaging in support seeking.

Tatum had a similar experience: “I dealt with like depression so you know, um, you know I would do cutting so you could visibly see there was something wrong.” These scars

were physical, but they immediately showed school employees and classmates that an emotional need existed. No matter what Tatum said to people outside their home, nothing could supersede the physical display that these marks made.

More discrete, but still relevant, is a child's mildly concerning behaviors at school. In response to the question, "how did people at school know you needed support," Jazmine said she was "not reading super well." Teachers noticed this, of course, and some made the connection that a poor home life limits a child's access and experience learning how to read with the help of a parental figure. As children get older, some individuals engaged poorly at school, doing things like skipping class. This is a nonverbal indirect support seeking strategy that Audrey engaged in. She said:

I would skip class a lot. I had friends that I got to see and I got to feel like a teenager again... I think having had my freedoms restricted in like that group home environment to being able to have more freedoms... I was given an inch and I took a mile, like, I was just craving like that sense of feeling free and I feel like it's kind of a push and pull dynamic of if someone's been restrained for so long, they're going to want to kind of take what they can.

Her choice to not be in school was an act of teenage rebellion, but it was also a conscious decision to choose escape and "freedom" over seeking support directly. These things, though not direct examples of support seeking, do signal a need for further exploration of what that child's needs may be. Nonverbal behaviors and circumstances tell a lot about the experiences of a foster child before their words or conscious actions are displayed. In a public setting, many times things are observed about a foster child that signal their need for support.

Becoming the Support They Seek

The final support seeking method to be noted is the idea of becoming the support they seek. While many support seeking behaviors directly exhibit need through portrayal of a negative emotion or alarming behavior, this tactic instead presents in a positive light. Kyra explained this phenomenon well. She said,

People say they wouldn't know my story if I didn't share. It has to do with the fact that I am a resilient person, I had to be. I present myself really well. I care deeply. My mother always taught me to treat people the way I want to be treated.

This individual, in a situation where they should be able to freely seek the support they need, instead became the sort of person they wish they would have. Foster youth engaged in behaviors or display character traits that give off the assumption that they may not need extra support, when really, these behaviors or traits are displays of what they wish to receive.

Becoming the support one desires seemed to be a way to cope that felt easier than directly seeking support. In specific, caring for people, and treating people the way she wanted to be treated are both experiences she wished she could have been a recipient of, but not knowing or not wanting to seek these out, Kyra became them herself. In a similar way, William remembered "masking as a really good kid" in times of need, which is quite different from the many examples of foster youth who may have portrayed themselves or engaged in behaviors that seemed "bad" in times of need, but this behavior still seeks support in its own way.

RQ3: a) What types of support comprise interactions between foster children and their biological family?

Results of the interviews highlighted multiple types of support. Again, to emphasize the significance of the multi-faceted nature of a foster child's network, the three contexts will be separated—biological family, foster family, and outside the home. Significant themes regarding

types of support present in interactions arose. First, in the biological family, problem-focused support was sought, nurturant support was present from afar, and cultural support emerged as a distinct type of support.

Problem-Focused Support Sought

The first theme is that foster youth sought problem-focused support from their biological family and the support they received did not always solve the problem. Foster youth sought tangible and advice support, two types of problem-focused support, from their birth family. The response did not always meet the need.

Kyra found a way to utilize her birth father for specific things. She mourned the inability for him to provide for her emotionally or relationally but recalled the instances where he provided financially or for some other physical, tangible need. She said she would reach out when she needed financial help, saying “I used him like an ATM pretty much.” Unfortunately, she said “my dad has never been a very emotionally available person... he’s always equated money to love.” Maybe there was a longing for a more emotionally supportive birth father, or maybe there was a longing for him to provide action support, but in a different manner. Yet, in the end, she said “I wouldn’t change how my dad acted if I could because I have proven to myself that I don’t need him.” In essence, Kyra came to terms with the experience of seeking problem-focused support, and receiving some version of it, and nothing more.

In addition to reaching out for tangible needs, foster youth reach out to their birth family while living in their foster home for advice. Jazmine remembered reaching out for advice on several occasions. She said:

There have been times where I’m like, I don’t want to ask [my foster mom] those questions. I would love to ask my actual mom or my grandma. And it’s like I can’t

really do that, like they just would not give helpful answers and they don't, you know, if I wanted something, they're the ones that ask me for advice.

Unfortunately, instead of receiving advice, Jazmine was instead met with her birth family asking *her* for advice. Problem focused-support seeking did not elicit the types of responses she may have hoped for, and what she got in return was ultimately unhelpful.

Nurturant Support Received from Afar

Another theme is that foster youth were somewhat nurtured from afar. Nurturant support refers to emotional support and esteem support. In general, foster youth did on occasion seek these types of support from their birth family, and they would sometimes receive a response. This support was "from afar," however, in the sense that at times, it was physically far from the child's location and other times, it was just far from what they actually needed.

First, emotional support and esteem support were sometimes intertwined. For example, Micah reached out for emotional support from his birth father and was met with a sort of esteem support message. His dad said, "We men. We get over it." This was slightly beneficial to him in that it did provide a response to his emotional support needs. However, it was far from what he needed in the sense that in an attempt to empower him as a man, it also pushed his emotions and needs aside.

Tatum experienced a significant moment when they came out as queer. Tatum wished their biological mother

Supported my identity. Tried to have an understanding. Like I didn't expect her to make that big of a change like using pronouns, but just having that understanding of like...

I'm growing up, I'm finding out who I am, just being accepting.

Instead of this emotional and esteem support, Tatum said “she didn’t understand me coming out as bi. She didn’t understand that. She said very hurtful things... She called me the devil.” When Tatum reached out to their birth mother, they were really looking for understanding and empathy. Instead of receiving this emotional support a deep emotional need was completely ignored, if not worsened. This nurturant support was far from what was sought.

In another case, Sage sought her mother’s emotional support. To soothe her emotions, Sage’s birth mother often said, “everything was going to be okay.” Yet again, this was somewhat helpful in that it addressed her emotional need, but at the same time, it presented a message that was slightly ignorant of the pain she experienced.

Though birth parents themselves have a mixed track record of sometimes providing nurturant support and sometimes not, some foster youth had other birth family relationships that they leaned on for support. An example of this is grandparents. Audrey experienced a great deal of esteem support from her grandparents. They threw her a graduation party, they helped her with college applications, and they affirmed and celebrated her college essays. These three specific things all relate to this youth’s sense of esteem. Feeling celebrated and honored for her accomplishments and feeling supported and cheered on towards her future endeavors, Audrey's personhood and sense of self were uplifted, exemplifying a key aspect of esteem support. In this case, esteem support was not necessarily sought, but it was received. She did not necessarily mention knowing that she needed it, or seeking it out, but she definitely highlighted her receipt of this type of support. This time nurturant support came from afar in that it came from her grandparents, and not a closer relationship.

Cultural Support as a Distinct Type

A third theme in understanding foster children seeking and receiving support in their birth family is that a new type of support emerged in conversations with former foster youth. That type of support can be coined “cultural support” and refers to the provision of culturally specific help for an individual. Tatum talked about their experiences seeking and receiving this type of support early on:

I was really close with my birth mom. It became different later on, but just at first, when I didn't know my foster mom, it was hard to talk to her about certain things. So I reached out to my mom... There was definitely a cultural difference and just things that she really didn't understand, like my hair. So I asked my mom at first.

In the beginning of their time in this foster home, they called their biological mother often, saying in their words that they needed “cultural support.” The experience of being black was core to Tatum's identity, and their foster mother did not have that same shared cultural experience. Thus, seeking and receiving this from their birth mother proved to be significant. Tatum needed culturally specific help. Fixing their hair is more than a tangible need in this case. It signifies being known and cared for in their unique cultural identity.

Another aspect of culture is family culture. Again, as a foster child is placed in a new home, they are entering a new family culture that they have not experienced. William was placed in foster care at a young age, and at age 8, was placed in his longest foster home, which was a home where he had two foster fathers. In general, he experienced a supportive environment in this home. For the most part he could not recall a time he wanted to reach out to his birth family for support. Nevertheless, as he experienced the difficulties of middle school and feeling “so different – being a foster kid was one thing, having two dads was another” – he did reach out to his birth father for a sense of familiarity in family culture. In his words “it felt

normal to hang out with my biological father in middle school, because it felt weird to be adopted and weird to have two dads.” Being supported in this unique cultural experience led him to reaching out to his birth father. He specifically needed cultural support, a person who understood and shared his familial identity.

RQ3: b) What types of support comprise interactions between foster children and their foster family?

In response to the question, what types of support do foster children seek and receive from their foster family, two themes arose. Foster children receive tangible support inevitably and they seek love as a distinct type of support.

Inevitability of Tangible Support

On a positive note, all former foster youth participants noted a physical need being provided for in their foster home at some point. Micah said he had a “house to live in.” For a child who has not always had consistency or stability in their physical home, having a house is a met need. Jazmine said, “If I needed more clothes or something like that, you know, obviously they would support me in that way.” This shows that Jazmine had her tangible need of clothing met. The word “obviously” indicates that this type of support is inevitable for a child in foster care. Audrey mentioned her group home worker who “would cook food for us.” Here, her need for food and sustenance was provided by her foster placement.

For a couple of participants, it felt as though their foster family provided them with all or everything they needed as far as tangible needs. Aaron said, “I feel like I had received all the help during my foster home” and listed “shelter, food, clothes, rides to school” as examples of this tangible support. When living in a foster home, it was inevitable his needs would be met. Similarly, Kyra said her foster mom “basically did anything and everything she could.” She

mentioned feeling taken care of with “meals and a warm bed.” For foster children, tangible needs were met as they received support from their foster family members in various ways, many of which were tangible.

Love Support as Distinct Type

Many times a foster child sought emotional support, or esteem support, or being there support. Sometimes it was more than those things though. The deep desire for provision for their need to be cared for as a person is a deep desire for love. Often, foster children were seeking love from their foster parents. Micah wished he had someone to talk to, “someone who would ask me my favorite color, anything really.” Someone who cares about the small details of a person’s life is someone who loves. Micah saying this did not mean he just wanted to talk about his favorite color. It stemmed from a deeper need for someone to care enough to ask. For someone to demonstrate love even in the smallest moments. Here, asking someone a question was not an example of tangible, advice, esteem, or emotional support, so it must be categorized in a new type: love.

Leah lived in an abusive foster home where she experienced theft, verbal abuse, and an overall poor system of support. She looked back and said, “I wish they acknowledged that I was somebody and not something to be stepped on all the time... that I would have been a human being to them, not just a servant.” A crucial aspect of love is acknowledging a person’s humanity. Leah did not receive this. She desired to be acknowledged as a human, not for her esteem to be uplifted, but for her to feel cared for and experience love support.

For Micah, there was pretty much no support sought or received in his long-term foster home. Likely, this is why he wished for someone to sit and talk with him and to show him any trace of love. Before this home, however, he does recall one house that he still thinks about to

this day. He stayed in this placement for a few weeks, but the support he received there was memorable enough to be relevant as he talked with me, over a decade later. He said:

There was a sense of love in that home—every day they woke me up for breakfast, they took me to get my hair cut... they actually cared. We would just sit in the car and play music... they treated us like their own kids.

To Micah, a sense of love is simple. It is daily routines together; it is acts of service. It is quality time. It is equality and just treatment. Again, making breakfast and getting a haircut could be reminiscent of tangible support. However, the need Micah is insinuating is that those things represent a sense of love. Foster kids seek love from their foster families, and this is its own type of support.

RQ3: c) What types of support comprise interactions between foster children and individuals outside their home?

Outside of the home, two main themes arose in regard to the types of support that comprised interactions between foster children and others. The first, is that foster children received both emotion and problem-focused support, with little direct seeking. The second is that support facilities represented institutional support without felt experience.

Seeking Little, Receiving All

A common understanding of foster children and support seeking so far is the lack of direct, and sometimes lack of conscious, support seeking. As mentioned, isolation and avoidance were common characteristics of foster youth outside their home. Yet, while a foster child often could not recall a specific time or way they reached out for support, every single participant could recall a situation or instance where they did receive support outside the home. Outside of the home, foster children seek little and receive all types of support.

Friendship is a source of support for many. Keondre raved about the amazing group of friends he had in high school. He noted his friends, and even their parents, as instrumental. They already knew of his situation, so he did not have to directly verbalize specific needs. Their presence in his life simply supported him by being there. Physically, he cherished the times where he could be out of his foster home and simply in the presence of these individuals. Along with being there support, the nature of this friend group provided him a network. What starts as a foundation for network support often grows into being a context where a person receives emotional support, among other types of support. Resultantly, as time passed, moments would arise where these friends and parents would provide Keondre with advice, or an emotionally supportive message, or a family dinner (tangible).

Extremely significant to the life and experiences of a foster child is the role of the counselor. Many foster youths sought support more easily in counseling settings where there sought emotional support was expected and encouraged. Aaron said his counselor was a friend of his, providing him network and emotional support.

My counselor became my friend. I believe that really changed my life in a way, it helped me forget certain childhood trauma that I was experiencing. He also gave me, he showed me he cared. I would say I had gained an emotional stability after doing counseling with him.

William remembered seeking and receiving emotional support from his counselor. Jazmine fondly remembered when she graduated, her “counselor even gave me a graduation card,” an instance of esteem support that affirmed her accomplishment. Similarly, Leah started therapy at age 17. Her therapist was the “only person who acknowledged my high school graduation.” This affirmation of both Jazmine’s and Leah’s accomplishment served as a memorable esteem

support message. Similarly, James's social worker helped him "find out how to not make the same mistake" (advice support). In each of these counselor/foster child interactions, support was received—some emotional, some esteem, and some advice.

Participants referenced various other individuals, such as schoolteachers, social workers, and neighbors, as occasional one-time supporters. Regardless of whether they sought it or not, former foster youth recalled receiving support.

Institutional Support without Felt Experience

Outside the home, mental health facilities proved to be a key setting in the discussion of foster youth support seeking and receiving. A common experience of indirect support seeking was exhibiting some sort of mental health concern or behavior (Elsie, Kyra, Tatum). In severe cases, this support seeking would lead to a foster child being forcibly removed from a home and into a mental health or treatment facility (Elsie, Sage). By nature, these facilities are meant to provide individuals with both problem-focused and nurturant support. Unfortunately, foster youth did not generally regard these places as supportive. Any time an individual shared experiences at a facility like this, it was with a tone of dissatisfaction.

Tatum specifically mentioned a time when the police had to restrain them from being physically harmful. Ultimately, the police responded to their seeking of emotional support by "sending me away." While in the facility for a short few days, Tatum could not recall instances of receiving support. Even if there technically was support being provided to them, it did not seem to matter or make an impact. Elsie also had multiple experiences being sent to a treatment facility for mental health issues. She said with exasperation "they would always just send me away." It is not even necessarily a matter of poor support in the actual mental health treatment center that is the issue. It is the act of being sent away to a facility by the people outside of the

foster child's home that foster children regard extremely negatively. Though meant to send a message of care and support, this forcible move is seen as anything but support provision.

Discussion

Three research questions formed the basis of this project. These questions aimed to uncover the “who” of the supportive communication process in each social context a foster child is a part of—biological family, foster family, and their greater community. This study also sought to reveal how children seek or don’t seek support from these various individuals, examining the verbal and nonverbal messages that were shared by foster youth in times of crisis or concern. Within these seeking and receiving supportive interactions, types of support were significant categories used to understand the messages shared between foster youth and their support providers or non-support providers. The results of this study reveal many findings that are both in line with and challenge existing research. For instance, in line with SIST (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995), Kyra asked her dad verbally for money when she had a financial need. Yet, results also indicated unexpected findings such as Elsie’s difficulty seeking support from her “amazing” foster family due to her previous traumatic experiences. Theoretical and practical implications of findings like these are unpacked in the pages to follow.

Results of this project showed that as former foster youth talked about who in their “family” they sought support from, many of these people were not biologically related to them, indicating that for foster children, family often has little to do with biological relatedness (Thomas et al., 2017). However, there was still some adherence to the discursive view of a traditional family being biological and heteronormative (Baxter, 2014), as individuals recalled seeking support from their birth parents. Understanding both of these realities, foster youth who participated in this study mentioned seeking support from both their foster families and biological families, which is in line with the idea of foster family discourse being multi-faceted (Suter et al., 2014). Interviews had many mixed responses about communication with birth

parents, which is in line with results found by Boyle (2017). The participants shared significant instances of support with their birth parents and foster parents at various times, emphasizing the complexity and fluidity of these familial and parental roles. Similarly, the mention of extended family members such as supportive grandparents, aunts/uncles, etc. supports the notion that kinkeepers are significant support resources in the context of foster care (Leach & Braithwaite, 1996). Accordingly, this study reinforces the presence and importance of many different types of family members in a foster child's life. In some ways, however, these results also challenged existing research about parent-child supportive communication. For example, de Jonge et al. (2022) asserted that mothers and fathers are sought for different support needs; however, in the interviews for this study, there was no clear gendered pattern for foster children regarding whether they sought support from a mother or father. Also, whereas previous research places a high emphasis on positive communication between foster parents and children (Shdaimah & Rosen, 2020), many of the participants of this study placed a greater emphasis on the support they received outside their foster home, demonstrating that sole focus on parent-child communication may be limited.

Participants also shared that trust and situational complexity deeply affected their ability and desire to seek support from their foster parents, further developing the importance of trust (Unrau et al., 2008). Even when a family member was available as a support provider, a foster child was not guaranteed to seek support from them. Trust was a significant factor in leading someone to seek support, and lack of trust prevented seeking, no matter how (un)qualified a person would be to provide support. The influence of relational dynamics on support seeking was supported by these interviews. Especially in the context of foster care, where individuals have experienced upheaval and trauma, the element of trust is of utmost importance (Shdaimah

& Rosen, 2020). This experience of trauma especially is significant to the people providing support to foster children. The idea of trauma being the foundation that led to seeking surfaced often (Lorio et al., 2023). Many participants self-identified their experiences as extremely traumatic (Elsie, Tatum, Micah, Aaron). While some research has shown that foster parents and support workers are aware of the extreme difficulty of a child being rehomed (Taylor & McQuillan, 2014), more resources should be developed to understand the extent of this trauma. For participants in this study, trauma directly affected their willingness, ability, and desire to seek support in specific ways. Thus, support research in foster care contexts (and likely other minority or at-risk populations) should investigate this in more depth. The idea of trauma inhibiting seeking for those with post-traumatic stress disorder has been studied (Smith et al., 2020), and it can and should be applied to former foster youth.

In addition to having access to their family members, foster youth also reported having access to various supportive workers and other members outside their homes. Research shows that individuals may seek support from friends or romantic partners (Brisini & Wang, 2024), and participants mentioned both of these categories of people in their interviews. These individuals proved to be recipients of participants' seeking at times. At other times, their support provision was noted without direct seeking mentioned. This specifically surfaced in the case of therapists and counselors. Former foster youth recalled the emotional and "being there" support they received as a byproduct of attending sessions with these individuals. As expected, findings supported the idea that children interact with those outside their home in times of need (Mirkovic et al., 2024). This is in line with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model that asserts the importance of the micro-, meso-, and macro-system in a child's life, demonstrating that the

model applies well to the foster care context, as foster children experienced supportive communication uniquely across the systems in which they exist.

The idea of the foster square was reinforced by this study as members of the biological family, foster family, and state were all sought by foster youth at least in some capacity (Nelson, 2017; Thomas, 2015; Thomas, 2024). However, an extremely important expansion of this model is in the fourth prong. Where Thomas (2024) and others have postulated the fourth corner to represent the state, this seems too limiting for the data of this study. Friends, teachers, group home workers, and counselors are all individuals that function beyond the state workers to provide support to foster youth. This project pushes the boundary conditions of the state to be more broadly inclusive of the greater community. All four contexts were significant, and the way a child interacted with these networks strengthens the relevance of the foster square and the ecological systems model. The realities proved what Nelson and Colander (2020) previously stated: family and friendship webs are complicated for children in foster care. All three of these categories—birth family members, foster family members, and people outside the home—were relevant and utilized as support resources for individuals in this study, demonstrating that foster children do behave similarly to non-foster children by seeking support from their family as well as non-family members when experiencing a stressor (Wills et al., 1996; Morton, 2015). Further, how the youth engaged in seeking differed in each context. For example, foster children engaged in direct seeking the least in their foster homes and noted using verbal seeking strategies more often with their birth family. Thus, the distinction of each system as a corner of the foster square is a helpful way to understand and study how a foster child communicates with members in each of these different social contexts.

Regarding how foster youth sought support, I identified the behaviors outlined in SIST (Barbee & Cunninham, 1995) in these data. Foster children used a variety of strategies that fell along the dimensions of verbal/nonverbal and direct/indirect. Interestingly, much of previous support research highlights verbal and direct seeking strategies as more prevalent, especially in the context of family (High & Scharp, 2015; Ishikawa et al., 2023). However, this study revealed that for a child in foster care, this is not always the case. Nonverbal and indirect seeking methods were noted quite often, and some variations of extreme indirect behaviors were especially significant to the supportive experience that a foster child engaged in. The theme of isolation and becoming the support they seek are indirect strategies that emerged as a result of this study. In a slightly different but related realm, nonverbal support-seeking was mentioned frequently, such as the use of emotional displays and concerning behaviors at school. This does support decades of research on nonverbal dimensions of supportive communication (Jones & Guerrero, 2001). Further research should emphasize the significance of the nonverbal and indirect behaviors that foster children engage in, and even consider asserting the primacy of these behaviors over other direct or verbal strategies. It is crucial to not assume the normative, verbal/direct seeking methods are effective for those who are part of minority, trauma-ridden populations. This study contributes important emphasis on nonverbal/indirect seeking, as participants talked about behaviors in these dimensions time and time again.

Seeking certain types of support was relevant to the interviews in this study. De Jonge et al. (2022) and Hoferichter (2021) found that children seek all types of support from their families, which was reflected by the former foster youth interviewed in this study as well. All types of support are noted by research as important to a child's life, and this was noted as former foster youth participants recalled seeking many types of support from the various individuals in

their lives (An et al., 2024). Foster children are known to receive support, especially tangible, from support providers (Lorio et al., 2023). Types of support were revealed to be in line with what was expected to be provided to foster youth in terms of tangible (problem-focused) support (Taylor & McQuillan, 2014). These results expanded upon this finding, though, as many participants shared the receipt of nurturant support from child welfare workers as well. There were also some limitations in the support types research. So far, types of support are categorized as action-facilitating and nurturant, but as foster youth revealed what they were truly seeking, some support needs arose that did not fit neatly into an existing type (Moisio & Beruchashvili, 2023; Burleson, 2008). Specifically, the seeking of love and cultural support both seem slightly more unique to the foster child experience.

Seeking love was a theme that arose in terms of what foster children are seeking from their foster parents/families. Various findings highlighted foster youth wanting to be cared for, thought about, talked to, etc. Current research often categorizes love as emotional support (Rossetto et al., 2017), including verbal and nonverbal expressions that boost a person's emotional state such as "I love you." However, foster youth hoping for love did not necessarily wish for these emotional messages but instead yearned for something more. In other research, presence support or "being there" support could be seen as related to being loved and cared for (Crowley & High, 2020). While related to emotional support and "being there" support, the findings seem to delineate love as a separate form of support. The love language typology developed by Chapman (1992) may give insight for understanding what a foster child is seeking when they say they "just want to be loved" (Micah). This theory says that love can be shown in five ways: words of affirmation, physical touch, quality time, gifts, and acts of service, and has recently been confirmed through qualitative research (Pett et al., 2023). As foster children talked

about wanting someone to spend time with them, or wake them up for school every morning, or make them feel like they belonged, there is a deep supportive need for love. On the surface these may seem like desires for tangible/presence/esteem support, but the participants expressed each of these desires synonymously with their desire to be loved. It is much more related to being loved than having a tangible need met. This suggests that love may be distinct from the other more sufficiently theorized and researched support types (esteem, emotional, tangible, advice, network). Further research should consider where love support fits in this typology or beyond.

Secondly, the results of this study reveal cultural support as a distinct type of support as well. Some research has been done to understand how acculturation and family communication intersect (Barker & Cornwell, 2019). However, this type of research often examines the experience of an entire family moving to a new culture and learning to communicate about and amidst the differences. A foster child enters a new home, and a new family culture (sometimes ethnic or racial culture as well), by themselves. The communication they engage in regarding this cultural change can be considered attempts to seek and receive cultural support, or messages that explain, clarify, or reinforce a person's cultural identity. Examining intercultural moments within immigrant families reveals that conversations about cultural barriers or differences do occur within family (Bolden, 2014). Thus, it is known that questions or concerns about culture do arise and are met with some sort of response. As the interviews with former foster youth revealed, various moments of intercultural communication led a foster child to seeking their biological family for cultural support. In many ways, this is a branch of esteem support, but it also functions closely to advice support. Yet, the support of a person's cultural identity is distinct in its focus on cultural heritage/identity and can be particularly relevant to the foster child context. Future research can and should explore what other contexts trigger specific cultural supportive needs,

and how messages specifically related to one's cultural identities are examples of support seeking and receiving. With adequate investigation and evidence, it may be considered its own type of support, especially when applying support type communication in intercultural family settings.

Practical Implications

Results from this study offer several key practical implications. Just as there are many supportive resources for foster parents (Shdaimah & Rosen, 2020), this study showed that there is a wide array of available support resources for foster children; however, whether they actually sought and or received was not always the case. It seems that simply having a social worker assigned to them, or living with a foster family are not sufficient means of support for a child. Many participants shared instances where an individual meant to support them simply did not (Leah, of her abusive foster mother). Practically, this study should send a cautionary message to adults in a foster child's life of the lack of support many children receive. Yet, it should also be encouraging in showing that for those who did feel a sense of received support, it was extremely significant, and in some instances, life changing (Aaron, speaking of his counselor).

It was very common for a participant to share an instance where a biological family member, foster family member, or individual outside the home attempted to support them verbally or nonverbally yet did not do so successfully. Further, some former foster youth did not mention receiving support from individuals that were meant to do so. Foster parents, social workers, and schoolteachers, for example, are in a foster child's life for specific purposes. If a former foster youth did not mention that person as providing them with some sort of support, that is a signal they were not doing their job well. In other supportive communication contexts, the idea of support provision training intervention has gained publicity (Harvey-Knowles, 2018).

Providing good support can be challenging, and researchers have developed interventions to help people learn how to do so better (Thompson et al., 2024). This should be a required assignment for all individuals providing support to a foster child. The trauma they have experienced demands people to learn to support them well.

Another implication is that many of the foster youth mentioned their counselors. Each time a counselor or therapist was mentioned it was with high regard. For emotional support needs, a therapist or counselor should be a mandatory resource for children. In Wisconsin, this should be added to the state-regulated orders for a foster child. Therapists are known to provide support to children (Ryan et al., 2023). Foster children would benefit from having a designated therapist as there is a lot of turn-over in their social workers, and there can often be change in which foster home or group home they reside. Thus, having a therapist or counselor who remains with them throughout all of these changes would significantly benefit the child and their mental state. As mental health was mentioned in many of the interviews, it would be ignorant to neglect the necessity of implementing a professional to support foster youth.

Limitations

All research has its limitations. In this study, the population was uniquely challenging in some ways. Foster youth are some of the individuals most prone to experiencing homelessness and poverty (Pac et al., 2017). The socioeconomic status was found to be a limiting factor in recruitment. For much of my recruitment process, I had no way to compensate the participants. For someone who is in financial need, this could deter them from participation. Further, financial security usually accompanies the ability to access the internet. One of the most heartbreaking moments of my study occurred before even beginning an interview. One individual had gained access to my Qualtrics survey and desired to be part of the study. They mentioned almost

immediately their currently unhoused status and inability to use Zoom. To remedy this, I attempted to conduct a recorded phone call interview instead, but when I called them at the time they suggested, their phone line was out of service. This experience showed me that my methodology immediately prevented many eligible individuals from sharing their story due to socioeconomic limitations. The access to Zoom and a functioning phone, and the freedom to sacrifice an hour of pay are both limiting requirements that my study exhibited.

Lastly, the qualitative nature of this project might have been somewhat limited by the closed-ended nature of research questions. Before beginning data collection, I asked the following research questions: “Who do foster children seek support from in (a, b, c)?” “How do they seek support from (a, b, c)?” “What types of support do they seek from (a, b, c)?” and “What types of support do they receive from (a, b, c)?” Each of these questions is important and, as noted in the literature review, there are gaps in research that these questions do help remedy. However, the wording of these questions solicited brief answers that did not provide me enough richness to explore more in-depth themes. Also, a limitation of these questions is that they assume support is sought. Significantly, results revealed that many participants talked about their experience *not* seeking. Every interview had at least one instance of a participant saying they did not seek support from someone for some reason. Thankfully, I was able to modify the research questions to include this “(not) seeking” element. The questions still did limit thematic findings as they asked questions that elicited a set list of answers—groups of people, specific support seeking behaviors, and types of support. These questions are still important and valuable because foster youth are an understudied population, and we need initial research in this context. In the future, more can be done to uncover the deeper meaning and “why” questions related to foster care supportive experiences.

Future Directions

The importance of understanding support within foster families is evident through the rich understanding gained from this study. It must not stop here. I have two main suggestions for future research in the topic of support and foster children. First, quality of support should be investigated in terms of foster care. Some participants in this study briefly mentioned examples of poor support, or support that they did not appreciate. The direct study of the quality of support that is provided to foster children must be conducted. Especially as the ultimate aim of this field of research is to better support children in foster care, this cannot be done without first understanding what instances of support are considered high quality and beneficial, and what instances of support are considered low quality and unhelpful to foster youth. Support cannot be improved if we do not know that it needs improvement. Also, quality should be studied in terms of how foster children perceive the quality of the support they receive because even if a supportive message is meant to be high quality, it may not be felt in that same way by a child in the uniquely traumatizing experience of foster care.

Secondly, expected support versus received support must be investigated in the context of youth in foster care. There was an underlying understanding that some foster youth assumed that support would be given, or assumed how that support would look, or expected various supportive resources from specific individuals. Inversely, there was also an underlying experience of individuals receiving support that they did not expect, or from individuals that they had not expected to receive support from. Expectations of support directly affect how a person experiences the actual support they receive, and this affects their well-being as well. There are also differences between what an individual wants, versus what they expect, versus what they receive, and research on support gaps suggests that each of these factors influence supportive

communication and outcomes (High & Crowley, 2018). Understanding what a child expects helps parents support them better. This is true of foster children as well, possibly even more so, due to the challenging nature of their situation. More research is needed to understand the interplay between desired, expected, and received support in the context of foster care.

Besides SIST, other theories could be used to learn about the experiences of foster youth. Specifically, relational dialectics theory (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008) would be a beneficial lens with which to view the experiences of a child in foster care. This theory asserts that relationships often have duality. There are positives and negatives, needs and wants, and other dichotomous scales in which to measure relationships. For foster children, there seems to be dichotomous patterns in their needs and desires for parental figures, trust and lack of trust for various family members, belonging in some places and lack of belonging in other places. This theory would provide a framework in which to place larger questions about the relational experiences of children in foster care. Additionally, the structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) could be another good lens to study foster families. In essence, this theory postulates that structures repeated over time create identity. It could be interesting to see what sorts of communicative messages are repeated in a child's life and how this aids beneficially or destructively in their identity creation.

One strength of this project was the participants' average age. Most of the participants in this study were recruited through email conversations with independent living coordinators. These coordinators mainly service adults between the ages of 18–23 that had recently aged out of foster care. Thus, the individuals they pointed me toward were generally within this age range. Because they were adults looking back on their childhood, they were able to identify behaviors and experiences that demonstrated their need for support that a child may not have the maturity to understand during that time. In some ways, this limited conversations as participants were

recalling memories in homes anywhere from a few years to several years prior. As a result, many participants had trouble recalling word for word messages. Much of the support they mentioned seeking and receiving was rooted in experiences and overall presence (or lack) of support seeking and receiving. Interviewing children could have allowed more current examples of supportive conversations in foster homes. Of course, there is more risk and complexity in interviewing children, so if future studies choose to interview current foster children, much care must be taken to protect the children who participate.

Lastly, this study was conducted in Wisconsin. This is a strength of this study as it gives specific experiential, qualitative data from the perspective of those who have been in foster care in this state. However, whether and how the findings from this project apply to the experiences of children in foster care from other states is unknown. Foster care is something that is very state-government specific, so the support sought and received might look different across the different states. It is important to know how to better support the 7,000 foster youth in Wisconsin, but it is also important to learn how to better understand and provide support to the other 361,000 children in foster care across the United States. To do this, focus groups could be a meaningful way to conduct research on foster children as they create a sense of comradery and empathy for the shared experiences of individuals in the group.

Conclusion

Through the lens of sensitive interaction systems theory, this study aimed to uncover from who foster children seek support within their birth family, foster family, and outside their home; how they seek support in each of those spheres, and what types of support comprise their supportive interactions with these social groups. The results of this study are astounding. Support is necessary for all individuals, perhaps especially so for those experiencing foster care. The life

of a foster child is complex and layered, as are their networked resources, making social support critical within this context. To better support a child in foster care, we must first understand what they experience. Learning the unique networks of a child, understanding the way trauma affects behaviors, investigating how a child verbally and nonverbally behaves, and holding space for all of these things to be fluid and uniquely individual is critical to entering into the world of foster care. The name “foster care” insinuates a certain care for a child. With poor support, however, care is the opposite of what a foster child experiences. As people, we must exemplify the humility to understand where our society has fallen short and failed foster children. Moving forward, we must continue to understand the supportive communication experiences of foster children so we can create a society in which we may proudly label the system “foster care,” knowing that *is* what a child will experience—the care and support they need to thrive.

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Appendix A
Recruitment Message

To be posted in Facebook groups, specifically those surrounding foster care:

“Thank you to everyone in this group for the vulnerability and honesty in each post. My name is Elianna Zimmerman, and I am a graduate student from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Under the direction of Dr. Youngvorst, I am studying how foster children seek support (IRB: 25.104). Would anyone who is a former foster youth be willing to meet with me over Zoom for a virtual interview? Interviews will last somewhere between 45-75 minutes. To be eligible you must be over 18 and have been in the Wisconsin foster care system at age 10 or older. I would be so grateful to hear about your life experiences and childhood memories. If you are interested, please fill out this survey:

https://milwaukee.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3OeIR04thR5nVoa.”

To be sent to individuals via email:

Hello!

My name is Elianna Zimmerman, and I am a graduate student at UWM. For my thesis, I am researching how foster youth seek and receive support by conducting interviews with adults who were formerly in the foster care system. This study has been approved by UWM’s institutional review board #25.104. As a sister of an adoptee myself, I know how important it is for people to have a voice in their own story. My hope through this study is to provide former foster youth the opportunity to speak their truth and share their story. In line with the goals of Independent Living, my aim is to empower foster youth and bring awareness to our communities as a whole.

Would you be willing and able to help connect me with individuals who might be interested in sharing their story with me? To participate, an individual must have memories of their time in

foster care and must have been located in Wisconsin during their time in foster care. Interviews will occur via Zoom and last approximately 60 minutes. I am happy to share any of my study materials with you ahead of time, including the interview questions. Would you be willing to connect me with any people who would potentially be interested in talking with me?

If you have questions or want to talk before reaching out to potential former foster youth, I am more than willing to call! 512-799-5799.

Grateful,

Elianna Zimmerman

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Hello! My name is Elianna, I am so grateful you are willing to meet with me. As you might recall, I am a Masters student at UW Milwaukee working on my thesis. I am also a sister of an adoptee. From a young age, I have been aware of how not every family looks the same, and I want to bring attention to foster children's experiences specifically. This project is important because foster kids deserve to have their voices heard and have those around them provide better support.

I prepared a set of questions to ask but know that our conversation is up to you. Feel free to share as much or as little as you would like. Family can be a sensitive topic and some of your experiences might be challenging to revisit. So, you can choose to not answer certain questions or end the interview at any point. Have you had a chance to review the informed consent? What questions or concerns do you have?

I will be recording this interview so I can make sure to review our conversation after it is completed. Only I and my faculty advisor will have access to the audio recordings. I want to make sure I have your verbal consent before I start the recording. **Do I have your permission to begin the recording and start our interview?**

I also want to point out that this interview is about you and your stories, so I will be talking as little as possible. I will be listening to your stories and trying not to interrupt you. So, I'll be nodding a lot, for example, instead of saying very much while you're talking. This can be weird for some people as it's not like everyday conversations, but it's important to keep the focus on your experiences.

Do you have any questions before I start recording?

****Start recording**** Thank you so much.

1. First, let's start by telling me about your journey through foster care. (When did it start, how old were you, how many years, etc.)
2. How would you describe your family? Who is in your family?

Now, I will begin to ask you questions related to specific groups of people in your family. First, I will ask about your birth family,

1. How would you describe your relationship with your birth family?

- 1.1. Can you recall a specific time you reached out for support from your birth family? Tell me about that time, what was going through your mind, and how you approached that conversation.

Optional Follow-up Questions:

- 1.1.1. What things did you say or do so that your family knew you needed support?
- 1.1.2. What were you hoping to get out of these conversations? How did you want your family to respond?
- 1.2. Who else in your birth family did you lean on for support, and why?
- 1.3. Overall, how did your birth family support you in times of need?

Optional Follow-up Questions:

- 1.3.1. How did they respond? What did they say or do to support you?
- 1.3.2. How did your birth family know when you needed their support?
- 1.4. Is there anything else you would like to tell me, or feel is important or relevant, regarding how your family supported you?

Now, we will talk about your foster family.

2. **You may have had multiple foster homes, so for these questions, you may choose to answer regarding whichever feels most relevant. How would you describe your relationship with your foster family? Answer regarding your most memorable foster family experience. (include age, years etc.)**

- 2.1. Can you recall a specific time you reached out for support from your foster family? Tell me about that time, what was going through your mind, and how you approached that conversation.

Optional Follow-up Questions:

- 2.1.1. What things did you say or do so that your family knew you needed support?
- 2.1.2. What were you hoping to get out of these conversations? How did you want your family to respond?
- 2.2. Who else in your foster family did you lean on for support, and why?
- 2.3. Overall, how did your foster family support you in times of need?

Optional Follow-up Questions:

- 2.3.1. How did they respond? What did they say or do to support you?
- 2.3.2. How did your foster family know when you needed their support?
- 2.4. Is there anything else you would like to tell me, or feel is important or relevant, regarding how your foster family supported you?

Lastly, I would love to hear about other people in your life, aside from family.

3. **What sorts of relationships did you have outside your families? Did you have friends at school, teachers or coaches you talked to often, or a close relationship with a case worker/social worker/therapist?** *Focus on a specific person if that seems appropriate, if it is more broad, give the interviewee agency in who they decide to share responses about.*

- 3.1. Can you recall a specific time you reached out for support from someone outside your family? Tell me about that time, what was going through your mind, and how you approached that conversation.

Optional Follow-up Questions:

- 3.1.1. What things did you say or do so that this person knew you needed support?
- 3.1.2. What were you hoping to get out of these conversations? How did you want these individuals to respond?
- 3.2. Who else outside of your family did you lean on for support, and why?

3.3. Overall, how did non-family members support you in times of need?

Optional Follow-up Questions:

3.3.1. How did they respond? What did they say or do to support you?

3.3.2. How did people outside your family know when you needed their support?

3.4. Is there anything else you would like to tell me, or feel is important or relevant, regarding how people outside your family supported you?

4. Is there anything else related to your experience with foster care and the support you received during that time that you would like to share with me?

Those are all my questions. Thank you for sharing openly and honestly. I know that some of the things we talked about today might have brought up emotions, or will later on, so I am going to share in the chat a file with links to various emotional support resources. Feel free to reach out to me as well if you have any questions or concerns. [send file]

I will be sending you a completed copy of this project sometime next year if you'd like one. Would you like me to send you one?

Okay, well, thank you again. Have a good rest of your day!

****End recording.****

Appendix C

Example Thank You + Resource Message

_____,

Thank you for talking with me today! I appreciate your wisdom and honesty and openness.

Like we talked about, here are some mental health resources in your area:

- Journey Mental Health Center
 - <https://www.journeymhc.org>
 - Crisis services if you need immediate support
- Behavioral Health Resource Center (Dane County)
 - <https://danebhrc.org>
 - Non-crisis, free mental health support
- Police Department
 - <https://www.cityofmadison.com/police/community/mentalhealth/resources.cfm>
 - A list of resources compiled by the police
- 988 Lifeline
 - <https://988lifeline.org>
 - Suicide & crisis lifeline

If you need anything, feel free to reach out!

Grateful,
Elianna

Appendix D

Participants

Interview #	Pseudonym	Current age	Ages in Foster Care	Pronouns
Thesis 1	Micah	22	8-18	He/him
Thesis 2	Jazmine	20	8-13	She/her
Thesis 3	Leah	~60	2-18	She/her
Thesis 4	Audrey	~20	16-18	She/her
Thesis 6	James	20	11-18	He/him
Thesis 7	Kyra	21	16-18	She/her
Thesis 8	Tatum	19	7-18	They/them
Thesis 9	Elsie	25	12-18	She/her
Thesis 10	Keondre	19	13-18	He/him
Thesis 11	Sage	24	10-18	She/her
Thesis 12	Aaron	22	13-18	He/him
Thesis 13	William	~25	4-18	He/him