

Factors Affecting Positive Transitions for Foster Children

Jennifer Anagnos

Undergraduate Student, Human Development and Family Studies

Megan Ware

Undergraduate Student, Human Development and Family Studies

Abstract

The majority of foster children are forced to endure a multitude of hardships and stress as they transition to new placements (Cole, 2005). This non-random pilot study investigated the foster mother's perspective on factors affecting positive transitions for foster children. The survey results support our hypothesis that foster mothers would find the quality of home life and emotional and physical caregiver availability to be the most important aspects affecting positive transitions. Implications for practitioners include slowly transitioning foster children to new placements and placing an emphasis on natural parenting in foster parent training. Future research would benefit from qualitative interviews and "mixed methods" to gather participants' lived experiences.

Keywords: foster children, foster care, foster parents, positive transitions

The majority of foster children are forced to endure a multitude of hardships and stress as they attempt to make successful transitions, moving from one foster caregiver to a subsequent or permanent placement (Cole, 2005). The label "foster child" typically indicates that the individual has had to transition to at least one new home and has endured some form(s) of abuse (Simmel, Barth, & Brooks, 2007). In addition to abuse, many foster children experience periods of neglect and over-monitoring. These harmful experiences usually result in feelings of powerlessness, behavioral issues, and a poor sense of autonomy (Schofield & Beek, 2009). Clearly, there is much room for

improvement in the foster care system. By having conducted research on the factors that may affect the transitions for foster children, we hope to have helped in a small way, to make some progress towards this goal. The current study investigated the factors affecting positive transitions for foster children from the perspective of foster mothers licensed through a small Midwestern foster care agency.

Literature Review

A review of the literature was conducted through the use of the search engine EBSCOhost to investigate factors affecting positive transitions from current caregivers to subsequent or permanent placements for foster children. The five “best fit” articles related to our study were identified (Cole, 2005; Dozier, Lindhiem, Lewis, Bick, Bernard, & Peloso, 2009; Ponciano, 2010; Schofield & Beek, 2009; Simmel et al., 2007).

Cole (2005) examined the impact of environmental and relational factors on infants’ levels of attachment security. This study revealed that attachment was more likely to be achieved in a well-organized home environment containing an assortment of stimuli and age appropriate educational materials. Attachment security is harmed by over-monitoring which causes the infant to exhibit disorganized/disoriented behavior, putting him/her at continued intellectual and relational risks. The study concluded that foster children come to expect the attachment style modeled to them in infancy from future caregivers.

Dozier et al. (2009) analyzed the attachments infants formed with their foster parents. The study found that infants placed in foster care before the age of one were able to make attachments much more easily than those who entered the system at a later age. This study provided foster parents with ten intervention sessions related to providing nurturance to their foster children. After these interventions, an increase in the children’s willingness to seek support was noticed.

Ponciano (2010) investigated, largely from foster mothers’ perspectives, how maternal sensitivity, adoption status, and foster mother experience affected the quality of attachment in the foster child-foster mother relationship. It noted maternal sensitivity as a very strong predictor of secure attachments. It was also discovered that

the less-experienced foster mothers and those with plans of adoption often cultivated more secure attachments with their foster children.

Schofield and Beek (2009) employed the Secure Base Model to illustrate the importance of quality foster parenting. There are five parts to this model: availability, acceptance, co-operation, family membership, and sensitivity. The study found that foster children need these five aspects in their lives in order to be able to thrive as adults. It was concluded that even the children in the study that had experienced abuse and neglect, if relocated to long-term foster homes employing Secure Base Model, could likely reach their full potentials.

Simmel et al. (2007) examined the behavioral differences between adopted children who had been in foster care and those who had not. Overall, it was discovered that adopted foster children had more behavioral issues than adopted non-foster children. Former foster children are more likely to have experienced abuse and neglect, leading to more behavioral issues.

Although recent literature illustrated the differences in the quality of attachment based on the foster parents' intention of adoption (Ponciano, 2010; Simmel et al., 2007), the environmental and relational factors affecting the child's quality of attachment and the steps foster parents can take to improve it (Cole, 2005; Dozier et al., 2009), and the important role foster parents play in a foster child's life (Simmel et al., 2007), recent literature did not focus on foster mothers' ideas for improving the transitions for foster children. According to Ponciano (2010), foster mothers are typically the primary caregivers for foster children. Therefore, it is important to gain foster mothers' perspectives as they would likely have the most contact with the children, and thus have a great deal of insight on factors affecting positive transitions. This study investigated what foster mothers believe should be done to ease the transitions for foster children, thus supplying the current studies with ways to improve foster children's transitions to new homes.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study was attachment theory (Davila & Levy, 2006). Attachment refers to feelings of

security that binds children to caregivers. Markers of attachment include behaviors such as clinging, crying, smiling, and exhibiting a preference for a few dependable caregivers. This theory states that children are likely to have a better sense of attachment if an adult providing loving and attuned care is present. Attachment theory explains that children use their attachment figure to confide in and turn to during difficult times. Children who lack a nurturing attachment figure often have trouble feeling secure in relationships.

In the context of our study, attachment theory would suggest that foster children need a trustworthy figure in their life. Foster children enter the system due to an initial disruption in attachment; they do not have an adult in their life providing loving, constant, and persistent care. The theory states that children with a secure attachment figure are better able to develop healthy relationships throughout their lifetime. Therefore, attachment theory would predict having a secure attachment figure as a factor in easing the foster child's transition into a new home.

Purpose Statement

This pilot study was conducted with the intent of using a reliable survey instrument to identify foster mothers' perspectives on possible adjustments that would allow for more positive transitions for foster children. Additionally, we hoped to draw foster care agencies and providers' attention to changes that can be implemented to facilitate positive transitions. It is anticipated that this survey will enhance the limited amount of research conducted on improving foster children's transitions to new placements.

This study was centered around the research question, "What are foster mothers' perspectives on the factors affecting positive transitions for foster children?" We predicted, based on literature and theory, that foster mothers would consider the quality of home life and the emotional and physical caregiver availability to be the most important aspects affecting positive transitions for foster children. The literature reveals the quality of home life as a very influential factor affecting transitions for foster children, and attachment theory suggests higher levels of attachment occur when constant and persistent care is present which coincides with our hypothesis.

Method

Participants

The participants were 13 foster mothers providing care through a small, Midwestern foster care agency. Demographics accounted for were gender, age of the parent, and amount of foster parenting experience. The age ranges of the participants were as follows: two were 27 to 32, two were 33 to 38, five were 39 to 44, three were 45 to 50, and one was 51 to 56. Eleven participants reported having 1 to 5 years of foster parent experience, one had 5 to 10 years, and one had 10 or more years.

Research Design

A cross-sectional and non-random research design was used to obtain the perspectives of foster mothers at one point in time. Online surveys, which were convenient for our specific sample, were administered using UW-Stout's secure online system "Qualtrics." This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Data Collection Instrument

We designed a survey focused around investigating foster mothers' perspectives on factors affecting positive transition for foster children. The survey included a brief description of the study, definitions of any terms not commonly known such as "sensitivity," risks and benefits, time commitment, confidentiality, voluntary participation, contact information of the research team and the supervisor, and instructions for completing the survey.

The survey, informed by the literature and attachment theory, consisted of three demographic questions regarding the participants' gender, age, and years being a foster parent, and 14 closed-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale. The Likert scale measured the intensity of the participants' attitudes ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). The survey also included two open-ended questions regarding ideas for improving transitions to new placements and factors that affect positive transitions for foster children. These questions served as a vital outlet for foster mothers to share their lived experience.

Moreover, many qualitative responses closely related to the survey statements, indicating our survey had a high degree of relevancy.

The survey instrument had both face validity and content validity. The survey established face validity in that all statements and questions investigated foster mothers' perspectives on factors that affect positive transitions to new placements for foster children as described in the literature. In terms of content validity, the survey statements and questions addressed the numerous factors affecting positive transitions to new placements for foster children. After piloting our survey, the human services lead worker at the foster care agency we collaborated with advised us to write our survey at an eighth grade or below reading level and pointed out vague survey statements that needed revisions. Upon receiving this feedback, we adjusted some of the statements to make them more explicit. In following the suggestion of not testing for multiple variables in a single statement, we created two different statements from one of our original statements. However, we neglected to pilot our survey to foster mothers; this is a limitation of the research and a recommendation for future research.

Procedure

The survey process began when we emailed foster care agencies seeking permission to survey foster mothers. After permission was granted, surveys were opened from March 17th, 2011 to March 29th, 2011 for foster mothers licensed through the collaborating agency to complete. Before data collection began, we numbered the surveys to ensure the anonymity of the participants. The human services lead worker at the foster care agency emailed an invitation for our online survey containing an attachment to the consent form as well as the IRB approval stamp to the foster mothers via blind carbon copy for confidentiality. The informed consent statement, ensuring the participants' privacy, appeared before the screen containing the actual survey. The participants' names were entered into the online system via blind carbon copy in order to allow them to stay anonymous. The human services lead worker emailed a copy of our survey to the foster mothers who could not access the online survey and then faxed us the completed surveys via blind carbon copy for confidentiality.

Data Analysis Plan

The data was first “cleaned” and checked for missing data and then “coded” using acronyms for each variable. All demographic questions were assigned a three letter acronym: *Gender of the respondents* (GEN); *Age of the respondents* (AGE); and *Years being a foster parent* (YRS). A three letter acronym was also assigned to all of the survey statements: *Foster parent training courses are helpful in facilitating positive transitions for foster children* (FPT); *The quality of home life provided by the current caregiver affects the transitions between placements for foster children* (HML); *Caregivers who have come to terms with their own childhoods are better able to help foster children transition into new placements* (CGC); *Caregivers with more parenting experience are better able to help foster children transition into new placements than those with little or no parenting experience* (PEX); *The more sensitive caregivers are, the better able they are to help foster children transition into new placements* (SCG); *Physical caregiver availability is helpful in allowing children to achieve positive transitions* (PCA); *Emotional caregiver availability is helpful in allowing children to achieve positive transitions* (ECA); *Foster children who feel a sense of acceptance are more likely to have positive transitions into new placements* (FCA); *Foster children are more secure when moving into a placement where there is an intention of adoption* (IOA); *Foster children are more secure when moving into a placement with three or fewer foster children* (MFC); *Foster children who have been taught problem solving skills by their caregivers have more positive transitions into new placements* (PSS); *County human service agencies should combine foster care programs* (ECC); *Foster parent training is adequate in preparing families to become foster parents* (PTP); and *Online training would be a valuable tool in helping foster families increase their skills in caring for foster children* (OTR). We also had two open-ended questions: “What ideas do you have for improving transitions to new placements for foster children? What are the most important factors affecting positive transitions for foster children?”

The data was analyzed using the computer program *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS). The individual was used

as the level of analysis. Since groups were not compared, the data analysis included frequencies, mean comparisons, and correlations. Additionally, a Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis was conducted.

Results

Correlations supported our hypothesis that foster mothers would find the quality of home life and emotional and physical caregiver availability to be the most important aspects affecting positive transitions. The frequency distribution analysis revealed missing data that was discarded. The variable analysis found that the majority of respondents agreed and/or strongly agreed that foster parent training courses, the quality of home life, foster children feeling a sense of acceptance, caregivers' acceptance of their own childhoods, the sensitivity of the caregivers, physical caregiver availability, emotional caregiver availability, teaching foster children problem solving skills, and online training are all important factors for providing positive transitions for foster children.

The variables regarding the helpfulness of foster parent training courses in facilitating positive transitions, belief in combining foster care programs, influence of physical and emotional caregiver availability, and quality of home life appear to have large significant relationships to the variable concerning the helpfulness of foster parent training courses in facilitating positive transitions. This can be explained in that all variables focus on training or relate to topics covered in training courses. The variables regarding the adequacy of foster parent training to prepare families to become foster parents, belief in combining foster care programs, influence of physical and emotional caregiver availability, and parenting experience appear to have large significant relationships to the variable concerning the influence of the quality of home life. This correlation can be explained in that these variables have a contributing role in the quality of life experienced by the foster child. See Table 1 for additional correlations.

A reliability analysis was run to indicate if the fourteen variables were a reliable index to measure the major concept: Foster mothers' perspectives on factors affecting positive transitions for foster

children. Our Cronbach's Alpha, a measure of reliability, was 0.840, indicating that the survey questions were a reliable measure of the major concept.

Table 1

Pearson Correlations Matrix

	FPT	HML	PEX	SCG	PCA	ECA	FCA	IOA	MFC	PSS	ECC	PTP
FPT		.809**			.570*	.646*					.621*	.567*
HML	.809**		.631*		.570*	.814**					.621*	
PEX		.631*										.565*
SCG								.659*				
PCA	.570*	.570*				.663*						
ECA	.646*	.814**			.663*							
FCA										.609*		
IOA				.659*								
MFC										.607*		
PSS							.609*		.607*			
ECC	.621*	.621*										.674*
PTP	.567*		.565*									.674*

Note. (FPT) = foster parent training courses are helpful in facilitating positive transitions; (HML) = the quality of home life provided by the current caregiver affects the transitions between placements for foster children; (CGC) = caregivers who have accepted their own childhoods are better able to help foster children transition; (PEX) = caregivers with more parenting experience are better able to help children transition; (SCG) = the more sensitive caregivers are, the better able they are to help foster children transition; (PCA) = physical caregiver availability helps children to achieve positive transitions; (ECA) = emotional caregiver availability helps children to achieve positive transitions; (FCA) = foster children who feel a sense of acceptance are more likely to have a positive transition; (IOA) = foster children are more secure when moving into a placement when there is an intention of adoption; (MFC) = foster children are more secure when moving into a placement with three or fewer foster children; (PSS) = foster children who have been taught problem solving skills by their caregivers have more positive transitions; (ECC) = county human service agencies should combine foster care programs; (PTP) = foster parent training is adequate in preparing families to become foster parents; (OTR) = online training would help foster families better care for foster children.
 ~ N=14; **Correlation is significant at the $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed) *Correlation is significant at the $p < 0.05$

Discussion

We found support for our hypothesis that foster mothers would consider quality of home life and emotional and physical caregiver availability to be the most important aspects affecting positive transitions.

Statistically significant correlations ($p < 0.01$) were found which supported this study's hypothesis. There was a statistically significant

correlation between the statements *The quality of home life provided by the current caregiver affects the transitions between placements for foster children*, *Emotional caregiver availability helps children to achieve positive transitions*, and *Physical caregiver availability helps children to achieve positive transitions*. These findings are supported by theory and literature. Attachment theory assumes that children are likely to have a better sense of attachment if an adult providing loving, consistent, and persistent care is present (Davila & Levy, 2006). Panciano (2010) found maternal sensitivity to be a very strong predictor of the security of attachment.

The frequency distribution also demonstrated support for this study's hypothesis. The majority of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the quality of home life, emotional caregiver availability, and physical caregiver availability are all important aspects in providing positive transitions for foster children. These findings are supported by Schofield and Beek (2009) who stated that the Secure Base Model, focusing on the importance of availability, acceptance, co-operation, and family membership, is beneficial to follow when caring for foster children.

The results, literature, and theory were all in concurrence regarding the survey statements *The more sensitive caregivers are, the better able they are to help foster children transition*; *Foster children who feel a sense of acceptance are more likely to have a positive transition*, and *Foster children who are taught problem solving skills by caregivers have more positive transitions*. The majority of our respondents agreed or strongly agreed with these statements. In regards to the literature, Schofield and Beek (2009) agreed that feeling a sense of acceptance and sensitivity is necessary to facilitate positive transitions. Attachment theory supports this with the idea that a sensitive caregiver who creates an accepting and educational environment helps the child to feel a deeper sense of attachment (Davila & Levy, 2006).

The results regarding the number of foster children present in a particular placement did not fit with theory or literature. The vast majority of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with this survey question, pointing towards a lack of understanding on this particular issue. Attachment theory assumes that children have

a better sense of attachment if an adult is consistently present (Davila & Levy, 2006). Through this, it can be inferred that the more children a foster parent is caring for, the more difficult it is to be consistently present and fully provide for each child's specific needs. As for the literature, Cole (2005) states that attachment is more likely achieved in homes with only a few other children.

Additionally, the responses gathered concerning the importance of an intention of adoption did not fit the literature. The majority of respondents either disagreed or neither agreed nor disagreed with the intention of adoption having significance. Simmel et al. (2007), conversely, found a negative relationship between the likelihood of adoption and foster children's behavioral issues.

The participants' responses indicated that parental experience is not an important factor in the foster child's transition. Panciano's (2010) hypothesis that foster mothers with more experience would be more likely to have securely attached children was proven wrong. Panciano (2010) reasoned that more experienced foster mothers are more frustrated with both the challenges of the foster care system and their foster children's behavioral issues. Additionally, they are more likely to have experienced the loss of prior foster children leaving their homes, leading to hesitation around getting emotionally attached, and resulting in less secure attachments. Furthermore, having just completed the difficult task of becoming certified, new foster mothers have much motivation to provide quality care.

The majority of respondents agreed that foster parents who have come to terms with their own childhood are better able to help foster children's transition. Davila and Levy (2006) use attachment theory to explain that foster parents who have not dealt with their own childhoods are unlikely to cultivate positive transitions for their foster children. These parents have difficulties making attachments with others and are thus unable to model this behavior, making it challenging for their foster children to learn how to form secure attachments.

The majority of the foster mothers sampled agreed or strongly agreed that foster parent training courses are helpful in facilitating positive transitions for foster children. This corresponds with a study referenced by Ponciano (2010), which found that providing

foster parents with extensive training results in fewer placement failures. The responses to the agency specific statements *County human service agencies should combine foster care programs*, *Foster parent training is adequate in preparing families to become foster parents*, and *Online training would help foster families better care for foster children* were quite varied, but there was a greater number of respondents who agreed than disagreed. While foster mothers are fairly positive about the current training, they are open to change. Ponciano (2010) supports this idea of change by advocating for separate training classes for experienced foster parents, with an emphasis on stress- and frustration-reducing techniques as well as tips on coping with loss.

Qualitative Analysis

We reviewed all qualitative comments and agreed upon common patterns and themes based on their content. The quotes taken from the qualitative comments from the respondents were transcribed word for word. Three of the six responses regarding ideas for improving transitions to new placements for foster children revealed that gradually transitioning children to new placements is ideal. One participant argued that a gradual move will support the child's need to "not lose those people that they are attached to because of the negative effects it will cause long term for that child to experience loss again and again." The literature supports this idea by stating that steps should be taken to make transitions as gradual as possible (Simmel et al., 2007).

Qualitative comments also included the importance of having quality foster parents with high levels of understanding and maturity. Participants recommended a focus on natural parent training, referring to teaching techniques for general child rearing, rather than overemphasizing the child's problems. This corresponds to our hypothesis that foster mothers would consider the emotional and physical caregiver availability to be important factors. Parents who are mature and understanding are aware of their foster children's need for them to be both physically and emotionally present (Schofield & Beek, 2009). Additionally, Dozier et al. (2009) found that quality parent training courses can help parents recognize their children's need for them.

The qualitative comments regarding the most important factors affecting positive transitions for foster children declared the need for foster children to feel as though they are part of the caregiver's family. Suggestions included providing a place in the home that is the child's own, ensuring they feel safe and loved, and showing them kindness. Others noted the importance of establishing a routine and having belongings with the children in easing the transition. All of these responses verified that the quality of home life is an important factor, as predicted in our hypothesis. This is supported by attachment theory, which assumes that receiving loving, consistent, and persistent care helps children feel a better sense of attachment (Davila & Levy, 2006). Schofield and Beek (2009) also supported this idea by stating that helping children feel as though they belong is a critical aspect in aiding the development of the foster child.

Limitations

A limitation to this study is the small sample size and the nonrandom design. Another limitation is using the 1-through-5 Likert scale, as instructed. The large number of "neither agree nor disagree" responses leads us to believe that having a 1-through-7 Likert scale would add more variation to the responses. Furthermore, the sampling of only one agency added to the limitations of this study because the respondents received the same training, resulting in some shared parenting characteristics. We should have asked another demographic question to see if the participants had received training through any other agency. We had expected that the collaborating agency would have wanted to ask open-ended questions, but they chose to submit survey statements. This is a limitation in that they had a great deal of knowledge and insight on foster care and could have asked questions that would have likely yielded rich qualitative data.

Implications for Practitioners

The data from this study demonstrates that foster mothers see room for improvement in foster parent training courses. Practitioners should explore ways of altering training to better equip foster parents. This study also found that foster mothers

believe that an effort should be made to slowly transition foster children to new placements. One final implication, derived from the qualitative comments and confirmed by the literature, of use to practitioners is to ensure that common goals are created and are made clear to biological parents, foster parents, and foster children.

Implications for Future Research

It is recommended that future research would include a random, large, national sample in order to be able to generalize the findings nationwide. Based on the large number of “neither agree nor disagree” responses received, it would be useful to increase the variability of possible responses by using a 1-through-7 Likert scale instead of a 1-through-5 Likert Scale.

Another implication we found that would be beneficial for future research is to study the effects of the quality of the relationship between the foster family and biological family on foster children. For example, it would be particularly interesting to study the influence of the frequency of communication between all parties on the child’s transition. In accordance with the literature, many foster mothers noted the birth-foster family relationship as being an important factor in promoting positive transitions to new placements for foster children in their qualitative responses.

Additionally, we would suggest conducting qualitative interviews and using “mixed methods” to enable participants to share their lived experiences. Participants could offer a personal account of their struggles and triumphs as well as pose their own questions and offer suggestions for practitioners and future research. One foster mother, for example, disclosed the difficulties she had experienced: “When you put your whole heart in a child even though you know they have a place to go it’s real hard to lay your personal feelings aside and put what is best for them first. I believe the key in making the transition better is entirely the way the foster family can have closure with it.” She went on to describe how her husband and God were crucial in gaining a sense of closure and questioned how people lacking these things gain closure. It would be fascinating to further explore that question and other questions posed by participants through qualitative interviews.

Conclusion

As noted in the current literature, the majority of foster children face many hardships in transitioning to new placements (Cole, 2005; Simmel et al., 2007). Our research found that an emphasis placed on improving such things as the quality of home life and physical and emotional caregiver availability can help allow foster children to achieve positive transitions. Foster mothers, because of their direct personal experience with foster care, have great insight regarding how transitions to new placement can be improved for foster children; their voices need to be heard.

References

- Cole, S. A. (2005). Infants in foster care: Relational and environmental factors affecting attachment. *Journal of Reproductive & Infant Psychology*, 23(1), 43-61. doi:10.1080/02646830512331330947
- Davila, J., & Levy, M. N. (2006). Introduction to the special section on attachment theory and psychotherapy. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 74(6), 989-993. doi:10.1037/0022-006X.74.6.989
- Dozier, M., Lindhiem, O., Lewis, E., Bick, J., Bernard, K., & Peloso, E. (2009). Effects of a foster parent training program on young children's attachment behaviors: Preliminary evidence from a randomized clinical trial. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 26(4), 321-332. doi:10.1007/s10560-009-0165-1
- Ponciano, L. (2010). Attachment in foster care: The role of maternal sensitivity, adoption, and foster mother experience. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 27(2), 97-114. doi:10.1007/s10560-010-0192-y
- Simmel, C., Barth, R. P., & Brooks, D. (2007). Adopted foster youths' psychosocial functioning: A longitudinal perspective. *Child & Family Social Work*, 12(4), 336-348. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2006.00481.x
- Schofield, G., & Beek, M. (2009). Growing up in foster care: Providing a secure base through adolescence. *Child & Family Social Work*, 14(3), 255-266. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2008.00592.x