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ARTICLE

The Needs of Foster Parents

A Qualitative Study of Motivation, Support, and Retention

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined motivation, support, and retention of foster parents in a child welfare agency in nine Canadian counties. Data from nine foster parent focus groups (54 participants) were categorized into themes for four structured questions. Results showed that the most frequent motivations for being foster parents were intrinsic, altruistic motivators of wanting to make a difference in children's lives and a desire to have children in the home. The most important supports and deficits in support from their agencies were emotional support, trust and good communication with workers, respect for foster parents' abilities and opinions, and being considered part of the child-care team. Strategies to increase retention of foster parents included improving supports for fostering, providing accurate information about the foster child, and introducing foster parents to the role gradually.

KEY WORDS:

foster children
foster parents
motivations to
foster
retention

THE NEEDS OF FOSTER PARENTS: MOTIVATION, SUPPORT, AND RETENTION

The number of children entering the foster care system has risen dramatically over the past five years in Canada and the USA (Hudson and Levasseur, 2002). There are a number of reasons for the rise of children in care. Factors such as growing poverty, increases in the number of teenage parents who lack adequate family supports, reports of child abuse and neglect, and substance abuse have all contributed to more youth in care (Pasztor and Wynne, 1995; Sanchirico et al., 1998).

Recent research reports that children coming into foster care are often older and have more severe behavioural, emotional, and psychological issues than previously identified (Farris-Manning and Zandstra, 2003; Sanchirico et al., 1998). Specifically, many current foster children present with higher rates of psychiatric symptoms, developmental delays, general cognitive deficits, and compromised attachment behaviors more often than is found in the general population (Annie Casey Foundation, 2002; Stein et al., 1996). Having more challenging children complicates the foster parent role because parents are being asked to deal with more difficult mental health, learning and behavioral issues in children with 'special needs'.

Juxtaposed to the increase of children in care, fewer family-based homes providing care are available for these children (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies [OACAS], 2003). Given the stresses of dealing with these children, foster parent attrition is a concern in meeting this growing need (Denby et al., 1999). The goal of the present study is to examine the motivations of foster parents and identify the supports that they need in order to remain as foster parents. This understanding can then be helpful in improving retention rates of foster parents.

Motivations to Foster

An important beginning point in addressing this crisis in foster care is to understand the motivations and satisfactions of foster parents. To begin, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations need to be considered because foster parents can be motivated by a combination of both internal and external processes. Work motivation has been defined as a set of internal and external forces that arouse or initiate work-related behavior and determine its direction, intensity, form, and duration (Ambrose and Kulik, 1999). Intrinsic motivation has been defined as tasks that are performed for the pleasure they yield and due to forces that are inherent in the person, such as values. In contrast, extrinsic motivation refers to environmental or situational expectations and rewards (Baron, 1998). Research has shown that intrinsic job attributes are highly related to job satisfaction and retention (Ambrose and Kulik, 1999).

Beginning with intrinsic motivation, research with foster parents has found that some intrinsic motivators are related to family dynamics such as filling an 'empty nest' (Andersson, 2001; Isomaki, 2002), wanting to adopt children, increasing family size (Edelstein et al., 2001), or providing a companion for an only child (Denby and Rindfleisch, 1996; Isomaki, 2002). Societal influences such as religious affiliation and feeling an obligation to care for others are another form of motivators found in previous studies (Gillis-Arnold et al., 1998). Some foster parents have experienced being in the foster system themselves, or experienced fostering through their family of origin or other relations and so identify closely with foster children (Baum et al., 2001; Redding et al., 2000). Another intrinsic motivator is altruism. Some individuals feel blessed for what they have in life and have a desire to 'give back' to the community (Denby et al., 1999; Testa and Rolock, 1999). Other altruistic motivators include wanting to help children, providing children with a stable environment, and fostering out of a love of children (Barth, 2001; Buehler et al., 2003).

One extrinsic motivator is monetary: some studies have reported that people foster as a means of supplementing family income (Isomaki, 2002; Redding et al., 2000). Of note is the suggestion that payment is not the principal determining factor for entering or remaining active in the foster care system (Denby et al., 1999). Although one study (Hudson and Levasseur, 2002) found that 70% of the respondents believed that they needed additional funding to maintain their foster home, other research (Kirton, 2001; Triseliotis et al., 2000) indicates that monetary compensation is not an exceptionally important motivator. What research (Pasztor and Wynne, 1995) does appear to indicate is that if foster parents perceived their reimbursement as adequate, it may positively impact retention.

Strengths and Deficits in Support for Foster Parents

Many foster parents decide to quit fostering because of perceived deficits in support for themselves and their foster children. In order to understand how to support and retain foster parents, current research on the strengths and deficits in support of foster parents needs to be understood. These supports can be classified as both intrinsic (emotional) and extrinsic (tangible) support.

Intrinsic supports for foster parents, crucial for retention and role satisfaction, include open communication and rapport between foster parents and agency workers (Rhodes et al., 2003; Sanchirico et al., 1998). In fact, lack of responsiveness, poor communication, and lack of support by child welfare agencies has been found to be related to foster parents leaving fostering before their first year in the system is completed (Annie Casey Foundation, 2002; Rhodes et al., 2001). A closely related support is foster parents needing recognition from agency workers as being members of the childcare team whose opinions are respected and abilities affirmed (Farris-Manning and Zandstra, 2003;

Hudson and Levasseur, 2002). Sanchirico et al. (1998) found that foster parents who were involved in case planning for children in their care had increased satisfaction with fostering. In contrast, the Annie Casey Foundation (2002) found that many foster parents felt unappreciated and unrecognized for the work that they did with foster children. It is possible that recognizing foster parents for the challenging job that they do is another key to improving retention.

One extrinsic support is adequate training. Foster parents today are assuming greater responsibility for arranging services for their children, as well as needing to know counselling and behavioral techniques to care for challenging foster children (Herczog et al., 2001; Orme and Buehler, 2001). Rhodes et al. (2001) found that foster parents' satisfaction and intent to continue fostering were correlated to their perceptions about the *effectiveness* of training, which can help them feel more prepared and supported in dealing with difficult children.

A second extrinsic support is adequate compensation. Research (Barth, 2001; Kirton, 2001) has found that compensation rates were generally perceived by foster parents to be low, without including annual cost of living adjustments, and have been associated with intentions to quit fostering. A different form of compensation is respite from fostering, which provides temporary relief for foster parents to rejuvenate from the stress of fostering and has been identified by foster parents as an important form of support (Hudson and Levasseur, 2002; Rhodes et al., 2001). Conversely, lack of respite care has been related to foster parents quitting (Triseliotis et al., 1998). Thus, foster parents need positive agency relationships, emotional support, and a variety of concrete supports to be motivated and satisfied with fostering and to increase the likelihood of retention.

Retention of Foster Parents

From the review of research (Denby et al., 1999; Rhodes et al., 2001; 2003), it is clear that adequate support for foster parents is related to better retention rates. When foster parents believe that they are receiving adequate preparation and training, respite, timely crisis intervention, and a sense of being valued and respected by the agency, they are more likely to continue to foster (Hudson and Levasseur, 2002). Foster parents quit because they are dissatisfied with agency relationships, have poor communication with caseworkers, perceive caseworkers as unresponsive, and receive inadequate training and support (Triseliotis et al., 1998). However, all of these studies are quantitative and there is likely more to be learned about retention from listening to foster parents' views about it. As well, understanding and addressing what foster parents perceive as deficits in support is an integral part of increasing retention.

Rationale for Current Study

Although much research has occurred with foster parents, most of the studies (e.g. Brown and Calder, 2000; Denby et al., 1999; Rhodes et al., 2003) are based

on questionnaire data or telephone interviews, which may limit the depth of information that is gathered. In contrast, the current study seeks to understand the needs of foster parents through using discussion groups to capture the rich, descriptive detail about fostering. Although other qualitative studies have examined some aspects of foster parent motivation (e.g. Buehler et al., 2003), they have generally used small samples from regional areas (Tennessee). Much of the available research emanates from the USA and Britain with a lack of current data on Canadian foster parents. It is important to determine whether findings from other countries are present in the Canadian context. In addition, past research may not be as relevant in today's child welfare climate. Many changes have occurred in the foster care system such as recent Canadian legislation that broadens the definition of a 'child in need of protection' to include neglect (Child Welfare League of Canada [CWLC], 2003), and recognition that children in care now have more complex and demanding behaviors (Hudson and Levasseur, 2002; King et al., 2003).

Using a qualitative methodology, the present research is designed to examine foster parents' experiences of fostering from their perspective. The aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding of foster parents' motivations to provide a better insight into why they continue to foster. If we can identify the potential motivators of foster parents, it may be possible to provide them with services and supports to sustain those motivations. The study also investigates strengths and deficits in support reported by foster parents in order to understand what foster parents need to do their jobs and how to improve foster parent retention. Although many studies examine only one of these issues, we thought it was important to examine them together because we believe that foster parent retention is directly related to their motivations and the supports they receive. A more complete, contemporary understanding of what motivates foster parents can be used to implement policy change in order to retain the foster parents who are already in the child welfare system.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 54 Caucasian foster parents (5 men and 49 women) who consented to participate in nine focus groups representing the nine child welfare agencies in southwestern Ontario. This qualitative study was part of a larger, mail survey study of 655 foster parents. Two groups were in urban centers (200,000–300,000 people) and seven groups were in more rural areas. Mean age was 45 years with an average of 8 years fostering experience. They had an average of 2.5 biological children in their homes and 70% were married. The rest were single, divorced, widowed, or in a common law relationship. A maximum of eight foster parents were accepted from each of nine child welfare

agencies. In cases where there were fewer than eight consenting foster parents volunteering from a county, all volunteers were asked to attend the focus group. This occurred in two rural counties where there was a smaller sample of foster parents from which to draw participants. When more than eight people per county volunteered, selection was made by the volunteer outreach foster parent for that county, who selected a range of parents on variables such as number of years as a foster parent, age of children fostered, and types of children fostered. Because the foster parents volunteered for the focus groups, we did not consider them to be representatives of their counties. Groups varied in size from 4–8 people. All participants were told that the broader goal of the research was for the data to improve recruitment and retention strategies at child protection agencies in order to meet the needs of an increasing number of children coming into care and that the final report would be made available to each of their individual agencies.

Discussion Prompts

All 9 focus groups used the same 10 questions or prompts for discussion. These prompts incorporated some of the concepts highlighted by Brown and Calder (2000). This study examined the answers to 4 of these 10 questions: (1) Why did you enter fostering? What motivated you? (2) What sustains you in your fostering commitment? (3) What are the strengths and deficits in the support you receive from the local child welfare agency? (4) In what ways do you think child welfare agencies can improve their retention strategies to maintain existing foster parents?

Procedure

Parents who volunteered for the focus groups were contacted by the Volunteer Outreach Foster Parent for that county, who arranged the evening for each group at the local agency site, including providing refreshments. Many of these outreach volunteers had been members of the consultation committee that designed the larger research project, including developing questions for the focus groups, and thus were committed to the process. In smaller, rural counties, the participants knew each other because of meeting regularly in foster parent support groups.

Participants were paid transportation costs for attending the group and for childcare, if needed. The focus groups consisted of the local foster parent coordinator as a facilitator, one of the last three authors (university professors) as cofacilitators, and one of three graduate student research assistants (first author) who acted as a recorder for each session. Participants were told that their comments would be kept confidential, permission to audiotape the discussion was requested, and they were told that they could request that the tape recorder be turned off at any point in the discussion (no focus group

chose this option). Focus groups lasted about two hours and were audiotaped and transcribed.

A qualitative methodology was used to augment data from a larger quantitative survey to provide more specific information about the *what* and *why* of fostering. The focus group methodology was chosen because we wanted the richness that results when participants are able to spark ideas from each other, which often produces nuances in material that may not be present in individual interviews (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). One advantage of focus groups identified by Jayanthi and Nelson (2002) is that they are helpful for understanding the *why* behind participants' comments. In addition, as Morgan (1997) states, they are more efficient than individual interviews, allowing us to hear from more parents, given the resources at our disposal. We assumed that our sample had a bias of being more highly motivated foster parents than foster parents who did not volunteer for the groups.

Analysis

Analysis of the discussion group transcriptions used the methods of Consensual Qualitative Research (Hill et al., 1997), which does not rely on preconceived hypotheses, but seeks to discover them during the gathering and analysis of data. The following steps were used: (1) the first author divided the data into themes (or categories) based on the four research questions, (2) the themes were taken to the research team of coinvestigators and graduate students to achieve consensus, (3) the first and third authors then coded the data into these themes, and (4) findings across the themes were described as general, typical, or variant. For a characteristic to be considered 'general', it was present in all nine focus groups; 'typical' categories were found in half or more of the focus groups; and 'variant' categories occurred in less than half of the focus groups.

RESULTS

As expected, foster parents provided a wealth of information about why they fostered and what sustained them, what they experienced as supports and deficits in support for their role, and what they thought would improve retention of foster parents. The categories used to group their responses to each of these issues are presented with examples.

Motivations of Foster Parents

Answers to the first two questions on motivation and sustaining factors were grouped together into themes descriptive of motivators. These foster parents were all motivated to foster because of intrinsic reasons of Altruism, Desire for Children in the Home, and Benefit to Biological Children, with the first two categories being 'general' categories that were present in all nine focus groups.

Consistent throughout all of their comments was a strong love and commitment to children:

I always thought about doing it [fostering] at some point in my life because children are my first love.

Altruism referred to helping children in need, wanting to make a difference in the lives of children, wanting to help the agency, or fostering a family member who was in care. As one parent stated:

I always felt that there were so many children out there who would never have an advantage to having a good home. If you had a good home to provide, why wouldn't you offer that home to a child who needs one?

Another general category was a Desire for Children in the Home. This motivation included wanting to fill an empty nest, using fostering as an avenue toward adoption, wanting more children in the home, and needing to be needed by children:

I had my own kids who grew up and didn't need me any more and I needed to be needed.

There was one 'typical' category (five groups) of motivation to foster being about Benefits to Biological Children. Foster parents talked about the importance of their biological children learning to share and accepting differences in children. As stated by one parent:

It's a great learning experience for my children to help another child.

Noteworthy, no foster parents mentioned compensation as a motivator for fostering.

Strengths and Deficits in Support from Agency

Foster parents spoke at length about the many ways that they either felt supported or did not feel supported in their role by their child welfare agency, including the following categories: Emotional Support, Trust with Agency Workers, Recognition as a Team Member, Resource Support for Foster Children, Crisis Intervention, Monetary Compensation, Respite/Relief, and Training.

Emotional Support

There was a wide breadth of responses included in the general category of emotional support with many responses related to relationships between foster

parents and agency staff. Foster parents reported feeling supported when they had good relationships with workers, when workers returned phone calls in a timely manner, when workers supported foster parent requests and opinions, and used open, honest communication. Many foster parents reported that they had positive relationships with individual foster care workers:

We've got excellent foster care workers and that is one of the sustaining things. Somebody from the agency was there to support us when we needed it.

When foster parents did not feel emotionally supported it was because they did not have a good relationship with their workers or the agency, felt that their opinions were not respected, workers were unavailable when needed and did not return telephone calls promptly, and communication with workers was poor. As one parent described:

They want to place a child in my home, I have all these capabilities. But when I'm asking for something, I no longer have those qualities that qualify me to make those decisions for the child. We have to be recognized for our experience, for what we do, and for our insights.

There was also recognition by foster parents that high turnover rates of workers tended to damage relationships and contribute to a lack of consistency in expectations about how foster parents should do their jobs.

Trust Between Workers and Parents

A closely related general category was foster parents reporting breaches in trust between workers and themselves. Parents felt that agency workers did not trust their abilities to deal with their foster children or trust them enough to give them full information about their child. Other foster parents felt that they had to watch what they said and did so because of fear that workers would lay blame on them for any misstep. For example one parent commented:

When you vent or have a problem, it gets held against you. I'm still not living down a difficulty that we had two years ago.

Some parents found that this type of break in trust made them reluctant to talk other people into being foster parents.

Recognition

Although some foster parents felt they were part of a team, most of the respondents (seven groups) believed that workers did not recognize and respect foster parents' ability to do their jobs competently, a 'typical' category. Because parents

felt that they knew their children better than did workers, they wanted to be consulted about decisions affecting their children. As one parent stated:

The times I've felt most valued was to have workers who called me before they did something and said, 'What do you think of this?'

Resource Support

This type of support was another typical category (seven groups) and included the need for more medical, educational, and counselling services for foster children. Some parents felt that they had to fight constantly for everything needed by their foster child, especially for children with special needs.

These are very damaged children and I have had to fight every single step of the way to get them therapy and educational support.

This category also included needing more amenities required by children (clothing, recreational equipment), as well as better information about the court process and their child in general:

I think sometimes they have nowhere else for this child to go. So, they don't want to give out too much information because then you won't take the child.

Crisis Intervention

Foster parents (seven groups) clearly indicated a need for immediate response by workers to crisis situations with their foster children, as well as needing support from workers after hours, a typical category. This need was particularly important for parents who had more difficult children in their homes:

When the first violent episode occurred, I couldn't sleep. I phoned three different people. One person called me back in the morning. I was so upset. I shouldn't have been alone. They should have been there to support me.

Monetary Compensation

Although parents in four groups were satisfied with the current levels of compensation, foster parents in five groups believed that they required additional funds to care for foster children. Specifically, they felt that rates for clothing and school activities were outdated:

Their per diem for each child, plus their clothing allowance, plus their allowance that they get for pocket money, I think that should be changed. I mean, where do they get these prices from?

Respite and Relief

Foster parents *typically* responded that respite from foster childcare was required to ensure positive functioning of their biological families.

It's so important for balance. If your own kid's mental health demands that you get respite, you must do it. Our number one priority still has to be our original family. There are times when they [biological children] need that separation.

However, they reported that relief was difficult to obtain and foster parents would burn each other out by using each other for respite. Some parents suggested that 'in-home' support, with another caregiver present, would be particularly helpful with special needs children.

Training

Although 8 of the 9 focus groups *typically* thought that the training they received to be foster parents was excellent, they also had many suggestions for improvement in training. Specifically, although there was an awareness that no amount of training would have prepared them adequately, foster parents wanted more realistic and specialized training that was geared to the specific needs of children (e.g. autism, abuse):

It has to be maybe individualized sometimes. If you have a special treatment child with a certain condition, would you have individualized training?

One theme that came through strongly was the need for foster parents to support one another. In this way, foster parents could share their common experiences and help new foster parents who were struggling. Thus, they suggested that foster parents be part of the training provided by the agency:

Foster parents should be involved in it [training], instead of just social workers who aren't dealing with the kids. We need to know from someone who's actually going through it instead of just what's in the book.

Throughout the discussion of strengths and deficits in support, although parents discussed many things that they would like to see changed, some parents expressed an understanding of the stresses on social workers:

The social worker has so many cases. I think everybody's stretched in this agency.

Retention of Foster Parents

Not surprisingly, when foster parents were asked to discuss methods that could improve retention of foster parents, they listed many of the same categories that they perceived as being deficits in current support. Typical categories included: Provide Emotional Support, Improve Relationships and Communication with Workers, Give Respect and Recognition, Provide Accurate Information about Child, Introduce New Parents to Role Gradually, and Have Foster Parents Support Each Other.

Foster parents thought that retention would be improved if they received more Emotional Support such as workers checking in regularly to see how things were going in the home, giving help when it was requested, and helping parents deal with their feelings of loss when a child was removed from their home:

They think that it's easy for us to let these children go. It's still hard. I cried and cried.

They thought that Introducing New Parents to the Role Gradually by having them start as a provisional home (providing a kinship placement) might prevent parents from feeling so overwhelmed. They also suggested that new parents not be given the most difficult cases:

They are overloading new, young foster parents with some of the most difficult cases, and then when they fail, there isn't the support.

In addition, they thought that having a better system of Foster Parents Supporting Each Other would aid in retention:

If we had a buddy system that would be better. Then you could call your buddy instead of talking to your neighbor or talking to a friend.

Others suggested a support group or coffee club that met regularly, as well as partnering two foster homes:

I wonder if they did something like partnered fostering. If you had foster parents who were the consistent parents and your weekend homes were stabilized. It would also be another source that the child sees as being a support in their life. They have two sets of families that are willing to consistently provide for them.

In summary, these foster parents were motivated by intrinsic reasons of wanting to help children in need, have children in their homes, and benefit their biological children. Foster parents felt supported in their role when they received emotional support from workers, felt respected for their opinions and abilities, had good communication and trust with their workers, and received crisis intervention when needed. They believed that retention of foster parents could be improved by all of these supports, as well as by providing accurate information about children in their care, introducing foster parents to their role more gradually, and encouraging foster parents to support each other in structured ways. Anecdotally, foster parents who participated in the focus groups appeared to appreciate being able to vent their frustrations and share their joys about fostering with other parents and with the researchers. They expressed

hope that their information could make helpful changes in how foster parents were supported by the agency.

DISCUSSION

One of the goals of the current study was to determine whether previous research is applicable to Canadian foster parents. The results of this study confirm many of the findings about foster parent motivation and retention found in previous qualitative studies. It is important to validate previous qualitative research because it increases one's confidence in the findings being a more representative description of the phenomenon under examination. Two strengths of the current study were its use of focus groups instead of individual interviews and inclusion of participants from a wide geographic area, rather than from only one county. The results also suggest some subtle differences from other studies, which will be discussed below.

Congruent with previous research (e.g. Denby et al., 1999; Isomaki, 2002), foster parents were motivated by intrinsic, altruistic values of wanting to make a difference in children's lives because of the love and commitment that they felt for children. These themes were close to the most frequent themes found by Buehler et al. (2003) for perceived rewards of fostering in their qualitative study with 22 foster parents. Also, similar to Kirton (2001) and Triseliotis et al. (2000), monetary compensation to foster parents (a possible extrinsic motivator) was not an important motivator, although parents wanted their foster children to have enough money for clothes and activities to help them fit in with other children.

This information is very important for child welfare agencies that want to attract and retain foster parents. These foster parents were people who viewed their strengths as parents as being essential to who they were as people. It is important to note that some of these parents volunteered for fostering when their own children had grown and left home. This group of more 'experienced' parents may be underutilized as foster parents and could be more directly recruited to continue their parenting through becoming foster parents (Leschied et al., 2004).

It is equally important to discover that intrinsic motivators were so much more prevalent for these foster parents than were extrinsic motivators. This finding is congruent with motivation theory (Ambrose and Kulik, 1999), which posits that intrinsic motivators are a more potent source of job satisfaction. Thus, it may be more helpful for foster care agencies to emphasize in their recruiting efforts the internal satisfaction that can come from 'making a small change in a child's life'. As another parent said:

I do it for the smiles. It's worth every bit of it.

In contrast with previous research, these parents were not as motivated to foster by religious affiliation (Gillis-Arnold et al., 1998). This may be one difference between some sections of the USA where religious affiliation is stronger relative to Canada, and thus a motivator for some people to foster. For example, over 25% of Americans, but only 13% of Canadians, identify as fundamentalist Christian (Neill, 2005).

One of the best ways to retain people in the demanding role of foster parent is to provide them with sufficient support. Similar to previous research (e.g. Brown and Calder, 2000; Hudson and Levasseur, 2002; Rhodes et al., 2003), these foster parents highlighted the importance of more interpersonal supports from agency workers of emotional support, open communication, responsiveness, and recognition for their opinions, as well as being considered to be part of the childcare team. At the same time, they also expressed a need for more extrinsic supports of specialized training and occasional respite (relief) from fostering.

One of the contributions from this part of the data was the breadth of detail that the focus groups provided. Because they were asked to discuss both the strengths and deficits of the support they received, there was the opportunity for parents who were not feeling supported to hear from parents who were experiencing good support from workers. This process was helpful in that it encouraged parents to consider other examples from the multiple workers they had dealt with over the years and added to the complexity of the data.

This Canadian sample was very similar to other samples of foster parents from the USA and Britain in the types of support that they reported needing to fulfill their job adequately and to experience job satisfaction. In fact, these parents were asking for qualities from management that most people expect in their workplaces. However, providing these kinds of support requires that fostering agencies dedicate enough financial resources so that their workers have time to provide these supports to foster parents. Foster parents are more likely to be willing to handle more frustration in dealing with difficult children if they feel integrated as part of the child welfare team. Having more say in their foster child's life and being involved in training of new foster parents could also contribute to foster parents feeling more respected by workers. Foster parents want to be recognized for the challenging work that they perform with children every day. As one parent stated, 'they forget that we have the kids 24/7'.

These foster parents articulated that providing enough support, in the many forms previously discussed, was essential for retention. This finding is consistent with results from survey research (e.g. Hudson and Lavasseur, 2002; Rhodes et al., 2001, 2003). However, the focus group discussions provided more detail about the types of support needed and a clear sense of what was most important to them. For these foster parents an open and honest relationship with an agency worker who respected their opinions was emphasized in every focus group. Having this type of support made it more possible for them to deal with the frustrations of the job, such as dealing with difficult children and

agency red tape. In addition, they recognized that all of the support that they wanted could not come from agency workers and that foster parents needed to support each other in a variety of ways as well. Some of the counties had more of these types of support in place (e.g. support groups that met regularly) than did other counties, which may have contributed to their role satisfaction. It could be helpful for agencies to encourage more formally a variety of supports that are led by foster parents themselves.

Although it may seem obvious that introducing foster parents to the role gradually would help with retention, the reality of the current shortage of foster parents in Canada means that new parents are too often given too many difficult children too quickly because there is nowhere else for the agency to place these children. However, fostering agencies do not help themselves or their children if they burn out new, or even experienced, foster parents.

In conclusion, finding few differences in results between these Canadian foster parents and research studies from the USA and Britain suggests that many aspects of foster parenting may cut across system and cultural differences. Thus, there may be a core set of motivators and supports that are needed for the role of foster parent, at least in western, industrialized countries. For this group of foster parents, retention involved feeling motivated to foster by intrinsic motivators (wanting to help children in need) as well as being supported by fostering agencies (emotional and resource support, crisis intervention). These foster parents felt rewarded by the impact that they saw themselves making in their foster children's lives and felt frustrated by a lack of helpful backup from their agencies. The challenge for fostering agencies is to find creative ways of maximizing the internal rewards of fostering, while minimizing deficits in support at a time when resources are often stretched to their limits.

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