

AN EXPLORATION OF FOSTER PARENTS' CONTINUING
EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS, EXPERIENCES, AND
PERCEPTIONS

Abstract

Continuing education and ongoing training may be a tool for motivating and retaining foster parents. Foster parents from the same agency were interviewed regarding their perceptions of their continuing education experiences. These parents all felt that more specific trainings regarding the specific issues with their foster children would be beneficial.

Problem Statement

Effectively handling the needs of children in foster care has historically been, and will continue to be, a challenging issue (Barth, 2004). Recruiting and then maintaining foster homes and foster parents are key issues in helping to provide a stable situation for children placed in foster care. The high dropout rate of foster parents has long been a concern to the child welfare system (Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001), and researching and addressing the reasons why foster parents quit or stop accepting children can begin to improve the retention rates of these very important front line providers. This research was designed to explore foster parents' perceptions and feelings regarding their post-licensing continuing education training. The ultimate importance of this research lies in the fact that more foster parents are needed to handle the immense caseload of children currently in the foster care system (MacGregor, 2006), and the post licensing continuing education may be an integral part of this support and encouragement. Each parent that can be supported and encouraged to continue fostering provides more children with an opportunity to be placed in a stable, long-term setting.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of three foster parent households, all in the same foster care agency located in southeast Florida, regarding their post-licensing continuing education requirements, experiences, and perceptions. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do foster parents describe their post-licensing continuing education experiences?

2. What are foster parents' perceptions regarding the value of their post-licensing continuing education trainings?
3. What impact do foster parents feel their post licensing continuing education is having on their motivation and ability to continue fostering?

Review of Related Literature

In America, there are over 400,000 children in the foster care system (Child Trends, 2011). Foster care parents are considered the front-line service providers (Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001), and agencies rely on these foster homes to alleviate the problems of children in their care. Barth (2004) reports that the training for these foster parents is becoming more ambitious and more effective. In Florida, a thirty- hour class entitled MAPP, Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting, is required prior to licensing, and 12 hours of continuing education are required annually after licensing. This training given to parents after they begin the fostering task is also vitally important (Denby, Rindfleisch, Bean, 1999; Herzog, van Pagee, & Pasztor, 2010; Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001).

Even with these 12 hours of annual continuing training, less than one-third of foster parents reported having enough information about the legal aspects of foster care; about working with a child of a different race, or about working with birth families (Buehler, Rhodes, & Orme, 2006). Without an individualized assessment of the specific needs of each foster home, specific training does not take place. This exploration of the post-licensing continuing education training from the perspectives of the foster parents

may shed some light on the value and the impact that the current training is having on the confidence and satisfaction of foster parents.

Methods

Participants

The participants were all foster parents who were licensed through the same agency in southeast Florida. The foster parents were contacted by an employee at the agency and asked if they would consider participating in this study. The contact information was then passed on to the researcher, and each household was contacted to confirm their willingness and availability to participate. Foster parents from three households were chosen.

After contacting a parent from each household, a time was scheduled to collect some demographic data as well as conduct an interview regarding their experiences with their post-licensing continuing education. The researcher utilized interview questions developed to gather information specific to the project research questions. The interview as a whole was conducted as an “extended conversation” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p.95). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The interviews were then transcribed and coded, looking for common themes and patterns.

Findings and Implications

There is not much current research available regarding the training and continuing education for foster parents. The findings from exploring foster parents’ experiences and perceptions of their post licensing continuing education can prove valuable for foster care

agencies when they are designing their post licensing educational opportunities. These respondents spoke about wanting specific topics addressed rather than broad “discussions.” While these respondents felt that a “requirement” for specific training based on their foster child’s situation may feel like a burden, they all agreed that “suggestions” would be helpful to them while choosing classes to attend.

It was surprising to this researcher that none of the respondents felt that their continuing education affected their motivation or ability to continue fostering. This may be a good sign for the agency involved. Apparently, these foster parents, who have many years of collective experience, are finding that motivation and ability through a different means. This could lead to further research regarding motivations for foster parents with a comparison of the original motivations of foster parents who are now long term and the original motivations of foster parents who have ceased fostering. An exploration of the continuing education perceptions from different agencies would also be useful to see how the findings compare to the agency utilized in this study. This researcher would also like to see the effect of a study that implements suggestions for training ideas that focus on the specific needs or situation of a child in that home. Agencies could easily incorporate that into an early caseworker visit when a child is newly placed in a home. The goal is for this study is to ultimately add something that encourages foster parent and adds to the stability of a foster child.

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