FOSTER PARENT STRENGTHS

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Abstract

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Trends from across the nation are that there is a shortage of foster parents for the number of children in foster care. In a rural northern California county, it is typically a struggle to find a place for children removed from their homes to be placed by the Child Welfare agency, even for an overnight situation. Many times, the family does not have relatives or close friends that are able to take children, and become approved to do so in a timely, emergent manner.

This master’s project examines how foster parents identify their strengths so that a rural northern county in California can start recruiting and retaining foster parents for their strengths. Recruitment is often a challenge, but retaining good, competent foster parents is an essential way to keep children safe and free from harm. Many times, people want to become foster parents to adopt children, and once they have adopted, are no longer foster parents. Overcoming this obstacle with recruitment efforts focused on strengths of existing foster parents will enhance overall retention within the system.
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Introduction

On July 1st, 2015, there were 362 children in foster care in the rural, northern California County this paper will be discussing (Webster, Armijo, Lee, Dawson, Magruder, Exel, Cuccaro-Alamin, Putnam-Hornstein, King, Rezvani, Wagstaff, Sandoval, Yee, Xiong, Benton, Hoerl & Romero, 2015). The county will be called Golden County throughout the paper to maintain confidentiality of the survey responders. Of these 362 children, only 73 (20.1%) were placed in licensed non-relative foster care (Webster, et al., 2015). This is due to the lack of licensed foster homes within the county. With only 89 homes total in Golden County in October 2015 (Rix, 2015), there are not enough foster homes to care for the children that need them because the number of children needing out-of-home care are increasing. On July 1st, 2010, Golden County had 203 children in foster care (Webster, et al., 2015). This is a sharp spike in the number of children in out-of-home placement in 2015 for the previous five years (See Figure 1). For the last 10 years, the chart below demonstrates the number of children in foster care at the highest level in 2015.
Figure 1: Golden County Children in Foster Care

With this dramatic increase in out-of-home placements in Golden County, the numbers of foster homes needed to meet the rising demand leaves a wide gap. This has not been the case. Foster homes are hard to come by and although the data shows that there are more foster homes than ever in Golden County, there are not enough to take sibling placements, older children and teens or children with difficult behaviors.

According to a policy report by County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA) and Legal Advocate for Permanent Parenting (LAPP) (2007), after kinship care, licensed foster families are the most preferential type of placement in foster care, yet a significant shortage in those types of home remains. With the lack of licensed homes accepting hard-to-place children, this also suggests reasons why there is an increase in out-of-county and group home placements in Golden County. Orme and Combs-Orme (2014) suggest that foster parenting is unique in ways that require dealing
with children with serious mental or behavioral issues and complex family relationships. This can overwhelm foster parents who parent these children on a 24-hour basis in their home. Many children in foster care have heightened behavioral, emotional, or medical care needs that makes caring for these children more challenging (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007). While these challenges make up the foster parent’s job, difficult behavior in a foster child is likely to weaken motivation to continue fostering (Deby, Rindleisch, & Bean, 1999).

An informal survey of California counties resulted in 77% of California counties reporting a decrease in the number of available foster family homes in the last 10 years, with a loss average of 30 percent (CWDA & LAPP, 2007). This decrease in the number of available foster homes can be attributed to many challenges. These challenges range from dissatisfaction, lack of communication, and few supports (Denby, Rindleisch, & Bean, 1999). Down and James (2006) state the failure rate for first time foster parents is less than six months, when many of the foster children are in the system for years.

It is suggested from other studies that inadequate supports and little to no cooperation from agencies may impede a foster caregiver’s sense of competency which leads to burn-out of foster parents (Cooley & Petren, 2011). With many concerns around recruiting and retaining foster parents in the nation, one survey stated that “many foster parents decide to quit fostering because of perceived deficits in support for themselves and their foster children,” (MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006, p. 353). In a Wisconsin study about foster parent supports and needs, one issue that needed improvement in the child welfare system was that foster parents want to be valued and
respected as part of the child’s team (State of Wisconsin, 2006). Many times, foster parents are not communicated with in regards to the child’s case plan with the agency and this leads to tension and no satisfaction with their role as a foster parent.

Motivation to become a foster parent is spread widely and has some unique looking circumstances for each foster family. Rodger, Cummings, and Leschied (2006) did a study on this and some of the themes for becoming a foster parent included well-meaning parents thinking they are taking a placement to keep children from future harm; although, most look at altruistic and internal motivations by each foster parent. The study further suggests that motivation internally fostered, like responsibility to the larger society or knowing that harm could come to a child if they stayed with their biological families, have a greater chance of staying with a fostering job (Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006). Denby, Rindleisch, & Bean (1999) further suggests that giving special attention to foster parents increases the probability of foster parents continuing with their jobs. When foster parents are contented with their agency relationships there is usually sharing of information, respect, and positive regard coming from the agency (Denby, Rindleisch, & Bean, 1999). Foster parents appreciate the social worker’s approval for what they are doing or trying to do with the foster children in their care (Denby, Rindleisch, & Bean, 1999).

A study by Coolie, Farineau, and Mullins (2015) indicates that foster parents that had children with less disruptive behaviors had a link to parental resilience and less challenges to foster parenting as a whole. It was also reported in this study that foster
parents identified that the social supports around foster parenting did not protect against the challenges of fostering as a whole (Coolie, Farineau, & Mullins, 2015).

Many studies reflected that foster parent training was lacking in many respects (Denby, Rindleisch, & Bean, 1999; State of Wisconsin, 2006; Cooley & Petren, 2011). Foster parent training should include these 12 domains (Buehler, Rhodes, Orme, & Cuddeback, 2006):

- Providing a safe and secure environment
- Providing a nurturing environment
- Promoting educational attainment and success
- Meeting physical and mental healthcare needs
- Promoting social and emotional development
- Supporting diversity and children’s cultural needs
- Supporting permanency planning
- Managing ambiguity and loss for the foster child and family
- Growing as a foster parent
- Managing the demands of fostering on personal and familial well-being
- Supporting relationships between children and their families
- Working as a team member

Buehler, Rhodes, Orme, and Cuddeback (2006) expand on this by saying that more is expected from foster parents than biological parents and competency of foster parents
must be at a higher bar. Foster parents think that their competency could be enhanced by more effective trainings (Cooley & Petren, 2011).

In order to fully categorize with strengths-based research, in this author’s study, we will be looking at another view of foster parents by having them identify their strengths. Concentrating on Golden County’s data and the licensed foster parents in Golden County will enable me to survey the 86 possible foster parents as participants in this study.

Literature Review

Very few studies in this review of the literature looked at foster parent strengths. For the study in this thesis, strengths of foster parents are defined as personal attributes or characteristics that one holds that create a good foster parent. Foster parents create continuity and stability for children in foster care (Odell, 2008). In a study of Aboriginal foster parents in Canada, it is said that foster parents attribute their skills and abilities to strengths that are important in foster parenting (Ivoanova & Brown, 2011). Of these skills and abilities, making connections with children, not holding grudges, being forgiving, perseverance, organization, being flexible and open minded, taking on advocacy roles, teaching experience, ability to communicate, and having problem solving skills are the strengths that foster parents need (Ivoanova & Brown, 2011). Empathy, tolerance, competence at managing ambiguity, and handling loss are cited as important foster parent strengths that foster nurturing parent-child relationships (Buehler, Rhodes, Orme, & Cuddeback, 2006). Patience and resilience were the most common life lessons brought up
by foster parents in a study of perceptions of foster parent competency (Cooley & Petren, 2011). Kindness, understanding acceptance, empathy, perseverance, commitment, consistency, and discipline were common themes among Aboriginal foster parents (Ivoanova & Brown, 2011).

In a study of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual foster parents, strengths that were noted are toleration of differences and distinctive qualities of foster parents and being open and honest with foster children (Downs & James, 2006). Both men and women were sampled in that study and women were more 26.7% more likely to have close relationships with the child’s birth family (Down & James, 2006). The Buehler, Rhodes, Orme and Cuddeback study of 2006, states that “for children whose permanency goal is to reunite with birth parents, foster parents must be able to work or support the work with birth parents and other members of a child’s birth family” (p. 540).
Methods

This student researcher attended two monthly foster parent meetings in Golden County in the month of November. Attendance was low since the holidays were approaching. The study was presented by this author and the management of Golden County Child Welfare Services. It was stated that the study was supported by the agency and the foster parents seemed to be interested and excited about the differing lens of the study.

From a list of active foster parents from Golden County, 73 surveys and informed consents were sent out on January 7th, 2016 with self-addressed stamped envelopes for return. See survey questions in the Appendix. The mailing was completed by this author and included gathering of supplies and mailing of the surveys. There were no difficulties in getting the surveys mailed. After three weeks, there was a follow up telephone call or text message (if mobile phone was listed) to remind foster parents of their participation.

Thirteen surveys were received back from foster parents including one that was not returned with a signed informed consent (N=12). This one will not be tabulated, nor any of the answers included in the themes below.

Five weeks from the surveys being sent, the data was compiled and analyzed. Each question and answer was listed in an Excel spreadsheet for easy coding. The quantitative questions were descriptively analyzed and the qualitative questions are analyzed using the general inductive approach by coding and choosing themes.
Analysis of the themes were broken out into questions that were requested by Golden County for the survey and questions that were tied to the methodology of finding out the strengths of foster parents. Themes were coded on the spreadsheet with corresponding numbers to each theme and then each theme was ranked by the number of occurrences in the data per question. The results of the analysis are below.
Results

The results of the survey varied greatly from participant to participant with many questions left unanswered, or answered in a different context than the question asked. It was challenging to analyze data that was not complete.

Of the 12 surveys received and coded (N=12), 100% were completed by females. Of these women, 41.6% were between the ages of 26 to 35 years old, 41.6% were between the ages of 36 to 45 years old, while the remaining were between 46 to 55 years old. Although 58.3% of these women had household incomes of $51,000 to $100,000, 33.3% had household incomes of $25,000 to $50,000. Of the 12 surveys, 91.6% categorized themselves as a foster parent to foster/adopt home, which means they want to adopt the foster children in their home.

When asked about what their three greatest strengths, the most common answer was love or loving children. Four participants described past experience a greatest strength, three described patience, and three described working with the foster child’s biological family as a greatest strength. One participant described one of their three greatest strengths as, “keeping relationships with bio family” (S9, 2016).

Most of respondents stated that they participate in family reunification when a child is placed in their home. Family reunification is when a child is removed from their birth family’s home and placed in foster care. Foster care can include placement with a relative, placement in a licensed foster home or placement with an approved caregiver that has an existing relationship with the birth family. Participants stated in the survey
that they needed to feel safe to participate in family reunification. One participant stated, “we have planned and supervised visits for children including bowling, park activities, games, hot cocoa, etc. Depends on bio family’s willingness to be appropriate and respectful” (S9, 2016). From the wide variety of answers to this question, some respondents did not feel that they had the chance to participate in the process. The highest participants rated themselves was a three on a scale from one to five regarding their contribution to helping with family reunification. One respondent described herself as a, “2-3 to be honest unless the parents are willing to change, it is not up to me as a foster parent” (S12, 2016).
Discussion

Findings from the survey demonstrate that foster parents want to be seen as loving individuals that nurture families. For the most part, respondents did not see themselves as contributors to families reunifying and only wanted to do so when they felt respected by the biological family and that the biological families were changing to become better parents. Past experience related to parenting was identified as being essential to becoming a good foster parent, such as raising biological children or education. Similarities between this study and the study done by Buehler, Rhodes, Orme and Cuddeback (2006) are that foster parents were willing to try to work with birth families of their foster children to support Family Reunification efforts.

Limitations of this study were that the study did not address challenges to retaining foster parents or challenges relating to being a foster parent. Other limitations were that this study did not address examining supports that foster parents would like to be in place to help with retaining foster parents. Additionally, this survey was completed by mail, a format that did not provide a place for follow-up questions to be asked to clarify statements. One survey respondent stated, “we are considering no longer continuing as foster parents” (S2, 2016). This statement will be forwarded to Golden County to look at retention strategies; however, I wish I could have asked this individual why.
Recommendations

Based on the findings from the survey, it is recommended that Golden County continue efforts already started to recruit and retain foster parents. In addition, institute new strategies to include foster parents in case specific details that they are not usually privy to during Family Team Meetings or conversations with the social worker. For example, letting the foster parents know that the biological parents are working on their case plan or not, and staffing safety concerns of the children with the foster parents.

Including a foster parent support liaison position between the foster parent and the social worker has been adopted by Golden County, but that position must be a recruiter, foster parent manager, and mentor in one, which would help promote the rapport between foster parents, social workers, and biological families. The county should consider further study about the potential for foster parents becoming a true working partner in the case by including them in planning visitation, working toward school success with children, working with and connecting biological families between visits, and becoming a support to the overwhelmed social workers because many participants in this study either did not know about or were not invited to case specific meetings for the child. Changing the “job description” of the foster parents by allowing or including foster parents as partners in the case process will have to include a culture shift in the way that Child Welfare Services now operates. This culture shift will take time, but as was found in this study the resources needed to make the shift could be identified by foster parents. Foster parents want to participate and be involved with all aspects of the child’s life, but are continually
not communicated with in a way that allows for joint management of a child’s case as a dependent of the court. In order to continue and expand on this endeavor, Golden County will need more clarification than what was received by this survey and could, potentially be a continuing project by a graduate student.

In addition, another future study that is recommended to a future master’s student for Golden County is to examine relationships between foster parents and biological families. During this study, it was noted that several foster parents were hesitant, if not against, contact with biological parents of their foster children. A study regarding how this relationship, or lack thereof, impacts the reunification process could be beneficial to Golden County in their recruitment efforts.

Recruiting foster parents that are open-minded, child-centered, and have the support of the liaison, mentioned above, likely could thrive in the bureaucratic nature of governmental work. This liaison would need to work closely in alignment with social workers, passing on information at critical times. The load for one liaison would be great having upwards of 89 foster homes in the county. A recommendation for Golden County is to support at least three of these classifications to encourage active recruitment and mentoring of foster parents.

Another recommendation would be to recruit foster parents that hold past experience at parenting. They would need either their own biological children, some education about child development or psychology, or work experience with children. This articulated past experience, as seen by several respondents of this survey has shown that maintaining effective foster parents is essentially communication, support and past
experience and was determined to be a strength in this survey by respondents as seen above.
References


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Appendix A: Golden County Foster Parent Survey

1. What is your age? □ 18-25  □ 26-35  □ 36-45  □ 46-55  □ 56-65 □ 66+

2. What is your income? □ Under $25,000  □ $25,000-$50,000  □ $51,000-$100,000  □ $101,000+

3. What is your gender identity? □ Male  □ Female  □ Transgendered  □ Other

4. What type of placements situations do you prefer?
   □ Foster  □ Fost/Adopt  □ Emergency Only  □ Infants  □ Children (3-11)  □ Teens

5. Please name three of your greatest strengths/attributes as a foster parent.
  ________________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________________

6. Name three activities you do for families (parents, children and/or relatives) during family reunification with a foster child?
  ________________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________________
7. Do you transport for visitation?

8. Do you transport the child(ren) to their school of origin (school before placement with you)?

9. Do you participate in school meetings?

   □ IEPs □ 504 Plans □ Parent Teacher Conferences

10. Do you participate in Team Meetings? If so, are biological families included?

11. On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being Little Help and five being As Involved As Possible: how do you rate yourself as to helping the parents with reunification?

12. On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being Little Integration and 5 being Total Integration: how do you incorporate the biological family into your foster child’s life? (Name three examples)
13. What in your life helps you continue this work with the DHHS?

__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________