

Foster Family Characteristics and Behavioral and Emotional Problems of Foster Children: Practice Implications for Child Welfare, Family Life Education, and Marriage and Family Therapy

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Abstract:

Orme and Buehler's article, "Foster Family Characteristics and Behavioral and Emotional Problems of Foster Children: A Narrative Review," is an important and timely contribution to the child welfare literature. Foster care placement has been increasing for almost 2 decades, and the new millennium finds a record number of children in care. Recent federal legislation has raised concerns among child welfare professionals that this trend will continue and perhaps even become more serious. Thus, the authors' synthesis of research on families in general, and foster families in particular, may be even more important in the future.

Article:

In 1997, Congress passed the [Adoption and Safe Families Act \(ASFA; 1997\)](#). [Gelles \(1998\)](#) described this legislation as "the most significant change in federal child welfare and child protection policy in nearly 20 years." Among its provisions, this legislation requires that agencies file a termination of parental rights petition when (a) children have been in foster care for 15 of the past 22 months, unless limited exceptions are met; (b) a court has determined that an infant has been abandoned; or (c) parents have attempted to murder or have committed voluntary manslaughter of one of their children or has committed felony assault that has resulted in serious bodily injury to one of their children.

What are the implications of this legislation? Many child welfare professionals strongly believe that this law will result in a dramatic increase in the number of foster children who are freed for adoption by termination of parental rights. Halpern (1998) stated that passage of ASFA indicated that "Congress believes adoption is the new panacea for the problems of foster care" (as quoted in [McGowan & Walsh, 2000](#)). For many children, however, especially some older and special needs children, adoption will not be a realistic or appropriate option, and they will remain in state custody until they turn 18 and age out of foster care.

In a preliminary study of the effects of ASFA, [Fagnoni \(1999\)](#) reported that some states have already begun to make "more timely permanent decisions ... [and to meet] mandated time frames to begin the process of terminating parental rights for some children who were already in foster care when ASFA was enacted." In more than one third of cases reviewed in states that reported data for this study, proceedings to terminate parental rights were initiated. In 60% of cases, however, agencies determined that it was not appropriate for children to be adopted. Thus, there will continue to be a sizable population of children in foster care.

With this new legislation as the background, I will attempt to draw out implications for practice from the excellent review by Orme and Buehler, focusing on two primary areas of practice with families and children who are involved with the child welfare system: screening, selection, and training of foster parents and foster care placement; monitoring; and troubleshooting. The practitioners to whom this article is directed include child welfare staff and marriage and family therapists and family life educators who may work with foster families,

adoptive families, or both. There are also some implications for education and training programs that prepare these professionals for practice.

Screening, selection, and training of foster parents

Orme and Buehler have identified several areas in which research indicates the need for attention to the screening, selection, and training of foster parents: parenting behavior, home environment, and family and marital functioning. Research in the other three areas that the authors investigated (demographics, parental mental health, and social support) is so scarce as to be of little direct value to the practitioner. Rather, the authors rightly acknowledge the need for more research specific to foster families in these areas.

Screening usually refers to initial assessment of a foster parent's application, with an eye toward evaluating a prospective foster parent's suitability for the job and identifying any potential threats to the health and safety of children who may be placed in their care. Selection and training often are treated as a joint collaborative process between the agency and the prospective foster parents. For instance, many states use the Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP) program, which provides prospective foster parents with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to be effective and satisfied as foster parents. In addition, MAPP emphasizes (a) the rights and obligations of foster parents; (b) shared decision making among foster parents, agency staff, and birth parents; and (c) mutual selection of the foster parents by the agency and the agency by the foster parents ([Lee & Holland, 1991](#)).

Parenting behavior

Orme and Buehler cited research on the general population indicating that children's social and emotional adjustment are associated with such specific parenting behaviors as higher levels of parental acceptance and monitoring and lower levels of harsh discipline, intraparental inconsistency, intrusive psychological control, and parent-child conflict. Nonetheless, the limited studies available on parenting among foster parents seem to indicate a tendency for these parents to be more likely to physically punish children and to have more negative attitudes toward childrearing than do nonfoster parents. Other studies indicate that about 18% of foster children are in at-risk homes and "that about 15% of foster parents manifest potentially poor or troubled parenting" (Orme & Buehler, p. 7). With the high rates of emotional and social problems that foster children bring into care, even foster parents who normally demonstrate positive parenting will likely be challenged by the behaviors of their foster children. Orme and Buehler did not cite studies on the prevalence of at-risk parenting behavior in biological two-parent, single-parent, or stepparent families, thus it is impossible to know if the prevalence of risk for foster children due to poor foster parenting is any higher than the risk to children in the general population.

Given the importance of parenting to the social and emotional health of foster children, parenting styles, beliefs, and behaviors should be a central focus of the screening, selection, and training process. There is little reference in the literature to use of standardized, valid, and reliable instruments to assess parenting behavior as an integral part of the screening or selection process. Although it is unclear why this is true, possible explanations include lack of understanding of the importance of positive parenting for the social and emotional health of the child, lack of familiarity with available instruments among child welfare staff, lack of competence to administer and interpret such tools, and the lack of federal or state requirements that this factor be considered in a rigorous way when conducting foster parent assessments. For child welfare staff to incorporate the findings of Orme and Buehler's article into their practice, these potential barriers will have to be assessed and addressed. For instance, in-service training programs and academic programs whose goal is to educate helping professionals to address child welfare issues could incorporate content on the use of such standardized instruments and assessment procedures into their curricula.

There is also a role for foster parent training to play in relation to parenting behaviors, and many of the programs currently used already incorporate material on parenting ([Lee & Holland, 1991](#)). Orme and Buehler cited research indicating that preparation and training can have a positive impact on foster parents' parenting behaviors, although, in their study, Lee and Holland found no difference between MAPP-trained and nontrained

foster parents on developmental expectations, value placed on physical punishment, parent-child roles, and empathy toward child's needs. Thus, whereas foster parent training programs may address the issue of parenting behavior, the impact of such programs is unclear.

Child welfare staff and family life educators that conduct these foster parent training programs should review their curricula to be sure that the important elements identified by Orme and Buehler are addressed. In addition, practitioners can contribute to their own understanding, and that of the field, of how to better prepare foster parents for the challenges of parenting foster children by evaluating their programs using rigorous designs and valid and reliable instruments. Education and training programs must equip new professionals with the knowledge and skills needed to make such curriculum assessments and conduct such program evaluations.

Home environment

In the general population, children who live in safe and stimulating environments seem to demonstrate fewer social and behavioral problems than do those who live in inadequate environments. The same is probably true for foster children, although there is little research in this area. Fortunately, research indicates that the home environment does not appear to be a significant concern for most foster children, perhaps because state licensing regulations specify safety, space, and other requirements. Nonetheless, one group of children appears to be more at risk for a poorer physical foster home environment: those in kinship care. It is unclear from Orme and Buehler's review whether the research they cited studied kinship homes that are state-licensed and thus subject to the same requirements as nonkinship homes. Also, it is unclear from the research cited whether the physical environments in kinship homes are of a significantly poorer quality to be of grave concern or whether they are simply less favorable than nonkinship homes. Research on socioemotional climate in foster homes has found a positive relationship between variety of stimulation and intellectual climate in the home and fewer socioemotional problems in the child. Nonetheless, there was no evidence cited regarding the extent to which social and emotional factors in the home may be a problem in foster homes.

This research on the physical and socioemotional home environment has implications for screening, selection, and training of foster parents. State licensing requirements should eliminate egregiously poor physical environments, and kinship homes should be subjected to these same requirements. Foster parent training programs also should address the issue of home environment so that all foster parents are aware of the importance of an adequate and stimulating environment for children. Special emphasis could be given to the importance of creating a positive socioemotional climate in the home, especially regarding creation of an intellectually stimulating environment. Prospective kinship caregivers might also benefit from required attendance in such training.

Family and marital functioning

High levels of family cohesion and low levels of family and marital conflict are associated with fewer child problems in the general population. Little is known about how these or other family and marital variables may affect foster children differentially. Orme and Buehler, however, cited one study indicating that 5% to 16% of foster families "seem to fall in a potentially problematic range" of family functioning and another study that found 35% of foster families rated as "less effective."

Because poor family and marital functioning can have adverse effects on children in the general population, there is no reason to suspect the effects on foster children would be any less. In fact, because of their conflictual and abusive histories, the effects may be worse for foster children. Thus, screening and selection for foster parents should incorporate standardized assessments in relation to family and marital functioning, as well as to parenting behaviors. Serious problems identified by such assessment may eliminate some prospective parents; for others with less serious family or marital problems, a referral for counseling may be made before a final selection or placement decision occurs.

Foster care placement, monitoring, and troubleshooting

Ideally, the foster care placement process involves careful matching of the child's needs and the foster parents' abilities to meet those needs. In reality, because of the shortage of foster parents nationwide, placements often must be made, especially in emergency situations, with more regard to the availability of foster parents than to achieving a good fit between foster home and child. Thus, the following comments may reflect what is a desirable or ideal practice, rather than that which is readily achievable.

The process of monitoring the foster care placement involves maintaining contact with the foster parents and the child to ensure that the child's needs are being met and that no problems that might result in a placement breakdown are left to fester. The documented link between multiple foster care placements and negative outcomes for children means that foster care workers must attempt everything possible to prevent placement disruptions. When such problems are identified and appropriate education or treatment is outside either the job responsibilities or the professional competence of the foster care worker, the foster parents may be referred for parent training, or any combination of the family, couple, or foster child may be referred for counseling. Thus, Orme and Buehler's research has implications not only for foster care workers, but also for family life educators who teach parenting courses and for marriage and family therapists who work with foster families and children. The areas of research that are particularly relevant for these practitioners are the fit between the child's temperament and parenting behaviors and foster family and marital functioning.

Fit between child's temperament and parenting

According to Lerner's "goodness of fit" hypothesis, congruence between child temperament and parenting style is an important factor in how well children and parents adjust to each other and get along within biological families. Although preliminary data support this hypothesis, the research is not definitive. Orme and Buehler noted that there is little research on the goodness of fit between child temperament and foster parents' parenting styles. Nonetheless, it is logical to assume that if this type of congruence is important in biological families, it may be even more important in foster families where parents and children do not have the necessary shared history and biological connection to hold them together. Such congruence may be especially true for placements involving special needs children, many of whom present serious physical, emotional, or developmental challenges for their caretakers.

The research cited in this article indicates that a thorough foster care placement assessment would involve evaluation of both child temperament and parenting behaviors. For example, child welfare staff should, whenever possible, gather data on the child's mood, sleep and eating rhythmicity, and activity levels. Foster parent characteristics (such as flexibility, mood, expectations of children's mood, sleep and eating rhythmicity, and activity levels) also should be assessed. Although this information may be gathered during the foster parent screening and selection process, it will be most useful to the foster care worker who is considering placement of a specific child in a specific home. Current child welfare practice involves assessment of foster parents' perceived abilities to care for various types of special needs children in an effort to assure children's needs are met and to minimize the possibility of disruption. Orme and Buehler's findings suggest that aspects of child temperament and foster parent characteristics and parenting styles should be incorporated in all child and foster parent assessments so the information is available for placement decisions. Because placements often are made in crisis situations and the most desirable fit between child and foster parents is not always possible, this fit should also be the subject of ongoing monitoring by foster care workers to identify potential problems early.

Family life educators who may have foster parents in their classes and marriage and family therapists who may be called on to work with foster families also need to be aware of these same goodness-of-fit issues. Foster parents may identify the child's temperament as a serious problem in the family, when, in fact, the problem may be the parents' lack of understanding or ability to deal with manifestations of the child's temperament. If parent educators and family therapists can educate foster parents on how to handle challenging aspects of a child's temperament, foster care placements may be less likely to break down.

Family and marital functioning

Foster care workers should be aware of potential signs of difficulties in family and marital functioning that can affect the well-being of foster children so they can monitor placements for potential problems. Foster care workers are generally not trained to deal directly with such issues, however, nor is it their job to do so. Thus, marriage and family therapists are better prepared to work with foster families to resolve such problems. Sometimes the family or marital issues will have little to do with the family's role as foster caregivers. In other cases, the presence of a foster child in the home may exacerbate already existing family and marital difficulties or may create problems that were not present before placement.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to delineate all the various areas in which marriage and family therapists must be knowledgeable to appropriately serve foster families and children, several areas warrant special attention. Family therapists need to understand the context, environment, and dynamics of foster families. Although most marriage and family therapists learn about family and marital development and dynamics in their professional training, little attention is paid to ways in which foster (or adoptive) families are similar to or different from biological families. Furthermore, therapists need to understand how families and marriages may be affected by the addition of a foster child; they should also understand strategies for helping families incorporate foster children with minimal discomfort. For instance, [Poland and Groze \(1993\)](#) described how foster care placement can affect biological children and offered some strategies to prepare children for the entry of a foster child into their home, as well as to counteract negative reactions when they occur. When problems have already arisen, therapists may need to draw on conflict resolution skills (especially when older children are involved) in collaboration with their family therapy skills.

Conclusion

Orme and Buehler have presented an important synthesis of research findings related to foster family characteristics and problems of foster children. Unfortunately, one of their major findings is that not nearly enough is known about this critical area. Not only have there been few studies, but many of those available do not have the methodological rigor required for practitioners to feel confident incorporating the findings into their practice. In the absence of an adequate body of knowledge regarding foster families and children, practitioners must rely on the more extensive body of knowledge about the mutually interactive effects of biological families and children. We cannot be sure that this knowledge is fully applicable to the foster care context, however. Thus, the implications set forth in this article are somewhat conservative, informed by the research that Orme and Buehler cited and by an attempt to logically extrapolate from research findings on biological families to practice with foster parents and children. With the increasing numbers of children in foster care, we cannot wait for the research to catch up with the need to recruit and select foster parents and to make placement decisions regarding vulnerable children. It is hoped that Orme and Buehler's work will stimulate an increased interest among researchers to address this serious knowledge gap so that, in the future, child welfare workers and others who work with foster families and children will have more solid empirical data on which to base their practice.

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