

## Kinship Foster Parents' Perceptions of Factors that Promote or Inhibit Successful Fostering

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### **Abstract:**

A better understanding of kinship foster families' perceptions of the familial factors and parenting beliefs that promote or inhibit successful fostering can inform child welfare practice and policy. To this end, and to extend previous research [Buehler, C., Cox, M. E., and Cuddeback, G. (2003). Foster parents' perceptions of factors that promote or inhibit successful fostering. *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice, 2*(1), 61-84.], semi-structured interviews were conducted with kinship foster parents to explore their perceptions with regard to the familial factors and parenting beliefs that promote or inhibit successful fostering. Nine kinship foster parents from 8 families were interviewed. The results of this study were compared to the results of the Buehler et al. [Buehler, C., Cox, M. E., and Cuddeback, G. (2003). Foster parents' perceptions of factors that promote or inhibit successful fostering. *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice, 2*(1), 61-84.] study on nonkinship foster parents.

Similar themes emerged from both groups, but kinship foster parents described more complex issues with their families- of-origin. Characteristics that promote successful fostering of kin include support of family, commitment to children, faith, good parenting abilities, church involvement, flexibility, and adequate resources. Characteristics that inhibit successful fostering of kin include strained relations with birth family, poor discipline strategies, inability to deal with "the system," lack of resources, and inability to deal with children's emotional, behavioral, physical problems. The findings suggest a need to focus on special training and support services for kinship foster parents, as well as assessments specific to kinship fostering.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the last decade or longer, kinship family foster care has challenged child welfare practice, policy, and research. Among the 2.9 million children who did not live with either parent in 2001, 1.4 million lived with grandparents and another 957,000 children lived with other relatives (Child Statistics, 2005). Although the body of research about kinship family foster care is growing, significant gaps in the literature limit our knowledge about this type of out-of-home care. These gaps constrain our ability to serve the vulnerable children placed in kinship care and those that care for them.

More specifically, little is known about the perceptions of kinship foster parents with regard to the familial and parental factors that promote or inhibit successful fostering, and how these perceptions compare with those of nonkinship foster parents. It is important to address this lack

of knowledge because child welfare agencies increasingly are relying on relatives to care for children who come into foster care (Schlonsky & Berrick, 2001). The perspectives of kinship foster parents need to be considered when assessing new kinship placements, developing modules for training, and planning for needed support services.

Because there is hardly any research about how these caregivers perceive their special role, practitioners only have “what works” with nonkinship foster care providers to guide them. As such, it is simply hit or miss in developing the necessary tools to guide their practice with this growing group of caregivers. For those reasons, the goal of this paper is to explore kinship foster parents' perceptions of familial factors and parental beliefs that promote or inhibit successful fostering and then compare their perceptions with nonkinship parents from a previous study (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003). This study, admittedly, is on the ground floor of trying to understand some basic similarities and differences between the way extended families parent and nonkinship foster parents carry out their foster parenting roles.

We will start with the basics. How does each group perceive its strengths and limitations? It is important to start here because once we have some answers, we can broaden the scope on a larger scale and be better able to inform child welfare agencies. Biological parents are increasingly relying on relatives to care for children who come into foster care. Since there is virtually no theory to guide the development of either policy, assessment, or training for these caregivers, our study attempts to put down the first of many bricks needed to understand how kinship fostering can be enhanced. We will start with what will be a long but necessary process by examining the similarities and differences in the way kinship and nonkinship foster parents see their familial factors and parenting beliefs contributing to successful fostering.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There is virtually no research about how kinship foster parents perceive the factors that promote and inhibit effective fostering. This is remarkable and sad because the number of children placed with relatives is on the rise and it is important to develop service strategies based on something more than guesswork. However, scholars and practitioners are not completely in the dark. There is some information on nonkinship foster parents' perceptions on the kinds of things that promote or inhibit successful fostering.

Buehler et al. (2003) conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 nonkinship foster parents to learn what they perceive to be the factors that promote or inhibit successful fostering. Their study found the most prevalent rewards for nonkinship foster parents were making a difference in children's lives, contributing to children's socioemotional growth, giving love and receiving love from children, and saving children from hardship. Their perceived stressors include dealing with foster children's emotional, behavioral, or physical problems, having to foster children of specific ages or being asked to foster too many children, issues of attachment and loss, perceived agency incompetence or inadequacy, dealing with the authority of the child welfare system, and dealing with birth parents.

Central factors that promote successful nonkinship fostering include having a deep concern or love for children, being guided by faith, being tolerant, being flexible, helping children deal with their feelings, being organized, having reduced other responsibilities to enable them to parent,

having clear structure, being consistent, being skillful with birth families, and having a cooperative marriage in married foster families. Factors that inhibit success include not having child-centered motives for fostering — like earning money for fostering, competing demands for their time and energy, not being supportive of the reunification plan, not being able to garner needed support, and not being able to communicate well under stress.

The information provided above about nonkinship foster parents is useful but limited. In the Buehler et al. (2003) study the perspectives of kinship foster parents are missing and this is a serious omission. Nonkinship foster parents' perceptions might not characterize those of kinship foster parents. Furthermore, the application of this information to training programs and the provision of support services to all foster families (i.e., kinship and nonkinship) might be narrow or misguided. The concern regarding the potential lack of applicability was based, to some extent, on research that describes some of the differences among kinship and nonkinship foster parents. This research is described below.

### *Characteristics of kinship foster parents*

There is ample research to allow an accurate demographic comparison between kinship and nonkinship foster parents. Compared with nonkinship foster parents, kinship foster parents are more likely to be African-American, older, single, less educated, unemployed, and poorer than their nonkinship counterparts (Berrick, 1998; Brooks and Barth, 1998; Franck, 2001; Fuller-Thomson and Minkler, 2000; Gaudin and Sutphen, 1993; Gebel, 1996; Le Prohn, 1994; Soloman and Marx, 1995). Also, there is strong evidence that kinship foster parents receive less training, fewer services, and less support than do nonkinship foster parents (Berrick et al., 1994; Brooks and Barth, 1998; Cantos et al., 1996; Franck, 2001; Fuller-Thomson and Minkler, 2000; Gebel, 1996; Iglehart, 1994; Lewis and Fraser, 1987; Scannapieco et al., 1997; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1995; Wulczyn and Goerge, 1992). Finally, kinship foster parents are more likely to foster children who have been removed from their biological parents' homes due to parental substance abuse compared to nonkinship foster parents who are more likely to foster children who are removed due to their biological parents' mental health problems (Beeman et al., 2000; Franck, 2001; Gleeson et al., 1997).

Given this body of knowledge, it is important to find out if kinship foster parents perceive that any or all of those factors are barriers to providing successful foster care. If, for example, kinship foster parents say that their lack of education is a barrier to successful fostering, and they cannot help their children with homework, services such as tutoring for the foster children or referrals to adult education classes could be provided.

We do know that differences exist in the provision of training and services among kinship and nonkinship foster parents. Nonkinship foster parents receive more services, but it is unclear why. It might be that kinship foster parents receive less training and support and fewer services because they do not request, do not need, or refuse such services. Differences could be attributed to the practices of child welfare workers. It might be that caseworkers do not feel that the same levels of services are necessary for kinship families as are needed for nonkinship families (Dubowitz, Feigelman, & Zuravin, 1993). According to Schlonsky and Berrick (2001), their lack of concern might be influenced by their beliefs and confidence in the strength of the family relationships. For instance, caseworkers were less likely to enforce parental visitation restrictions

with kinship fosters than with nonkinship foster parents (U.S. General Accounting Office [GAO], 1999). Caseworkers may feel that it is a family's prerogative to raise their relatives as they see fit, without the interference of the child welfare agency. Finally, it is unclear if kinship foster parents even desire an equivalent level of training, services, or support.

### *Child welfare workers' perceptions of kinship foster parents*

There has been some exploration of how child welfare workers perceive kinship family foster parents. Child welfare professionals report that, generally, children are better off being fostered by kin and that children in kinship care have a stronger sense of belonging (Beeman & Boisen, 1999). They also believe that their placements are more stable and the level of care and parenting in kinship homes generally are good (GAO, 1999). However, the research indicates that the perceptions of child welfare workers have not been linked with specific familial characteristics or parenting beliefs (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1999 and Gleeson, 1999).

Some research have discussed the kinds of difficulties workers perceive when working with kinship foster parents. Child welfare professionals have reported that kinship foster parents often are more difficult to supervise (Beeman and Boisen, 1999 and Gleeson and Philbin, 1996), require more time to assess (Berrick, Needell, & Barth, 1999), make case plans harder to enforce (Berrick et al., 1999 and U.S. General Accounting Office, 1999), are more likely to delay reunification (Berrick et al., 1999), and are less likely to meet the children's health and educational needs when compared with nonkinship foster parents (Berrick et al., 1999). Also, some workers have reported that kinship foster parents are less likely to communicate with them about their children's behavior problems, and are less likely to follow through with services for their children (Gleeson and Philbin, 1996).

Issues surrounding the birth parents of children in kinship foster care are of particular concern for child welfare workers. Working with the biological mother often is the most difficult aspect of providing services to a kinship foster parent (Gleeson et al., 1997), and kinship foster parents' unwillingness to establish and maintain boundaries with birth parents is the most common reason that kinship placements disrupt (Terling-Watt, 2001). It is important to note, however, that all of these perceptions come from caseworkers and reflect only one side of the relationship between kinship foster parents and agencies.

In summary, we just do not know enough about the self reported need of kinship fostering to develop services rooted in principles of client self determination. After all, it is the foster parent, who when asked, usually can, with some prodding perhaps, tell child welfare workers what they need. It would be tremendously helpful on the broader scale to learn more about how these foster parents perceive their role and how those perceptions differ from nonkinship foster parents. To do this we must begin to build a body of knowledge that can eventually translate into better services and thus better outcomes for children. Therefore, we cautiously delve into uncharted territory by documenting kinship foster parents' perceptions of factors that promote and inhibit effective fostering, as well as perceived rewards and stressors associated with kinship fostering. Our study builds on the research of Buehler et al. (2003); however, it will take it a step further by comparing and contrasting the perceptions of both kinship and nonkinship foster parents, something that has not been undertaken heretofore.

## METHODS

### *Study design and sample*

The University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board approved all study procedures for the requirements of human participants. Data were collected from September 2001 through December 2001. The present researchers used very similar methods as the Buehler et al. (2003) study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of nine kinship foster parents from eight foster families who were approved to foster by state child welfare agencies in two southeastern states. The names of the kinship foster parents who expressed interest in participating in the study were provided by child welfare caseworkers from a southeastern state. Kinship foster parents were contacted by telephone and were invited to participate in the study.

Of the eight families who participated, four were two-parent families and four were one-parent families. Of the nine foster parents, six were African American, two were Caucasian and one family was multiracial. These parents had fostered from 1 to 3 children.

### *Procedure*

Interviews were conducted in the foster parents' homes and were audio-recorded. Participants responded to 12 semi-structured questions pertaining to their fostering perceptions. A modified version of the set of twelve interview questions previously developed by Buehler et al. (2003) was used. The wording of the questions was changed to reflect kinship fostering rather than nonkinship. These questions are included in the Appendix.

Two interviewers conducted the interviews separately which helped reduce any potential interviewer bias from influencing the emergence of identified themes. One interviewer was an African-American woman and the other was a Caucasian man. Before the interview the participants were given the opportunity to read and then sign the consent form to voluntarily participate in the study. The interviewers discussed the confidentiality of the interviews and reiterated that any information shared by the participants provided would not be shared with child welfare agency or caseworkers. The interviewers also informed the participants that they were only interested in their honest thoughts and opinions; and there were no right or wrong answers to the questions. During the interview participants were given ample time to think about the questions and then speak freely without interruption. When it was evident that they were finished answering the questions, the interviewers prompted, "Is there anything else you would like to add?" This allowed participants to give further thought to their responses and then include anything that might have been missed. At the end of the interview the interviewers asked, "Is there anything else you would like to add about what it takes to be a foster parent?" Upon completion of the interview participants received a US\$25 Wal-Mart gift certificate for their participation.

### *Analysis*

The interviews were transcribed by an administrative staff person who typed them verbatim. Relevant text segments were identified by the second author and these extractions were reviewed and verified by the first author. Discussions between the first two authors followed regarding the text segments; and all differences were resolved. After reviewing the transcripts, highlighted text was coded into one of four categories: rewards; stressors; familial or personal factors that

promote successful fostering; and familial or personal factors that inhibit successful fostering (see Buehler et al., 2003).

These four categories served as a “start list” for coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Next, narrative segments were assigned secondary codes reflecting a more specific type of reward, stressor, promoting factor, or inhibiting factor. This was done independently by the first and second authors. Seven reward themes, seven stressor themes, twelve facilitating themes, and nine inhibiting themes were identified. There was high agreement between the two coders: 86% for rewards narrative segments; 84% for stressors segments; 80% for factors that promote fostering segments; and 81% for the factors that inhibit fostering segments. This was calculated by dividing the number of coder agreements per categories and then dividing that number by the total number of text segments.

## RESULTS

The results from this study are organized as follows: First, for each of the four start list categories (e.g., perceived rewards); themes from the kinship foster parents' interviews are identified. Second, we include selected quotations from the transcribed interviews to specify the context of the themes. We will only include those quotations that are particularly salient and unique. Additional quotations can be obtained from the first author. Third, a comparison of kinship and nonkinship foster parents' perceptions about successful fostering is provided.

### *Perceived rewards*

Perceived rewards are explained as motivating reasons for foster parents to continue to foster in the face of various personal or fostering challenges (Buehler et al., 2003). Seven general themes described kinship foster parents' perceived rewards associated with fostering (see Table 1).

Table 1. Perceived rewards associated with kinship fostering

| Themes   | Kinship<br>(N = 9) |      | Nonkin<br>(N = 22) |      |
|--|--------------------|------|--------------------|------|
|  | N                  | %    | N                  | %    |
| Helping child in need/rescuing child from their previous situation or hardship | 7                  | 77.7 | 6                  | 27.3 |
| Learning about child/getting to know child                                     | 5                  | 55.5 |                    |      |
| Seeing child grow/develop  | 3                  | 33.3 | 12                 | 54.5 |
| Receiving love from child  | 3                  | 33.3 | 6                  | 27.3 |
| Preserving family  | 2                  | 22.2 |                    |      |
| Providing for basic needs for child  | 2                  | 22.2 |                    |      |
| Providing child with stability   | 1                  | 11.1 |                    |      |
| Making a difference in a child's life  |                    |      | 12                 | 54.5 |
| Showing child that somebody loves them   |                    |      | 8                  | 36.4 |
| Providing some sense of “normalcy”/belonging                                   |                    |      | 5                  | 22.7 |
| Inspired/mission work  |                    |      | 4                  | 18.2 |

| Themes                             | Kinship<br>(N = 9) |   | Nonkin<br>(N = 22) |      |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|---|--------------------|------|
|                                    | N                  | % | N                  | %    |
| Providing safe, secure environment |                    |   | 4                  | 18.2 |

Kinship foster parents thought that helping children was rewarding, and these helping behaviors included “rescuing” children from their previous situations, contributing to children's socioemotional development, providing children with basic needs, providing children with stability. Other rewards included learning about or getting to know the children in their care and receiving love from children. In addition, kinship foster parents found that preserving their families by keeping the children out of nonkinship foster care was important. The following is an example of an apparent compelling sense of commitment to preserve the family.

I guess being able to participate and help when a child is in need. We can come together and keep our children from going into state custody maybe by me just being there when a child needs placement, even if it's just for a couple of days or a couple of weeks. It would help them a lot to see that hey, somebody does care.

### *Perceived stressors*

Perceived stressors are considered demands, situations, or circumstances that the foster parents' believe disrupt the normal state of their lives and trigger a stressful state (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2001, p. 572). Seven themes described kinship foster parents' perceived stressors associated with fostering (see Table 2).

Table 2. Perceived stressors associated with fostering

| Themes  | Kinship<br>(N = 9) |      | Nonkin<br>(N = 22) |      |
|---|--------------------|------|--------------------|------|
|   | N                  | %    | N                  | %    |
| Attachment/reunification issues                             | 6                  | 66.6 | 12                 | 54.5 |
| Adjusting to fostering/little time to prepare               | 6                  | 66.6 |                    |      |
| Child's emotional, physical, behavioral problems            | 5                  | 55.5 | 14                 | 63.6 |
| Dealing with “the system”/authority of child welfare system | 5                  | 55.5 | 9                  | 40.9 |
| Knowledge of child's birth family                           | 4                  | 44.4 |                    |      |
| Lack of family support                                      | 3                  | 33.3 |                    |      |
| Having few resources (money)                                | 1                  | 11.1 |                    |      |
| Age or number of children                                   |                    |      | 12                 | 54.5 |
| Perceived agency incompetence/inadequacy                    |                    |      | 12                 | 54.5 |
| Visits with birth family                                    |                    |      | 9                  | 40.9 |
| Children going back to bad living situation                 |                    |      | 8                  | 36.4 |

| Themes  | Kinship<br>( <i>N</i> = 9) |   | Nonkin<br>( <i>N</i> = 22) |      |
|---|----------------------------|---|----------------------------|------|
|   | <i>N</i>                   | % | <i>N</i>                   | %    |
| Unrealistic/unmet expectations                            |                            |   | 6                          | 27.3 |
| Lack of specific information regarding child's history    |                            |   | 5                          | 22.7 |
| Not being included in case planning/not being listened to |                            |   | 5                          | 22.7 |
| Child care/respice difficulties                           |                            |   | 4                          | 18.2 |
| Getting adequate healthcare                               |                            |   | 4                          | 18.2 |
| Conflict with birth children                              |                            |   | 3                          | 13.6 |

Attachment issues regarding the desire for kinship foster parents to continue fostering their children and dealing with plans of reunification with the birth family were common stressors among the kinship foster parents. Also, many kinship foster parents thought that they did not have enough time to prepare for fostering and that created stress.

Yes. Yes, yes, yes. It was more like — are you serious? It was a big change; trust me, a totally big change. I mean, because I had started to worry, okay my kids are grown; I mean my oldest son has a baby. She's like a year old. And, I was like well I can come and get them and ship them back you know. And, when she came I was like — okay what am I going to do with this little baby here, you know? It was a big difference. I mean I really had to adjust to a lot of different things, a whole lot of different things. Now that was stressful trying to adjust. Yeah. He's out in the parking lot — oh you want to get this baby. I was actually getting off from work and I came out the door. I mean, for him to just pop up with her, I mean that was a real surprise. Actually I didn't know what to do with her. For fourteen days I did not work because I didn't have anybody to keep her, and I was like — okay what am I going to do here?

Another foster parent had a similar example.

Right now, one of the things that makes it really difficult, because as I said before, my youngest child is 31 years old, and I had pretty much gotten used to — at 52, this was the time of my life that I was supposed to enjoy life. But because the Lord troubled my heart to take this child in, it makes it difficult because I can't just get up and move when I want to move any more. That's the hardest thing. I can't buy for myself like I thought I was going to be able to do when I got this age, but it's worth the sacrifice.

One kinship parent was not financially prepared to begin fostering.

I had had a lady that kept her for me for a while and then my husband said he just did not think that it was fair for us to pay that type of money for daycare if she didn't belong to us. I mean because we were actually losing money. But we did it and then eventually I said you know we can't afford this because we were, I mean we were financially

preparing for ourselves not for this baby. I mean I actually lost a lot of time off work. So I ran out of paid leave. So I had missed these days being off without pay.

Additional stressors for kinship foster parents included having issues of attachment and loss, dealing with the emotional, behavioral, or physical problems of foster children, dealing with “the system,” adjusting to fostering, concern that foster children will go back into a bad living situation, and dealing with the birth family.

Kinship foster parents perceived the issue of dealing with birth parents a stressor. One kinship foster parent expressed difficulty dealing with the fact that she had custody of her own sister's children.

But it just makes it more difficult I guess knowing, knowing the birth mother, instead of being in a situation where we didn't know. I think the last visit that we had was in court. For me it's a little difficult knowing that my sister, who is their birth mother, is a prostitute who's on crack. And it's very difficult. So sitting in court, the judge says there's no reunification, never. She tells us that the babies are ours, she points to us and said they're going with their mother and father. And then the look on my little sister's face — no hope. So, it's a fine line. Do you take everything that she's ever had away from her and now there's absolutely no hope and when she goes back out on the street, what's she got to live for? Or do you taunt her with the fact that, hey, you get your act cleaned up; you get straight; you follow the rules; and you can see the kids as an aunt later down the road. It goes back to that dysfunction and we don't want them to know they live with their aunt and uncle and their mother is somewhere else. We want to be the mother and father. And so that's been the hardest part for me. How do we protect the children because they're our thought? You know, how do we protect them, but still not take all that hope away from her?

Another kinship foster parent stated that her knowledge of the child's birth family was a stressor. She expressed difficulty in possessing knowledge that she was unable to share with the child about other family members who chose not to be involved in the child's life.

And that's stressful because a lot of them have not even taken time out to come and be with him. Why is it that your brother has a son and you won't even take time out to come around and let him get to know who his sisters and brothers are and different stuff like that? And, that's stressful because a lot of times he [the foster child] asks you a question, you can't answer it.

Several kinship foster parents expressed concern that the birth parents of the foster children often show up at unexpected times.

I think it needs to be somebody who lives away, lives like us. We live three hours away from the core of my sister's contact with my family. And that makes it less, less likely that she's going to just stop in for a visit when she gets high someday.

One foster parent shared a similar experience.

She don't want supervised visits. She thinks she can come and get her and take her with her, whenever. And, like I told her, until you show me a change or do what the State told you to do... No!

Another foster parent's perception echoed the above.

Basically, if the other parents were involved they tried to stay involved I think it would make it hard. Uh huh. And daddy was showing up and I want my child. And then the mother come around and you know it's basically when a child is attached to his parents and they was taken away from their parents I think that would really make it hard. Well you would have to be to the point where you would have to have restraining orders to keep that child's parents from coming around and calling. I mean it would be real hard because I don't want her to see me or her mother at ends with each other you know because us being with her, she would be like well you don't like my mama why do you have me, you know. So when I feel like tension is growing between me and her mother I stay away.

One kinship foster parent expressed the desire to protect the child from his/her birth parents at the expense of the birth parents standing with the agency.

I mean I would let them [the agency] know what I know because I wouldn't put that child in that position. And, I wouldn't be able to see the child going and living with her if she was not really ready. I mean I love my sister to death and would give my right arm for her, but before I would let her take that child and ruin her life, I would tell. I mean I'm not going to cover up for anybody when it comes to children.

The theme of dealing with “the system” was pronounced. This was evident by one kinship foster parent's response to what she found stressful about fostering. It is not difficult to sense the frustration of the respondent.

The legal system. The constraints that as a foster parent you have no rights. Unless you've been like us and spent thousands of dollars for an attorney to provide your rights for you, you know, the court system. We don't even feel like the babies have had rights. Its been before two crack heads... they look at the birth parents as, you know, they look at their rights more strongly than they do anybody else's [be]cause the court system [is] so fearful of being, I guess...overlooking the birth parents. Their parents come in and out of their baby's lives and, you know, because, you know, the court, you're just so afraid that they're going to violate the parents' rights that they'll put, you know, the courts will put them back into a bad situation just because, um, there's, you know, they're both parents. They're just given so many chances, it seems like, it seems like they're just given chance after chance to make it right.

### *Factors that promote successful fostering*

Twelve themes that described kinship foster parents' perceptions of factors that facilitated successful fostering were identified (see Table 3). Recurring themes in the kinship foster parents' responses emphasized the importance of family. Most kinship foster parents believed that it is

necessary to have the support and cooperation of family, and that it is the family's duty to assume responsibility for care of children rather than allowing them to become wards of the state.

Table 3. Perceived factors that promote successful fostering

| Themes   | Kinship<br>(N = 9) |      | Nonkinship<br>(N = 22) |      |
|--|--------------------|------|------------------------|------|
|  | N                  | %    | N                      | %    |
| Support of family/responsibility to care for child         | 7                  | 77.7 |                        |      |
| Love/commitment to child                                   | 7                  | 77.7 | 19                     | 86.4 |
| Faith/moral values   | 6                  | 66.6 | 18                     | 81.8 |
| Good parenting/experience and availability                 | 5                  | 55.5 |                        |      |
| Being involved in church                                   | 3                  | 33.3 |                        |      |
| Flexible/open to new things                                | 2                  | 22.2 | 13                     | 59.0 |
| Adequate resources   | 2                  | 22.2 |                        |      |
| Good co-parenting/Strong cooperative marriage              | 2                  | 22.2 | 10                     | 45.5 |
| Being able to create a nurturing environment               | 1                  | 11.1 |                        |      |
| Having another child of same age                           | 1                  | 11.1 |                        |      |
| Being able to deal with “the system”                       | 1                  | 11.1 | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Being able to help with school work/Promotes learning      | 1                  | 11.1 | 4                      | 18.2 |
| Accepting of child's differences                           |                    |      | 18                     | 81.8 |
| Able to help child with feelings                           |                    |      | 11                     | 50.0 |
| Organized, routinized, structured, and ability to plan     |                    |      | 11                     | 50.0 |
| Having other responsibilities reduced                      |                    |      | 11                     | 50.0 |
| Clear structure  |                    |      | 10                     | 45.5 |
| Consistent enforcement of rules, children held accountable |                    |      | 10                     | 45.5 |
| Realistic expectation of foster child /fostering           |                    |      | 10                     | 45.5 |
| Skillful with birth family                                 |                    |      | 10                     | 45.5 |
| Acceptance of foster child as their own                    |                    |      | 9                      | 40.9 |
| Teamwork   |                    |      | 9                      | 40.9 |
| Support from kin   |                    |      | 8                      | 36.4 |
| Use of positive discipline                                 |                    |      | 8                      | 36.4 |
| Supportive job situation                                   |                    |      | 7                      | 31.8 |
| Not too needy personally                                   |                    |      | 6                      | 27.3 |
| Providing good role models                                 |                    |      | 5                      | 22.7 |
| Willingness to grow personally                             |                    |      | 5                      | 22.7 |
| Able to work well with caseworker                          |                    |      | 4                      | 18.2 |

| Themes                                | Kinship<br>(N = 9) |   | Nonkinship<br>(N = 22) |      |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|---|------------------------|------|
|                                       | N                  | % | N                      | %    |
| Community/friend support              |                    |   | 4                      | 18.2 |
| Home/family that feels safe           |                    |   | 4                      | 18.2 |
| Able to advocate for foster child     |                    |   | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Able to work with lots of people      |                    |   | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Experience with children              |                    |   | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Family oriented                       |                    |   | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Fun-loving                            |                    |   | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Get help from counselors              |                    |   | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Love in family of origin              |                    |   | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Having two parents                    |                    |   | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Willing not to bad mouth birth family |                    |   | 3                      | 13.6 |

Another important theme that emerged was that kinship foster parents' love and appreciate children and have a strong commitment to take care of them. Some kinship foster parents suggested that having faith, religious and moral values, and being a good role model were positive factors in fostering. To this end, some kinship foster parents believed that an involvement in church contributed to successful fostering. This is a strong support system that could be utilized if larger studies verify these findings.

In addition, kinship foster parents believed that certain skills and parenting beliefs were necessary for successful fostering. Positive and consistent parenting-like having one parent available to stay home with the child, and having previous experience in caring for children were factors that promoted successful fostering. Having both parents involved and sharing the responsibilities in raising the children also were perceived to promote fostering.

Other factors identified by kinship foster parents as being helpful to successful fostering were having another child of same age in the home, having the ability to help children with school work, and being able to work with the child welfare agency. Kinship foster parents also viewed openness to learning new things, the ability to create a nurturing, secure and safe environment, and having adequate resources as promoting successful fostering.

Perceiving that the family had a responsibility to raise the children emerged as a facilitating factor for kinship foster parents.

We all work together. It was our responsibility as a family to raise him and let him see that just because your mother is gone-that you're not alone. We can come together and keep our children from going into state custody maybe by me just being there when a child needs placement, even if it's just for a couple of days of a couple of weeks. It would help them a lot to see that hey, somebody does care, you know.

Several kinship foster parents suggested that their relationships with the children in their care made it easier to foster, gave their children a sense of continuity, and made it easier to establish nurturing bonds.

Um, I'm new at this. This is a whole new experience and, but it does take some, a lot of love and, you know, you go to be there with your support. You know, they, they look to you all they got. And, you know, that, I mean, like, like he got his aunt, his grandmother, you know. She interacts with him a lot and, you know, he knows who she is. He likes his photo album, he knows everybody on the photo, his photo book, you know.

Another foster parent stated the following.

I guess it made me really want her by her being a family member because as I said once before I'm not going to see any of my nieces, nephews or cousins or anything like that end up having to go home if I got room in my home. And, I don't treat them like a nephew I treat them like they were mine you know anyway.

Another foster parent provided the following statement.

I think being related to a child makes you love them more because they are flesh and blood. And, I really feel like taking in a child that is related to you, see the love is already there because you naturally love your family. But then to know that, to me knowing that my sister did her wrong made me love her more, and I felt like well she's going to need extra love because she's growing up and she's seeing her mother, and knowing that's her mother — her mother is not raising her. And, that's going to make a child wonder what's wrong with me that my mother didn't want me. So, to me it makes you want to give them extra love, you know, love them a little bit more then you would love anybody else.

Yet, another foster parent stated the following.

Coming from a close knit family, we work together. Well, I think because of the bloodline, you have that certain connection. But the fact that you are blood, have the bloodline, that love is forever, you know, and I think that that provides an even more safer environment for him. Love is just there. So we're together holding each other up to make a strong roof and this is what I'm trying to instill in him. We're blood. You just can't turn against each other. Next to God, we're all we have.

### *Factors that inhibit successful fostering*

Nine themes that described kinship foster parents' perceptions of factors that inhibited successful fostering were identified (see Table 4). Being unable to deal with the “the system” or operate under the authority of the child welfare agency was identified as an inhibiting factor for kinship foster parents. Other factors included inadequate resources, the inability to manage the child's behavioral, developmental, or health problems, the inability to handle loss and the reality of reunification with the birth family, and having a dysfunctional family or parents with unresolved personal issues.

Table 4. Perceived factors that inhibit successful fostering

| Themes  | Kinship<br>(N = 9) |      | Nonkinship<br>(N = 22) |      |
|---|--------------------|------|------------------------|------|
|   | N                  | %    | N                      | %    |
| Strained relations with birth family  | 7                  | 77.7 |                        |      |
| Poor discipline strategies  | 5                  | 55.5 | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Inability to deal with the system/authority of agency                               | 4                  | 44.4 |                        |      |
| Lack of resources/not enough help/support   | 3                  | 33.3 | 4                      | 18.2 |
| Inability to deal with child's emotional, behavioral, physical problems             | 2                  | 22.2 |                        |      |
| Inability to handle loss/reality of reunification and desire to be permanent parent | 2                  | 22.2 | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Having a dysfunctional family   | 2                  | 22.2 |                        |      |
| Being unprepared to foster  | 1                  | 11.1 |                        |      |
| No commitment/wrong motivation  | 1                  | 11.1 | 7                      | 31.8 |
| Other demands for time and energy   |                    |      | 5                      | 22.7 |
| Love a foster child too much  |                    |      | 4                      | 18.2 |
| Poor communication under stress   |                    |      | 4                      | 18.2 |
| Being overly worried about effects of foster child on birth child                   |                    |      | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Inflexible/unwilling to grow  |                    |      | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Not being able to accept children's histories                                       |                    |      | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Not being able to handle an emotionally withdrawn child                             |                    |      | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Other foster children coming and going  |                    |      | 3                      | 13.6 |
| Unequal spousal or family commitment to fostering                                   |                    |      | 3                      | 13.6 |

Other factors that inhibited fostering included having issues with family members and having a significant age disparity. One grandmother identified that a significant age disparity between herself and her teenaged granddaughter might be a barrier to fostering successfully.

Now that is the one that we already are facing right now. It's a difficult age with her being a teen, difficult age with me being an over-the-hill grandparent. I mean, I'm a great grandparent, and so right away that age thing there is a big disadvantage. I don't see things the way the teens do today. But the other thing is the morals are real hard to instill in them.

#### *Comparison of kinship and nonkinship perceptions*

The results of the present study were compared with those of a previous study (Buehler et al., 2003) in which 22 nonkinship foster parents were interviewed using the same semi-structured interview questions and methods with one exception-nonkinship foster parents were not asked

questions regarding being a relative to the children in their care. Table 1, Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4 illustrate perceptions about fostering success that are common and unique to kinship and nonkinship foster parents. These results are a beginning to understanding how kinship foster parents differ from nonkinship foster parents regarding familial and parental factors that facilitate or inhibit fostering. It is with additional empirical studies, we believe that to the extent that differences emerge, assessment protocols, training curricula, and service programs could be modified to accommodate the special needs and interests of kinship foster parents.

## TRUSTWORTHINESS OF FINDINGS

Comparable to reliability and validity which helps to support quantitative findings, there are certain criteria that help substantiate the trustworthiness of qualitative data (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1990; Sandelowski, 1986). Such criteria include credibility in accurately describing and interpreting participants' accounts, variability of participants' accounts, neutrality or unbiased methods, and generalizability of findings (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1990, p. 215; Sandelowski, 1986). We will discuss the strengths and limitations of our sampling, data collection, and data analysis methods in this context.

### *Strengths*

First, our study accurately describes kinship foster parents' perceptions about fostering. The interviewing process was designed to allow participants to talk openly and honestly about their perceptions about fostering. An assurance of confidentiality by the interviewers and interviewing them in the privacy and comfort of their own homes contributed to the candor of their responses. Their accounts were accurately transcribed and quoted.

Second, in terms of variability of the data, we included all themes that emerged from the interviews, even if only one kinship parent reported it. This range of perceptions (Krefting, 1990) provided valuable insight into successful kinship fostering.

Third, we addressed the issue of neutrality by using strong data collection methods. The use of two interviewers instead of one reduced the event of interviewer bias. There was little room for the interviewers to influence the participants or bias the results because the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then quoted directly. These procedures further eliminated all issues regarding reading unclear handwritten notes or recalling by memory the participants' statements and their contexts.

The above strategies helped enhance the trustworthiness of our study's findings. However, in addition to the strengths, it is also necessary to report limitations of the study's methodology and findings. Thus, a discussion about limitations follows.

### *Limitations*

The trustworthiness of our findings is somewhat compromised due to four limitations, three of which has to do with the sampling procedure. First, in this current study we relied on referrals from caseworkers from a southeastern public child welfare agency. Unsurprisingly, all of the participants were from public child welfare agencies and lived in the southeastern region of the United States. The purposive sample used in this study may not be representative of the demographic characteristics of kinship foster parents in the United States. Consequently, using

such a sample detracts from our ability to generalize our findings to the general population of kinship foster parents or kinship foster parents from private child welfare agencies.

Having stated the above, striving to generalize our findings was not our intent (see Sandelowski, 1986). In this exploratory study our aim was to describe the perceptions of kinship foster parents and gather new information (Marlow, 2005, p. 137) about kinship foster parents' perceptions. We accomplished our study's goal by gaining rich information central to what promotes and inhibits successful kinship fostering (Marlow, 2005, p. 138).

Second, though a list of 27 kinship foster parents' names was provided by the child welfare agency as potential participants, once contacted, some kinship foster parents did not participate due to lack of interest. Lack of interest to participate was evidenced by potential participants communicating that they were no longer interested, not answering the telephone, or not returning a maximum of three telephone messages to contact us. In some cases where there was a married couple, the foster mother, but not the foster father participated. It may be that the nine kinship foster parents who agreed to participate in this study possessed different characteristics (e.g., motivation) or circumstances (e.g., available time) than those who declined to participate.

Third, because the study's sample size is small we cannot guarantee saturation of themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1988) was achieved. It is unknown whether additional themes would have emerged if the sample size had been larger.

Future follow-up studies that build on our research could be strengthened by enhancing the sampling procedures. Quantitative studies might identify a larger pool of potential participants from several child welfare agencies from various regions of the country from which to select the sample. Perhaps a stratified, random sampling procedure could be used (see Buehler et al., 2003) in order to reduce potential bias and support the applicability of the findings to other kinship foster parents beyond the sample. A larger sample, in general, would also increase researchers' confidence that all themes surrounding kinship foster parents' perceptions are known.

The fourth limitation of this study concerns the data analysis procedure. In the current study, the second author identified relevant text segments and these extractions were reviewed and verified by the first author. In a future, similar study, perhaps more than one researcher could identify relevant text segments to begin with, and then jointly compare for relevant text segments. Researchers might also consider using a software program (e.g., ATLAS.ti) for a systematic approach to managing qualitative data. Either of these methods would further reduce bias from entering the analysis process.

## DISCUSSION

In general, kinship and nonkinship foster parents are similar in their perceptions of fostering rewards and stressors and in their perceptions of factors that facilitate or inhibit successful fostering. However, differences regarding the birth family were more pronounced and complicated among kinship foster parents.

These findings suggest that the dynamics between caregiver and birth family warrant careful attention prior to the placement of children into kinship care, and ongoing assessment during a

placement. In addition to assessing kinship foster parents' strengths and areas for improvement. The assessment phase could be used to understand and validate those areas of concern so that child welfare workers and kinship families can better partner together to achieve their mutual goals early in the process of providing the best possible care for children.

For instance, because kinship foster parents often are grandparents (Fuller-Thomson and Minkler, 2000; Link, 1996; Scannapieco et al., 1997), it is prudent to assess concerns that could arise due to an age disparity between the foster parent and foster children during pre-placement evaluations and home studies. These same concerns should then be addressed more broadly with training and the provision of services, such as foster parent mentoring.

Additionally, because kinship foster parents possess knowledge about the birth families and are likely to have close dealings with them, training and services should equip them to manage familial dynamics in ways that ensure the best outcomes for the children in their care. Training specifically designed for kinship foster parents might entail components that pertain to managing good relationships with birth parents, setting boundaries with birth parents, and cooperating with the agency to protect foster children from further maltreatment at the hands of the birth parents—items identified in this study.

Child welfare agencies can utilize information about what promotes and inhibits kinship foster parents to tailor efforts specifically designed to recruit and retain potential kinship foster parents. These efforts might inform kinship foster parents about various ways in which the agency is committed to supporting their unique situation as a relative foster parent versus someone without prior knowledge about the child.

While much more research needs to be done to verify the following, at this stage, it seems that the love foster parents have for the children of relatives, plus their commitment to keep their families together (Schlonsky & Berrick, 2001), can be drawn upon when caregivers are struggling. These rewards can serve as motivating and stabilizing mechanisms for kinship placements. In their recruiting efforts, child welfare agencies might appeal to kin's strong convictions about family values to attract them to fostering. And to diminish potential kinship foster parents' fears of arising fostering problems, recruiting agencies could assure them that bonds that have existed prior to the formal foster care arrangement often can help stabilize a placement more quickly and give a sense of continuity to foster children who are placed with someone who already knows them (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1999 and Schlonsky and Berrick, 2001).

Unlike nonkinship foster parents who are expecting to have children placed in their homes, kinship foster parents often do not plan to foster, but do so only after a family crisis has occurred. In addition to the rewards that kin might experience by fostering their relatives, this also could bring about undue stress in the sense that they are not prepared to support children socially, emotionally, or in other important ways.

Foster parents' inability to deal with stressors might lead to their lack of motivation to provide quality services, the inappropriate treatment of children, or their quitting fostering altogether due to frustrations (Baring-Gould et al., 1983; Rhodes et al., 2001; Triseliotis et al., 1998). Therefore,

kinship foster parents need to develop adaptive efforts to deal with various challenges in order to promote successful fostering. Child welfare agencies can support kinship foster parents by preparing well in advance provisions surrounding coping with a new family addition. Although sudden placements often are unavoidable, support, training, and services can be “front-loaded” to help stabilize these imminent kinship placements.

Regarding the issue of promoting successful fostering, it is interesting to note that seeking help from counselors was a theme that was unique to nonkinship foster parents (Buehler et al., 2003), but not to kinship foster parents. Previously cited research supports that kinship foster families are less likely to tell their caseworkers about their children's behavioral and emotional problems or follow through with psychological services than nonkinship foster parents (Gleeson & Philbin, 1996). It is unknown, however, if kinship foster families do not believe the children in their care have behavioral and emotional problems that warrant counseling, if caseworkers fail to make appropriate referrals for services, or if culturally competent services are not available to kinship foster parents who are typically African American. These issues warrant further empirical investigation.

### *Future research*

More qualitative work along the lines of this study might be helpful in developing the categories that would guide needed larger quantitative studies. Future studies might use standardized items which would produce more descriptive data for analysis. In contrast to open-ended questions like the ones used in this study, a standardized measure, such as a Likert-type scale, would highlight relevant information that can be used to identify appropriate and adequate provisions to support kinship foster families. Moreover, such a measure would focus and enhance the communication between the interviewer and participant.

### CONCLUSION

The demand for kinship foster care continues to rise as more biological parents rely on their families to come to their aid and care for their children. Child welfare agencies must address this trend by adequately preparing and assisting kinship families to raise their kin. Although there is ample research about foster care in general, the field has a long way to go before it understands the complex dynamics of out-of-home care provided by aunts, uncles, older brothers and sisters, and most importantly — grandparents. This study contributes to the beginning stage of understanding kinship foster parents' need for unique and differential assessment protocols, training, and support services in order to facilitate successful fostering.

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## APPENDIX A

1. What do you find particularly rewarding about fostering?
2. What do you find stressful about fostering?
3. Think about your family — What are some of the things about your family that make fostering a more successful experience?
4. Continue thinking about your family — What are some of the things about your family that make fostering more difficult?
5. What personal beliefs or beliefs as parent have you that make fostering easier?
6. What personal beliefs or parenting beliefs have you that make fostering more difficult?
7. How does being a family member affect your care giving?
8. In general, how would you describe a family that would do well in fostering? How does being kin affect that?
9. In general, how would you describe a family that would have a tough time with fostering? How does being kin affect that?
10. What special characteristics do foster parents and families need to have to do well in fostering?
11. What special characteristics do you think kin foster parents need to have to do well in fostering?
12. What about when it is time for them to leave?

Is there anything else you would like to add about what it takes to be a foster parent?

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