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Research to Practice Series Needs and Experiences of Biological Children of Foster Carers

*The Institute of Child Protection Studies **Research to Practice Series** links the findings of research undertaken by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, to the development of policy and practice in the area of child, youth and family welfare.*

About the Institute of Child Protection Studies

The Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University was established in 2005 to carry out high quality research, evaluation and professional development to enhance outcomes for children, young people and families. ICPS is based within the Learning Sciences Institute Australia, in the Faculty of Education and Arts, ACU.

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Needs and Experiences of Biological Children of Foster Carers

Issue 8 of the ICPS Research to Practice series discusses the experiences of biological children of foster carers – their caring roles and responsibilities, the positive impacts and challenges of fostering, and the needs of biological children. It is based on a scoping study undertaken by ACU Social Work students, Jayna Farnham and Christine Dean, who completed a placement with ICPS in 2014. The study aimed to deepen our understanding of the experiences and impacts of fostering on the biological children of foster carers. The qualitative study held focus groups in Canberra with biological children of foster carers aged 8 - 18 years, and with foster care parents, about the experience of fostering for biological children of foster carers. More information about the study and the report is provided at the end of the issue.



Section 1

Caring roles and responsibilities

Although every foster care experience is unique, and there were significant variations and complexities in the foster care arrangements for the families who participated in the study, there was one common aspect present across the focus groups and in all the children's experiences: *the contribution that biological children made to caring for the foster child in their home.*

"I feel proud that I gave a child that needed a family, a family." (Child)

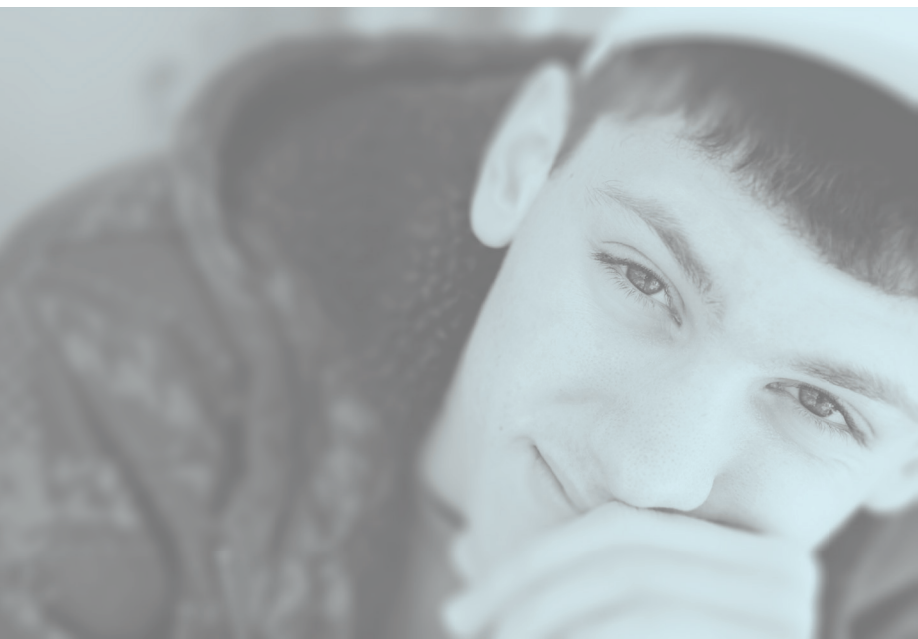
Children and their parents felt that biological children contributed in a very real and tangible way to the caring of the foster child within their family, particularly with practical day-to-day caring tasks. This was particularly evident as the biological children grew older.

"So now [my child] is more of a carer [themselves], so rather than having a playmate which is what it was in the beginning, [they've] now taken on a lot more of the caring role." (Parent)

Many of the children also provided a high level of emotional support to foster children, such as listening and being attuned to their needs and concerns. Some children mentioned that they were the person that foster children were more likely to share their problems and concerns with, and said this was because children often find it easier to talk to other children, rather than adults. This placed a lot of responsibility on biological children, who had to make regular 'judgement calls' about how serious the information being shared with them was, and whether they needed to tell their parents.

"You didn't really have to talk, they just wanted to tell someone... I guess they didn't want to tell an adult and they felt comfortable sharing it with a child rather than an adult." (Child)

For some, this caring role and responsibility stayed with them throughout and beyond their foster caring experiences, and impacted their life in a variety of ways.



Positive impacts of foster caring for biological children

The majority of the children indicated that the positive impacts of fostering outweighed the negative experiences, and highlighted that fostering had helped them to broaden their world view, build family and friendships, have access to more fun and shared activities, and develop new skills.

Many children said that fostering gave them a more balanced view of the world, exposing them to issues they had not considered prior to fostering, including knowledge about the experiences of more vulnerable children in our community. Some children stated that they were in a position of privilege and had very little knowledge of what it was like for other children prior to the fostering experience.

“I think also ... kids with foster children are a bit more educated about um, more educated about some of the tough times that kids have ... having a foster kid as well teaches you to be a bit more respectful I guess.” (Child)

Most of the children talked warmly about the relationships they had with foster children, with many referring to foster children as their foster siblings or brothers and sisters. Many children, particularly those whose families were providing permanent care, identified that fostering had provided them with a sibling they would not have otherwise had. They also talked about foster children who had ‘aged out’ of the system as still being part of their families.

“They are still part of our family, they come to Christmas dinners, my grandparents are their grandparents, so they are still part of our family even though they are out of the system.” (Child)

The children also particularly valued the fun and shared family activities that foster children encouraged them and their families to engage in. Many of the children said that their families went on more ‘family outings’ together due to fostering, which they enjoyed.

“Well we usually only do big family activities on school holidays instead of just weekends so we do it more often than we would if we didn’t have foster children.” (Child)

For many children, the fostering experience presented opportunities for them to grow as individuals and build new skills. This included practical caring tasks (which some children referred to as ‘parenting skills’), and also social and emotional skills and confidence. They expressed that these skills were often developed through the emotional support and care that they provided to the foster children. Parents discussed how their children were challenged and provided with opportunities to engage in play with other children.

“It changed me for the better, I used to be shy and really unbrave, now I am strong and confident and good with people.” (Child)

“[The foster child] is actually pushing [them] in some ways and [they’re] becoming more physically adventurous.” (Parent)

Challenges for biological children

Challenges associated with foster caring that were identified by the children included problematic behaviours of foster children; sharing people, time and toys; feeling jealous, ignored and left out; changing family dynamics; increased levels of family stress and conflict; and loss and worry.

Children discussed how the behaviour of some foster children affected them in a variety of ways. Some felt hassled and annoyed, and others felt differing levels of resentment towards their parents for how they responded to these behaviours. The behaviours mentioned as the most difficult to cope with included when foster children broke commonly understood and accepted 'family rules'. Children became annoyed when their parents applied different rules or approaches to discipline to the foster children in their home. Parents also identified this as one of the main challenges in their fostering experience.

"Most foster children have behaviour that not only has our child never experienced but would never be tolerated from them, so trying to let them understand why you're tolerating this from somebody else when your expectations would never let that happen for them." (Parent)

"[It is hard when] he does bad things he doesn't get punished as I would if I did them." (Child)

Sharing their own time was an issue for some children who wanted time to themselves, and felt that the foster child wanted their attention all the time. Some also found it hard to share significant people, such as parents. At times, they felt jealous of the foster child, perceiving that they became the centre of attention at home. Both children and parents were acutely aware of the changing dynamics that foster caring brought to their family, and discussed the tensions that arose as a result of the biological child's position changing in the family. This was particularly an issue when the biological children went from being the only child, or the eldest child in their family.

"Because this is a permanent placement... like this is forever and ever...and it sort of started to hit [my child] like this is not just the kid that I am being nice to that has just come in, this is like my [sibling]. My mum and dad love [this child] probably as much as they love me sort of thing. Like [they're] really here, [they're] my equal . . . we then had a rough patch with [our child], I guess that change in dynamics started to sink in." (Parent)



Foster parents reported they that continually monitored the impact that the foster child and their behaviours had on their own children. When they thought that the impact was too great, they had sometimes decided to take a break from fostering altogether, or had varied the type of foster care they were providing. The safety of their children was often the catalyst for such a decision.

“At this point it was probably more the safety of, you know, seeing [my child] in tears because [they have injured]. . . from [toys]. . . being flung around.” (Parent)

Although children said that they rarely talked to their parents about it, they knew that fostering put extra stress and pressure on their parents, and sometimes on themselves also. Some children stated that they didn't talk to their parents about these concerns because they didn't want to cause them further worry.



“When [they're] angry or complaining and then I feel regretful ... Because I start thinking that it's my fault it's hard for them... but I don't want them to feel bad.” (Child)

Both children and parents spoke about the various losses that biological children experienced as a result of fostering: loss of position in the family, privacy, freedom, time and opportunities, attention, and sometimes the loss of relationships when foster children moved on from their households. Some biological children found it particularly difficult when foster children left their care, particularly where they had developed significant relationships, or if they never saw the children again. Many of the children also struggled with feelings of guilt and worry about children who had returned to their family of origin.

“I don't think I have ever saw any of them again. Like sometimes they stay with us for a long time and like I still think it was kind of weird cos like some people would stay with us for like half a year and the second they leave you never saw them again.” (Child)

“I'm scared like maybe they are going back to their parents and is it going to be just as bad for them.” (Child)

The needs of biological children of foster carers

Biological children of foster carers were proud of the role they played in providing foster care, and although they experienced many challenges, they also experienced positive impacts. Parents and their children both felt that the support provided to them could be improved and extended, to help ensure the fostering experience was positive. When asked about what support they might want and need, the biological children and their parents focused on the children's need to be acknowledged and included, and to receive appropriate information and support.

Children also discussed the need for widespread changes in regard to how fostering is viewed within the wider community. They were aware that foster children are quickly labelled, and often viewed by others as being difficult, different, or as outsiders in their family. Many children were cautious of disclosing their foster care status, to avoid other people labelling or stigmatising their foster sibling and family situation. Just as they didn't like their foster siblings to be labelled, the majority of children also did not like being referred to as the 'biological child', saying they didn't want to be differentiated from their siblings, and were all part of the family.

“One thing that I hate people saying ‘so they’re not actually your family’. Like that’s why I don’t tell people cos that’s what they would say every single time, that’s what I hate.” (Child)

Although the biological children did not want their own targeted support, they agreed that they would benefit from some more practical information and strategies to cope with the daily aspects of being part of a foster care family. In the first instance, they suggested they would prefer to get this information and support from their parents, rather than having formal support provided by an outside agency or service. While they said they did not want to receive ongoing formal support, such as counselling, they thought that receiving more training would be beneficial, particularly prior to fostering, so they could better understand what it would be like to have a foster child in their home. Some of the children had already attended training provided by a foster care agency. They felt that training needs to be offered to children of all ages, and should be specific to the type of foster care they provided. They also thought that the training should provide them with a good understanding of what fostering was going to be like, and provide them with some strategies to cope with the challenges and issues that fostering could bring to their families.

When asked by researchers whether they wanted some form of peer support, the children suggested holding groups for biological children just to 'hang out' and have fun together, rather than settings which focused on the negative aspects of fostering. Some indicated that foster children could also be included in these activities.

“The carer support worker was very good, she always bought something for both of them and stuff and it’s like well I’m here for you, this is special time for you.” (Parent)

Although parents readily acknowledged the role of their children in caring for the foster children in their homes, all parents agreed that their children needed more support from foster care agencies, and said that this support was often ad-hoc and provided at the discretion of individual workers. They emphasised that as their children were central to their decisions about whether to start and continue foster caring, and the type of care they provided, they should be acknowledged and included more by foster care agencies. Support oriented to a whole-of-family focus (including children within the family) would ensure that children's needs are considered and assessed, and parents could be enabled and supported to meet the needs of their own children.

The parents in the study stated that they had not had the opportunity to talk with other foster carers with biological children about the challenges that fostering provided to the whole family; and that by participating in the study, expressed that they learnt a lot from the more experienced foster parents. They agreed that more opportunities to access peer support for foster parents with biological children would be helpful.

Key Messages

1. Biological children make important contributions to the care of foster children, and the sibling relationships they build are valued and significant.
2. The experiences and needs of biological children often help to determine whether parents will start or continue to foster and what sort of foster care they provide.
3. Biological children have specific needs and experiences that need to be considered and included in the supports provided to foster care families.



About the Study

This scoping study was conducted by two social work students in 2014, under the supervision of a researcher from the Institute of Child Protection Studies. It aimed to deepen our understanding of the experiences and impacts of fostering on biological children of foster carers, by answering the following research questions: 1) What are the needs and experiences of the biological children of foster carers within the ACT? And, 2) What are the policy and practice implications of these children's needs and experiences for the ACT foster care sector?

Although the study was limited in time and scope, the study included three distinct research phases. Phase 1 included a systematic and targeted literature review on the issue of biological children of foster carers. Phase 2 allowed for consultations with key stakeholders to identify the current policy and practice responses for biological children of foster carers in the ACT and Australia. Phase 3 involved the research team conducting a series of focus groups with foster carers and their biological children aged 8 – 18 in the ACT. Participants were recruited from a foster care agency in the ACT. The project was conducted with the approval of the ACU Human Research Ethics Committee.

More information and the full report is available at www.acu.edu.au/icps

References and Useful Resources

Noble-Carr, D., Farnham, J., & Dean, C. (2014). *Needs and Experiences of Biological Children of Foster Carers: A Scoping Study*. Canberra: Institute of Child Protection Studies, ACU.

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