



## THE LIFE EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER PARENTS WHO NURTURE FOSTER CHILDREN IN ZWELITSHA, EASTERN CAPE PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this paper was to examine the life experiences of foster parents who are nurturing foster children. Qualitative method was employed in the study and snowball sampling was used in the selection of the participants. Two focus group discussions were held; each with 10 foster parents and data was thematically analyzed. The findings revealed the provision of foster care to have both positive and negative effects. It can be concluded that it is important for social workers to understand care giving as it occurs in a variety of contexts. They also need to be aware and understanding of the value and role that foster parents play in the lives of vulnerable children. The paper recommends that foster parents should form support groups to discuss their experiences in foster care and ways to solve problems. Social workers should assess foster parents before and after placement and should provide services.*

**KEY TERMS:** Foster parents; Cultures; African values; Foster care placement; Social worker; Biological children.

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## INTRODUCTION

Foster care placement refers to a temporary alternative care arranged for children deprived of a family environment (Jorens, 2013). The affected children are placed in the care of related or unrelated individuals awaiting reunification with their families or the completion of a more permanent form of alternative care. Foster parents have a significant responsibility of caring for children who are unable to live with their families, many of whom have experienced significant behavioral, emotional and developmental problems. In this caring task, foster parents are key determinants in child outcomes. Hence the current paper will investigate their life experiences in providing foster care placement. In South Africa, the increased number of orphans and other vulnerable children resulted in an increase in research investigating foster parents' experiences about foster care in recent years (Ciarrochi et al, 2011). It is now to synthesize the available literature on what is already known about foster parents and their experiences. This paper can serve to increase social workers' awareness and understanding of this important caregiving role and enhance practice and policy imperatives. In assessing the life experiences of foster parents thoroughly, the paper starts by describing the problem. Literature reviewed and theoretical framework are presented in the second section. The third section focuses on the method of data collection and analysis. The findings are presented and discussed. The fourth section is the recommendations and conclusion.

## EXPLORATION OF THE PROBLEM

In South Africa, there is dearth of recent data on foster parents because many studies on foster care come from Britain and United States. An investigation of foster parents' experiences regarding foster care is very important to find required and necessary support, foster parents' recruitment rates and improve retention as the number of children in need of foster care rises. Foster parents are the ones accountable for addressing the needs and challenging behaviours of foster children. Their perceptions are important in determining areas of improvement in foster care system because they are at the forefront in service delivery (Daniel, 2011). When there is an allegation of any abuse including family violence, children are considered to be in need of foster care services that include protection. Some children are removed from their homes and placed in foster care because of the investigations into these allegations. This paper mainly focuses on foster parents because social workers and children's courts approve foster parents before they start fostering (Children's Act, 2014). The interest of foster parents is to improve the lives of foster children even though they come from different backgrounds; foster parents have a common interest. Foster children sometimes display behavioural problems because they have witnessed, experienced and been exposed to many types of abuse at the hands of their loved ones including their own parents (Daniel, 2011). The researchers will systematically investigate these issues because the aim is to explore life experiences of foster parents who nurture foster children in Zwelitsha, Eastern Cape of South Africa.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will focus on literature on foster parents' experiences about foster care, their role in foster care as well as theoretical framework that guided the study. The well-being of foster parents is greatly affected by the provision of foster care. In turn, foster care stability and child outcomes can be affected by the well-being of foster parents.

### *Positive experiences of foster parents*

The experiences of providing foster care are described as essentially rewarding. Providing children with a stable, safe, nurturing home environment which helps them to grow and mature is described as gaining the personal satisfaction. By contributing and making a positive change on the lives of needy children, foster parents feel personally useful. The relationships that develop between foster parents and their foster children are rewarding for foster parents (Broady et al, 2010). In addition, fostering for some foster parents meets their own personal desires to have a family especially for those who were unable to have their own families (Riggs et al, 2009). Most studies reveal that positive effects such as developing respect and accepting various cultures and value systems are one of the positive impact that foster care placement has on the entire family (Blythe et al, 2014).

### *Negative experiences of foster parents*

Foster parents cope and deal with behavioural problems of foster children because comparing foster children with the general population of children; they are the ones who display more problematic behaviours (Morgan & Baron, 2011). It has been discovered that foster children's behavioural problems affect the well-being of foster parents and it also creates tension within the foster family (Broady et al, 2010). Foster parents describe managing behavioural problems of foster children as tiring, stressful and relentless. Morgan and Baron (2011) identified a significant positive relationship between behavioural problems and foster parents' level of stress, anxiety and depression. Both parental ability and supportive personal networks have been found to partially mediate these effects on the well-being of foster parents. Similarly, Murray et al (2011) found that regardless of the children's

behavioural problems, the well-being of foster parents is equivalent to parents at large. The potential transitory nature of foster care causes fear and grief to foster parents. They fear of losing the foster child after they bonded and became attached to the child (Broady et al, 2010). It appears that foster parents are not fulfilling a professional role but rather a parental role and fear of losing their foster child is their articulated sense of hopelessness in relation to the child welfare system (Broady et al, 2010; Riggs et al, 2009). Foster parents experience grief even if they were part of the decision for the removal of the child (Pickin et al, 2011; Samrai et al, 2011; Thomson & McArthur, 2009).

### ***Role of foster parents***

According to the Foster Care Association of Western Australia (2009), foster parents also have fundamental roles and responsibilities. In order for foster parents to promote a child's development, they need to provide quality care, support and supervision and that makes the foster family role broad and challenging. As a result, this implies that foster parents should discuss all their foster children's aspects since they are going to foster them. They should provide unchanging, safe and sustaining home environments and all aspects of healthy development for foster children including their physical, social, emotional, psychological, cultural and spiritual needs. They should encourage and support the relationships between foster children and their biological children and their connectedness with social networks and groups. They should engage parents of foster children and families in a manner that is tolerant and respectful of their essential part, cultural identity, and spiritual beliefs and should also promote positive relationships where possible.

Foster care matters a lot considering the fact that a large number of children are placed under foster parents; hence it is the key responsibility of those who are responsible for foster children to ensure the number, quality and stability of foster care placement of such children. In 2011, there were nearly 3.85 million orphans in South Africa including children without a biological mother or father or both parents which equivalent to 21 % of all South African children. Again, in 2011 the total number of orphans has increased substantially with 853,000 more orphans as compare to 2002 (Statistics South Africa, 2012). Foster parents have a great contribution and impact in the provision of family-based care that have complicated histories which sometimes lead to troubled and challenging behaviors. Empowering, supporting and developing foster parents to take care of foster children in a manner that provides strength and security includes foster parents themselves being supported professionally both practically and emotionally (Brown et al, 2014). After committing themselves to foster care, foster parents encounter various problems as they try to take care of the needs of foster children with limited support. According to Chipungu and Bent-Goodley (2004), foster parents are often required to provide extra care and attention to address the needs of foster children yet with limited resources and support.

### ***African values and cultures' influence in experiences of foster parents and outcomes of foster care placement***

Parents hold on to the notion that no child can be an orphan in Africa, as roles of mothers and fathers are defined collectively. As such, it is presumed that no man or woman who believes in cultural values and morals will allow a child to be an orphan (Pavlovich, 2013). In Africa, caring for someone else's child is not viewed as burden by foster parents. Actually, taking care of foster children is common in Africa, where children belong to their foster parents as much as to their own parents. Foster care placement is indeed quite common, according to Demographics and health surveys (DHS) in African countries, between 9 and 35 per cent of households shelter for foster children. Many parents believe that fostering is an efficient device to help foster children become independent adults with proper values (Adsera & Tienda, 2012).

### ***Theoretical framework***

This paper used family systems theory. In "the Foster Family in a Systems Theory Perspective," Eastman (1979: 565) describes the dynamics involved in families providing foster care. When a foster family is too open, there is a risk of entropy through the loss of identity. Eastman also discusses the sense of loss felt by all family members for relationships that began and ended so quickly. Therefore, in homes where there are often temporary placements, feelings of loss can exist throughout the entire placement process. When describing flexibility and stability within the family system, Eastman maintains that "just as a foster child may have a hard time knowing to whom he belongs, the foster family may have a hard time knowing who belongs to it". Each family system has a degree of openness that allows it to function. It is still true that the level of openness required of most foster homes is much greater than in the average of family system. The effects of such a continuously evolving family system are sure to have an effect on individuals that belong to such system.

Patterns that defuse anxiety are an area of focus of the family systems theory. The perception of either too much closeness or too great distance in family relationships is the main producer for anxiety. The level of anxiety in one family member will be determined by external stress levels and how one is sensitive to particular themes that have been handed down from generations. A state of anxiety or reactivity may be set in state if members of the family are unable to think through their responses to dilemmas of the relationships but rather reach anxiously to perceive emotional demands, a chronic anxiety state or reactivity may be set in state (Brown, 1999). According

to the family systems theory, the individual is capable of self-regulation when important relationships are disturbed or unavailable. The family system could be influenced by the actions of an individual family member if that person occupies an important position in the system. If that person stays in meaningful contact with other members of the family, the entire system could change or shift its functioning. When a system changes, the behavior of family members changes as well (Rothbaum et al., 2002).

## METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The study was conducted at Zwelitsha Township, King William's Town in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Qualitative method was adopted for this study. Focus group discussions were held with 20 foster parents and the researcher used focus group discussion guide to collect data with them. Two focus groups were formed and each group was made up of 10 foster parents. Focus group discussions were used in this paper because they generate a lot of information through social communication. Participants are reminded of their own emotions about the research topic because of the dynamic interaction that prompts their thoughts. Focus group discussions allow individuals to express themselves about the topic than individual interviews in a short period of time; this could make them less expensive and faster than individual interviews (Holloway & Wheeler, 2013).

The study population composed of all supervised foster parents who are living at Zwelitsha Township. In selecting a sample, the study used snowball sampling. The researcher approached one fostering family and that family referred her to other fostering families. This technique allowed participants to nominate others who could provide information relevant to the research questions and data was thematically analyzed.

## FINDINGS

The findings begin with the characteristics of the participants, followed by the positive and negative experiences of foster parents.

### *Characteristics of the participants*

The researcher organized two focus group discussions during data collection (ten foster parents in each group who are residing at Zwelitsha). Some foster parents were providing foster care to children whom they were biologically related to, while others were not related at all. In this respect, their knowledge and experience of social and foster care practice added value and credibility to the data obtained from such participants. These foster parents provided foster care from 1-5 children and had extensive knowledge regarding foster care. Majority of them were females and most of them were fostering their grandchildren. The findings are presented according to themes which were based on the following: positive and negative experiences of foster parents in nurturing foster children. The first theme is positive experiences of foster parents who nurture foster children, with four subthemes and the second theme is negative feelings of foster parents regarding foster care with three subthemes.

### *Positive experiences of foster parents regarding fostering*

Four positive subthemes emerged from the discussion with the participants. These subthemes include foster care grant as an incentive to foster families, the desire to help and make a difference, the desire to contribute to the well-being of younger generations and positive family relationship. These subthemes are presented in the next subsections.

#### *Foster care grant as an incentive to foster families*

The majority of foster parents were grateful to the government for introducing foster care grant because it helps them a lot in meeting all the necessary needs of their foster children. They use that grant for almost all household needs. A foster parent mentioned that:

*Life would be very difficult if there was no foster care grant, we as foster parents would be unable to meet all the needs of our children because some of us are not working. I don't use this grant for only the needs of my foster children but for the needs of the entire household. (FP13)*

#### *The desire to help and make a difference*

One of the sub- themes of the foster parents' experiences involved their motivation to provide and continue providing foster care. While the foster parenting experience may change during the tenure as foster parents, one aspect that did not change was their desire to help. While this desire was primarily directed at helping other people, it expanded into helping the community and society as a whole. One FP said that: *Our societies turned to be*

*something else, I feel sorry for so many children and there are so many families that are facing challenges, fostering makes me feel like I am contributing to better the society (FP12).*

#### *The desire to contribute to the well-being of younger generations*

Foster parents were seeing part of their role in providing care for children as giving back to the younger generation. Foster parents are caring for those children to teach future generations about humanity, they are teaching them values so that they can also pass it to the next generations. They believe that it is important to do something good for another person because even foster children are learning from them. A FP stated that *“When I’m gone and my children see someone who needs care, they will provide for that person because I taught them love and care”*, (FP9).

#### *Positive family relationships*

The majority of foster parents reported positive relationships with their foster children. They mentioned that it is not only positive between them but to the entire family. A FP mentioned that *“I feel so blessed to have these children, we are always happy and they never gave me any problems. They are respectful to me and to this family”*, (FP 6).

#### *Negative feelings of foster parents regarding foster care*

Guilt, poor relationship with social workers, and behavioral difficulties of foster children were some of the negative experiences of foster parents. These are presented herein.

#### *Guilt*

The finding further revealed that the majority of the participants pointed out that it is a very sad moment when a child has to leave the family. Foster parents described denial and guilt when a foster child is removed from them. The researchers suggested that whenever a child is removed from a foster family, whether to be reunited with the biological parents, trainings for grieving process should be provided to the foster family so that they can cope with their loss. A FP declared as follows: *I felt like the whole world has turned against me when social workers came and removed him. I was very hurt because he was my only boy and I loved him very much (sobbing)*, (FP9)

#### *Poor relationship with social workers*

The majority of foster parents said that they do not have a good relationship with social workers; their relationship revolves around the foster child. Social workers never asked them about their own experiences and challenges they face as foster parents who are fostering children with different behaviors. All of them mentioned that when social workers visit them, they talk about the foster child and that brings no balance to their relationship. They never visited foster homes to assess the experiences of foster parents or foster family as a whole.

One of the participants maintained as follows: *I can say social workers don’t care about us as foster parents; they only care about foster children, their experiences and their needs (FP11).*

#### *Behavioral difficulties of foster children*

Most foster parents reported that foster children have a serious problem when it comes to their behavior. They sometimes do not care about other people’s feelings, they become selfish. They can be disrespectful towards everyone, including foster parents. A FP reported that: *If I’m asking her to wash dishes, she will say but mom why can’t you ask her to wash them?* (FP17). Another one said: *If she comes back late from school and I’m asking where she was, she just looks at me and leaves the room without saying anything* (FP14).

## **DISCUSSION**

The positive experiences of foster parents included motivational subthemes of desire to help and make a difference and the desire to contribute to the well-being of younger generations. Negative experiences are also discussed.

Foster care grant serves as a powerful incentive for fostering orphans in the context of scarce income opportunities. A social security system that is both directed and means-tested helps to find ways to access grant, especially in a society that is faced with world’s worst AIDS epidemic and poverty. Those incentives as the Department of Social Development has noted are not necessarily perverse (Marais, 2013). The findings from a study that was conducted by Metcalf and Sanders, (2012) indicated that the motivation to foster originated out of a desire to help. This experience of being helpful was reported by nearly all of the older foster parents and is consistent with studies of foster parents of all ages. Many older foster parents reported continuation of family as an important motivation. Hayslip and Smith (2013) on resilient grandparent caregivers found that grandparents are fostering their grandchildren because it is essential for the well-being of the children. The responsibility expressed by grandparents in their study indicated that their desire for grandchildren to be taken care of as well as taught to take care of themselves. All foster parents believe in Indigenous or African values and cultures that is why they started

fostering. They hold on to the notion that no child can be an orphan in Africa, as roles of mothers and fathers are defined collectively. Furthermore, for some who could not make their own families, fostering meets their own personal desires. Numerous studies indicate the positive impact that fostering has on the entire family, allowing and instilling respect and acceptance of various cultures and value systems (Brown & Campbell, 2007). The findings from a study that was conducted by Brown et al (2014) revealed that the relationship between social workers and foster parents is difficult and demanding. Poor relationships with social workers obstruct optimal fostering and may cause placement breakdown and foster care attrition.

When communication between social workers and foster parents is poor, the relationship between them maybe problematic (Samrai et al, 2011). Research has revealed that foster children display higher levels of problematic behaviors as compared to children in general population (Leslie et al, 2010). Internalizing behaviors such as depression or anxiety and externalizing behaviors such as substance abuse and disobedience are related to behavioral problems. When a foster child leaves the foster family, that on its own negatively affects foster parents because they may feel guilty and will try to find out what they did wrong, some even believe that they have done something wrong that is why the child is removed. Even if parents are the ones who asked for the removal of a child due to inability to continue caring for the child, they will feel guilty and blame themselves (DeGarmo, 2013).

### Implications of the findings to social work policy and practice

The findings were similar to previous research studies which indicated that the training that is provided to foster parents and foster children is inadequate; they lack ongoing support throughout foster care placement. Therefore, it is important to implement and address more stringent changes in policy to ensure that resources will be enough and accessible to foster parents. This may require that social workers frequently visit foster care homes to find out if all members of the foster family are still coping with the placement. This paper further provides implications for social work practice. Some foster parents identified poor relationships with the fostering agency so there is a need to increase the level of communication in order to develop more healthy relationships and positive rapport. It is important for social workers to follow-up from foster families whose foster children have been removed to ensure their emotional and psychological well-being.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Fostering plays an important role in the lives of foster parents and the input it has on their daily lives is very inspiring. The fact that many foster parents especially grandparents want to help and contribute to the well-being of younger generations makes a great contribution to the society and it inspires those who would like to foster in the future. The negative experiences on the other side demotivate them because they might perceive fostering as a system that brings problems to the family that already has its problems. Therefore, in order for foster parents to understand the dynamics of foster care placement, social workers need to make them understand care giving as it occurs in a variety of contexts. The following recommendations are drawn from the findings and conclusion of the study:

- Foster parents should receive training before the placement of the child under their care.
- Social workers should provide counseling to foster parents and the foster child prior to foster care placement.
- Social workers should visit foster homes to assess their psychosocial well-being
- There should be support groups for foster parents whereby they share views, experiences and solutions to their problems.

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