

Making foster care possible

A study of 307 foster families in Victoria

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Why in times of economic hardship do some families continue to offer to help others in the form of foster care? Can an understanding of foster families improve the targeting of foster programs? This paper presents findings from a study of more than 300 foster families from seven foster care agencies throughout urban and rural Victoria. The families who currently choose or are chosen to foster are most likely to be dual parent, stable and settled Australians with an active connection and commitment to their local community and to family life and children. They do not appear to be motivated principally by rational monetary incentives but rather by a mixture of a belief in the benefits of family experiences, a strong desire to have and nurture children, a willingness to share tasks as a family unit, to both give and receive support and a conviction to be of service to others. It is concluded that foster families are not only child and family centred, they are part of active and reciprocal family and community networks that focus upon the needs of children and non-material family values.

At a time when economic imperatives and community values have coalesced to condemn the disadvantages of institutional care, child welfare organisations are increasingly turning to foster care as an alternative form of home-based care for children. This is not just a local phenomenon but a trend throughout the Western world (Colton & Hellinckx, 1993, p.233).

Although foster homes have long been thought to provide the 'best' alternative child rearing environment, it was a major discovery of 19th century administrators that it was also cheaper. Thus foster care has frequently been seen as both a social and economical panacea for many institutionalised populations. Stable families who will take an additional child (or in some cases several siblings) on a temporary basis, are keenly sought by foster care agencies through a variety of family and community networks and local newspapers.

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Existing programs contain underlying assumptions about why families provide foster care, which form the bases for recruitment strategies. Achieving the most effective balance of incentives has led to a series of variations designed to improve the response rate of prospective families. The short-lived nature of these variations reflects not only changes in government and administrative policy and shifts in community attitudes, but also a lack of knowledge about those who currently foster and the reasons that motivate them.

Definitive answers about why families foster may not be possible, since motivations are elusive, difficult to describe and tend to change with time. If foster care placements are to be increased, appropriate prospective families must be the target of recruitment. Diverting resources from institutional to home-based services (even if adequately and sensitively funded) may not increase the availability of foster care placements if such resources are poorly targeted. A better understanding of existing foster families may help to identify these prospective families and clarify whether they are likely to respond to rational and/or altruistic incentives, thus guiding future recruitment strategies.

Background

In the past, both community and family-based child care have frequently been modified in an attempt to find the most economically viable and motivationally engaging system. The majority of these modifications have used a form of subsidised resource/service or remuneration as a rational incentive to provide home-based care, for example:

- non-monetary exchanges with socially distressed individuals (eg, work for shelter)
- boarding out of children in the expectation that their 'small services' or work (eg, as an unpaid hand on the property) would recompense for their keep
- early stages of the cottage system (engagement of couples where the 'cottage father' received in-kind rewards such as rent-free accommodation, subsidised food etc.)
- the industrial model (with shift work, rostered staff, etc.) where quasi-parents were fully employed.

Some modifications have also emphasised altruism, such as:

- a reliance on unpaid religious groups to provide care (particularly for the most 'challenging' cases)

- the use of senior residents as monitors or staff as a reward for exemplary behaviour.

It is accepted that existing foster families do not form the only base for considering expansion. It may be that governments and organisations, whilst carefully protecting the interests of foster children, wish to consider targeting different families to those currently fostering. For example, it would be useful to examine reasons for the under-representation of ethnic minorities providing foster care placements. In addition, as community attitudes change to accept broader definitions of the family, foster care agencies could assess whether these 'new' families are eligible to provide foster care. Consequential developments may extend the range of families willing to offer their services in foster care programs, thus increasing available resources. However, despite such possibilities of expansion, it is also important to explore the extent to which current resources have been tapped.

Incentives used to expand existing programs should be carefully considered to ensure that the net result is a gain in the overall number of suitable families prepared to foster children

As noted above, changes in child welfare have typically included variations to rational incentives. Such modifications have recently led to a proposal to pay 'wages' to foster families who have previously contributed their services on the basis of cost-replacement financial compensation. The costs and benefits of such a proposal need to be weighed against the attitudes of existing foster families who may be strongly opposed to becoming employees of foster care programs (Gibson et al. 1989). Incentives used to expand existing programs should be carefully considered to ensure that the net result is a gain in the overall number of suitable families prepared to foster children. It would be imprudent to introduce monetary incentives and employer-employee relations to attract new inexperienced families, whilst unintentionally alienating valued, existing foster families. In light of the limited success of previous changes, it would be appropriate to

carefully re-consider the role of incentives in recruiting new foster families.

Prior research has provided a description of the basic demography of foster families, but this information has been of limited use in planning recruitment strategies. In a series of recent studies (Tierney, 1974; O'Brien, 1984; Rumbold, 1989; Gibson et al 1989; Webb, 1990; Were, 1990; Tierney & Were, 1991; Dyer, 1994) there is compelling evidence for taking a family-in-community approach to understanding motivations to foster. The findings of these studies suggest that foster parents proceed to fostering through processes that include:

- prior experiences that predispose a family to foster
- a triggering event followed by:
 - a series of negotiations with an agency including introductory sessions about foster care
 - a lengthy process of discussion and thought by the prospective foster parents resulting in a commitment to foster and:
 - a series of informative induction sessions
 - a process of family conferences to consider the roles of various family members
 - an agency-based assessment of the family.

Such findings have expanded the understanding of foster families, however the developmental and community context within which families decide to foster has rarely been considered. The reasons and incentives for fostering are located within this family-in-community context; shaped by the family's past, subject to common processes and potentially accessible to agencies seeking a triggering incident.

Of particular significance is the study undertaken by Were (1990) involving eight foster families systematically chosen to represent a typical range of foster placements. In this study, it was found that the families provided foster care as a unit and that the habit of referring to 'foster mothers' while ignoring other family members was mistaken. For example, although it had been common knowledge that the presence of a foster child impacts on the foster families' 'own' children, the results of this study demonstrated the extent to which the foster families' children contributed to the fostering enterprise. A comparison of the results of this study to agency records suggested the findings were generalisable.

In a study by Gibson et al (1989), two further foster family characteristics were identified. Firstly, families were found to be extremely active in a variety of community affairs, particularly those associated with their children ('own' or foster). This contrasts with Fanshel's (1966) suggestion that foster families are an isolated anachronism when compared with the general community, '.... [with] adherence to earlier modes of thought and living folk families' (p.10). Secondly, the families strongly opposed any suggestion that they should be regarded as 'employees' of the state, or of any organisation.

The present study

The purpose of the present study was to explore foster families in their family-in-community context in order to improve our understanding of why they foster and the way in which family members contribute to the fostering enterprise. The findings should be understood within the broad range of services in Australia that bear the title 'foster care'.

Foster care programs vary a great deal from place to place. For example, the main programs in New South Wales are operated directly by the state government department through district offices (Gain, Ross & Fogg, 1987). They are generally non-participative and the foster care 'field staff' frequently lack professional training and supervision (pp. 130-136). Another version of foster care in New South Wales is reported by Smith and Smith (1990) who describe a small program operated by a voluntary agency where the foster parents were recruited '.....through "Positions Vacant" columns as paid service providers with specific skills in parenting' (pp. 146-165). Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid (1992) report an experimental study where, over a period of two years, relatively minor variations to professional support and stipends to foster parents significantly increased not only a sense of 'being valued' but an increase in 'meaningful mission'. Associated with this was an increase in retention rates of foster parents. Therefore, when generalising the findings from the current study, caution is needed in applying them to other programs where goals, target groups and methods of administration may differ.

RESEARCH SETTING AND SAMPLE.

Seven typical Victorian foster care agencies were selected for this study. Victorian foster care programs operate under the auspices of various voluntary agencies. Typically they are small, professional

and work to common standards developed by the Victorian Government Department of Health and Community Services (*Practice Standards in Foster Care*, 1984). Approximately 90% of working expenses (excluding the uncosted contribution of foster families, boards of management and staff) are provided by the State. These agencies operate in defined regions with populations of between 120,000 and 400,000. In addition to caring for children, foster parents contribute as members of boards of management (2 agency presidents were foster parents), as trainers of new foster parents, as group leaders and fund raisers etc.. The programs are extremely flexible offering a range of services from emergency care and regular respite care through to long term foster care. It is assumed that biological parents would, in most cases, maintain frequent contact with the foster family caring for their children and, broadly speaking, the programs are regarded as family support services.

The caseworkers in each of the seven agencies were interviewed to gather information about the agency's entire complement of foster families. In addition, several foster families were interviewed to enrich the data.

METHOD AND PROCEDURES

An interview schedule was constructed covering the following domains:

- demographic data about the foster family and their families of origin
- family developmental history
- family community connectedness
- recruitment
- fostering history
- division of foster care responsibility.

A modified case study method was used to obtain data on 307 foster families. Interviews were conducted with the caseworkers who knew and worked with the families. Although the length of contact between the worker and their assigned foster families was not recorded, workers were mostly very well acquainted with families, and all used current agency records to inform their responses during the interviews. Typically, these workers had been involved with the families in many ways, for example: they had made professional visits to the homes of these families; had conducted assessments; and had participated in ongoing discussions about foster children and their parents. In order to verify the reliability of the data, a number of interviews were conducted with individual families in their own homes.

Findings

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA.

Foster parents in the study tended to be in their early forties, had been married for an average of 16 years and had an average of 4-5 years of fostering. The majority were stable dual-parent families with less than 12% of foster parents forming a single parent family: including always single, divorced, separated and widowed parents. Of those families with children, two out of three began fostering when their own children were under the age of twelve, although at the time of the study many families had older children no longer living at home.

The average number of own children across all foster families was 2.7. This is the same as Gain et al's (1987) findings for New South Wales foster families (p. 44), confirming that the family size of foster families is generally higher than the national average of 2.3. A deeper analysis of the data revealed other interesting factors. In particular it was found that the mere measurement of the number of children per family was misleading. Information gathered regarding special features that led families to fostering indicated that many of the foster parents were childless couples meeting their needs for children through a range of alternative care programs (see later). If childless couples are excluded from the data, the average number of children per foster family rises to 3.1. The families of origin of most foster parents in this study were also large with an average of 4.2 children. Sixteen percent of families in the study had a child not born to the parents, eg, an adopted child, informal foster care arrangement etc.. For some, this arrangement preceded their commencement in the foster care program, for others it occurred after they began fostering.

In keeping with the findings of Bebbington and Miles (1990) very few foster parents completed tertiary education (less than 3%) with the majority of men working in blue collar (40%) or small business/white collar (38%) occupations. Despite previous work experience, most of the foster mothers stayed at home (77%) but a significant number (27%) had some form of part-time employment with a major degree of autonomy that permitted them to vary their work schedule and meet family obligations. Where mothers had worked prior to fostering a significant percentage (38%) worked in areas relevant to the human services including child care, home help, nursing etc.. However, only 12% of fathers had existing or prior occupations relevant to fostering.

By far the majority of foster mothers were born in Australia (84%). The next largest group were born in Great Britain (9%) with only 5% born in other European countries. For foster fathers, the data was incomplete; in 12% of families the father's country of origin was either unknown or irrelevant (single parents). But for those fathers where information was available, 78% were Australian born and 11% were born in Great Britain. A further 9% of foster fathers were born in other countries of Europe. Despite recent increases in Asian and other non-European migration, from this research foster care appears to be principally an anglo-celtic enterprise; only four foster fathers and two foster mothers were born outside Australasia and Europe. Many factors may account for this distinctiveness, including cultural variations in child care practices, the possibility of informal supports based upon other kith or kin networks etc.. Further research may illuminate this interesting question.

The suitability and stability of the foster home is a crucial factor in foster care. Bebbington and Miles (1990) argue for the importance of adequate space for families contemplating fostering. Most of the families in the current study enjoyed stable, although modest, living circumstances. Ninety percent of families in the present study either owned or were buying their own homes, lived in a house (rather than flat or unit 1%, or farm 9%) and had lived in that house for an average of 9 years. Eighty nine percent of the families were described as 'financially stable'.

Interviews with families and with caseworkers typically revealed people who place family life at the centre of most decision-making

Summarising the demographic characteristics, the average foster family is likely to be Australian born and come from and have a larger family than average. They will tend to be mature aged parents with a low to middle family income and be financially stable. It is more than likely that one parent will be in full-time work and the other (the mother) at home. Where the mother has part-time work she will tend to have flexible arrangements to increase her ability to meet child care commitments. The family will probably have lived in the same home and/or area for a lengthy period of time. However, a

focus on measures of family demography alone excludes the developmental history of the family and its role in the local community, or in other words, the ecological dimension. Inclusion of this dimension expands the informational base for examining how families come to foster.

FAMILY DEVELOPMENTAL HISTORY.

It is almost axiomatic to state that foster families are family oriented. Interviews with families and with caseworkers typically revealed people who place family life at the centre of most decision-making. Major family choices about careers, material possessions, holidays, location shifts etc. tended to be considered firstly for their potential impact upon the needs of the family as a unit.

The interaction between foster families and service user families is an important issue for future research, although not the focus of the present study. All foster families in this project might be seen as providing support to user families and their children by virtue of the task of fostering. However, this study explored the degree of support they provided to those *other than* these service users, both as participators in foster care organisations and as extended family members. Notwithstanding the energies expended on fostering, some 42% of families were described as either providing support for, or were in reciprocal supportive relations with, other foster families or extended family members.

An interesting aspect of the study concerned particular family features that were thought to have contributed to the motivation to foster. In the family interviews, questions brought to light significant and sometimes traumatic personal and family experiences from foster parents. Caseworker assessments and past interviews with families had also revealed many sensitive personal histories. In many cases families and workers spoke of difficult adolescent and early adulthood experiences for one or both of the parents, such as violent family breakdown, incarceration (them or their parents), substance abuse etc.. A common outcome for these people as they reached adulthood was the formation of a successful and happy marriage. This new family bond seemed not just reparative but nurtured a deep appreciation of children and family life; a child centred orientation which was highlighted as an aspect of motivation to foster. This commitment to family life appeared to be passed to the next generation, with many older children who had left home, still participating in family decision-making and assisting in the tasks of fostering. This family

reparative pathway to a successful outcome has also been noted by Quinton and Rutter (1988).

Forty-one percent of families had a strong 'family' orientation in their lives coupled with a need to be of service to others

The issue of childlessness or family limitation appears to be a major factor in the motivation to foster, with many families wishing to have more children than was reproductively possible. This issue was raised by workers or families in 23% of cases. This interest in increasing the number of children in the family became translated into adoption and fostering.

Forty-one percent of families had a strong 'family' orientation in their lives coupled with a need to be of service to others. For some, this need arose from their religious convictions, for others, it seemed to be more embedded in family life and traditions. In fifteen percent of families a strong history of fostering or family-based alternative care was identified.

FAMILY COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS

Many foster families in the study were actively involved in both religious and community organisations at the local level. Three quarters of the families were known to have religious beliefs and more than half were deemed to be either religiously active or very religious in following their beliefs.

Foster families were generally long standing local residents. Although they had lived in their present homes for an average of 9 years, these families had lived in the local area for an average of 15.4 years, and many of them for much more than 20 years. This local familiarity led to a form of community connectedness that reflected the foster families interests in children. More than 80% of families were involved in their local community, some diffusely through low-level participation in a number of organisations, but others were far more intensely committed, taking on leadership roles and other demanding obligations. The minor to middle-level community involvements included sporting club secretaries, scout leaders, school council members, etc. where the amount of time required varied with parental availability and the degree of their children's participation. In some families, however, the involvement was considerable, for exam-

ple: two presidents of the foster care organisations were foster parents themselves; many were members of foster parent support groups and related peak organisations, some were local government representatives, some chaired rural interest groups etc.

Strangely enough, several of the foster families interviewed did not see their low-level activity as 'involvement' in the community, but simply as the expected level of parental participation in local clubs and societies (one parent likened it to fulfilling her 'tuck shop' duty roster). In many cases the commitment was temporary, lasting the period of a child's attachment to a particular sport (although this could be several years). However, as children grew and the sports or activities changed, so parental commitment tended to shift to the child's new area of interest.

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RECRUITMENT

Most families (approximately 70%) commenced fostering when the youngest child was less than twelve years of age. For forty percent, the youngest child was between 5 and 12 years, suggesting that as this child began school the parents sought opportunities to continue caring for young children through foster care. During the interviews it became clear that for many foster families, as the demands for the care of their own children diminished, they felt increasingly able to address a long-standing wish to offer support to other families.

In most cases, the wish of families to help children was not initially expressed as a desire to foster. Many families had previously provided or considered such things as: temporary holiday placements, respite care for disabled children and family day care, before being drawn to foster care. The triggering event that connected them with fostering is of particular interest.

From all known cases, the most common form of recruitment (49% of families) was a response to an advertisement or article in a local newspaper. In many cases, these advertisements or articles were written for particular children with an accompanying brief personal history that appealed to the intending foster family.

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The next most common form of recruitment (20% of families) was through contact with an existing foster family. This type of recruitment took a variety of forms with the initiative sometimes being taken by the new family and sometimes by the existing foster family, either independently or in response to an agency program. Recruitment drives from agencies outside the family's area, leaflet drops and/or posters, together accounted for a total of 15% of family commencements. Only 14% of families actually presented themselves to the agency to initiate an enquiry.

FOSTERING HISTORY

The families in the survey had been fostering for an average of 4.6 years. Only 23% of families were in their first year in the program and six families had been fostering for 19 years or more. Up to five years of fostering experience accounted for some 72% of the families, and up to eleven years accounted for 92%. Only eight percent of families had been fostering for twelve or more years. It would appear that for most families foster care has a span of around five to ten years.

Although all families had fostered during the preceding twelve months, some 40% of the families were awaiting placement of a child (or 'resting') at the time of the survey. Families actively fostering were caring for an average of 1.6 foster children per family. Some 26% of families had previously fostered special needs children and 62% had fostered children under State guardianship. The average number of placements for all families was 12, with nearly all families taking

both long and short term placements during their fostering career.

At the commencement of fostering, most families (87%) placed some restriction upon the type of children they would foster. Most frequently when this was one factor, it was the age of the child that concerned them (20%) but many families had multiple restrictions (59%) including mixtures of age, gender, numbers and special needs issues. Around half of all the families relaxed their restrictions throughout their fostering career as they were extended (or 'stretched' as it was described by the agencies) to meet the particular needs of certain children in the program. For around 12% of families 'stretching' was not an issue since they placed no restrictions on their commitment from the commencement of their involvement in the program.

DIVISION OF FOSTER CARE RESPONSIBILITIES.

One of the most interesting features of this study was the way in which families shared the responsibilities of foster care. Of the 283 families (92%) where sufficient information about this issue was known, 94% reported sharing of foster care responsibilities between all or most family members. For 67% of these families the responsibilities were judged as 'strongly shared' and in a further 27% foster care duties were considered to contain 'some shared responsibility'. Only in 6% of cases were the duties of foster care the responsibility of the mother alone.

Limitations

This study is limited to the degree that it principally relies upon the agencies' records and caseworkers for its data. However, the rigorous nature of family assessments and the length of contact between agency and family (on average the families had been fostering for 4.7 years) increases the data's reliability. It is also important to emphasise that the data for this study did not simply rely upon the impressions of caseworkers but rather upon their elaborations of the hard data contained in agency files. These files were consulted for each family at the time of the interview. It is reasonable to argue that the long-standing working relationships between foster families and agency caseworkers made available a quality of information that would not have been possible to access through researcher-conducted interviews. The data is also strengthened by the large number of cases accessed through this methodological procedure. Such a substantial population would not have been feasible

if interviews had been conducted with each family.

A further limitation to generalising these results concerns the large number and range of family welfare agencies in Victoria and throughout the rest of Australia that provide foster care programs in similar or varied forms. The study was an attempt to address this issue by involving a number of agencies of different size, location and auspice. However it was not possible to involve all registered foster care agencies in Victoria and it may be that some agencies have a group of foster families with different characteristics to those reported in the present study.

Nevertheless, the population size, rigorous and consistent procedure, and range of agencies warrants cautious confidence in a degree of generalisation to current foster care programs. This confidence is strengthened by the degree of similarity of the results to former studies in this field. Some of these findings are consistent with previous research conducted in Britain. For example, the tendency of Australian foster parents to identify with foster children on the basis of unhappy childhood experiences (28% of families in the current study) and their inability to have (more) children (23% of families) have been previously identified in British studies (Kay, 1966; Dando & Minty, 1987). However, unlike Dando and Minty (1987: 397) the present study provides no correlation between these factors and the standard of fostering provided by the families. The factor of 'family and service to others' orientation amongst foster families (41% in the current study) is similar to the factor identified by Dando and Minty (1987:398) as 'altruistic/social conscience motive'. Interestingly none of these factors account for a majority of the current families studied although the percentages are certainly large enough to signal a significant set of identifying characteristics amongst those who foster.

Conclusions

The findings of this study provide a useful description of foster families in Victoria, confirming some previously identified factors but also establishing new and interesting family-in-community characteristics that could influence future recruitment strategies.

To those familiar with the field of foster care the families in this study are easily recognisable but also possess some interesting characteristics which have not previously been associated with foster families. They are easily recognised

because on the surface they are 'ordinary' families: Australian born, two parents, one bread winner, with a slightly larger number of children in stable living and financial circumstances etc.. They are interesting because of the high percentage actively involved in 'working' associations with others: enjoying mutually supportive relationships beyond the immediate family (42% of families), sharing family tasks (94% of families) and with an active and ongoing involvement, in their church and/or local community (80% of families). In fact it is these characteristics that are most commonly held by families in the study.

Potential families tend to commence fostering when a particular triggering incident engages their pre-disposed commitment, when their children are at school and when the parents are mostly in their late thirties. The success of local advertisements in current recruitment (49% of families where the reason was known) supports the finding that families are interested in local issues. Once involved in foster care, they tend to continue fostering for approximately ten years, extending the range of their involvement beyond their initial expectations. These families do not appear to be motivated by rational monetary incentives but rather by a mixture of a belief in the benefits of family experiences, a strong desire to have and nurture children, a willingness to share tasks as a family unit, to both give and receive support and a conviction to be of service to others.

It should be recognised at this point of conclusion that this study is, in part, a reflection of current and former recruitment policies and practices in the participating agencies and is, in that sense, a description of things 'as they are'. Discussions about what 'might be' in a future where families may be fully paid to provide foster care or where the criteria for assessment of families may change to include those currently precluded from fostering, remain the focus another paper and perhaps another time.

In the meantime, organisations extending or developing foster care programs may do well to target incentives to match the motivations that attract potential families. In the authors' view, such organisations should not accentuate rational motives at the cost of altruism and need to find ways of accessing all family members, especially those involved in local community activities centred on children.

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