

Quality foster care Who decides?

Dawn M. Juratowitch and Norman J. Smith

The selection of foster parents with qualities necessary to undertake care of other people's children is a difficult task. Little research has been done in identifying what the associated qualities are. This paper reports the first stage of a research study examining these qualities from the perspective of foster parents themselves and experienced family care workers. From a qualitative exercise involving 10 foster parents and 2 family care workers over 50 nominated qualities were elicited covering motivation; personal attributes; knowledge and skills with children and competencies emanating from experience. Arising from this exercise a model was constructed which identifies stages in foster parenting. This could enable differential educational strategies based on a competency approach to be developed in order to achieve a better level of quality control.

The provision of substitute care for children is a complex area. It is based on the principle of catering for the physical as well as the social and emotional needs of children. Those responsible for managing the provision of the actual care have to assess both the child's needs as well as the capacity of those who will directly provide the day to day care. Whilst it is a substitution for home care in many instances it has to be of a higher standard than that which the child has previously been receiving.

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The selection of those who provide the actual care has serious ramifications for statutory authorities. If they fail in the selection of their substitute care providers the quality of the care subsequently given will be such as to constitute a serious injustice to the child. On the other hand the quality of caring has to be such that it does not preclude the child from

returning to his or her natural home where this is possible.

So, considering the importance of selecting substitute, or foster carers, it could be expected that a lot of attention has been given to the subject by service providers and researchers. More importantly – that there are clear guidelines on how to select persons able to provide substitute care at a level which is satisfactory to organisations, including the children receiving the care at their hands.

This paper briefly explores work done in this area, then describes the background, rationale, conduct and results to date of a small study to examine the area of quality of foster care as it relates to the foster carers.

BACKGROUND TO STUDY

Using the terms 'foster care' and 'substitute care' in the child welfare, psychological and social work literature, specifically the Journal of Social Work Research and Abstracts, a thematic literature search was done. Having found one relevant reference, a 'snowball' approach was adopted by tracing citations of the source in the Social Citations Index; this pointed to specific papers and types of journals. We also explored databases on Internet using the term 'foster care' and did searches of these through JANET. In addition, details of our study were E-mailed on the Social

Work and Family listserver and produced two contacts in the USA who are currently interested in the same area of research.

Prospective foster parents must be aware they will probably receive little preparation for the type of problems they will encounter; be aware of their own needs and capacities and have the energy and values required to care for others.

The researchers were disappointed if not surprised that this area has not attracted much attention over the years (Carbino 1980). Lawrence(1993) in particular draws attention to the sparsity of work in the Australian context in relation to the recruitment of foster carers¹. However, there is nothing included on the personal attributes desired in potential foster parents which are used, or could be used, to assist in their selection. Smith's (1991) Australian study focussing on society's expectations of mothering touches on some of the positive and negative attitudes conveyed to birth parents by foster parents emphasising that the qualities held by foster mothers in particular are

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important in the overall context of 'caring'.

We were fortunate to be able to access Goddard and Carew's (1993) work which, in a small section, deals with assessing foster parents and is focussed on the Australian context. They point to the difficulty surrounding this type of venture, emphasising the need for foster parents to be more than just parents in that they have to be able to 'love and let go' (p231). In the studies they examined, many of which were more than ten years old, a number of factors were cited as important indicators in the selection of foster parents. These included: the need for agencies to be clear in communicating what was expected of foster parents in relation to whether they were to undertake short or long term care; the need for foster parents to be able to deal with behavioural problems in children, and the need for both parents to be involved in fostering. Prospective foster parents must be aware they will probably receive little preparation for the type of problems they will encounter; be aware of their own needs and capacities and have the energy and values required to care for others. In the selection process itself important factors are the emotional maturity of applicants and the reasons for wanting to be foster parents. How the applicants feel about parents whose children are placed in foster care, together with their likely response to visits of the children by the parents, were also cited as important factors.

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One study in particular referred to by Goddard & Carew (1993), that of Cautley (1980), identified characteristics in new foster parents which were proposed as indicators of success in fostering. These were their familiarity with children; having good parenting models themselves; their parenting skills in handling difficult behaviours; willingness to work with the social worker and the agency; and the decision-making manner of the foster parent and their 'parenting attitudes'.

A study which was not included in Goddard & Carew's review was that of Dando & Minty (1987). This focussed more on the long term care characteristics

which made a 'good' foster parent. In particular these authors were interested in linking this with outcomes. Besides building up a sociological picture of long term foster parents, they examined the personal experiences of foster parents during their childhood and focussed on the different types of motivation for the task of fostering. Rating of the foster parents was achieved using the following categories, arrived at in consultation with the researchers and family care officers: agency role understanding; basic child care capabilities, like being warm and understanding; and special capacities such as ability to cope with the legal ramifications of caring for a child in care. The sample of foster parents selected were those who in the judgement of the family care officer (social worker), were 'good' foster parents.

The parents' ideas about the aim of fostering fell into two broad classes:- acting as temporary parents with a focus on the child's developmental needs and passing on skills to them and, to a lesser extent, as a secondary support for the child's own parents

Findings related to mothers' motivation to foster stemmed mainly from one of three origins: childlessness; altruism; and identification with deprived children. The findings also reinforced results from earlier studies, such as Kay (1966) and Josslyn (1952), and were a good point from which to start our own study.

METHODOLOGY

Because of the focus of Dando & Minty's study (1987) and its relation to previous studies, we decided to adopt a similar approach, that is to interview foster parents who had been selected by family care workers as 'good' foster parents irrespective of the length of time they had been fostering. This was an initial pilot study in order to generate data to proceed to a prospective larger study. Since so little research has been done at all in the area, it was felt that a qualitative in depth approach was initially necessary to define and refine methodology as the study proceeded.

The population from which the sample was drawn was a large geographical area

of a metropolitan based statutory family based service in south-east Queensland.

The joys of fostering were expressed as externally focussed – seeing developmental changes in the child and meeting interesting people; or internally felt as pleasure in generally helping in crises

Twelve foster parents were approached after being nominated by two experienced family care officers as providing, in their judgement, 'good' foster care. Ten subsequently agreed to be interviewed. The interviews took place over one and a half weeks. Half the respondents were interviewed in their homes, the others by telephone either because of geographical distance or at their request. From an examination of responses it appears that the major differences were in time taken to complete the semi-structured questions rather than in relation to the number or type of responses to the semi-structured questions and method of interviewing.

In only one family was the foster father available for interview.

The researcher explained the study to each foster parent in terms of wanting to know what qualities foster parents felt people attracted to foster parenting should have. They were informed that they had been approached because of their experience and in regard for their work. They were also told they would be interviewed by one of the researchers who was not an employee of the statutory organisation and that their observations and responses to questions would be treated confidentially. It was also explained that their responses might be used as the basis for a larger study.

The approach focussed on asking foster parents themselves what *they considered* were the characteristics of a 'good' foster parent. This was based on the premise that the foster parent would, in effect, convey qualities which they themselves believed they had.

After an introduction to the study, respondents were asked about the length of time they had fostered, total number of children they had cared for, preferences for short or long term stay, gender and age of children cared for, and also if they had children of their own.

Inherent personal qualities	Motivational qualities	Knowledge of children	Capacity to relate to children	Modified experiential qualities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • caring • personal stability • patient • flexible • sense of humour • tolerance • hope • non-judgemental 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • willing to learn • understanding • not give up • perseverance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understand and assess child's needs • accept child's parents and background • look deeply at behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accept children are damaged • not seeing children as ends in themselves • can display affection to children • communicate at level of child • not hurt by children • give reassurance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • aware of own weaknesses • able to deal with a variety of problems • positive attitude towards child's family • able to adjust to change • able to let go • accept pain of separation • adjust own standards • able to live with anger • know what to expect

FIGURE 1. NOMINATED QUALITIES OF FOSTER PARENTS

They were then asked to describe why they became foster parents; the duties and responsibilities of a foster parent; some of the good and bad things about fostering and what qualities they thought a foster parent should have. This followed on to seeking some comment on ways the experience of having their own children, if appropriate, had on their foster caring role. In conclusion, the issue of visits by a child's natural parents was explored, together with the foster parents' perception of the role of the family care worker and statutory organisation.

The family care worker who knew the foster parent was also asked to nominate the qualities of those foster parents.

Following content analysis of both sets of interviews, a 'construct' based list of statements was assembled which will form the base for the next stage of the study. The list will be given to all foster parents and family care workers throughout the State for them to judge their usefulness as qualities foster parents should have.

RESULTS

The range of years respondents had fostered was from 6 to 14, with a median of 10 years, and the number of children fostered was from 16 to 60, with a mean of 33. Nearly all parents had experienced a variety of placements, from overnight to periods of years. As a result of fostering some had adopted children. All but two of the families had children of their own and, of these, five had adopted children.

The reasons for fostering focussed predominantly on the loss associated with their own children growing up and they 'liked being a mother..'; and they had responded to an advertisement for foster parents or as a result of thinking about adoption. The parents' ideas about the aim of fostering fell into two broad

classes: acting as temporary parents with a focus on the child's developmental needs and passing on skills to them and, to a lesser extent, as a secondary support for the child's own parents. The joys of fostering were expressed as externally focussed – seeing developmental changes in the child and meeting interesting people, or internally felt as pleasure in generally helping in crises. The negative aspects of fostering could also be categorised as internally or externally directed. Criticisms were made about the constant movement of children, behavioural problems, and lack of support by family care staff – to feelings of frustration at not achieving with the child what they had set out to do, and the time it took to achieve change.

A total of 54 qualities, which respondents felt foster parents should have, were nominated. When duplicates were removed, 33 remained. A content analysis of the statements was made by both researchers independently to look for possible clustering and to see if construct matching could be made. All statements

were categorised into groups determined by both researchers, with the exception of five which included, for example, 'learning not to be fussy'.

Five categories were identified as shown in Figure 1. These were:-

1. Inherent personal qualities.
2. Motivational qualities.
3. Competencies relating to knowledge of children.
4. Competencies covering ability to relate to children.
5. Modified experiential qualities, that is qualities modified by experience of caring, or changed through training.

DISCUSSION

Further work now needs to be done on the elicited qualities by returning to the foster parents and family care workers for them to assess the extent to which they are accepted collectively. It is also intended to widen the data collection. At this point, however, it is possible to postulate a possible

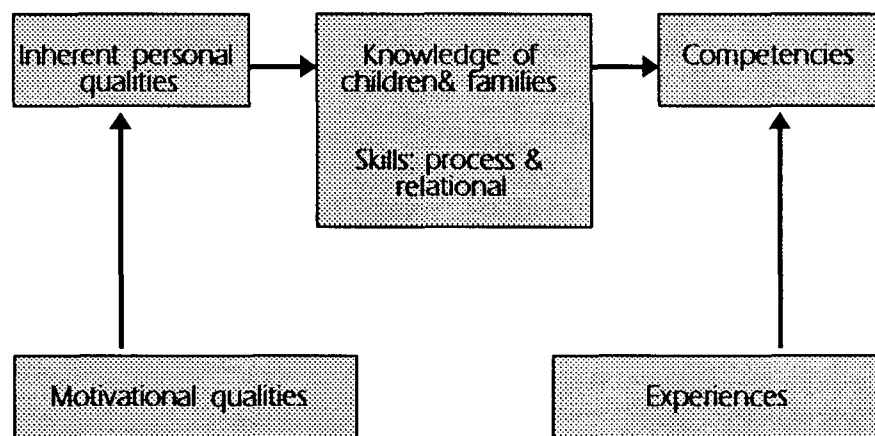


FIGURE 2. A MODEL TO AID THE IDENTIFICATION OF FOSTER PARENT ATTRIBUTES

model (Figure 2) which may help to identify stages in foster parenting which require different strategies relating to selection, training, competency development and assessment. It does not include procedural knowledge of statutory agencies, an understanding of which has to be covered irrespective of selection and training procedures adopted.

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Accepting that the personal attributes which foster parents identified could apply to many categories of philanthropic work these still have to be harnessed to motivational attributes. The successful combination of these in this context, however, is also dependent on a training

procedure which equips prospective foster parents with knowledge of children and families as well as with skills in relating to children and their birth parents. This kind of preparation, if it followed a selection process, may also serve as a 'self selecting' procedure. Uncommitted prospective foster parents may select themselves out after attending preparatory training which focussed on knowledge of the special needs of children in care and the skills in relating to them.

If this initial training program was based on a competency model, it could also provide the agency with measures for assessing levels of performance. Since the aim of the National Training Board, through its State Industry Training and Advisory Boards, is to identify competency standards for *all* workers in the Community Services and Health Industry, including foster parents, it is important that we continue to examine and define the qualities which are the hallmark of competent foster parents. ✪

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¹The study by Evans, S. & Tierney, L. 1995, 'Making foster care possible: A study of 307 foster families in Victoria' in *Children Australia* 20(2), pp. 4-10, was published after the present study was completed.

AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT REPORTS TO UN COMMITTEE ON CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD PROGRESS

In December 1995 the Australian Government finally submitted its report on measures taken for the implementation of rights set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in December 1995.

In accordance with the requirements of the Convention the report was due on 15 January 1993. Its delay was reportedly due to the need to gather data and consult with the States and Territories on its content, as most child and family welfare legislation in Australia is enacted and administered in their legislatures and jurisdictions.

Copies of the report, entitled *Australia's Report Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, can be obtained from the Attorney General's Department. Ph: (06) 250 5676

Steps are now being taken by a coalition of non-government agencies, including **Oz Child**, to develop an alternative NGO report; this is permissible under the terms of the Convention.

This effort is being coordinated overall by **Defence for Children International: Australia**, PO Box 383, Dickson ACT 2602. Ph: (06) 247 0278

Karen Medica of **Oz Child** is coordinating the Victorian contribution. PO Box 1310, South Melbourne VIC 3205 Ph: (03) 9695 2200 Fax: (03) 9696 0507