The impact of fostering on the biological children of foster carers

A review of literature

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Based on a paper presented to
Fostering the future
11th biennial IFCO conference
Melbourne, July 1999

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Substantial changes in the nature of foster care during the last few decades place increasing demands not only on foster parents, but also on all members of their family. Some of these changes include the increasing number of children needing foster care and the resultant growth in the number of foster families, the move towards de-institutionalisation, the use of treatment and specialist foster care and more emphasis on family reunification. Despite this, biological children of carers receive very little attention and recognition of their contribution.

In spite of the extensive literature on the subject of foster care, very little has been written on the impact of fostering on biological children. The literature related to foster care has primarily focused on professional processes, such as assessment and selection of foster families and management of the placement of a foster child. The limited amount of literature available on this topic is mainly from the UK and the US and is mainly related to foster mothers and their perceptions, with very little reference to their birth children. This along with my personal interest and practice experience has inspired me to conduct a literature review and write this paper.

FOSTERING AS AN ENTIRE FAMILY TASK

Based on findings from work with natural children, it has been clearly argued in the literature that foster care should be seen as an entire family task, not just foster parents alone. More importantly, biological children should be seen as a separate entity in the entire fostering system.

HOW FOSTERING IMPACTS ON BIOLOGICAL CHILDREN

The presence of foster children in the home can affect the lives of biological children in many ways, and with varied magnitudes.

Practical difficulties and day-to-day living with foster children

- Sharing their parents, friends, possessions, toys, bedroom, etc;
- being woken up at night;
- having their possessions destroyed;
- coping with foster children's difficult and annoying behaviour, eg, stealing, lying, etc;
- more attention given to the foster children than to themselves;
- lack of privacy;
- foster children receiving a greater amount of pocket money than that of the birth children;
- not having enough seats in the car and difficulties in getting to school on time.

(Triseliotis et al, 1995)

In their study Poland and Groze (1993) found that 67% of biological children reported changes in their home after fostering began.

Impact on family dynamics, equilibrium and relationships

In order to fully understand the impact of fostering on biological children, it is essential to have some knowledge of how the dynamics of a foster family work.

According to Pugh (1996), because of the temporary nature of foster care, the family equilibrium is likely to be affected more by fostering than any other factor. This is because biological children experience not only a succession of new members with various histories, but often have to cope with changes in respect of their status.

Poland and Grose (1993) found that 61% of foster parents felt that foster care did not produce better family relationships.

Price and Landsverk (1998) argue that abused children, by their inappropriate and disruptive behaviour, can contribute to negative and coercive family interaction.

One study in Australia (Were, 1990) found that the first few placements were more disruptive for most foster families than subsequent placements.

Loss of parental attention

In a number of studies, loss of parental attention was identified by biological children as one of the worst things they experienced as a result of fostering (Part, 1993; Pugh, 1996; Reed, 1996-97).

The Surrey Foster Care Executive Committee (1995) identified that jealousy among foster carers' own children was common in many foster homes, when foster children rightly received a great deal of attention from their own family, relatives and social workers as compared to the birth children.

Some young people did not want to add to the demands on their parents, but at the same time felt irritated by having to wait their turn for attention (Twigg, 1994). In my view, this probably explains why many biological children of carers often put up with difficulties and refrain from voicing their feelings.

A self-help group consisting of 13 biological children reached a consensus that the foster children were more favoured, and received much more attention than they themselves received (Johnston, 1989).

Problems with attachment and separation

Much has been written about attachment and loss experienced by foster children as a result of being removed from home and placed with strangers. Regrettably, very little attention has been paid to the attachment problems of biological children who are frequently exposed to foster children moving in and out of their homes.

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The following observations and comments have emerged from the review of literature.

Wilkes (1974) and Ellis (1972) note that when foster children frequently move in and out of the foster home, the adjustment period can become a continual source of stress for the foster family.

One study concluded that children who foster were likely to be affected to some extent by problems with attachment and loss, particularly in the case of frequent short-term placements (Pugh, 1996).

Foster families have to determine how much of themselves they can risk in their attachment to the foster child. Poland and Groze (1993) observe that this effort to protect themselves from the grief of separation can be a source of stress for foster families.

One child, aged 8, observes, 'When a foster child leaves, it's like a death in the family' (Kavanagh, 1988:10).

Other emotional costs of fostering

The emotional impact of fostering on biological children can be quite profound as evidenced from the literature. It is important to be aware that the likelihood of the children of carers being exposed to certain disturbing issues is greater than for children whose parents are not fostering.

Based on their study findings and practice experience, Pugh (1996) and Neate (1991) respectively concluded that the biological children of carers were exposed to violence, sexual abuse, drug abuse and suicide.

It was also demonstrated that a number of children found great difficulty in expressing hostile feelings towards the foster child, and that the real stresses in fostering for these young people arise from premature growing up (Martin, 1993).

Poland and Groze (1993) argue that fostering can also evoke ambivalent feelings among biological children towards the foster children. For example, biological children may be confused when they are told that a foster child needs their love, understanding and patience, yet they experience negative feelings toward the foster child

Nearly a quarter of 23 children interviewed in one study reported some difficulties and feelings of irritation in relation to being part of a foster family (Reed, 1996-97).

The consensus by a self-help group ran by Johnston (1989) was that fostering left children feeling hurt, that their problems did not matter, and that they were expected to take second place to the foster children. The majority felt a great deal of anger from time to time, which they kept suppressed because of perceived negative parental reactions.

Particular implications for fostering sexually abused children

The reality is that any foster family can find themselves unexpectedly fostering a sexually abused child. This has particular implications for biological children, as this can make them more vulnerable and place them at risk. A very serious issue that families have to face is when their own children are being sexually abused by the foster children.

All the children in one study had shared their home with, and sometimes baby sat, foster children who had been sexually abused. Two of the girls in the group, aged 11 and 12, described how they had had disclosures made to them, and how they had then felt uncomfortable in their own father's company for a while. Two boys of 14

and 15 years talked about how vulnerable they were when abused children behaved in a sexually provocative way (Martin & Standford, 1990).

Martin's study (1993) found that some young people had experienced having to manage disclosures and facing the dilemma of whether to tell an adult despite being asked not to. This dilemma of dealing with an issue of confidentiality can be a common occurrence for many biological children and can cause a great deal of distress for them.

AGE AND GENDER OF BIOLOGICAL CHILDREN

A number of studies have demonstrated that younger children, particularly those who are female and closer to the age of foster children, are more vulnerable and are more likely to contribute to placement breakdown (Reed, 1996-97; Pugh, 1996; Berridge & Cleaver, 1987). Foster parents and social workers, however, need to be mindful that in an emotionally disturbed child there can be a marked difference between his/her physical age and level of maturity, which is likely to have a bearing on their ability to adjust.

Pugh (1996) maintains that older siblings, especially the girls, were more likely to feel confused about whether they were peers or parent figures, while younger children were more egocentric and less able to put things in a wider perspective

A separate study revealed that 55% of placements broke down where the foster parent's children were under the age of five, in comparison with only 27% when no such child was present (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987).

PLACEMENT BREAKDOWN AND RETENTION OF CARERS

It is obvious that abrupt placement breakdowns can have a highly distressing impact on a foster child and that serious damage can result as a consequence. This negative impact can also extend to the foster parents and their own children.

Some studies have demonstrated that the presence of biological children in the foster home can, in fact, contribute to placement breakdown (Triseliotis et al, 1995; Martin, 1993).

One of the studies argued that fear of termination may force many foster carers to deny that the fostering experience is having anything but a positive effect on their own children (Twigg, 1994).

Regrettably, very little attention has been paid to the attachment problems of biological children who are frequently exposed to foster children moving in and out of their homes.

ALLEGATIONS AND ACCUSATIONS OF ABUSE

Allegations of abuse against foster carers can impact negatively on all members of their family. Nonetheless, I believe that the extent of this impact will largely depend upon how the agency deals with these allegations and what level of support is offered to the carers. Similarly, the carers themselves also need to take appropriate measures in order to protect themselves as well as their children from any potential allegations against them. In some instances, a carer or member of their family may be subject to a child protection investigation as a result of an allegation.

Neate (1991) notes that accusations of abuse can also be made against the biological children in the family, and they therefore need to learn to protect themselves.

It is rightly argued by Martin (1993) that the fear of allegations that is felt by carers' children can make them prematurely adult and distort aspects of their development.

The literature stresses the anguish and trauma experienced by foster carers and their children as a result of allegations of abuse, and the need for an agency to provide adequate practical and moral support.

FOSTERING AS A POSITIVE GAIN AND SATISFACTORY EXPERIENCE

Despite these negative effects, fostering can also have a positive influence on biological children and can result in a satisfactory experience.

In one of the studies, two young people displayed striking concerns for others and awareness of complex emotional issues beyond their age and felt that this gave them more sense of responsibility (Pugh, 1996).

Most of the 23 children interviewed in Reed's study (1996-97) commented that they were happy with their current level of involvement, and that if their parents discontinued fostering, they would still wish to remain in contact with foster children and/or contribute in some way to their life.

In an earlier study by the same author (Reed, 1994) it was shown that four factors, whether singly or in combination, were important in making fostering a satisfactory experience for birth children:

i) adult foster carers had sufficient time and energy for their own children;

ii) young people's responsibilities for helping the young person in care were not perceived by them as onerous and restrictive;

iii) the family home was sufficiently large to cater for adequate privacy and personal space for everyone; and

iv) when difficulties arose, young people were able to talk over their feelings and experiences with the adults in the household.

The above findings have particular implications for practice and should be heeded by the agency professionals and foster parents in their efforts in making fostering a positive experience.

Eighty per cent of the children who participated in a study by Part (1993) said that they liked fostering. Several commented on the greater maturity that they thought they gained because of the experiences the family had with fostering.

According to Pugh (1996), the contribution of children who foster

enhances the fostering experience in three different ways:

i) a role model,

ii) a bridge between foster child and foster carer, and

iii) support to their parents.

SUPPORT TO THE FOSTER CARERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

The need for support

Planning ahead, preparing biological children and providing them with appropriate support can save many children (both foster and biological) from unnecessary trauma. An abrupt placement breakdown results in children being transferred to another placement at short notice, without proper assessment of needs, matching or preparation of either the foster child or new foster family. The importance of timely and adequate support cannot be emphasised enough and should be provided at all levels beginning from recruitment and training to post placement, with a particular emphasis on involving them in decision making.

Involvement in training and assessment

MacPhee (1993) describes how the information provided by a group of experienced carers has been used for prospective foster carers as part of their orientation and pre-service training, and with approved foster carers in ongoing training programs.

Downes (1987) asserts that prospective foster parents need to be alerted during the assessment period to the difficulties that they may need to anticipate between their own and foster children.

Poland and Groze (1993) discuss several training programs which aim to deal with various stresses resulting from fostering. These programs introduce prospective foster carers to the agency and teach such things as coping skills in disciplining the foster child, dealing with changes that will occur in their family as a result of fostering, and working with the foster care agency.

In Stockport, when a family is approved for fostering, the children are awarded a Junior Foster Carers' Certificate (Neate, 1991). In my view, this should be adopted as a standard policy by all fostering agencies in order to make these children feel valued and accepted and to have their contribution acknowledged.

... agencies need to acknowledge the powerful effects of fostering on biological children as well as the valuable contribution made by them. This will hopefully motivate agencies to develop policies and guidelines to help these children effectively adjust to the fostering experience.

The role of foster parents

It is crucial that carers themselves acknowledge the negative impact of fostering on their own children. Some of the strategies suggested for the carers are cited below.

In Downes' (1987) view, family conferences prior to placements can aid communication between parents and their children, although in my opinion this may not always be possible in situations where placements need to be made at very short notice.

Triseliotis et al (1995) suggest that foster carers should accept that the care of their foster children is bound to be different in a number of ways from those of their own children.

Stahl (1990) argues that equal commitment from both partners, positive problem solving skills and joint discussions can help overcome some of their difficulties. It is also suggested that by focussing ahead of time on the difficult issues and recognising the feelings of their own children, parents can reinforce the positive values and family motives to foster that will help prepare the children.

The Surrey Executive Foster Committee (1995) encourages foster carers to be more outspoken about their rights and entitlements.

Penn (1989) recommends a behaviour modification model for training, designed for both foster as well as biological children. It is argued that the benefit of using behaviour modification is that the parents act as 'therapist' in their own home, selecting target behaviours themselves.

Ellis (1972) notes that foster carers need to be aware that the adjustment that their children have to make initially can be as great as those of the foster children.

The role of social workers and other agency professionals

First of all, agencies need to acknowledge the powerful effects of fostering on biological children as well as the valuable contribution made by them. This will hopefully motivate agencies to develop policies and guidelines to help these children effectively adjust to the fostering experience.

Pugh (1996:21) recommends that agencies must:

i) look at ways of involving prospective carers' children fully in the fostering assessment and preparation;

ii) stress the importance of careful matching, considering the needs of the child and the foster family when making placements;

iii) allow carers' children to have access to support themselves;

iv) identify ways of showing recognition and appreciation for the role of carers' children, and

v) empower carers' children through representation of their needs and interests in fostering policy and practice at all levels.

We as workers should spend more time with biological children during home visits, which would relieve foster parents of the sole responsibility of dealing with the impact of foster placements on their own children.

In an attempt to minimise the impact of sharing homes with sexually abused children, Macaskill (1991) advocates that social workers attempt to gain some understanding of how comfortable

or uncomfortable families feel about addressing sexual issues. In her view, families should also be encouraged to talk to their own children about sexual and disruptive behaviour of the abused child.

The workers must be open and honest about the description of the child, and a thorough attempt must be made to set realistic expectations as to outcome (Wilkes, 1974).

I believe that our task of supporting biological children should be seen as a priority, not an optional extra. In my experience, we as social workers and other agency professionals are not always pro-active in this role either due to a high caseload, or the foster child being our main focus of attention.

Access to information

There is no substitute for making adequate and age-appropriate information available to biological children in an attempt to make them adequately prepared for any potential difficulties. The importance of this is clearly stressed in the following discussion.

Some young people who took part in Martin's (1993) study felt that adequate information would help them anticipate, and possibly change, various behaviours displayed by foster children, and manage the encounter more appropriately.

Pugh (1996) found that many carers' children expressed a desire to be kept informed by parents and social workers, and for their voice to be heard by those with power. Parents saw themselves as having a significant share of the responsibility for educating their own children about fostering and experienced difficulties in conveying a realistic picture because, at the initial stages, they were still learning themselves.

The young people who participated in the video titled 'Children Who Foster' (Martin & Stanford, 1990:14) argued that giving them information is a way of protecting them from finding out in more painful ways from the foster children themselves. They say, 'Don't try to protect us, give us information, or at least enough information for us to protect ourselves'.

Biological children feel that they themselves are protected from information which social workers 'patronisingly' believe the children can't deal with. A young woman aged 18, comments in frustration:

> The social worker should be able to tell the natural child as much as possible. If they feel that a child can't handle or will go and tell everybody then that child shouldn't be fostering. At least they will have found it out (Neate, 1991:20).

Promotion of self-help groups of biological children

Biological children of carers need a common forum through which they can voice their feelings, and share experiences with others in a similar situation. They need to be given an opportunity to do so in a safe environment without feeling threatened.

The benefits of self-help groups have been highlighted by a number of authors and researchers. It was unanimously agreed by a group of biological children interviewed by Pugh (1996) that they would gain mutual support from meeting other children who foster. This group provided a safe outlet for venting frustration, when young people felt reluctant to bother their parents with their hostile feelings towards foster children and resentful about getting reduced parental attention.

There is no substitute for making adequate and age-appropriate information available to biological children in an attempt to make them adequately prepared for any potential difficulties.

The group offered a forum for some anger to be expressed and allowed the young people to communicate something indirectly to their parents and social worker (Martin, 1993).

According to Macphee (1993), support groups can also be used to initiate the process of opening the channel of communication between biological children and other children in care.

A self-help group of 13 natural children identified the following reasons about their understanding of why they were meeting as a group (Johnston, 1989):

i) to discuss things they liked and did not like about fostering;

ii) to discuss the problems of foster children and to gain a greater understanding of these problems;

iii) to discuss their own role as biological children in fostering;

iv) to discuss the effects of behavioural problems on foster families;

v) to help each other through sharing experiences and understanding each other's problems;

vi) to express their feelings about events related to fostering.

The group felt that they had a right, not usually recognised, to be involved in any major fostering decision that would affect them.

The literature reviewed makes very little mention of the need for communication to occur between foster children and biological children. I believe that this could help them walk in each other's shoes and thus gain a greater insight into each other's problems.

CONCLUSION

Despite substantial changes and new developments in foster care, there is still a lack of attention regarding the needs and problems of the biological children of carers. As Martin and Stanford (1990:15) rightly put it, 'It doesn't make sense to expose children to the problems of the adult world and maintain a silence in the guise of protecting them'. Hence, it is crucial that all levels of the fostering system acknowledge the profound impact of fostering on biological children and the vital contribution made by them, and ensure that they are adequately supported, valued and accepted.

This literature review has highlighted the need for more research into the effects of fostering on biological children and provision of adequate support for them. Gaining a clear understanding about the extent and complexity of this problem, will serve

as the first step towards achieving the goal of making fostering a positive experience for all those concerned. I believe efforts to support foster families and their children need a team approach, which includes input and equal commitments from all those involved in the entire fostering process. □

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