Balancing contradictions

The experiences of biological children of foster families

Elaine Nuske

This paper presents findings from a recent research project that provided an opportunity for the voices of a special group of young people to be heard. The biological children of foster families have rarely been the focus of foster care research. Their stories are used in this study to highlight individual experiences and, ultimately, to inform the practice of offering support to foster families.

Twenty-two young people between the ages of nine and thirty-two were interviewed. Their stories told of life in a confusing and contradictory world of foster care. This paper presents, through the words of the young people, four essential themes that highlight these contradictions. These are: sharing and losing; being responsible and escaping; caring and resenting; shouting and keeping quiet. Recommendations are made to improve training and support to foster families.

Elaine Nuske, BSc, MA, CQSW, PhD
School of Arts and Social Sciences
Southern Cross University
Coffs Harbour NSW 2452
Email: elaine.nuske@scu.edu.au

This article reports on a recent study into the experiences of biological children of foster families. Much of the previous research in foster care has been conducted with practitioners and academics as the proposed audience (Ainsworth 1999; Sinclair, Wilson & Gibbs 2005). Results from the research presented here are intended to be shared also with those who are care providers. The results highlight the need for foster carers to be informed, and recognised as agents of change who can influence the issues raised.

The foster care system is rapidly undergoing changes. There are increasing problems with recruiting foster families, partly due to economic restraints that place pressure on women to enter the paid work force (Andersson 2001; Ainsworth 1997; Bromfield & Osborn 2007; Cashmore, Higgins, Bromfield & Scott 2006; Evans & Tierney 1995; Gain, Ross & Fogg 1987). In addition, deinstitutionalisation has led to a situation in which young people requiring placement may have high emotional and physical needs, or may have a history of substance abuse, mental health problems or other risk-taking and anti-social behaviour. The international literature reports that these factors have contributed to a high rate of placement breakdown within those families currently fostering (Berridge & Cleaver 1987; Delfabbro, Osborn & Barber 2005; Farmer, Moyes & Lipscombe 2004; Sinclair, Wilson & Gibbs 2005; Smyth & McHugh 2006). If foster care is to survive these issues and continue as a viable service delivery system, those involved in recruitment, training and support must understand the experiences and needs of families – both those currently fostering and those considering the role of foster parent.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2010), during 2008-2009 there were 34,000 Australian children living in out-of-home care. The Australian Foster Care Association (undated) note on their web site (http://www.fostercare.org.au/priority.htm) that there are approximately 9000 families providing foster care. The type of foster care and support provided varies significantly between public and private organisations in city, country and regional areas. The types of care vary from short-term or emergency care, through medium-term care (two to eight months), to long-term or permanent care and respite care. Thus the fostering experience has many faces.

In this paper, previous research relating to the experiences of the biological children of foster families is firstly identified.

This is followed by details of the research recently conducted by the author, with an analysis of themes arising from the interviews. It will be shown that this current research does not directly dispute previous findings, but places a different emphasis on, and offers new understandings of, the young people's experiences. This information will inform discussion on the implications for practice.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The focus for this research is the biological children of foster families. This group has for over twenty years been identified as significant in terms of the 'success' of foster placements. Cautley (1980) named problems between the foster child and foster parents' own children as the reason for breakdown in 75% of placements in the first three months of placement. Triseliotis, Borland and Hill (2000) interviewed carers who had ceased to foster and found that:

> The possible impact of fostering on their families was at the forefront of many respondents' concerns (2000:111).

In addition, Ellis (1972), Wilkes (1974), Crowley (1985), Kaplan (1988), Martin (1993) and Berridge and Cleaver (1987) identified the impact of fostering on these young people as a reason for placement breakdown. During the 1990s, the biological children of foster parents were increasingly heard. In the UK, the establishment of the National Children's Support Group in 1989 led to the creation of the video 'Children who foster'. This was a powerful tool, allowing the voices of these young people to be heard and to advocate for more clearly defined training and support. A flurry of research followed, attempting to address the gap in the literature and identifying the need for direct services to consider the issues raised (Fox 2001; McFadden 1996; Poland & Groze 1993; Pugh 1996; Talbot 1997; Twigg 1994; Watson & Jones 2002). However, despite this increased level of interest, Moslehuddin (1999), in his review of the literature in this area, noted that there was still a need for further research to understand the complex issues being presented.

The main issues raised within the above-mentioned studies focus on the emotional needs of the children of foster carers, the possibility of their being exposed to emotional damage, and the range of positive and negative experiences reported by them. Twigg (1994) placed 'loss' at the forefront of the agenda, seeing foster care as a 'blow' to these young people. He was surprised at the extent of anger they expressed, and considered that they were placed at psychological risk through the fostering process. Pugh (1996) emphasised the gains and losses experienced by the biological children of foster parents, and called for the empowerment of these children, and for practitioners to match 'whole families' at the time of placement. While Pugh (1996:20) asked the

question 'could they be suffering emotional harm?', Reed (1994) saw the young people as being weighed down by the caring role imposed upon them. Martin (1993) clearly stated that the young members of the family were being expected to share and understand the children placed, and to put their own needs aside. Much of this research asked participants about the 'good things' and the 'bad things' relating to the fostering experience, with the majority of the young people suggesting the good outweighed the bad (Fox 2001; Part 1993; Pugh 1996). Watson and Jones (2002), in considering the discrimination and losses expressed by the young people who they interviewed, suggested that:

> Had similar treatment been suffered/experienced by a child/young person looked after by the local authority, it could be subject to a planning meeting, review or child protection conference (2002:54).

Thus, biological children in families who foster have been identified as having a significant contribution to make to the success of a foster placement (Sinclair, Wilson & Gibbs 2005; Twigg 1994; Watson & Jones 2002), although this might come at a cost for these young people. The research reported here offers a window into the everyday experiences of these young people, and provides practitioners, and potential foster carers, with important issues to consider when contemplating a placement.

... biological children in families who foster have been identified as having a significant contribution to make to the success of a foster placement, although this might come at a cost for these young people.

METHODOLOGY

The research was a qualitative study based on a phenomenological methodology (Van Manen 1990). This method aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of everyday experiences. It questions the 'taken for granted' assumptions that are evident within a certain experience. The researcher therefore attempted to understand an experience 'from the inside'. Phenomenological study is fundamentally concerned with revealing the nature of social phenomena by uncovering meaning through analysis of participants' descriptions of how they experience the phenomena. Thus the aim is to reveal the nature of a phenomenon as humanly experienced (Parse, Coyne & Smith 1985:16).

METHOD

Twenty-two in-depth interviews were conducted in NSW, Australia, with participants aged between 9 years and 32 years who were, or had recently been, living as biological children in foster families. The participants were contacted by letters sent from the local Foster Care Association to all the families in their area. Of the 22 participants interviewed, 16 were under 18 years of age, and 6 were between 18 and 32 years. Ethical issues were given high priority, with detailed consideration being given to confidentiality and anonymity (Morrow & Richards 1996). Counsellors were made available for the participants following the interviews. For those under 18 years, informed consent was obtained from both a parent and the participant. For the adults, consent was obtained in their own right.

> *One of the motivations for fostering, as expressed by participants, was to share their family with a child who did not have an available family. There was a sense that they had a 'good' or 'happy' family which they could share with a child in need.*

A series of open-ended questions was used to guide the semi-structured interviews. For example, the interviews opened with 'Think back to when your Mum or Dad first mentioned they were thinking about becoming foster parents. Tell me about it'. The questions then moved through the anticipation of fostering, to its reality – for example, 'What was it like for you when ... arrived in your family?' Following this, clarifying questions were used to draw out specific issues – for example, 'Could you tell me more about that?' Finally, concrete examples were drawn out – for example, 'Tell me about sharing your bedroom with ...?' or 'Can you give me a story about what happened when your family went out together with ...?' Thus the narrative of the participant became the focus of the interview.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the extensive data gathered in the in-depth interviews. Each transcript was analysed in detail with every comment being sectioned or organised into groupings that responded to questions asked of the data, such as 'What is this an example of?', 'What is going on here?' and 'How does this relate to my research objectives?' Initial themes and sub-themes within each individual transcript emerged. Following detailed analysis of the individual interviews, the next stage was to develop essential themes from the 22 stories. Thus themes from the individual interviews could be merged, as they indicated common issues.

The analysis of the interviews identified the confusing nature of the stories. Individual participants revealed binary themes discussed in close proximity, including many examples of both positive and distressing experiences encountered since their families had started fostering.

FINDINGS

An overall theme of *living within a contradictory experience* was clustered into four sub-themes: *sharing and losing; being responsible and escaping; caring and resenting; shouting and keeping quiet.* Each of these themes provides the foundation for understanding the experiences of the young people interviewed. Individual participants' responses did, at times, fall within multiple sub-themes with contradictory comments appearing within individual accounts.

Sharing and losing

One of the motivations for fostering, as expressed by participants, was to share their family with a child who did not have an available family. There was a sense that they had a 'good' or 'happy' family which they could share with a child in need. In addition, juxtaposed with this offer to share were some real issues related to loss. Although loss has been clearly identified previously as an issue for the children of foster carers, this has not been balanced with the elements of sharing that the young people in this study emphasised. The young people experienced loss of time with parents or family as a whole; or loss of the sense of working together as a family.

According to one young person, the experience was good because it allowed her:

> To share experiences with the other kids and help other kids through it.

And:

> Just to be there when they needed you ... You have to put your whole heart and soul into these kids and try to make them feel comfortable ... at the same time you have to keep a fair distance away to save yourself.

One young person clearly expressed sadness at the loss of family time together:

> (Before we started fostering) we used to go out a lot. Every weekend we used to go somewhere like [a large town nearby] or for a day out, but now, because we have got foster kids, we can't actually do that any more.

Most biological children felt unable to talk to their parents about the losses from their lives. For some, this caused enormous emotional turmoil, at times resulting in them removing themselves physically or emotionally from the

family in an attempt at self-protection against more loss or pain. For others, sharing and its resultant loss brought other gains in terms of friendships, however tenuous, and a sense of pride in being able to share their precious family with others.

One young person eloquently expressed how he saw his family as no longer working together:

> So everyone learns to function without each other's help – like Mum is too busy with the foster kids, so I have to learn and do all this by myself.

In direct contrast, the same young person recalled:

> At the same time I was gaining a family, like the two sisters that we adopted, I love them just as much as my own sister.

Therefore it seemed that most of the young people simply learned to live with this contradiction, to accept this as inevitable or, as one young man vividly stated, to 'ride the waves' or 'go with the flow'.

Being responsible and escaping

The participants expressed concern about the amount of responsibility that was placed on them to care for the foster children. For most, this responsibility was at times satisfactory; however, at other times, it was a burden. As a reaction they felt they needed to escape such responsibility by removing themselves in various ways, often by avoiding or breaking free from this part of their life.

Responsibility for the foster children was evident in the following comment:

> I take a lot of responsibility most of the time ... I am very good with the kids.

An alternate view was expressed by a different participant who said:

> It was pretty good, we would go out in a group ... we classed each other as brothers.

However, this can be seen in contrast to his other comments:

> Some of the most difficult things about fostering are having to watch them all the time.

This young person clearly moved to escape this responsibility by turning outward and, eventually, getting in trouble with the police. He said:

> (After we started fostering) we just started doing our own thing and not worrying about Mum – not asking if we could go and do this or that, we'd just go and do it ... I got into trouble as I got older.

Another reflected:

> That's the thing (that feeling of responsibility) – you are young, you are 12 years old, what are you really going to do? You kind of carry losses and move on. And what fear you have – because

it is your Mum's job, you can't say 'Mum stop working, stop making money, stop putting food on the table, 'cause someone broke my transformer'.

Thus it is evident that the young people are torn between being responsible and wanting to escape the situation of their family.

Caring and resenting

The participants strongly expressed their struggle with maintaining a caring attitude, as well as having feelings of resentment associated with their family's fostering experience.

One young girl talked about how she is confused about her caring role in the family, saying firstly:

> I was very close to the three boys. I took on a motherly role with them ... I am just a natural carer I suppose.

But also:

> I got thrust into the role of caretaker a lot and I tried to mediate between my parents too ... it was a big ask and it caused a big rift between me and my parents

> *They attempted to be heard in various ways, by talking and communicating with parents directly, by physically shouting, or by developing acting out behaviours in attempts to be noticed.*

Another participant said:

> I look after the kids ... it feels alright – sometimes I get annoyed with it. One of the babies used to cry in the night and because Mum and Dad were so tired, I used to go and get him. I would take him to bed with me.

The following extract summarises vividly this contradictory dimension. One young person explained:

> And all the garbage that I had to put up with through my upbringing. At the same time I knew it was good for the kids – I knew that they needed a home. This is an older, more mature intellect reflecting back on all the good things and benefits to society, blah blah blah, but while it happened it was really rather a crappy feeling ... So feelings of anger, a lot of resentment and also a lot of happiness, and if there were people to talk to and help me deal with these feelings, I think there would have been more happiness.

Resentment was expressed toward the foster children for not being grateful for what was being offered. Participants resented the losses they were experiencing as a result of their

family fostering and also resented the extra stress they saw placed on their parents. One young person commented:

> The most difficult thing is to think about what the kids have been through before they come to you. It's a struggle to try and understand them, but also at times not being too happy about them being with you – so there is a bit of conflict there. It is really confusing. You grow up like on the fence. You are in the middle of everything. You want to get angry with the kids and you want to jolt them because they have done something stupid then you sit and think why they have done it and you can't. You can't let a lot of your anger out.

> *... it appears that the fundamental nature of the experience is contradictory. ... despite recalling some fairly dramatic and disturbing experiences, most of the young people who were interviewed told how they were glad their family had fostered ...*

Shouting and keeping quiet

The young people often needed to 'shout' in order to be heard. They often found that, due to the extra 'busyness' of the family, they were 'forgotten'. They attempted to be heard in various ways, by talking and communicating with parents directly, by physically shouting, or by developing acting out behaviours in attempts to be noticed. Due to the frustration of not being heard, they sometimes decided not to bother their parents with their issues. One comment shows how a difficult adolescence might have been related to a desire for more parental control:

> Yes (fostering has changed me) – my behaviour. In one way I think I would go and do things and get in trouble. I think to myself anyway now these days it was only so I could get Mum or Dad to come in and get me or get up me – give me a belt or something.

It seemed that it was not possible to ask directly for that time or help due to the family being so busy:

> (It would have helped) if I could have sat down and talked to Mum and Dad more, I think, instead of having to get into trouble to get hold of them. It would have been good but most of the time like Mum was putting out tea or getting kids ready or something.

A final word reflecting on difficult experiences seems to sum up this contradiction well. This was expressed as a 'double-edged sword' and a dilemma that affected day-to-day life experiences and coping mechanisms. Although

coping well with problems, there was flatness, an 'emotional numbness':

> This is where the double-edged sword comes in. With some people's problems, they just cease to function. It can be an idiotic thing or sometimes small things set people off pulling their hair out, right? Fostering has taught me to value more important things in life and to realise that most problems are not upsetting to me, but to my friend it was different. He had just crashed my motorcycle – it didn't bother me, it was just another problem that I could deal with – there is an emotional numbness that comes with dealing with problems.

Thus, they began to see the foster children as needing or demanding more attention and time, and having more severe problems. They defended themselves against the pain of not being heard by retreating and keeping things to themselves.

PRACTICE ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

The words of the young people raise important implications for carers and practitioners. Practice needs to address these experiences to allow optimum support to be offered to all involved in fostering; to allow for dialogue with both prospective foster families and those currently fostering. The fostering system will strengthen as a result.

From the stories of the young people participating in the study, it appears that the fundamental nature of the experience is contradictory. Thus, despite recalling some fairly dramatic and disturbing experiences, most of the young people who were interviewed told how they were glad their family had fostered and suggested they may even become foster parents themselves. This is highly surprising given the distress they talked about. There was no distinction between the younger and older interviewees in this regard; however, it could be suggested that negative experiences are forgotten in the light of feelings of being 'duty bound' to be understanding of the foster child's needs. Of significance is the reluctance of some of the young people interviewed to share these issues with their parents for fear of burdening them further. With a resultant shared understanding, foster parents and workers can address these issues. There is, therefore, a need to generate conversations about the contradictory nature of foster care. These dialogues could begin very early in the process of foster family assessment, being inclusive of the foster parents' own children, and continuing into training that involves all members of the foster family.

CONCLUSION

Phenomenological research is based upon the reader engaging with the analysis. It is hoped that those reading this analysis will find a window into understanding and hence to understanding foster families in more depth. This research has focused on foster families who have their own children living at home whilst they are fostering. For these children,

the experience may prove to be either negative or positive. Some may be adversely affected, some may experience distress, stress, anger and resentment, or may leave home with a sense of loss of their 'normal' family. Some will remain dedicated to caring for others and will ride the waves easily. However, we owe it to these young people to listen with care. ■

REFERENCES

Ainsworth, F. (1997) 'Recent trends in out of home care of children in Australia', *Children Australia*, 22(2), 4-8.

Andersson, G. (2001) 'The Motives of foster parents, their family and work circumstances', *British Journal of Social Work*, 31, 235-248.

Australian Foster Care Association (undated) *Priorities and Position Statements (2002-3)*, retrieved 13th March from <http://www.fostercare.org.au/priority.html>.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2010) *Child protection Australia 2008-9*, Child Welfare Series No. 43, Canberra.

Berridge, D, & Cleaver, H. (1987) *Foster home breakdown*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Bromfield, L.M. & Osborn, A. (2007) 'Getting the big picture': A synopsis and critique of Australian out-of-home care research', *Child Abuse Prevention Issues*, No. 26, retrieved 13th March 2008 from: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/issues/issues26/issues26.html>

Cashmore, J. (2002) 'Promoting the participation of children', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 26, 837-847.

Cashmore, J.A., Higgins, D.J., Bromfield, L.M. & Scott, D. A. (2006) 'Recent Australian child protection and out-of-home care research: What's been done?', *Children Australia*, 31(2), 4-11.

Cautley, P.W. (1980) *New foster parents: The first experience*, New York: Human Services Press.

Christensen, P. & James, A. (eds.) (2000) *Research with children: Perspectives and practices*, Melbourne: Falmer Press.

Crowley, M. (1985) *Preparation for foster care practice*, Social Work Monographs, University of East Anglia.

Delfabbro, P.H., Osborn, A. & Barber, J.G. (2005) 'Beyond the continuum: New perspectives on the future of out-of-home care research in Australia', *Children Australia*, 30, 11-18.

Ellis, L. (1972) 'Sharing parent's with strangers. The role of the group home foster family's own children', *Child Welfare*, 51(3), 165-170.

Evans, W. B. & Tierney, L.J. (1995) 'Making foster care possible: A study of 307 foster families in Victoria', *Children Australia*, 20(2), 4-9.

Farmer, E., Moyes, S. & Lipscombe, J. (2004) *Fostering adolescents*, London: Jessica Kingsley.

Fox, W. (2001) *The significance of natural children in foster families*, Social Work Monographs, School of Social and Psychosocial Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.

Gain, L., Ross, E. & Fogg, S. (1987) *A balancing act: Foster care in NSW*, Council of Social Service of NSW.

Kaplan, C.P. (1988) 'The biological children of foster parents in the foster family', *Child and Adolescent Social Work*, 5(4), 281-299.

Martin, G. (1993) 'Foster care: The protection and training of carer's children', *Child Abuse Review*, 2, 15-22.

McFadden, E.J. (1996) 'Family centred practice with foster families', *Families in Society*, 77(9), 545-574.

Morrow, V. & Richards, M. (1996) 'The ethics of social research with children: An overview', *Children and Society*, 10(2), 90-105.

Moslehuddin, Md. B. (1999) 'The impact of fostering on the biological children of foster carers: A review of the literature', *Children Australia*, 24(4), 49-54.

Mullin, E. & Johnson, L. (1999) 'The role of birth/previously adopted children in families choosing to adopt children with special needs' *Child Welfare*, 78(5), 579-592.

National Children's Support Group (1989) *Children who foster*, video, York, UK.

Part, D. (1993) 'Fostering as seen by carer's children', *Adoption and Fostering*, 17(1), 26-31.

Parse, R.R., Coyne, A.B. & Smith, M.J. (1985) *Nursing research. qualitative methods*, Maryland: Prentice Hall.

Poland, D. & Groze, V. (1993) 'The effects of foster care on biological children in the home', *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 10(2), 153-163.

Prosiak, K.V. (1995) *Adjustment of natural children in treatment foster care*, Masters Practicum Proposal, Nova University ED 387 775.

Pugh, G. (1996) 'Seen and not heard? Addressing the needs of children who foster', *Adoption and Fostering*, 20(1), 35-41.

Reed, J.A. (1994) 'We live here too: Birth children's perspective's on fostering someone with learning disabilities', *Children and Society*, 8(2), 164-173.

Sinclair, I., Wilson, K. & Gibbs, I. (2005) *Foster placements: Why they succeed and why they fail*, London: Jessica Kingsley.

Smyth, C. & McHugh, M. (2006) 'Exploring the dimensions of professionalising fostering: Carers' perceptions of their fostering role', *Children Australia*, 31, 12-19.

Talbot, C. (1997) *Sons and daughters of foster carers: Children and young people who foster*, presentation at IFCO Conference, Vancouver.

Triseliotis, J., Borland, M. & Hill, M. (2000) *Delivering foster care*, London: Batsford.

Twigg, R.C. (1994) 'The unknown soldiers of foster care: Foster care as loss for the foster parent's own children', *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 64(3), 297-312.

Van Manen, M. (1990) *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*, Ontario: State University of New York Press.

Watson, A. & Jones, D. (2002) 'The impact of fostering on foster carer's own children', *Adoption and Fostering*, 26(1), 49-55.

Wilkes, J.R. (1974) 'The impact of fostering on the foster family', *Child Welfare*, 53(6), 373-379.