

# PROMOTING STABILITY IN FOSTER CARE

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## Introduction

For the child in residential care who, for whatever reason will not be returning to the natural family, long term foster placement is often seen as a means of providing a suitable alternative family environment. The formation of mutually satisfying emotional ties within a family setting is recognised as being an important ingredient in the healthy psychological development of a child. However, the high rate of foster placement breakdown attests to the fact that these ties are not easily formed.

## Children in Foster Care

In South Australia, at any one time, approximately 2,300 children are known to be living apart from their parents. Some 1,500 of these children are in foster care. A 1982 Department for Community Welfare survey of a 50% sample of children who had been in continuous foster care for more than three years revealed that, while 60% of the sample had experienced only one foster placement, 24% had experienced three or more foster placements. Figures are similar in the United States where analysis of eleven foster care studies revealed that some 23% of children had three or more placements. (Westman, 1979).

Where foster placements breakdown there is inevitably a sense of frustration and disillusionment on the part of the foster parents, and yet another experience of failure and rejection on the part of the child which further underscores a developing sense of worthlessness. It is in everybody's interest therefore, that foster placements are carefully planned, with due regard being given to both the needs of the child and the capabilities of the foster parents.

## The Needs of Children

The child's needs are primarily for a stable and continuous relationship with nurturant caregivers in order to develop socially and emotionally. Hess (1982) stresses the importance of permanency planning in foster care, which emphasizes those features which enhance and promote attachment between children and adults. In normal development parent-child attachment is the result of an on-going developmental process between a child and his or her primary caretaker. Beginning antenatally it continues on through infancy and toddlerhood and is related to the child's subsequent relative capacity for intimacy and strong human

relationships. Hess states that knowledge of this concept and its related dimensions is a prerequisite for the ability to plan wisely for children in out-of-home placements. She then lists three conditions affecting the strength of the parent-child attachment.

1. The first is *continuity* which consists of the parents predictable availability during the period of the child's need, and includes both the parents constancy and the amount of time sufficient to allow for repetition of the parent-child interactions.

2. The second is *stability* which describes the lack of serious environmental change or stress in the context of the parent-child relationship, and which supports the capacities of both the parent and the child to engage in the attachment process.

3. The third condition that is mutuality or interactions between both the parent and the child which reinforce the experience that each is important to the other.

What is readily apparent to Child Care Workers is that in the case of many children requiring foster placement these conditions have broken down, or have never really been present in the natural family. However the temptation to think that all such children need is a "good home" should be resisted, as in fact, foster children all too often remain emotionally tied to their parents by unmet needs and unresolved conflicts. Thus the child will take into a foster placement all the emotional residue of previous experiences.

## Placement Process – The Child's View

Superimposed upon this is that in many instances separation of the child from the natural family produces a reaction akin to grief. Thus as the child enters foster care two processes occur simultaneously: the grief process related to the separation from parents, and the gradual process of attachment with new caretakers, based on the need for day-to-day care both physical and emotional. Rutter (1978) has described four observable phases in children's reactions when they are placed in foster care.

*Phase 1, the Pre-protest stage.* This is a period during which much observable emotion is absent or extremely shallow, and behavior is generally conforming.

*Phase 2, Protest* is a period characterized by anxiety and anger, with thoughts and behavior directed towards the lost parent.

*Phase 3, Despair.* Depression and hopelessness are often expressed during this phase, and the child may be apathetic, restless, withdrawn and even regressed.

*Phase 4, Adjustment.* The primary indication of this phase is the child's seeking of new relationships and the emotional investment in them.

Because children find it difficult to deal openly with the intense and painful feelings generated throughout the above phases, their behaviors are often a good indicator of their feelings about being placed in foster care.

Thus, the placement usually begins with an initial "honeymoon" period, during which time the child attempts to orient himself to the new surroundings, different rules and expectations. After some initial stability has been established through a new constancy of environment a number of reactions can follow. These reactions can depend upon the age of the child, previous experiences in other placements, level of emotional development, etc. They often seem to come from nowhere, and can catch the foster parents unaware.

It is at this time i.e. the Protest phase, that the foster placement is at its most vulnerable. There can follow a period of mixed emotions on the part of the foster parents as they can begin to have second thoughts, especially if they perceive the child as suddenly becoming "naughty", or they feel that they are unable to cope with the new behavior or meet the child's sometimes considerable needs.

Common is the overt seeking of security and direct assurances on the part of the child that he will not be rejected. Young children, and those with a background of emotional neglect especially, can become very clingy and even regress to more immature levels of behaviour. Examples include separation anxiety, waking frequently in the night, bed-wetting and wanting assistance with, for example, dressing, even though it is known that the child is competent in this area. For the unwary foster parent such behaviors can be perplexing and frustrating, especially when these behaviors are not easily modified. Feelings of annoyance and even anger are not uncommon at this time as parents feel emotionally drained by a child who is always following them around and being so demanding of their time and energy.

Another common pattern of behaviours experienced by foster parents is the

deliberate and sometimes continual testing of their rules and their commitment to the child. At first sight this may seem a less obvious method of seeking security as the child continually appears to set himself up for failure.

As this testing can become fairly extreme on the part of the child, for example stealing, aggression and even running away, foster parents can find themselves under considerable pressure at this time.

Nevertheless, such behaviors are important because they are attempts on the part of the child to decide if the new foster parents are trustworthy. Trust on the part of the child is vital for it is the first step to feeling secure and accepted, and where trust has been broken previously children are reluctant to place themselves in situations where they can be hurt again.

Eventually, however, the child will begin to accept that he is indeed going to stay in his new home and become an integrated member of the family. As the child begins to feel more secure, feelings can be expressed more directly instead of being acted out behaviorally. Paradoxically a number of things can follow from this increased sense of security on the part of the child that foster parents can still find threatening. For example there can be more overt expressions of anger and frustration from feelings accumulated from earlier experiences. These can often be coupled with the child making negative comments about himself, as self doubts or questions regarding self-worth surface more openly. There may also be a range of feelings expressed about biological parents, either anger at rejection (and also possibly guilt that they themselves may have caused this) or curiosity about them if their memory is poor, or there has been no contact with them for some time.

It is at this time too, that the child begins to make the important steps into truly age appropriate social relationships. There is a gradual abandoning of the egocentric controls upon which the child has depended for so long, and willingness to enter into the give and take of relationships. Accepting the reciprocity of interactions and the sharing of experiences, rather than the purely taking which marks the emotionally immature and insecure child, means that the child is feeling secure enough to trust others with part of his life, and allow them to make some decisions on his behalf without feeling anxious or threatened. Should this stage be reached in a foster placement the child stands a good chance of continuing on with a normal life and all that this implies for a future healthy development, and the foster parents can feel justifiably proud of their achievement.

#### **Foster Parents**

In many instances however, foster parents are given no help in their often complex

and demanding role. It is frequently assumed that all is needed to be a foster parent is a good dose of common sense together with previous parenting experiences with their own children. This is, of course, not the case as most foster children have their own special needs. The chances of foster placements being successful is enhanced, and the incidence of foster placements breaking down is reduced if foster parents can be carefully selected, and once selected trained and supported systematically.

Unfortunately, procedures for the selection of foster families are often unsophisticated. As sometimes the motives of families wishing to foster are inappropriate and not in the best interest of the child, e.g. attempting to meet their own emotional or financial needs, selection procedures can help by limiting questionable applicants and hence time wasting in training, and reduce eventual foster care breakdown.

A number of selection procedures are described in the literature, e.g. Anderson (1982) and Simon and Simon (1982). Anderson's method consists essentially of a series of interviews which includes a comprehensive family genogram, compiled with a questionnaire. Simon and Simon's approach is more comprehensive as it combines selection and training. During this process prospective foster parents are given experimental exercises designed to test, for example, their motivation, flexibility and problem-solving abilities.

The preparation for fostering and the ongoing ability of foster parents to manage the problems encountered in the task is the realm of training. Stonehouse (1980) suggests that training should be designed not only to teach the necessary skills for successful fostering, but should also let people know that they are doing well, and that what they do matters. It should impart a rationale as well as skills. She also advocates that training be built into the work situation and not simply be a "one off" experience.

#### **Training**

The concept of an ongoing training programme that is built into an agency's foster care service is supported by Shaw, Bensky and Dixon (1981). They suggest that all people are not ready for the same input at the same breadth and depth, and that ongoing training programmes need to be individually tailored to take into account not only the capabilities of the foster parents but also the age, level of development and any special needs of the foster children concerned. They also point out that an important element of training should cover the areas of stress management and burnout prevention.

Some suggestions as to methods, settings and approaches to training can be found in the literature, e.g. Bailey and Reiss

(1984) and Ziarnik and Bernstein (1984). These authors favour a behavioural approach, considering it to be a useful model in practical terms for foster parents to use when dealing with behavior problem children. In itself, however, it is not all that foster parents need by way of training. There are many other aspects to being a successful foster parent than just managing behavior, e.g. a knowledge of child development, factors promoting or affecting psychological development in children, basic listening skills and practical problem-solving skills to name but a few.

Some parent training programmes have become extensive and sophisticated. The Arizona Foster Family Institute offers a number of topics in sessions ranging from 2 hours through to full day workshops. This type of training is required for licences to be granted initially, and ongoing yearly training must be undertaken to gain annual licence renewal. (Norgard and Mayhall, 1982).

The enhanced abilities of the foster parents, brought about through training are unlikely to be sustained however, without ongoing support. This of course, can take many forms. Baker and Northman (1981) suggest two main approaches to support for foster parents. The first is from a formal system provided by professionals from the sponsoring agency. This would include both inservice programmes in the manner of the Arizona Foster Family Institute, as well as a more personalized approach, tailored to the individual needs of each foster family. The second is a system of informal help, where a natural support system evolves from the foster parents themselves getting together because of a common need. These are valuable for they allow the sharing of much useful practical information which can only be gained from the day to day experience of fostering. Such mutual support also allows for positive feedback in a cohesive group environment and allows the individual foster parents to feel that they are indeed performing a worthwhile role.

#### **Conclusion**

Help for children in foster care can best be provided by maximizing the potential of the foster parents, through training and ongoing support systems. In South Australia there is no group providing any or all of the screening, training or support in a comprehensive manner, as suggested by the literature. Funding is certainly a crucial issue as non-government agencies attract only 27% of available funds for foster care, and only 12% of available funds for preventative care and family support.

A philosophical and policy stance is needed which recognizes the importance of permanency planning for children in

foster care. Without this, the agencies involved cannot give the necessary prominence to specialist teams to select, train and support that much needed commodity called foster parents.

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