

Policy Implications of Foster Family Characteristics

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The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997

Designed to shorten the time in which a decision is made regarding the permanent placement of a child, i.e. whether the child will return home or find another permanent living situation (adoption).

ASFA Impact

- ◆ More impact on the size, rather than composition, of the group of children in foster care
- ◆ Shifts the locus of services from foster care to permanency planning (returning home or being adopted)

Types of Foster Care Placements

- ◆ Traditional foster care: children are placed in non-relative families within their community
- ◆ Treatment or specialized foster care: foster family has received specialized training to meet the emotional and psychological needs of the child
- ◆ Kinship foster care: child is placed with other family members, outside of the biological parents residence
- ◆ Shared family care: child and parent or parents, reside in the same residence with foster parents

Foster Family Households

- ◆ Single parent families have increased due to special recruiting initiatives for single parents of color and the expansion of kinship foster care
- ◆ Families in which both parents work have increased due to high housing costs and the increased standard of living
- ◆ Treatment foster care and kinship foster care are the most rapidly growing child placements, which results in the magnification of the bimodal distribution of positive versus aversive parenting interventions

The Fundamental Assumption of Child Welfare Services

- ◆ To ensure that the environment in which the abused or neglected child resides after service interventions will be safer than the environment in which the abuse or neglect occurred.
- ◆ Child welfare services is not responsible for ensuring that the foster care environment is a positive and rehabilitative developmental experience

What are the best home environments for foster children?

- ◆ Having fewer children in the home
- ◆ Higher levels of maternal education
- ◆ Greater income
- ◆ Having married parents

What needs to be done to improve the quality of foster care?

- ◆ Research
- ◆ Higher reimbursement rates for foster families
- ◆ Provision of medical insurance, liability insurance, and child care to foster families
- ◆ Evidence-based training for foster parents
- ◆ Implementation of shared family care program
- ◆ Affordable housing for foster families

Research

- ◆ There is a lack of research pertaining to the issue of the physical safety of the child in foster care, and only minimal attention paid to the influence of well-trained foster parents on the child. Additionally, research is needed to provide evidence-based training for foster parents.
- ◆ Research is spawned by policy and generates policy, yet there is no funding for a methodologically sound program of research.

Research cont.

- ◆ Research on foster care has moved from the Children's Bureau Research and Development Program to the Office of the Assistant Secretary on Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), but it does not receive the support needed or provided compared to other types of poverty research.
- ◆ Additional research funding can come from the following sources: Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, 75% match rate by states, and the NSCAW Research Group's continuation of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being.

Reimbursement for Foster Parents

- ◆ Foster parents are reimbursed for the cost of care, not salaried. These reimbursement rates are very low, and do not include cost-of-living adjustments.
- ◆ Treatment or specialized foster care receive higher reimbursement rates, but most parents receive the basic foster care rate, which increases minimally as the child ages.
- ◆ Foster parents also receive a clothing allowance (\$100 twice a year), and the child is eligible for Medicaid.
- ◆ These reimbursement rates are far below the USDA estimates for raising children.
- ◆ Since the federal government does not have limitations on the amount of its 50% cost-sharing with states, there should be more commensurate reimbursement rates and annual cost-of-living increases.

Insurance and Child Care

- ◆ Because foster parents are not paid, they are not required to contribute to Social Security, nor do they have access to a retirement plan or health insurance for themselves or other family members.
- ◆ In addition, some states do not provide liability insurance for foster parents or provide immunity from frivolous lawsuits, which are added financial threats to foster parents (Illinois Foster Parent Association, 1997).
- ◆ In the past, foster parents were prohibited from utilizing child care services for their foster child. Although this has changed, there are still few states with child care provisions.

Training for foster families

- ◆ Over the last few decades, training has become more ambitious and effective.
- ◆ Minimum training (1-2 days) is required in almost all 50 states, however some training programs last 10 weeks. Kinship foster parents may be exempt from training in many states.
- ◆ Effective training includes an understanding of legal issues influencing the child's placement circumstances, focus on the safety and development of the child, and discussion of how to work effectively with biological parents and welfare staff.

Training for foster families cont.

- ◆ Although not well documented (J.H. Lee & Holland, 1991), positive benefits of intensive training include a lower likelihood of placement disruption (Boyd & Remy, 1978), a greater identification with helping the entire biological family (D. Lee & Nisivoccia, 1989), and a greater ability to manage the challenges of caring for sexually abused children (Barth, Yeaton, & Winterfelt, 1994).

Shared Family Care

(Barth & Price, 1999)

- ◆ Originally developed in Europe, it is new to the United States. This program involves placing the parent and child in the same foster home, in which the parent is provided training, while the safety and supervision of the child is ensured.
- ◆ This program is difficult to fund, as Title IV-E (which pays for most foster care) requires that the parent and child be separated.
- ◆ Although efforts have been made to increase the availability of funding for this program, they have failed to gain approval in the US Congress.

Affordable Housing for Foster Families

- ◆ Low- to middle-income foster families feel a drain on the resources due to the cost of housing.
- ◆ Many foster families live in communities with adverse features, to be able to afford housing. However, this may also lessen the developmental opportunities for children. Furthermore, the supply of affordable housing for poor families is shrinking, and the shortage for larger families is even worse (Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000).

Affordable Housing for Foster Families cont.

- ◆ Foster parents need similar incentives to those of police officers and teachers in some areas, such as housing allowances, tax credits, and no-interest automobile loans.
- ◆ The cost and availability of large housing is increasing the difficulty in finding families that can care for sibling groups.

A vision to guide the policies involved in foster parenting

To provide more foster care in the local neighborhoods and the foster parents will work cooperatively with biological parents to achieve reunification or open adoption (Annie E. Casey Foundation-sponsored Family to Family program).

The role of the foster parent in this vision:

- ◆ Working with biological parents and social workers to help promote reunification until that goal is beyond reason and time,
- ◆ Supporting the achievement of other permanency options, and
- ◆ Helping a child to make developmental gains (Barth, 1999a).

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