An Ecological Systems Approach to Understanding Social Support in Foster Family Resilience

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Abstract

Families who care for children in the foster care system often experience challenges related to the system, accessing services and supports, and managing relationships. However, many families thrive as foster care providers possess unique attributes and strengths that contribute to experiences of resilience. With the use of an ecological framework, this study examined social support among resilient foster families in one southwestern state in the United States to better understand how foster caregivers experienced positive reciprocal transactions across systems. As part of a larger study, in-depth narrative interviews were conducted to examine the process of resilience for families who foster. Findings revealed that families accessed and benefited from social support on micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. Understanding how families cultivated social support across multiple levels offers implications for practice and policy when considering how best to retain and support families who care for vulnerable children and youth.

Keywords: Foster care (family), social support, fostering, family support, resilience

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Foster parents serve a critical role in the child welfare system, caring for almost half (46%) of the children in out-of-home placements across the country (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). Foster parents' ability to provide for our nation's most vulnerable children depends on their interactions with multiple systems and levels of support. Many states struggle with recruiting and retaining foster families to adequately meet the number of children requiring out-of-home care. There is a need to understand how best to support families in their ability to provide for children and youth in out-of-home care. Despite the challenges many foster families encounter, there are also families who persevere and continue providing quality care to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and youth involved in the child welfare system. This study examined how social support contributes to the resilience of foster families, from an ecological perspective. Applying an ecological framework allows for an understanding of the reciprocal transactions between each system of support.

Literature Review

Foster parents have a significant responsibility in caring for children and youth at a time when their biological parents are unable to provide for their safety and well-being. This responsibility can be challenging. Foster parents balance relationships with public child welfare agencies, service providers, and biological families, in addition to providing stability and meeting the developmental and emotional needs of the children in their care. Previous research with foster families has identified social and emotional supports as critical to their satisfaction and continued fostering (Author B, Author A, Author D, 2013; MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006). Support can be reciprocal, based on support received from others as well as the value placed in providing social support to others (Authors, in press). Positive relationships

between foster parents and service providers contribute to overall foster parent satisfaction and placement success (Brown, 2008; Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999; Farmer, Lipscombe, & Moyers, 2005); however, few studies have investigated the interplay of varying levels of social support and how that impacts resilience in foster families.

Tangible and Emotional Support

Research regarding social support in foster families typically differentiates between tangible resources, meeting the needs of foster children and families through the provision of goods and services, and emotional supports. Both tangible and emotional support can be provided from within the family system through a sense of connectedness and mutuality, or through external support, which is provided from outside systems in their environment (Walsh, 2002). Tangible resources and emotional support have been identified as protective factors, especially when dealing with challenging behaviors exhibited by children and youth with a history of maltreatment (Cooley, Farineau, & Mullis, 2015). Systems of care can be difficult to navigate and a lack of funding can limit services and availability of practical support from service providers and caseworkers (Author A, Author B, & Author D, 2015). Acquiring and maintaining services impacts foster families' ability to adequately meet the behavioral and medical needs of the children in their care, and ultimately impacts their satisfaction with fostering (Author A et al., 2015).

Previous research has also identified that respect and validation from child welfare workers and agencies contributes to placement success (Brown, 2008; Farmer et al., 2005). Foster parents feel supported when they are considered part of the interdisciplinary team which values their input (McDonald, Burgess, & Smith, 2003; Triseliotis, Borland, & Hill, 2000) and when they have some control and support in decision-making (Eaton & Caltabiano, 2009; Author

B et al., 2013). Foster parents have also described the importance of sensitivity and emotional support when foster children leave their homes (Author B et al., 2013). This sense of loss and difficulty during transition requires emotional support from within the family unit and from external support systems.

Informal and Formal Support

Foster families may receive tangible and emotional support formally, through professional services, or through informal, natural occurring social networks. Regarding formal support, the quality of relationships with service providers affects the satisfaction, success of placements, and the desire to continue fostering (Author B et al., 2013; Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006). Positive relationships with service providers have open communication, and both the physical and emotional availability of child welfare workers (Hudson & Levasseur, 2002; Rhodes, Orme, Cox, 2001). Foster parents have expressed a desire to openly discuss their stresses and challenges with service providers without fear of repercussions or being viewed as unable to cope (Brown, 2008; Hudson & Levasseur, 2002; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, & France, 2011). Relationships are negatively impacted when accurate and complete information regarding the foster child is not provided, when the foster parents' attachment and grief is not acknowledged (Cavazzi, Guilfoyle, & Sims, 2010), when there is a perceived lack of trust from the child welfare worker (Metcalfe & Sanders, 2012), and when foster parents do not feel respected (Brown, 2008; Murray et al., 2011). For foster parents, feeling respected involves inclusion in decision-making, regular communication, and feeling acknowledged and appreciated for their role.

Informal support is also important and has been linked to reducing caregiver stress and increasing placement stability. A main source of informal support identified by foster families is

access to other foster parents and resources for foster children and families (Brown, 2008).

Foster families benefit from being connected with other foster families as they are able to relate

to each other's experiences and experience an empathetic understanding of their challenges and

stresses. Support groups for foster parents and kinship providers may be most beneficial when

the facilitator has personal fostering experience (Green & Gray, 2013; Octoman & McLean,

2014).

Beyond support from other foster caregivers, informal support is also perceived when the

foster parent's significant others, such as family and friends, recognize the impact and value of

fostering (Brown, 2008; Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003). Family cohesion is also important,

as there is a desire for a strong family unit and relationships between biological and foster

children (Brown & Calder, 2000). Support from faith communities and one's own faith also

contribute to successful placements as they provide sources of support and coping (Buehler et al.,

2003; Howell-Moroney, 2013). Informal supports are more developed and stronger when formal

supports are inadequate (Cavazzi et al., 2010; Oosterman et al., 2007); however, the complexities

of issues encountered in foster care require an integration of informal and formal support.

Family resilience

Reliance on a network of family, friends, and professional supports has been cited as an

important factor influencing resilience in vulnerable families. For example, Lietz and Strength

(2011) studied family resilience in child-welfare involved families, identifying social support as

one of several factors contributing to families' ability to achieve reunification and maintain

healthy functioning. Although the sample was of the biological families, the importance of both

receiving and providing social support was an important consideration that impacts various

family systems. Walsh (2002) has also examined resiliency-based practice with families,

contending that building community and extended family support networks are important, as is the feeling of mutual support and connectedness, which can impact formal and informal supports.

Ecological Theory

Social support and its contribution to family resilience are contingent upon various interacting supports. Ecological theory provides a framework for understanding human behavior within the nested structures of the ecological environment and the interactions between individuals and environmental occurrences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The nested systems within the ecological environment are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

The microsystems represents the systems closest to the individual and describes the interpersonal relations, roles, and activities of the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1994). Individuals can both influence and be influenced by the microsystem (Johnson, 2008). Understanding foster family support systems within the ecological perspective, the micro system includes partners or spouses, children, close friends, neighbors, extended families, workplaces, licensing and child welfare workers, and for some families, people connected to them through faith organizations. The linkages and direct interactions that occur within the microsystems are represented by the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1994). These interactions can be healthy or unhealthy, and either promote improved functioning, or inhibit it.

Foster parents are subjected to many rules, regulations, and decisions that are made without their input yet affect their family's lives; essentially they are placed in a position between the larger child welfare system and their family as a microsystem. In the ecological systems framework this is described as the exosystem, or the interactions, linkages, and

processes that occur between two or more other systems, with at least one of the settings not including the direct individual involved but causing an indirect influence on the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1994).

The macrosystem is the overarching culture or subculture that provides the defined beliefs, norms, values and customs of the system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1994; Johnson, 2008). The happenings in the macrosystem affect the processes that occur within the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The macrosystem of the foster family incorporates the political, economic, and social climate of the community, the child welfare agency, both the state and federal level climates (Johnson, 2008). Finally, the chronosystem put the transactions in historical context, understanding how normative and non-normative events impact interactions across systems.

As described through the ecological systems theory, foster families function in relation to broader and cultural contexts, and the meaning people assign to their experiences in these contexts has a significant impact on their decisions and well-being. Examining the individual influences, both directly and indirectly impacting foster families' decisions and experiences, takes into account how roles change and individuals and systems accommodate each other. Considering that foster families interact with a variety of systems, as well as varying levels of family and community, research and practice with this population should be approached from an ecological perspective.

To date, studies have examined foster parent satisfaction and needs of foster families, yet little research has taken an in-depth look at social support. Understanding not only what types of social support exist to support resilience in foster families, but also how these varying levels of support may interact and how families may compensate for more or less support in a particular

domain is important. This study sought to understand how foster families who have been able to overcome the challenges associated with fostering, interpret and utilize their support systems effectively.

Methods

A mixed methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2003) was used to examine the family strengths that were useful to families who have been able to sustain long-term fostering. In the initial study (Authors, in press), ten strengths emerged as important to a family's capacity to overcome the challenges of fostering. Of these ten, social support was discussed with the greatest frequency and it was in many cases appraised as most important for a family unit to cope and adapt to the stressors associated with providing foster care. The purpose of this study was to analyze all qualitative data that were coded "social support," to provide an in-depth analysis of this one strength. Social support was defined as emotional and tangible assistance that is provided within the family system (internal social support) and from outside of the system from people such as neighbors, extended family, coaches, or pastors (external social support). Social support was described by participants throughout the interviews.

For the first phase of the larger study, all licensed foster parents with a current email address in a southwestern state were invited to participate in an on-line survey; 681 foster parents responded (36.5% response rate). Seventy-one respondents met the inclusion criteria for the second phase of the study, that they were licensed for at least five years and rated within the healthy range (≥ 3.0) on the Family Assessment Device (Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop, 1983). A purposive sample of 20 families was invited to participate in two in-depth narrative interviews, based on family structure (e.g. single versus two-parent household), racial/ethnic identity, and geographic location across the state, to ensure diversity. The purposive sample included seven

single-parent households and 13 two-parent households. The average time fostering of the 20

families was 9.4 years and the foster parents reported providing care for 3 to 25 or more children

($M = 14.9$). Twelve families identified as multiracial, six identified as Caucasian, and two did not

identify their race. All 20 families were invited to participate in a second narrative interview, of

which 18 participated in both. The second interview was conducted 4-6 weeks after the first.

During the second interview, researchers provided a summary of the first interview, asked if

there was anything they would like to add to the first interview along with follow-up questions

about difficulties the family had experienced, changes in the family, what the family has found

helpful as a foster family, and any additional advice they might have for other foster parents. The

resulting 38 interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by at least two

researchers, as triangulation by observer. Researchers used open coding to analyze the interviews

for social support. Further analysis was conducted on social support codes to develop sub-themes

of types of social support (source and context). - Several additional strategies were used to

manage research reactivity and bias including reflexivity, peer debriefing, member check, and

maintaining an audit trail.

Findings

Social support was described by all foster families as critical to their ability to continue

fostering. Foster parents in this study identified both emotional and tangible supports that

contributed to their ability to continue providing care to foster children over the years, and

allowed their family to manage stressful or challenging tasks. Consistent with an ecological

framework, foster parents identified multiple levels of support and discussed how these supports

interacted, were reciprocal, and even how they adapted over time.

Levels of Social Support

Microsystem. When discussing the microsystem, foster families described the importance of reciprocal transactions with many systems such as those that occurred within their family, from partners or spouses, biological and adopted children, their adult children, close friends, and extended families. For example, one foster parent said, "I think building your supports is huge. And if building that support is your mom or your licensing worker or another foster family, or your best friend—whatever that support is, make sure that you utilize them." Similarly, one parent discussed the value of having her parents as a support when stating:

> If I did not have my parents, I could not do this. I could not. And I think of myself as a
> very strong and independent woman. I've been single for a long time and I feel like I can
> pretty much do anything on my own. Except for being two places at once.

Foster parents also discussed naturally occurring external supports from neighbors, coworkers, faith communities, coworkers, and other foster parents. For example, one foster parent talked about the emotional support of another foster parent when explaining, "She fostered before I fostered. So she understands when a foster parent complains about different behaviors or the complications of the system [that] the average person doesn't understand."

Just as informal social support was important, formal support provided by child welfare professionals was also highlighted as essential to one's ability to sustain fostering. Foster parents identified the importance of child welfare professionals in providing tangible and emotional support. For example, one foster parent stated, "Sometimes it's as simple as putting in a daycare referral," when discussing the tangible support needed. Another foster parent spoke of the emotional support she gained through open communication with the child welfare professional, stating, "If you have really good communication and you have really good case workers, and you have really good family support coordinators. That is so key."

In addition to discussing the importance of receiving social support in the microsystem, foster parents also discussed ways in which they gave support representing the value they placed on social support even when the output was flowing from their system to assist others. For example, several foster parents discussed the importance of building positive working relationships with biological families consistent with a focus on shared parenting. One foster mother described the moment she arrived to pick up a newborn from the hospital:

> Everybody's crying…I walked over to the teen mom and the grandparents and I introduced myself…I said 'Take a deep breath. No one's here to hurt you.'…I said, 'I just want to tell you some things that the state's gonna expect out of you…The state doesn't want your baby. They just want the baby safe.' So the grandmother… she's writing down notes like crazy…And I must have stayed there two hours.

The foster mother continued by describing the information and emotional support she felt helped ease the transition for the family. She added, "I could relate. How would I have felt if someone was coming in to take my child?" indicating a sense of empathy that helped her support the family.

Another foster parent shared a memorable experience in which a former foster placement reached out to her after aging out of foster care that offers a great illustration of the importance of reciprocal transactions:

> My second son that I had here couple years ago called at Thanksgiving time. 'What are you doing for Thanksgiving?' I said, 'What do I do for Thanksgiving?' He goes, 'I know.' He goes, 'Can I come?' And I said, 'Yeah! But maybe you should bring the turkey this year?' And there's this long pause. And I was kind of joking. And he said, 'I could probably try that.' I'm like, 'Really? You would try that for me?' He goes, 'Yeah.'

> He goes, 'You put on a really big spread.' He goes, 'I could do that.' I said, 'Okay, I'll do
>
> all the rest of the stuff.' You know, and he brought a turkey and he's done it now, three
>
> years in a row.

This foster mother shared her pride in being able to continue supporting a youth and that he had remembered a family tradition that he wanted to continue. By changing the relationship such that he too contributed to the meal, demonstrates the importance of moving some relationships to become bidirectional and mutually supportive over time.

Mesosystem. The mesosystem involves the interaction of two or more micro systems. For many foster parents, their commitment of fostering comes out in other areas of their lives such as at work, school, with extended family, or in the community. Through the interaction of the micro systems, others around them were exposed to and ultimately considered fostering serving an important role in recruiting other families. Participants often shared stories of extended family, co-workers, neighbors, and now even their adult children becoming foster parents because of these interactions, and how they ended up helping one another. For example, one foster parent shared:

> I met new people…The lady that lives behind me over here, she has—she's now adopting
>
> her grandson. And I took care of him for a little bit when she was, you know, trying to
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> work and she's trying to rescue that situation, you know. And I was here, so I'd take care
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> of him and…so now she's adopting…it's interesting how people's lives change. They see
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> what you do, and 'naw, it's not too bad. Maybe I'll do that too.' You know?

All of the foster families discussed the importance of building support networks and having multiple systems in place to rely upon, suggesting the benefit of having systems interact in the mesosystem. One foster mother said, "Your team should include at minimum the bio

family, the CPS case manager, the GAL, and the licensing worker, at a minimum. And then you build your team from there." Other parents described the need to know the resources within their supports and how to use them. This included not only building their support system, but also learning how to navigate the system by gathering information from multiple perspectives. One parent emphasized, "Information is key…so asking information from other foster parents; even from other agencies…and so it's just about having that other support system…and then to ask questions, just from everybody."

Foster parents also frequently talked about helping others build their support networks, by sharing their years of experience and mentoring new foster parents. One parent shared:

I know when people go through classes together they tend to buddy up and become friends. So then, in that situation they'd be fairly equally experienced. But a lot of times they come from referrals, so they may be going through the licensing process because their friend who's done foster care for six years referred them. They need to know that person is a support for them too…we're all in this together.

Foster parents frequently described their commitment to mentoring newer foster parents, again emphasizing the benefits of not just giving, but also receiving social support.

Macrosystem supports. Foster parents described how greater society and cultural norms impacted their support, through acknowledgement of racial differences and stigma associated with being involved in child welfare. They also had positive or negative experiences related to public awareness of abused and neglect children and systems of care. For example, one parent described an article she shared with other foster parents, to help educate others about fostering: "It [article] just talked about, kind of debunking the myths, the stereotypes of foster parents." Foster parents also spoke to the general misunderstanding about their motivation to foster. One

foster parent remarked, "There was this whole long thing about 'don't call me a hero. I'm not doing this to become a hero. I'm doing it because these children are a part of my life.'

The racial differences and stigma associated with taking in children who were of different racial backgrounds than the foster family was also evident in the interviews. On foster parent reported receiving comments such as "How could you do that? How could you take in a black child and you're a white family,' and things like that." In response, the foster parent stated, "And really, it doesn't matter. Kids are kids." Another parent describes turning a similar experience into an opportunity to educate others:

> I go out in public with my white children and I have a Hispanic foster placement and a
> black foster placement. And of course I get questions, and that's my opportunity to
> educate. To say, 'You know what, these are my kids. And I chose for them to be in my
> life and my home and they're a part of my family.' And 'what else would you like to
> know?' So then you can talk about foster care from that point on.

The macro system, incorporating the larger state child welfare agency and the provider system, also directly impacted individual foster families. Families spoke about how overwhelmed the system is; when speaking of the challenges faced working with the child welfare agency, a foster parent stated "I don't point my finger at any one thing other than that the state is overwhelmed." In attempting to receive services for a child, a foster parent spoke to the difficulties working through the complex behavioral health system: "Maneuvering through the system and trying to get him the supports that he needs and being available to the schools to offer supports to them when he's having difficulties in class has been a struggle."

Exosystem. Overwhelmingly, foster families in this study described the importance of communication between various support systems. The exosystem includes decisions that

impacted foster parents without their input, and were some of the greatest challenges foster

families mentioned. When speaking of communication, many families emphasized the

importance of receiving adequate information about medications, trauma histories, and

behaviors, at initial placement of the child. This allowed them to adequately address the needs of

the children in their care. They also described the importance of receiving communication that

workers were hearing their concerns or requests, even if issues were not yet resolved. One

parent shared:

> Even if that means following up with a phone call saying 'I don't have time to do this
>
> right now. I will get it done next week.' Or 'I don't have that answer but I will tell you
>
> who does.' Just making contact with them, even if it's not with the answers that they
>
> want. Just the contact.

Simply maintaining communication that their concerns were not forgotten, communicated to

foster parents that they were valued members of the team. Foster parents also discussed the

importance of knowing who to contact and feeling as though they could ask questions when

needed. Illustrating this point, one foster parent shared:

> Foster parents feel like they can't ask questions or maybe they're embarrassed to
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> ask questions about why the kids are in care or what truly happened. And then
>
> they'll get bits of information from the children, which is often inaccurate because
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> it's coming from a child's perspective…I encourage my foster families to get
>
> everybody's email address. Get the case manager, the supervisor, the guardian ad
>
> litem, the attorneys, anybody and everybody they can get in contact with.

This foster parent was a licensing worker, who utilized her experience as a foster parent to

encourage her foster families to communicate amongst the team supporting the child and family.

However, when decisions were made in policy or by someone in leadership to limit this information, that action had a very real effect on the foster family.

Many foster parents also described their role communicating across supports. They described the need to advocate for the children in their care amongst providers, case workers, the courts, and biological family members. Describing her role between levels of support, one foster parent shared, "So you're an intermediary trying to represent that child to the doctors, plus satisfying whether it's an agency or state…And so it really becomes a multi-level system." Another foster parent described her role in advocating for a meeting between foster parents and biological parents, to increase communication:

> They call it an ice-breaker. CPS is supposed to offer that as soon as the children are placed. An ice-breaker so everybody can meet everybody…. So I encourage my families to ask for it, and this lady asked for it… And it was wonderful. They [biological parents] were so happy to see that this foster family was normal, their children were cared for, and loved and healthy. And the [foster] mom got to see, wow, these were normal people, that just happened to make bad choices. So it was great.

When the foster parent who was also a professional, advocated for the ice breaker, this represented an indirect provision of social support to those foster and biological parents.

Chronosystem. The chronosystem includes both normative and non-normative events that impact families and the ways they interact with one another and their social networks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This can include macro changes such as how a highly publicized death of child in foster care can impact how a caseworker treats a foster parent or how neighbors perceive a family providing care. This allows includes micro-level transitions, such as how the entrance or exit of foster children, adoption, or launching of children into adulthood impact the

functioning of the family unit. The chronosystem provides a larger context regarding how events impact interactions across systems.

For families who foster, the importance of social support during difficult events and transitions was discussed extensively. Several families discussed the adjustment that occurred within their family when a child was placed due to the trauma experienced by the child just after their removal. They described the need for social support during a "warm-up period," when the child and family unit were both adjusting and supporting each other. They also described how the need for adjustment was ongoing, as they learned to adapt to changing circumstances and to accommodate the needs of all family members. One foster parent shared about her family:

> They become very flexible. They become really good at backing me up. And I can't go somewhere because somebody's sick, then another [child] stepped in and [said] sometimes, it's just, well, we can't go. And so they've learned that you just can't say you're going to do this and you're absolutely going to do it. So they've learned to adapt to things, and I think that's probably one of the best things we've taught them is that you can't guarantee what's going to come tomorrow.

Families also supported each other through the transitions of children going back to biological families. They discussed the attachment to the children they cared for, but also supporting the children's attachment to both families. It was natural for foster parents to become attached to the children in their care, and wanted to support them as they transitioned back to biological families. Even when families eventually adopted, they still supported their children's interest in learning more about their biological families, saying "When they're ready, we'll discuss it."

Discussion and Implications

Findings from this study highlight the importance of an ecological approach to understanding social support among foster families and offer important practice and policy implications. Families in this study described the importance of relationships as a means of social support that has contributed to their experiences of resilience. Families went on to describe how they were able to use the social support they received and how the interactions between supports allowed them to be more successful in fostering. They also discussed strategies for fostering success by effectively accessing, leveraging, and providing social support.

Importance of Relationships

Foster parents in the study described multiple levels of social support that contributed to their resilience as foster families. From an ecological perspective, drawing from multiple levels for social support and having open communication and healthy functioning between the levels can be most advantageous in that each individual and source of support can offer a unique contribution, perspective, and expertise. Participants discussed how each source of support had something to offer to ensure the success of the family. This finding can inform practice among child welfare workers and other professionals working with families in the child welfare system to help them in identifying the social supports available to them, those they can draw on, and others they can explore. This type of intervention supports strengths-based practice with families and children in that it allows them to explore how they can improve their family's well-being with the help of others. This finding extends previous research that has shown that both formal and informal sources of support are helpful among foster families (Brown, 2008; Buehler et al., 2003; Octoman & McLean, 2014).

Foster parents in the study also described experiences of strengthening and modifying relationships as the needs of their families changed over time. They talked about where their

families were when they started fostering and how this changed, as they shifted to being able to mentor and support other families who were fostering. This offers important implications for recruitment and training for new and seasoned foster families. Recognizing that families, their resources, and strengths develop and change over time, allows practitioners to more accurately assess and provide support to foster families, which ultimately impacts the children they serve. Research has shown that many foster families want to support other families who foster (Author B, Author C, & Author D, 2015) and that foster families desire access to other foster families as a source of support (Brown, 2008; Octoman & McLean, 2014). It is critical for child welfare professionals to acknowledge the importance of drawing on the support and experiences of families who successfully foster.

Families also talked about how they managed to strengthen their own families through fostering by supporting each other. For example, they referred to being flexible, creative, and attentive to each other. All families face difficulties and transitions, but having the support to draw upon, the skills, and resources to use in times of need can lead to better outcomes. Fostering is often stressful and also very rewarding and to have people and organizations in place to provide necessary support, guidance, and to celebrate successes increases longevity and well-being among foster families (Author B et al., 2013; MacGregor, et al., 2006).

Families (parents and children) in the study often discussed their ability to educate others about foster care and about their families. This finding also supports the notion that foster families can be ambassadors of foster care by sharing their own stories and experiences. Families talked about explaining how the system works as well as debunking myths about children in foster care and families who provide foster care.

Building, Utilizing, and Cultivating Supports

Foster families discussed the relationships and interactions between supports as well as how their efforts and actions to create, build, and maintain relationships and supports were paramount in their success. Families recognized that social support is reciprocal. They talked about the value of the support they received from others as well as the importance of giving back and providing social support to others, which is consistent with studies highlighting the importance of positive relationships in child welfare (Brown, 2008; Denby et al., 1999; Farmer et al., 2005). Recognizing that social support is a continuous, bidirectional network that develops and changes over time, allows practitioners to more accurately assess and provide support to foster families, which ultimately impacts the children they serve.

Families described how they were able to put their supports into action and effectively use social support they had. Families first had to identify who the sources of support were and how they could help. Much of this happened unintentionally, however families did talk about specific strategies they used to ensure they were accessing the resources available to them and advocating for services and other things the children in their care needed. Families learned over time how to communicate effectively with agents of the child welfare system, with other families, and with the children in their care. They learned who the "players" were who were involved in the child welfare system, who was most and least helpful to them, and what they could do to navigate systemic barriers. Foster parents often compensated for less formal support, by creating stronger connections with informal supports, such as other caregivers, family and friends (Cavazzi et al., 2010; Oosterman et al., 2007). Previous research has shown that families who are able to identify and advocate for needed services and supports are more satisfied with their role in fostering (Brown & Calder, 2000; Author A et al., 2015).

Consistent with previous studies, foster families in this study also discussed their desire to be included, respected, and treated as part of the team (Brown, 2008; Farmer et al., 2005; McDonald et al., 2003; Triseliotis et al., 2000; Author B. et al., 2013). By being a part of the team and engaged in efforts to support the child and the biological family, foster families described feeling more supported, able to provide more support, and more valued. These findings have implications for efforts to improve relationships and communication between foster parents and child welfare workers and providers, as well as improving cross-system coordination. A "one-size-fits-all" approach doesn't work, and there's a need for communication, education, and coordination across multiple systems working with children in foster care. Child welfare systems and their policies should encourage appropriate relationships and communication between foster parents and biological families.

In terms of training and orientation for new foster families, foster parents should not only be introduced to various supports and resources, but shown how to access them and mobilize the supports available. Looking at social support beyond what supports exist with tangible and emotional supports, to really considering the interaction and context that impacts foster parents' ability to care for our most vulnerable children, is important. Foster parents should be taught about how the system works and how to navigate it. Most of all, foster parents should be provided with adequate support from child welfare workers and providers and relationships with other foster parents should be encouraged and supported (Author B et al., 2015; Author A et al., 2015). Currently, foster parents in the state where the study took place receive financial support from the state to care for children in their care, and varying levels of social support from their licensing agency in the form of training, socialization and networking opportunities. Families may also access services from community non-profits across the state to help meet their needs as

foster parents. However, resources and support can vary depending on location, awareness, agency, and needs and may not be accessible to all foster families.

Conclusion

Although there were limitations to this study as it was based on a purposive sample of families who foster, the findings offer important insight into the value foster families attach to being part of an ecological system that fits the mission of fostering. Goodness of fit refers to the degree to which a system is situated in an environment that has the resources needed to allow it to thrive. This requires systems that contribute to the growth and development of that system but is also reciprocal, in that the system contributes to its environment. It is clear that families who foster serve an essential function to our capacity to provide for the safety, well-being, and permanency of vulnerable children. Their contributions in providing care, in recruiting and supporting new foster parents, and in providing a feedback loop to the child welfare system are substantial. In the same way, families who foster need to experience an ecology of support that similarly contributes to their capacity to foster.

Natural occurring informal support is essential in providing respite, transportation, and a listening ear when needed. Formal support that comes through the child welfare system is also critical. Tangible support such as foster care stipends, authorizing respite care, or setting up transportation is needed. Emotional support such as debriefing difficult circumstances or providing a sense of security through availability of a licensing worker or counselor are also important. Developing a macrosystem that creates a culture of acceptance for unique family structures would also help families who foster as well as the children for whom they care feel welcome and included in their local communities. Taking an ecological approach offers many places of intervention to develop the goodness of fit needed for these families to thrive.

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