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School-Based Supports for Foster Families: Understanding the Experiences and Needs of the Biological Children of Foster Parents



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ABSTRACT

Foster families face a range of experiences during the fostering process that affect all members of the family both positively and negatively, including the biological children of foster parents. Recent research has addressed effects of fostering on biological children, however there is a gap in the literature concerning long-term supports for these family members. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of the biological children of foster parents while investigating suggestions for school-based supports. Two broad categories of themes emerged from the data along with three specific recommendations to inform school-based supports for biological children of foster parents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- Foster children experience **unique circumstances** during their time in the foster care system that can result in **educational, behavioral, and social-emotional difficulties**. (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017; Scherr, 2014)
- Fostering children takes **a physical and emotional toll on families**, including their biological children. (Younes & Harp, 2007)
- The following themes emerged in the existing literature about the **impacts of fostering** on the **biological children** of foster families:
 - Active Involvement in the Fostering Process
 - Positive Impacts of Fostering
 - Emotional Maturity
 - Having to Share
 - Ending of Placements
- When foster families feel equipped for these changes and challenges, they can provide better care at home and will have a greater chance of preventing burnout. (Randle, 2013).

METHOD

Sample: $n=10$ biological children between the ages of 10 and 25. Participants must have had a foster care placement in their homes.

Research Design: Qualitative individual semi-structured interviews

Methodology: This study utilized a phenomenological, qualitative method of research with a thematic analysis approach to data evaluation.

Questioning: The lead researcher developed a semi-structured interview protocol which allowed the researcher and participant to engage in non-hierarchical dialogue. Questions were selected to explore the following topics: The participants experiences of having a foster child in his/her home, what kind of support was received, and suggestions for schools to provide support to the biological students of foster parents.

RESULTS

Experiences of the Biological Children of Foster Parents

Positive Experiences	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <u>New Siblings</u>: “[One of the best parts was] there’s another person around to bring another personality in.” <u>Diverse Experiences</u> <u>Helping Others</u>: “One thing was just knowing that I was making a difference” <u>Closer Relationships with Parents and Biological Siblings</u> <u>Unified Family Mission</u>
Negative Experiences	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Foster Kids’ Trauma</u> <u>Foster Kid’s Behavior</u> <u>Ending/Temporary Nature of Placements</u> <u>Older Siblings Carrying the Weight for Younger Siblings</u>: “I was trying to stay home as much as possible instead of doing what I wanted to do or going to youth activities...Even my schoolwork started to fall behind because I was focusing on helping her out....And then like when my bother started falling behind, I kind of pushed him to keep up.” <u>Busy Schedule</u> <u>Split Attention</u> <u>Effect on Academics</u>: “I wanted to hold the baby first of all, but just taking care of them and helping out my parent because they don’t need to do everything. So just like putting them first but in a way that was above my academics as well because I was thinking about them and not school.”

Suggestions for Support

Ways to Support Biological Children	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Community</u> <u>Someone to Talk To</u>: “...I knew that they knew, but they should have, someone should have just been like, ‘Hey, I know this is going on, I’m here.’ Just something as simple as that.” <u>Validating Their Experiences</u> <u>Additional Supports</u>
Advice for Biological Children about to begin fostering	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Be Patient and Loving</u>: “keep an open mind and try to put yourself in this person or child or whoever it is situation and just be patient...and just love on them. Don’t be afraid to.” <u>Invest in Relationship with Parents</u>

IMPLICATIONS

- School Psychologists should **initiate contact** with the biological children of foster parents after finding out that a family within the district is fostering. The school personnel can validate experiences and offer options for support.
- The school psychologist and other personnel can help the biological children of foster parents find a **community** of people who have shared their experiences. This could be within district or community-based groups.
- School psychologists can advocate that educators utilize an ecological lens and employ a **whole-family approach** when providing supports.

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