Title

What Counts In Recruiting and Retaining Good Foster Carers? *Social Support Does!*

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Introduction

This short paper puts forward the strong contention that social support counts as a critical factor in what makes a good foster carer. To date there has been a lack of research to look at particular facets of social support. As part of the research partnership between James Cook University and the Queensland Department of Families (Mackay/Whitsunday Region) support and the role it plays is being more comprehensively explored. For the purposes of this paper this writer outlines details relating to this research project, what literature tells us about support, why this research and approach is needed and some initial comments and findings from the research.

Background and methodology

This research is using a feminist narrative approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of ten female foster carers within the Mackay/Whitsunday Region. To date all ten foster carers have been interviewed once but followup interviews are yet to be fully completed. A particular focus of this research is exploring the role of social supports, including informal (or weak tie) supports, in the day to day lives of female foster carers. There are several definitions of social support. Adelman and colleagues view social support in terms of communication whereby the receiver and provider influence each other and uncertainty is reduced (1987). O Dea (1989) defines social support as relationships and attachments in our everyday lives which provide a sense of being cared for, loved, esteemed and valued, and a sense of belonging (p.5-6). While training and economic support are part of overall support they are not an emphasis of this particular research and paper.
Support is such a vital factor in people’s lives that writers, such as Rosenfeld (1997) have made research findings that correlate good health (physical and mental) to having a variety of support networks. Research relating to foster caring bears out that view. Research and literature to date tells us that carers identify support as being more important than money and they have identified physical and emotional availability, respect and practical help by workers as a major factor in remaining a carer (Butler and Charles 1999; Fisher, Gibbs, Sinclair and Wilson 2000). Support given can be viewed as either positive or negative depending on how the foster carer perceives it. Support needs to be an imaginative, practical and prompt response to an accurate perception of a carer’s situation as the carer herself conceives it (Sinclair et al 2000:71).

In a study by Stone and Stone (1983) to look at factors associated with successful foster care placements one factor was rated significantly higher than any other (the second factor being rated 24% lower) and that was contact rapport building, and energy expended by caseworker with foster parents (14). Other researchers have also noted that physical and emotional availability, respect and practical help by the workers was seen as major factor by foster carers (Fisher, Gibbs, Sinclair and Wilson 2000).

Lack of support has been identified as having a significant, negative impact on carers and past foster carers have identified that the lack of support of workers as a common cause for ceasing to foster (Triseliotis, Borland and Hill 1998). Carers are particularly vulnerable after a stressful incident and in increasingly complex fostering situations incidents and allegations are common. The need for both preventive support in skill building and training for carers, and for support during and after the crisis if retention of foster carers is a consideration, is paramount. Significant events can erode the positive picture a foster carer has of themselves; a feeling of isolation and lack of support sets in and difficulties among family members occurs. In such circumstances, the provision of effective support becomes a moral imperative. (Sinclair et al 2000:107).
Placement endings are another susceptible time for foster carers when support needs are greater. This is more so when a foster carer has not been included in preparation and planning of a placement ending and susceptibility is exacerbated with the feeling of not being part of a team, and sometimes policies being followed at all costs regardless of negatives effects on children and foster carers. The lack of follow-up support after a placement ending is felt acutely by carers and there was a strong feeling of wanting social workers to know what it was like being a foster carer and wanting to be heard and valued by social worker (Strover 1996/97).

Support is a recurring theme as an integral ingredient in the successful recruitment and retention of foster carers and is a factor in preventing breakdowns of placements. Support also assists in clarifying issues relating to the role and status of foster carers (Sellick 1992).

**Why this research is needed**

The statement by the President of Australian Foster Care Association, Bev Orr that foster care was in crisis in most areas of Australia in terms of carer recruitment and morale (Milburn 2002 internet) is not refuted by practitioners or foster carers. There is a critical need to have a diverse pool of appropriate foster carers in order to have successful placements but the difficulties in recruiting and retaining foster carers have never been greater. Foster caring is not easy. Writers and foster carers identify carers are expected to perform professionally regarding challenging behaviours, accept abusive/neglectful parents, provide care for children at a minutes notice and for an undefined time. All this is expected without any/much training, support, information, inclusion in planning or recognition (Moore 1991). It could also be added that this care which is 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, is expected without being paid for time given in caring, superannuation or respite or leave. Research needs look at a number of factors in relation to successful recruitment and retention and this research will inform policies, strategies and practices in relation to the role of support.
Females, as in most areas of caring, are almost exclusively the primary carers in the fostering situation. This has been the case for over 100 years of formal fostering arrangements with government but despite this fact it is next to impossible to find information or research that focuses on the female carer and their views. Studies, such as Flaherty and Richmans, note that women seem to have a greater awareness of the needs of themselves and others which in turn led to a greater potential for providing support and a need for social support for a feeling of wellbeing (O Neill 1999). It would seem crucial that if recruitment and retention of carers is in crisis then we need to talk to foster carers themselves about what works for them in fostering and what they need. Hence this research is using female carers stories about their experiences and perceptions to draw out the remotivation factor and find out what is important to them.

A number of writers have acknowledged that we need to be informed about what rewards or remotivates carers. Towle (1970) talks about the concept of remotivation, as opposed to the initial motivation of fostering, as being important in retaining carers. Butler and Charles (1999) state that that retaining carers is dependent on recognising and managing the interlocking nature of tangible and intangible rewards (57). They noted that it was not the tangible rewards by themselves that could adequately explain the retention of carers on a long term basis but rather the meeting of their emotional needs and expectations. This view is endorsed by Himmelweit (1994) who talks about the care economy depending on different motivations for work. She notes that carers often react differently to incentives or disincentives to those in the paid economy. Responsibilities and doing what is right for those in their care often outweigh the offer of direct rewards. Indeed carers do not always see caring as real work.

Social supports and in particular informal supports have been identified as being critical but have not been covered in any detail in research to date. Writers such as Sinclair et al (2000) and O Neill (1999) in their recent research studies note that while they view informal support as crucial, these aspects are not the focus of their studies. This is because formal or case work supports are able to be easily identified and enhanced if
necessary by those working with carers, and literature tells us that that caseworker support one of the primary concerns for foster carers.

Literature also tells us informal or weak tie supports are also important. Informal or weak tie supports include the spectrum of informal sources of social support found within the community (Adelman et al 1987:127). Adelman and colleagues (1987) argue that the less developed relationships provide significant and critical support but their importance has been overlooked in favour of the stronger relationships. Oppenheim (1992) notes that carers need different networks that meet different needs. Again, this research is delving into this neglected area of informal supports.

Given the need to have good foster carers and accordingly effective recruitment and retention strategies, support has to be an integral part of such strategies. For these strategies to be effective we should understand what it is foster carers need and want — what will keep them motivated. Foster carers in my research have said it would be nice if people realised we are not just a foster carers: we are wives, mothers, sisters, friends: we are people who have lives and are human and have our own needs. It is no good planning strategies without first hearing the voices of those who are, or have, fostered.

**The research undertaken so far.**

There has been no evidence to date that contradict the literature searches that foster carers have disagreed with. Support, including acknowledgement and respect, is identified as a critical factor for all carers in continuing to foster. Views endorsing literature include:

- To be genuinely listened to — not just heard and their views dismissed
- To have someone there and responding when there is a crisis
- To work in partnership with all involved in fostering
- To be valued and respected — we may not have a piece of paper but we have a degree in life experience..
- To have genuine involvement in planning that involves children in their care
- To have caseworkers who can understand the difficulties, or know what it is like to provide 24/7 care
- To have an involvement in recruitment and support of foster carers
• To have a clear role and status.

Given the research being undertaken does not have structured questions, there has been flexibility in moving to where the foster carer might want to focus or to delve more closely about particular aspects. Having completed the first round of interviews with carers, they invariably first talk about Departmental staff and the need for more understanding and awareness of Family Service Officers about the role they play. This is almost standard but in fact as they speak about their fostering experience and what is important to them they mention others as key supports and contacts. It is not Departmental staff or agency staff that get them through each day but rather their family and key contacts. This is in no way negates the role of any caseworker in supporting foster carers but does identify the importance of social supports in their lives. Comments about support include:

Support would have to be one of the most important things you will ever have...and you need it. You need the support to get you through the tougher times. Family and close friends are second to none and they are the most important that people have

Being able to debrief with someone you know who understands is really important because of the high stress levels most of us are working under..

Mums talk about their children and their day at playgroup, sport, with neighbours, friends...we (foster carers) are not meant to. We're watched about everything - we can't say we are having a crap day or we are at our wits ends, we are not meant to whinge or break down...an average mum can and its accepted as normal! If we do its bad!! We are human too.

This research is still to be completed but on the evidence collected, by way of literature and interviews, it can safely be said that support counts as a vital ingredient in recruiting and retaining good fosters carers. Positive support, as viewed by foster carers, has to be something we understand and work towards.

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