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Foster Parents Experiences with Conflict and Grief

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Psychology
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Abstract

The study explored foster parent experiences of completing an online training program about the challenges of foster parenting in order to gain a greater understanding of how these challenges affect foster parent mental health and retention, and how they could be aided though online training. Thirty foster parents completed the four modules of the training program, and then completed a telephone interview about their experience of completing the course, and their experience with fostering in general. This study focused on two of the modules, the 'Four Tools for Conflict Resolution" and "Reactions to Grief and Loss".

The results suggest online delivery could be beneficial in overcoming the multiple barriers foster parent face to accessing training, and that foster parent mental health and foster parent retention could be improved by including and increasing the involvement of the foster parent as a valued member within the foster child's caring team.

Key Words: foster parent, grief, loss, conflict, online training,

Dedication,

To every child that I have met through my career,

You were my inspiration to pursue this research, and I will continue to dedicate

my work to helping you and your families experience success.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my great appreciation to my parents, Paul and Darlene Bilawski, for their support through my educational career, and for trusting and believing in me through every decision I made to pursue this accomplishment. Together, you have both provided me with a strong foundation of unconditional love and encouragement throughout the pursuit of all my goals. None of this would have been possible without you, and I am forever grateful.

I would like to thank every foster parent who participated in this research. I find each one of you inspiring.Thank you for the valuable insight you provided, and for sharing so many of your personal experiences with me.

I would like to thank my research partner Laura Bonnell. The mutual support and respect that came so naturally within our working relationship truly made this project a wonderful experience. I feel so lucky to have had the opportunity to work with you.

Finally, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Alan Leschied for all your guidance and genuine enthusiasm in my work for this project, as well as your unwavering support for me throughout my graduate education. To experience someone believe in my strengths and abilities as a researcher and counsellor as you do is so encouraging. My confidence in my skills and knowledge that I have developed throughout this graduate program has flourished while under your supervision, and will no doubt carry through with me throughout my career.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Placement breakdown is distressing for the foster family, the foster child, and all stakeholders involved (Gilbertson & Barber, 2003). Numerous reports suggest that there exists a chronic shortage of foster parents, and many foster care agencies are having difficulty recruiting and maintaining foster parents. This fact is juxtaposed to the increasing number of children coming into care who are in need of foster homes (Brown & Calder, 1999; Festinger & Baker, 2013; Younes & Harp, 2007). Among the reasons foster parents cite for leaving their role as a foster care provider is an insufficiency in training and support. This study will focus on foster parent's experiences and the emergent needs to understand the nature of support foster parents require and the role of training to support their caring for our most vulnerable children.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

  The conflict foster parents experience within relationships with other stakeholders in the fostering system, and the grief foster parents feel when a child is removed from their home, makes the role of the foster caregiver increasingly difficult. Conflict between foster parents and other stake holders may lead to more foster home breakdowns, or may hinder the foster parents' ability to cope with grief when a child leaves their care. Therefore, the interplay between these two phenomenon may intensify the difficulty of either experience.

Conflictual Relationships

  Foster parents have a unique role where they assume the role as the primary caregiver, but not the legal guardian. Their parenting choices are influenced or determined by people or groups outside the family system, such as biological families or foster care agencies. These external parties often hold stronger decision making influence or power regarding the foster child, compared to the foster parent (Thomson & McArthur, 2009). This shift of decision making power characterizes the dynamics of foster parenting to be dramatically different than parenting biological children, and can to several conflictual issues. While child behavioural difficulties are often cited as a leading factor related to foster placement breakdown (Taylor& McQuillan, 2014), negative interactions with social workers, or other agency workers, has been cited as a motivator for discontinuing the role as a foster carer (Rogers, Cummings, Leschied, 2006). Therefore, it is important to examine the conflict foster parents face with agency stakeholders, and understand its influences in order to promote foster parent retention.

A common issue reported by foster parents is insufficient information about the foster child. Foster parents often feel that they are not being given sufficient information about the child they have agreed to care for, or feel information is being withheld from them. Without sufficient information about the child, the foster parent may feel they are unable to effectively consider the child's needs while making parenting decisions. (Hedin, 2015; Pollack, 2012; Fisher, Gibbs, Sinclair, Wilson, 2000;).

Foster parents may feel undervalued or disregarded by various stakeholders within the fostering system, such as social workers, birth parents, or policy makers (Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, & France, 2011). Foster parents want to be seen as part of the team caring for the foster child, and want their insight and input regarding the care needs of the child to be recognized and respected, but often feel their ideas and recommendations are ignored (Fisher et al. 2000; Van Holen, Vanderfaeillie, Vanschoonlandt, De Maeyer, Stroobants, 2015). This could lead foster parents to feel disconnected from social workers, and unsupported in their role as a foster carer.

Another issue foster parents commonly report is insufficient support from social workers. Foster parents frequently report that social workers do not effectively support them when they experience difficulty with a foster placement (Khoo & Skoog, 2014). Foster parents have expressed a need for more pre-placement preparation support, ongoing communication, and emotional support during, and after foster placements (Van Holen et al, 2015; Taylor & McQuillan, 2014; Murray et. al, 2011; Mitchell, Kuczynski, Tubbs, & Ross, 2010). Conflict within the foster parent- birth parent relationship is one of the top issues affecting placement disruption (Taylor & McQuillan, 2014), however, a positive and supportive relationship between the foster parents and birth parents could

result in more stable placements (Van Holen, et al. 2015; Kalland, Sinkkonen, 2001; Palmer, 1996; Linares, Montalto, Rosbruch, & Li, 2006). Nesmith, Patton, Christophersen & Smart (2015) found that foster parents who worked to build trust and maintain a positive relationship with birth parents did so by avoiding judgement and empathizing with birth parents. These foster parents considered how they might react if their child had been taken from them, which helped them respond compassionately rather than defensively when birthparents were angry or accusatory. Nesmith et al (2015) found trust building and empathy helped build a working alliance between foster and birth parents. While positive foster parent- birth parent relationships are important and beneficial, navigating this type of relationship may be difficult if the foster parent is not adequately supported and educated on how to do so (Murray et. al., 2011). Therefore, it is important for social workers to support foster parents to develop positive relationships with birth parents (Hedin, 2015).

Ambiguity within Foster Care

There are numerous elements of ambiguity involved in the removal of a child from a foster home and the conflict and tension that may be manifested between foster parents and other stakeholders in the foster care system. In order to better understand how to support foster parents, it is critical to gain a better understanding of their experience in the foster care system, and how the stressors involved with fostering children may affect their lives and mental health. This phenomenon can be depicted and understood through the concept of ambiguity and its effect on family stress. Being able to manage ambiguity and deal with loss and grief are important competencies for foster parents (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Thomson & McArthur, 2009). Understanding how the ambiguous

elements of loss in foster care may affect the foster parent could provide a richer understanding of foster parent needs and how to help them.

Ambiguous loss describes a loss that is unclear, undefined, and elusive (Boss, 2010). As described by Boss (2010), there are two kinds of ambiguous loss: in one type, there is a physical presence but a psychological absence, and in the other, there is a physical absence but a psychological presence. Ambiguous loss experienced by foster parents would be an example of this latter version. While the child is no longer in their home, the psychological presence of the child may still linger for the foster parent. The ambiguity of the loss complicates grief, confuses relationships, and prevents closure.

The nature of this loss affects every member of the foster family to different degrees. Because the breakdown of a foster home is not commonly recognized as a significant loss, the foster parent may not allow him/her self the same empathy that they would for a more common or recognized loss such as through death (Betz & Thorngren, 2006). Foster parents may rationalize that they are overreacting, or feel others do not understand the loss or emotions they feel. Adoption of ambiguous loss theory could validate the feelings and needs of foster parents by giving a name to their experience and assuring the foster parent that what they are experiencing is 'real'.

Ambiguous Roles

The personal and professional elements of the foster parent role adds role ambiguity to their position with the foster child (Thomson & McArthur, 2009). Confusion regarding the role between parents and caring professional can make it difficult for outsiders to comprehend a foster care provider's experiences and feelings.

Urquhart (1989) noted that "Outsiders often view foster parent's grief as a neurotic misunderstanding of their roles; foster parents simply are expected to cope and carry on" (p.196). One problem may be that the professional aspect of foster care is held within the personal life of the foster parent.

Personal emotions and experiences are intertwined within the professional aspect of the foster parent role; it may be unrealistic to expect foster parents to hold these two elements apart from each other when they are experienced simultaneously in both the physical and psychological aspects of their lives. While foster parents are expected to provide care as would a biological parent, they are often not provided with the same depth of understanding and knowledge regarding the foster child that a biological parent would possess. For example, foster parents may not be informed about a child's mental health issues or the details of what occurs in the child's therapy sessions (Spielfogel, Leathers, Christian, & McMeel, 2011). Without this information, foster parents are at a disadvantage for managing and understanding a child's behaviour and further, withholding this information also reinforces the message that the foster parent's relationship with the child is devalued by service providers. Expecting foster parents to provide quality care without the information given to service providers increases family stress. Ambiguous loss theory considers these feelings, and assumes that the psychological composition of members in a family may be different from the physical or legal construction of this relationship (Boss, 2007).

Stress surrounding the foster home breakdown may be intensified or made worse if the foster parent feels that their relationship with the child is being ignored or devalued. When foster parents' recommendations or requests for the foster child's placement are

disregarded, the foster parent may feel helpless and ignored by the system (Urquhart, 1989; Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibbs, 2000). Foster parents may believe that their genuine attachment and desire to care for a child is undervalued (Riggs & Willsmore, 2012). They may also feel devalued if their opinions on what is best for the child are ignored, despite the fact that the foster parent has spent the majority of the time with the child. If the relationship is ignored or devalued, so may be the right to grieve the loss. Not acknowledging the connected relationships between the foster parent and child could also intensify tension and conflict between foster parents and other stakeholders within the foster care system.

Boundary Ambiguity

Boundary ambiguity is defined as the condition of not knowing who is in or out of a family. Such ambiguity increases stress because the family structure is disturbed, roles are confused, and tasks are left incomplete. Boss (2002) explains that the barriers to managing family stress are not necessarily related to the actual removal or loss of an individual. Rather, it is the ambiguity regarding whether the absent individual is in or out of the family system that blocks managing family stress and inhibits positive coping. Foster parents, either consciously or unconsciously, may find themselves in a state of anticipating a child's removal. This state of anticipatory loss can be very stressful. In addition, knowing there are others who actively make decisions about the removal of family members could lead foster parents to feeling powerless in keeping their family together. This may be intensified if the foster parent perceives these outsiders to know very little about the relational ties within their family. Foster families may be acutely aware of misunderstandings, conflicts, or inadequate communication with foster care

agencies because of the control the agency has over the composition of the family. In this way, foster families are at a higher risk of family stress because they are not able to control the internal contexts of their family.

Families have both internal and external contexts that interact with each other to determine levels of stress (Boss, 2002). External contexts reflected in economics, history, and culture, are not usually within the family's ability to control, though they do influence the perceptions and experiences of the family. The internal contexts of families are malleable and readily under the control of the family, and involve structural, psychological, and philosophical dimensions (Boss, 2002). Part of the structural dimension of the family's internal context involves family boundaries, the family's definition of 'who is in or out' of the family, as well as each individual's role and tasks within the family. In order for family boundaries to be clear and healthy, they must be maintained by those within the system (Boss, 2002). However this is not always the case within the foster care system. While it is the foster parent's decision to open their family boundaries and accept a child into their home, it is not always their choice regarding if or when the child will leave. Therefore, foster families give up some of their control over the structural elements of their internal family context to the foster care system, which can lead to boundary ambiguity. When it is an agency decision for a child to be removed from a foster home, notice of the decision and removal of the child tends to come with minimal opportunity for closure or goodbyes (Khoo & Skoog, 2014). This can have a negative effect on the foster parent, leading to a withdrawal of service. (Khoo & Skoog, 2014; Riggs & Willsmore, 2012; Wilson et al. 2000). James (2004) found that the majority of children in their study (94.1%) had experienced a system or policy related

move. The high frequency of this type of move paired with the negative emotional responses with its suddenness typically involve an increase in the likelihood that foster parents have or will experience grief from a child being removed from their care, which could lead foster parents to be reluctant to care for another child. Each time a child enters or leaves a family system, the family boundaries need to be reorganized. Constant reorganization of boundaries, roles, tasks, and structure is stressful and can have an emotional toll on the members of the family. Family boundaries within foster families are made more complicated when there is ambiguity regarding how long the child will remain in their care. In addition, when information about the child is withheld it raises questions about the child's role within the family structure.

Family Stress Theory

ABC-X family stress theory provides a formula to understand how the factors surrounding family stress interact to determine the overall degree of stress (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2009). 'A' represents the actual event which interacts with 'B', the families coping resources, which interacts with 'C', the meaning the family makes of the event. These three factors all influence each other to determine 'X', which reflects the degree of stress or crisis (Betz & Thorngren, 2006; Wilmoth & Smyser, 2009). By using ABC-X family stress theory, ambiguity of placement breakdown is viewed with the context of how this can affect the foster parent on multiple dimensions and theorize how to effectively reduce family stress caused by ambiguous loss.

In the case of a foster home breakdown, the A factor consists of the child leaving care, which may reflect events or decisions leading up to their departure. Among the most

stressful events within the foster parent- foster child relationship include the child

returning to a perceived dysfunctional family, witnessing the child leaving foster care

prematurely, and/or grieving the departure of a foster child (Jones & Morrissette, 1999).

Foster families may experience ambiguity in regards to the permanency of the removal,

or the details regarding the child's next placement. Foster parents may wonder about the

events or reasoning behind the decision to move the child (Wilson et al., 2000; Younes &

Harp, 2007). While the effects of these events are not entirely pre-determined, it is

possible to help foster parents understand how the event is affecting them. Also, it is

possible to aid the 'B' and 'C' factors even if the foster parent has been affected by the

event over a considerable period of time. The 'B' and 'C' factors are influenced by the

ambiguity of the event. Through targeting the ambiguity, foster parents can be enabled to

discover coping resources and engage in meaning making in regards to their loss.

The coping resources available for dealing with ambiguous loss are often

ambiguous in themselves as there are no set rituals for comprehending this kind of loss.

While the foster parent may benefit from utilizing the same coping mechanisms as they

would a loss through death, the foster parent may not consider this since the child is only

'lost' from their care. Thus, they may not make the connection between the child leaving

their care and the fact of a grief response (Edelstein, Burge, & Waterman, 2001). The

support systems the foster parent has in place may be unaware of how to support the

family, just as the foster parent may not know what others could do to support or console

them. The ambiguity that characterizes foster care creates ambiguity in itself regarding

useful coping strategies. Foster parents may have a wide variety of coping resources

available to them, but they may not be utilizing them because the ambiguity of the event

makes it difficult to recognize their situation as requiring a coping resource. There may

also be other potential ways of coping that foster parents have not considered. The foster

parent's emotional experiences after the removal of a foster child can be validated by

recognizing their experience as a loss, which validates their experience of grief as a time

to use coping resources.

Meaning making can be difficult if there is ambiguity surrounding the reasoning

behind the distressing event or 'A' factor. The family may be unaware how to make

meaning of the event because of the lack of information or unclear nature of the loss

(Boss, 2010). The foster parents may become immobilized in the midst of the ambiguity

and constant 'what ifs', clouding their ability to make sense of the situation (Riggs &

Willsmore, 2012). When a family is able to understand their own experience within an

event, they may be more able to make meaning of it even if they do not have all the facts

about the actual event. Foster parents may experience a range of emotions such as anger,

sadness, relief, frustration, or confusion when they experience conflict with care agencies

over a foster home breakdown (Khoo & Skoog, 2014; Riggs & Willmore, 2012). This

could prove to be overwhelming without specific knowledge regarding how to navigate

within the foster care system. It may not be possible to adopt the label of 'grief' around

which to organize their emotions and conceptualize their experience. By providing foster

parents with knowledge regarding conflict resolution and validating their grief, it is

possible to lessen the ambiguity related to their experiences in foster care, and enable

them to make greater meaning of their experiences. The overall level of stress resulting

from foster home breakdowns varies: some breakdowns may lead to the foster parent

discontinuing their role as a foster parent, while at other times, the foster parent may be

able to easily accept the transition. ABC-X theory helps give an explanation to the varying responses to this event, and can help predict what interventions or coping mechanisms may be useful for the foster parent

Breakdown in Placements within Foster Care

Foster home breakdowns are a reality for many foster parents. In many cases, foster families expect the child placed with them to eventually move on to another placement. However, because there are external forces that have decision making power regarding the composition of the foster family, the timing of a child leaving may not be what these parents had expected or hoped for. While foster home breakdown has been researched since the 1960's, there is limited research that has focused on the foster parent's experience (Khoo & Skoog, 2014). Foster home breakdown or the removal of a foster child may occur for a variety of reasons that include; system or policy reasons, escalating behavioural difficulties with the child, or at the request of the foster parent themselves. Regardless of who makes the request leading up to the change in placement, foster parents express a range of challenging emotions and responses to the removal of the child that includes guilt, a sense of failure, anger, sadness, grief, and loss (Khoo & Skoog, 2014; Thomson & McArthur, 2009). The grief experienced by foster parents following the sudden removal of a foster child could contribute to the foster parent being unwilling to provide care for other foster children in the future (Khoo & Skoog, 2014). Support from social workers has shown to have a positive impact on the foster parents' satisfaction within their role, which could lead to increased placement stability (Taylor, McQuillan, 2014). Therefore, it is critical for agencies to have a greater understanding of the grief foster parents experience after a foster home breakdown, as well as how to

support foster parents during this time, in order to be able to provide support to foster parents through difficult transitions.

Research on foster placement breakdown has examined factors that may be linked to the level of risk that includes poor attachment (Joseph, O'Conner, Briskman, Maughan, & Scott 2014), maltreatment history (Fisher, Kim, & Pears, 2009), and parenting characteristics (Crum, 2010). The influence of these factors on placement breakdown has, overall, been found to be minimal. Joseph et al. (2014) viewed attachments with birth parents affected by the attachment with foster parents. He found secure relationships with birth parents often led to secure attachments to foster parents; however, many foster children with insecure attachments with birthparents were also able to form secure relationships with their foster parents. Joseph et al. (2014) also identified that features or frequency of past placements were not reliable predictors of the quality of current placement interactions or attachments. According to this data, past placement experiences were not predictive of future placement attachments. Fisher et al. (2009) examined differences in maltreatment histories in preschoolers who had four or more foster care placement breakdowns. While the authors acknowledged there could be other factors about these children that may be associated with placement history, the maltreatment histories of children with placement instability did not differ from the general population of foster children.

Crum (2010) identified two factors that could account for foster care breakdowns: 1) Foster parents with high parental support, effective communication, effective limit setting, high satisfaction with parenting, and high parenting alliance would significantly predict long term placements, and 2) Foster parents with low parental support, ineffective

communication, ineffective limit setting, dissatisfaction with the parenting role, and low parenting alliance would significantly predict the number of placement disruptions. Crum's (2010) results noted the characteristics in his first criteria explained 15% of variance in stability, and that parent support and limit setting were the two independent variables more responsible for the result. The other characteristics had little influence. In contrast, the results for the parents that met his second criteria showed these negative characteristics had no statistical significance; these variables only accounted for 2% of the variance in placement disruption.

Some factors that have been associated with an increased risk of placement instability or foster home breakdown included being an older child, the presence of behaviour problems, and previous moves within the foster care system (Khoo & Skoog, 2014). However, it is possible that these three factors could be a result of instability within the foster care system rather than the cause, or may highlight circumstances where foster homes require more support. Older children may have had more time to experience multiple moves, or the result of 'normal' emotional experiences of youth during the pre-pubescent and pubescent years that may pose unique challenges, compared to younger children.

Multiple placement histories have been found as a contributor to higher externalized and internalized behaviours even after controlling for behavioural problems occurring prior to being in care (Price, Chamberlain, Landsverk, Reid, Leve, & Laurent, 2008). However, James (2004) found that only 20% of placement changes were related to behavioural problems, while 70% were related to system or policy mandates. It was also found that a high number of previous moves did not increase the risk of experiencing a

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first behavioural related change. While behavioural difficulties are reported as a reason for placement breakdown, foster parents report that it is not the behaviours that lead to placement instability, but the lack of planning, support and information provided by social services that makes caring for foster children difficult (Khoo & Skoog, 2014). James (2004) found that behaviour related placement breakdowns were most likely to occur within the first 100 days, suggesting that foster parents require more support within the first three months of a placement.

While children who are in care share some uniqueness that creates challenges to their care, James (2004) and Khoo & Skoog (2014) suggest that it is also possible that children who experience multiple placement breakdowns are not provided with the support they require to thrive; that foster home breakdown is a system problem rather than a problem with foster children or parents themselves. Providing foster parents with more support and training to be able to manage and cope with placement instability and the difficulties foster children pose may be a more effective route to aid the struggles foster parents face and increase foster parent retention.

The Challenge of Foster Parent Training

Many foster parents cite a lack of adequate training as one of the reasons they discontinue foster care, and developing training programs has become a focus for aiding this problem (Festinger & Baker, 2013). While many training programs have been developed, results regarding outcomes are often mixed when it comes to the effectiveness of foster parent training. Ontario has incorporated the pre-service training model *Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education* (PRIDE), however there has

been little research on PRIDE regarding knowledge retention, effect on service quality, or overall effectiveness (Festinger & Baker, 2013; Nash & Flynn, 2009).

When training programs focus on teaching specific skills with the aim of decreasing foster home breakdowns and increasing stability, only modest statistical support is reported (Dorsey, Farmer, Barth, Greene, Reid, & Landsverk, 2008). Spielfogel et al. (2011) conducted a pilot training program to help foster parents better manage child behaviour. Foster parents participated in a focus group discussing the applicability of the material in the training program. While foster parents reported they needed behaviour management skills, they expressed that the skills taught in the proposed training program were not effective based on their experiences of using those skills with foster children. Participants also expressed they need to know more about home visits and the histories of children and questioned the effectiveness of mental health services. Further, foster parents believed that therapists should include foster parents to collaboratively address a child's behaviours. Importantly, participants also expressed that the requirement to meet once a week as the training program had planned, was unrealistic for them. Finally, while foster parents were asking for more skills, the data revealed that what foster parents were asking for was more information about the children, more support from agency workers, and more collaboration for care.

MacDonald and Turner (2005) attempted to decrease foster home breakdown by providing foster parents with Cognitive Behavioural Training (CBT). While the foster parents reported increased knowledge and ability to use the new skills, problem behaviours of their foster children did not decrease, and foster placement breakdown was higher in the treatment group than the control group at a six-month follow up. Both of

these projects (Spielfogel et al, 2011 and Macdonald & Turner, 2005) focused on teaching skills to manage behaviour rather than targeting the expressed needs of the foster parents. Turner, MacDonald, and Dennis' (2007) systematic review of six different cognitive behavioural training programs for foster parents noted that there was no indication that these cognitive behavioural training programs benefited foster parents or foster children. One training program that focused on behaviour modification that did provide positive evidence is *Keeping Foster Parents Trained and Supported* (KEEP) (Chamberlain, Price, Leve, Laurent, Landsverk, & Reid, 2008; Price et. al 2008). Foster Parents participating in KEEP received 16 weeks of training and weekly phone calls to monitor progress and provide support for foster parents in the application of skills and interventions. As a result, KEEP produced improvements in parenting skills, children's behaviours, placement stability, and family re-unification.

There have been numerous attempts to address the inadequate training of foster parents. However, training that has been provided to address the issues of foster parent competency has produced only modest results and foster parents continue to leave foster care. Literature and research shows that foster parents are expressing a need for more support and guidance in their role as a foster parent; more information on the child prior to placement regarding the child's history involving past behaviours; knowledge regarding the treatment needs of the child(ren) along with their life history. They also express a desire for more support and relief during the placement, and to be more involved during the decision making process regarding options for next placements or alternatives to the removal of a child (Gilbertson & Barber, 2003; Khoo & Skoog, 2014; MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied 2006; Riggs & Willsmore, 2012; Spielfogel

et al. 2011). While there have been efforts to meet foster parent requests, foster parents continue to report needing more information on specific areas of fostering (Cooly & Petren, 2011)

Foster Parents Needs

Research related to foster parents and the struggles they face highlight that it is not the child's or the foster parent's fault when placement breakdowns occur. Placement breakdown is more likely to be the result of a system that is not properly providing foster parents with the information, education, and support that is required for them to perform the task at hand (James, 2004; Khoo & Skoog, 2014). Training programs that tell foster parents what to do and studies that examine what characteristics about foster parents predispose placement breakdowns have often been inconclusive in their results (Dorsey et al., 2008; Festinger & Baker, 2013; Nash & Flynn, 2009). One topic that appears to be missing in the literature is the effect on mental health and the emotional impact that foster parent's experience while they are providing care. Teaching foster parents about the emotional responses and difficulty they face when a child leaves their home could help the foster parent better prepare and seek support during this particularly challenging time. Educating foster parents on the various experiences and conflicts that may occur with other stakeholders in the foster care system could also enable them to navigate the system better and advocate for their own needs. While parenting and behaviour management skills are important, lessening the ambiguity around the personal struggles the foster parents face is critical because it is one of the key differences between parenting biological children and foster children. In order to improve placement stability, foster parents need to be supported by being provided with information about the unique

challenges they will experience and how to understand the challenges from multiple

perspectives. Education is also needed that will inform foster parents regarding how to

cope successfully through these challenges.

Accessibility to Training

Caring for children with special needs or difficult behaviours can be very time

consuming. In addition to caring for the child in the home, foster parents must

communicate and plan visits and appointments with various stakeholders. Foster parents

may also have their own children or careers. These multiple roles lead foster parents to be

very busy, and the foster parent may be left with little time or availability for ongoing

training. Foster parents often face barriers to attending training such as child care,

transportation, financial cost, and their children's caretaking needs (Murray et al. 2011).

Additional barriers such as health concerns, working full time, or having multiple

children in the home may cause attending a training group once a week to be too much of

a commitment for some foster parents (Spielfogel et al., 2011; Leathers et al. 2011).

Providing quality online training is a possible solution for this problem. In a field

evaluation of online foster parent training, Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell (2006) found

online training to be a popular method of learning and is best suited for populations who

have the motivation to learn independently, but lacked the ability to attend on-site

training. Foster parents appreciated being able to complete the training at their own pace.

They also appreciated not needing to find child care, or having to leave the home to

complete training. Online training appears to be a suitable option for addressing the

barriers to training that foster parents face (Murray et al, 2011**;** Pacifici, Delaney, White,

2006)

Summary

Foster families need to be able to manage with the ambiguous nature of family boundaries involved with having an open family system (Mosek, 2004). Coping resources can be identified and improved through education, and gaining greater understanding regarding how an event has affected the family. Without connecting their experience to grief and loss, the foster parent may not know what coping resources to draw on, or how to begin dealing with the loss (Abrams, 2001). Foster parents could experience less isolation and more validation when they realize they are not alone. In order to accomplish this, foster parents need to be encouraged to be aware of the ambiguous aspects of foster care; their common experiences should be identified and validated so they can utilize coping resources and make meaning out of their experiences. While the system of foster care is in need of modification and amendments to better support foster parents, providing information to help foster parents cope and understand their current and previous experiences could be beneficial and therapeutic.

There has been a significant amount of research focusing on what influences the risk of foster home breakdown. These factors include parental, child, and family characteristics, and attachment. Numerous researchers have also studied the link between various training programs for foster parents that focus on topics such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy techniques and parenting skills, as well as satisfaction and retention. However, these research findings at best have yielded only modest results that link training with preventing foster home breakdown.

The Present Study

Rationale

Foster parent retention is a pressing issue within foster care agencies, and is critical to provide the highest quality of care for our most vulnerable children. While foster parents have asked for support, training, and information, foster parent retention continues to be an issue. This indicates that foster parents still have needs in order to continue their role as foster carers that are not being met. The present study is a part of a larger project involving the Child Welfare League of Canada. This larger project has been exploring the challenges which lead foster parents to leave their roles as a foster carer. In the first phase of the larger project, 941 foster parents completed a survey that explored the challenges that could lead them to resigning their role. From this collected data, four training modules were created that targeted the unmet needs identified by foster parents. By involving foster parents in the review and further development of this training program, the researchers are able to ensure the expressed needs from the survey were properly understood and effectively addressed in the training modules.

The current project consists of an evaluation of an online training program. This training program focuses on providing foster parents with information directly related to the challenges they face within the foster care system, and the modules were created from foster parents' reports regarding the type of information they felt should be prioritized. Four modules are included in the training: Laying a Foundation for Children in Care; Four Tools for Conflict Resolution; Unpacking Behaviour; and Dealing with Grief and Loss. The Conflict Resolution and Dealing with Grief and Loss modules will be the focus

of this portion of the evaluation. The evaluation focused on the experiences of foster parents with the training program, specifically what they felt was helpful, what was missing, and what they would change.

The research questions for this project include: 1) What is the extent to which foster parents will gain a better understanding of their own foster parent experience? 2) What is the extent to which foster parents will have a positive reaction/experience with being given information within each of the modules? 3) What is the extent to which foster parents will comment on the nature of an online training program as opposed to an in-person format? 4) Technical difficulties aside, will foster parents will find the nature of an online delivery of learning convenient?

Specifically of the four training modules provided, this project focused on foster parents' experience during the modules regarding conflict resolution and grief and loss. Research questions regarding these topics included: How do foster parents experience conflict and grief within their role as a foster carer? 2) A possible change in perceptions regarding conflict management? and 3) How foster parents may have been able to reorganize or make meaning of their experiences with grief and loss.

<center>**Chapter Three**</center>

<center>**Methodology**</center>

Design

   This research project used a qualitative research design to examine and analyse the effect and applicability of an online foster parent training module through a post-test only single group design. Narrative research methods were used to collect and analyze the data. This allowed the data that was collected to promote a rich understanding regarding foster parent retention, and provided an in depth examination of the foster parent experience including the concerns they have, and the challenges they face within the foster care system.

   Data Analysis. Data was collected through written feedback from response questions posed to foster parent both prior to and following the completion of each module. The data collected was analysed through content analysis. This involved a close examination of the narrative feedback to organize the data into themes that were developed by the researchers according to the reoccurring responses within the data set. Frequency was used to code data to highlight important themes. It was inferred that higher frequency of a theme implied greater importance placed upon on it by foster parents. Upon full completion of all modules, oral feedback was collected through a semi-structured telephone interview. Interviews were based on both pre-determined, open-ended questions and prompts drawn from themes in the written feedback responses. The telephone interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were analysed through content analysis, and were added to the existing data set derived from the written responses.

Participants

The present study drew on a consenting convenience sample of foster parents. Invitations to participate in the study were sent through; the Child Welfare League of Canada, the London-Middlesex Children's Aid Society, The Brant County Children's Aid Society, The Chatham Kent Children's Aid Society, and the Elgin-St. Thomas Children's Aid Society. Consent to participate in the study came in two parts: first, potential participants were asked for their consent, in terms of completing the modules, to provide written answers to the feedback questions. Once all modules had been completed, the people who had given consent for collecting their responses to the written pre-and post questions based on each of the modules was asked for consent to participate in a a telephone interview. Inclusion criteria were that the individual must have, at the time of the study, an active foster parent in Canada, and have access to a computer with internet access. Qualifying participants had lived experience with providing foster care and directly experiencing the challenges the modules aim to target. Therefore, they are considered to be experts on the topic of the unmet needs felt by foster parents which effect foster parent retention.

The study attracted thirty-six qualified participants. Six did not fully complete the modules, and did not complete a telephone interview. Thirty qualifying participants completed the modules, and a telephone interview. Though the level of fostering experience was not directly asked during the study, many participants mentioned their level of experience during the telephone interview. Over half of the participants identified themselves as experienced foster parents, some of whom mentioned they had eight to

over twenty years of fostering experience. Four foster parents identified themselves as new foster parents with under three years of experience.

Measures

Feedback questions were utilized to collect written information regarding the participant's thoughts, reactions, and opinions on each module. Prior and following completing each module, participant provided answers to five open ended feedback questions. Feedback questions were as followed: "Before doing any viewing of the materials or assigned reading, what do you know, about the content of this module?"; "After watching, listening and reading, what turned out to be true?"; "What misconceptions have you identified?"; "What did you learn that was new?" and "What are you left wondering about?".

Telephone interviews were utilized to collect verbal feedback, and to provide the participant an opportunity to expand on written responses. The telephone interview consisted of eight open ended pre-determined questions (Appendix C), as well as prompts to encourage the participant to expand on their verbal and written feedback to provide a rich detailed account of their experience with the modules, and how the modules related to their experiences as a foster parent.

Procedure

For each module, participants completed the written feedback questions. Participants sent their typed feedback responses via e-mail to the researchers who organized the data into a spreadsheet. This spreadsheet was organised by participant, module, and feedback response question. This allowed the researcher to review the

responses from an individual participant, a specific module, or a specific feedback question. This organization method facilitated the researcher's ability to observe common themes and responses in order to create prompt questions. Once a participant had provided their feedback for the final module, they were contacted either by telephone or e-mail to set up a telephone interview.

Before the telephone interview began, the researcher explained the purpose of recording and transcribing the telephone interviews. They were assured that there were no wrong answers, and that the purpose of the interview was not to test their knowledge but to obtain an in-depth understanding of their experience completing the modules and how it related to their experiences as a foster-care provider. Participants were reminded that all of their answers would be kept confidential, and that they could provide as little or as much information as they felt comfortable. Participants were welcomed to review their submitted feedback responses or the training modules during the interview as a way to recall their experiences and thought processes while they completed the modules.

During the telephone interview, the researcher listened attentively to the participant to notice themes or concerns within the participant's narrative. The researcher used this information to construct prompts to encourage the participant to provide a rich detailed account. While the participant was in control of the information they chose to share, some of the information they selected to provide may have been emotionally difficult to recall or verbalize. To ensure no harm was done to the participant through the interview process, the researcher, who was a trained counsellor, attended to the participant's emotional state and checked in with the participant to see how they were experiencing the interview. If the participant was feeling distress from the interview

process, the researcher used counselling practices to aid the distress. Once all interviews were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed and coded by common themes and frequency. The researchers analyzed and used this data to complete the research project.

Chapter Four

Results

This results section is organized into three theme groups; Conflict Resolution, Grief and Loss, and The Training Module. The Conflict Resolution theme group include five sub themes that related to the Four Tools for Conflict Resolution module. The Grief and Loss theme group includes three sub themes that related to the 'Dealing with Grief and Loss' module. The Training Modules theme group includes sub themes relating to the participants experience of completing the modules and their opinions on its usefulness.

Conflict Resolution Themes

Participants were responsive to the 'Conflict Resolution" module, and very open in discussing the various conflicts they encountered with other stakeholders in the fostering system. A number of common themes concerning conflict within their foster parent role emerged throughout the interviews.

The lack of information received by foster parents about the foster child in their care was frequently mentioned by participants. Receiving inadequate information lead to additional conflicts and struggles within the foster parent role. Participants often described a disconnect between social workers and foster parents, characterized by comments of being misunderstood and undervalued by social workers. Despite this conflict, participants reported that the foster parent-social worker role was a critical source of support, both for providing quality care to the foster child, and for the foster parent to feel supported and successful in their role. The lesson on empathy within the

Conflict Resolution module was found to be especially helpful in managing conflict within the foster parent-social worker relationship, and in promoting a better understanding of the social worker's role. Participants also expressed the importance of maintaining both a positive relationship with the child's birth parents, and in planning strategies in order to increase the likelihood of a successful placement by improving the foster parent- birth parent relationship in helping to reduce loyalty conflicts for the foster child.

The following section summarizes foster parents' input regarding each of the learning modules.

Lack of Information. Lack of information about the foster child was a commonly discussed concern affecting the conflict foster parents experienced with social workers. When information about the foster child was withheld, foster parents reported they perceived a lack of being a significant part of the caring team, despite the providing daily care for the child. Participants expressed that being given an inadequate amount of information regarding the child was frustrating, and placed the foster parent at a disadvantage in providing the care the foster child required in order to meet their individual needs.

Participants reported that they needed all available information about the foster child prior to the placement being effected, as well as updates throughout the placement as new information became available in order to ensure they could understand and meet the needs of the foster child. This fact also extended to ensuring that the foster placement did not negatively affect the care of their own biological children.

Information about the child's mental health was reported as particularly relevant such that the foster parent could determine if they were able to meet the child's needs in anticipating the kind of parenting and care the child would require. Foster parents also reported that it was important for social workers to guide the foster parent to information sources so they could further educate themselves on the child's specific mental health needs. Foster parents reported that without comprehensive information about the child, they would be at a disadvantage as they may be unaware of specific triggers for the child's negative reactions to; specific events, the origin of difficult behaviours, or how to support the child through periods of crisis.

> *"I get the feeling that she doesn't want to do whatever we've got planned, but I don't know why. And then behind the scenes I later find out, well, because this reminds her of something else that happened, or so-and-so is going to be there and—So, you know, it's helpful to know what is going on in the family's life as well"*

> *"My first foster placement was mental health, and I had no clue. Like, I had no idea how to even evaluate the severity of it because I wasn't educated enough... I know that placement was extremely rough just because of the lack of education, of not even knowing what questions to ask with mental health because as a foster parent, you know, a lot of us that are coming in don't necessarily have experience with mental health"*

Through the interviews, foster parents postulated some potential reasons as to why information may be withheld or not adequately communicated. These reasons

included that the information was unavailable or unknown to the worker at the time of the child's placement, or the worker may have held back information from the foster parent in order to place a child who was difficult to match with any other existing foster placement.

Foster parents found the withholding of information as problematic for several reasons. If the foster parent was unaware of a particular child's needs or behaviours, they would not be able to prepare themselves to care for those needs, or manage the behaviour safely. Foster parents reported it was particularly traumatizing when they were unable to meet the needs of the child placed in their care. If the foster parent was not given adequate information, the foster parent found themselves in an unknown situation, and left unaware of the origin or triggers of difficult behaviour that may occur throughout the placement.

> *"Sometimes it just kind of like, frosted over, you know? Or put in, you know, milder terms than it really should be, because then the parent- The foster parents walking into something that they really totally didn't expect."*

> *"You get them, they're handed to you and they give you a few words, and away the—the CAS worker goes away and leaves the child with you, and you're left to find out yourself. And that's not just the way it should work"*

In order to obtain the information they required, foster parents reported that they needed to continuously ask social workers for that information. Some participants shared that at the start of their fostering career, they were unsure of what to ask for, or how to

ask for it, but through their experience of fostering they learned what questions to ask, and how assertive they needed to be to get the information they were seeking.

> *"It took me a long time to realise that not only can I get after my worker for information, but that I should… initially when I came across the situation, I'm going "well why did you do that, why did you tell the foster child that and not me that?" I would just let it ride thinking that 'Well they know more than I do, they know better than I do" You know? And it took me quite a while to realise that when the child is in your home, and you're caring for that child, or you, and your loving that child, and you're advocating for them, that you are in many ways in the role of a genuine parent with the child and you have to fight and advocate for them the exact same way as you would if it was your biological child."*

> *"I think new foster homes are afraid to ask questions because they are new. They don't know what they can ask and what they can't ask, and there's nothing wrong with saying, 'hey, tell me about the parents. Have they been in trouble with the law? Have they done this, have they done that?' That's their right, because they're bringing this child into their home."*

It is important for foster parents to have access to as much information as possible in order to determine if the foster home is the proper placement for the child. If the foster child is placed in a home that is not equipped to care of that particular child's unique needs, it could put the foster child, or the foster family at risk, and would likely lead to a foster home breakdown.

Disconnection within the Working Relationship. While discussing experiences of conflict with social workers, participants described a disconnect or 'gap' between social workers and foster parents. Foster parents reported that social workers did not fully comprehend their experience of being a foster parent, which lead to perceptions of being misunderstood and underappreciated in their role as a professional caregiver. Feelings of disconnection can increase when foster parents perceive their special knowledge about the child as being disregarded, or when the dynamics and needs of the foster home are ignored during the placement process.

Participants reported that they did not believe social workers actually understood what it was like to be a foster parent, which contributed to a perception of distance and disconnect within the foster parent-social worker relationship. While the disconnect between foster parents and social workers was frequently noted by participants, it was difficult to articulate. Some participants reported that this disconnect was based on their belief in being undervalued or disregarded by social workers and other stakeholders. Other participants connected the distancing with social workers as due to the perception that, as foster parents, they were asked to complete tasks or manage a placement in ways that were not considered to be relevant to the needs of the child or the dynamics of the foster home. The disconnect appeared to be focused on the fact that the only way to truly understand what it is like to be a foster parent is actually foster a child, and without that experience it was not possible to fully comprehend the meaning of fostering.

Participants emphasised the importance of social workers considering the needs of every member of the foster family, especially the foster parent's biological children, when making recommendations or care plans for the foster child. Participants reported

that the gap manifested itself to varying degrees with different social workers, and was particularly evident with social workers who had less experience with children and families.

"You get some workers who, they have no clue. They haven't had the life experiences, and that's one thing I've found. I have seen a different with workers who come into the field and they have no clue. They've never been a babysitter… they come out of school and, you know, they have all the wisdom in the world"

"The agencies need to be just more aware of what they do ask of their foster parents as it's not just the child lives here, and then goes to visit then goes home, it's really, you know, this family, the child in our family and, yeah, it's quite an all-encompassing position that we take on."

Participants expressed the importance of social workers paying special attention to the foster family's needs when placing children in their care, specifically the foster parent's biological children, career, area of expertise, and the general dynamics of the home. If the foster parent's needs and abilities were not thoroughly considered during the placement decision process, this perception of disconnection between foster parents and social workers increased. Participants reported that a poorly matched placement can be devastating to a foster family, leading foster parents to consider leaving their role as a professional caregiver.

"It's always been my experience that they are well aware of that. It's also been our experience that in spite of knowing exactly who we are, why we foster, and what we were hoping to be able to lend to foster children, we have had a few

placements that were not a good fit and not in unique ways but very overt, very

obvious ways, and we felt let down in those cases, and it, you know, required a

move for the child, which wasn't necessary either, it shouldn't have been

necessary"

Though foster parents often do not have the level of academic knowledge about
child psychology and case management which social workers possessed, they did have
extensive experience and knowledge regarding the specific child in their care, experience
gained from previous foster placements, and insight into the kind of placement that would
be most successful in their home. Participants emphasised that they desired recognition
from social workers and other agency stakeholders for the time they spent with the child
placed in their care, and for this knowledge to be drawn upon when care plans were being
created. They also expressed a gap in the social worker's understanding of the child's
needs, which could be aided by the knowledge and contribution of the foster parent.

> *"I feel that the agency is absolutely well educated, wonderful people, know their*
> *stuff, know children to an extent, but nobody knows the children and the*
> *behaviour like the foster parents do."*

> *"I think all the agencies need to know the valued experience that we have. We*
> *have a lot of experience; I believe we're not being utilized… We have hands-on.*
> *We're here 24 hours. We know the child better. We've learned from experience*
> *from past placements"*

> *"You really need to tell the workers what you see and what you don't see, because*
> *they don't know the kids. They don't know what they're needs are. They place*

them in your home and you talk to the workers every so often, and if you don't tell

them what the kids need, they're never going to know."

The disconnect perceived by foster parents was particularly concerning in efforts focused on foster parent retention. In order to increase foster parent retention, it was considered essential for social workers to empathise with foster parents in order to decrease the perceptions of disconnection between foster parents and social workers.

Empathy for Social Workers. The "Conflict Resolution" module taught about empathy as a strategy for managing conflict, and enhanced the participant's knowledge about the various stakeholders in the foster system, what their roles and responsibilities were, and the kinds of pressures they manage in their role. Many participants spoke to the lesson on empathy as being significantly impactful, and felt it helped them change their perspectives and attitudes. From the participant feedback, it appears that empathy may be a possible protective factor for foster parent retention.

Participants who were new to their role as a foster parent tended to find the empathy lesson in the 'Conflict Resolution" module enlightening. They especially appreciated learning about the roles, responsibilities, and work pressures that various players in the child welfare system had to face. The stories of the experiences that each stakeholder went through was found to be especially effective for communicating different perspectives. These lessons about the other stakeholders points of view was useful for providing foster parents with a grand picture of what everyone else in the fostering system experiences, and what their priorities are. Participants felt the lesson on empathy would enable them to feel less frustrated and approach conflict with other

stakeholders in a more understanding way. Many participants felt they already had empathy skills prior to completing the modules, but they had not yet fully applied this concept to the conflict they experienced with other stakeholders in the fostering system. Participants felt the lesson helped them be more empathetic and less judgemental in situations that they found frustrating, especially with social workers. The "Conflict Resolution" module appeared to help participants realise that even though they experienced conflict with social workers and other stakeholders, they were still all working towards the same goal of helping the foster child.

> *"I think it just enhanced my understanding of all players in the child welfare system, and just, you know, a greater empathy for how everybody feels, maybe so next time I feel frustrated with how something's going, I can sit back and look at where that person's coming from, and all the pressures on them, and just kind of maybe not be so judgemental or quick to be frustrated with them."*

> *"I'd been having some issues with my worker, and thinking that, oh, this is good, this is an opportunity to have a reminder to sort of think about where your head is at before you go getting, before you react emotionally to things, and yeah, I just thought it was timely for me, personally, and that it was good information and a good reminder to kind of put yourself in someone else's shoes before you react."*

> *"There's, you know, so much of a demand, you know, so many children and the caseloads are phenomenal, so, you know, that is, I don't know how that will ever change. The caseloads are phenomenal, and so they can't put the time and effort into it that really is needed for a case"*

Experienced foster parents tended to describe conflictual situations they had experienced, and how they applied empathy skills. These foster parents tended to do this throughout their interview while discussing various modules. There appeared to be a correlation between foster parent experience and the use of empathy. Considering this possible correlation and how participants who were new to their role as a foster parent found empathy to be significantly effective for reducing frustration, it is possible that empathy may be a potential protective factor for foster parent retention. If new foster parents feel less frustrated with the other stakeholders in the fostering system, they may be less likely to leave their role as a foster parent.

Foster Parent's Need for Support. The 'Four Tools for Conflict Resolution" module reflected participants' expressions regarding the importance of the foster parent-social worker relationship as a potential source of support. In order to be supported in their role, foster parents expressed their belief in the need for social workers to partner with them to care for the child, and to support them in their role as a professional caregiver.

Participants described the kind of support they needed from social workers, and the means by which the social worker and foster parent could work together as a team to care for the foster child. This included helping the child settle in to the foster home, and mediating struggles that may arise regarding house rules or parenting differences between the child's biological home or previous foster placement, and the new foster placement.

Participants also identified how helpful it was when social workers listened to their concerns about the child, and helped in a collaborative effort to generate possible solutions to problems the foster parent was dealing with.

"This is our first foster experience, so we would need some extra support, probably more so than someone who's been doing this for five or 10 years or have had, you know, several placements along the way, and I think that part of it is lacking, support for the foster families."

"I think that's great that they work with the biological parents, and have that contact for the kids as long as it's in a safe environment, but when there comes an issue with conflict between the foster home and what the biological parents are telling the kids they can and can't do, or what they should be allowed to do, then the social workers need to step up and say, maybe in the biological home they would be the rules, but you need to follow the rules in your foster home"

Foster parents need to feel supported by social workers in their role as a professional caregiver. New foster parents reported that they required extra support and collaboration from the social worker in order to feel adequately supported in their role. In some cases, the social worker may need to take the time to teach the foster parent, or direct them to helpful information sources. This will be critical if the foster child has mental health challenges. Participants reported that it was helpful when their social workers suggested websites or books about mental health issues that affected the foster child. Understanding currently diagnosed, or potential mental health issues and their

warning signs can help foster parents in their confidence, and enable them to manage the foster child's needs.

Regardless of their experience level, foster parents reported that prompt communication between the social worker and foster parent is essential for foster parents to be supported in their role. Without adequate communication, foster parents reported experiencing isolation in their efforts to care for the child. Regular visit check-ins, and quick replies were important for participants to feel connected, and supported in their role by social workers.

> *"I've been very, very fortunate with the workers that I've dealt with at (Location) CAS, in that they are good at that, even my personal resource worker has sent me e-mails going 'Oh, I found this website, you might be interested'"*

> *"We need them, that we need their support, we need their encouragement. Without that, then we feel like we're on this on our own, that we're drowning, that we—We just need their support and their resources. We just need them… Regular check-ups with phone calls, visits, and just prompt, prompt replies, probably. Like if you were texting them, that they reply promptly"*

Participants reported that they were able to identify relevant supports on which to draw; however, there were times when these supports were not adequate or were not offered/available to the foster parent. The foster parent role was described as demanding, and participants reported that it was devastating when the supports and resources that are put in place to help them are unavailable.

Cutbacks in funding to the foster care system was reported by most all of the participants, especially in terms of received support. Participants found that social workers often seem too busy with large caseloads to respond to foster parents' requests in a timely manner, or to organize foster parent support networks. Some participants reported that they were referred to the CAS manual when they encountered a problem, which they reported to be unhelpful, and often not applicable in real life situations. Funding cutbacks and the lack of available of support from social workers left some participants reporting that they experienced high degrees of hopelessness about receiving adequate levels of support.

> *"They have strong resources in place in terms of supporting you, it's just when it doesn't happen it's really devastating because it's a very tough job."*

It is important for foster parents to experience the social worker's understanding and respect for the toll that fostering children can have on the foster family, and help to ensure that the foster family's needs are met in order to provide quality care was considered an essential part of the experience.

Relationships with Birthparents. The foster parent's relationships with a child's birthparents were discussed briefly in the "Four Tools for Conflict Resolution" module. While some participants did not mention their relationships with birth parents, others discussed it extensively. Participants who spoke to this topic stressed the importance of working with biological parents, as well as providing helpful suggestions regarding how to safely approach and navigate this relationship.

Participants recognized that foster children had a desire to be a part of their biological family, and found that building a positive relationship with birth parents increased the potential success of foster placements. Making the birth parent the enemy and holding anger and resentment towards birth parents was reported to be ineffective and unhelpful to the success of the placement.

Though the foster parent-birth parent relationship requires considerable sensitivity and time to develop in a positive way, participants described several strategies that they found to be helpful for developing a positive relationship with birthparents. Physically meeting the birth parents was found to be a helpful strategy to encourage the development of a positive relationship with birth parents. Putting a face to a name eased the birth parent's anxieties and questions regarding the person who is caring for their child. Other beneficial strategies included ongoing communication with the birth parent whenever possible.

> *"If you put your back up at the beginning and don't want to talk to these parents, you want nothing to do with them, you're angry with them for what they've done to the child, it's not going to work, and we found that."*

> *"I think it was almost a relief to her to know that I wasn't, if you will, an icky person taking care of her child. She got to talk to me, she got to know a little bit about me."*

Trust and mutual respect between the foster parent and the birth parent made various aspects of the foster placement more successful. Participants found a positive relationship with birth parents decreased power struggles and increased the likelihood

that the birth parent would be more willing to accept and appreciate the care being provided by the foster parent. In applicable situations, participants found that emphasising to the child that the placement was a stepping stone to reuniting the child with their family helped the child feel more secure in the placement, and assure the child that their desire to be a part of their biological family was accepted by the foster parent.

> *"Having a great relationship with the biological parent is such a benefit to the child and the foster parent...Because you're able to do more, like get their hair cut. If the biological mum likes you and you can call mum and say, Hey! Dude needs a hair cut ... mum's likely to say yes, but if you have no relationship with her, then she's going to say no, 'cause that's the only piece of control she has left."*

Though the foster parent-birth parent relationship was found to be important and helpful to the success of a foster placement, it does not come without difficulties and risks. Though the foster parent does not hold responsibility for child apprehension, participants found that birth parents may at times 'blame' the foster parent for their child's removal, or may direct their frustrations with the apprehension towards the foster parent. Some participants emphasised the importance of recording interactions with birth parents in order to protect against later allegations.

Anger from birth parents directed at foster parents can be extremely challenging to manage. Participants were able to excuse the blaming by remembering they were not responsible for the apprehension, and by empathising with the birth parent's situation.

"If you flip it and you think your child's been taken away and you don't know who has your child, you haven't met them, you haven't seen them, you know nothing about them, you are going to worry, and you are going to be very, very upset, and it's going to be stressful for you as a biological parent."

While relationships with birth parents were not mentioned by all participants, the feedback provided suggested that it may be an important topic regarding foster parent retention. If new foster parents understand the risks and importance of relationships with birth parents, it may help ease some areas of tension or conflict and increase placement stability.

Greif and Loss Themes

The grief that foster parents experience when a foster child moves to another foster placement is challenging for foster parents. Some participants were very open with this topic, while others provided more generalized answers. This is likely due to the personal nature of the subject. The feedback received about the 'Dealing with Loss and Grief" module was very in depth and emotive. Three themes emerged from this feedback. Participants described a wide variety of unexpected emotions in their role as a professional caregiver including attachment, love, grief, and loss. Learning about foster parent experiences, and being given the label of 'grief' helped participants to experience reassurance that their experiences were normal, and provided them the permission to feel their reactions, and allow themselves to heal. Participants reported that connecting with others, or simply hearing the stories of others about their emotional reactions within fostering provided some comfort and healing. The feedback from participants provided an insightful look into the experience of grief for foster parents.

Unexpected Emotions. While foster parents enter their role as a professional caregiver understanding that the children placed in their care will eventually move on, the emotional responses from this process are not easily predicted. Participants reported experiencing emotions that were much stronger than they anticipated. The attachment that develops between the foster child and all members of the foster family can be very powerful. The knowledge that the foster child will one day move on can lead to feelings of loss and grief, even before the child actually moves out of the home. Unexpected emotions throughout the placement make the foster parent's role more emotionally difficult than the foster parent may have anticipated.

The removal of a foster child from the foster parent's care was often much more difficult for participants than they had originally anticipated. While the sudden removal of a foster child can be particularity difficult for the foster parent, participants expressed that learning about the child's transition plans, and understanding the inevitability that the child will one day move on, does not prevent the unexpected emotions of grief. In contrast, the anticipation of the child's removal can lead the foster parent to experience feelings of grief while the child is still in their care. Even in cases where the foster parent is made aware of the child's pending removal, when the time comes for the child to move on, the foster parent may find that they are not ready to say goodbye. The attachment and love that develops over the time the foster parent cares for the foster child can make the transition particularly difficult for foster families. The degree of attachment all members of the foster family develop for the foster child often becomes much stronger than the foster parent anticipates.

"People don't realize when they take children in care, and I don't think agency realizes it either, the impact that this is going to have on your family and on yourself ... you get attached to these kids, you love them like your own, you raise them like your own, and then you have to let them go, and there is no choice in the matter... I don't think foster homes and the agency workers really know that impact that that has on your family. It's extremely difficult ... we raised two children like our own, and the agency asked us repeatedly if we were interested to adopt, and we did say yes, and they turned around and sent these kids home, and a few years later they're back in care, and it's really hard. It's like a death in the family. You feel like you've lost them forever."

"I can't prepare for in advance knowing—You know, the last time somebody left and I moped around the house and I was sad and angry at the world and blah-blah-blah, isn't the same, and won't be the same for this two in particular because they've been here almost three years"

"He was to be with me for a long while, so I had told him that, you know, we're going to work this out together forever ... when they just pulled him out of my home, I didn't realize that would ever happen so I felt like I let him down even though—So I just thought, you know, I'm not made for this, like I'm not doing this anymore 'cause I think I'm on top of things and I'm not, and I promised this child and really let him down more than anything."

In addition to feelings of loss and sadness, participants also described worries for the child's future, questions about how the child was doing, and thoughts about what it

would be like if the child could have stayed longer or had been adopted by the foster family. Participants often did not associate their reactions to the child's removal from their home with the label of 'grief' until they received some training about the topic. These participants expressed that they never fully realised that they were grieving, and that they never truly understood their emotional reactions prior to learning about foster parent grief. These participants reported that they were relieved to learn about foster parent grief, and to be able to give their experience a name. Without being given the label of grief for their experience, foster parents may not recognise their reactions as a natural response, and may be unaware of how to manage their feelings.

> *"I think the biggest thing for a lot of foster parents is it's not the type of grief that people recognize, right? You know that you agreed to this, so why are you grieving when they go home, kind of thing. And I think that's the biggest challenge for a lot of foster parents"*

> *"I don't think grief ever goes away. I don't think it ever really leaves you. It does dissipate, it's not as heavy, I'm sure a couple years from now I'll be able to talk about this other young girl without tearing up and stuff like that, but I don't know that I would ever stop wishing it could have been different, that you know, there could have been a way for it to work here for us."*

> *"It's a loss for us because they're gone, and we loved those kids and we wanted to keep them, and we still wonder, you know, what would we be doing today? We'd go on vacation and think, boy, you know, these little ones would have loved this. Will they ever have this?"*

Participants with extensive fostering experience reported that the feelings of loss and attachment were very powerful, and they were uncertain if there was a way to fully prepare new foster parents for the emotional experiences of fostering. Participants who were new to their role reported that they had yet to fully experience these emotions, but reported that the module provided them with some understanding of the emotional struggles they would soon face.

> *"It's like getting on an emotional rollercoaster, and sometimes you just can't get off... And all the training in the world is not going to prepare you for, until you're actually going through it."*

> *"I believe it helped prepare me for what's to come. I mean, you can never really truly prepare yourself, and when it comes you'll feel it differently. I really liked how it said that every case is different... I think it helped prepare me as much as it can for something that you can't really prepare yourself for."*

The unexpected level of emotionality involved in fostering is a challenging aspect of the foster parent role, and difficult to fully prepare for. While it may be difficult to fully prepare new foster parents for the emotionality of fostering, educating foster parents about this aspect can help foster parents feel less isolated and alone. If foster parents recognize that these reactions are normal, they may be more likely to seek help or comfort, which could help improve foster parent retention.

Reassurance. The topic of grief was approached sensitively in the 'Dealing with Loss and Grief' module, and worked to help foster parents recognize and accept their feelings by reassuring them that the grieving process was a normal and expected aspect of

their role. Throughout the interviews, foster parents who chose to share their grief experiences expressed that the grief module normalized and validated their feelings, and helped them to realise that they were not the only one struggling with the challenging emotions associated with a child leaving the foster parent's care.

Participants expressed that the module reassured them that their grief reactions were normal, and gave them permission to grieve. The lessons assured participants that a child leaving their care was a difficult experience to go through. Some participants expressed that the module made a significant difference for them, and identified the module as the source that helped them realise their reactions were normal. One participant spoke about the difference in attitude about grief and emotional expression from ten years ago to now, and felt that the move towards recognizing grief reactions in the foster parent role to be especially significant and beneficial to foster parent's mental health.

> *"I know that it's through that course, through that module, that it's normal to grieve, and what is normal grieving, or so-called normal grieving, and so that was comforting to know that, yeah, of course you're going to grieve. It's a loss of somebody special that's had a major impact in your life, and like you said, it'll be two years or a little over two years by the time she's gone."*

The grief module reassured participants that their feelings were valid, and gave participants permission to express their feelings. Some participants expressed that they had been holding on to their emotions, and questioned if they could feel sad or hurt when a child left their care, even though they knew the child would eventually move on. The

module also validated other challenging emotions involved with foster children transitioning to a new placement, including anger towards the transition in general, and lingering feelings of guilt and grief from placements that had ended months or years prior to completing the module. Participants were able to generalize this validation to themselves, and were able to recognize that struggling with a child leaving care does not imply they are emotionally weak or unfit to be a foster parent. It helped them recognize that their emotional responses are not a weakness. Participants who had yet to experience the ending of a foster placement also found this aspect of the course to be beneficial, and expressed they were able to accept that they would experience hurt feelings because of the lessons they learned in the ' Dealing with Loss and Grief" module.

> *"When she was moved to a group home as much as I had no energy left to continue and try to be there for her… once she was gone, it broke my heart. It really did. Because, (Sigh) I'm going to start crying. I still miss her. I still am broken hearted. And, the module, allowed me to grieve, and to admit to myself it was grief. And that was hurting. And now I still am."*

Through the lessons and reading about the personal stories of experiences with grief of others, participants reported that they were reassured their reactions were normal. Learning about other foster parent's accounts in the module helped foster parents acknowledge their feelings, and allowed them to admit to themselves that they were hurt. Some participants shared that they had wondered if they were the only one who experienced foster parent grief, and hearing about other accounts reassured them that they were not alone.

"I find it helpful to hear actual people talking, or writing, or whatever. You know, like, actual real-life experiences of foster parents around that. Like, I found that— I was actually teary at a couple of points because it was just, "Yeah, I get that! You know, I really get that", and I found that—Yeah, I just found it very comforting and very affirming, really."

"The nicest thing I found about that was it kind of gave me some, it validated some of the things that we have struggled with when we've had teens transition out of our home, whether it be that they transition because they aged out, or whether they transitioned out because their behaviours and they just couldn't keep it together anymore… There's been a few that we've kind of struggled with when they've left, and the nice thing about that part of the program was it kind of validated some of the feelings and some of the anger and some of the hurt that we went through. It kind of validated that for me."

From the feedback that participants provided, it appears that the 'Dealing with Loss and Grief' module helped participants accept and process their emotions by reassuring them that their reactions are normal and experienced by many. Communicating this message of acceptance may help increase foster parent retention by reassuring foster parents that having emotional responses to the ending of a placement does not imply they are unfit to be a foster parent.

Healing Connections. Reaching out to others was one of the strategies for managing grief included in the 'Dealing with Loss and Grief' module. The module included personal stories, blogs, and quotes of other foster parent's experiences with grief

and loss. Participants emphasised how healing it was to hear other foster parents stories, and identified support systems and connections with others to be an effective way to manage their grief.

Though making supportive connections with other foster parents can be very beneficial, it also requires that foster parents are able to make themselves vulnerable to someone else. Regardless of experience level, seeking support could be difficult for foster parents if they perceive that asking for support would require them to admit that they were struggling. The "Dealing with Grief and Loss" module appeared to help some participants realise that seeking support was not a sign of weakness or incompetence, but rather a strategy that they could use to become stronger and more effective in their role as a professional caregiver. Through completing the module, participants were able to realise the importance of seeking supports when they were experiencing grief in order to let themselves heal, and feel less alone.

> *"I think the biggest take away from that for me was to talk to other people when I feel that way… Because it's so easy to just kind of bottle it up and think, like, why do I feel like this, and, you know, that wasn't my child anyway. But to talk to other foster parents and just get that kind of empathy from them and just a feeling of community in that, you know, lots of people feel the same, is part of caring for kids in the foster system. So I think that was my biggest takeaway was when I have that grief, I'm going to seek out others to help me"*

"It's okay to have struggles and ask questions and gain support from other foster parents, and that it's not a sign of weakness, not a sign of incompetence, but that we are stronger when we work together"

While foster parents have a resource worker and other family and friend supports, if those people do not have fostering experience, they may not be able to provide the support the foster parent needs while they are grieving the loss of a foster child. Foster parents may find that though their usual supports may be very supportive for most issues, support coming from someone without fostering experience is suspect without an understanding of the concept of foster parent grief. Participants often expressed that people without fostering experience may not be able to see past the idea that the foster parent knew the child would leave one day when they took on the placement.

"People don't understand what it's like to lose a child that's not yours when you feel like that child is yours because you've raised them for so many years. It's hard for them to understand how you feel and how sad you are. They don't understand it. So you really need to talk to somebody that gets it, and sometimes that's really hard to find"

"I started expressing that grief um, I was at work, it was probably about two, three weeks after the modules, after having finished it, and I don't have another placement right now…But somebody at work asked me if I had somebody in the home and I said no, and I volunteered the information that I don't know if I'm ready for another placement. I'm still grieving the loss of the last one, and they just stood there and looked at me like 'You're grieving the loss of the last one?'…

Most people don't even understand why you, you know, they don't even know

anything about what goes on in the home in terms of your relationship with the

youth or their behaviour… They are just like, "Well I wouldn't want somebody

else in my home! They have a key to your house? They're teenagers! Are you

crazy?"

Participants described the importance of new foster parents being connected with others so they could talk about their experiences with someone, and so they could ask their questions and share worries about fostering to another foster parent who they perceive as understanding their role. Participants reported that new foster parents may not realise how normal it is to grieve foster children who leave their care, and may not realise the importance of support systems with the fostering experience. Agencies may need to provide new foster parents with opportunities to connect with other foster parents in order to ensure that new foster parents have sufficient support in their new role. While some participants longed for such a system, one participant described their involvement in a system much like the support system others were hoping for.

"Our society has started a mentorship sort of program that new foster parents

that are coming in get a mentor… I've recently been set up with a few families as

a mentor to them so that if they have any questions, they can call me with those

questions, or if before they get their first placement they're just worried about,

you know, what's it going to be like, or after they get their first placement, then

they call me and say, "Oh, my god. I have a kid. What do I do with this child

now?"… So that's kind of different because when I first started, they didn't have

that… it's scary 'cause you have somebody else's kid, you don't know anything

about them, and you just have to wing it... I don't know if there is enough training

that they could possibly do that would kind of set you up, like, properly for what's

it actually going to be like, 'cause I think everybody experiences it differently as

well... I think that they're kind of doing a little bit better now with this mentorship

program."

From the participant's feedback, it is apparent that supportive connections among foster parents can be especially effective to help foster parents manage their grief and worries related to fostering. Foster parent retention and mental health could likely be enhanced by strategically enhancing healing connections among foster parents, and building foster parent support systems.

Training Modules Themes

Overall, the feedback regarding the training program was very positive. Each participant was able to identify at least one topic in the training program that made a particular impact on them, or that they experienced as very important for foster parents to know about. The majority of participants within this sample had been fostering for over 10 years, and reported that they already had been taught most of the information presented in the course. Despite learning the information in the past, these experienced foster parents tended to appreciate the course as a 'refresher' as it explained lessons in a better way, and helped them employ skills they had not recently utilized. The majority of participants reported that the content of the course was beneficial for any foster parent, but would be most beneficial for foster parents with less than five years of experience.

Participants discussed their experiences with online training, and outlined both the benefits and drawbacks of completing a training course online as opposed to in class. There was an overwhelming positive response to completing training online, as it provided much desired flexibility which helped participants overcome several barriers to accessing training. While many participants preferred online training, they also acknowledged that in class training did have some benefits that this online course did not provide. Participants also explained their experiences with technical difficulties and how it affected their participation.

Benefits of the Training Program for Various Experience Levels

The Western Foster Parent Project educated foster parents about the various aspects of fostering that were often difficult and lead foster parent to consider leaving their role as a professional caregiver. The participants found the information provided to be relevant, insightful, and impactful. Participants found that the information would be most applicable to new foster parents, but found it to be an effective and worthwhile refresher course of the information they already knew.

The information in the training modules was found to be relevant, easy to understand, and accurately spoke to the emotionality involved in fostering. Participants who were new to their role as a foster parent found that some of the information overlapped the initial training they received before having a child place in their home, but found that by completing the modules while they had a child placed in their care they were able to immediately apply some of the information in their home.

"I don't have anything to add to anything to what you guys have said 'cause you've done an incredible—You know, your presentation and the research is phenomenal."

"Very relevant. Some of the things were kind of a refresher from the training that we did have just recently, but there were a few things that I did learn that I could apply right away, because in the training, then, you don't have the children there, so you're, it's just kind of generic, but when you actually have a child in your home, then I was able to apply some of these training techniques to our specific case, and that was very helpful."

The majority of participants had been fostering for over 10 years at the time of completion of the course, and reported that they already had been taught most of the information presented in the modules. These participants with extensive experience often expressed that they wished they had received the information taught in the modules when they were beginning their role as a foster parent.

"I know that the agencies all have the foster parent training program but honestly you come out of there and you think you know what's going on, and you think you know what to expect, and you really don't know anything, um, so yeah, I would recommend it being compulsory for anybody whose been a foster parent five or six years or less, after five, six years if you're still hanging in then your kinda obviously figuring yourself around."

"This is probably the best I've ever seen, and it should be presented to any prospect of foster parents, and I'm actually going to, I was going to ask if we have

permission to take this over to our foster agency, you know, and have them to look

at it to say, you know, this is kind of what you need to be presenting and showing

prospective foster parents, you know, as a teaching tool for them before they even,

you know, want to begin.”

While participants with extensive fostering recommended that the content of the

course would be most beneficial for foster parents who were new to their role, or had less

than five years of experience, they also reported that their experience of completing the

training program was both beneficial and impactful for them despite having previously

been exposed to most of the content. These experienced foster parents tended to

appreciate the course as a 'refresher' as it explained lessons in a better way that made

more sense to them, and helped them employ skills they had not utilized in a while.

Participants with extensive experience expressed that they appreciated how the training

program gave them a different point of view, and reminded them of tools and strategies

that they had learned and applied before, but had forgotten about over the years. Some

participants shared that following the completion of the modules, they were able to re-

apply previously learned skills in their home. In this way, the modules helped

experienced foster parent break out of old routines and apply know skills with a fresh

point of view. This helped participants with extensive fostering experience enhance their

skills, provided them with a confidence boost when faced with a challenging aspect of the

foster parent role, and reminded them of the positive impact they were making in the

lives of their foster children. Participants often expressed that they appreciated the

opportunity to complete a training course, and that having reminders and refresher on

information they had learned in the past was a desired way to keep sharp and prepared in their role.

> *"For me, personally, I would probably say I may have known probably most of it, but in saying that, it's always good to have reminders. Sometimes just because you know something, you've learned something, you've lived it, if you haven't had to think about it, you don't realize you're doing it sometimes. You know what I mean? Or maybe there's certain things you forgot that you used to do, but then you become into this new normal for whatever reason. And so it's always nice to have a refresher even though, like I say, if I've kind of been through many of these scenarios, it's still important for me."*

> *"You forget those coping techniques and you forget the strategies that you were taught as the years start rolling by. And you know what? You start flipping back into the ways that don't work and you keep forgetting about strategies that probably would work if you remembered to apply them time after time."*

While the training program may prove to be most beneficial for foster parents who are new to their role, completing the training program at any level of fostering experience appears to have positive effects, and was found to be beneficial for any experience level.

The Benefits of Online Training

Online training was reported by these foster parents to be a very beneficial avenue for learning. This delivery method overcame several barriers preventing foster parents from completing other programs. Participants discussed multiple ways that online

training was able to combat these barriers, and provided a wealth of feedback explain how online training was especially helpful for the foster parent population.

In class training was found to be difficult for foster parents to attend as it required students to be physically present at the specified time for the entire duration of the course, and therefore did not often afford much flexibility. The foster parent role is demanding in time and energy, and physically attending at a training course can pose a barrier to foster parents. In addition, foster parents often have jobs and other obligations in addition to their parental responsibilities. Participants expressed that parental responsibilities and busy life schedules often created situations that requires foster parents to leave partway through or cancel their attendance to training course at the last minute. After the children's bedtime, or during nap times, were popular moments for participants to work on the modules.

> *"For me, I work! For me to get to a training program, which primarily are all during the day, right? I can't go to. When I have to meet a requirement of so many training hours, and that's why I tend to get the repeat on training because only so many of them are done at night, or, you know, you gotta take what you can fit into your schedule…I mean, I've taken vacation days. I've taken time off work to get, to go to training, which I shouldn't have to do."*

> *"I went to a mindfulness one 6 weeks or so ago, and there were 8 parents there and within the first hour two of them had had calls that they needed to leave… They lost out on the training if it's a one-time opportunity and, you know, maybe*

it would come around again in a year or so, but they lost it. If it had been an

online thing, they could have picked it up the next day."

"I end up missing some training seminars that I'd like to go to because there's

something else going on at that time that I need to be at."

In order for foster parents to attend training, they often must find child care. This can pose a significant barrier to accessing training. Participants expressed that it was very difficult to find a babysitter who was competent enough to care for their foster children, especially if their foster children had significant needs. In some cases, a foster parent may feel more than one babysitter is needed in order to care for their children. Many participants found not needing to find child care to be a major benefit of completing online training. Participants felt that the flexibility of online training allowed them to complete the course in a convenient location, during the time they had available, which enable them to complete modules without sacrificing their current routine or schedule.

"I had just tucked the little one in and I'm like, I have a few hours to myself. It

was fantastic to be able to do it when you had the time to do it, 'cause not

everybody can drive somewhere and do it, and then I could look back if I wanted

to."

"I have two fetal alcohol kids, a brain injury, a drug baby and a methadone baby,

and I don't have an adequate sitter to access the resources so I can leave the

house to go….Who's going to watch my kids and be competent?... Who wants to

step in my shoes for a few hours?"

Several participants reported that the ability to choose when to complete the course enabled them to get a more complete experience of the training. The online method of delivery allowed foster parents to review past material, and complete the modules at their own pace. This allowed participants to check their own understanding within the course, and ensure that they did not miss any information. Participants were able to put their own needs first when completing the modules. For example, if the participant felt sick, rather than having to attend the training sick or miss it completely, they were able to care for themselves and complete the training at a later time. Participants found that because they were able to complete the modules when it was convenient for them, they were able to spend more time reflecting on the information in the modules, and were able to enjoy it more.

> *"I enjoyed it 'cause if I don't get something, I can go back and re-read it, where if you're in class you'd miss it, that's it, you know, or you can ask questions or whatever, but you don't always, don't always like to put your hand up and say 'Repeat that'."*

> *"If you're in a bad day or whatever, you can't just walk away from the training, or if you have a sick kid you have to miss the class, whereas if it's online, then you can do it when you're feeling up to it."*

Discussion with classmates is one aspect of in class training that online training lacks. Some participants expressed that open discussion was not important to them as they preferred not to share during these times. Others appreciated that the online lessons did not get side tracked by questions and discussions, and they liked knowing that no

information would be missed or skimmed over due to being short on time after a lengthy discussion. While some participants did express the value of discussion, others felt that is was not necessary, and was a small drawback in comparison to the convenience and flexibility that online training provided.

> *"The computerized lesson on a computer doesn't get sidetracked in a way that live lectures do… so you stay on subject."*

> *"I think personally, because I don't like to share my dirty laundry per se, so it's not important for me to be in a group where I can have a discussion… In my pyjamas, having a tea is the best way to do it."*

The online course used several different activities and methods of presenting information to the participants to keep the participant engaged with the lesson, and to offer an opportunity to check understanding. The lessons presented the information in a variety of ways including the use of personal stories, illustrations, lists, and links to resources. There were some parts that were read aloud to the participant, and some parts that the participant could read to themselves. Participants found the use of various activities enjoyable, and maintained their interest.

> *"I enjoyed the interactive part, that was very good, too, and, because, you know, as you can imagine, if you're coming home after work or after, you know, being with foster children all day long, it's kind of nice to have the colour and the images and the clicking and the dragging from one part to the other that breaks things up a bit, so I thought that was very well done."*

Overall, the online course delivery method was appreciated by participants, and fit well into the lifestyle and dynamics of the foster parent role.

Drawbacks of Online Training, Including Technical Problems

While online training may be more easily accessible, there are still areas that are lacking in comparison to in class training. Lack of interaction with others, temptation to procrastinate, and ease of understanding were all areas that participants found to be lacking in online training. Participants discussed these drawbacks, and explained how it affected their learning and experience with online training.

While working independently was desirable for some participants, the lack of interaction and ability to ask questions during the lesson may hinder the learning experience of some foster parents. If the foster parent's average day is characterized by minimal interaction with other adults, it may feel more isolating to complete training online. Participants also felt interactions with others foster parents and instructors could help ensure the foster parent receives the full benefit of the training program.

Foster parents come from a wide range of educational backgrounds, and it can be difficult to ensure the material is both simple enough for some, and challenging enough for others. While most participants appeared to have gained a thorough understanding of the information in the modules, some participants felt the modules had too much theory and found it difficult to understand the information. Without an instructor present, it can be difficult to ensure foster parents of all education levels are fully understanding the material provided. Foster parents felt interaction and discussion with other foster parents could have been especially useful in the grief and loss module considering how personal

the topic was, and how healing it can be to share experiences with others. Though foster parents found it much more convenient to complete training online, the lack of interaction with other people and fellow foster parents was a drawback that was often mentioned by participants.

> *"Initially, I thought Yay! I can do this online. And I don't have to pack and go out and go anywhere, and then I was part way through it and I was thinking, damn, maybe I'd rather go to the agency and do it because I'm on a computer pretty well all day at work."*

> *"If you're in a group setting and you are presenting this, then people can share their stories. That's probably the only thing that would be missing, but if you're going to continue with online training, and you guys do, you know, you could do more blogs, just like you had the one. You could have more videos of actual foster parents talking about whether it be loss or whether it be about this puzzle or whatnot. So there's ways around that—And I think people learn by your personal stories. We can all learn from each other."*

> *"Foster parents come from a wide range of backgrounds, and some may have had only high school education, some college, some university, maybe some didn't even finish their high school, and I felt that anyone who didn't have probably—It was written at maybe a college/university level, and I think if this goes forward things need to be a little bit more simplified and the words need to be more simplified for perhaps those foster parents that don't have post secondary education or maybe not even have finished secondary education."*

While the flexibility of online training was appreciated, participants also noted several consequences of having additional flexibility. Though having to attend the training could pose some barriers to accessibility, it also provides clear consequences if attendance was not possible. Some participants felt that while flexibility was beneficial, the lack of consequences due to procrastination could make it too easy to prioritise other commitments, and not complete the training program in a timely manner.

While the time to complete in class training can be guaranteed fairly well, online training is not as predictable. Estimated time to complete online training will typically vary depending on the foster parent's level of understanding, concentration, and reading speed. Some participants felt the estimate time to complete the modules was understated, and felt frustrated when it took significantly longer to complete the modules than they had anticipated. Some participants felt that the time they were able to afford for the online course was at a time that was more difficult for them to learn, such as late at night after children had been put to bed. Though the flexibility of online training may make it easier to work into a busy schedule, it may be lead to the foster parent setting aside time that may be more difficult to absorb new material, which could lead the foster parent to not receive the full benefit of the training program.

> *"Going to the classroom I believe eliminates the procrastination element, thinking I'll get to it, I'll get to it, I'll get to it. You know, okay, so come Friday morning at 10 o'clock and it's at CAS, you have to be there….Or you've missed your opportunity. So for me, going for the classroom helps with that element of it."*

"That would have been my regret is that I couldn't answer them to the full extent

that I wanted to because it was later at night after (my foster child) went to bed,

and I was exhausted and couldn't give it the time that I wanted to."

The participants found the modules to have several technical problems that complicated their participation in the training course. One of the main technical complaints focused on the links to other web pages not working as some web page material had been removed or changed between the creation and delivery of the training program. Some activities in the modules asked participants to read a blog or web page, and then complete some reflection questions. The broken links caused participants to not be able to access the needed material in order to complete specific activities. In the 'Reactions to Grief and Loss' module, 'Beth's Story' was one link that did not work for any participant. Participants often mentioned the link to 'Beth's story' not working, and were disappointed as they found the personal stories in the 'Reactions to Grief and Loss' module to be very beneficial.

"The technical problems were just all really link-based. So it would say, like,

"Click here" and you would open it. Sometimes the links worked wonderfully,

other times the link would say "page not found", or if it was like an article within

Yahoo or something like that, it would just go to the Yahoo search screen. So

those are really only the technical glitches were just, was linking issues."

"The worst thing for me to have to deal with was multiple, multiple technical

difficulties. That was, that was the most negative thing for me, and because of

those, it did not make it enjoyable to do the course. So I'm thinking that if, you

know, if those technical difficulties are resolved, then it would be a very good

course for almost any foster parent to take. You know, I truly believe that, and I

wouldn't tell you that if I didn't think so."

There were a few technical difficulties within the module itself that complicated the participant's use of the training program. Participants appeared to be more effected by the malfunctioning 'back button'. When participants tried to press the button to return to a previous screen, a problem occurred which caused the pages to overlap. Some participants found this frustrating if they had wanted to go to a previous page to re-read it, or check the information that had been covered while trying to answer a question or complete an activity. While the 'next page' button did not have any malfunctioning reports, one participant with education in web design pointed out that the 'next page' button changed and moved its place on the page throughout the module. This participant felt that this could be confusing for some foster parents, and advised that it would be more effective if the 'next page' button was consistently in the same pace, and the same shape. There were a few minor technical difficulties that participants found throughout the module that made the training program slightly more difficult or confusing, and led the participants to find the modules to not be very user friendly. Some if these problems included questions not showing while the participant answered them, and confusing buttons. Some parts of the module included audio recordings of the lesson content which allowed the participant to listen, or be 'read to' by the module instead of having to read. Having the content of the page read by the module was an appreciated aspect of the training program by many participants; however some users felt confused when some pages were read and others were not. The unpredictability of which parts contained audio

recordings and which did not led some participants to wonder if the previous parts of the module were supposed to be read by the participant, or if they missed clicking something on another page to activate an audio recording. Having more consistency or some kind of warning before the content is read may be beneficial.

"You were asked some questions, and then I thought, oh, geez, well what was that one again? And then I went back, I tried to, you know, I hit the back button key, and then everything became jumbled and I thought, well, this is no good. Now, you know, I can't really finish this the way I wanted it to."

"Yeah, I just noticed when I was doing the last module, when you click on a question to write the response, the question disappears. So I thought if you could somehow keep the question there while the little kicker thing comes up to write a response, that would be helpful, just 'cause I like to look back and re-read the question while I'm writing an answer."

"I thought it was a bit too complicated [Chuckle], too many buttons. I wasn't sure if some of the questions where we were supposed to things, so there was a little bit too much going on."

"It was okay that I had to do the reading of all that kind of stuff myself, but when she did pop up and start talking, it made me wonder whether or not the whole course was read to me… That would be fantastic if I could sit and have a virtual online experience."

Another significant issue that some participates faced was the difficulty of the modules being accessed with Apple products. The modules did not perform as well on

Apple computers or iPads, which led foster parents using Apple products to miss out on parts of the lessons. While some participants may have access to a non-apple product that they can complete the training program on, foster parents may be unwilling to do so.

> *"I really couldn't get the full effect of the module at all because being on an Apple… But I managed through. I just clicked through and went back, and I found my way around it…But I couldn't get the audio the way it was supposed to work. I'm sure I didn't get a lot of the interaction of clicking on something and getting feedback. It had to be a little more manual for me."*

While participants were able it identify several drawbacks of online training, online training still proved to be desirable and preferred by several participants. Many reported these drawbacks could be resolved. Technical problems can be frustrating and can lead to confusion. If foster parents are feeling overwhelmed by technical problems, it could affect their drive to complete the modules. However, participants still felt that the course was worthwhile and provided great information. Many felt that if the problems could be resolved, that it would be a very effective course.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the research provided insightful results for the research project related to the Western Online Foster Parent Training Modules. While relationships with other stakeholders were often conflictual, they were still viewed as a critical source of support to the overall success of the foster placement. Learning about foster parent grief provided participants with an experience that was both enlightening, and healing. The module itself was viewed as relevant and beneficial for foster parents to complete. While in class

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training was still considered to be important, online training was experienced as a very

helpful alternative for foster parents who preferred extra flexibility at the cost of in

person interaction. Technical problems were an area of particular frustration, and will

need to be resolved prior to further administration of the training module.

Chapter Five

Discussion

Introduction

This study was an extension of a larger project involving the *Child Welfare League of Canada* that explored the challenges foster parents face that lead them to want to leave their role as a foster care provider. The first phase of that research involved 941 foster parents who completed a survey that explored the challenges within the foster parent role. This data was used as the basis to create an online foster parent training program that had as its focus, educating foster parents about the most challenging areas of the foster parent role, as well as foster parent mental health and self-care. As a result, an online foster parent educational program was devised to address certain of the issues that arose out of that previous reach. Thirty foster parents took part in the online training program and then completed a survey that provided feedback on their experience, their opinion of the content, and how the content of the training program related to their personal experiences of foster parenting. The current study was specifically focused on the foster parents' feedback related to the 'Four tools for Conflict Resolution' and 'Reactions to Grief and Loss" modules, as well as the participants' general experience with the training program, and the online delivery. The feedback was analysed and sorted into themes to produce the results of the study.

This discussion will explore the connections of the present study in the context of previous research. The themes that emerged in the results corresponded with previous research, as many of the emergent themes have been explored and discussed in research regarding foster parents, and the foster care system. The links and connections made

between the current study and previous research will be followed by a discussion of what is most relevant to clinical research, as well as foster parent's current needs in relation to counselling. Next, this discussion will consider the present study's relevance to future research, and will explore future directions for development as well as the areas of foster parenting that could benefit from future research. Finally, and exploration of the limitations of the present study will be discussed.

Relevance to Previous Research

Conflictual Relationships. Rogers, Cummings and Leschied (2006) found that negative interactions and relations between foster parents and social workers can negatively affect a foster parent's motivation to continue their role as a foster parent. The present study found that negative relations with social workers could leave a foster parent feeling unsupported and undervalued in their role. Some participants reported that negative interactions with social workers was more of a deterrent to continuing providing services than negative interactions with their foster children.

Thomson & McArthur (2009) reported that external parties, such as social workers, often hold more decision making power than foster parents do regarding the foster child in their care. The reports of participants in this study are in agreement with this statement, and expand on how emotionally difficult it is to be in such a situation. Several foster parents described their "heart ache" when a child they had desired to adopt or continue caring for was removed from their home despite the foster parent's recommendations. Situations where the foster parent experienced powerlessness regarding decisions for their foster child increased conflictual feelings and interactions between foster parents and external parties.

Lack of Information. The lack of information regarding the foster child that is provided to foster parents is an issue that has been commonly raised within research literature (Hedin, 2015; Pollack, 2012; Fisher, Gibbs, Sinclair, Wilson, 2000). Previous research has shown that insufficient information about the child leads the foster parent to be unable to effectively consider the child's needs while making parenting decisions. Results of the current study are consistent with previous research. Participants in the current study described how the lack of information they received regarding their foster children has negatively affected their ability to care for the foster child's specific, individual needs. Participants reported the lack of a full family and health information background complicated parenting decisions, and made it difficult to predict situations that could potentially trigger a negative behavioural or emotional response in the child. This commonly effected their ability to soothe or provide support for the child during emotionally difficult times. Being unable to support the foster child through difficult times was reported to be emotionally difficult for the foster parent as well.

Disconnection. Fisher et al. (2000) and Van Holen et al. (2015) both reported that foster parents view themselves as a part of the caring team, and want their insights into the child's best interests to be recognized and valued. In the current study, participants reported that no one knew the foster child better than the foster parent, and they expressed that other stakeholders should seriously consider their recommendations. Participants reported that there was a disconnection between social workers and foster parents. Murray et al. (2011) also discussed this sense of disconnection in their research, and, similar to the present study, found that the disconnection experienced by foster

parents left them to believe they were undervalued and disregarded by various

stakeholders within the fostering system.

Lack of Support. Khoo & Skoog (2014) found that foster parents reported being

unsupported by social workers during difficulties within foster placements. Previous

research has also found that foster parents have requested more pre-placement

preparation support, ongoing communication, and emotional support both prior to and

following placements (Van Holen et al, 2015; Taylor & McQuillan, 2014; Murray et. al,

2011; Mitchell, Kuczynski, Tubbs, & Ross, 2010). This is consistent with the findings of

the current study. Participants specifically reported that additional support within the

early stages of the placement is needed, and that effective communication is essential to a

successful placement. Participants also reported that more emotional support from social

workers is needed, especially for reactions of grief and loss following termination of the

placement.

Relationships with Birthparents. While foster parent-birth parent interaction has

been found to be frequently conflictual (Taylor & McQuillan, 2014), it has also been

found to have the potential to increase placement stability when the relationship is

positive and supportive (Van Holen, et al. 2015; Kalland, Sinkkonen, 2001; Palmer,

1996; Linares, Montalto, Rosbruch, & Li, 2006). While only a few participants within the

current sample spoke about relationships with birth parents, the feedback provided by this

group was consistent with previous research. These participants often reported how

essential it was to build and maintain a positive relationship with the birth parents.

Participants reported that they often learned early in their role that resentment and

negative feelings towards the birth parents were unhelpful, and that they could enable the

placement to run more smoothly by working with the birth parents whenever possible. Some of the strategies participants described included avoiding judgement and empathizing with the parents regarding the fact of their child being in child welfare care. Nesmith, Patton, Christophersen & Smart (2015) also found these strategies to be commonly utilized by foster parents to build positive relations with birth parents, and consistent with the findings from the current study, found that these strategies helped the foster parents to respond compassionately rather than defensively when birthparents were angry or accusatory.

Reactions to Loss and Greif Understood Through ABC-X Family Stress Theory

Boss (2002) found that ambiguity regarding whether the absent individual is in or out of the family system is a barrier to managing family stress. It inhibits positive coping, which is consistent with participant's reports of experiencing grief and loss due to the anticipation of a child's eventual removal, or the uncertainty of the permanency of a child's placement.

ABC-X Family Stress Theory provides a formula to understand how the factors surrounding family stress interact to determine the overall degree of stress where 'A', the actual event interacts with 'B' the family coping skills and 'C' the meaning the family makes of the event, to determine 'X', the relative degree of stress. By applying this theory to the results of the present study, we can see how the training module was able to decrease family stress by strengthening the 'B' factor of coping skills, and 'C' factor of meaning making.

From the qualitative results, it is evident that participation in the module was associated with an increase the 'B' factor, foster parents' coping skills. Participants discussed their realisation of the importance of reaching out to others during times of grief and loss. Participants described plans to talk about their reactions with co-workers, friends, family, and other foster parents. In the modules, foster parents were introduced to blogs by foster parents, and some participants reported they planned to continue reading those blogs, or start their own, as a way of reaching out. Reaching out was the coping skill that was most commented on by participants, and the feedback provided by the sample suggests that the training module was able to effectively increase the participants 'B' factor coping skills.

The results of this study regarding grief and loss reflected that it was acceptable to increase the meaning making 'C' factor by helping foster parents develop a new meaning for their experience. The training program primarily did this by giving the participants' experience a name, and by validating and normalizing the experience. Several participants expressed that they never realised they were grieving before completing the training program. Participants also reported that the training program validated and reassured participants that their emotions, thoughts, reactions, and experiences were both normal, and accepted. By validating and normalizing, and providing a name for the experience, the training program assisted participants to grieve, and create new meaning for their experience, therefore improving the 'C' factor of meaning making.

It is reasonable to assume from the results produced from this study, and by the logic of ABC-X Family Stress Theory, that this training program has the potential to reduce family stress related to foster parent grief. Due to foster parent grief being a

challenging area of the foster parent role that may lead foster parents to leave, it is reasonable to assume that training on grief and loss reflected in the 'Reactions to Greif and Loss" module, could have the potential to make a positive impact on foster parent retention. More research is needed to determine the validity of this claim, and the long term impact of training on grief and loss.

While the training module provided a significant amount of information that was well received by the participants, it was able to also provide a therapeutic element by teaching coping skills and enlightening participants about different perspectives and different points of view thereby increasing the B and C factors of ABC-X Family Stress Theory. Utilising the concepts of ABC-X Family Stress Theory, while constructing training programs for foster parents, could enable training programs to provide a therapeutic element. This may prove to be an additional 'value added' to the training program. Counselling services may not always be easily accessible by foster parents for a variety of reasons such as financial or scheduling difficulties. Therefore, ABC-X Family Stress Theory may be very valuable to creators of foster parent training programs or counselling psychology in general in order to add a therapeutic element to training programs.

Relevance to Counselling Foster Parents

Previous research on foster parent retention has focused on topics such as finding a specific characteristic about foster parents or children that may increase foster home breakdown, or teaching foster parents specific parenting skills. This study recognized that foster parent retention and foster home breakdowns are part of a larger systemic problem. Rather than exploring a specific characteristic or missing skill, this study focused on

providing foster parents with information about their role, and the challenging experiences foster parents commonly face. By providing education and knowledge about the foster care system, the current study answered foster parents requests to be included as a valued part of the caring team. Including foster parents in the evaluation of the course could in itself be an aid to foster parent retention. The current study was able to gain a better understanding of the foster parent experience, and was able to gain insight into the impact that the training program could have for foster parents.

Despite the conflict reported in the foster parent- social worker relationship, participants in the present study described social workers and resource workers as critical sources of support to foster parents. While it is important to understand the conflict that occurs within the foster parent-social worker relationship, it is equally important to understand the importance of the support network found within this relationship. While social workers may recognise that the foster child's care is in part their responsibility, they may not as easily recognize that the foster parent also needs their care and support. By supporting the foster parent, the social worker will also be supporting the foster child by ensuring the personal wellness of their caregiver.

Participants often expressed that social workers did not understand what it was like to be in the foster parent role, and without the experience of fostering a child, it was not possible to fully understand the dynamics of the role. This perception appeared to increase feelings of disconnection, and decrease a sense of support within the relationship. The 'Four Tools for Conflict Resolution' module appeared to aid perceptions of disconnection and lack of support by educating foster parents about empathy, and the dynamics of the foster parent role. Participants found the lesson on

empathy helped them to better understand the social workers perspective, and helped aid

conflict within the foster parent-social worker relationship. Some participants reported

that the training module would be beneficial for social workers to complete. These

participants felt that the training module was able to accurately describe the foster parent

experience. It is implausible to expect all social workers to foster children in order to

better understand the dynamics of the foster parent role, however, it is possible to provide

education to social workers focusing on empathy and the dynamics of the foster parent

role. Providing knowledge and education to both social workers and foster parents about

the other's role could increase engagement and connectedness. This may in turn decrease

feelings of disconnection, and increase supportiveness, which could lead to increased

foster parent retention. More research is needed to determine the validity of this relational

interplay.

One participant in the current sample described their experience with their first

The results of the current study highlight foster parents' desire to be valued and

utilized as an important asset to the caring team for the foster child in their care.

Feedback regarding the negative effects of insufficient information disconnection

demonstrate that foster parent mental health can be negatively affected when they are

excluded from various aspects of their foster child's plan of care. It appears that in order

to positively influence foster parent retention, social workers and fostering agencies must

increase their engagement with foster parents, and increase the foster parent's

involvement in the development and delivery of the plan of care for the child.

One participant in the current sample described their experience with their first

foster placement as very positive, which they found to be largely due to the extensive

amount of information about the child that the social worker voluntarily provided them

prior to the placement. This participant reported that they felt supported by the social worker, included in the caring team, as well as acutely aware of their foster child's needs, and the most effective parenting methods for their foster child. The participant reported that the extensive information they received increased their confidence in their ability to provide the needed care for the child, which attributed to the success of the placement. This example demonstrates the positive effects which derive from social workers actively involving foster parents in the planning process, and through teamwork and mutual respect within the foster parent-social worker relationship.

While all participants had positive reflections on their experience with online training, there were still some who preferred to come to a face-to-face class to learn. The major factors leading to a preference for in class training were the social interactions, ability to interact with the instructor, and the accurate time requirement needed to complete the course. If online training is to become more widely used, it would be important to find a way to increase interaction among participating students. Participants of this study suggested some methods of incorporating an interactive element within the training modules. One suggestion was to create a space for foster parents to share their answers and reflections to various questions within the modules with other participants. This could be done in a blog, or a discussion forum format. Another way to increase interaction with online training would be to create a buddy system for completing the modules. Two participants of the current sample chose to complete the modules together by scheduling a time with each other to complete the modules together over the phone. These participants found this method to be very beneficial as they were able to discuss aspects of the course that interested them, and they were able to check their

understanding of the course content with each other. They also found that some of the course content prompted the sharing of personal experiences with each other. One of these participants identified as an experienced foster parent, while the other was new to their role as a foster parent. They found that the mix of experience levels provided valuable insight to both of them, and reported a more significant experience due to their ability to discuss and reflect on the content together, and recommended their team method for other foster parents. Pairing online students together could provide additional insight to course content, and could potentially aid the development of support networks between foster parents, which participants expressed to be essential for new foster parents.

Another request was to have someone more readily available to answer questions while progressing through the modules. While there were e-mail contacts participants could connect with to address concerns, it may be beneficial to include a questions and answers forum as many participants had similar questions, and encountered the same issues. This could also provide a space for participants to point out technical problems with the training program so they could be addressed and corrected in a timely manner as technical problems were found to be a significant drawback to online training.

Relevance to Future Research

There is limited previous research and literature regarding the effect on mental health and the emotional impact that foster parent's experience while they are providing care. The current study found that foster parents find it very helpful to learn about foster parent grief as it aids their healing process. Teaching foster parents about the emotional responses and difficulty they face when a child leaves their home can help the foster

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parent better prepare and seek support during this particularly challenging time. Future research is needed to gain a better understanding of foster parent grief, and how to help foster parents heal. There are likely many areas of the current foster care system that may lead to an increase in the level of grief that foster parent feels when a child leaves their care. For example, some participants cited lack of information sharing and collaboration to be factors that can negatively impact foster parents. The impact of such factors should be examined in order to create plans to reduce these factors within the foster care system.

Festinger and Baker (2013) found that lack of adequate training was one of the reasons foster parents choose to discontinue foster care. Several foster parents in the current studies sample cited some areas that they felt there was a lack of training, such as fostering teenagers and mental health issues. However, the results of the current study tended to focus more on the lack accessibility to available training. This topic was likely discussed more frequently with the current sample due to the online delivery of the training. Participants often described how online training helped them overcome the challenges they faced when trying to access training. Barriers such as adequate child care, travel time, time and location of the training, as well as how often the training is offered were experienced as significant challenges to accessing training for foster parents. The results of the present research study regarding online training suggests that accessibility to training may be a more imminent concern to foster parents than the range of training offered. More research is needed into what foster parents need in order to access the training they want to undertake.

The foster parent demographic may often face multiple barriers to attending in class training due to the responsibilities involved with caring for foster children. A

method of training that affords the student flexibility to choose when and where to complete training was found to overcome multiple barriers to training that foster parents struggle with. Though it may appear to be a logical choice for foster parents to complete training online due to the demands of fostering, some participants preferred to complete training in class as opposed to online despite their acknowledgements of the benefits they experienced. It is likely that the responsiveness of an individual to online training is more determined by personal factors rather than the membership of a broad demographic. Participants of the current sample described various personal factors that impacted their preference between online or in class training. Some of these factors may include learning styles and, desire to interact with others. Another factor that may affect a preference between online or in class may be life situations or other valued life commitments. However, personal factors may not always correlate to a specific preference between online or in class training. For example, while one participant appreciated online training for the lack of class discussion, they preferred in class training over online training. Additionally, while a student may be able to identify their preference for online or in class training, their preference does not necessarily correlate to the method that the individual student may be able to learn most effectively. More research is needed to determine who would benefit most from online training as opposed to in class training.

The current sample generally reported a positive learning experience with the online training program. The current study was able to engage foster parents by providing education, as well as reassuring and validating the difficult aspects of the foster parent role. If foster parents are engaged through the sharing of knowledge and involvement of

developing a plan of care, they could be more likely to view themselves as a valued member of the caring team, which could increase both foster parent satisfaction in their role, and foster parent retention. This approach could lead foster parents to experience an increase in their perceived self-value within the foster care system. More research is needed to determine the long term effects of the training program as it relates to foster parent retention.

Limitations

The current study provided insightful information about the foster parents experience; however the study did face several limitations. These limitations may have hindered the depth of information collected. An examination into these limitations could provide insight into the collected information, and advise future research methodologies regarding the topic of foster parent retention.

The current sample was comprised of thirty foster parents, twenty eight being foster mothers, and two being foster fathers. The participants had a range of experience levels and fostering specializations. While the sample did provide insightful information that was consistent with previous research, the sample size was still low considering the size and range of experiences within the foster parent demographic. In addition, participants were predominantly from a small number of CAS' located in south-western Ontario, and therefore may not represent other populations of foster parents across Canada, especially in more rural areas.

Limited demographic information regarding each participant was collected. While many participants volunteered information such as their years of experience, marital

status, and the type of foster care they provided, participants were not all asked a set of demographic questions. The current study could have benefited from specific demographic information about each participant including; age, marital status, biological family composition years of experience, experiences of past grief training, and type of foster care provided, such as age range, specific needs of the child, or typical duration of care. These were all personal factors that many participants discussed and linked to their individual experience of fostering during their interviews. For example, foster parents who specialized in care for teenagers and babies found some of the information to be less relevant to their specialization of foster care, and single foster parents believed they faced additional struggles within their role as a foster parent. Having greater insight into these demographics could have allowed the interviewer to inquire about how these personal demographics affected their experience. This information could have provided more in depth and detailed information about the specific demographic the training module would most benefit, and how to modify it in order to increase its relevance to a greater population of foster parents. The relations between personal demographics and the fostering experience could have also provided additional future research directions about the needs of specific demographics of foster parenting, such as single foster parents or foster parents caring for teens, and how the foster system in general could better meet the needs of these specific demographics.

There were six foster parents who began the modules, but did not complete all modules, and did not take part in the telephone interview. These foster parents were unresponsive to reminder e-mails. It is unknown why these foster parents did not

complete the modules. Therefore, there may be a demographic that is facing a barrier(s) to completing online training that is unknown to this study.

The data collection process had some limitations due to confusion. There were five response questions to be answered with each module. One was to be answered before completing each module, and the remaining four were to be completed following completion. Participants were told to copy and paste these questions into an e-mail, provide an answer, and send them to the researchers. However, the training module did not allow the participants to copy and paste these questions. Some participants wrote them out, others used numbers, and others did not complete them at all due to the additional encumbrance. In addition, some participants found the wording of the questions to be confusing, and were unsure of what information or responses the researchers were looking for. This led some participants to question if they were 'doing it right'. Participants completing the modules on an iPad found the response questions more difficult to complete as they had to switch between applications and type on an iPad to complete them. These problems and frustrations limited the amount of feedback provided to the researcher during the completion of the modules.

Within the modules, there were several opportunities for participants to answer questions, or provide self-reflection. Several participants inputted their answers and feedback into these text boxes. However, due to the training module being a pilot version, these text boxes did not maintain a record of what was typed into them, nor did they send the inputted information to the researchers. Hence, all the information the participants shared within the module was lost. This limited the amount of in depth information the

researchers were able to collect regarding the participants experience of completing the online training program

The training module itself had some technical challenges that created limitations. The training modules did not function well on Apple products, so participants who used Mac computers and iPads to complete the modules had increased difficulty and could not access some of the activities that PC users could. In addition, the training modules worked best on the internet browser 'Google Chrome'. Those using other browsers tended to have some additional difficulties. While participants were advised to use a PC and download the browser 'Google Chrome' to complete the modules, participants often reported using their own preferred browser and computer or tablet despite the additional difficulties they encountered. This was due either to the participant's preference, or to what program was available to them at the time. This resulted in some participants having additional difficulties and frustrations while completing the module, which likely affected the participant's report of user satisfaction and general experience with the training modules. There were some technical difficulties that affected all users regardless of the computer, or internet browser they were using. Some common examples including being unable to access 'Beth's Story" in the grief and loss module, and difficulties with the 'back' button. Participants reported that these difficulties negatively affected their user satisfaction and general experience. This limited the results collected as participant were not able to experience the training module to its full extent.

In terms of research tools, this study contained no control group or pre-post-tests, and did not explore potential long term effects of the training module. The lack of a control group limits the results or learning experiences that can be attributed to the

training program rather than other factors. A pre and post-test would have provided more information regarding the level of information retention the participants experienced, and could have provided insight into what foster parents already knew prior to completing the training module, which could have been used to prevent duplicating training. This research project did not include a follow up interview to measure for information retention, or the potential lasting effects of the training module on foster parent retention. The lack of these research tools limits the long term reliability of the results of the study, and limits the conclusions that can be drawn.

Summary

Notwithstanding the limitations to this study, the results highlight the desire and need of foster parents to be increasingly considered as an integral part of the care team for a foster child. Foster parents expressed the need for more information about the child, support from the agency, and inclusion in the planning process. In addition, they expressed the negative effects of the disconnection they feel within the foster parent-social worker relationship, and for social workers to be more understanding and empathic towards their unique emotional experiences that are part of what it means to provide care for foster children. In order to increase foster parent retention, foster parents need to experience a sense of being valued and appreciated by the foster system for their commitment to the foster child, and to be recognized and respected as an expert regarding the foster child they care for. Several participants of this study expressed that foster parents are led to believe they are at the 'bottom of the totem pole', and are often disregarded by various professionals involved with the child's care. It is imperative in addressing the challenge of foster parent retention and the success of the foster care

system for this belief to be radically changed. The results of this study suggest that this

can in part be accomplished by increasing the foster parent's sense of being valued and

respected by the fostering system.

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APPENDIX A

Tables

Table One

Conflict Resolution Themes

Foster Parent #	Lack Of Information	Disconnection within the Relationship	Empathy With Social Workers	Need for Support	Relationships with Birthparents
FP #1				1	
FP#2		1	1		
FP#3	2			1	
FP#4	2		2		1
FP#5			3		
FP#6					1
FP#7	3	1		5	
FP#8	11	3		4	1
FP#9		2	1	5	1
FP#10				1	
FP#11		2			
FP#12	1	1	3	2	
FP#13	1		2	1	
FP#14	1		1		3
FP#15		3		1	
FP#16			3	11	4
FP#17			3	1	
FP#18		1		3	
FP#19			2		
FP#20		2	1		
FP#21	6	5		12	17
FP#22		2	2	1	
FP#23				2	
FP#24	1	2	1	1	1
FP#25	5	2		2	
FP#26	1	4			
FP#27		2	1	1	
FP#28	3			1	
FP#29	1			3	
FP30	3		1	3	2
Total	41	33	27	62	31

Table Two

Grief and Loss Themes

Foster Parent #	Unexpected Emotions	Reassurance	Healing connections
FP #1	1		1
FP#2		1	
FP#3			
FP#4	1		1
FP#5		1	1
FP#6	3		1
FP#7			
FP#8	5	6	3
FP#9	1		
FP#10			
FP#11	1	5	
FP#12	2		1
FP#13	5	1	1
FP#14	4		1
FP#15	1		
FP#16	5	5	
FP#17	1	3	3
FP#18			
FP#19			2
FP#20		1	
FP#21	12	4	9
FP#22			
FP#23			
FP#24	2	1	
FP#25	1	1	1
FP#26			
FP#27			
FP#28			
FP#29			
FP30	2		1
Total	47	29	26

Table Three

Training Module Themes

Foster Parent #	Benefits for Various Experience Levels	Benefits of Online Training	Drawbacks of Online Training	Technical Problems
FP #1		2		1
FP#2		1	1	1
FP#3	1	2	2	1
FP#4		3		1
FP#5		3		1
FP#6		1	1	1
FP#7	1	3	1	1
FP#8	1	1	1	3
FP#9		2		1
FP#10	5	2	2	
FP#11		1	3	1
FP#12	2	4	1	1
FP#13	2	5		1
FP#14	1	5		2
FP#15	5	5	3	6
FP#16	4	7	1	2
FP#17	2	4		1
FP#18		1	1	
FP#19		2	2	2
FP#20	2	3	1	5
FP#21		2	2	1
FP#22	3	3	1	3
FP#23	3	2	1	1
FP#24	1	2		2
FP#25	1	1	4	6
FP#26		1		
FP#27	7	1		
FP#28	1			
FP#29		3	1	5
FP30		4		1
Total	42	76	29	51

APPENDIX B

Invitation E-mails

E-mail One

Welcome to the Western Foster Parent Project E-mail

Hello (Participant),

My name is Nadine Bilawski and I am a M.A. student working with Susan Rodger and Alan Leschied on the Western Foster Parent Project.

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate, and for the feedback you have already provided us on module one. We really appreciate your contribution.

I just wanted to send this e-mail as a gentle reminder that we appreciate your feedback and look forward to hearing about how you experience the rest of the modules. I'd like to let you know that if you have any difficulties or questions regarding the training modules, or about the feedback questions, that I would be more than happy to clarify or explain anything you need.

At the bottom of this email I've attached a link to the training module website as well as a copy of the feedback questions so you don't have to search for it. I understand that being a foster parent can be a very demanding job, and sometimes training programs can feel like just one more thing on the to do list. I look forward to hearing about how you experienced the modules when it's convenient for you.

Thank you again!

-Nadine Bilawski

Website Link
http://www.edu.uwo.ca/sbmh/foster-parent-project-2014/index.html

Feedback Questions:
To answer before the module:

1.*"Before doing any viewing of the materials or assigned reading, what do you know, about the content of this module?"*

To answer after completing the module:

2.*"After watching, listening and reading, what turned out to be true?"*

3.*"What misconceptions have you identified?"*

4.*"What did you learn that was new?"*

5.*"What are you left wondering about?"*

100

Email Two

Invitation for Telephone Interview

Hello (Participant)

My name is Nadine and I am a M.A. student in the Counselling Psychology program at Western. I am working with Susan Rodger and Alan Leschied on the Western Foster Parents Project. Thank you so much for completing the modules. As a part of the data collection for this project, I will be conducting interviews over the phone to get a full understanding of how you experienced the training program. I'd like to set up a time to do this phone interview at your convenience. Please e-mail me back let me know what days times would best work for you and your family.

Thank you again for your participation, and I look forward to hearing from you.

-Nadine Bilawski

APPENDIX C

Research Tools

Research Tool One

Prompt Questions

_____

1. "Before doing any viewing of the materials or assigned reading, what do you

    know, about the content of this module?"

At the end of each module you will see a final page that has four more questions we

would like you to answer:

2. After watching, listening and reading, what turned out to be true?

 3. What misconceptions have you identified?

4. What did you learn that was new?

5. What are you left wondering about?

Research Tool Two

Telephone Interview Questions:

1. What do you think foster parents and child protection agencies and workers need to know and understand about families and your experience as a family with a foster child or youth with mental health concerns?

2. What did you think about the topics in the course? Did you think anything there was not needed, or was there something that was missing?

3. What did you think about doing an online course?

4. Did you experience any technical problems?

5. How did taking this course fit in with all the other demands on your time and energy?

6. Can you talk about how you think taking this course might change things for you, your foster child(ren) and your family?

7. What do you think is important for us to know about developing, delivering and evaluating this course? Do you have any advice for us?

8. Any final feedback or thought you wish to share about the course?

APPENDIX D

Department and Ethics Approval Sheet

APPENDIX E

Nadine Bilawski

Curriculum Vitae

EDUCATION:

Masters Arts- Counselling Psychology
Western University, London, ON in Progress,   Expected completion June, 2016

Bachelor of Arts with Honors - Child and Youth Care
Ryerson University, Toronto ON   Completed October 2014

Advanced Diploma- Child and Youth Care
Fanshawe College, London, ON   Completed May 2011

RESEARCH

Residential Child and Youth Relief Workers
B.A Thesis, Ryerson University   September 2013- May 2014

The Western Foster Parent Project
Master's Thesis, Western University   September 2014- May 2106

COUNESELLING EXPERINACE:

Intern Counsellor, Family Focused Therapy:
Madame Vanier Children Services   September 2015- Present

Child and Youth Counsellor:
Madame Vanier Children Services   January 2011- Present

Child and Youth Counsellor:
Merrymount Family Support and Crisis Center   January 2011- January 2013