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# Promoting Resiliency and Managing Behaviour: Evaluation of an On-line Foster Parent Training Program

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Graduate Program in Psychology

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

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of foster parents using a four component online training module and to assess the effectiveness of each module as an effective and relevant educational resource. The study focused on the content of modules one and three which discussed, respectively, promoting resiliency in children and dealing with challenging behaviours. Participants included thirty experienced foster parents from southern Ontario. Foster parents participated in semi-structured interviews as part of the evaluation. Analysis of the content of the interviews revealed eight themes reflecting both the content of the training modules and the participants' evaluation of the experience of their completion. Results suggest that the content of the modules reflected the lived experiences of foster parents and were considered to be useful in training, particularly for beginning foster parents. Results are discussed in their relevance for foster parent retention and recruitment.

*Key words:* fostering, foster parents, foster children, child welfare agencies, online training, resiliency, behaviour management.

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## Literature Review

The number of foster parents in Canada is far from sufficient to meet the number of foster placements needed (Brown, & Bednar, 2006). There are both challenges to recruitment and retention in the fostering experience, and foster parents have expressed the need for support if they are to continue to provide this indispensable service (Brown, 2008; Vanschoonlandt, Van Holen, Vanderfaeille, De Maeyer, & Andries, 2013). Identification of the factors associated with successful placements as well as developing an understanding regarding what contributes to the breakdown of those placements are critical if resources are to be put in place to help foster parents address these issues (Brown, 2008; Brown, & Bednar, 2006; Brown, & Campbell, 2007). Focusing on behavioural management of the children in care is a key factor that can help reduce the stress between foster parents and children (Strijker, van Oijen, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2010). Many interventions, however, focus only on the management of behaviour (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Vanschoonlandt et al., 2013); understanding where disruptive behaviours come from and why they may have become adaptive may be critical in helping foster parents deal with problem behaviour (Holland, & Gorey, 2004).

### **Status of Fostering in Canada**

Currently there is a shortage of foster parents in Canada, while coincidentally the number of foster children needing care continues to significantly increase (Brown, & Bednar, 2006). The Child Welfare League of Canada (CWLC) reported that the number of children in care in 1998 was 36,080, increasing to 76,000 by the year 2000 (Farris-Manning, & Zandstra, 2003). Not only has the number of foster parents declined, but cutbacks in health, educational, and social services has meant that there are fewer supports in place for those parents who choose to foster (Farris-

Manning, & Zandstra, 2003). With an increasing number of foster children in Canada, it is especially important to retain current foster parents and develop support systems to ensure that future foster parents have access to necessary resources to support them in this work.

To help address these concerns, research has been conducted to determine what foster parents perceive as contributing factors to the decline in recruitment and retention (Brown, 2008; Brown, & Bednar, 2006; Brown & Campbell, 2007; Vanschoonlandt et al., 2014). Brown and Bednar (2006) asked foster parents what would make them consider terminating a foster placement. Based on concept mapping the results suggested the following in contributing to low rates of foster parent retention: a lack of community resources; unsuccessful attempts at fostering; problems with an agency; the child not adapting; the child's behaviour; the child being a danger to the family; the child having complex needs; and the parent having poor health or changed circumstances. Brown (2008) also examined what foster parents perceived they needed for a successful foster placement. Again, concept mapping identified the following factors: the need for community support; personalized service; a good relationship with the agency, having information about the child; personality and skills; for the parent to look after themselves; to have a supportive family; and to have a foster family network. Other studies suggest that a major issue in the success of a placement relates to effectively responding to the behaviour of the child, supporting foster parents during periods of stress, and having support systems in place to help foster parents with this issue (Cooley, Farineau & Mullis, 2015; Stijker, van Oijen, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2010; van Rooij, Maaskant, Weijers, Weijers & Hermanns, 2015; Vanschoonlandt et al., 2014). In the final analysis, the relationship between foster parents and their foster child(ren) is complex and numerous factors can lead to the success or disintegration of the placement.

## **Challenges in Fostering**

When bringing a foster child into their home, foster parents will have expectations of building a bond with their foster child(ren). Normal child developmental processes suggest that children usually become attached to a primary caregiver within the first few months of their life (Gabler et al., 2014). However, a foster child's previous experiences with their biological parent(s) and previous foster placements can make attachment to their current foster parents considerably more difficult (Gabler et al., 2014; Puddy & Jackson, 2003). Research suggests that a previous history of frequent foster placement breakdown is positively correlated with future placement instability, as the child may disconnect emotionally from future caregivers (Rock, Michelson, Thomson & Day, 2015). Foster children may have internalized negative feelings including worthlessness and may have expectations that foster parents will not meet their needs or care for them due to their past experiences with caregivers (Craven & Lee, 2010; Gabler et al., 2014; Puddy & Jackson, 2003). Increased parental stress when starting a new placement can influence a child's mental health and attachment to the foster parent (Gabler et al., 2014; van Rooij et al., 2015). Foster parent stress has been shown to be associated with internalized problems in foster children, which contribute to future attachment difficulties (Gabler et al., 2014). Often foster children feel that they do not belong, that they have a sense of "otherness" and that they are different from the biological children in the foster home (Storer, Barkan, Stenhouse, Eichenlaub, Mallillin, & Haggerty, 2014).

When first entering a placement, foster children express a desire to return to their shared home with their biological parent (Storer et al., 2014) Over time however, this changes. While attachment may not occur immediately with the foster parent, given time and positive parenting practices, foster children can develop secure attachments (Gabler et al., 2014). Though foster

parents may have a strong desire to bond with their foster children, it may take longer for foster children to develop an attachment to their foster parent. Gabler et al. (2014) indicated that foster children showed increased attachment to their foster parents within the first six months of placement, but that the level of attachment security was lower than that of low-risk children. A foster child's attachment to their foster parent may be slower to develop than would attachment with lower risk children (Gabler et al., 2014). Developing attachment and using positive parenting practices with foster children is a significant factor in teaching children about caring relationships. However, part of the reality for foster children includes the fact that they may have to move to a different placement or eventually be returned to their biological parents. It is important for foster parents to nurture skills that will help foster children when they move on to their next placement.

## **Developing Resiliency in Foster Children**

When children are provided with a stable environment and the prevalent crisis abates, there is an opportunity for skills to develop and grow. As the child may have had numerous placements during their time in foster care, it is important for foster parents to help children develop skills that improve their resilience. While the foster child may eventually leave the home, during their time together, the foster parent can provide the child with the opportunity to learn skills that will allow them to cope better in difficult situations. Thus, though the foster parent may no longer be present to directly care for the child, they will have helped the child develop the ability to better care for themselves.

Foster children who are resilient generally cope well despite having experiences that would generally lead to negative outcomes (Bell, Romano & Flynn, 2013; Schofield & Beek,

2005). Bell, Romano and Flynn (2013) indicated that 50-70% of foster children in a large Ontario child welfare sample showed resilience on at least one behavioural outcome. Thus, capacity for resilience, despite negative conditions, does exist in many children and should be further encouraged by foster parents. However, though children may show resilience on one factor such as a specific behavioural outcome, this does not mean that the child will show resilience in other aspects (Bell, Romano & Flynn, 2013). The greater numbers of skills the child develops, the more improved their functioning will become across a variety of situations (Bell, Romano & Flynn, 2013).

In assessing a child's needs, it is important for the foster parent to recognize both strengths and deficits in order to deliver care that provides resources to help in areas where the foster child is having difficulty (Bell, Romano & Flynn, 2013; Craven & Lee, 2010). Resiliency is created through social competency, problem solving ability, autonomy, optimism and social support (Craven & Lee, 2010). The ability of foster parents to promote these skills can help build resiliency in children. However, many of these traits are based on being able to trust others, which may be an experience which foster children have not had the opportunity to build (Craven & Lee, 2010).

*Protective Factors.* Protective factors help to minimize environmental factors that can create a maladaptive outcome (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2008; Schofield & Beek, 2005). By examining protective factors and encouraging these in foster children, foster parents can promote resilience. Several protective factors have been identified, the first being proactive orientation (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2008). This includes the desire to take initiative in one's life and to have positive self esteem and self-efficacy. Children who show proactive orientation view themselves as survivors and are more likely to experience

that they can influence a situation, rather than passively accepting its results (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2008). They believe in their abilities to overcome obstacles and treat difficult situations as learning experiences (Alvord & Grados, 2005).

Foster parents may encourage these protective factors by allowing children to have responsibilities and choices so that they develop a sense of self efficacy, problem solving skills and promote their self esteem. Self regulation, the ability to control one's attention, emotions and behaviour is another protective factor (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2008; Schofield & Beek, 2005). By having positive self regulation skills, children are able to self-soothe in stressful situations, allowing for appropriate responses and thus making the development of healthy relationships easier (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Schofield & Beek, 2005).

*Positive Parenting Practices.* Positive parenting practices can be another protective factor. Children with foster parents who are warm, loving and provide consistent boundaries are more likely to show resilience (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Bell, Romano & Flynn, 2013; Fuentes, Salas, Bernedo & García-Martín, 2015; Rock et al., 2015; Inchaurondo, Bailón, Vicente, Tió & Bolós, 2015). Encouraging a sense of connection and attachment can help with developing relationships both with the family and with peers (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2008). Having positive relationships help the child develop self esteem and self efficacy (Alvord & Grados, 2005). Strong relationships help children cope with stressors in their life and thus can promote resiliency (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2008). Over time, children who interact with foster parents who use positive parenting practices show a decline in behavioural problems (Fuentes et al., 2015). Developing these relationships is an active process to be encouraged and continuously developed (Alvord & Grados, 2005). Promoting positive relationships and interactions can help children learn how to treat others with

respect, reciprocity, and develop these positive relationships. Resiliency can also be developed directly through interactions with the family, as well as with the greater community (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Bell, Romano & Flynn, 2013).

*The Role of Education.* Education, extracurricular activities and community are protective factors outside the family that can encourage resiliency in a child (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2008; Bell, Romano & Flynn, 2013). Absenteeism and academic difficulties are shown to be significant risk factors in children (Inchaurondo, Bailón, Vicente, Tió & Bolós, 2015). Schools, extracurricular activities and community activity can allow the child to develop the skills they are learning at home in a different setting with people other than their immediate care givers. Teachers, peers, mentors, community support services, health care and religious centers are other sources of support that a foster child can draw upon (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2008; Inchaurondo, Bailón, Vicente, Tió & Bolós, 2015). Accessing these services so that their foster children can have the opportunity to utilize them is another way in which foster parents can promote resiliency. In understanding and identifying protective factors, foster parents can encourage their foster children by promoting skills that help develop resiliency.

*Emotional and Behavioural Challenges.* While foster parents seek to encourage their foster children and help them develop and grow, foster children often show challenging emotional and behavioural problems due to being maltreated. Facing these difficulties can place significant stress on a foster parent. One of the major contributing difficulties and stresses in a foster home is the behaviour of the child (Cooley et al., 2015; Strijker, van Oijen, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2010). Significant behavioural problems exhibited by a foster child have been shown to increase the likelihood of foster placement breakdown (Cooley et al., 2015; Rock et al., 2015;

Strijker et al.2010). These problem behaviours are often due to experiences in the child's past, reflecting their histories of abuse or neglect (Holland, & Gorey, 2004). For example, children who have experienced abuse, neglect, or parental substance abuse are more likely to be in conflict with foster parents or other children in the home (Holland, & Gorey, 2004). As well, foster children who have been sexually abused are six times more likely than children who have not been abused to have multiple foster placements (Holland, & Gorey, 2004). Gabler et al. (2014) found that younger foster children had fewer behavioural problems than did older foster children, indicating that longer durations of negative experiences increases the likelihood of the foster child presenting with behavioural issues.

*Placement Changes.* A greater number of placements has been shown to be associated with less favourable outcomes for foster children (Bell, Romano & Flynn, 2013; Rock et al., 2015; Rork & McNeil, 2011). For example, fewer different caregivers has been associated with lower levels of both childhood anxiety and physical aggression (Bell, Romano & Flynn, 2013). Thus, historical factors of the child can be useful predictors of behaviour problems and placement breakdown.

Simply removing foster children from these situations and transitioning them to other homes is not an adequate response to address these problems (Vanschoonlandt et al., 2014). Research indicates that being placed in a caring environment is an inadequate response in diminishing these problem behaviours. Rather, further interventions are needed beyond being placed in a positive environment (Gabler et al., 2014). The difficulties that foster parents address are often exacerbated by the fact that they are frequently not provided the resources to effectively respond to these problems before the child is placed in the home (Chamberlain et al., 2008). Educating foster parents about potential behavioural problems and providing access to resources

to better understand these issues and manage behaviour may be a key component in reducing this stressful factor. Thus, an increase in supports may help contribute to an improved experience for both foster parent and child.

## **Behavioural Interventions**

Behavioural intervention resources are provided to foster parents in one of two ways. The first is through curriculum based programs where the foster parents are taught about the issues regarding behaviour and how to manage them (Vanschoonlandt, Vanderfaellie, Van Holen, & De Maeyer, 2012), although the effectiveness of these programs has been debated (Vanschoonlandt et al., 2012). The second behavioural intervention resource is provided through the implementation of training based programs where the foster parents are provided with resources and supported in how to implement them (Vanschoonlandt et al., 2012). However, the effectiveness of these programs has also been shown to be inconsistent (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Macdonald & Turner, 2005; Vanschoonlandt et al., 2012). While not all interventions have been successful, there appear to be key variables aiding in program effectiveness. For example, home based programs that work with the individual child have been shown to be more effective than group programs (Vanschoonlandt et al., 2012). As well, programs that focus on positive interactions between the parents and child while practicing the learned skills were shown to be the most effective (Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008). While research has shown some variables to be effective in dealing with behaviour, new research should focus on developing and implementing programs incorporating factors which have consistently been found to be effective.

While managing behaviour is important, resources for dealing with behaviour often fail to describe the *function* of the behaviour exhibited by foster children, and foster parents have

expressed a desire for training in the aetiology of child behaviour (Murray, Tarren-Sweeney & France, 2011). Even when programs try to incorporate the origins and functions of problem behaviours, behaviour management is often the prominent focus due to the urgency of protecting both the foster family and foster child (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Vanschoonlandt et al., 2013). For example, one study utilized a module format delivered by a trained professional to foster parents, explaining common problem behaviours exhibited by foster children and addressing the implementation of the learned skills (Vanschoonlandt et al., 2012). All participants completed the sections of the modules that were directly related to managing behaviours. This included providing praise, effective commands, reward programs, positive involvement and structure. Those components that were related to understanding behaviour, such as avoiding problems, solving problems, autonomy and monitoring, were not completed by all participants even though these were still considered a mandatory part of the program (Vanschoonlandt et al., 2012). However, helping foster parents better understand where their child's behaviour originates and how a maladaptive behaviour may have been helpful to their foster child in the past, may provide important insight that forms the basis for the foster parent to be emotionally and intellectually prepared for managing the behaviour. The current module on behaviour represents an attempt to address this gap in the literature by taking the foster parent through a number of activities that will help them understand their individual child's behaviour (Western Foster Parent Project, 2014).

While identifying key areas that foster parents perceive to be difficulties is important in informing further research, these studies are not without limitations. First, these studies may not be reflective of the general foster parent population as the sample sizes were small, ultimately questioning the power and thus generalizability of the findings. As well, the history of the

participants may influence their perceptions of their needs. More experienced foster parents may have different perceptions than foster parents who are earlier in their careers (Brown, 2008). Other factors such as age, socioeconomic status, or living in an urban versus a rural location may influence foster parents' perceptions of need. Furthermore, some of these studies do not use randomization of sampling and rely solely on self-report measures. This may cause a selection bias due to participants actively deciding to respond and participate. There may be a difference in the motivations behind choosing to participate in the research, which may cause a bias in the population sample. Finally, foster parents in dire need for support may not have the time to participate in a research study or may not have access to the services encouraging participation in these research studies.

While the research on the implementation of behavioural management programs is promising, there are some limitations. Due to the ethical obligations to provide support for all participants, no control groups were used. One study found that there was a difference between pre and post tests; however, the finding was not statistically significant (Vanschoonlandt et al., 2012). The researchers suggest that if a control group was assessed alongside the treatment group, there may have been a significant difference between the group that received the behaviour management program compared to those who did not. Due to an over-inclusion of programs in the meta-analysis of effective aspects of behaviour management programs, the quality of the studies may be a confounding variable, as poorly developed studies may have been excluded.

Understanding that resilience can be encouraged through the promotion of protective factors is important for foster parents to learn. However, as the issues that children experience are often complex due to the experience of past trauma, foster parent training is crucial in

preparing foster parents prior to a child entering their home. Training foster parents in techniques such as cognitive reframing, thought stopping, behaviour management, relaxation and self control can allow both the child and the parent to work together to help manage difficult emotions and behaviours (Alvord & Grados, 2005). Training foster parents on effective parenting techniques that include both warmth and affection alongside consistent boundaries and discipline can aid in the development of a positive relationship (Alvord & Grados, 2005).

## **Foster Parent Training**

Children in foster care exhibit impairment across a variety of developmental areas (Murray, Tarren-Sweeney & France, 2011). Foster children often have developmental delays, medical problems, academic challenges, behavioural and emotional problems (Puddy & Jackson, 2003; Rork & McNeil, 2011). The scope of these difficulties is much more severe when compared to non-clinical populations (Murray, Tarren-Sweeney & France, 2011). In developing a relationship with a foster child, there is increased risk for conflict between the foster parent and the child (Puddy & Jackson, 2003). Positive parenting practices where the foster parents are warm and empathetic, yet define clear boundaries have been shown to help decrease problem behaviours in foster children (Fuentes et al., 2015). Providing the opportunity for foster parents to learn effective parenting practices can be critical in diffusing these situations and allow for the opportunity for positive relationships to grow. The stress of helping a child with such impairments can be intensified by the added pressures of the foster care system, such as interactions with case workers or foster care agencies (Murray, Tarren-Sweeney & France, 2011). The high demands on foster parents in caring for foster children, in combination with foster parents' feelings of lack of control over the situation and intrusive or negative interactions with child agencies, leads to an environment that is often too difficult for foster parents to sustain

and thus leads to foster placement breakdowns (Murray, Tarren-Sweeney & France, 2011).

Foster parents have identified the following areas that would increase their sense of competency.

First is the need to feel acknowledged and respected by the community and agencies. Second, is the need for preventative practices both on the individual level and through policy that will improve foster children's development and well being. Third is for improved access to support systems that are currently unavailable or difficult to access such as respite care, financial assistance or specialist services (Murray, Tarren-Sweeney & France, 2011).

It is important to provide foster parents with training in order to help them meet the needs of their foster children while managing their own needs as well. A lack of foster parent training was found to be related to foster placement breakdown, as foster parents felt unprepared to face the difficulties of managing their foster child's behaviour (Puddy & Jackson, 2003; Rock et al., 2015). Foster parent stress, and behaviour problems of foster children have been shown to be significant predictors of negative foster placement outcomes (Cooley et al., 2015; Rock et al., 2015; van Rooij et al., 2015). Foster parents who lack adequate training experience begin overwhelmed by the challenges that accompany fostering a child. Lack of training is often stated as one of the reasons foster parents choose to stop fostering (Festinger & Baker, 2013). Studies have shown that insufficient foster parent training diminished the effectiveness of foster parenting for both the child and the foster family (Puddy & Jackson, 2003). When asked what they would include in foster training, foster parents often stated the need for more overall training along with access to more in depth information of specific topics related to fostering (Festinger & Baker, 2013).

While a variety of foster training programs exist, the underlying goal of training is the same: providing foster parents with the information and resources they need to prepare them for

a foster placement. Training programs have been developed to help prepare foster parents for their placements through instruction on effective parenting practices and behavioural management techniques (Puddy & Jackson, 2003). Training programs often include topics such as the following: behavioural management; preparing parents for a new placement; effective parenting and communication; placement guidelines and regulations including issues related to the disruption of a placement; communication with child agencies; building relationships with foster children; developing resiliency in foster children; and other topics related to the health and safety of the child (Nash & Flynn, 2013; Puddy & Jackson, 2003; Rork & McNeil, 2011).

Placements where the foster parents were characterized as receiving greater degrees of training have been shown to reflect greater stability, more effective parenting practices, reduced childhood behavioural problems, increased positive relationships between foster parents and child agencies, increases in foster parent satisfaction with their experience and decreases in attrition rates for foster parents (Puddy & Jackson, 2003; Rork & McNeil, 2011). Foster parents who experienced adequate training reported greater satisfaction in their ability to balance their biological family demands along side their relationship with their foster child(ren) (Puddy & Jackson, 2003). Adequate training has also been associated with foster parents' willingness to continue to foster (Rork & McNeil, 2011). In a meta analysis of various foster training programs, Nash and Flynn (2013) found that the majority of participants showed positive improvements on factors such as being able to better manage their foster child's behaviour, having lower turnover of foster placements, improved parenting skills, and increased positive outcomes for placements. However, Nash and Flynn (2013) also found a negative impact of some foster parent training on their ratings of their foster children. This suggests that foster parent training may have influenced their perceptions of the foster child(ren) by making them aware of the difficulties they may face

when taking care of foster children (Nash & Flynn, 2013). Thus foster parent training needs to not only be informative, but supportive of the foster parents. However, it may not be enough to simply inform foster parents. What is also required is the necessity to create support groups, resources and techniques that foster parents can draw upon when facing difficulties related to their foster children.

It is important to acknowledge in the implementation of foster parent training that a variety of factors influence a foster family including their parenting history, foster child history, presence of biological children, culture, motivation for fostering, level of experience, needs of the foster child and available supports (Rork & McNeil, 2011). These factors can influence the efficacy and applicability of various training programs and thus these programs need to be evaluated. Asking foster parents to identify their needs and what they would find useful to be covered in a training program can help decrease training attrition rates, and present foster parents with a program that will increase their knowledge and skill set (Rork & McNeil, 2011). Often, foster parents are required to take training every few years to maintain their status as a foster home. These training sessions are often provided as onsite instruction and offered in multiple sessions (Nash & Flynn, 2013). However, it may be difficult for foster parents to take the time to attend these sessions. Completing home-based sessions through video tapes or online have become increasingly popular, and allow foster parents to complete training at home, where they can participate during whatever time suits their schedule (Murray, Tarren-Sweeney & France, 2011; Rork & McNeil, 2011).

However, effectiveness of many of the training programs offered to foster parents has yet to be evaluated (Puddy & Jackson, 2003; Rork & McNeil, 2011). As such, future training programs need to be carefully evaluated in order to determine if they are an effective method of

helping to improve foster care. For example, the training program MAPP/GPS was found only to slightly improve foster parent's behavioural management skills when compared to untrained foster parents. (Puddy & Jackson, 2003). Evaluation of foster training programs is key in determining which components influence the efficacy of the program (Nash & Flynn, 2013). For example, the level of experience a foster parent has, the number of prior placements of the foster child, and the type of emotional and behavioural problems the foster child experiences may influence how applicable a specific training program is for a particular foster family (Nash & Flynn, 2013). Determining these factors also allows agencies to determine which type of foster training is most relevant to which population of foster parents (Nash & Flynn, 2013). Difficulties arise because of the variety of programs and the lack of a standardized method of presenting the material (Nash & Flynn, 2013). Offering the program online means that each participant is receiving a standardized form of training with minimal variability due to the presentation format. Thus training fidelity is increased (Nash & Flynn, 2013). As part of the current study foster parents were invited to evaluate on-line program in order to help identify strengths and weaknesses of the program and make applicable changes.

## **Summary**

The number of foster children that require a placement in homes greatly outnumbers the number of foster homes available (Farris-Manning, & Zandstra, 2003). To help address this challenge, research has been conducted to examine the factors that contribute to foster family breakdown, and identifying those factors that need to be in place for success in these relationships (Brown, & Bednar, 2006; Brown, & Campbell, 2007). As the behaviour of a foster child can have a significant impact on this relationship, it is important that foster parents are able to understand and manage their foster child's behaviour (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Cooley et al.,

2015; Holland, & Gorey, 2004). Educating foster parents and providing the resources to help with these behaviours is an important process that can contribute to more successful placements (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Vanschoonlandt et al., 2012). Understanding behaviour is an important component that appears to be missing in the implementation of many of the behavioural training programs. The goal of this project is, in part, to help address this gap.

### **The Present Study**

The purpose of the present study was to examine foster parent's perceptions of four educational modules to better understand the experience of being a foster parent. The modules were separated into four key areas that discussed challenges that occur when fostering. The modules were developed based on feedback from current foster parents about the difficulties they had with fostering and the need for resources to help address these problems (Leschied, Rodgers, Brown, Atkins & Pickle, 2014). Through understanding the experiences of foster parents, the goal is to identify factors that will help encourage foster parent retention.

This study examined the experience of foster parents using two of the four training modules in order to assess the effectiveness of the modules as an educational resource to provide support in managing problems that arise when fostering a child. Educating foster parents on managing difficulties related to fostering a child has been shown to promote foster parent retention (Hudson, & Levasseur, 2002). Specifically, the current study examined the first and third modules. The first module focused on introducing the child to a new placement and how foster parents can help develop resiliency in the child. Examining protective factors and implementing these factors can help the child build skills that they can use, even after placements are terminated or break down, thus further helping and protecting the child even when the foster

parent is not present. The third module focuses on unpacking the behaviour of a foster child in order to better understand what precipitates difficult behaviours, which may inform which interventions can be effectively implemented to address these behaviours. Many studies have focused on the management of behaviour (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Vanschoonlandt, et al., 2013). Less emphasis has been placed on understanding where that behaviour has originated and its function. In examining foster parent feedback, one of the goals of the current study assessed if the module is an effective resource to help foster parents better understand how to encourage resiliency in the children they foster, as well as to better understand the reasons behind their foster child's behaviour.

It was hypothesized that the foster parents will find these educational modules as an effective resource in addressing these concerns. Developing resiliency in children by teaching positive coping strategies can help them function in a variety of situations and thus have a positive impact on the fostering relationship (Bell, Romano & Flynn, 2013). Management of maladaptive behaviour has been shown to help reduce foster parent stress and fatigue (Strijker, van Oijen, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2010). Understanding where a child's behaviour originates is expected to help foster parents better understand the function of their foster child's behaviour, and thus help with managing it in an appropriate and effective manner. As such, it is expected that this educational module will be an effective resource in helping mitigate foster parent stress in relation to their child's difficult behaviour. By providing foster parents with applicable resources through these educational modules, it may help reduce the amount of stress experienced by foster parents by teaching them skills and coping strategies and thus aid in foster parent retention.

## **Method**

### **Design**

The current study used a qualitative design. The choice of a qualitative design is consistent with the goal of promoting understanding in regards to foster parent retention; the experience of being a foster parent; understanding the concerns of foster parents; and the problems they face. Sources of data included narrative data which allows for an in depth examination of these issues through exploring the subjective experience of foster parents.

*Data analysis.* The data was collected using written feedback in response to questions asked of foster parents both prior to and following completion of each module. Content analysis was used to analyze the data from these written responses. Content analysis requires a close reading of the narrative data that is coded into common themes. These themes were determined by the researchers and developed through the responses occurring in the data set. The feedback from the telephone interviews was added to the data set and coded according to the themes identified from the written responses. The data was coded for frequency. The frequency of similar responses was an indication of common concerns or issues in relation to fostering. For example, the greater the frequency of a specific theme or response, the greater likelihood that it is a common concern shared by multiple foster parents.

### **Participants**

Participants for the present study reflected a consenting convenience sample of foster parents. Invitations for foster parents to participate in the study were sent through a national foster parents organization, as well as child welfare offices in a large Canadian province. The sample size included thirty foster parents. Consent was acquired implicitly through the foster

parent's participation in completing the survey questions that are part of the module, as well as verbal consent when participating in the telephone interview. The inclusion criteria for participation in the study included being a current foster parent in Canada and having access to the internet to complete the online modules. As the participants are foster parents that are living with foster children and directly dealing with the issues the modules are attempting to address, these foster parents were considered experts in the experience of fostering. Therefore, the expectation was that they will be able to assess if these learning resources were applicable to real world situations and helpful in understanding the needs that are currently not being met by available support systems for foster parents.

## **Measures**

Five open ended questions were used for the written component of the modules. These included: "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?". During the telephone interview eight predetermined questions will be used, as well as prompts that will be developed from coding the written responses. The questions for the telephone interview include: 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 with 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? Foster parents will be prompted to expand upon and clarify their verbal answers so as to encourage detailed responses.

## **Procedure**

Prior to beginning each module, the participants were asked the following: “Before doing any viewing of the materials or assigned reading, what do you know about the content of this module?” The participants wrote their response to this opening question in an email that was sent to the researchers. The participants then worked through the module and following its completion, responded to four open ended questions. Responses to these questions were added to the email sent by participants to the researchers. The researchers then coded these answers thematically and placed them in a spreadsheet. These themes informed the questions and prompts that were used during the follow up interview, as well as allowing the researchers to track any missing written feedback.

Following completion of the modules, participants were contacted by telephone to complete a semi-structured interview using predetermined questions. During the interview the participants were asked questions and provided with prompts to allow for further expansion on their written answers. The interview allowed the participants to express in depth their experience as a foster parent. If the participants chose not to complete sections of the written feedback, the researchers then created prompts to ask the participants if they wished to provide verbal responses to fill in the missing information. Participants were reminded that all of their answers

would be kept confidential and that they were not obligated to answer all questions but that their feedback was appreciated.

Following completion of the interviews the researcher thanked the participant. As the interview questions related to the experience of fostering children, both presently and in the past, it was expected that for some participants, answering the questions may touch on experiences of a highly personal and emotional nature. To ensure that no harm had come to the participants during the course of their involvement, at the end of the interview, the researcher, who has been trained in counselling, checked in with the participant regarding their experience in the project. Through completing this check in, the researcher helped ensure that the participant left the conversation feeling ready to continue their regular schedule. If the participant was experiencing any level of distress after answering the questions, the researcher used evidence-based practices to help diminish any distress the participant may be feeling. Once all interviews were completed and collected, the audio recordings were transcribed. Researchers then coded the data into common answers and themes, expanding on the themes that appeared in the written submission.

## **Results**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of foster parents using the four foster parent training modules to assess the effectiveness of the modules as an educational resource to support foster parents through the difficulties associated with fostering a child. In examining the feedback from these modules, the current study assessed two of these modules regarding their effectiveness as an educational resource in helping foster parents understand behaviour and promote resiliency in foster children.

Eight themes were identified based on the content of the thirty foster parent interviews. These eight themes were: (1) building a foundation; (2) management of foster child behaviour; (3) changes to the foster care system; (4) further resources; (5) experience of completing the modules (6) experience of completing an online course; (7) suggested changes to the modules; and (8) technical problem.

### **Theme 1: Building a foundation**

The focus of this theme was the discussion of the content in Module 1: Building a Foundation. This module discussed the beginning of foster placements and meeting the child's immediate needs based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). Subthemes included meeting basic needs and creating a stable environment; promoting self capacity; the role of social workers in providing information; and validating foster parents.

Foster parents expressed the importance of ensuring the basic needs of the child were met before moving on to address other issues. This prioritization was reported by foster parents in helping to prevent the child from becoming overwhelmed. Foster parents indicated that creating a stable environment helped foster children in becoming more emotionally stable. As well, foster parents suggested the importance of meeting the basic needs of the child was critical as these children may not be emotionally prepared to accept more than that.

“But I would say for certain, regardless of that, I would say it’s very accurate, yes. For a lot of them, it is their basic needs that will stabilize their emotions. A lot of them have not had their basic needs met nutritionally and safety-wise, sleep-wise. So for sure that at least gives them some foundation, some understanding of what they can expect in your

home. And, you know, they need to have a sense of security in you and in their needs being met before you can ever approach any emotional needs.”

“So I kind of gave a shorter version when I re-wrote it, but, anyways, what I was going to say is that a lot of the stuff that was in that module, I had already learned along the way. But it would have been very very handy, more than handy, would have been really helpful to have a module like that or have a training session like that uh, just to kind of give you the heads up as you’re going into it. For a new foster parent because I’m sure we all go in there going I just have to care about, I just have to love the, and I’m doing this because I do care and I want to make a difference, I’ll hand out lots of hugs and kisses and tell them how important they are and then bam all of a sudden they are in your face and they are screaming at you and hate you, and it doesn’t matter if they are two or twelve or eighteen, you know. Just the fact that being in care can grate on them and they can turn on you, and, I think it’s really, really important, as you emphasised in the module, that initially you start with the very basics, and I’m sure that everybody does, but you bring all the emotion and caring and love that, you know, you really need to hold back on a little bit on the overt caring and loving because they are not necessarily ready for that, at least with the older ones you know?”

A subtheme emerged reflecting foster parents’ statements regarding the promotion of self capacity in foster children as a significant message to send to foster parents. It is important that foster parents have the ability to not just meet the child’s needs, but to teach them skills that they can use when they move on from a placement.

“Let me see.... Ummm. \*pause\* I’m just trying to remember it. I’m just scanning quickly through the intro page. I mean its been a while since I watched it. Life carries on. I swear to god I have no memory, that’s my problem. I don’t know. Like I said I think for one it was covering. It was good. Like it was very good. I just feel like I didn’t learn a lot of new in there. Because I already had most of that information. I’d already been exposed to those kind of teachings. So for me, it was just a good reminder, of how to...you know.. like how to remember... Like I said I think the one comment I made was the idea to build the child’s self capacity. I think the trap that we fall into as foster parents, and you get these kids and they are so far behind where they should be, we tend to start doing things for them but then we forget to stop doing it for them when they can grasp it and do it for themselves. I don’t know. I’m guilty of probably still continuing to do it even though there comes a point where they’re full able and capable of doing it themselves. And I didn’t realize, really, I’m not building, yeah, their self capacity. I need to build their self capacity. Even if it’s hard to stand back and watch them do it because it’s not going to be done perfectly, it’s not going to be done the way you want it, exactly, but you still got to let them do it, you know. You got to let them try to the best of their ability and learn that, whatever, using a knife and fork, dressing themselves. Whatever we’re talking about on any given day. Because I feel like, especially with the littler ones, I do too much for them. And my own kids I think, I would be even guilty with my own kids, of still probably doing too much for them for too long, when they are probably fully able and capable of doing it for themselves. So I liked that. That was my favorite thing of that module, was reminding me I need to let them do it. Even if it’s not perfect. And let go of control basically.”

“So, I don’t know. I think sometimes you just think about pouring into them and loving them while they’re at your house, and then don’t really think too much beyond that when they’re, you know, when they’ve moved on again. I don’t—I haven’t always thought about, you know, giving them the skills to deal with stuff after, after they leave our home. I mean, one thing I’ve always told them is that they can always pray to God and he can help them wherever they are, you know, even after they’ve gone from our house and stuff, but I think there’s a lot there that you can do even in, like tools that you can give them in teaching them how to be independent and dealing with different, you know, high-stress situations, teaching them how to self-regulate and stuff that would help them in the future.”

Foster parents expressed the importance of social workers providing accurate information before the placement began in assessing the appropriateness of the placement. Restricting access to accurate information places foster parents in a compromised position in meeting the needs of the child. This fact also creates greater potential for foster placement breakdown. In providing information, social workers need to provide an accurate depiction of the child’s behaviour and needs.

“Okay. Well, I think, I think the first thing that you have to consider is whether or not you’re going to be able to meet the needs of the child that’s coming into your home. Because if you can’t, then it’s really traumatic for everybody. I think a lot of the workers are aware of kind of the supports that you need, but maybe, maybe recognizing that, you know, this is an issue and it’s going to be an issue in your home, and to try and help you prepare for that one because—and I think they do a fairly good job of that. I think, you

know, if you've never experienced having a child with mental health issues in your home, the biggest thing will be realizing what you need to do and how you need to help in looking for, you know, signs of things that, like early warning for, you know, other issues that might come up, and safety above everything else, I think."

The content of this module was considered to be a useful refresher in reminding foster parents how to meet their child's basic needs. As well, foster parents reported that its content validated the actions they took during the transition period of meeting a new foster child coming into their placement.

"Sure. Well, the first one about bringing the child, I just love the practical suggestions. So when a child comes in, show them around, show them where they're going to sleep. Like, that never really dawned on me, probably 'cause the only full-time placement we had was a 9-month-old [chuckle]But just—Like, even when she came in, we tried to make her feel comfortable and show her the toys, and just—So the module, how it showed, or talked about doing those specific things as being so important. That just kind of drove it home for me, so that when we do have another full-time placement, I will do those things, I'll take the child around the home, show them everything, show them where we're going to eat, and when we're going to eat, and all that stuff. Yeah."

"Just reading over it, making you feel that you've done the right thing. Like I said, like what I found where you keep the room simple, and that I read that somewhere, and oh, man, here I thought I was neglecting the child because there wasn't much in there, but it was my first child and my first home, and I didn't have anything there, but in a way, it was probably better for him, and he liked that little room. Like, I always told him he

could move into the bigger room when we got more stuff, and he didn't want to, but I still didn't realize that he was more comfortable in that little room than in the big one.”

## **Theme 2: Management of a Foster Child’s Behaviour**

This theme included content pertaining to issues related to managing a foster child’s behaviour based on the content from Module 3: Unpacking Behaviour. Subthemes included understanding the cause and functions of behaviour; the impact of a foster child’s behaviour on the foster parents and their biological children; content related to the puzzle activity in Module 3; further information on managing behaviour; and the role of foster care agencies.

Understanding how previous trauma has impacted a foster child and how it effects their behaviour was a dominant subtheme. Foster parents related that it was important to empathize with the child and understand the function of their behaviour when dealing with it.

“I think you really need to understand it, and actually my 13-year-old, for the last eight days, has been just a handful, but when I look at all that she’s dealing with in her life, I understand it. Now the real struggle is understanding it and still having to somehow put some boundaries and parameters around the behaviour. Right? So I can understand it, and I think it’s really essentially to understand it. I mean, otherwise we’re not dealing with, we’re only dealing with the outside of it, we’re not going to actually be able to change anything other than maybe compliance, I guess. But if we want to look at long-term change and development in their lives, we have understand what the behaviour means and then once we know what it means, then sometimes knowing how to still manage the behaviour while responding to the underlying concerns is, frankly, it’s a bit of a challenge for me right now. I’m kind of working on that one.”

“Absolutely. I mean, if you know what to look for, if you know that, you know, something happened, you can understand maybe some of the, some of the responses that you get. Like, you might get a fear response or something that shouldn’t be fearful, and if you know, like, the background, you can realize oh, okay, this is a trigger for something else, and you can help them through it. If you don’t know, that’s amazingly hard to deal with because you can’t, you can’t prevent the antecedent, you know? Like, you don’t know where it’s coming from and so sometimes you end up repeating a few things before you actually catch on to what’s going on. So it helps the children in our home because then you’re already aware and you can filter for that sort of things that are happening. Also, if you have, you know, relatives or other, you know, just get-togethers or whatnot, you can sort of help out and make things less stressful for the kids in the home.”

Foster parents also discussed the impact that a foster child’s behaviour has on themselves as well as their biological children. Foster parents emphasized the importance of recognizing this impact and finding supports for themselves and their family. As well, foster parents discussed their own reactions and parenting when dealing with extreme behaviours.

“I think you don’t really understand initially—I don’t know how long it takes, or when the light bulb comes on to say how you could get pulled into it emotionally. How, you know, things can become a tug of war and it’s all based on your emotions and your perspective because you think, oh, I can handle that, I can handle that. For instance, I have one child who has very little attachment capability, and it’s very difficult when you are giving, giving, giving, giving, and you don’t get anything back on an emotional level, there’s no connection. And I think go back a couple of years, when I’m sitting at CAS

and they tell you that this is a possibility with some of these kids, think, yeah, I can handle that. But, you know, there are still days where that's difficult. You know, when you don't get a good morning or a good night or any interaction that is not initiated or, you know, pulled along by you. So I think if I were to sum it up, I would say the control on your own emotions and expectation that you have going into the relationship, you think you'll be different and that you'll be able to handle it, and that's not necessarily always true."

Many foster parents expressed that the puzzle activity outlining that children can have different developmental, emotional, academic and chronological ages was a very important tool in understanding the needs and behaviour of foster children.

"You know, it's one thing to just say, like, "Oh, well. Yeah, she's 16 but she's really 6." And it's another thing to have her live with you and realize that that's not really accurate, those types of statements of, you know, there's such a variety. It's not that she's just 6; she's 2 in certain areas and she's 16 in some areas and she's 7 in some areas. So I think for me, personally, 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."

"Oh, I found that really helpful, too. Just to understand that chronological age doesn't determine how children behave in all those other areas of life, like education, cognitive, all that, because I think even in our public school systems we group children by age,

chronological age without really recognizing all the other areas of development that may not match up with that age number. And so I think coming at a situation with a child who's come into care, and kind of being aware of those areas and how you can kind of identify their ages in those different jigsaw puzzle areas, it just will help so much with expectations and how you approach a child when you recognize those things. So I found that really helpful; I'd never seen that before. I kind of understood that kids don't always match up to their chronological age but it was neat to see it in the puzzle like that, and how that all fits together. And then the backpack, too. Like, we all talk about baggage, and that just, in such a vivid picture of the things that a child comes in with and just recognizing that there's all this going on in their little brains and their little lives.”

The need for more information regarding how to manage different behaviours and the gaps in resources in reference to behaviour were a common concern for foster parents. Foster parents reported that resources on behaviour focus primarily on school age children and that specific information on infants and teens was more difficult to identify and access. Foster parents also expressed that they would like more information on attachment and de-escalation of behaviours specifically related to foster children. Having an encyclopaedia-like resource related to disorders and behaviour was mentioned by multiple foster parents.

“Like, it’s easy for me to bring them into my home, and it’s easy for me to love them in spite of themselves, but how do I help them. You know, if a 3-year-old comes in and he’s acting like he’s 1, do you treat him like he’s 1 or do you push him ’til he gets to 3? Like, it’s just—There’s not enough education or support, so the part that becomes the most

taxing is because I have to stop what I'm doing and ignore that child so I can research how to parent him. So that's the part that become taxing because not only do you have a developmentally challenged person in your home, you now have to go research how to help him."

"Well, I think more emphasis on de-escalating problems and issues, and like the how-to's, and I know that it's not a cookie cutter thing for every situation, but I think that would be helpful. Tips on how to de-escalate situations or if a potentially violent situation could occur, how do you go about making sure that that doesn't go into a secondary phase where things could get a little bit more riskier."

Foster parents reported that the information they were provided by social workers was critical in understanding and managing behaviours. However, foster parents stated that they understood their foster child's behaviour and needs more than the workers due to the amount of exposure they have to the child compared to the workers. Foster parents also reported that they too often had to advocate for their children to the agency when trying to meet their foster children's needs.

"We've had a great working relationship. I'm very vocal with the agency. I advocate for the kids, so if I don't like something or I don't think it's working, I'm the first one to pick up the phone and say, Hey, and they always joke with me and say, Tell me how you really feel. But, you know what? I'm here for the kids; I'm not here for the agency. I don't work for them. I'm here for the kids because if I don't advocate for their needs—they're here 24/7. The workers don't know them, they don't see them enough, so for me

it's really important that if something's not working that I say to them, Look, what more can we do? Is there a program? Is there something we can do? I have a little one right now that, she's fantastic in the house, she's fantastic when I take her out, but when she's at school she has behavioural problems because socially she's not at the same age level as her peers. So I just sent an e-mail to the one worker who's part of the mental health part, and I said to her, Hey, I know you did a [counsel? council? – 49:44] program a few years ago for another child that I had. Can you run another program? Is there something happening? This child needs something. And I'll tell you, my e-mail, the response that I got was, Well, the Doctor Such-and-Such, and I won't say her name, Such-and-Such was just at the school and had written a report. I'll forward it on to you. Well, why didn't they forward it on to me a month ago when it was written? I'm the one that has the child, and I should be given the information because how can I better help her if you don't tell me what you've written for your report. And it wasn't shared, and it should be shared. But they always forget about the foster parents. So then when I asked her about the program, she said, Well, we're not running one right now, but you're doing a great job in the home. She hasn't solved the problem at school, so now they're going to go out to school, and I had said to her, being me, I'm going to, you know, as soon as you find out the date, let me know because I'd either like to go or I'd like you to come over here after so we can discuss it, because I think sometimes foster parents don't want to get involved, and they'd rather the workers just do everything, and sometimes I think it's—Well again, just like with the bio parents, it's give and take, and 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. So our job is to advocate and the workers, hopefully if you have a good one, will listen, and help you out, and find that right program or whatever it may be that the child needs, they'll help you find a solution."

### **Theme 3: Changes in the Foster Care System**

Foster parents expressed their concerns related to the foster care system and provided suggestions on the changes they would like to see. Subthemes included the need for more information prior to placement; changes to present training; communication between foster parents and the agency; supports offered to foster parents; paperwork; and access to mental health care.

The requirement for more information regarding the foster child in order to insure that the family could meet the needs of the foster child and the potential challenges they would be facing was of major concern expressed by foster parents. Foster parents expressed that the agency should better match the child to a family based on a variety of factors including culture and the level of experience of the foster parent.

"Okay. I think what I would like the foster agency to know about our family first and foremost is why we chose to be a foster family, what we believe our strengths are in meeting the needs of a foster child, and what our preferences are as far as the age of the child and whether we would choose a boy or a girl, or what we think fits best within our family given our strengths, and 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, but—So I think those three things: Why we foster, what our strengths are, and the type of, the kind of child that we think we can best meet the needs for.”

Foster parents are provided training before accepting a placement. However, foster parents expressed that improvements should be made to the training they are receiving.

“So I thought, I thought, I don’t think there’s too much else that I’d like to add other than, as I said, the fact that I think that the training needs to be much more realistic, and I guess to some extent there’s a fear that they’re going to put foster parents and adoptive parents off, but you’ve got to ask the question whether or not that will be better than sort of throwing them in, sort of into the deep end.”

“I honestly think that they need to provide more training. I know specifically with our agency, which is interesting ’cause I also sit on our foster parent board of directors, and I know in our current area as we’re starting to gather information from other agencies, is that there’s no set level, like provincially, for education for our foster homes. So we’re in an area where our training is like minimal, and I mean laughable. Like, as a foster parent it’s almost disgraceful [Laughter] that they’re not educating the homes how, maybe, Toronto has this awesome booklet they go through and they [inaudible – 3:31]. So there’s not, there’s not like a standard, there’s not like a provincial standard that every foster home in Ontario should have this set amount of education and training.”

In complimenting the training offered, many foster parents expressed that they desired both improved support systems in place as well as access to other foster parents in an effort to build a support network when it was needed.

“Um, I think it covered a lot of stuff. I think—I think it’s hard, and I don’t think there’s enough training on what it’s actually going to be like when you become a foster parent. I mean, we did the PRIDE classes and stuff like that, but I really don’t think that it touches on that, and our society has started a mentorship sort of program that new foster parents that are coming in get a mentor. So it’s somebody who’s been doing it. So, I mean, 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, and you feel very—I mean, it’s scary ’cause you have somebody else’s kid, you don’t know anything about them, and you just have to wing it. So it’s, uh—I guess it kind of goes back to training, but I don’t think that there—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. But that would be my only thing. I think that they’re kind of doing a little bit better now with this mentorship program.”

Foster parents expressed a need for improved communication between foster parents and the foster parent agency. Foster parents expressed their desire for child welfare agencies to be more open to their feedback and for the agency to reply to them more quickly.

“P: I think maybe that 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.”

I: How could they best give that support and those resources?

P: Regular check-ups with phone calls, visits, and just prompt, prompt replies, probably. Like if you were texting them, that they reply promptly. [Pause] Yeah.”

“P: I think they need to actually listen to what we’re saying instead of putting it through a filter of what they expect us to say.

I: Okay. Can you explain a bit more of what you mean by that?

P: Of course. I feel that a lot of times when we communicate with them, sometimes they don’t actually listen to the words we’re saying. So I might say a child absolutely needs this, and they’ll say that’s fine, you’re a really wonderful advocate, but no, we don’t need to provide that for your child. And it’s not, you’re not listening to why I’m saying that I need it, you’re just saying we don’t do that, or sometimes you just get completely ignored. A lot of your requests just get ignored if they don’t plan on dealing with them.”

A subtheme of concern included the writing of reports and paperwork that is part of the fostering system. Foster parents indicated the need for clear explanations in the need for logs and advance notice for care plan reports.

“Something that I do personally that the agency is now starting to share with new homes and older homes, is I have a template, and I have a template for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and then depending on the child in my home, what I do is I do one up according to that child’s needs. For instance, if they go, maybe they don’t go for visits or they do, so they go with mum. There’s a box, and it’s for mum, dad, early years daycare school, and then you just check off that box, there’s a line underneath, you can say the time, then I’ve got a spot for comments. I have all the behaviour traits where they can tick off the box, and then right beside it, date it, sign it, child’s name. I think that’s really important for protection of the foster home and it’s really good for new foster homes, too, because they can go back and say, Oh, yeah. That’s right. This happened on this day. It triggers memories, too, of what might have, like if you have to go back for instance and look. Let’s say an incident happened, I don’t know, four months ago, you could go back at those log notes and it’s so easy. Okay, what triggered that child’s behaviour on that school day? And you could go back and kind of look. I think that the agency is so general sometimes when they’re like, Well, just go do your log notes. But new homes and even homes, they don’t know what they’re writing. So I think the agency needs to be a little bit more helpful that way, and, you know, stop—I don’t know. They need to just be more helpful.”

“Like the care plan. The policy of the children aid society are that the foster parent should stand and contribute to the plan of care, and afterwards, after its written up you get a copy

of the plan of care for your own reference. And that doesn't happen. I can count the number of times and I've probably had over forty or fifty kids here over the twenty years, and I'd be hard put to say that I've got ten plans of care."

Lastly, foster parents reported concerns when trying to access mental health services for their foster children. Foster parents reported a high degree of frustration in not having access to services and not being able to access medical and mental health information about their foster children.

"I think that we need more support, and the agency needs to—and I know their money's tight, but they need to listen to us when we say that the children need some kind of counselling and stuff, and help, and to push for getting these children the help they need and making sure the child stays on track, and stays committed to getting the help instead of saying, okay, they're done, and you don't push them to keep going, getting the help."

"So the kids don't get counselling and therapy that they need without big long waiting lists but they can get into a psychiatrist pretty quickly, but my experience there is that, it's not the same, it doesn't work the same. It's great if they need medications, but it's not a good resource for the child just to sit in and uh, and talk. And being the foster parent, it isn't really an option for a lot of them, whether they like you or not, and even if they do like you and care about you they don't want you to know too much. So they need somebody to really sit down and listen to them. The one girl that I had here went down to W.D. Sutton School, it had a small little group of students, she could work at her own

pace, and there was a counsellor there who sat and listened to her pretty well every day, and she could say what she wanted about who she wanted, and she didn't feel that it would go anywhere else, where sometimes I find these young people are afraid to speak out, they are afraid to tell you what's bothering them, or what's really (inaudible- 938) they are afraid to tell you if they think they hate their parents, they are afraid to tell you um, well, they are either afraid to tell you that they hate their workers, or they are right out there going 'I hate that worker' You know? They're not holding back on it. I think um, a good listening ear that is neutral and removed from the child's immediate life is so important, and it just doesn't seem to be available. The workers try really hard, um, and I don't know if they can push for changes on that, but, anyways. That's all I can think on that one."

#### **Theme 4: Further Resources**

This theme reflected foster parent's desire for further resources that they expressed were not being made available to them. These concerns were reflected in three subthemes including: resources related to navigating the foster care system and community resources; resources related to the care of foster children with specific needs; and resources related directly to foster parent challenges.

Foster parents shared that there was a lack of training regarding how to navigate the foster care system and how to access community resources when fostering a child.

"And so when we're thrown into it, you know, we're just, people say things and you just don't know. There's just not the education there, I found. I had no education on it at all with dealing with any of it, so it was kind of just like all of a sudden you're thrown into

this and you're dealing with a child that has mental health issues and you're dealing with the agency and their protocol and you're, you know, you're dealing with the schools and you're, and you're just not—It's a lot. It's overwhelming and there's just not a whole lot of education about it.”

“So there’s, like, this huge transition when you, like especially for us fosters to adopt families, where it’s a complete unknown. And then another thing would be the court process. [Chuckle] It’s ridiculous. You know, we go to court all the time, like foster parents don’t generally go go, but, I mean, you know, okay, court’s on Thursday and you don’t always know what’s happening or you hear feedback and sometimes you’re not really aware of what can happen. Yeah. So those sorts of things would be good. I think for me as a big thing will be the transition between foster parent to adopt.”

Foster parents identified numerous topics on which they would expressed a desire to see further resources developed that focused on fostering infants, teens, children with drug and alcohol related issues, brain injuries, and the impact that trauma has had on the physical, mental and emotional development of children. They also expressed the need for a database of disorders that would link to resources on the management of behaviours and problems related to specific disorders. This included in depth training on different disorders such as ADHD or FASD.

“What do we need to see. We need more training in regards to mental health. I think we need more training on attachment. What else? Oh! Drug addiction programs. Drug addiction and alcohol addiction programs. Training in regards to how to deal with that and what we can do to kind of help our youth through these periods of time ’cause they really struggle, and then, of course, it causes a lot of chaos and turmoil in the home, and

so then, of course, it leads to struggles for us as well in our we're supposed to cope with it, how we're supposed to deal with it so that we can kind of work through it and get through it without having huge blowups in the homes.”

“Yeah, and for different, different, different, like, different—A lot of our kids have brain-based development, so mental issues, right? Either it be neglect, fetal alcohol, there may be drugs involved. So it's all really brain-based and there's a lot—Yeah, we just need strategies on what are we supposed to do in a particular situation so when the kids come you're not like, “What's wrong with you?” [Chuckle] “What am I supposed to do with you?” You know, like that's—You know, that's really what a foster parent needs is to be able to know, okay, well what am I supposed to be doing? Like, 'cause the ultimate question is, it's like everybody says, you meet a child where they are, when they come into your home, and that's right, and that's good. You meet a child where they're at, but where do you go from there? Like, you can meet them where they're at, but you can't just keep treating them as if they're 1 when they're 5. Like, you have to know, well, where—Okay, here's a better way to describe it. A foster parent needs to know what the reasonable expectations are for that particular child.”

Finally, foster parents expressed the need for further resources related to supporting themselves in their role as a foster care provider, an example being the grief they experienced when a foster child was removed from their care.

“Yes. I think that is a big thing because a lot of people maybe feel like they're not, like they might be too shy or self-conscious to actually, you know, ask for help when you need it. They might be like, oh, maybe they think I should do this on my own, or, you

know. A lot of people, like, regardless of whether they're foster parents or not, have difficulty asking for help, and it's important with these kids because if you're seeing something, like, you don't want it to go on for long durations, you want to make sure that they get the help that they need as soon as possible because the sooner you can sort of get this going, the better off they'll be in their development because the earlier on the better. And I've had to learn how to recognize that myself [chuckle] and now when I see something, you know, I make sure, okay, this is what I'm seeing. Like, 'cause a lot of these people that are foster parents, like myself, have not had their own children, too, so sometimes it's hard to tell whether or not is this child behind, and, you know, even just asking questions that, you know, seem to be, like, what a lot of people know already is something that can be important because you may not recognize that they're behind in something or they need help if you're trying to do it in a bubble."

"P: Well, you know the question about what was I left wondering about, okay, so now I understand that there's grief and they're going to go through, as a foster family I go through grief, and as a foster child I go through grief, and our losses are different, but what do I do with that? And there's a lot of programs that are available, whether it's a book or a bereavement group, you know, because when you lose a child—I've lost a biological child, though we've also had 30-some children leave our home—to some foster families, losing, the child leaving their home is the same as the death of a child. They are just—in fact, it could be worse because they feel that child may be going back into a risky situation and they're not there to help. So where do you go with that? How do you handle it. Understanding that it's going to be there is one thing, but having resources. And I know in some of these modules you linked to different resources. I thought there

could be, and maybe I overlooked it in this one, but I thought that there could be some direct resources provided on, you know, more information around grief and loss.

I: Okay. So, like, places foster parents can go to help deal with the grief and loss?

P: Yeah. Is there a—You know, local churches or hospice or if there's a grief share program. There are plenty of books, there are plenty of websites, but are there any particularly good ones out there that, you know, foster families could gain support from.”

### **Theme 5: Experience of Completing the Modules**

Any information pertaining to the overall experience of completing the modules was reflected in this theme. The subthemes coded in this section included: the target audience; evaluation of content; applicability of material; and validation of foster parents.

Foster parents reported that they found this course to be most useful for new foster parents, as well as a refresher course for experienced foster parents. Foster parents reported that the content covered an overview of a broad range of topics, thus making newer foster parents a target audience. They suggested that experienced foster parents would need a more in depth review of specific topics.

“But it’s always good for that reminder. There were certain segments, not necessarily in that first one, that it would just sort of hit you back at home again, put you back in your place. Kind of went, “Yeah, gosh. I wonder if I’m getting away with—I wonder if I’m losing that. I’m not using that tool as much as I should be.” Or—You know what I mean?

So they were great reminders moving forward. But I mean, it still was a great unit for, you know, newer foster parents.”

“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 [chuckle] 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.”

In evaluating the interview content from this sample of foster parents, a desire was expressed for more in depth content of each subject. Suggestions reflected that the content was useful in addressing the needs of children but the need for more information specifically on teens and infants was also expressed. As well, some foster parents found the material to be more theoretical and expressed a preference for more practical suggestions. Some participants found the content to have religious undertones and suggested changes be made for it to be more secular. Finally, having more interactive components and better programming was suggested in presenting the material.

“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.”

“Was integrating the knowledge with people’s real-life experiences, because [didn’t need? – 24:13] it just brought it home in a very practical way to me, and sometimes I need the practical stuff. The theoretical framework is great, but sometimes transferring that into actual practical stuff can be a bit of a challenge ’cause—or just is, sometimes. So I really like that. I liked the fact that the modules were a reasonable length so it was something you could sit down and do in a setting when you still have a pretty busy life, and that, you know, you could sit down and do it anytime, anywhere, and that if you— Like, at one point I was partway through one, and then there was an issue that I needed to deal with, and I just came back to me and it’s still there, and I just really liked the flexibility that it gave me.”

Foster parents reported that they found the content of the modules to be immediately applicable to their foster family. They also reported the content to be information needed by all foster families. They reported that case examples were the best method to aid in the understanding of the content. The content allowed new ideas and perspectives to be learned about parenting foster children.

“I think keep including those personal stories from real foster parents and from real caseworkers and all that, ’cause that was probably the most impactful, ’cause sometimes it can feel a bit distant when you’re just looking at it on the screen and you’re reading all these facts and stuff. And I think keep having somebody do the voiceover bit, ’cause that

was kind of cool to hear somebody actually talking in a real voice.”

“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.”

Foster parents reported that the information in the modules validated their experience. Foster parents could relate to the experiences of the foster parents in the modules and reported that this had the impact of reducing their feelings of isolation. Foster parents reported feeling more positive about their experiences after completing the modules, as it helped them feel they were “on the right track”.

“Yeah, there’s bound to be glitches, but I really, I think what I found most—I mean, the theoretical framework and all that kind of stuff, again, a lot of that stuff I know, or did know, but I found it, 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.”

#### **Theme 6: Experience of Completing an Online Course**

The evaluation of the experience of completing an online course was coded in this theme.

This included the positive factors of completing training online; the positive factors of completing a course in a classroom; and the difficulties of completing training online.

Foster parents outlined a variety of reasons why they found completing the training course online to be a positive experience. This included the fact that it was flexible and they could schedule involvement in the training modules when they had time; that it was more financially feasible (i.e. they did not have to pay for gas or a babysitter); that they could easily return to it if interrupted; that it could be completed at a pace catered to the individual; and that the training could be accessed on multiple occasions.

“See? I’m all for online, but that’s only [laughter] that’s only ’cause I’m pushing it here, and my background is designing online courses and doing online trainings. So from my perspective, I am one of the ones that just rave about it because I’m a busy person who, you know, runs my own company, who is a mum and a foster parent. I honestly love online education because I can pause it and leave the modules, I can come back to it when I want to come back to it, I can do it at my own pace. So I’m a firm, like, I think we should have more online training. I like the combination of, you know, online and having some type of dialogue. So I don’t know. I don’t know. It would be interesting, and I know that we’re testing this with our own foster parents of, okay, well you go and do some of this and then we’ll get together on a conference call, all of us, and do some discussion.”

“It was good ’cause I could do it at my own pace, I could do it, you know, if it was just an evening when everybody went to sleep [chuckle], then I could sit down for 45 minutes and watch one of them and answer the questions at the end. So it’s nice to kind of be able

to do it rather than some of the other trainings that we do. You have to go somewhere from 6 to 8, and you're kind of stuck there, so you have to have either your spouse home to watch all the kids, or a babysitter or something like that, so it's nice to be able to do it at home."

Foster parents indicated that there was a preference for completing training some aspects of the training in a classroom as opposed to online. The most dominant theme was interacting with other foster parents and sharing their experiences. Foster parents reported that they found it helpful to learn from other foster parents. As well, having to take the course in a classroom as opposed to online eliminated the ability to procrastinate.

"No. No, not at all, really. It would have been nice to talk and share other stories. That would have been nice. That's the nice piece where 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. There could have been a—I'd have another one where—um, I'm not very good on the computer, so bear with me—where you could post your questions and your answers."

"I: Okay. How critical do you feel that is when it comes to training programs, the discussion after?

P: Uh, pretty critical, because that's where a lot, especially with foster parents, that's where, you know, often that's where a lot of the support comes from."

“So that was good, the combination was good. It was very good. And you know I like the socialness of being in a meeting and having that interaction with other people, I like that part of it. But like everybody else too, sometimes I’m just too busy, can’t make it there, but it’s nice if I can do it online and then maybe talk about it at a later point in time or something, so I think the combination Idea is very good.”

There were several factors that foster parents identified as being the downside of online training. First, if content was confusing they were not able to ask questions, or if they could, it took time to receive a response through email. Second, when completing training at home there were often interruptions. Third, foster parents who are not technologically inclined reported having greater difficulty navigating the training. Fourth, some foster parents indicated that they would like a hard copy of the material, not just the ability to access it online.

“It was kind of double-edged. Doing it in class, it’s structured, so you have to set aside the timeframe. It’s very structured. You go in, it’s regimented. You go in, you do it, you get out. Doing it online at home was nice. It afforded me flexibility. The downside is, it was very susceptible to everything that goes on in my home. [Chuckle] So all of a sudden I may have been sitting down for, just getting things opened up and something would pop up and I’d have to close out and go and deal with an issue, and then I may not get back to it for days on end at a time because there was just stuff that just—Just stuff. Life just gets in the way. It didn’t afford very well to being able to just go at it and just get it done.”

### **Theme 7: Suggested Changes to the Modules**

Any suggested changes to the format or content of the modules was coded in this theme. Suggested changes included introductory and instructional content; changes to current content;

content that should be added; interactive and discussion components; evaluation after completing training and changes to the format.

Foster parents shared suggestions regarding how this training program could be shared with others. These included having links to the training program on foster agency websites and sending our reminder email, especially around difficult times of the year such as the holidays. Foster parents suggested that this guide should be accompanied by a short outline of the material that would allow participants to see if the training would be beneficial to them. They also suggested making beginner, intermediate and expert levels of training to increase the applicability to different levels of experience. Accurate accounts of the length of time to complete material and indications if the module could be accompanied by audio were also suggested.

“But, like I said, I guess the main thing is when they come out with it, I know everybody’s busy, but if somehow if you had online courses like this, if we received an e-mail so we would be, we’d get it as soon as it comes out, then we can have that chance to take a quick look it and see if it’s something that we would want to take.”

“Like, don’t just sit there and read it and go, okay, well, it will probably take them about 15 minutes. Well, answering questions alone was long enough, and I didn’t even have big long answers. Right? Somebody not doing your course needs to sit down and an average person and an average reader, not a speed reader do it and then give you a real time. Right? Or else you’ll have people going okay, well they say it’s only going to be 4 hours, I better plan for 8, which doesn’t look good for the reception of. “

Changes to the current content were suggested. Some foster parents noted that many of the resources were American and expressed a desire for more Canadian material. One respondent noted foul language in one of the resources and that this lessened the professional tone of the material. Multiple foster parents noted that the content was written at a university/college level of understanding and suggested adding definitions to words.

“What I did find that I don’t think was helpful at all is some of your case studies and some of your reference materials are American based. And I think if this is going to be for...if the whole thing is meant to be based on Canadian foster parents I think you need to look at addressing that because their foster care system is vastly different than ours and I don’t think it’s relevant even as a case study or even as a....referring to it. It needs to be all Canadian content.”

“Some of them I could download, others I couldn’t, for some strange reason. I felt that—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.”

Foster parents expressed a need for more content added to the training regarding certain topics. These included: further information on teens; specific, in depth information on specific behaviours and disorders; information on attachment; and adding material on child grief to the grief module.

“From an experienced foster parent point of view. I think just, again, going into detail about different techniques, like, every child that comes into your care is different, and we seem to forget sometimes. Like, you know, if you’ve had a placement for 6 months or a year, and you’re in the gibe with, you know, let’s say, you know, the child just only has ADHD but then your next placement not only has ADHD, but they also are really psychologically a lower level and you’re dealing with different things. So for me, I guess it would be great to have almost like an encyclopaedia-type reference-type stuff that— Because you learn all of these things, and like I say, it was a great refresher as an experienced home to go through some of that, so it is a great refresher because you forget.”

Adding interactive and discussion components in promoting interaction with other foster parents was suggested to improve this training course. This included adding a chat room for discussion; online classroom sessions; and contact information for any questions participants may have.

“Or to—Which just allows—’cause I think people have questions, so if there’s not anyone monitoring it, like if there’s no kind of chat room or no kind of place where people can ask questions, I think that’s where people, at least in my area, get a little wary of, like, well, you know, I don’t like the fact that I can’t ask a question, or I can’t, you know, I can’t do this. I have to do it all on my own. So having an element of that

socialism in, being developed into the program. Now whether that is a forum or if there's, you know, if you're doing like a [inaudible – 19:33]-type community within it where people can chat and connect with one another, but I think it's kind of combining, you know, allowing some type of communication and questions, or other foster—Because, you know, other foster parents may have the answers, the majority will, you know, just depending on all of your experience, or people might want to add valuable things to certain modules. So I think, I think that that's an important part of when we're developing something online is how we can bring a community together around it, and especially when we're dealing with training, it's great to—You know, it's almost like a book club, you know, when you go read a book but you come back together and you discuss what you've learned, and sometimes that's where some of the best learning comes in is discussion.”

Having the means to evaluate content and understanding after completing the training program was suggested. This included: being tested on content after each module; being able to save content written on activities during modules; and having printable “cheat sheets” outlining the content of modules.

“Wow, that's a huge open-ended question, huh? Wow. No, like I said, I really thought the course was really well put out. It would be awesome to, you know, if you're going forward, like, that there's basic and more advanced courses, you know, depending on your experience, because it's kind of hard to cookie cut or something, but you do kind of have like beginner homes, intermediate homes, and, you know, really seasoned homes, and so it would be really great to, again, like, have this variety of modules, like, of course where again, too, I can come back and take it when I need it, again, if I need a refresher.

You know. That's also another really great thing is that when you're done the, like, when you're done all the modules, if there was like some type of cheat sheet that you could, if you even wanted to, print out, you know, and put in a binder, or whatever. Again that, you know, just the really great highlights of the modules of what you learned in that, so that it's just an easy reference. If you want reference back to something, you can just look at this cheat sheet and be like, Ahh. This is what I learned. Now I remember.”

“The only thing I'd like to see is like a printout of my own answers on each of the modules, where I've answered the question, because you kind of go back and look at what you were thinking then and maybe what you're thinking now and how your mentalities have changed. I think it might be important for people to have that information to take home with them.”

Finally, foster parents suggested changes to the format of the modules. These included: being able to go to the previous page; consistent icons for navigating between pages; being able to pause and have the module return to the same section of the module; keeping questions visible when participants answer questions; easier access to both the child and teen story lines, rather than one or the other; and changing colors that are difficult to see.

“I found that a little frustrating 'cause we have a 3-year-old and a 13-year-old and a 14-year-old, so following one trail and then I'd come to the beginning and try and follow the other trail to sort of make sure I was understanding things from both my, all my kids' perspectives. If there would be away of sort of changing that so that you could easily go on both streams if you happen to have kids in both pathways, kind of thing.”

“And we had to design a website put it up there and stuff like that, and one of the things that we learned, and I have found holds true, is that consistency, if you have an arrow that indicates to go to the next page try to stick with it. I know just in one spot there was a little figure of a person walking in a certain direction, and that was your link to click on to go to the next page. But it took me a minute or so to figure that out. I was looking for the arrow.”

### **Theme 8: Technical Problems**

This theme included any specific technical problems identified by participants. These included the following: that there was nowhere to respond to questions; the modules did not work with Apple products; the program did not allow for the copy and paste functions; the program did not allow for clicking on ‘sticky notes’; trouble with the audio; animation glitches in the videos; links were often unavailable; unable to access “Beth’s story”; overlapping screens; program was slow or would not load; and unable to download additional readings.

“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.”

“Yeah. 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.”

“I did, especially in going backwards. So let’s say exactly at the end, when I was supposed to answer those questions and I wanted to go back to refresh my memory, and it wouldn’t easily go back. Sometimes if you did go back, then you’d have two pages at once showing on the screen. So you’d have words overlapping each other. And so that wasn’t very easy to go back and relive it, so that might just be at the pilot stage.”

## **Summary of Findings**

Analysis of foster parent interviews identified eight main themes: (1) building a foundation; (2) management of foster child behaviour; (3) changes to the foster care system; (4) further resources; (5) experience of completing the modules (6) experience of completing an online course; (7) suggested changes to the modules; and (8) technical problems.

Within the Building a Foundation theme foster parents expressed the importance of creating a stable environment in which the basic needs of the child were met in order to provide a safe space for a foster child to develop mentally and emotionally thus promoting resiliency in the child. In reference to managing behaviours, understanding precipitating factors and the function of the behaviour was a dominant subtheme. Foster parents suggested a variety of measures that could be taken in order to further help them manage their foster child(ren)’s behaviours. Foster parents expressed the need for a variety of changes to the foster care system in order to encourage better communication between foster parents and social workers, as well as to help foster parents navigate within the fostering system. This included a variety of changes to the training and supports currently available to foster parents. Foster parents identified a variety of areas where resources are not currently available and the kinds of resources that they would like to see made available in the future. Foster parents evaluated the experience of completing the

modules and provided feedback on the content within the modules as well as other pertinent information such as the target audience for this training program. Foster parents shared their experience of completing the modules online and their preference for accessing the material in this fashion as opposed to completing the training in a traditional classroom format. Any suggestion on changes to the content within the modules or to the format in which it was presented was coded into the “suggested changes” theme. Comments on any technical difficulties while using the modules was coded into a separate theme.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of foster parents completing online training that had four modules: Building a Foundation; Four Tools of Conflict Resolution; Unpacking Behaviour; and Dealing with Grief and Loss. Specifically this study examined modules one and three. The first module addressed issues related to introducing the child into a new home and promoting resiliency in the child whilst in care. The third module focused on understanding precipitating factors that cause challenging behaviours in foster children in order to better meet the needs of the foster child and help in the management of difficult behaviour. Through analysis of the foster parent interviews, findings suggest that the online modules were an effective teaching resource for training and educating foster parents. Furthermore, findings suggested the content of the modules was relevant to the fostering experience and of particular importance for new foster parents.

The overall findings of this study suggest that foster parents found that the content of the “Building a Foundation” and “Unpacking Behaviour” modules were pertinent to the fostering experience. In reflecting upon their own experiences of beginning a new placement with a foster child, foster parents indicated that understanding the previous history of foster children in order

to meet their basic needs was a significant factor in caring for their foster child(ren). The topic of developing resiliency in foster children during a foster placement was identified as an important message to both new and experienced foster parents. Foster parents identified managing their foster child(ren)'s behaviours was one of the most challenging aspects of fostering. Foster parents reported that understanding the history of a child and determining the causes of behaviour were an important factor in managing their foster child(ren)'s behaviour. In evaluating the experience of foster parents in completing the modules, foster parents identified the positive and negative aspects of completing the course online, as well as providing suggestions to the content and format of the course.

### **Links to previous research**

Prior life experiences for foster children directly impact both their development and ability to make secure attachments to foster parents (Gabler et al., 2014; Puddy & Jackson, 2003). While foster parents may wish to connect with and show their foster children love, foster children are often slower to reciprocate this connection due to past experiences where caregiver relationships were severed (Craven & Lee, 2010; Gabler et al., 2014; Puddy & Jackson, 2003). Upon reflecting on the material in the “Building a Foundation” module, foster parents in the current study reported that the message of encouraging resiliency was an important lesson to new foster parents and a useful reminder for those more experienced. As well, many foster parents acknowledged that meeting basic needs comes before any bonding can take place.

Throughout the interviews, foster parents discussed the importance of creating a stable environment through, first, meeting the child's basic needs, before addressing higher needs. Previous research has shown that building a relationship between the foster child and foster

parent is an active process that develops slowly over time (Alvord & Gravos, 2005). Being able to empathize with the foster child and meeting their basic needs are the first steps in beginning to develop this relationship. The ability to encourage self capacity in foster children was viewed as a significant aspect of fostering. While many foster parents reported a desire to “fix” their foster child’s problems, teaching foster children the skills to be able to solve their own problems or the ability to better care for themselves by helping them reach developmental milestones was viewed as a critical part of being a foster parent. Research has shown that when children are able to develop a variety of skills it provides them with the ability to be more resilient when faced with challenges (Bell, Romano & Flynn, 2013).

Foster parents reported that understanding the past history of the foster child was crucial in understanding their behaviour as it allowed foster parents to better understand the function of the behaviour. Foster parents reported that the information given to them by social workers was often not sufficient and that they expressed a desire to access more information such as health records or to be able to speak to their foster child’s mental health providers. Foster parents reported that, currently, they often do not have the right to that information, as they are not considered as the legal guardian of the child. Restricted access to information impeded a foster parent’s ability to meet their foster child’s needs and to address behavioural concerns. The stress of managing behaviours has been shown to be an added factor in foster placement breakdown (Brown, 2008; Brown, & Bednar, 2006; Brown, & Campbell, 2007; Strijker, van Oijen, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2010). Foster parents reported that they too often did not have an accurate picture of the child’s behaviour prior to placement. Foster parents reported that this may have been due to social workers reluctance to share this information as it may impact a foster parent’s decision to take the foster child. However, foster parents report that not having this information increases the

likelihood of foster placement breakdown and the foster home may not be able to meet the needs of the child. Training can help foster parents learn how to understand and address these behaviours, but communication with social workers is an added factor that can influence the success of a foster child(ren)'s placement and the ability of foster parents to meet the child's needs.

For the foster parents in the current study, managing behaviour was a significant concern. In line with the findings of previous research, foster parents reported that the behaviour of foster children significantly impacted both themselves and their biological children and was a primary contributor to foster placement breakdown (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Vanschoonlandt et al., 2013). Foster parents reported that it was crucial for the family to be supported when dealing with behaviour in order to mitigate the negative impact of stress upon their own family.

Foster parents reported the need for an encyclopaedic-like resource for different disorders and behavioural problems that are common when working with foster children. Some foster parents expressed frustration at having to do research to find such information while trying to meet the needs of severely distressing behavioural disorders in the children they were caring for. Many behavioural programs focus on behaviour management as opposed to focusing on an understanding of the causes and functions of behaviours (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Vanschoonlandt et al., 2013). However, foster parents reported that they found the Jigsaw Puzzle Child activity, which outlined that children can have different academic, emotional, social, life experience, appearance, I.Q. and chronological ages, very helpful in allowing them to better understand where their child was more advanced or delayed when compared to their chronological age. Foster parents reported that this activity allowed them to view their child in a different way and thus better understand their child's behaviour and how to meet their needs.

Online training has shown itself to be an effective means of providing education to foster parents (Pacifici et al., 2006). Many foster parents indicated that there were numerous benefits of accessing training online, such as not having to arrange for baby sitters, being able to do the training at their own pace, having a flexible schedule and being able to access the training multiple times. The flexibility offered by online courses is often seen as a strong benefit of this form of education and knowledge dissemination (Qui & McDougall, 2013). However, many foster parents also commented that online training can be isolating and that they missed the social aspect of the traditional classroom experience. Being able to incorporate a social experience into online training is clearly significant and the inability to fully interact with peers can be a downside of online training (Qui & McDougall, 2013). Foster parents shared that while training provides opportunities to learn, interacting with other foster parents is a valuable experience as they can share their stories about foster parenting and become a support network for each other. Previous research has found that when compared to training at home that does not allow for interpersonal interactions such as training DVD's, the interactive components of web based programs that enable communication and discussion with other members helped the members translate what they learned into practice (Pacifici et al., 2006; Qui & McDougall, 2013). Furthermore, foster parents indicated that it was important to be able to gain feedback from an instructor if they were having difficulty understanding the content of the training. Online programs can use a variety of ways to incorporate this social aspect including forums, chat rooms and online classrooms where an instructor teaches the material at a predetermined time, much like in a traditional classroom (Pacifici et al., 2006). In evaluating the experience of participants taking online courses, future courses may continue to improve and incorporate important factors that facilitate learning.

## **Relevance to Foster Parenting**

Previous research has indicated that a variety of factors have contributed to foster placement breakdown (Brown, 2008; Brown, & Bednar, 2006; Brown & Campbell, 2007; Vanschoonlandt et al., 2014). The number of foster homes in Canada is insufficient to support the current population of foster children (Brown, & Bednar, 2006). Thus it is important to identify supports that can be provided to current homes and provide proper training to new foster parents to help prevent foster placement breakdown. Providing training before beginning fostering has been shown to help foster parents meet the needs of foster children and allow them to better manage the challenges related to fostering (Puddy & Jackson, 2003; Rork & McNeil, 2011). Foster parents in the current study reported that the content of these training modules contained important information related to fostering that would be helpful to new foster parents. Participants indicated that fostering can be an isolating experience as the majority of emotional, mental, and financial resources focuses around meeting the needs of the foster child. Foster parents repeatedly mentioned the challenges of scheduling and time management when fostering a child. Presenting training through online resources is a means to make training more easily accessible to foster parents, thus ensuring that they have the opportunity to access the material.

In providing feedback on the current training program, foster parents were able to identify gaps in resources and changes that need to be made to the foster care system. Social workers have a significant role to play in the placement of foster children, and foster parents in the current study discussed the significance of communication between themselves and social workers. Foster parents reported that poor communication with social workers contributed to the challenges of fostering. Many foster parents noted that having a positive relationship with their social worker should include frequent and open communication as a significant factor in the

success of a foster placement. Foster parents reported repeated incidents where responses from social workers to their concerns were slow or insufficient. Foster parents reported that they did not believe social workers were able to fully understand their concerns due to their limited interaction with the foster children. Foster parents reported that having social workers better comprehend the challenges they faced may help social workers in helping them access appropriate resources.

## **Future Research**

Foster parents indicated that this training program was particularly suited towards the needs of beginning foster parents and would be an excellent training program to participate in prior to beginning fostering. Experienced foster parents shared that it contained useful refresher material but the content of the modules outlined topics they had already learned through experience. Future researchers could evaluate the needs of the more experienced foster parents in comparison to beginner foster parents. In evaluating these needs, more advanced training should be developed that is better suited to foster parents who have been fostering for many years. Within the analysis of foster parent interviews, one theme indicated the areas in which foster parents felt they needed more support or that there was no current resource available to meet that need. These suggestions reflect areas where further research is needed. Foster parents reported having difficulties finding resources related to the unique challenges of fostering infants and teens. Further training is needed to help support foster parents caring for children of these ages. Helping children who have been exposed to drugs or alcohol or who have their own addictions was another subject area that foster parents reported a desire for more education and training. Foster parents reported that there is little information on supporting foster children with brain

injuries. Future research may focus on caring for children with brain injuries within the context of fostering.

### **Limitations to the Current Study**

The current study was not without limitations. First, due to the small sample size, these foster parents will not be representative of the experience of the overall population of foster parents. Second, demographic information was not gathered and therefore no conclusions can be made as to the impact that factors such as age, ethnicity, or education could have on the foster parent's perceptions of the training modules. Third, the findings are limited to the experience of these foster parent participants and may not reflect the experience of foster parents as a whole. While the qualitative method allows for an in depth analysis of the foster parent interviews, it limits the ability to make cause and effect predictions, thus limiting the ability to predict the effectiveness of the training modules across a broader audience of foster parents. Fourth, there were a variety of technical difficulties when accessing the material in the modules. Some participants were not able to access all the information provided within the modules which will have impacted their experience of completing the modules and thus their perceptions of the training. Furthermore, participant knowledge of technology could have an impact on the perceptions of these training modules as some foster parents did mention that they were not well trained in using technology and this made navigating the modules more difficult. Fifth, the current study did not include a control group of participants who had not completed the training and thus we are limited in drawing conclusions on the impact the training has in educating foster parents.

## **Summary**

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings of the current study provides further support for the positive impact that on-line training can have on the fostering experience. Foster parents shared their experiences of completing training and the benefits and detractions of learning through an online program. Foster parents' experiences were reflected in the content of the training modules and were identified by foster parents as a resource that would be helpful to new foster parents. Foster parents identified the importance of understanding the child's previous history as a significant factor in meeting the needs of the child and in managing their challenging behaviours. The concept of promoting resiliency in foster children was identified by foster parents as a significant message that promoted the well being of foster children. Presenting the information through an online course allows for more flexibility and thus more foster parents may be able to access the training. In evaluating these training modules foster parents were able to identify gaps in resources and make suggestions as to further resources that need to be developed along with changes to the current foster care system.

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## Appendix A: Semi-structured 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 B

Table 1 Frequency of Responses Coded per Theme

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Theme 1: Building a foundation</b>	<b>Theme 2: Management of foster child behaviour</b>	<b>Theme 3: Changes in the foster care system</b>	<b>Theme 4: Further resources</b>	<b>Theme 5: Experience of completing the modules</b>	<b>Theme 6: Experience of completing an online course</b>	<b>Theme 7: Suggested changes to the modules</b>	<b>Theme 8: Technical Problems</b>	<b>Total # of themes coded per participant</b>
P-1	2	2	0	0	4	3	0	3	14
P-2	2	4	1	1	2	2	4	3	19
P-3	1	3	1	2	4	2	6	2	21
P-4	1	1	2	0	4	1	0	2	11
P-5	2	3	0	0	7	1	1	0	14
P-6	1	5	0	1	1	3	0	0	11
P-7	0	0	6	0	3	2	0	1	12
P-8	1	1	6	0	2	2	2	1	15
P-9	1	1	1	1	6	3	0	1	14
P-10	0	4	1	1	2	2	2	1	13
P-11	1	1	2	0	5	4	1	1	15
P-12	1	1	1	2	4	2	0	1	12
P-13	4	3	1	0	7	1	0	1	17
P-14	0	4	2	2	10	1	2	4	25
P-15	0	3	2	0	5	3	3	2	18
P-16	3	2	3	1	2	2	4	2	19
P-17	2	3	1	0	2	3	1	1	13

P-18	2	4	3	1	7	9	5	3	34
P-19	0	3	11	0	1	3	2	1	21
P-20	0	0	2	0	6	5	0	1	14
P-21	2	8	1	1	2	2	2	1	19
P-22	2	2	3	0	7	1	5	1	21
P-23	1	2	1	0	4	2	1	2	13
P-24	4	3	2	0	6	3	0	1	19
P-25	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	4
P-26	0	3	1	0	5	3	0	1	13
P-27	1	2	0	3	5	2	1	1	15
P-28	2	7	4	1	7	2	2	1	26
P-29	2	3	1	1	2	3	0	2	14
P-30	1	4	0	1	5	2	4	1	18
<b>Total # of codes per theme</b>	40	83	61	19	127	74	48	42	



## Research Ethics

### Western University Health Science Research Ethics Board NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Dr. Susan Rodger

Department & Institution: Education/Faculty of Education, Western University

NMREB File Number: 105617

Study Title: Improving Outcomes with Children in the Care of Child Welfare Through Improving Foster Parent Retention and Competence

Sponsor: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

NMREB Initial Approval Date: September 26, 2014

NMREB Expiry Date: January 30, 2015

#### Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Instruments	feedback questions to be completed at the end of each module, and saved to the OWL project site, by participants	2014/07/25
Instruments	Interview questions for telephone interview	2014/07/25
Western University Protocol	revised protocol	2014/08/13
Other	telephone script: reading the LOI, asking if person would like to participate and the nature of the participation, and the interview	2014/08/13
Recruitment Items	Recruitment email, with typos corrected	2014/09/11
Revised Letter of Information & Consent	LOI unedited, addressing points 1-3 on the email from Grace Kelly, dated Sept. 11, 2014	2014/09/11

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the HSREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of HSREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

## Vita

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