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Continuing to Foster: The Impact on Foster to Adopt Families

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
Sociology and Anthropology

By
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Under the mentorship of Dr. April M. Schueths

ABSTRACT

Foster parents play a critical role in the life of children in foster care. Increasingly more foster parents are becoming the adoptive resource for these children. This exploratory qualitative study examines the lives of five foster families located in the southeastern part of the United States who have adopted at least one foster child and continued fostering other children in their home. The data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This research fills a gap in the literature on how adoptive families are affected by the decision to continue fostering. Five main themes emerged from this study: Intention, Financial Incentives, Parenting Style, Family Bond, and Children's Age. Children that were adopted at an older age tend to be more resistant to the idea of continuing to foster while children adopted at a younger age were more likely to understand this as part of family life. Findings also suggest that an open parenting style, in regard to communication and acceptance plays a role in the success of these families. Although the results of this study are preliminary, the findings are valuable in facilitating the best practices for placement of foster children.

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INTRODUCTION

Almost half of the children in the U.S. foster care system (407,000) were placed in a non-relative foster family home at the end of 2011 (Administration of Children, Youth, and Families 2012). In Georgia the number of children in foster care is approximately 7, 697 (Child Welfare Report Outcomes Data 2012) and about 59 percent are placed with a non-relative foster family (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2011). Recent research provided by the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013) on foster parent adoption has highlighted that “foster parent adoption currently accounts for nearly half the adoptions of children from foster care” (12).

Adoption by non-relative foster parents is often seen as the best permanency option for foster children who are not able to be reunited with birth family or kin. In the United States there are currently more than 104,000 children available for adoption in the public foster care system (Dave Thomas Foundation 2013; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2013). In 2012 over 900 children in the state of Georgia were adopted through the public child welfare system, and over 75 percent of these children were adopted by their foster parents; 14 percent of those to non-relatives (Children’s Bureau 2012). Without the utilization of foster adoptive parents, many children would be left without options for permanency.

There has been research conducted on foster parent retention (Berrick and Skivenes 2013; Geiger, Hayes and Lietz 2013; Gibbs and Wildfire 2007), however, exploration is needed in the area of foster adoptive parents who continue to foster. Little is known about how this affects the family unit, and especially the adopted child. In the “Preparing and Supporting Foster Parents Who Adopt” article provided by the Child

Welfare Information Gateway, it states that further research should focus on the impact of the adopted child when their parents continue fostering other children. To fill a gap in the current child welfare literature the question that drives this research project is: How is the family impacted when they continue fostering children after the adoption of one child?

Although this research will not directly work with the adopted children, it will still have the potential to generate policy solutions and open an eye to an area of foster parent adoption that has not been greatly studied. This study provides an overview on how these specific family types are functioning in order to better inform our understanding of continuing to foster and any strategies to help improve these specific kinds of families.

This qualitative research project examines the family dynamics of Georgia foster to adopt families that have adopted a child and continued fostering.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the lack of literature on continuing to foster, ample research is available in many similar areas of adoption. First, I will provide an examination of the literature on financial assistance. Next, I will discuss the current literature on foster parent's intent to adopt, followed by a review of the literature on foster parent retention. I will conclude by presenting findings from research on parenting styles in relation to foster parents.

Financial assistance

The U.S. government has long been implementing programs to promote the adoption of children from foster care and the implementation of subsidy programs have had a positive effect on increasing adoption rates (Hansen 2007). In 1980 the government passed The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act which promoted adoption of

children in foster care by providing monthly subsidies (Buckles 2010). The maximum monthly adoption assistance payment in Georgia is as follows: Age 0-5 \$441.04, Age 6-12 \$463.85, and Age 13-18 \$486.67 (North American Council on Adoptable Children 2010). The foster children eligible for this assistance are classified as children with “special needs” and this criterion varies from state to state. According to the Georgia Department of Human Services website:

As defined by the State of Georgia for the purpose of adoption, children with Special Needs include those who meet one of the following criteria at the time of placement: A child who has been in the care of a public or private agency or individual other than the legal or biological parent for more than 24 consecutive months. A child with physical, mental, or emotional disability, as validated by a licensed physician or psychologist. A child who is a member of a sibling group of 2 or more placed in the same home.

In the fiscal year 2012, 88 percent of children who were adopted through a public agency received an adoption subsidy (Children’s Bureau 2013). According to the State Child Welfare Policy Database, in Georgia, about 52 percent of children adopted in 2010 were receiving Title IV-E federal adoption assistance (2). This adoption assistance, in the form of subsidies, helps make adoption possible for children in foster care. “These findings indicate that adoptive parents- in particular foster parents who plan to adopt- do respond to the financial incentives of the adoption subsidy program” (Buckles 2010: 624).

Retention

Although there is not a great deal of work examining foster parents’ intention to adopt, much research has focused on foster parent retention and factors that determine the stability of foster family services. Existing research on retention draws notice to the needs of foster to adoptive families that may impact the decision to provide adoptive placements. For example, Gibbs and Wildfire (2007) examine retention and length of

service and found that foster parents are not concerned about how long they foster and the decision to continue fostering is mainly influenced by experiences with child welfare agencies. “Interactions with the child welfare agency are the most commonly cited factors affecting foster parents’ decision to cease foster parenting” (2007: 589). Similarly, another study on foster parent intent to continue fostering found that foster parents that were satisfied with their experience, the children in their home, the agency, and the way they were treated were the most likely to continue fostering (Denby, Rindfleisch, and Bean 1998).

A study by Geiger, Hayes, and Lietz (2013) discovered emerging themes in foster parents’ decisions to continue fostering: self-efficacy, social support, financial considerations, systems issues, and family-related factors (1361). The least prominent factor was family-related issues. These family-related issues were things such as increased level of family stress and concern about the emotional impact transitions may have (1363). When elaborating, some respondents mentioned needing to assess the toll fostering had taken on their other children, both adopted and biological (1363). This response was the only mention of concern for biological or adopted children in the home. It would appear that more often than not, families are less concerned about their own adopted or biological children than they are other factors when it comes to continuing their foster service. Therefore, research that focuses solely on feelings/attitudes of parents and continuing to foster is limiting by not providing a more holistic view of the entire family, including the children.

Intention to adopt

Information provided about foster parents and their intent to adopt is valuable in making sure that foster parents are not pressured to make any decision regarding fostering or adopting. According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, in fiscal year 2011, 54 percent of children adopted from foster care were adopted by their foster parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2012). Data is unavailable on whether or not these foster parents planned to ever adopt. The National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey (FCAAS) (2013) conducted by the Dave Thomas Foundation discovered that Americans who have considered adoption are more likely to be women, minorities, between the ages of 18-34, college educated, single and make an income between \$25,000-\$50,000 (9). In the FCAAS 2013 survey 84 percent of Americans have a favorable to extremely favorable opinion of foster care adoption, which has not grown much from the support of adoption in the 2007 survey (10). Americans consider adoption for altruistic reasons, such as, believing that all children need love and wanting to help children in need (National Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey 2013: 26).

Parenting

Research has suggested that foster parents should be chosen on their capacity to provide effective parenting skills. Parenting skills are important for all families, but may play an even larger role for foster families. Berrick and Skivenes (2012) found in their cross-national study of “exemplary” foster parents that both American (n=87) and Norwegian (n=54) high quality foster parents exhibited effective parenting skills. Some of the characteristics of these exceptional foster parents were helping all members of the

family feel a part of the family, equality for all children, and nurturing (Berrick and Skivenes 2012: 1964). Berrick and Skivenes (2012) provided a look at how integration strategies are important in making sure children are included into new families (1964).

It is vital to have foster parents that are making an effort to create an atmosphere of belonging for all children. In agreement with this ideology, Beuhler, Cox and Cuddeback (2003) argue that foster parents “need to be skilled at creating family patterns that are characterized by clear, consistent routines and expectations, as well as flexibility and tolerance” (61). From the literature it is possible to make an inference about the quality of parenting skills of the participants.

Age

A factor needed to be considered when studying how the family is impacted by continuing to foster, is the age of the children, both adopted and biological. This area has not been greatly studied in the U.S. in the past couple decades but research from other sources can be used for foster families and children in the United States.

Researchers, Twigg and Swan (2007), from Canada published a study entitled “Inside the foster family, what research tells us about the experience of foster carers’ children” where they examined published research articles to determine how foster parents’ own children are impacted by fostering. What Twigg and Swan found was that previous research on age differences was severely lacking and even more so, weak and inconsistent (2007: 51). Their research recognizes the unique challenges all foster families face and like other research (Berrick and Skivenes 2012; Beuhler, Cox and Cuddeback 2003) suggests the best way for these families to be successful is accepting foster children into their home and making them a part of the family (2007: 58).

A U.K. study by Sutton and Stack (2013) used qualitative interviews to ask biological children (age twelve to eighteen) about their experience with fostering. Again, age is mentioned as a possible important factor but a lack of good literature has demonstrated this subject difficult to address. The results show however that how the young people interviewed viewed themselves as empathic, proud team players who embrace fostering as a part of their lives (British Journal of Social Work 2013: 606).

Although this honor's thesis research had no participants with biological children, once a foster child is adopted, they become their child and therefore can exhibit the same attitudes and behaviors as biological children do to foster children.

In the review of the literature there is lack of research on how continuing to foster impacts the family life of foster to adopt families. That is why the question is so important: How is the family impacted when they continue fostering children after the adoption of one child?

METHODS

An exploratory qualitative research approach was used for this study. This research project was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Georgia Southern University (IRB#:H14151). A purposive sample of foster parents was gathered through the Georgia Department of Family and Children Services in Cobb County that matched the eligibility criteria. The sample included five foster parents or foster families that have undergone the required foster parent training in the state of Georgia, finalized an adoption of a child they were fostering, and had a foster child in their home within the last twelve months.

Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews were a much more effective way to gain information needed for this research as opposed to a quantitative method. The interviews allowed for a personal connection to be made between the interviewer and interviewee. Participants felt very comfortable to open up about their children and family life. However, with this method, there were fewer participants. Using participants from the Department of Family and Children Services is both a strength and weakness. We learn about how adoption works in the state capacity within a certain county but this may differ in other counties as well as in private and non-profit adoption agencies.

Participants were at least twenty-five years of age, as this is the minimum age to be a licensed foster parent in the state of Georgia. The average age of the participants was 37 years old. A recruitment flyer was sent out via email to all families in Cobb County that are continuing to foster after the adoption of one foster child with the help of a Department of Family and Children Services supervisor (See Appendix A). This researcher completed an internship with the Cobb County Department of Family and Children Services during the summer of 2013 and established a positive working relationship with staff and supervisors. Thus they agreed to assist with recruitment for this study. Any interested participants contacted the researcher directly through email. All participants were explained the research procedure and signed a written consent form before participating in the study (see Appendix B). Pseudonyms were assigned; therefore the participant's names were not tied to any of their responses. All materials were kept in a locked filing cabinet and electronic data was maintained safely. The participants were asked to take part in an interview located in a neutral community location of their choice (such as a private room in a public library), the privacy of their home, on the telephone,

or via Skype (or other webcam program). Most of the interviews took place in the respondents' homes with only one being on the telephone and one in a quiet corner of a restaurant.

Prior to the interview the participants were asked to complete a brief, demographic questionnaire (see Appendix C) including their sex/gender, age, marital status, education, income, and religion, etc. Next, they participated in an in-depth, semi-structured interview and were asked open-ended questions related to their foster parenting experiences, their family structure and their children (see Appendix D). Impromptu questions were asked as well. On average the interviews lasted approximately 54 minutes. In this time, participants were asked to provide information about their family structure, their feelings about being a foster to adopt family, how life has changed since adoption, and why they decided to continue fostering.

The participants all came from the Georgia Department of Family and Children Services. Four of the five participants identified themselves as white. Two of the participants were single mothers, and the other participants were married (one same-sex married couple). All had some college or a college degree or a higher level of education. All participants had at least three years of fostering experience with one participant having been a foster parent for over eleven years. The majority of participants had adopted more than three children. The children both adopted and foster ranged from ages two to nineteen. All participants identified as being religious, either Protestant or Catholic. Also, with the exception of two families, one that made \$25,000-\$49,000 and one in the \$150,000-\$174,999 range, the participants reported having an approximate annual income of \$50,000-\$74,999 a year.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed word for word into Microsoft Word using Express Scribe to help the process. The unit of analysis was each family unit. Regardless of whether one parent was interviewed, the unit of analysis is each family. However, when interviewing the three married couples, only one person was interviewed. Two wives were interviewed in the different-sex couples and one husband from the same-sex married couple. After transcription, the interviews were analyzed line by line using an open coding process. The transcriptions were read through several times and key words and phrases were highlighted and given a code by hand. Through careful examination of the text, several themes emerged. Because this is a qualitative study, the hypothesis was developed inductively by using thematic coding (Strauss and Corbin: 1990). This approach explores participant's lived experiences and subsequently generates a hypothesis from their responses.

RESULTS

Financial Incentives

The literature suggested that foster parents do respond to financial incentives when it comes to adopting a child from foster care. Despite this information, the interview protocol did not ask questions related to finances and participants were not asked directly about receiving subsidization. However, through the lengthy conversations about the experience of being a foster family, none of the participants mentioned the assistance. This researcher is familiar with the criteria for subsidized adoption in the state of Georgia and during the interviews the families disclosed information about their adoptive children's situations, therefore it can be inferred that of the five families

interviewed, four of them were likely eligible to receive subsidized adoption assistance. Although the majority of families in this study were likely eligible for assistance, it is unclear whether they actually utilized the service.

On the other hand, financial assistance may not play as important of a role in the decision to adopt for these particular participants. All the participants in this study would be considered middle class and possibly less likely to need the financial assistance. However, even middle income families often struggle financially. It is possible that families may have avoided discussing the topic of finance for fear of being labeled as someone who is “in it for the money.” The only mention of money came from Melissa, a single mother of four adopted children, who said “Money will never be a reason I do not take in a child. I will buy a bigger house and a bigger car if I need to.”

Intention

Strikingly, of the five foster to adopt families interviewed, only one person ever had the intention of adopting. As Melissa, a 39-year old single mother, called it, “I wanted to create my family through adoption.” Each person had a slightly similar response as to why they became foster parents. For instance, Hank a 42-year old male, who recently married his partner, said “I figured this would give me a good thought on whether I wanted to have my own children or not.” Similarly, Rosa, a 31-year old married mother of now four adopted children, stated “I never planned to adopt. My husband and I wanted to be foster parents because we believe in the idea of fostering. We believe in helping a family when they need it and then reuniting children with their parents.” Beth, a 31-year old single mother of a pre-teen, toddler and baby remembers wanting to “try fostering out” and then “I just fell in love with the whole idea.” Nicole, a

41-year old married mother of six was raised in a family who fostered. Her parents were foster parents and she has many siblings through adoption. For her, becoming a foster parent was natural; she began fostering in her late twenties as a single woman and is now married with several adopted children. This shows how despite ones original intentions when becoming a foster parent, situations and circumstances change that may alter the choices one makes. This is valuable for agencies to know so they do not pressure or label new foster parent recruits into fitting into one category.

When participants responded to being asked about their decision to continue fostering after the adoption of a child, surprisingly, only two participants mentioned their adopted children as a reason for eventually closing their home, echoing a similar sentiment that if the children asked them to stop, they would. These results matched previous research (Geiger et al. 2013) that found family-related factors tended to be less important when it came to decisions to continue foster service. For most of the families, the decision to continue fostering children appeared to be an honest desire to help the children in foster care and a desire to adopt more children. There was a strong sense of duty expressed by many of the parents. Rosa talks about her and her husband's decision to continue fostering:

Well, I mean that's probably our biggest trouble today. We still want to be foster parents. We believe in the process, we believe in providing a safe place for kids to be, we believe in working with families, we believe in reunification. I feel like it is something you can do to give back to the community. We have resources. It feels right to share them. It is the thing we would do for free. We really do enjoy this. We love seeing the fruit from it. I think that's why we continued.

However, all participants stated in some way or another that they now have tighter restrictions on the foster children they will accept into their home due to the adopted

children they already have. Beth, single mother of three, reflects back to the beginning of her foster parenting years “when I started I said I will take anybody, for any reason, any age group, and now I just can’t.” Hank, who recently adopted a thirteen year old and is fostering an eleven year old, says:

I’ve found myself saying no more often than not. I used to be like any kid that they would call me about, yeah, yeah, yeah, come on, I’ll take them. Now, it’s more often no than yes. I have to be concerned about any dangers, I am not concerned about it myself but I am concerned about my kids and other foster kids that are in my home, their safety comes first. Because, [adopted child] is my life, I don’t want anything to happen to him and I don’t want anything to happen to my foster son either so I always consider that before I say yes or no.

Rosa, a married mother of four adopted children expresses similar sentiments, “It’s our responsibility to keep them [adopted children] safe and protected and feeling secure in their relationships here and their place here so that unfortunately has changed very much the way we foster.” A single mother Melissa responds “I want my two older boys to be the big brothers and the men in the house, it is hard, but I do not take children that are older than my oldest.”

Despite having more restrictions and sometimes taking into account safety, all the foster parents expressed a deep love for what they do. As Rosa would say, “it’s awesome and hard and exhausting and wonderful.” The decision to continue fostering was as similar as reasons they began fostering in the first place, to either adopt more children or honestly help the children in care.

Parenting Style

In keeping with the literature on parenting from Berrick and Skivenes (2012), this research found that effective parenting skills can help create successful families and that this group of foster parents would likely be considered exceptional. We must take into

account the recruitment process for this study may have unintentionally created a selection bias. Foster families who have had good experiences with DFCS are most likely more willing to partake in a study advertised by DFCS.

All of the families in this study reported having open communication with their children. This included conversations about birth parents, foster care, and adoption, as well as general family decisions. Participants described using “kid-friendly” terms and language to make things easier for the children to understand but that having open communication “allows for less confusion and more reliable questions and answers.” With Hank and his thirteen year old adopted son, he still has contact with his birth mother but was happy to be adopted by Hank, “we had that conversation before we even went down that road and you know he was asked by many people if he wanted me to adopt him, his caseworkers, the adoption workers, the lawyer, the judge, I mean everybody asked him the same question, it was always yes.” Nicole and her large family are open about everything and she learned that after many years of fostering, open communication is the best way;

I did not start off being this way, but I learned it is necessary, taking the truth and talking to them in a way that is appropriate; it is easier to be as up front as you can. All of them know a lot, a lot, my teenagers have done volunteer work, studies and participated in forums, my younger kids are fairly well informed, they know we have kids that have some kind of situation and they are with us for a little while and sometimes they do not get better. They know we get visits and have caseworkers come out. They know we go in front of a judge and know what panels are. They know a lot, even about their own personal situations. They know they are adopted; we have talked about their adoption stories, and have somewhat of a relationship with their extended families (referring to birth family).

In Melissa’s case, she is very consistent with her word choices, “I repeatedly say the same things over and over again in a certain way so that if or when they are asked

questions about certain things, they have an answer and one that I have helped control.” Rosa says, “Even though they are children, they are extremely observant, if I am not open with them, they will get their information from somewhere else.” You can see how having an open dialogue and clear, consistent information is beneficial for the children. This is in concurrence with the literature from Beuhler, Cox and Cuddeback (2003) as well as from Berrick and Skivenes (2012) that both emphasized the importance of effective parenting styles and the children having a clear sense of belonging.

Family Bond

The family bond theme ties into the previous theme about parenting styles in that with open communication, closer family bonds are formed. A reoccurring statement from all the foster parents was “these are my children.” Labels were not used to define or separate the foster and adoptive children from one another; they were all considered their children. This lack of labeling and acceptance into the family provides foster children with a stable atmosphere of love and acceptance which is craved by children who have often been maltreated. Also tying in with the intention theme, forming bonds with these children was the main reason the foster parents decided to adopt. As Hank describes:

I never in a million years imagined myself adopting someone. I could not even possibly fathom that when I first started and it was not until my adopted child came to me that there was even a possibility of him going up for adoption and by then Mike, Mike has touched my heart, he is mine, there is no going back.

Adding to that sentiment Rosa says “There is no doubt in my mind that those children are mine. At the end of the day, those are my babies.” Nicole feels the same way when talking about her soon to be six adopted children, “We are a family, just like any other

family, we have ups and downs and bad days and good days, and fighting and bickering but when you get down to it, we are family, blood or not, and that means something.”

Children's Age

Through these interviews it has been discovered that the age of the adopted child plays a role in how the family functions. For example, in the cases where the adopted children were older at the time of their adoption, the parents expressed that the child showed more animosity towards the foster children. For Hank, his adopted son has asked him several times “when is he (referring to the foster child) going home?” His son also dislikes having to share his bedroom and often tells the foster son he must knock before coming in. Hank says the biggest difference since the adoption is that Mike now has claim over everything, he refers to everything as “mine.” This could be an example of a growing pre-teen and hormones or the beginning of a longer negative impact. Hank adopted his son Mike, after fostering him for three years, along with other children too, and there was only a month after finalization before Hank began fostering another boy. It is possible Hank and his son did not have ample time to adjust to being a forever family before another child was brought into the home.

This same situation was found similarly with Nicole and her oldest children. She has four adopted children and is in the process of adopting two more. The oldest are nineteen and seventeen, adopted as teenagers, Nicole admits she does not have a close relationship with either of them, perhaps because they were adopted during adolescence. They are no longer living in her home with the younger children, ages two, eight, and nine. In contrast, Nicole's younger kids have adapted to the fostering lifestyle and are very free about asking about more children;

Particularly if we go to a foster meeting and they play with someone who is cool, they will say “he needs a home “or “we got a bed” and if we haven’t taken anyone in a while, they will ask if we are still getting kids, even if we have someone, they will ask “are we going to keep them, maybe?”

Melissa adopted children when they were babies and are now pre-teens. Having foster children in their home is views as “normal” and seen as the way that all families are.

Melissa reported that her adopted children feel it is their duty to help these foster children and they are so used to having foster children in their home, they do not know anything else. Much like Melissa, Rosa expressed the same views when talking about her first adopted son, Jaden, seven years old:

I think because of the background Jaden came from, he recognizes that other foster children may have been in similar situations and therefore he wants to help them. He offers them his favorite pillow or blanket and has this huge capacity for sharing. It is amazing.

From the interviews we can gather that children that have grown up with foster children coming and going more frequently may have an easier time adjusting to their circumstances, meaning, wanting more children in the home, sharing and playing with them. On the other hand, older children seem to struggle more with the idea of sharing their things and are anxious to be left alone from the foster children, this could however also be attributed to puberty and hormones in pre-teens and young adults. Most likely due to the openness of communication and overall acceptance of all children, the children of these foster parents, regardless of age, have adapted well to their lives.

The majority of the foster parents reported being more than satisfied with their fostering experiences and reflected on how much it has changed their lives. Hank added this about his experience and advice to others, “Just do it, become a foster parent, it has changed my life dramatically and in the best way possible.” In the same way, Nicole adds

“If I had it to do all over again, I would so do it...you get so much from it, so much, I couldn’t imagine who I would be, it molds you, teaches you.” Contrary to previous research by Rhodes, Orme and Buehler (2001:84) who found the “reasons for quitting include lack of agency support and poor communication with caseworkers...” This thesis research found that in this particular Georgia County, the foster parents interviewed felt supported and were more than happy with their experience.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gain a broader and in-depth understanding of the unique family dynamics of foster to adopt families and how agencies can better serve and strengthen them. Foster children can be classified as a vulnerable population and it is society’s responsibility to ensure safe, stable and loving lives can be provided for them. Every family is different, including foster to adopt families, it is hard to make sweeping conclusions about people that are so diverse but this study has shown some of the many qualities that make foster to adopt families so unique. Five themes emerged throughout this study, Intention, Financial Incentives, Parenting Style, Family Bond, and Children’s Age. The foster parents represented in this study were passionate about their foster parenting and adoption experiences which easily showed in how well their families have adjusted. As mentioned, it is possible this sample may be considered “exemplary,” thus the findings cannot be generalized to all populations of foster to adopt families beyond the participants interviewed.

Due to the importance of effective parenting skills that became prevalent in this research study and others by Berrick and Skivenes (2012) and Beuhler, Cox and

Cuddeback (2003), parenting classes should be provided, in addition to the required training already necessary, in order to become a certified foster parent. The classes should focus on acceptance, equality and belonging. Agencies and prospective parents need to recognize the uniqueness of foster children and tailor their classes to teach and provide information on how best to parent foster and adopted children. Making all members of the family feel welcome and included can be challenging and having clear direction can help ensure these families are functioning at their best.

This research has highlighted the love that one can feel to a child regardless of blood relation. For foster children, this love, stability, and sense of belonging has such a big impact on the quality of life for children. This is important in regard to keeping families together and providing safe and loving homes for all children.

Through this research it has been discovered that children adopted at older ages (pre-teen to teen) have a harder time being accepting of foster children coming into the home. This is not to say that older children are less happy. Because this an exploratory study, a more in-depth study should examine the full impact age has on children as literature is lacking in this area. Children adopted at infancy and at younger ages grow up with the familiarity of foster children coming and going and appear to be more willing to have more children come and go from the home and raised with the ideology that it is a duty to help these other children. The Department of Family and Children Services, as well as parents should take into consideration the ages of the adopted children when they continue their fostering service. However, this research and other research has suggested that families with open communication and clear senses of belonging for all children, are capable of maintain happy, loving homes.

Currently there is no formal policy in the state of Georgia on waiting to continue fostering again after adopting. When parental rights are terminated and if the foster parent agrees to adopt, in that time period before finalization, only then are they not allowed to foster. After the finalization, foster parents can resume fostering. The length of time between termination of rights and finalization varies on every case. Since it would be unrealistic to expect families to stop fostering after they adopt, to make sure that the adopted child and parent has time to form a close attachment, the Department of Family and Children Services, should require a period of time after finalization where they cannot foster. Newly adopted foster children go through several large milestones in a short period of time, the loss of their birth families, loss of old life, perhaps siblings, a struggle with their identity and developing a new sense of who they are with their adopted family (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013: 2). Time is needed for both the parent and child to adjust to a permanent life together and work out any post-adoption feelings the child may be experiencing.

The limitations of this study include the small sample size, limited to one regional location. A larger, more regionally diverse population should be used in future studies. Despite the small sample size, this research raises interesting questions that can be used to fuel future research. Also, this study focused solely on foster parents within the Department of Family and Children Services, other research should examine how private agencies differ from the state agency. The sample was socioeconomically middle class which caused an underrepresentation of other social classes. Although this sample did not cover the entire state of Georgia or all of the foster to adopt population within the Department of Family and Children Services these preliminary findings are able to

impact the lives of the 1,661 children in Georgia who are need of adoptive families (Children's Bureau 2012).

More research is needed in this area; these particular families are very unique and therefore have new sets of challenges. Future research should focus solely on the adopted child and their personal feelings and relationships with the foster children that come into their home. Other considerations like the adopted child's attachment to their parents should be measured using a scale in order to determine the closeness of the attachment. A more extensive study would include both qualitative interviews and quantitative data.

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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT

Dear Foster Parents:

Hi! My name is Mariann Torrence and I am an undergraduate sociology student at Georgia Southern University. I am conducting a research project and am looking for foster families to tell their story about their experiences with being a foster to adopt family. Specifically, I am seeking to interview foster parents that have adopted a child and continued fostering other children. I would like to interview families that have adopted a foster child and had other foster children in their home within the last 12 months. Foster families are of great importance to our society and deserve to tell their story in a safe environment. I understand that you might be hesitant to participate in this research project; however this is a confidential study. This research project has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Georgia Southern University (IRB#: H14151). Personal information discussed will be kept strictly confidential.

If you qualify and are interested in participating in this study, please contact Mariann Torrence at (404) 483-555. You can also email me at mt01918@georgiasouthern.edu. You can also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. April Schueths at (912) 478-2368 or aschueths@georgiasouthern.edu

APPENDIX B



COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

You are being invited to participate in a research study about foster to adopt families. The research is being conducted by Ms. Mariann Torrence, an undergraduate sociology major at Georgia Southern University.

Please read this document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Title of the Research Study: Continuing to Foster: The Impact on Foster to Adopt Families

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to examine the familial effect and experiences of foster to adopt families, and how the family functions after the adoption of a foster child (while continuing to foster other children.)

Your participation in this research is *completely voluntary*. Please carefully read the information presented below and decide whether or not you wish to participate. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision about whether or not to participate in this research project. To be included in this study you must be at least 18 years-old, and you must meet all of the criteria:

- You are a foster parent that has completed the necessary training.
- You have finalized an adoption of a child you were fostering.
- You have had a foster child in your home within the last 12 months.

Procedures: You will be asked to participate in an interview, either one-on-one OR with your partner/spouse (if desired or applicable), located in a neutral community location of your choice, in the safety of your own home, on the telephone, or via Skype (or any other webcam program) whichever was agreed upon prior to the study. Your interview will consist of two parts. First, you'll be asked to fill out a general demographic questionnaire that includes your gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, and income, etc. Next, you will be asked to answer a series of open-ended questions about your experiences with fostering, your relationship with your children, and ways that your family dynamic has changed.

The interview will be recorded by an electronic audio recording device and the researcher will take notes with a paper and pen. The electronic recording will be destroyed following the transcription of the interview. You should know that at any time throughout the interview you are free to take a

break, ask me to turn off the audio recording device, ask me to stop taking notes, or refuse to answer any questions or to stop the interview.

Your responses will not be associated with you in any way, and your name will not be tied to any of your answers or any of the research materials. Results will be used for data in a research presentation at an academic conference and possible publication in a refereed academic journal.

Discomforts and Risks: The possible risks include disclosing personal information that might be sensitive. There are no direct benefits or compensation to you for participating in this study except potentially expressing your opinions and needs in a safe, confidential setting. Potential benefits to others include sharing valuable information related to foster to adopt families.

Duration/Time required from the participant: Participation will take approximately 60 minutes.

Confidentiality: Due to the sensitive nature of this study, maintaining your confidentiality will be given the utmost concern. Interview notes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the faculty researcher's office at Georgia Southern University for a maximum of three years. Upon completion of each interview, audio files will be immediately transferred to a password protected thumb drive and kept in password protected files. The PI will transcribe the interviews using the secure audio files. After transcription of each interview the audio file will be destroyed. All interviews will be transcribed by August 2014. Transcribed interviews will not include any identifiable participant information. Codes will be assigned rather than names. Transcribed documents will also be kept on a secure password protected thumb drive and in password protected word documents. The only individuals with access to your interview and questionnaire responses will be the two researchers. Once the information is no longer needed or after three years, this material will be destroyed.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

Potential Risk: Some of the topics covered in this interview may be sensitive in nature. If at any time during the interview you experience any emotional distress please stop the interview and contact the Georgia Southern University, Psychology Clinic at (912) 478-1685.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. In the event of problems resulting from participation in the study, psychological treatment is available for low cost at the Georgia Southern University, Psychology Clinic (912-478-1685)

Right to Ask Questions: You have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher named above or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843.

If you consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records. This project has been reviewed and approved by the GSU Institutional Review Board under tracking number H14151.

CONTINUING TO FOSTER: THE IMPACT ON FOSTER TO ADOPT FAMILIES 30

Principal Investigator: Ms. Mariann Torrence, Cambridge at Southern, Apt. 519, Statesboro, GA 30458, (404) 483-0555, e-mail: mt01918@georgiasouthern.edu

Faculty Advisors: Dr. April M. Schueths, 1060 Carroll Building, Statesboro, GA 30460, (912) 478-2368, e-mail: aschueths@georgiasouthern.edu

Participant Signature

Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

Investigator Signature

Date

APPENDIX C

**Continuing to Foster: The Impact on Foster to Adopt Families
Demographic Questionnaire**

GSU IRB # 14151

1. Age _____
2. Sex/Gender _____
3. Race/ethnicity _____
4. What is the highest level of education you have completed? If you're currently enrolled in school what is the highest degree received?
 Primary school to 8th grade Trade/technical/vocational Professional Degree (M.D., J.D., etc)
 Some high school, no diploma Associate Degree Other: _____
 High school graduate or GED Bachelor's Degree
 Some college credit, no degree Master's Degree
5. What is your current marital status?
 Single Separated Other: _____
 Living with a partner Divorced
 Married Widowed
6. What was the approximate annual income of your household during last year, in US dollars?
 Under \$10,000 \$50,000-\$74,999 \$125,000-\$149,999
 \$10,000-\$24,999 \$75,000-\$99,999 \$150,000-\$174,999
 \$25,000-\$49,999 \$100,000-\$124,999 \$175,000 and over
7. Do you identify as a member of any of the following religions?
 Christian-Protestant Jewish Spiritual
 Christian-Catholic Muslim Not Religious
 LDS / Mormon Other: _____
8. How long have you been a foster parent?
 Less than 6 month's 3 -4 years 9-10 years
 7 -11 months 5 -6 years 11 years or longer
 1-2 years 7 -8 years
9. How many foster children have you adopted?
 One
 Two
 More than Three

APPENDIX D

Interview Protocol The Experiences of Foster to Adopt Families

Interviewee Code _____

Interviewer _____

Date/Time of Interview _____

Consent and Introduction

- Introduce yourself
- Review:
 - The study's purpose
 - Plans for using the results from the interview
 - Informed consent form - verbal permission is required; Note response: _____

I have several questions to go through, and this interview should take about 40-60 minutes. Keep in mind there are no right or wrong answers. First, I'll ask you to complete a Demographic Questionnaire and then I'll ask you some open-ended questions about being a foster to adopt family. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Tell me about yourself

After the participant exhausts his/her response to the opening question, he/she will be prompted to explore the following areas if he/she didn't discuss them or discussed them superficially in the initial response. Bullets indicate topics that will be prompted.

- *Family*
- *Family structure (cohabiting, traditional nuclear family, blended, etc.). Who lives in your home?*
- *How many biological children do you have?*
- *How many children are you fostering (fostered in the past)?*
- *How many foster children have you adopted or are in the process of adopting?*

2. Tell me what it's like being a foster to adopt family?

After the participant exhausts his/her response to the opening question, he/she will be prompted to explore the following areas if he/she didn't discuss them or discussed them superficially in the initial response. Bullets indicate topics that will be prompted.

- *What are the misconceptions of being a foster parent?*
- *Why did you and your partner/spouse decide to foster?(if applicable)*
- *How do you respond to questions about your children?*
- *What do the children know about fostering and adopting?*

3. How has your family life changed since the adoption?

After the participant exhausts his/her response to the opening question, he/she will be prompted to explore the following areas if he/she didn't discuss them or discussed them superficially in the initial response. Bullets indicate topics that will be prompted.

- *What do you wish you had known before the adoption that you know now?*
- *What role did your adopted child play in the family before versus now?*
- *How much does your adopted child know about his or her birth family?*
- *How does your child interact with the foster children that come into your home?*

4. Tell me about the decision to continue fostering.

After the participant exhausts his/her response to the opening question, he/she will be prompted to explore the following areas if he/she didn't discuss them or discussed them superficially in the initial response. Bullets indicate topics that will be prompted.

- *Do you have more restrictions on which children you will take into your home?*
- *Are you open to adopting more children?*
- *How well does your adopted child get along with the foster children?*
- *Do your children ask you questions?*

5. Is there anything else you feel is important that you would like to add?