The quality of evaluations of foster parent training: An empirical review

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ABSTRACT

A comprehensive literature review was undertaken to identify published evaluations of foster parent training programs (pre-service, in-service single session, and in-service multi-session). Results of the review of the literature revealed that few evaluations have been conducted on the preservice training programs most widely used and the results are mixed at best in the evaluations conducted. Moreover, the best evaluations of in-service training were for the programs least likely to be offered to foster parents: multi-session programs. Taken together, the results point to gaps in the knowledge base and directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Foster parent recruitment and retention are long-standing problems that persist regardless of the size of the foster care population. Many agencies report difficulty finding and licensing appropriate homes as well as keeping foster parents committed and active (Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell, 2005; Fees et al., 1998). Foster parent turnover in particular is troubling because it results in costs to the agency, the foster parent, and the child (Macdonald & Kakavelakis, 2004, as cited in Turner, Macdonald, & Dennis, 2007). Agencies must spend time and money finding replacement homes; foster parents who terminate may experience a host of negative feelings including anger, shame, and sadness; and children who must be re-placed due to termination of a foster parent home experience yet another separation, change, and loss.

Foster parent dissatisfaction has been identified as a significant risk factor for termination in several different studies (Rhodes, Orme, &

McSurdy, 2003; Turner et al., 2007). One cause of foster parent dissatisfaction is lack of preparation for the type and severity of problems presented by the children in their care, and their lack of ability to effectively manage those problems (e.g., Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell, 2005; Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Fees et al., 1998; Grimm, 2003; Spielfogel, Leathers, Christian, & McMeel, 2011). According to Crase and colleagues a lack of adequate training – even after being licensed – is one of the most frequently cited reasons that parents discontinue their careers in foster care (Crase et al., 2000, as cited in Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell, 2005). For this reason, training of foster parents has taken center stage as a possible solution in addressing the problem of foster parent turnover (Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell, 2005; Christenson & McMurtry, 2007; Fisher, Gunnar, Chamberlain, & Reid, 2000; Gamache, Mirabell, & Avery, 2006; Leathers, Spielfogel, McMeel, & Atkins, 2011; Lee & Holland, 1991; Pacifici, Delaney, White, Cummings, & Nelson, 2005; Price et al., 2008; Puddy & Jackson, 2003). The need for more specific information on various aspects of fostering was one of the most common topics among survey respondents in an interview study of foster parents who were asked, "If you were to create

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a foster parent training program, what would you do differently?" (Cooley & Petren, 2011). More training and more effective training have been viewed as key ingredients in stemming the tide of foster parent dissatisfaction and turnover. Other studies have presented similar findings (Cuddeback & Orme, 2002; Fees et al., 1998; Whenan, Oxlad, & Lushington, 2009).

Despite the important – perhaps even central – role that foster parent training may be playing in the course of foster parent, foster child, and even agency experiences within the child welfare system, it appears that much remains to be learned about the delivery of state of the art information to foster parents in a timely and effective manner. The purpose of the current review article is to assess the state of knowledge with respect to evaluations of foster parent training. To that end, a comprehensive search was undertaken to identify evaluations of foster parent training programs within the PsycInfo and PsycInfo Ovid databases.

The purpose of the current paper is to examine the quality of the evaluations conducted on the foster parent trainings in order to identify major trends, important gaps, and directions for future evaluation research in this field. Through this effort, three types of trainings have been identified: pre-service trainings offered to prospective foster parents, discrete in-service trainings on single topics offered to existing foster parents, and multi-session in-service trainings offered to existing foster parents.

2. The trainings

2.1. Pre-service

As Grimm (2003) pointed out ten years ago, despite foster parent training being one of only seven components identified by the U.S. Government as necessary to assuring quality care and services to children in foster care, there is little standardization in the field of foster parent training. Examples of lack of consistency across states include variation in number of pre-service hours a prospective foster parent needs in order to be licensed, which curriculum should be used, and how states should evaluate the quality of their training (Grimm, 2003). Few states appear to know whether training requirements are being satisfied due to irregularities in data collection regarding completion of training hours. Grimm also noted that federal guidelines regarding training effectiveness are ignored because most agencies merely collect data on attendance rather than on knowledge obtained or competencies mastered. Further confusing matters is the fact that federal guidelines, state guidelines, CWLA standards, and Council on Accreditation (COA) requirements vary among each other and tend to lack specificity.

Obviously, the most important way in which training varies is related to the content. A comparison of the content of the two "gold-standard" pre-service trainings, MAPP and PRIDE revealed considerable overlap in content but also areas that were unique to each (Dorsey et al., 2008). The two programs are similar in length (27 h for PRIDE, 30 h for MAPP) and share similar foci. The MAPP curriculum is designed to address 12 "key skills" while the PRIDE curriculum focuses on 5 "competencies." Both include a wide focus on the knowledge and skills necessary to work within the child welfare system and emphasize core values of foster care (e.g., building strengths, building connections, developing relationships, and supporting children's needs). Both have been criticized for their substantial attention to procedures and policies at the expense of attention to content involved in effectively meeting the needs of troubled youth (particularly their scant focus on managing difficult behaviors). Nonetheless, the MAPP and PRIDE curricula have been widely adopted across the nation. Currently, 26 states require foster care agencies to use either MAPP or PRIDE as their pre-service training curricula despite very little empirical evidence to support the effectiveness of either of these programs (Dorsey et al., 2008). Table 1 presents an overview of the evaluations conducted on pre-service training of foster parents.

Only seven articles were found in the literature in which an evaluation was conducted on pre-service trainings: two on PRIDE, two on MAPP, one on Institute for Human Services training, and two that looked at a combination of trainings as opposed to a specific pre-service training program. The two PRIDE evaluations (essentially the same study with pretest–posttest in one paper and pre–post–post in the other) were conducted by Christenson and McMurtry (2007, 2009). These consisted of a one-group pretest posttest evaluation of 228 foster parents who received PRIDE training program in Idaho in 2003. The outcome measure used was created by the authors to reflect the content of the PRIDE training and included 18 items related to the curriculum. The purpose of the evaluation was to ascertain whether participants gained the knowledge that PRIDE was developed to impart. Paired t-tests were conducted on knowledge at pretest and at posttest (or post-post), many but not all of which were found to be statistically significant, showing increased knowledge. Fifty-one of the original sample of 228 completed the post–post 18 months later. Christenson and McMurtry (2009) report maintenance of the gains over that time as well as an 80% foster parent retention rate (41 of the 51 were still fostering children). While promising, the study has some obvious flaws, especially with respect to lack of comparison groups, nonvalidated measures, and attrition from the original sample.

The two MAPP evaluations are not much stronger. Lee and Holland (1991) undertook a small pilot study of MAPP with 17 parents who received the training and 12 who did not, using a two-group pretest posttest design. Change was measured using the Adult/Adolescent Parenting Inventory (Bavolek, 1984). Results on posttest did not indicate any statistically significant differences on knowledge and attitudes between the two groups, although the small sample decreased the likelihood that any effects would be found. The 62 foster parents in the Puddy and Jackson (2003) study did not fare better. The authors concluded that, "The results indicated that the MAPP/GPS did not adequately prepare foster parents according to its own program-identified goals nor did it adequately prepare foster parents to manage behavior problems in foster children. Trained foster parents improved in only 4 of 12 program-identified goals and in only 3 of 22 basic parenting skills" (p. 987). Two other studies of pre-service training did not produce more promising results (Nash & Flynn, 2009; Simon & Simon, 1982). Only one pre-service training study, a pilot study of a web-based session by Delaney, Nelson, Pacifici, White, and Smalley (2012), employed randomization. Participants consisted of 41 prospective foster parents in the treatment group, and 51 in a comparison group. Results showed increased knowledge of child abuse and neglect in the treatment group when compared to the comparison group. Results of an empathy measure did not differ significantly between the two groups.

Needless to say, this literature on results of pre-service evaluation is weak at best and suggests a major area for additional focus and attention. In light of the fact that agencies are mandated to provide pre-service training, and foster parents are required to attend in order to obtain their license, it would behoove the field to establish that the time and resources allocated to this endeavor (human and financial) produce benefits that outweigh the costs. Even if this small set of findings were consistently positive in demonstrating improved knowledge – which they are far from being – there would be cause for concern because of the limited number of replications and a lack of objective outcomes (i.e., actual foster parenting behaviors). Overall, the results are mixed, with some but not all outcomes being positively associated with having been trained. Nash and Flynn (2009) for example report a negative effect of the training on foster parent ratings of their foster children. This suggests that the training heightened their awareness of the potential problems they might encounter. This would be troubling if the negative perception is transmitted to children or results in greater levels of foster parent dissatisfaction, the very problem that training is designed – at least in part – to address.

Directions for future research abound, including a greater number of studies of the impact of pre-service training on foster parent knowledge and attitudes; use of stronger methodologies (random assignment, standardized measures, use of statistical controls) in order to assure greater confidence in the findings; and inclusion of qualitative approaches to