Research article

# Child behaviors as a moderator: Examining the relationship between foster parent supports, satisfaction, and intent to continue fostering

Morgan E. Cooley [a,*], Heather M. Farineau [b], Ann K. Mullis [c]

[a] Department of Social Work, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, USA
[b] School of Social Work, Florida Atlantic University, USA
[c] Department of Family and Child Science, Florida State University, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Foster parents need access to supports and resources in order to be satisfied with their caregiving role and continue providing foster care services. However, they often experience multiple demands in their role as a substitute caregiver that could lead to stress. Child behaviors especially may be a significant factor when considering sources of strain and may be a potential risk factor for negative outcomes such as dissatisfaction or the decision to discontinue providing foster care. The purpose of this study was to examine whether child disruptive behaviors moderated or influenced the nature or strength of the relationship between foster parent supports and satisfaction as a caregiver as well as intent to continue fostering. The sample consisted of 155 licensed foster caregivers from across the United States. Child behaviors served as a significant moderator between some types of supports and satisfaction. Implications for future research, practice, and policy are discussed.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## Introduction

Foster caregivers often experience multiple demands in their role as a substitute caregiver and as a result, may be at risk for negative outcomes, such as dissatisfaction with fostering or deciding to stop fostering (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Cole & Eamon, 2007; Holland & Gorey, 2004; Rhodes, Orme, Cox, & Buehler, 2003). According to Gibbs (2005), foster parent satisfaction and their desire to continue fostering may be important factors in understanding their ability to provide suitable care to youth in the child welfare system. Satisfaction with fostering has been identified as an important contributor to foster parents' decision to continue their role as substitute caregivers for youths in the system (Marcenko, Brennan, & Lyons, 2009). Additionally, foster parents' intent to continue fostering is equally important as a means for maintaining stability for children in their care and maintaining an adequate pool of qualified and motivated foster parents.

Various resources are needed to adequately support foster parents, preserve their satisfaction, and keep them fostering, such as resilience, social connections, support in times of need, and the opportunity to form a positive attachment to their foster child (Brown, 2008; Cavazzi, Guilifyle, & Sims, 2008; Hallas, 2002; MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, & Lescheid, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001). However, child behaviors may also be a significant factor when considering foster parents' satisfaction and intent to continue fostering. Previous research has indicated that child behaviors may be one of the most significant factors that impact caregivers' decision to continue fostering and more research is needed

---

* Corresponding author at: Department of Social Work, 208A Hunter Bldg., University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Chattanooga, TN 37403, USA.

to understand their impact (Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007). In a qualitative study of foster parents, Zuniga (2012) found that foster parents are often times unsure of how to deal with children's various behavioral difficulties. While foster parents may have positive relationships with professional staff, the difficulties with managing child behaviors are troublesome. Given this, it is critical to understand how significant these behaviors are in relation to the function and well-being of foster caregivers. Understanding the interconnection of supports, child behaviors, and foster parent satisfaction with and intent to continue fostering is important for ensuring quality substitute caregivers for youth in the child welfare system. More specifically, it is critically important to understand how child behaviors may in fact moderate the benefits of foster parents resources and supports on their satisfaction with fostering and desire to continue providing services.

*Foster Parent Resources and Supports*

As previously mentioned, resources and supports for foster parents can play a significant role in both their satisfaction with and desire to continue fostering. Researchers have suggested that foster parents may need to possess personal values or character attributes to persevere and remain resilient throughout the challenges of fostering (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Some researchers have suggested that resilience is more of a personal attribute than a skill that can be taught (Whiting & Huber, 2007), but as such, it is still a very important resource for foster parents. Daly and Dowd (1992) proposed that foster parents might need positive values, high energy, resilience, and good judgment in order to manage their role as a foster parent. Sinclair and Wilson (2003) found that the personal attribute of resilience of the foster parent might also be an important attribute in providing quality caregiving. In a study by Oke, Rostill-Brookes, and Larkin (2011), foster parents reported more successful fostering experiences when they relied more on their positive, internal attributes or characteristics related to parenting capabilities versus external supports.

Concrete supports refer to formal support networks that offer tangible resources in times of need, such as housing, food, financial assistance, and job assistance (Strengthening Families, 2012). Lack of adequate financial support may hinder caregivers from continuing to foster if they perceive that compensation does not meet their family's needs (Fees et al., 1998). Daniel (2011) found that multiple foster caregivers felt that adequate financial support is necessary for recruiting and maintaining current foster care placements, and is a critical resource in their fostering process. Foster caregivers who perceive low levels of financial support may be more likely to discontinue fostering than foster parents who feel adequately supported (Rhodes et al., 2001). In addition, one study that examined foster parents who received increased financial support showed fewer exits from foster care (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992).

Another important resource for foster parents is the relationships they have with others. The retention of foster caregivers can be challenging as caregivers often report inadequate support or strain from various support systems (Cavazzi et al., 2008; Maclay, Bunce, & Purves, 2006). When caregivers do not get their needs met through formal supports (e.g., licensing agencies) they may create stronger connections with informal supports, such as family and friends, which could have many beneficial effects (Maclay et al., 2006; Oosterman et al., 2007). Support may be especially beneficial to foster caregivers, as they have reported feeling isolated from their non-foster counterparts due to the services they provide (Cavazzi et al., 2008). Benefits of informal support or social connections may include more satisfaction in their role as a foster parent, less strain, and improved psychosocial well-being, which have been attributed to caregiver longevity or commitment to fostering (Brown, 2008; Cavazzi et al., 2008; MacGregor et al., 2006).

Another supportive relationship for foster parents may be the relationship with their foster children. In non-foster care populations, researchers have found that the ability to nurture a positive relationship with one's foster child may contribute to family well-being (Strengthening Families, 2012). Difficulty developing a strong attachment with one's foster child can strain foster parents, who also benefit from and need positive relationships with youth in their care (Hallas, 2002). The attachment with one's caregiver can be mutually beneficial to both caregivers and youths, as the strength of the relationship between foster caregivers and youth could be predictive of the success of that particular placement, such as less behavioral disruptions and longer stays by foster youth (Leathers, 2006). In addition, foster parents could also benefit when they perceive their caring or nurturing behaviors to be recognized by their foster child (Hallas, 2002). One study found that foster parents who rated higher levels of commitment to their foster child experienced more delight as a result of the relationship with their child (Bernard & Dozier, 2011). Therefore, opportunities to foster a positive relationship between caregivers and foster youth can potentially increase foster parents' desire to continue fostering based on positive experiences. Collectively, researchers have found how these various supports and resources for foster parents can influence their satisfaction and desire to continue fostering youth.

*Satisfaction and Intent to Continue Fostering*

As addressed earlier, foster caregivers face numerous challenges and responsibilities that may influence their satisfaction as a caregiver. Satisfaction and retention of foster parents is critically important in the services for children in care. In the general population, it has been found that ongoing stress may undermine parents' confidence and self-efficacy in regards to their ability to best care for their children (Mash & Johnston, 1983; Raver & Leadbetter, 1999). Despite their role as a non-biological caregiver, it is possible that foster parents may be similarly affected by stressful fostering experiences and a range of difficult child behaviors (Whenan, Oxlad, & Lushington, 2009). Satisfaction of foster parents is particularly important