



# Foster parenting together: Assessing foster parent applicant couples<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined family and marital context, parenting knowledge and attitudes, and mental/emotional health in a sample of 99 heterosexual foster parent applicant couples to determine whether there were distinct sub-groups in the sample with regard to marital/family context, psychological symptoms, and parenting attitudes and knowledge; to describe those sub-groups; and to examine whether those sub-groups experienced different rates of approval to foster and placement of children in their homes. The sample included only applicant couples who completed all questionnaires and 30 h of MAPP training over 10 sessions. Due to sample size, we estimated one Latent Class model for marital/family context and psychological symptoms, and another for parenting attitudes and knowledge. Analysis revealed two distinct classes of applicant couples for marital/family context and psychological symptoms, designated as Problematic Family Context (PFC), 60% of the sample and Nonproblematic Family Context (NFP), 40%. Significantly more NFP were approved to foster and had children placed in their homes 14 months later. Latent Class Analysis also revealed Problematic (35%) and Non-problematic (65%) sub-classes for parenting attitudes and knowledge; however, both classes were about equally likely to be approved to foster and to have children placed in their homes. These findings underscore the importance of screening during foster parent training and suggest that the MAPP training was partially successful in selecting applicants with the most foster parenting potential.

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## 1. Introduction

Nearly half (47%) of the 394,833 children in foster care in the US at the end of FY 2011 lived in non-relative foster homes. Of these 184,532 children, almost two-thirds (63%) lived in foster homes headed by married couples (National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2012). Selection of these foster homes challenges agencies to assess foster parents and foster parent applicants as both individuals and as members of couples and families, including their relationships with one another as well as the potential to parent. Yet little is known about married couples who apply to foster in terms of their relationships with one another as well as the potential to parent.

### 1.1. Foster parents as couples

Though almost two-thirds of children in non-relative foster care live with married couples, the foster parenting literature usually fails to recognize either the role of foster fathers or the complexity and importance

of the marital context in foster families. Mothers frequently provide the only data about foster families (Inch, 1999), in part because they reportedly handle most interaction with foster care agencies (Wilson, Fyson, & Newstone, 2007) and are believed to be the primary caregivers (Gillian, 2000). Indeed, foster fathers have been regarded sometimes mainly as sources of support for foster mothers (Dando & Minty, 1987).

Available research about foster fathers is mainly based on qualitative studies of small samples. This small body of knowledge, however, demonstrates that foster fathers may be important sources of care for foster children and reflects growing appreciation of fatherhood overall. Foster fathers report playing active roles in parenting, serving as role models, and having positive influences on foster children (Denuwelaere & Bracke, 2007; Riggs, Delafabro, & Augustinos, 2010; Wilson et al., 2007). Foster fathers recognize that children's experiences with their foster fathers are likely to be significant and complex, in part because so many foster children have not experienced relationships with fathers before (Fernandez, 2007).

The marital relationship itself is also an important resource for children in foster couple homes. Lamb (2012) reviewed and summarized four decades of general research on determinants of child adjustment and reached the conclusion that although family structure is not important, quality of parenting, quality of relationships between parents, and economic circumstances are key determinants of successful child adjustment. Both marital harmony and conflict are known to have independent significant influences on children's adjustment (Lamb), possibly by influencing children's emotional security (Buehler, Rhodes, Orme, & Cuddeback, 2006).

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## 1.2. Quality of parenting

Quality of parenting is inadequately studied in the foster care literature, despite its clear importance to child outcomes. This may be in part because, as [Berrick and Skivenes \(2012\)](#) discuss, so much of good foster parenting goes beyond “basic” good parenting to deal with foster children’s special needs, backgrounds of maltreatment, and traumatization due to removal from their homes and placements with strangers, in the context of the foster care system.

Good parenting has been defined and measured in too many ways to recount in this manuscript. We have previously defined context-based parenting as “behaviors that, given a child’s age, developmental needs, and special circumstances, are optimal for promoting the child’s healthy growth and development” ([Combs-Orme, Wilson, Cain, Page, & Kirby, 2003, p. 440](#)). This definition seems particularly apt for foster parenting. Certainly, marriage and family relationships and functioning are part of that context as well.

Parenting includes parental attitudes, knowledge, and behavior. Attitudes about parenting can be thought of as preconceptions of desirable parenting behavior or a generalized model (or several models) of how parents should behave while fulfilling childrearing duties. The question of how parents are differentiated by their attitudes about parenting practices has been a subject of study throughout most of the 20th century, primarily by descriptive studies.

The influence of attitudes on behavior is not consistently clear. Parents’ attitudes toward corporal punishment, for example, are not perfect predictors of use of corporal punishment and may be moderated by other variables (e.g., [Crouch & Behl, 2001](#)). However, parenting attitudes are generally believed to make important contributions to actual behavior, even if this relationship is not absolute ([Holden & Buck, 2002](#)).

Marital quality and quality of parenting are consistently correlated in the research ([Grych, 2002](#)), but the variety of global measures employed makes it difficult to be more precise about how they interact to influence child outcomes. [Belsky and Fearon \(2004\)](#) asserted that “...there are different types of families in which marital quality, parenting, and child development go together in rather different ways” (p. 503). Both good parenting and healthy marital relationships contribute to positive child outcomes, but they may exist in different combinations.

Using the NICHD Study of Childcare, Belsky and Fearon examined 829 two-parent intact families and reported that quality of marriage and quality of parenting are found in different combinations. For example, they found that 15% of married families in this nationally representative sample showed high quality marriage and parenting, 43% showed moderate quality of both, and 16% showed poor quality on both. The rest (26%) exhibited a mixed pattern.

Not surprisingly, [Belsky and Fearon \(2004\)](#) found that in first grade, children who lived in families with both good parenting and strong marital relationships had the best outcomes, and children whose families lacked both types of resources showed the poorest outcomes. The two groups also differed on a number of important antecedent factors, including income ratio, maternal age and education. Consideration of these pre-existing differences attenuated some, but not all, of the relationships.

Findings for the mixed groups revealed that outcomes for children who grew up with only one set of resources (high-quality parenting or high-quality marital relationships) were not as good as children who had both and were better than those of children who had neither. When only one advantage was present, high-quality parenting seemed to be most advantageous. It is reasonable to assume that similar relationships would exist for foster children and parents, albeit probably in more complicated ways due to the legal complexity of the foster care system. Moreover, standards are higher for foster parents, because the state has assumed legal authority over children ([Shlonsky & Berrick, 2001](#)).

## 1.3. Other aspects of the fostering context

Foster care agencies seek resources for children with many problems. Foster parent training and the home study are both designed to select parents who will provide for the basic and complex needs of children in foster care. Foster children require the same level of quality of parenting as all children, in addition perhaps to extra skills and knowledge related to their histories of maltreatment and other disadvantages ([Shlonsky & Berrick, 2001](#)).

Research, training, and other materials recognize the importance of foster parents’ having good mental and emotional health (e.g., [Dickerson, Allen, & Pollack, 2011](#)), and the parenting research is clear that mental illness and symptoms are detrimental to parenting. For example, there is an extensive body of research demonstrating that maternal depression is damaging to infants and young children ([England & Sims, 2009](#)), due to mothers’ emotional unavailability, detachment, and hostility, as well as difficulties providing for physical and safety needs. Other symptoms, such as anxiety, and certainly more serious mental disorders, would certainly also be expected to impair parenting behavior and children’s development ([Dickerson et al., 2011](#)), particularly given the vulnerabilities of foster children.

Foster parent selection is an important issue made critical by the high numbers of children in care, the challenging nature of fostering children with many problems, and the shortage of qualified foster parents. Standards must be high, and yet it is possible that the serious lack of homes may lead agencies to approve homes that are inappropriate, particularly two-parent homes, which potentially have more financial and time resources ([Orme et al., 2006](#)). Anecdotal evidence suggests that agencies approve some families with reservations when there is no clear reason not to approve them, but then do not place children in these families ([DHHS, 1993](#)). If this is the case, the determinants of approval and placement might be different. Of course, there are other reasons why children might not be placed in approved families, such as the lack of a suitable match between the types of children needing placement and the types of children families are willing to foster ([Cox, Cherry, & Orme, 2011; Orme, Cherry, & Cox, 2013; Orme, Cherry, & Krcek, in press](#)). Nevertheless, placement is a stronger indicator of selection. For this reason, we examine both indicators of approval.

We address five issues in this study, in a sample of 99 foster parent applicant couples:

- (1) Using data from both fathers and mothers, we describe family context (including mental/emotional health), and parenting knowledge and attitudes.
- (2) Employing latent class analysis in two separate analyses of the standardized scale scores, we determine whether this overall sample contains discrete types (subpopulations) of foster parent couples with different dyadic patterns of scores.
- (3) We describe these patterns based on the scale scores and compare them to patterns found in the overall sample.
- (4) We describe how these discrete dyadic patterns based on scale scores are differentially associated with clinically significant problems (that is, using clinical cut-off points) in family context and parenting knowledge and attitudes.
- (5) Finally, we examine whether different co-occurring patterns of family context and parenting knowledge and attitudes are differentially associated with both approval to foster and placement of foster children.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Sample and design

This study is part of a larger study of 161 foster family applicants reported in more detail elsewhere ([Orme et al., 2006](#)). The focus of this study is on the subset of 99 heterosexual married couples and, more

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