



Foster parenting together: Foster parent couples

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ABSTRACT

Almost two-thirds of children in non-relative foster care live in homes headed by married couples. However, the literature includes little about either the role of foster fathers or the complexity and importance of the marital context for fostering. This study examined family functioning, overt interparental hostility, depression, and parental acceptance in a sample of 111 heterosexual foster parent couples and the relationship between family context and potential to foster parent successfully. Latent class analysis revealed three distinct types of foster parent couples, “Good Context” (33%), “Typical” (56%), and “Bad Context-Discordant” (11%) couples. “Bad Context-Discordant” couples are notable for having much lower scores on all context measures, for differences between mothers and fathers, and for the fact that most fathers had depression scores in the clinical range. Finally, results indicated that better family context was related to greater potential to foster successfully and that on three of five dimensions measured mothers exhibited greater 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 the 2011 federal fiscal year 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). Yet little is known about married couples who serve as foster parents in terms of marital and family functioning, parenting, and other contextual variables. We begin by briefly reviewing the literature concerning foster fathers and foster parent couples. This is followed by a discussion of the importance of both the quality of parenting and the role of the marital relationship itself in parenting. Finally, we discuss parental mental health as an important aspect of the foster family context.

1.1. Foster parents as couples

The foster parenting literature includes little about either the role of foster fathers or the complexity and importance of the marital context for fostering. Mothers frequently provide the only data about foster families (Inch, 1999), in part because they reportedly handle most of the interaction with foster care agencies (Eastman, 1982; Wilson, Fyson, & Newstone, 2007) and are believed to be the primary caregivers (Gillian, 2000). Indeed, foster fathers sometimes have been regarded merely 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. Foster fathers report playing active roles in parenting, serving as role models for fathering and having positive influences on foster children (Denuwelaere & Bracke, 2007; Riggs, Delafabro, & Augostinos, 2010; Wilson et al., 2007). Foster fathers recognize that children's experiences with their foster fathers are likely to be significant and complex, because so many foster children have not experienced positive relationships with their birth fathers (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 research on determinants of child adjustment and reached the conclusion that although family structure (in terms of whether parents are married or not) 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, Benson, & Gerard, 2006). Given histories of maltreatment, poor parenting, and difficult family contexts, it is logical that foster children's needs exceed those of other children in these areas.

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

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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, as foster children’s needs are likely to be many and unique. 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 generalized 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 and 21st centuries, primarily using descriptive studies.

The unique nature of foster parenting requires dealing with children who have serious behavioral and emotional issues, complicated family relationships, and other problems. Frequently, foster parents do not even have complete knowledge of their foster children’s previous lives and may need to adjust their parenting as they go to deal with children who have been scarred by sexual and physical abuse, deprivation, and chronic insecurity.

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).

Limited research has examined parenting attitudes specific to foster parenting. Harden, Meisch, Vick, and Pandohie-Johnson (2008) developed a measure of parenting attitudes central to foster parenting, emphasizing attachment/commitment to the child as most important. Others included attitudes toward: child’s relationship with biological family; previous experiences with caregiving and child emotional and behavioral problems; role and relationship with the foster agency; and child-centered motivation to foster. Generally low reliability of the sub-scales (only one demonstrated internal reliability greater than .70) may limit the usefulness of the measure, but their findings do suggest that parents who have positive attitudes toward the foster care experience also report more appropriate parental attitudes overall.

1.3. *Quality of marital relationship*

The quality of the marital relationship for married parents and the quality of parenting are consistently correlated in the parenting research (Grych, 2002), and it is easy to presume that these two attributes always go together. However, the variety of global measures employed in this research 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). Belsky and Fearon examined this issue with 829 two-parent intact families. They found that 15% of the married families in this nationally representative sample demonstrated high quality in both 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, maternal age and education. Consideration of these

pre-existing differences attenuated some, but not all, of the significant relations.

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 was the 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 legal complexities of the foster care system and children’s histories. Moreover, parenting standards are higher for foster parents, because the state has assumed legal authority over children and by doing so has assumed the obligation of providing the best possible environments for those children (Shlonsky & Berrick, 2001).

1.4. *Foster parent mental health*

Foster care agencies seek resources for children with many and varied problems. Foster children thus require a high-quality home environment as all children do, but foster parents often must demonstrate extra skills and knowledge to nurture them, given their unique histories of maltreatment and other disadvantages (Shlonsky & Berrick, 2001).

Foster care agencies’ training materials recognize the importance of foster parents’ having good mental and emotional health (e.g., Dickerson, Allen, & Pollack, 2011), and parenting research is clear that mental illness and symptoms are detrimental to parenting and child outcomes, but few studies have focused on foster parents’ mental health issues (for exceptions see Burgess & Borowsky, 2010; Cole & Eamon, 2007; Mennen & Trickett, 2011; Orme et al., 2004). Foster care workers are alert for signs of mental illness that might impair foster parenting, but research has not provided guidance on the prevalence of mental illness in foster parents nor on its effects.

Extensive research demonstrates that maternal depression is damaging to infants and young children; depression in particular impairs parents’ emotional availability and sensitivity to a child’s needs (England & Sim, 2009). A recent meta-analysis of 193 studies (not including foster children) reported that the offspring of depressed mothers are at high risk of depression and other psychiatric disorders (Goodman et al., 2011).

Although paternal depression has been much less studied, research also shows that paternal psychiatric disorders may be as damaging for children as maternal disorders (Ramchandani & Psychogiou, 2009). Depression has been the most often studied; the children and adult off-spring of depressed fathers are at higher risk for behavioral and emotional problems.

Parental depression and possibly other disorders affect children’s outcomes through several avenues, including effects on parent–child interactions, the marital relationship, and even the financial resources available to the family and child. Parents with psychiatric disorders provide less competent physical care and nurturing for their children and spend less time with their children (Ramchandani & Psychogiou, 2009). Of course it is impossible to know how genetics and epigenetics (the influence of the environment on gene expression) influence these risks, just as it is impossible to calculate the effects of foster children’s experiences of previous poor parenting and maltreatment, but these findings do suggest that depression influences parenting behavior in ways that are damaging to children.

1.5. *Research questions*

This study seeks to understand important aspects of the family context among married foster parent couples, examining both individual-level and dyadic data with both foster mothers and fathers. First, we examine family context in a sample of foster parent couples. Second, we determine whether this overall sample contains discrete types (sub-populations) of foster parent couples with different dyadic patterns of

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