



## Measuring the willingness to foster children with emotional and behavioral problems

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### ABSTRACT

Many children in foster care have emotional or behavioral problems or are at risk for these problems. It is important to identify parents willing to foster children with these problems in order to ensure placement, care, stability and well-being of such children. This study presents a new 40-item self-report measure of the willingness of parents to foster children with emotional and behavioral problems, and two 20-item parallel forms of this measure. In addition, this study presents evidence of reliability and validity of scores derived from these measures with a national sample of 297 foster mothers. Coefficient alpha for these measures was .92 or greater, indicating excellent internal consistency reliability. Scores from these measures were unrelated to demographic characteristics, providing evidence of discriminant validity. In addition, scores from these measures were higher for foster mothers licensed to provide treatment foster care than for mothers only licensed to provide regular foster care, providing support for known groups validity. Finally, support for construct validity is provided by the fact that foster mothers with higher scores on these measures had fostered longer, were fostering more children at the time of this study, and had fewer children removed from their home at their request.

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### 1. Introduction

Currently 463,000 children are in out-of-home care in the United States (Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2008). Many of these children have emotional or behavioral problems, or are at risk for such problems. Estimated rates of emotional and behavioral problems in foster children range from 25% to 62% (e.g., Heflinger, Simpkins, & Combs-Orme, 2000; Kortenkamp & Macomber, 2002; McCrae, 2009; McMillen, et al., 2005; Sawyer, Carbone, Searle, & Robinson, 2007; Vandivere, Chalk, & Moore, 2003).

Identifying parents willing to foster children with emotional and behavioral problems is important for the placement, care, stability, and well-being of these children. The limited available research indicates that willingness to foster children with emotional and behavioral problems is correlated positively with being licensed to foster more children, fostering more children, fostering longer, and currently having foster children in the home (Cox, Orme, & Rhodes, 2002; Kriener & Kazmerzak, 1995). In addition, it is important that parents be willing to foster children with emotional and behavioral

problems in order to reduce placement disruptions associated with these problems (Aarons, et al., 2010; Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007) and the exacerbation of these problems associated with placement changes (Barth et al., 2007; Holland & Gorey, 2004; Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000).

Very little is known about the percentage of parents willing to foster children with emotional and behavioral problems, but available research suggests that the majority of parents are not willing to foster children with such problems. In a survey of 1013 Iowa foster families, Kriener and Kazmerzak (1995) reported that 46% of foster families accepted children with behavioral problems. By contrast, in the National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents (NSC&FFP) (DHHS, 1993), 26% of licensed foster parents reported they would not foster a child with serious emotional or behavioral problems, and only 23% indicated that they would foster a child with serious emotional or behavioral problems.

One limitation of both the Iowa study and the NSC&FFP was that neither study specified the types of emotional or behavioral problems (e.g., sexual acting out, emotional withdrawal, bed-wetting, etc.), so it was not possible to tell what problems parents had in mind when they responded. Cox, Orme, and Rhodes (2003) extended this research by asking 142 foster parent applicants to rate their willingness to foster children with nine types of problems: setting fires, head-banging, withdrawing totally, acting out sexually, unruly behavior, destructive behavior, trouble behaving in school, lying or stealing, and bed-wetting. Results of this longitudinal study

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showed that families who were more willing to foster such children were more likely to have children placed fourteen months after pre-service training.

Since not all foster parents are willing to foster children with emotional and behavioral problems, it is important to identify those who are willing due to the prevalence of these children, the limited availability of families willing to foster these children, and the negative outcomes of placement disruption. Child welfare experts also have criticized policies and practices that result in multiple failed placements for children with emotional and behavioral problems (Barber, Delfabbro, & Cooper, 2001). However, to date no standardized measure of expressed willingness to foster children with emotional and behavioral problem exists. Such a measure could be used with foster parent applicants to help educate and assist them in deciding what type of foster home licensure they wish to pursue. It also could be an important tool for foster parent couples at the application stage. In addition, it could be used with licensed foster parents to match foster children and foster families or as an intermittent assessment to monitor attitude change toward children with behavior or emotional issues. Therefore, this study will attempt to address this gap with a psychometric study of a new measure, the Willingness to Foster Scale—Emotional and Behavioral Problems (WFS-EBP).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Design and sample

This study was part of a larger project designed to develop and test foster parent assessment tools. Using a cross-sectional design, a convenience sample of foster mothers was recruited from a list of state and local foster parent associations obtained from the NFPA website ([www.nfpainc.org](http://www.nfpainc.org)). Recruitment information packets were sent to state and local foster parent associations by mail and email. Recruitment packets included information about the study and tools for distributing information to foster parents. These packets included cover letters describing the study, endorsement letters from the president of the National Foster Parent Association, flyers about the study that could be reproduced and distributed to foster mothers, and information about the study that could be placed in association newsletters or websites. Associations were asked to distribute flyers to members, place announcements in newsletters, and place announcements on their state association websites and message boards.

All advertisements included an email address and a toll-free project telephone number. Foster mothers were asked to use one of these means to contact us to participate. Those willing to participate provided their names, mailing addresses and, if available, email addresses. Additional information about the study was sent upon request. Foster mothers who chose to participate received a \$50 gift certificate upon completion of the study measures.

Initially, recruitment packets were mailed only to state foster parent associations. About three months into the project, recruitment materials were resent to state foster parent associations in states from which we had not received any completed questionnaires. Also at this time, recruitment materials were sent to local foster parent associations from those states.

### 2.2. Measures

Participants completed the WFS-EBP in addition to multiple scales and other questions as part of the broader study. Items suitable for various types of validity analyses were selected from these data. These items included (1) demographic and background characteristics; (2) licensure type; and (3) provision of care items.

#### 2.2.1. Demographic and background characteristics

Mothers reported age, current employment status, highest degree or level of school completed, marital status, race/ethnic background, and total gross annual family income.

#### 2.2.2. Licensure type

Foster mothers reported whether their licenses were for foster family, emergency, specialized foster family, relative foster, group home, and/or other care. Foster parents who are licensed as specialized or treatment foster families are, by definition, parents who are willing to foster children with emotional and behavioral problems.

#### 2.2.3. Provision of care

Provision of care was assessed with the following questions: number of years fostered, number of foster children currently in the home, and number of foster children removed at foster parent request.

### 2.3. Willingness to Foster Scale—Emotional & Behavioral Problems (WFS-EBP[40])

The WFS-EBP(40) is a new 40-item scale designed to measure expressed willingness to foster children with 40 different types of emotional and behavioral problems. Content for the WFS-EBP(40) came from a review of relevant literature and research on foster parenting and foster parent applicants, foster family training curricula (Child Welfare Institute, 1987; Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 1993), agency assessment practices, and our previous research (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Rhodes, Orme, Cox, & Buehler, 2003).

The WFS-EBP(40) went through an extensive review process. Foster care professionals reviewed a draft set of items for clarity, comprehensiveness, sensitivity, and practice relevance. Experienced foster parents and foster care workers from public and private agencies reviewed the measure and participated in small focus group discussions about the measure. The resulting 40-item measure was used in this study (see Appendix A). Each item is rated on a four-point scale: (1) *would not be willing to foster this child under any circumstances*; (2) *might be willing to foster this child with a lot of help and support*; (3) *probably be willing to foster this child with a little extra help and support*; and (4) *would be willing to foster this child without any extra help or support*.

## 3. Results

Results are presented in five sections: (1) foster mothers' demographic characteristics; (2) factorial structure of the WFS-EBP(40); (3) construction of parallel forms, scoring procedure, and descriptive statistics; (4) internal consistency reliability; and (5) validity evidence for the WFS-EBP scores.

### 3.1. Foster mothers' demographic characteristics

A total of 297 foster mothers completed the survey. These mothers lived in 35 different states; respondents per state ranged from 1 to 45. Most were married, European-American, and had high school educations or some college (Table 1). About one-third were employed full-time, and about one-third were not employed outside the home. The mean age was 44.03 ( $SD=9.80$ ). On average, there were three children in the home ( $M=3.33$ ,  $SD=1.95$ ), two of whom were birth or adopted children ( $M=1.63$ ,  $SD=1.55$ ), and one who was younger than six years of age ( $M=1.06$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ). The median length of service was 5.00 years.

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