



A comparison of foster and adoptive parent satisfaction and commitment[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Foster parents
Adoptive parents
Parenting satisfaction
Parenting commitment
Child welfare
Foster children

ABSTRACT

Recruitment and retention of foster parents, as well as the potential for disruption and dissolution of adoptions, pose significant problems for child welfare systems and the well-being of children they serve. Parent satisfaction and commitment are two important constructs that have shown bearing on these outcomes for both foster and adoptive parents. Parents who identified as foster only ($n = 155$), adoptive only ($n = 195$), or foster and adoptive ($n = 60$) in one northeastern state were asked about their satisfaction and commitment to the children they cared for through a cross-sectional survey. Results indicated that satisfaction and commitment were significantly higher in parents who identified as adoptive, as well as those who identified as foster and adoptive, versus those who identified as foster only. No statistically significant differences in the variables were found between the adoptive only and foster and adoptive groups. Findings highlight the potential importance of strategies to help support foster parents and the need for more research in this critical area.

1. Introduction

Recruiting and retaining foster and adoptive parents (hereto referred to as “parents”) pose significant challenges to public welfare systems with potentially negative consequences for children in care, child welfare agencies, and parents themselves (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2002; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). A large proportion of foster parents choose to end fostering for various reasons, some of which involve low fulfillment and dissatisfaction with their role (Cooley, Farineau, & Mullis, 2015). A significant percentage of adoptions also disrupt before they are finalized (an estimated 10–25%) or even dissolve after the adoption is finalized (an estimated 1–5%; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). Parent satisfaction and commitment play an important role in retaining foster and adoptive parents and in the permanency of child welfare placements, both of which have important impacts on child well-being; and thus warrant attention for further study in order to better understand how to retain and maintain foster and adoptive placements.

1.1. Parent satisfaction

Parent satisfaction is a primary factor related to parents' intent to continue fostering (Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz, 2013). Satisfaction can be defined as the feeling that one's needs and/or expectations are being met (Fees et al., 1998). Studies have indicated that satisfaction with the act of fostering children may include constructs such as satisfaction with the demands of the role, feeling supported by the child welfare agency, having other social supports to turn to, and feeling personally satisfied by the decision to foster (Fees et al., 1998). For adoptive parents, satisfaction may stem more from whether the reality of adopting met their expectations, and if they felt prepared for their role as adoptive parents (Berry, Barth, & Needell, 1996). Particularly in cases of child welfare adoption, access to information about the birth family and/or child's history was also relevant (Berry et al., 1996). The impact of child behavior problems on caregivers can also be a significant factor in parents' satisfaction levels, particularly for foster parents (Cooley et al., 2015).

Large studies have found high rates of satisfaction for both foster and adoptive parents, with the highest ratings found in studies exclusively sampling adoptive parents. In a study of 1268 adoptive parents four years after adoption, Berry et al. (1996) found that 97% were

[☆] This project was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 90C01115-01-01.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.03.010>

Received 1 August 2017; Received in revised form 5 March 2018; Accepted 5 March 2018

Available online 06 March 2018

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satisfied or very satisfied, and 98% would do it again. Another study found that for adoptive parents, satisfaction with the decision to adopt may serve as a protective factor against adolescent conduct problems, thereby serving to buffer the negative impact of child behavioral problems on parent satisfaction (Nilsson et al., 2011).

Foster parent samples show more variation. Eighty-four percent of 536 foster parents in one state reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their role (Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999). In a national sample ($n = 155$) using the same instrument created in the study by Denby et al. (1999), foster parents reported very high levels of satisfaction (6.2 on a 7 point scale; Cooley et al., 2015). Yet a study conducted in a different state yielded just moderate ratings of satisfaction by foster parents ($n = 649$), with an average satisfaction rating of 3.7 on a 6 point scale (Geiger et al., 2013). The survey used in this study (Foster Carer Satisfaction Scale, Eaton & Caltabiano, 2009) originated from an instrument used to assess employee attitudes about aspects of their jobs, which raises some questions about the face validity of this tool for this population (Geiger et al., 2013). Therefore it is unclear if this differentiation in scores is due to true variation in foster parents' satisfaction levels, or the instruments used to measure this construct; or, it may be true variation in satisfaction levels. Because child welfare is organized at the state-level, resources and services available to foster parents vary across states, and these supports have been found to relate to parent satisfaction (Fees et al., 1998).

1.2. Parent commitment

An alternative outcome variable that may have important bearing on foster and adoptive parent retention, as well as child well-being and permanency, is parent commitment. The construct of parenting commitment is newer in the literature than that of satisfaction. As a result, fewer studies have examined these levels, particularly in adoptive parents, or have explored the constructs of both satisfaction and commitment in the same study. Commitment to children has been defined as a (foster or adoptive) parent's investment in the child and desire to continue a relationship with the child into the future (Bates & Dozier, 2002). Researchers suggest that commitment may be a critical variable when it comes to surrogate parenting relationships (both for the parents, and for children's well-being), particularly since these parents do not experience the natural attachment process typically associated with birth and early caregiving moments (e.g., oxytocin; Bernard & Dozier, 2011).

Research examining the impact of commitment on adoptive parents, which may have been previously assumed, now appears to be more of an emerging domain. One qualitative study found that the construct of commitment is an important factor in perceived success of placements, particularly when children struggle with severe behavioral and/or emotional issues, for both foster and adoptive parents (Masson, Hackett, Phillips, & Balfe, 2014). In a recent study of adoptive parents ($n = 437$) in one Midwestern state, researchers used a study-dependent (non-validated) survey to assess adoption preservation outcomes through several domains, including caregiver commitment. Researchers noted that questions on commitment were developed to assess caregivers' attitude toward maintaining the adoption. Questions included whether parents would end the adoption if they could, whether the decision to adopt has had a positive impact on their family or not, impact of the child's emotional and behavioral problems, perceived ability to manage their child's behavior, and degree of negative feeling toward their adoptive child. Adoptive parents rated their commitment highly ($M = 4.19$ on a 5 point scale), and results indicated the relationship between commitment and child behavior problems was negatively related such that greater commitment was associated with fewer behavior problems (Liao, Dababnah, & Park, 2017).

Foster parent commitment can be more complicated to assess, in that the fostering relationship is not necessarily assumed to be a permanent one. However, that does not automatically mean that foster

parents are less committed to children during the time that they care for them. It also does not necessarily mean that these parents intend for the relationship to end once the placement has ended, as discussed by Lo et al. (2015). Commitment has been found to be a significant predictor of parents' ability to take delight in the children they care for (Bernard & Dozier, 2011). This may be linked to how much these parents thought of the children as their own, and the extent to which they felt their relationship would endure beyond the fostering context (Bernard & Dozier, 2011). Commitment is also associated with increased likelihood that young children in foster care will be adopted or obtain long-term placement (Dozier & Lindheim, 2006). Similarly to adoptive parents, foster parent commitment can also have an inverse and predictive relationship to child behavior problems, wherein higher foster parent commitment predicted fewer behavior problems later on, and higher child behavior problems predicted lower levels of foster parent commitment later on (Lindhjem & Dozier, 2007; Lo et al., 2015).

Foster parents have shown moderate to high levels of commitment. Dozier and Lindheim (2006) created the "This is my baby/child" semi-structured interview to assess caregivers' commitment toward their children (Dozier & Lindheim, 2006). The interview itself asks in several different ways for foster parents to think about their desire for a long-term relationship with their foster child, and whether or not they see themselves keeping in contact with that child in the future. Three studies using this same outcome measure found that foster parents scored average ratings of 3.3, 3.8, and 4.4 respectively (on a scale ranging from 1 to 5; Bernard & Dozier, 2011; Dozier & Lindheim, 2006; Lo et al., 2015). Additionally, Lo et al. (2015) compared commitment levels of foster parents to residential care providers using the same instrument, and found that foster parents were significantly more committed to the children they cared for than residential staff (Lo et al., 2015).

1.3. Present study

While the above studies have found some variation in satisfaction and commitment across separate samples of foster or adoptive parents, to our knowledge, no researchers have examined satisfaction and commitment in the same study, using the same measurement tool, or within the same sample, with parents who share the same broader contexts and resources. Additionally, no other researchers have considered whether parents who both foster *and* adopt may be a distinct group worthy of further consideration. The foster and adopt group was comprised of parents who had both fostered children (who then aged out or went on to other placements and/or were reunified with their birth families) and also adopted children out of child welfare after fostering them. Our goal in including those who have both fostered and adopted as a separate and distinct group is to examine whether or not this group may be qualitatively different than those who foster, as well as those who adopt. Examining levels of satisfaction and commitment across different types of parenting roles may have important implications for parents, stakeholders, and the children being cared for.

1.4. Research questions

The goal of this study was to compare parents who identified themselves as foster parents, adoptive parents, or both foster and adoptive parents to assess whether significant group differences existed for parenting satisfaction and commitment. While we utilized existing literature supporting high levels of satisfaction and commitment among adoptive parents (Berry et al., 1996; Liao et al., 2017) to inform our hypotheses, this study will also provide important new information about whether adoptive groups are actually higher in satisfaction than foster and/or foster and adopt groups by examining these levels within the same population. Though it may be intuitively assumed that foster parents would be lower on satisfaction and commitment than adoptive parents, this information needs to be empirically supported within the literature base.

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