FINDING FOREVER HOMES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON
THE EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER PARENTS IN
SAN DIEGO COUNTY

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Finding Forever Homes: A Qualitative Study on the Experiences of Foster Parents in San Diego County

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to foster parents everywhere. Your commitment to the lives of foster children goes unnoticed, and without your love and support the foster care system would be nonexistent.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Finding Forever Homes: A Qualitative Study on the Experiences of Foster Parents in San Diego County
by
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The aim of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of foster parents in San Diego County; specifically, to discover why these individuals chose to become foster parents, and to uncover the daily responsibilities and occurrences of foster parents. Nine participants were recruited from San Diego County’s Foster Parent Association to participate in recorded, in-depth interviews. This study brings to light the experiences of foster parents, and perhaps will inspire others to become foster parents.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Foster parents play a vital role in the child welfare system. They house and support foster children who are taken from their biological families and made wards of the state. Foster parents receive children who have been abused, neglected, and/or abandoned into their homes to support and care for them.

The primary purpose of the foster care system is “to provide a safe, temporary placement for children who cannot remain safely in the home of their parent(s)” (South Carolina Department of Social Services 2012:1), and “the goal of the foster care system is to safely reunite children with their own families under improved conditions” (Danielson and Lee 2010:1). Foster parents are informed in mandatory training classes that the goal is for foster children to reunite with their biological parents(s); however, it is sometimes difficult for foster parents to say goodbye to foster children if they do go back with their biological parents(s), despite the fact that reunification with biological parent(s) is the main goal of the foster care system.

My qualitative study was based on the research question: “What are the experiences of foster parents in San Diego County?” I focused on the lives of nine foster parents and gained insight into the foster care community through the eyes of the participants. I found four major themes in my research (with sub-themes): (1) Reasons for becoming a foster parent; (2) Feelings about foster children; (3) Best and worst experiences foster parents have with foster children; (4) Improvements in the Foster Care System. These four themes are important for understanding the roles of foster parents.
CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND

When children are neglected or abused by their parent(s) or guardian(s), they become wards of the state, and when this happens they are placed in the private home of a state certified foster parent. Foster care is a short-term living situation until a permanent home is found for the child, and “over half a million children in the United States receive foster care services each year” (Cheng 2010:1311). Although reunification with biological parents, where foster children return to their biological home, is the number one goal of the foster care system, “on average a child receiving foster care spends almost 29 months in the child welfare system, and 36% of served children enter long-term foster care” (Cheng 2010:1311). Foster parents become responsible for children entering the system, and “the caregivers in such families are responsible for the lion’s share of the children’s care and are often called on to facilitate a number of other case-related tasks intended to further the goal of permanence” (Zinn 2009:185). For example, foster parents are in contact with the social workers of both the child and the biological parent(s) or guardian(s), assist in visitation with the child’s biological parent(s) or guardian(s), and often even become adoptive parents; in fact, in 2007, “of the 1.8 million adopted children in the United States, 37 percent were adopted from foster care” (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2011:1).

Foster care services began in the United States in the mid 19th century by Charles Loring Brace, the founder of The Children’s Aid Society. Brace placed around 30,000 abandoned children living in New York City with farm families in the Midwest and west, known as the Orphan Train Movement, which lasted until the early 1900s. The Children’s Aid Society (2012) continues to be a leader in foster care reform and advocacy.

In the United States as of 2009, “both the number of children in care and entries into foster care decreased, while exits from foster care increased” (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2011:3). Specifically, “there were an estimated 423,773 children in foster care, 24 percent were in relative homes, and 48 percent were in non-relative foster family homes. The majority of children left the system to be reunited with their parents or primary
caretakers, and close to half of the children who left foster care in 2009 were in care for less than one year” (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2011:1).

Of the estimated 423,773 children in foster care in the United States, the state of California is responsible for about 63,000 foster children, and “since 2000, there has been a 45 percent drop in the share of California children in the system, a reduction achieved largely through shortening the time that most children spend in foster care” (Danielson and Lee 2010:1). However, “despite the significant reductions, the number of children who age out of the system—often facing uncertain futures with too little adult guidance—has actually risen since the beginning of the decade” (Danielson and Lee 2010:2). This data shows that while huge strides are being made in California’s foster care system, the system still faces challenges. The data also demonstrates that trends within California’s foster care system reflect those within the United States as a whole.

There are approximately 1,500 licensed family foster homes in San Diego County (County of San Diego 2012). If a person is interested in becoming a foster parent, he or she must go through a specific process to become licensed. To be licensed through San Diego County, an individual must attend an orientation meeting, fill out the application forms, pass a home inspection, be fingerprinted, be CPR and first aid certified, and complete 27 hours of training classes. These requirements are in place to make sure foster children are adequately cared for.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of foster parents, and then to “communicate the cultural meanings [I] have discovered to readers who are unfamiliar with that culture or cultural scene” (Spradley 1979:205). Specifically, I asked questions about day-to-day duties foster parents perform, their relationships with their foster children, and in general, their experiences as foster parents.

I conducted nine semi-structured interviews, where Esterberg (2002) says, “the goal is to explore a topic more openly and to allow interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words” (p. 87). I used a semi-structured interview guide with ethnographic prompts that I created. I tried to consistently use open-ended questions to allow my participants to talk continuously without being interrupted, and avoided asking leading and closed-ended questions. Also, like Weiss (1994) suggests, I tried to pick up on markers in my interviewees’ responses, which are passing references “made by a respondent to an important event or feeling state” (p. 77). It is important to note that out of the nine foster parents I interviewed, seven were women and two were men, and thus my study mostly reflects a female perspective on foster parenting. Conducting semi-structured interviews, where “we try to move beyond our own experiences and ideas and to really understand the other person’s point of view” (Esterberg 2002:87), was important for my study, and listening to my interviewees tell their stories allowed me to gain insight into their lives.

I conducted individual interviews with each of my participants at a time and place convenient to them. The participants were recruited from San Diego County’s Foster Parent Association and participation was voluntary. As participants contacted me, I found more participants via the “snowballing” method, where I asked my participants to connect me with other foster parents. My in-depth interviews took approximately 60 minutes and were recorded in their entirety using the notebook option in Microsoft Word on my laptop and the Voice Memos option on my iPhone. A sample interview guide is located in Appendix.
Immediately after an interview, I transcribed it and began coding, and I continued to code throughout my research process. According to Esterberg (2002), “qualitative coding entails three basic procedures: noticing relevant phenomena, collecting examples of these phenomena, and analyzing those phenomena in order to find commonalities, differences, patterns, and structures” (p. 58). I achieved this through open and focused coding of my transcripts, where my first step was open coding, where I went through all of my transcripts, line by line, and identified common themes using the computer program HyperResearch. By reading over the coded transcripts I was be able to find several themes that arose throughout all nine of my transcripts. My second step was focused coding, where I went through the transcripts line by line once again, but this time I focused on the common themes that emerged from open coding and was able to pull out relevant quotes for my findings section.

I applied inductive reasoning in my interviews, where, “rather than beginning with a particular theory and then looking at the empirical world to see if the theory is supported by “facts,” you begin by examining the social world and, in that process, develop a theory consistent with what you are seeing” (Esterberg 2002:7). I didn’t start my interview process with any expectations or hypotheses; rather, I was able to pinpoint various themes throughout my transcripts.

I followed a code of ethics while conducting and transcribing my nine interviews by following the ethical considerations of consent, risk, and privacy. According to Esterberg (2002), “maintaining confidentiality and obtaining informed consent” are two major considerations when conducting qualitative research (p. 45). Foster parents who participated in my research were verbally informed of the purpose of the study, risks, benefits, confidentiality, and a telephone number to call for questions. This information was also given to the foster parents on an informed consent form approved and stamped by San Diego State University’s Institutional Review Board, which they signed. I obtained consent from all of my interviewees by asking them if it were okay that I interviewed them, and I informed them all that the interview would be recorded. Esterberg (2002) also suggests, “a relatively easy way to help protect your subjects’ privacy when you are writing notes and transcribing interview tapes is to assign a code number or pseudonym and use that instead of the person’s real name” (p. 54). I assured my interviewees that only I would listen to the interviews, and that the interview files would be deleted from my computer and iPhone once they were
transcribed. I also assured my interviewees privacy by using pseudonyms, and masking any other identifying information in the transcriptions of my interviews.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

I discovered four major themes (with sub-themes) from my coding process, which are reasons for becoming a foster parent, feelings about foster children, the best and worst experiences foster parents have with foster children, and improvements in the foster care system. Foster parents have different suggestions to improve the foster care system, which include better-trained social workers and holding biological parents accountable to the court-mandated orders to get their child/ren back. Although foster parents have both enjoyable and unpleasant experiences with foster children, the good outweigh the bad. Foster parents recognize the importance of finding foster children a permanent home, whether it is with their biological parents or through adoption. There are various reasons why individuals choose to become foster parents, but overall foster parents have an enthusiasm for children and believe that all children should live in loving homes.

REASONS FOR BECOMING A FOSTER PARENT

I discovered from my interviews that some of the reasons why people become foster parents are because they cannot have biological children, they have a desire to contribute to society, or they have a passion for children.

Inability to Have Biological Children

Amy was told she could not have children of her own because of health reasons, so she and her husband decided to become foster parents:

My husband and I got into it because I was not supposed to have kids. I’ve had diabetes for numerous years, and so as a social worker we just thought doing foster care would be our way of having kids without necessarily having them, having our own kids…For my husband and I, it’s that we really enjoy kids, and it’s kind of our contribution to society, to take care of the kids.

Ben and his wife also could not have biological children:

Ben: We ourselves didn’t have children and we decided we both loved children and wanted to have our own children and that’s why we became foster, since we couldn’t have our own we decided to foster.
It can be tough for individuals to find out they cannot bear children, and fostering is an option families have to see what it is like having kids.

**Contribution to Society**

Some people are inspired to become foster parents because they know someone who is currently fostering. Foster parents try to recruit others to become licensed because of the need for foster parents. Lindsay was motivated to try out fostering after talking with some close friends:

Actually, my husband and I had some really good friends that were foster parents. My husband and I…didn’t think that we could have children of our own. So we thought, okay, we’ll see how it really is to be parents, right, we kinda thought fostering is a great step without having to commit to anything, like forever.

Other foster parents see fostering as a way of giving back to society and helping others, like Danielle and her husband:

Danielle: I believe it was God-driven…but my husband and I had gotten married. He had sold his business because of a disability, and he wanted to work with kids. He had been a ‘Big Brother’ at one time, and I heard an ad on the radio about being a foster parent, and it stuck with me all day.

Giving back to society and volunteering take many forms, and many individuals get involved in something to help others. Some people may get involved because of religious reasons, some people donate money, and other people donate time, like foster parents.

**Passion for Children**

Other foster parents realize that not every child lives in a loving environment and become foster parents to ensure that all children have the opportunity of a happy childhood, like Linda, who says:

I’m kind of an impulse shopper, and I saw an ad on television, and it’s about, oh I’d say 35 years ago, and I had my own two young children, and I saw an ad on TV, be a foster parent, and I had a very happy childhood, and I thought all kids should have a happy childhood, so we looked into it and then started fostering.

Like Linda, Hannah believes children deserve a happy, loving home:

I was 24 and I wanted to start having a family. And at the time he was my husband, now he’s is my ex, he wasn’t ready, and so we agreed like this would kinda be like our trying it, to have kids. Not only that but when I was back in middle school, some my friends, a couple of my friends were foster kids and they didn’t really enjoy it, so it was kind of a way to fix both problems, to give kids that were good a home and then to also test out the parenting ability.
Ben and his wife also became foster parents for the love of children:

Ben: It started years ago, it was really my wife who was the one who really wanted to become a foster parent. We ourselves didn’t have children and we decided we both loved children and wanted to have our own children and that’s why we became foster, since we couldn’t have our own we decided to foster…for the love of children.

Like Ben, Rodger and his wife started fostering “to do something they thought would help some kids.” Jamie began fostering because she wanted to adopt:

I entered into a program because I wanted to do adoption. So in order to do the adoption I needed to make sure that I was a foster...I had to be a registered foster parent also at that time.

Some people become foster parents because they want to give children an opportunity to have the positive childhood they experienced themselves; on the other hand, other individuals choose to become foster parents because they do not want children to grow up in the same negative environment they experienced. While Katie grew up in a loving family, her husband did not:

Katie: In my home it was one mom, one dad, 11 children…And in our home, my mom and dad, it was a very loving home…And my husband, on the other hand, he was raised in foster care. And he would tell me some of the stories of things that he experienced in foster care, that I would have to tell him, stop, I don’t wanna hear no more…And so my goal is to make sure, I’d like to make sure that the children that come into my home, they experience what I’ve experienced, and my husband wanted to make sure that none of the children experience what he’s experienced.

Although fostering can be stressful at times, foster parents are dedicated to improving the lives of foster children and are willing to share their love with kids who are removed from their families. Rhodes, Orme, and Buehler (2001) examine why certain foster parents continue to foster and others do not. There is a shortage of family foster homes, and recruitment for new foster families is necessary. The authors suggest, “foster parents quit because they do not have enough information about foster care and are dissatisfied both with agency interactions and the level of agency services for them and their children” (Rhodes et al. 2001:86). One of the main reasons foster parents quit is because of their dissatisfaction with agency policies and practices. Another reason is children’s behaviors. Foster parents contemplate quitting because they expect that seeing a child leave would be too hard, and they don’t enjoy the unanticipated difficulty in working with birth parents.
A possible solution to these problems would be more adequate training and services for foster parents. Cooley and Petren (2011) discover that foster parents desire more comprehensive training, and suggest “more specific training for working with particular populations of children, greater exposure to veteran foster parents, and more role playing and real life scenarios” (p. 1973). More adequate training could potentially better prepare foster parents to care for foster children with various behavioral problems, and if foster parents know what to expect, they may be more likely to continue fostering. Although foster parents are required to take a certain number of classes dealing with topics such as behavioral issues before becoming licensed, the classes can always be improved.

**Parenting by Foster Parents**

Parenting strategies vary among families and households, and in two-parent households, the responsibilities of each parent vary from family to family. Many of the parenting strategies of foster parents resemble those of parents with biological children. Crum (2010) studies the parenting characteristics of foster parents in relation to placement stability or disruption. Because foster children exhibit more social, behavioral, and psychological problems than children living in biological homes, foster care agencies have to meet the needs of foster children by finding them permanent placements. Thus, foster parents need to be adequately trained in dealing with these types of children, which may mean that parenting foster children differs from parenting biological children because of increased behavioral problems; however, he finds that “95% of foster parents reported having little to no difficulty setting limits for their child, and reported feeling comfortable with the guidelines they have set for their foster children” (Crum 2010:189). For example, Rodger expected his foster children to obey the same rules as his biological children:

> We really weren’t set on rules. The same rules that pertained to our kids pertained to them…They were expected to do the same thing as our kids, where they were brought into our house to be part of our family…I mean, clean your room, you make a mess, you clean it. Study for school, do their homework…same rules that pertained to our kids.

Zlotnick et al. (2010) examine parenting models. They show that parenting models are typically based on stable homes rather than transitional homes, such as foster care. Zlotnick et al. (2010) use the Circumplex Model, which identifies 16 types of couple and family relationships, to measure the success of parenting within transitional homes, and find
that “consistent with the Circumplex Model, all four parent groups identified communication, specifically respect, as crucial to successful parenting” (p. 22). They find that parents with children in transition, such as foster children, are successful when they deal with the surveillance of outside systems and oppose the negative connotations of the backgrounds of foster children. Zlotnick et al. recognize the importance of the unique experiences of parents in transition homes in parenting models. Successful parenting includes effective communication and respect, which is important because foster parents require certain skill sets, such as patience, the ability to say goodbye, and the ability to parent children with behavioral and emotional issues. Lindsay and her husband work as a team to parent their foster children:

Lindsay: We pretty much share a lot of the responsibility. I handle typically the interactions with the social workers, and I handle medical appointments. My husband does a lot of the cleaning and upkeep.

Foster parents are aware of the needs of foster children, and do their best to give them what they need. I discovered that in two-parent foster families, most of the work is split up between each parent; however, foster moms do a majority of the interactions with social workers and the setting up of appointments:

Linda: I will do more of the appointments, the visits, even though he’s done both. But for the most part, I would be in the charge of...like the business part of it. Of things that have to be kept, giving the social worker information or working with the social worker, the teachers, the therapist. And he’s basically a dad. A lot of these kids have never had a father in the home.

Katie: My husband, he helps me with the children. For example, if I have, if my son has a baseball game or a football game over here, and the kids have a doctors appointment, then he would either take my son to his game, I go to the doctors appointment, so that we’re able to kind of meet all the needs of the kids.

The roles of the mother and father differ in different foster families. Bernard and Dozier (2011) utilize the “This Is My Baby” interview to study the commitment foster parents have to their young foster children. This study evaluated foster parent delight in relationships with their young foster children. Bernard and Dozier highlight the maternal commitment mothers have for their biological children, and question whether foster mothers are able to feel the same kind of commitment to foster children. They realize that the levels of commitment to unrelated children vary. For example, some foster mothers see foster children as their own, while others remain distant in their relationship with a foster child and
do not become particularly attached. All of my interviewees expressed loving their foster and adopted children like their own, and if they did not have biological children, they could not imagine loving their biological children more than their foster or adopted children, like Danielle who says, “my kids, I never gave birth so I don’t know if I could love them more if they were my own, but in my mind, I couldn’t love them more than if I had given birth to them.”

Riggs, Delfabbro, and Augoustinos (2010) study the role of foster fathers. This study is important because most studies focus on foster mothers. Unlike Lindsay, Linda, and Katie’s husbands, Ben does a majority of the caretaking in his family:

The difference between me and my wife have is, me at home taking care of them. She works full-time, I work part-time. I’m quite satisfied with what we have at home now as far as kids…One thing I’ve always learned doing the foster parenting is the licensing person is a very good mentor, she always told me never take on more than what you are willing to do. So be happy with what you are able to do. Don’t think you can save the world, save the ones that you can and mentor those that you can.

Riggs et al. (2010) examine the role of foster fathers in the lives of foster children. They highlight how foster fathers often exhibit an opposite role of the abusive experiences of biological fathers in the lives of foster children, which results in positive rather than negative views of parenting in the child’s eyes. They find that these fathers are committed to being a positive role model in a child’s life, while at the same time breaking free from gender-normative approaches to parenting. One participant “not only engages in behaviors that may be considered traditionally masculine, but also in behaviors that involve boundary setting and emotional nurturance” (Riggs et al. 2010:33).

Buehler, Cox, and Cuddeback (2003) looked at parental characteristics that either encourage or hinder successful fostering. They suggest that family functioning should be one of the main focuses during the training of foster parents, and that training should continue throughout the fostering process. The authors identified perceived rewards and stressors parents associated with fostering. Perceived rewards included making a difference in a child’s life and seeing a child grow and develop, while perceived stressors included behavioral, emotional, and health problems of foster children and perceived agency incompetency or inadequacy. The authors also recognized factors that assist in successful fostering and inhibit successful fostering. Factors assisting in successful fostering included a
concern for children’s welfare, support from one’s church, and the ability to help foster children with their feelings. Factors inhibiting successful fostering included non-child centered motives for fostering, other demands for time and energy, and not enough help or support.

It is important that foster children have positive influences in their lives and individuals that act as role models, and foster fathers are an example of one potential positive influence. In general, no matter the different roles of foster parents in two-parent households, it is most important that foster parents show love to their foster children.

**FEELINGS ABOUT FOSTER CHILDREN**

Foster children enter the system for numerous reasons; for example, biological parents may use drugs, abuse, or neglect their children. The main goal of foster care is to find a permanent placement for children, whether it is going back to their biological parent(s), adoption, or long-term foster care. The most important thing, however, is that each foster child is placed with a good “match,” meaning someone with whom they work well, who will take proper care of them, and who will hopefully be their permanent placement. Foster parents want children who have been in their homes to find permanent residences, or “forever homes.” They realize that moving a child from one home to the next is detrimental to that child; therefore, the goal of the foster care system is to reunify children with their biological parent(s) if possible, and if not, find them permanent homes as soon as possible.

Amy, a foster parent and former social worker, understands the importance of successful “matches”:

> You know, it depends on the kid. This last one I didn’t feel so good about because of comments that the dad had made. I just didn’t feel like it was necessarily the perfect match for him. The family before that with the little girl we had was great. And so it just depends on the kid and the family that they’re going to.

As hard as it is for Jamie to accept the fact that she is working with biological parents to get their child/ren back, she understands that the number one goal of the foster care system is reunification:

> I was always commended by the social workers…because I always kept it in my mind that no matter what…you have to think of it as this: you have been doing the foster to adopt…this child no matter what if he does go back to his parents, which I mean is very emotional for me, but if he was to ever go back to his parents I always thought at least from the age of seven months until whatever time he was
back, he’s going to have the most loving, the most caring, and the most happy lifetime, that hopefully that will take him and keep him for when he grows older.

Wulczyn, Chen, and Courtney (2011) study how county social structural characteristics affect the rate of family reunification in the foster care system using a multi-level discrete time hazard model. These characteristics include urbanism, race, number of female-headed households, proportion of households in poverty, and foster care placement rate. All of these characteristics vary by state and county. Wulczyn et al. (2011) find that all of these characteristics, with the exception of poverty, affect family reunification; however, “one has to remember that poverty, family structure, and race are highly correlated, which may mean the underlying processes are more complex than these rather simple models suggest” (p. 429). Reunification, or the process of returning foster children to their biological families and the number one goal of foster care, is most likely after six months of initial placement, and every six months, the likelihood that reunification will occur goes down. Ben understands the importance of reunification:

You tell them (biological parents) that I’m doing this for you and the child and I hope you get back together, reunite and be fine…it’s helping people and that’s what it is, it’s a service.

Reunification takes a team of people: foster parents must work with biological parents to set up visits and encourage them to continue with court-mandated requirements, and social workers must visit frequently with both foster children and biological parents to encourage reunification and check to see how everybody involved is doing. Rodger hopes biological parents take the steps necessary to get their child/ren back:

And we’d emphasize to biological parents that their kids are not here forever. They were gonna be returned to them as long as they followed the criteria that the department has set up for them as far as classes and stuff. And we’d tell ’em, as long as you continue to do what you’re asked to do, you’ll get your kids back. It may take a little while, but you’ll get your kids back.

Foster parents care about the kids that come into their home, and want to make sure that they are safe once they leave their home.

**Placement and Permanency**

Placement and permanency are two terms used frequently in the foster care system. Placement refers to placing a child who enters the foster care system with a foster family:
Jamie: In actuality, we don’t pick them. They’re actually placed. There’s like a form and I think it’s similar to the adoption also, is what you’re willing to accept, what, if you want males, females, you know are you willing to take a child with a disability, are you willing to take a child that has medical needs that you know requires a lot of medical visits. Are you willing to take an infant, or do you want children who are seven to twelve. There is, you can mark all of these things off on a sheet to figure out what you what. And then what they do, they pretty much, they’ll call you when they have a placement.

Once children become County dependents, they are immediately given a place to live. However, that immediate placement may not be permanent. For example, way station homes have special licenses, and these foster parents take children immediately after they are removed from their current living situation for up to 30 days until they can be placed with a permanent placement. Katie’s home is a licensed way station:

But the way station homes are for the children that are, when they’re initially removed from their home…I believe what they do is the mom, they make a comment, you know, my kids can go with my aunt or my uncle, cousin, or someone from my church. So then that child would go to a way station home where they’ll be in a home environment…And in the way station home they would be there anywhere from possibly overnight to 30 days. And after 30 days if they have not found a place for the child, then they would put them in a long-term foster home. So if it’s something like, maybe they’re going to be going with their aunt, they would stay there long enough for the County to do the fingerprint and the background check on the aunt, and then that child would be able to go with their aunt.

Permanency refers to finding a placement for a foster child that will last until they either go back to living with biological family or age out of the system. Permanency is the number one goal of the foster care system, and according to Katie, “it’s more important to place them with a proper foster home, than just to place them in a foster home.” It is detrimental to children when they move from one foster home to the next, especially after multiple placements, which is why permanency is so important. Newton, Litrownik, and Landsverk (2000) study the relationship between number of placements and the prevalence of problem behaviors in foster children. They find that unstable placement histories, especially multiple placements, result in negative internalizing and externalizing behavior in foster children. Externalizing behavior is outward behavior; for example, aggressive behavior. Internalizing behavior affects children internally, such as anxiety and depression. The authors suggest that behavioral problems are both a cause and an outcome of placement instability. For example, “for the 173 children in the sample who initially were rated as not
evidencing behavioral problems, number of placements was a consistent predictor of increased internalizing, externalizing and total behavioral problems following a second assessment at 18 months” (Newton et al. 2000:1372). Negative externalizing behavior leads to more placements; at the same time, children who are well adjusted initially also experience behavioral problems after the breakdown of a placement. These problems affect the child negatively, therefore suggesting that placement permanency is vital to foster children.

Permanent placements differ for each foster child and include reunification with biological parents, adoption, long-term foster care, or admittance to a group home. Reunification with biological parents is the preferred placement for children in the foster care system, and foster care’s number one goal. Cheng (2010) used the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being to conduct a longitudinal analysis on how child welfare workers’ (social workers) involvement with biological parents, and the implementation of needed services for biological parents, influenced the outcome of children in long-term foster care. He found that social workers that are very involved with a foster child’s biological parents are more likely to reunify. He also found that reunification happens more often when parents need housing or financial services as opposed to domestic violence services. However, “the present research demonstrated that strong caseworker engagement can make adoption more likely” (Cheng 2010:1314). Ultimately, if biological parents are provided with the necessary services, they are more likely to reunify with their children. This study shows that reunification is possible, and that the social worker plays a vital role in making reunification happen.

Smith, Rudolph, and Swords (2002) assess permanency planning for foster children as stated in the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) in relation to kinship care. Smith et al. compare the permanency of children placed with kin, or relatives, to children placed in foster care. They find that “infants placed with relatives tended to remain more than twice the mean number of days than infants placed in regular foster care” (Smith et al. 2002:183). Kinship care is fairly new in the foster care system, and relatives must be licensed foster parents to take care of their kin, which could serve as an obstacle to placement. Smith et al. are critical of the current conditions of kinship care, because they differ from foster parents within the child welfare system. The use of kinship care is important to study because
it could reduce the number of children entering the foster care system. Children are only placed with kin if their kin is willing to take them in and care for them.

Long-term foster care results in a foster child staying with one foster family until they either reunify with their parents or age out of the system. Group homes, like the Polinsky Children’s Center in San Diego County, are communal living centers where children live in a dormitory-like setting with 24-hour staff as opposed to living with a family. Foster parents recognize how important permanency is for foster children:

Lindsay: It could be going to another foster family, it could be they’re going back to their biological family, it could be that they’re going to, go to a family that maybe is not gonna adopt them, but they’ll have long-term foster care with. It would be a family that would take guardianship over them without making that permanent adoption plan.

There are various options for permanency, and foster parents value permanent placements for foster children, like Linda who says, “so the whole idea is, these children will be with whoever they’re going to be with the rest of their life early on.” Katie took guardianship over her foster children instead of adopting them, because their biological father is in the process of getting his life together and getting his daughters back. Guardianship means that foster parents have legal rights, but if the children’s biological parent(s) are ever able to get their children back, the children will go back to them.

The foster care system is making legal changes so that permanency remains the number one priority for foster children. One of those changes is making it a law that foster parents have to pass both the foster care home inspection and the adoption home study process. The foster care home inspection makes sure that the foster home is safe for children and complies with all health and safety codes of the State, while the adoption home study process involves a home inspection and in-depth interviews with the foster/adoptive parents where social workers really get to know the foster/adoptive parents they are working with to best place children. This is in place so that if a foster parent decides to adopt, he or she can do so without hesitation:

Linda: Now our County is doing something called melding, and everyone who comes in to be a foster parent or adoptive parent will go through not only a foster home licensing process, but they will need to go through the adoption home study process, and be approved in both those areas to be a foster parent...But it’s all being done towards achieving permanency for the child, however that happens. So people are already approved to adopt, and they’ll ask them very early on, I mean at the time of placement, if this child doesn’t reunify, would you consider
being their permanent placement. So they’ll know from the beginning whether or not, if they place with that family, and not knowing the child and never seeing the child before, it’s not an absolute guarantee that family will adopt, but most foster parents adopt, and a large portion of the kids that can’t go home and are adopted are adopted by foster parents. So it’s kind of like streamlining.

Crea, Griffin, and Barth (2011) recognize the necessity of permanent placements for foster children. They studied the relationship between home study assessments and the recruitment of adoptive, or permanent, families; in other words, child specific recruitment. Specifically, this study focuses on potential adoptive families the child already knows. Crea et al. find that home studies identify general information about families, but do not depict enough sensitive information that could be crucial in matching a child with a family, and “home studies under-perform in areas that serve as important sources of information for decision-making. While recruiters’ adaptability is commendable in their methods of collecting additional information, these efforts may be occurring because of a lack of clear and appropriate home study guidelines at the administrative and policy levels” (Crea et al. 2011:33). They suggest that home studies be done differently so that permanent placement, or adoption, can be available more readily and more successfully for foster children.

Stott and Gustavsson (2010) study the outcomes of children aging out of the foster care system when they turn 18 and are considered adults. They recognize that the foster care system emphasizes and strives for permanency for foster children; however, the reality may be that adolescents expected to age out of the system will experience placement instability. Their research suggests “that youth who exit care to a legally permanent relationship do better than those who emancipate” (Stott and Gustavsson 2010:623). The importance of permanency is the creation and maintenance of healthy relationships and bonds, and when there is a lack of permanency, foster children typically have less healthy relationships. When foster children age out of the system they face hardship in education, employment, and housing, and indulge in criminal acts and various forms of abuse. Thus, the outcome is usually negative. Younger children are more likely to be adopted than older children, and older children are more apt to have placement instability than their younger peers. Stott and Gustavsson suggest policy changes in the foster care system where stable placements are prioritized over the standards of legal permanence for adolescent foster youth.

Reilly (2003) also recognizes a need for programs and policy interventions for youth exiting the foster care system, because data shows that these youth have a difficult time
living on their own, and “minimizing the number of movements for older youth necessitates making out-of-home care more acceptable to older youth in care by giving them more control over their living arrangements” (p. 741).

Currently, foster care assistance ends when an individual turns 18, and many foster youth, once dumped by the system, experience homelessness, unemployment, and lower educational attainment than individuals who never entered the foster care system. The law AB 12 was passed in September 2010, and under AB 12, foster youth receive the same funding and qualify for the same programs as foster youth until they turn 21 years old. However, the foster parents I interviewed are not seeing AB 12 in full effect. There needs to be more options for foster children aging out of the system, and, unfortunately, the foster care system does not have many options for teenagers or children aging out of the system:

Hannah: Polinsky is the big foster group home here, it’s the intake center for all the, like if the cops wanna drop somebody off they take them to the Polinsky. If foster parents can’t handle the child and want to return them, they return them to Polinsky. Polinsky’s the big return center, or the intake center, however you want to, it’s the biggest group home in San Diego County…They do usually let older children stay there with in and out privileges. It’s mostly just like a temporary kind of group home shelter. There’s San Pasqual which has it’s own high school academy thing, but it’s out in the middle of nowhere. Then there’s other group homes, or there’s other foster parents, but foster parents, like I said, don’t really, not many take kids that age. So it’s really hard for them. Now with the AB 12 there’s supposedly going to be teenage housing. But “A,” they don’t have any money for it, and “B,” there is none available. So who knows when that’s ever gonna happen.

Clearly, there needs to be more options for teenage foster children, and foster children aging out of the system, so that these kids can fulfill their potential and be able to go to school and follow their dreams.

**Adoption**

Adoption is the next best option for foster children, after reunification with biological parents fails, because adoption guarantees permanent placement. Ryan et al. (2010) studied the options of adoption for foster children, and they specifically compare the process of kinship adoption to other adoption options. More than ever relatives are adopting foster children through kinship adoption. They find that kin adoptive families have fewer children, are smaller in size generally, and make less money yearly than non-kin adoptive families. Also, white families are more likely to adopt kin than families of color, and children adopted
into kin families are more likely to be female. However, Scott et al. find that kin adoptive parents say that their family functioning, or overall family happiness, goes down when their kin is adopted, possibly because “kin families may have felt more obligated to take on additional family members, despite unpreparedness or ambivalence” (as cited in Ryan et al. 2010:1637). While kinship adoption makes adjusting to a new life easier for a foster child, it does not always work out well.

Many foster parents end up adopting one or more of the children that enter their home. Danielle did not enter the foster care system with the intention of adopting, but the adoption of her two children ended up being her best experiences as a foster parent:

I don’t know, how could you have a child in your house, for me, how could you have a child in your home for a year, be a parent, them be your child, and then when they go up for adoption give them to somebody else…My husband and I didn’t get into it to adopt, but at the time we were newly married…and we wanted kids. And then we just didn’t have our own, it just never happened for us, so when it came time for adoption it just seemed like the natural, it was just natural for us to keep them. You know what, I think, probably my best experiences were, of course, the adoption of my children, my two kids.

Rodger and his wife fostered for thirty years, so when they adopted their daughter the process was easy:

Rodger: Well when we adopted her it was real simple. I mean, if she had been living with you, or the child been living with you in that time, and they were looking for an adoption, and you said you wanted to adopt, they would just start the paperwork, and then, it didn’t take long. Within a month they’d say, okay, you have an appointment with the judge to finalize the adoption, and that’s what we did with her, we went to court and they gave her to us and that was it. It wasn’t hard back then. Now I know it’s hard, it’s a lot harder.

Hannah considers every child that comes into her home her own, and views adoption as, “It’s whoever is with you at the end of the road is whoever’s with you at the end of the road. If it’s one kid, if it’s five kids, it’s whatever, that’s who’s with you.” Ben has a similar viewpoint, where he believes, “I think they adopted us.”

However, foster parents who enter the system with the intention of adopting sometimes experience frustration with social workers after being placed with a child who the social workers say will most likely go up for adoption, but really they are further from adoption than anticipated. Certain foster children are closer to a 2-6 hearing, which is where the biological parents rights are revoked. This means that the biological parents have not kept up with the requirements the court set up, including, but not limited too, visitations with
children, drug testing, and various classes. Jamie experienced frustration in the process of adopting her son:

And I was doing what they called a concurrent placement plan…where they place a foster child with you that is on the cusps of having the parental rights terminated. So when my child was placed with me...he was placed with me when he was seven months old. And at that point the biological mother did not visit him. And he had been in the system, he was placed with me in January, he was in the system in October the previous year...So what that entailed was they were going to be terminating her rights…If the parent’s rights are terminated then he would become free for adoption and then I would, he would go with me. Well concurrent placement in this way, doesn’t always work this way. So that three and a half years almost was when he had been with me until he was adopted.

Jamie believes that the courts should hold biological parents more responsible so that foster children either reunify with their biological parents in a timely matter, or are put in an alternative permanent placement, like in Jamie’s case, adoption:

Foster families are trying to work with the families in trying to help them to get, to do better. But there’s no set of consequences. The parents have no consequences. There’s no, I mean there’s consequences in the end, and yes you’re going to lose your child, but that consequence, heck it drew out for three years. Perfect example…three years without consequence.

Adoption is a great way to achieve a permanent placement for a foster child, even though the adoption process can be tedious.

**BEST AND WORST EXPERIENCES WITH FOSTER CHILDREN**

Foster parents have both positive and negative experiences with foster children. For example, foster parents enjoy the times when their foster children flourish. Some foster parents are also happy and excited when they are able to adopt a foster child they developed a special bond with. Negative experiences include dealing with delinquent behavior on a day-to-day basis and seeing foster children suffer.

**Positive Experiences**

The positive experiences are what keep foster parents wanting to continue doing foster care and work within the foster care system, and some of these experiences are even unexpected. Foster parents are able to influence the lives of many individuals including both
foster children and their biological families. Each of the foster parents I interviewed expressed having positive experiences as foster parents:

Amy: The top one would be being able to adopt our daughter.

Lindsay: Getting to make a difference in the lives of their biological families has been something completely unexpected that’s just really, really cool…Getting to work with them and share in their, our first mom, share in her progress, and in her success. That was completely fulfilling…And having a conversation about our daughter that we’re gonna adopt, where they told us, you know, if our daughter has to be adopted, we’re so thankful it’s you. And being trusted with their child. That’s pretty amazing, pretty amazing experience.

Linda: And with Joey, Joey was a really, he was just such a beat down little boy…and they told me that he was probably autistic. Well over the time that I had him, in those 30 days he started coming out of his shell, and starting to be happy…And over the time that I had Joey, I had him another, oh 3 years, so I think I had him 4 years total. He just, he had such a overcoming spirit. He just had the worst background, and he just rose above it.

Katie: My best experience is when I got my three girls. At first, actually initially I got the two. They’re all three sisters. And the two girls came with me, and they were supposed to be with me for just a few weeks, and so forth. But after they went to court it seemed like it was gonna be a little longer. So the social worker contacted me and she asked me if I would keep them for 6 months. And I says I would keep them only if you send me the other girl, because I hear they have a little sister that was in another foster home…So when I got all the girls…that was a pleasure, it was a real pleasure, having the three sisters.

Danielle: I think just the experience of watching these little kids come into your home that you know didn’t have anything prior, come in and be surrounded with love, and their world opens up.

Jamie: My best experiences? When I got my son.

Hannah: When you know you’ve taught them something and they got it, you know.

Rodger: Just some of the comments some of the kids used to make. We had one kid for five years, he would make comments like, boy I can hardly wait till you get old so I can watch you and take care of you.

Ben: When one of the kids tells me that they appreciate what I do, and they tell me they love me. That’s what you do it for, just for that. Helping a family. It’s just, you know, passing forward, you know just helping out, being there with the help and that’s what I try to teach my kids.

Foster parents strive to care for foster children to the best of their ability, and when the outcome is positive, it makes fostering that much more rewarding and enjoyable.
Negative Experiences

Foster parents also have negative, frustrating, and sometimes sad experiences with foster children. Although these experiences occur, they do not typically result in foster parents removing themselves from the foster care system. For some foster parents, saying goodbye to a child is the most challenging part of the system:

Amy: We had one little boy that we had about two weeks. He was released from the hospital, we brought him home, and noticed that there was on a spot on the bottom of his spine. Took him into the doctor, and the doctor released him with a very small spot of spina bifida. And then he went home to his mom, like four or five days later, and I don’t know if he was followed up on. So that was a difficult one.

Although the objective of foster care is for foster children to return to their biological home, it is still tough for foster parents to say goodbye to their foster children:

Lindsay: Oh probably my daughter going home. That’s probably the worst thing. I mean, it’s tough. Saying goodbye is really tough.

Danielle: We had one little boy who was with us for three years, and the day that the judge was going to remove rights and give us adoption, you know put him up for adoption, and we wanted to adopt him, his birth grandmother came from another state and took him on that day. We had one hour to say goodbye to him. That was I think the hardest part, you know, because he had become a brother to our other foster son. It was difficult for all of us, that particular one was the hardest one.

Hannah: One of them came to me at age four and he left me at age six, and I really, really fell in love with that one, it was very sad day when I had to give him up.

Foster parents also take in foster children with extreme behaviors that sometimes disrupt family life:

Linda: I haven’t had that bad to where it was like traumatizing experiences, but very difficult little kids that...but they’re amazing because they’re so brave...We had a 3 year-old little boy who was horrid, and he would peel the wallpaper off the walls and flush it in the toilet so it backed up...But I mean there’s kids that are difficult because they do things like that.

Ben: We had one boy, just he was very troubled, and a lot of anger, and as soon as I would leave the house he would just terrorize my wife...He never was towards me. And for whatever reason when I would come back he would straighten up and never gave me any problem whatsoever. He would just terrorize my wife whenever I would leave the house, and it came to a point where I couldn’t leave.

It is evident that foster parents care greatly for the children that come into their home, and although there are difficulties in parenting children with behavioral and emotional
problems, some foster parents are understanding of the children’s actions and try their best to make sure they are in a loving environment.

**Foster Children and Behavioral Problems**

Foster children experience behavioral problems at a higher rate than children not in the foster care system, and foster parents are aware of this. Foster parents learn how to deal with various behavioral issues in the mandatory classes they take to get their license. Ryan and Testa (2005) studied delinquent behavior in foster children in relation to their placement, number of placements, and maltreatment. They find that foster children who are maltreated by their biological family members are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior:

Danielle: My kids have issues from their childhood, Max really struggles right now, he has depression, he has anger issues just like his birth dad, but he’s getting help. Jackie, she is probably one of the sweetest people you will ever meet in your whole entire life. Most of the time when she would steal when she was little, she doesn’t do it anymore, she would steal to give to other people, because that’s how she is.

Also, multiple placements, or placement instability, increase the likelihood of delinquency in foster children; for example, “the relative risk for children with only one placement (12%) or even two placements (11%) is nearly identical to the relative risk associated with the children who avoid placement all together (11%). This pattern suggests that placement instability, not placement itself, is at least partly responsible for the increased risk of delinquency” (Ryan and Testa 2005:245). Ryan and Testa recognize that delinquent behavior could be learned before a child is placed into foster care. Another explanation of delinquent behavior is that the child was poorly supervised prior to being placed into care, because deviance is learned socially through the environment and association with deviant peer groups. Also, multiple placements causes a child’s social attachments to weaken, and thus they are more likely to participate in delinquent behavior. Behavioral problems are due to many factors, and foster parents have diverse ways of dealing with children with behavioral problems, like Amy who said:

A lot of them have tantrums. A lot of them have issues with stealing and lying, because that’s what’s been successful for them in their biological families is lying and stealing…There’s a lot of mood disorders in the kids, and a lot of them are in therapy weekly because of the traumatic abuse that they’ve been through.
It is apparent that while raising foster children may be a challenge, foster parents understand the situations foster children come from, and are willing to not only tolerate their behavior, but also work with them on their behavior. Linda tries to get her foster children involved in various activities:

We try to get them all in something they’re interested in, because they do so much better when they’re feeling successful at something, or they’re good at something. Because they, foster care is never a positive thing, oh you’re a foster kid. Like there’s something wrong with them. There’s people that don’t think their kids should play with foster children because there’s something wrong with foster children.

Cox, Cherry, and Orme (2011) recognize that many foster children have emotional or behavioral problems, or are at risk of developing these problems, and study the willingness of foster parents to take children into their homes with emotional or behavioral problems. Currently there is no measure used to evaluate the willingness of a foster parent to foster a child with specific problems. Therefore, Cox et al. developed the measure the Willingness to Foster Scale-Emotional and Behavioral Problems (WFS-EBP). They find that “foster parents who indicate a willingness to foster children with emotional and behavioral problems will not only have longer careers as foster parents but will also have more children in their homes relative to licensed capacity at any given time” (Cox et al. 2011:63). They also find that foster parents who held specialized foster care licenses were more willing to foster children with emotional and behavioral problems than foster parents who held traditional licenses.

Strijker, van Oijen, and Knot-Dickscheit (2010) study the importance of the agreement between foster parents and foster children regarding problem behavior. Foster parents have the ability to rate the severity of behavioral problems in foster children, but foster children do not have this option. Sometime foster parents give their, typically older, foster children an ultimatum:

Hannah: And then the last one I had for a about three months, everything seemed really great but she had two sides to her, one side she was sweet, playful and very nice, but then on the other side she was failing school, skipping school, had unprotected sex several times and wanted to get pregnant at age 15...And she had had sex with three or four different individuals in my home, and she had a sex tape going around school. It just, I was like, you either need to stop or you need to go, and she decided to go.

Strijker et al. (2010) believe there is a need for foster children to also assess behavior problems, which could reduce a foster child’s number of placements. Their study examines
the agreement between a foster parent and a foster child concerning problem behavior and the length of that specific placement. Strijker et al. find that severe behavioral problems, and the agreement between a foster child and a foster parent about behavioral problems differing, lead to the ending of a placement. Strijker et al. realize the importance of an understanding between foster parents and foster children in terms of behavior problems to reduce the number of placements a child has.

Hurlburt et al. (2010) use the Parent Daily Report (PDR), which measures parent-reported child behaviors, to examine the relationship between behavioral problems and negative placement disruptions, meaning placements that affect foster children negatively, in foster care. Hurlburt et al. find that foster children with high PDR ratings and who were living with non-relatives had higher levels of negative placement disruptions. Hurlburt et al. (2010) suggest that PDR be used to help foster parents prevent placement disruptions and that “PDR counts continue to have predictive value,” so that foster children have more permanence (p. 925). Any means to improve the quantity of placement disruptions is important in the lives of foster children.

As Hannah puts it, “there’s no “typical,” everybody, it’s based off of their experience.” Foster children have a large range of behavioral and emotional problems, but foster parents are aware of this and are willing to work with foster children in developing positive habits.

**IMPROVEMENTS IN THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM**

Foster parents see the need for some changes in the foster care system, all with the well being of foster children in mind. Two major improvements include the role of the social worker and holding biological parents accountable.

**Holding Biological Parents Accountable**

Biological parents have certain criteria they have to meet, established by the courts, before they are able to get their children back. They also have a certain amount of time to meet each court mandated requirement, which may include but is not limited to, parenting classes, drug and alcohol treatment, and therapist appointments. The courts try to help biological parents get back on their feet as much as possible.
The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997, or Public Law 105-89, promotes and values the health and safety of foster children over reunification with biological parents, which is the number one goal of the foster care system. ASFA “ensures safety of abused and neglected children, and requires States to initiate court proceedings to free a child for adoption once that child had been waiting in foster care for at least 15 of the most recent 22 months, unless there was an exception” (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2012:1). The foster care system does what it can to reunite foster children with their biological families, but its focus is on finding a permanent placement, or home, for foster children, whether that is reunification or adoption. Parental rights are terminated in what is called a 2-6 hearing:

Linda: So, first they would do a 2-1 hearing to terminate the services to the parent, and then they set in court the 2-6 hearing, which terminates their rights. So the parents really have to get busy right away and do what they need to be doing. Which is a huge challenge, because there’s a lot to do. And they’re given a list with numbers and programs to call, but they kind of have to go from being drug addicts to motivated, capable people to get going on this. But a lot of them do it, so they can.

McWey, Henderson, and Alexander (2011) study foster care decisions made in Virginia from 1980 to 1993, 1994 to 1997, and 1997 to present. They used ecological theory and a mixed-methods approach to observe these family-court interactions. McWey et al. find that more parental appeals, or appeals by biological parents to have more time to complete court-mandated classes or requirements to get their children back, were overturned during 1980 to 1993 than from 1997 to present. In 1997 the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was passed, which emphasizes permanency planning for foster children. Also, in all three time frames, parents with mental health issues were less likely to get their appeals approved in court, while substance abuse wasn’t as likely to affect court outcomes. This means that biological parents with alcohol and drug problems who appealed in court for more time to complete court-mandated requirements were granted appeals more often than biological parents with mental health issues. This suggests that the courts consider mental health issues untreatable and substance abuse treatable. In terms of getting children back, biological “parents must demonstrate, according to specifications of the foster care system, that they are fit and able to care for their child by completing within a set period—typically 12 months under ASFA—all specified requirements of their individualized foster care case
plan” (McWey et al. 2011:1038). The court is supposed to have the best interests of the child in mind when making a decision. Rodger wants to see foster children reunited with their biological family:

They were gonna be returned to them (biological parents) as long as they followed the criteria that the department has set up for them as far as classes and stuff. And we’d tell ‘em, as long as you continue to do what you’re asked to do, you’ll get your kids back. It may take a little while, but you’ll get your kids back.

McWey et al. (2011) find that prior to the implementation of ASFA, family-specific evidence was used in court benefiting biological parents and put biological families back together. On the other hand, post-ASFA decisions were based on the rules of ASFA, making it more difficult for biological parents to get their child/ren back.

Although ASFA has set rules in place about the amount of time biological parents have to get their children back, foster parents are still waiting lengths of time before being able to adopt foster children:

Danielle: I mean if you go three months with your child in the foster system and you never make contact, you never call, or you never show up, and they were given bus tokens, and we would drive to meet them, where are you at. I mean our goal was to have them have their birth family back. I mean, if at all possible.

Jamie believes that the courts give biological parents too many breaks and extensions on requirements for getting their child/ren back. Jamie wishes the courts actually held biological parents to a set standard:

And foster parents you get mistreated…you’re going to these court dates with these children and you’re looking at these parents that you know it took them a year to finish a six-week course, and the person isn’t even working…and then you just see the court just say okay well you get another six months. Here’s another six months, and it’s like they’re not doing anything, they’re doing the bare minimum…Because if they have the consequences and they’re actually held to those consequences then I think that it would make it easier for a parent to succeed because they’re having a more structured thing. And if they can’t do it, if they throw their hands up and say I don’t want to do this, then you know what maybe it’s better off that your child is with another family. Children in the system are just sitting and just waiting and waiting and waiting for parents that aren’t really ever going to be there.

Jamie agrees with the goal of ASFA, which puts the health and safety of foster children first. She understands how detrimental it is to children to play this waiting game in the foster care system for months, even years, before they end up back with their biological parents or find
another permanent home. Hannah also thinks that biological parents should be held more accountable:

Don’t get me wrong I understand the concept of, biological parents come first, but…I still have personal problems with understanding how biological parents can mess up time and time again and still get their kids back.

Although ASFA intended to get foster children into a permanent home as soon as possible while still trying to reunify them with their biological parents, it seems like biological parents are given the benefit of the doubt in most cases, and have extended periods of time to get their children back. On the downside, children are in the foster system longer. Foster parents, like Jamie, “think that they need to make the parents more accountable.”

**The Role of the Social Worker**

Social workers play a vital role in the foster care system. Foster parents have a social worker, foster children each have their own social worker, and if a child goes up for adoption, both foster parents and foster children get an adoptions social worker. For foster parents, social workers make sure their homes are appropriate for housing foster children and that they comply with all the rules and regulations of the foster care system. For foster children, social workers are supposed to make sure that they are adequately being cared for, and are supposed to meet with them once a month. Unfortunately, social workers have huge caseloads, which make it hard for them to keep up with all their cases. Also, foster parents question whether new social workers are receiving sufficient training.

Schwartz (2008) looks at three different cases of foster children. One case looks at a sibling set of four boys found under-sized and malnourished:

In this case, a social worker was supposed to visit the Jackson home weekly. She did not. When she did visit the Jackson’s, apparently about once a month, she did not see the boys or do much more than ask, “Is everything all right?” Whether the social worker had too heavy a caseload, and/or she was inadequately trained to do her job were questions raised at (New Jersey) state hearings that ultimately restructured the expectations in terms of preparation and workload for social workers. (P. 611)

In Milwaukee, more than a dozen children experienced negative relationships with social workers, such as, “infrequent caseworker contact with the children, too frequent moves of children from one foster home to another, and delays in placing the children in permanent homes” (Schwartz 2008:612). Schwartz recognizes that social workers are overloaded with
more children than they can handle effectively, and also sees the need for better-trained social workers. Foster parents also recognize that social workers have a tough job and are overloaded, but they still get frustrated with social workers at times:

Amy: We have some social workers that are more willing to help the parents try to get their children back. You have some social workers that from the very beginning don’t think it’s a good idea for the parents to get the child back. And some social workers are more open and willing to give you information, and others don’t. And their caseloads are very heavy right now, so usually most social workers have 40-60 kids on their caseload at a time…So, you have some that are really into it, and I think you have some that are just worn out. The burn out rate for social workers is every five years, they’re just burnt out. So I think the County has a lot of burnt out social workers.

As Rodger puts it, “some workers would listen to what we would say, others would really ignore what we were telling them.” What foster parents think social workers are supposed to do and what social workers actually do differs and causes frustration:

Jamie: The social worker in my opinion is supposed to be, they’re the facilitator for the family, for the child and the family. So there supposed to be working to get both the family and the child reunited…They need to give new social workers like a packet, with like all the papers they should need, like here’s what you should have. Because mine, the new one, he didn’t have these forms for the, those forms for a visit, the like if I did a visit I need a visit form or a phone call form. He didn’t have those, he didn’t even know they existed.

Hannah also experiences frustration with social workers:

Hannah: Don’t get me wrong, I know that they’re busy and they got a lot on their plates, but there’s a disconnect there, there’s a lack of attention and detail. There’s a lot missing. Don’t get me wrong, like I said, they have 30-40 caseloads, and like I said, you’re bringing like a half a day per kid per month and that’s not a lot. Drive out to a home to do a visit and come back you’ve already wasted like two of your four hours with that kid.

Ben recognizes that social workers have a tough job and personally has only had positive experiences with social workers:

They got a tough job, they’re very busy. I think it’s almost a thankless job sometimes. There are some very good ones out there. And there are some out there, the new ones, I mean it’s a learning process that you gotta go through. The good ones will listen to the foster parents, and will sit down and listen to what they need. I’ve been fortunate that I’ve had a lot of good social workers. There’s a couple of people that I know of that haven’t had, it can be very, very rough.

Pasztor et al. (2006) realize that there is inadequate research regarding foster parents and access to healthcare for their foster children, so they studied the needs of foster parents to
give recommendations about the qualifications and roles of foster parents. The authors suggest that foster parents must be seen as an active and valued member of the service provider team; therefore, foster parents must be completely informed about the needs of their foster children. Foster parents must also have full access to healthcare and mental healthcare for their foster children. The authors suggest that these are basic necessities for foster parents to successfully raise foster children. Katie agrees that social workers need to inform foster parents of all the needs of the children coming into their home:

And that is, stop putting everything under the confidentiality umbrella, and tell us what we need to know so that we can properly care for these children. If it’s confidential, then you need to tell me and say don’t tell nobody else, which we’re not…So we know to keep confidential, but there’s certain things you need to tell us. Just tell me the truth. And I think they’re afraid if we tell the truth then you may not take them.

Overall, it seems like foster parents experience more frustration than gratitude toward social workers. According to Hannah, “the social workers don’t make it worth it. In all my years, I have to say, there’s probably only two or three social workers that I can say have been worth their weight in gold.” Foster parents suggest that in order to improve the foster care system as a whole, biological parents need to be held more accountable, and social workers need to do their jobs thoroughly and properly.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The goal of this ethnographic study on the experiences of foster parents in San Diego County was to bring to light the motives individuals have for becoming foster parents, to explore how foster families function, and to comprehend the foster care system. In particular, I asked participants to describe their reasons for becoming a foster parent, as well as to explain their experiences with foster children and involvement in the foster care system. I gained insight into the roles of foster parents within the foster care system through the words of my participants, and found that although foster parenting may be difficult at times, making a difference in a child’s life is well worth it. This study allowed foster parents to share their experiences, both positive and negative, of raising foster children.

Four main themes emerged from my research. Those themes were reasons for becoming a foster parent, feelings about foster children, the best and worst experiences foster parents have with foster children, and improvements in the foster care system. Reasons for becoming a foster parent included the sub-theme of parenting by foster parents. Foster parents are trained in how to specifically parent foster children, because many foster children have behavioral and emotional problems. Feelings about foster children included the sub-themes of placement and permanency and adoption. Placement and permanency was an important sub-theme that described how important placement stability is for foster children, and participants emphasized in their own words the importance of permanency for children in the foster care system. Adoption was another important sub-theme because many foster parents adopt foster children. Best and worst experiences foster parents have with foster children included the sub-themes of positive experiences, negative experiences, and foster children and behavioral problems. Foster parents are willing to work on behavioral problems with their foster children, and although they have negative experiences with foster children, the good outweigh the bad. Improvements in the foster care system included the sub-themes of holding biological parents accountable and the role of the social worker. Foster parents
recognize that certain improvements can be made in the foster care system at the benefit of both foster children and foster parents.

There are potential problems and limitations to my study. I only interviewed nine participants, and seven of my nine participants were foster mothers. Therefore, there was not an equal representation of foster fathers. This could have affected my findings and made them more representative of the female viewpoint.

This study is important because it looks at individuals directly involved in the foster care system and their point of view on how the system operates. The best way to improve the foster care system is to consider the suggestions by people whose are living the experiences of the system daily. My findings are evidence that while most foster parents are willing to work in conjunction with the foster care system to improve the lives of foster children, there are still flaws and improvements to be made.

Foster parents had the opportunity to share their stories, and by reading these stories, other foster parents may find comfort that other people are going through the same things they are. Future research on this topic should focus on working on changing the negative connotation foster parents are given. Lindsay would like to see a change on the image of foster parents:

And I think too, for me, I would just really love to change the, the idea of what a foster parent is, the connotation. I do believe there’s a negative connotation attached to being a foster parent. I think you say foster parent and people immediately think, oh, those are the people that have 6 kids, and they put them all in bunk beds, and they’re all just doing it for the…money.

Through my research I discovered that the reasons individuals become foster parents is not because of the money, but rather out of passion and compassion. As Katie put it, “we chose to be foster parents, but you did not choose to be a foster child.” All nine participants hope to see a change in the negative image of the foster care system.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE
Tell me about becoming a foster parent.
Tell me why you chose to become a foster parent.
Can you describe for me, step by step, the procedures to become a foster parent?
   - Describe any difficulties or challenges you encountered in the process of becoming a foster parent.
   - Describe the roles that you and your husband/wife have as foster parents. (If applicable).
   - Tell me about your best experiences(s)?
Tell me about your worst experiences(s)?
What are the benefits of being a foster parent?
How are foster parents reimbursed?
Describe the job done by the County in foster care.
What are some recommendations you have for the County to improve foster care?
Describe for me your typical day.
What do you enjoy most?
What do you enjoy least?
Describe the process of getting to know a new foster child.
Describe typical behaviors of foster children.
Tell me about the process of a foster child being placed into foster care.
Tell me about the process of a child getting into a foster home.
Tell me about the process of deciding to adopt a foster child.
Tell me about the options foster children have once they leave their foster family.
How do you feel when a child you’ve been taking care of leaves?
   - How do you feel when you are introduced to a new foster child you are responsible for?
How do your biological children feel about their foster brothers/sisters? (If applicable).
How has your life changed since becoming a foster parent?
How do you deal with the stresses of being a foster parent?
   - How do you feel about planning family activities when there are foster children coming in and out of your home?
Concluding questions: Allow the participant to reflect on the interview and ask me any questions.