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Experiences, Concerns, & Needs of Foster Parents to Promote Child Resiliency

Emma Friemel

University of Arkansas

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Abstract

Children in foster care are highly likely to have experienced some form of abuse or neglect, along with a host of other negative or harmful experiences. These experiences can leave them vulnerable when faced with difficult situations in the future. This research examines the various factors that may affect a foster child's ability to be resilient in future adverse situations. There are several studies that examine the resiliency of children in foster care, but few examine resiliency from the perspective of the child's foster parents. Three hundred and sixteen prospective, current, and future foster parents in the state of Oklahoma were given a survey that included questions regarding their experiences as a foster parent. Based on Masten's resilience theory, the relationship between risk factors and protective factors was examined in order to see the different components that influence a foster child's potential to be resilient. Thematic analysis was used to determine common themes regarding risk and protective factors among foster children and foster parents, as well as experiences with support agency workers, and ways that foster parents think that the foster care system could be improved in order to help the child be more resilient.

Keywords: resilience, foster children, foster parents

Introduction and Literature Review

The foster system serves hundreds of thousands of children and youth every year who would otherwise remain in an abusive or neglectful household. If there is suspected abuse or neglect, children may be placed into a foster home until their home is deemed safe enough for them to return. Both the foster child and foster parents must adapt their lives as they experience incredible change and learn to become more resilient for future challenges.

In 2017, over 440,000 children were in the foster care system in the United States (Children's Bureau, 2018) and the number continues to grow. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, in Oklahoma alone, there were over 10,000 children from 1 to 20 years of age in foster care in 2016 (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). Children who enter the foster care system at any point are at a greater risk for a host of negative outcomes, such as heart disease, alcoholism, shorter lifespan, etc. (Felitti, et al., 1998).

Foster children and parents alike experience incredible difficulties while adjusting their lives to one another, as well as facing the consequences of a child that has once been in an abusive/neglectful home. Because so many children and families experience the foster care system, it is crucial to determine what does and does not encourage individuals to be resilient in future difficult situations. Using Masten's (2018, 2011, 2001) resilience theory, the proposed study aims to explore foster parents' experiences within the foster care system to identify factors that may promote or hinder resiliency.

Foster Care System

A child is placed into the foster system if there is suspected abuse or neglect in a home. If there is suspected abuse or neglect, a caseworker will investigate the child's

home situation. If they are at a moderate risk, then the child will typically remain in the home, and the parents will receive home-based education services. However, if a child's home is deemed unsafe and the child is at high risk, the child will be removed from their home and placed into temporary care in a shelter, group home, with a family member, or a foster home while the caseworker determines the best possible living situation for the child (Oklahoma DHS, 2017). Foster care is a significant intervention that provides relief while the foster child's home situation is investigated. Many children are reunited with their primary caregivers after a length of time in foster care, however, many children may age out of the system, be adopted by their foster parents, or become emancipated (Oklahoma Department of Human Services, 2017). The length of stay for a child in foster care varies between cases; however, the average length of time for a child to remain in foster care in 2016 was 1-2 years (Children's Bureau, 2018). The majority of children and youth in the foster system are White, Hispanic, or African American, and are of all ages (Children's Bureau, 2018). With the increasing numbers of children in foster care, the role of the foster parent is becoming even more important.

In order for an adult to become a foster parent, they must fulfill a set of requirements offered by the state. According to the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, this can include things like licensing, certification, and education classes that attempt to prepare them to become a foster parent (Oklahoma DHS, 2018). Foster parents can never truly prepare for their foster child, though. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychology (2018), around 30% of children who are placed in the foster system have emotional, behavioral, or developmental issues that stem

from their abuse or neglect, such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression (Harden, 2004), which can be challenging for foster parents to learn to manage and adapt to.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Children who have been affected by the foster system experience many hardships and challenges in their life. Children in foster care are likely to have accumulated several Adverse Childhood Experiences (also known as ACEs), which can have lasting negative consequences. ACEs are stressful or traumatic experiences that happen in childhood, such as physical/emotional/sexual abuse, neglect, or severe challenges in the household (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). The more ACEs a child experiences, the higher risk they are for having health problems in later life than those who have no ACEs. Individuals with 4 ACEs are 2 times more likely to develop cancer or heart disease. Those with 5 ACEs are 8 times more likely to become an alcoholic, and those with 6 or more ACE's have a life expectancy that is 20 years less than people with less than 6 ACEs (Felitti, et al., 1998). All children in foster care automatically have at least one ACE due to the childhood maltreatment they experienced that placed them in the foster care system - many of these children will continue to accumulate multiple ACEs based on the severity of their situation and quality of foster placement. Eighty percent of children who were in the foster system that have experienced abuse or neglect have one or more chronic medical issues (Vandervort, Henry, & Sloane, 2012), and are at a greater risk for criminal behavior later on in life than children who never experienced violence or neglect in the home (UNICEF, 2006). They are also more likely to experience negative health effects, like obesity and heart disease, as well as performing worse academically and engaging in riskier behaviors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018;

Stott, 2012). Children in the foster care system, however, do not always experience negative outcomes. With the proper supports, the foster parent and child can develop a positive relationship with one another during their time together (Simmel, 2007).

Resilience Theory

When individuals go through adverse experiences, they may begin to develop resilience. Based on Masten's resilience framework, resilience is the ability to "adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the viability, the function, or the development of that system" (Masten, 2014, p. 6). When an individual experiences adversity, it is important to examine the different factors that either hinder or promote the level of resiliency (Yates, Tyrell, & Masten, 2015). Risk factors include anything that contributes negatively to an individual's outcome, such as low income or a history of trauma (Masten, 2011). On the other hand, promotive factors, or assets, are resources that typically help and assist any individual's outcome at every level of risk (Masten, 2018). Protective factors are similar to promotive factors, but are more focused on mitigating the potential for negative outcomes. (Masten, 2018). There are also multiple approaches to measure and analyze resilience. The person-focused approach compares different people in order to identify resilient versus not resilient individuals and the differences between the two. The variable-focused approach is more broad, and seeks to find the relationship between how different factors promote/hinder resiliency (Masten, 2001).

Children in foster care are highly likely to have gone through adverse experiences, because of the abuse and neglect from their parents and the huge transitions from home to home. Developing resiliency can help children in the foster system who have been abused or neglected potentially avoid many of the negative outcomes that

come from the ACEs they have accumulated. The purpose of the proposed study is to identify features and experiences within the foster care system that would contribute to or hinder resiliency among children and their foster families, from the perspective of foster parents. These features and experiences will be identified based on key concepts from Masten's resiliency framework (i.e., identification of assets, risks, promotive factors, and protective factors; Masten, 2018, 2011, 2001).

Method

Sample

Data for this study comes from the 2017 Oklahoma State University Center for Family Resilience Foster Parent Survey. A total of 316 foster parents were administered an online survey via Qualtrics, asking them questions about their various experiences parenting foster children, child needs, and interactions with foster care system staff and administrators. The survey includes basic questions about demographics, employment, ages, etc., as well as questions about their involvements with their foster children and the system, resources they may have had, different forms of education they've received about foster care, etc. The proposed study specifically focuses on parents' written responses to the following open-ended items:

- *What experiences and/or situations prevent you from considering fostering?*
- *Please list your reasons for considering quitting and/or quitting the foster system.*
- *What is the most important thing a foster child needs?*
- *What challenges do/did/will you face as a foster parent?*

- *What challenges do foster children face?*
- *To feel more supported/respected as a foster parent, the following can be done....*

Plan of Analysis

A qualitative approach was used to look for common experiences, concerns, and needs reported by foster parents that would theoretically contribute to or hinder resiliency processes. Based on Braun and Clarke's (Braun & Clarke, 2006) thematic process for analyzing qualitative data, the survey data was examined for reoccurring themes among the foster parents' responses. Initial data analysis involved pulling relevant quotes from parents' survey responses and assigning them a code – either based on Masten's resilience theory or in vivo – along with a definition for the code. After coding the responses, reoccurring themes from the codes were determined and then refined. For each theme, an analysis was conducted to ensure there is no overlap between themes. To ensure reliability of the codes, another individual coded 10-15% of the survey responses. Finally, a report of the final themes from the foster parent surveys was written in order to relate the research back to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

The survey responses included discussion involving, risk factors (170), protective factors (84), experiences with agencies (75), and ways to improve the foster care system (46). A breakdown of the total number of comments made about each theme and subtheme is included in Table 1 at the end of the study. Consistent throughout the responses was the difficulty and frustration of being a foster parent because of the plethora of risk factors associated with foster child and foster parent experience. Based on

many of the survey responses, there were several common themes that emerged regarding risk factors, protective factors, agency worker experiences, and suggestions to improve the foster care system as a whole.

Risk Factors

Over half of the survey responses included experiences and concerns for both foster parents and foster children that could contribute negatively to the foster child's outcome. Foster parents had risk factors specifically associated with their own experiences, including a feeling of being burned out, the demandingness of being a foster parent, feeling a lack of support from agency workers, receiving poor treatment from agency workers, and feeling like they did not receive enough information regarding their foster child placement. One parent articulated several of these frustrations in one of their survey responses:

There is no support for foster parents. We are ostracized if we ask for help, we are regarded as uncaring if we have to put our own family's needs first. We spend countless hours and money attending trainings on how to manage the behaviors of the children in our home but when a problem arises, we have no say in the care the children receive.

In addition to risks associated with foster parents, the foster parents in the survey noted numerous risk factors that their children have experienced that have contributed negatively to their possibility of resilience. The responses included discussion involving ACE's, the difficulty of transitioning into the foster care system, negative experiences with the child's biological parents, frequent transitions between several foster homes, the

presence of mental health diagnoses, and the struggles these children face in school. One parent shared their observations of their own foster children's experience:

Each child is unique and their challenges are unique to them. But they face the worry of will they want me? New bed, new school, new faces, new everything. They have been through their own trauma, their own hell, and as such we need to help them heal. It's not as easy as a band aid fix. Their wounds are much more serious and need time to heal. They need love to heal but it won't happen overnight.

Protective Factors

In order to mitigate the effects of risk factors faced by foster parents and children, protective factors are crucial in promoting resilience among foster children. Compared to the number of responses given regarding risk factors, responses including protective factors were mentioned less than half the time. There was significant discussion about the importance of foster children being in an environment of love, stability, structure, consistency, understanding, acceptance, safety, security, and support- most of which are provided by foster parents in the home in order to promote resiliency. When asked about the most important things that a foster child needs, two parents responded with:

"To feel safe, then to feel loved. This is often achieved through structure and consistency."

"Knowing their self-worth and creating meaningful bonds with caregivers and/or parents. Self-Control. Sense of belonging. Knowing unconditional love."

Experiences with Agencies

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Among the responses given in the survey, a plethora of answers included some sort of experience with an agency worker assigned to the individual's foster child and foster home. The responses were analyzed to determine the overall attitude of the foster parent towards the agency worker, and if their experiences were more geared towards being a risk factor or a protective factor. The experiences were classified as positive if the response included some form of praise towards an agency worker in the past. One foster parent noted that:

"I had one caseworker who was INCREDIBLE."

On the other hand, negative agency worker experiences were classified based on if the response included some form of criticism or frustration towards the agency worker. One parent described their experience as such:

"The other childrens' worker was awful- terrible about responding to emails/texts/calls, dismissive of concerns, treated us poorly/suspiciously. If this worker had been our first worker, we would have immediately closed our home."

The results showed that there were almost five times more negative experiences with agency workers than positive experiences. More often than not, foster parents expressed that their caseworkers or other agency workers communicated poorly, left the foster parent feeling unvalued or unheard, or the foster parent felt that there was a preference towards the foster child's biological parent(s). There was very little discussion about the characteristics that made certain agency worker experiences positive.

Improving the Foster Care System from the Perspective of Foster Parents

A surprising amount of responses given from the survey were geared towards ways that foster parent's wished the foster care system was improved in order to better

their overall experience as a foster parent. This data was not originally intended to be analyzed, however, almost 50 responses included some form of suggestion by the foster parent to improve their experience for future foster child placements. Almost all of these responses included ways that agency workers could improve their interactions with foster parents, such as providing more information regarding the foster child placement, giving the foster parent greater rights regarding their foster child, taking the concerns and thoughts of foster parents more seriously, increasing the accessibility of resources regarding mental health services for the foster child, and following through with the promises made to foster parents and their foster children. When given the question of ways to make foster parents feel more supported/respected, several parents had similar responses, such as:

“Clear communication with respect from DHS, an understanding and paradigm within DHS that the foster families are allies. No retaliation when foster parent disagrees with DHS.”

“Listen to concerns, be included as part of the “team”, be involved in the child’s case, be informed of the case details.”

Discussion

This study seeks to bring awareness to the various factors that can either hinder or promote resilience among children in foster care. Obviously, each child is different and no two children will have the same responses to adverse situations depending on their previous family history, however, the research allows us to see common factors that increase a child’s likelihood to be or not be resilient. Because of the cumulation of ACE’s that these children experience, it is only necessary that researchers learn ways to help a

child be more resilient in the future. Without resiliency, an individual would be unable to recover from adverse situations and would continue living in overwhelming stress and discomfort. The foster parents in the survey expressed that their foster children are likely to have accumulated a number of risk factors based off of their previous life experiences, including the presence of ACE's, having a difficult transition from their biological home into foster care, moving from foster home to foster home, the presence of a mental health diagnosis, and having trouble in school. By determining these factors that are likely to make a child less resilient in the future, proper interventions implemented by foster parents or foster agencies can be put in place to promote resiliency in the child (Leve, Harold, Chamberlain, Landsverk, Fisher, & Vostanis, 2012).

Foster parents, as well, experience their own set of risk factors from just being a foster parent. The foster parents in this survey shared their own risk factor experiences, including feeling a lack of support, having a negative experience with a support agency, being treated poorly by agency workers, the demandingness of being a foster parent, and not receiving enough information regarding their foster child placement. These risk factors can contribute negatively to the resilience within the foster children because of the residual effects from the toll that is taken on the foster parents' own resiliency. Several of the parents mentioned feeling burned out because of their experiences being a foster parent, which can lead to less effective parenting, and even the potential to quit foster care and no longer take placements. This is clearly a huge problem, and it is crucial for agencies to provide proper resources in order to equip foster parents and give them the assets they need to continue fostering and support their foster children. This should include not only physical supports, like trainings and funds for things like therapy, but

also emotional and communicative supports, such as making parents feel involved in the case (MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, Leschied, 2006).

Opposite to risk factors, the survey data also showed several protective factors that foster parents contribute towards the resiliency of their children, including stability/structure, love, consistency, support, understanding/acceptance, and safety/security. These things work to mitigate the negative effects of the risk factors experienced by both foster children and parents and seek to promote resiliency in the child. Although both risk and protective factors were presented in the survey data, there were more than twice as many risk factors than protective factors. Based on the variable-focused approach in Masten's resilience theory, we can see the disproportionate relationship between these two factors, and the overall hindrance to resiliency this data set represents (Masten, 2001). Children in foster care, because of increased exposure to trauma and often turbulent experiences in foster care, are in desperate need of a foster home that is loving, stable, and nurturing- circumstances that they are likely to have lacked in their previous home. This research confirms the necessity of foster parents to create a home that exemplifies these characteristics, so that foster children can develop positively and learn to overcome challenges (Harden, 2004). By developing a positive relationship with an adult caregiver, the foster parent can facilitate learning in regard to maintaining healthy relationships, understanding how to self-regulate, and learning problem solving skills for future situations that they likely had not learned from their biological parents (Masten, 2015). Although most of the foster parents had similar responses in ways to promote resilience among their foster children, it would certainly

still be beneficial to provide proper training and resources so that foster parents know the significance in providing a loving and stable home for the child.

In addition to the components of Masten's resilience theory, two other themes emerged from the data. Many of the foster parents expressed frustrations and negative experiences with agencies like DHS, whose purpose is to better the life of the foster child and provide proper supports to all parties involved with the foster care system. Most of the responses involving these agencies were incredibly undesirable, and involved some sort of discussion that left the foster parents feeling unheard or unvalued, that there was a clear preference given to the child's biological parents, and that there was an immense lack of communication given to the foster parent regarding their foster child. All of these components could be classified as risk factors, leaving the foster parent and child even more vulnerable in future experiences with adversity. However, another theme that emerged involved suggestions for improving the foster care system in order to better the lives of foster parents and their children. This included discussion regarding ways that agency workers could improve communication with foster parents, an overall increase of rights for foster parents and children in the system, and greater access to mental health resources for the foster child. The data provides valuable information from the perspective of the foster child's direct temporary caregiver, and institutions and agency workers can seek to minimize these risks and aim to make the life of foster parents less strenuous and frustrating. Agency workers can begin to work towards a system that provides greater supports, inclusivity, and partnership with foster parents, which will in turn encourage high foster parent retention, and more foster homes to accept placements and provide foster children with a safe and temporary home (Hamilton, 2011).

Study Strengths & Limitations

A significant strength of this study is the number of foster parent participants who chose to take part in the survey. The survey included responses from 316 individuals who have been a foster parent or are considering becoming a foster parents for the foster care system in Oklahoma, and from the data, over 375 items were coded for this research, with certain items being cross-coded. The open-ended items allowed for parents to share their experiences regarding their foster child and the system thoroughly and in-depth regarding risk factors, protective factors, interactions with agency workers, and suggestions to improve the system as a whole.

Another strength of this study is the emergence of data regarding ways that foster parents wish the system could improve. Because foster parents play a significant role in the life of a foster child, it is crucial to take their thoughts and feelings into consideration for how to make the system better overall. When a child is removed from their home and placed into a foster home, they will likely spend the majority of their time with their foster parents and family. As the child's temporary caregiver, and in some situations the future adoptive parent, their suggestions should certainly not be taken lightly.

Although the findings of this study showed several different factors that may influence the resiliency of children in foster care, it is crucial for other studies to be conducted to ensure the most accurate overall picture of resiliency among foster children in the foster care system. Other studies regarding the experiences of the foster child's biological parents, agency workers, and the foster children themselves should be examined in order to determine the most ideal outcomes to improve the foster care system to encourage resiliency among foster children.

A limitation of the study is the lack of participant responses regarding promotive factors. This could be attributed to the inclination for evaluation comments to skew negative (Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998). In order to have the best overall picture of the likelihood of resilience in future adverse situations, it is important to take into consideration the promotive factors that the foster parent and foster child have experienced. It is an essential element of Masten's Resilience Theory, and unfortunately is lacking in this research (Masten, 2011).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study show that children and parents involved in the foster care system experience a variety of risk and protective factors that either promote or hinder resiliency among foster children. Firstly, the most significant risk factors that were mentioned were categorized into either risk associated with the foster parents or risks associated with the foster children. Risks associated with foster children mentioned in the survey responses included adverse childhood experiences (ACE's), difficult transitions once entering foster care, the presence of mental health disorders, the number of transitions between foster homes, difficulties in school, and connections with the child's biological parents. Risks associated with foster parents mentioned in the survey responses included risk factors from the parents' life outside of foster care, lack of support for parents, negative experiences with support agencies, poor treatment of foster parents, the demandingness of being a foster parent, and a lack of information given to foster parents. Other findings in the study included positive and negative experiences with agencies meant to support foster children, as well as ways that the foster system could be improved from the perspective of a foster parent. All of these components lead

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to the overall level of resiliency in the foster child when faced with future adverse situations.

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Table 1

Thematic Categories	Number of Comments
Protective Factors (Total)	84
Stability/Structure	17
Love	32
Consistency	13
Support/Understanding/Acceptance	12
Safety/Security	10
Risk Factors (Foster Children) (Total)	63
Adverse Childhood Experiences	14
Difficult Transitions	24
Presence of Mental Health Diagnosis	10
Frequent Transitions in Foster Care	6
Difficulties in School	9
Risk Factors (Foster Parents) (Total)	108
Burnout	7
Lack of Support	19
Negative Experiences with Support Agencies	29
Poor Treatment of Foster Parents	20
Demandingness of Being a Foster Parent	24
Lack of Information	9
Experiences with Agencies (Total)	75
Positive Experiences	6
Negative Experiences	29
Lack of Communication	20
Foster Parent not Feeling Heard/Valued	12
Preference given to biological parents	8
Ways to Improve the Foster Care System (Total)	46
Better Communication	5
Taking Foster Parents' Concerns & Thoughts More Seriously	9
Following Through with Needs of Foster Parents & Children	3
More Information	15
Expanded Foster Parent & Child Rights	11
Expanded Mental Health Resources	3