

The Impact of Fostering on the Foster Family

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The introduction of a child into a foster home has a profound and multifaceted effect upon the parents and children of the foster family.

This paper describes some of the resultant stresses, and outlines ways to manage them productively.

Fostering has a significant impact on the foster home. This paper examines the vibrations of feelings and behavior set up in the foster family as it responds to the impact of fostering a child or children. Each family, of course, responds to fostering in its unique way, and it is impossible to deal comprehensively with all the variations of response. Rather than attempting a detailed approach to response, this paper selects four stresses from the total impact force and deals with ways the family may respond to them. These four stresses are: the stress of the disruption of the family equilibrium; the stress of coping with the child in transition; the stress of dealing with the alien agency; and the stress of harboring great expectations. An attempt is made to clarify the nature of the stress and to show how such stress leads to the development of responsive feelings and behavior in the family members. Implicit is the awareness that foster families can be helped to deal creatively with these stresses; the problem remains that all too often this help is not forthcoming.

Disruption of the Family Equilibrium

Families develop an equilibrium in their functioning so that there are familiar patterns of activity, relationships, decision making and problem

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solving. Stress of any type tends to disrupt the equilibrium and by and large, the greater the stress the greater the disruption. An additional child in the home is a significant stress and always causes disruption in the existing transactional patterns.

The addition of one more child greatly increases the numbers of relationships available in the home. For example, one foster child added to a family of three increases the possible groups from four to 11. Two foster children would increase the possible groups to 26, and so on. There are now many more relationships to take the time of family members and they have less opportunity to be with each other. Furthermore, each family member now has a number of groups within the home in which he may be included or from which he may be excluded, and he must work out his position with each group. Within each group the hierarchical order has to be established, and individual members may find themselves pushed into less prominent roles.

It is important to remember that foster family care is not simply foster parent care and that the problems of working out the surrogate relationship with the foster child do not stop with the parents, but involve the children as well. The role of the surrogate brother or sister is a difficult one. The child, lacking the adult's reasoning capacity, sees the world in egocentric terms. If there are "bad" parents, then his parents could be bad. The foster sibling serves to stir up his own feelings of possible abandonment. In fact, he always experiences some abandonment; when his parents give their attention to the foster child, the family's own child frequently wonders if his parents have given up on him. Although cast into this stressful situation, the foster family's own child feels somehow obligated to like, befriend, understand and tolerate the very source of his discomfort. The strong pressures to accept the foster sibling lead the biological child to feel guilt for his appropriate hostile feelings and, if such feelings manage to gain expression through his repressive defense, they are most often greeted with parental dismay and reproach. Depending on the manner in which the child deals with stress, he may display a variety of responses. One commonly sees minor upsets in the family's own children following the introduction of foster children to their home. Generally these are of a transitory nature, but unless such behavior is understood and adjustments made in the family functioning, the children can develop more maladaptive behavior.

Familiar patterns of family activity may also be upset by the foster child. Family patterns tend to develop gradually and the individual members are scarcely aware of how important these are until it becomes difficult to engage in them. Mealtime conversations, deciding which television show to watch, visiting a relative, taking a trip, playing games — all of these activities are altered by the presence of another child.

Coping With the Child in Transition

Foster care is by nature transitory and the foster child throughout his stay is in transition. He has left one place and he will be going to another. The child has had a life before he comes and he brings this life and its experiences with him. The foster family have not experienced any of this and the child, aside from what they have learned about him from the agency, is an unknown to them. The family may have fantasies of what he experienced, or they may be afraid to talk about certain things or do certain things for fear of upsetting, hurting or disturbing the child.

Once he is in the home the family is expected to relate to this child in as open and loving a way as possible, while at the same time realizing that the relationship must end. This puts heavy demands on the family's feelings. The problem is made more difficult by any uncertainty that is allowed to creep in. For example, when the length of stay is left vague, it is difficult to know how to relate. There is a natural reluctance to getting into deeper feelings when the time for the relationship is to be short, but what if one doesn't really know how long the stay will be? If a deep relationship is broken on short notice, this can be traumatic; but if the parents keep themselves emotionally distant, this can be rejecting. The foster family's own child is prepared to share his toys readily with a foster child who is staying only a short time, but he feels somewhat differently if the child is to be there a long time. In the confusion of a gradual transition from expecting a short stay to experiencing a longer stay, resentful feelings are easily generated.

With a child in transition the foster parents may have difficulty in exercising control and may be hesitant and indecisive, wondering whether it is fair to punish the foster child or wondering whether there is any point, since the child is only a temporary member of the home. Foster parents are not the guardians of the foster child; the child does not belong to them. In such a situation the parents are hard pressed to exercise their authority. The family's own children see discrepancy between the way the parents deal with them and their foster siblings, and they may go through a period of upset behavior until the discrepancy is clarified.

The foster child comes into the home showing the effects of the last separation or, worse, showing the effects of numerous separations. He brings with him his natural defenses. (1) He may be unable to express his feelings or to ask what has happened, he may deny that he has undergone any difficulties, he may repeat behavior related to resolving repressed conflicts, he may attempt to become the one who does the pushing around, he may see every difficulty that arises as being caused by somebody or something other than himself, or he may act a lot younger than his age. All of this behavior is common in children who are in transition, and this behavior can be difficult to contend with in the home.

Another feature of this transitory relationship is the foster child's own family. The CWLA Standards for Foster Family Care Service, (2) states regarding visits with the own family: "The frequency and place of visits should be determined by the child's welfare rather than by administrative convenience. Arrangements for visiting should be made so as to encourage regularity and reduce any strain in the atmosphere." There is no need to elaborate on the stress that visiting and contact with the foster child's own parents could have on the foster family. Comparisons of parenting ability, competition for the child's affection, mutual hostility and related guilt are some features with which the foster parents may have to contend in dealing with their foster child's own parents in this transitional situation.

At the time of parting, the foster family has to deal with the work of separating from their foster child. The stress of separation is difficult when human feelings are lost in the urgency of necessary plans. The foster family has real attachments to the child and yet this is often overlooked by the sudden removal of a child from the home, with nary a thought to future contact or even to exchanging letters or phone calls.

Dealing With the Alien Agency

Through the eyes of the foster family, the child welfare agency may look much different than it does through the eyes of the agency worker. As with any relationship, the relationship between foster family and agency begins in ambivalence. The word "alien" is used to highlight the negative pole of this ambivalence. *The alien agency is a description of the agency as it might be viewed through the eyes of a critical foster family.*

No matter how sensitive the worker, the foster home study is stressful to the family because, if the worker is to do her job, she must evaluate what she sees. The family is then under some scrutiny and judgment, and the worker can be viewed as a potential source of hurt and criticism. Throughout the agency-foster family relationship this potential is there, and foster families are likely to be sensitive to it, especially at times of trouble with the child. Even when there is no trouble foster parents may feel that the alien agency is constantly looking over their shoulder, and their self-esteem is forever under threat. The feelings about the agency as remote and judgmental are increased when the family has difficulty with their assigned worker. They usually say nothing for fear of what will be said about them in the discussions at the agency that they know will follow their complaint.

The alien agency places a child without adequately considering how that child might affect the life of the foster family. The alien agency doesn't give the family time to consider the placement request and never takes the time to see that the family's own children understand what is going to happen. Foster parents find themselves accepting a child because to refuse the eloquent

request of the worker would make them feel guilty; or worse, they feel that if they refuse they may not get another offer. The foster family's own children may return home from school to find a foster sibling in the home, and there is now no opportunity to voice their concerns and objections. Once the agreement is reached, the alien agency places the child in such a hurry that the foster family never quite get to hear what they are expected to do with this young stranger.

The alien agency, for whatever reasons, does not tell the foster parents about the difficulties the child has presented in the past. When old difficulties emerge the foster family is unprepared and the parents may feel they are to blame, or they develop a mistrust and hostility toward the agency. In cases where the alien agency really doesn't know much about the child, it never says it doesn't know, but musters up some vague reply to the inquiries of the foster family.

Once the alien agency gets used to a foster family, it uses it to the point of exhaustion. "The Jones family is really the only one who could handle a child like this; they will always make room for one more."

The alien agency never clarifies who is to make what decision, so that the foster parents are always in doubt as to how much initiative they may take. What do they do if Billy swears or if Mary steals? If they do something they may be wrong; if they do nothing, they may be wrong; if they phone the worker, they may be wrong.

The alien agency makes all the important decisions without the participation of the foster parents. Consultations with psychiatrists and social workers may give token recognition to the foster family for data-gathering purposes, but in the decision-making process the foster family is left out.

The alien agency supplies inexperienced workers, who have little supervision and who, as soon as they are getting to understand the family, are caught up in the ongoing worker turnover and replaced by another worker.

The alien agency pays lip service to upgrading its foster home programs. There is talk of foster parent groups, there is talk of better home studies, there is talk of worker-foster parents teamwork, there is talk of never again overloading a home, there is talk of special transition homes, there is talk of developing the career aspects of foster parents. There is talk from this agency, but no action. The foster family will eventually despair of change and will stop fostering or cease to relate with the agency in anything but the bare administrative necessities.

Harboring Great Expectations

We have borrowed Charles Dickens' title to highlight the common but destructive practice of harboring unrealistic expectations about what is going

to be accomplished by the foster placement. Great expectations usually grow out of a combination of agency need, unclear contract, and foster home grandiosity. The agency must place a difficult child, and out of its need it approaches the foster parents in a way that bolsters the parents' self-esteem. "Billy really needs a home like yours; his last home just wasn't suitable." The parents feel needed, and from the way the worker talked to them they feel capable and competent. Their sense of their own capabilities may have become exaggerated. The situation is more likely to develop into great expectations when there is vagueness about what should be accomplished, or when the truth about the child's former behavior is not told.

Once great expectations have developed one can count on a later deterioration in the feelings in the foster home and in the relationship with the agency. When the child begins to show behavior that indicates he may not be doing so well as expected, the foster home is hesitant to inform the worker because that would be tantamount to admitting failure. As the difficulty increases, the foster parents feel increasingly less capable and more self-critical. They begin to reject the child. The situation may then degenerate to the point of precipitous phone calls or open anger. The atmosphere in the foster home is tense and its members feel guilty and angry. In the worker's estimation, at this point the home is unsuitable and in the urgency of the situation he is likely to go to the next home, saying, "Billy really needs a home like yours; his last home just wasn't suitable." The seeds are sown for the regrowth of great expectations.

Successful Coping With Stress

Stress is a neutral entity in mental health. It is how stress is dealt with that makes for growth or decay. This paper thus far has principally dealt with negative results of the stress of fostering on the foster family. The impact of fostering on the foster family can also have positive results. The equilibrium of the foster family may be disrupted, but the re-equilibrium may produce more openness and awareness in the family members. The foster family's own children may develop greater awareness of the strengths in their own home, and their understanding of the world may be broadened. The experience with a child in transition may allow the family to begin to be less threatened by the transitory quality of life itself, and in this deep but transitory relationship they may find strength for dealing with their own separations. The family may meet and overcome their feelings about the alien agency, and so develop a deeper sense of respect for each other and a deeper sense of confidence in the family. They may also learn that realistic goals are achievable and, when reached, promote a real sense of satisfaction.

This happy state of affairs cannot be reached by the family without the

help of the agency. The foundations of competent agency involvement are essentially built on simple, well-known principles. To begin with, there should be a thorough home study that includes some thought about the needs of the agency and the needs of the individual members of the family. Before each child is placed the foster family should have time to plan for his arrival and to deal as much as possible with family feelings. The worker must be open and honest in the description of the child. A thorough attempt must be made to set realistic expectations as to the outcome. The length of stay must be decided; where this is not possible, the principles on which this decision will be made should be stated. Foster parents should be involved in decision making. The relationship with the worker should be cooperative and provision should be made for the agency to deal fairly with foster family complaints. When these principles are practiced, the impact of fostering on the foster family leads to growth and satisfaction in its members. ♦

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