

Hardiness of Foster Families and the Intent to Continue to Foster

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ABSTRACT. Recent research in the area of foster care has examined a number of external factors that may influence foster family retention. However, insufficient research has been devoted to the question of foster family hardiness, or internal strengths of foster families, and how it may affect retention. Hardiness in families means that families possess a belief that they can control or influence events of their experience, feel deep commitment, and anticipate change as a positive challenge. Additionally, hardy families exhibit a confidence in their abilities. Utilizing the Family Hardiness Index, this research reports findings from a study of 82 foster families from one southeastern United States metropolitan area. Foster families who reported an intent to continue to foster scored higher on the Family Hardiness Index than families from a non-clinical sample. Foster families who reported an intent to continue also scored higher than those foster families who reported they did not intend to continue. Logistic regression indicated that higher levels of hardiness and fewer years of licensure as foster parents were significantly associated with intent to continue to foster. The study also discusses implications of hardiness screening of prospective foster families and its potential value for improving support to and retention of foster parents, thus increasing stability and service efficacy for the children they serve. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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In 1999, approximately 133,000 family foster homes provided care for non-related children licensed in the United States. Of the more than 568,000 children in substitute care, approximately seventy-five percent resided in family foster care settings (Child Welfare League of America [CWLA], 1999).

Family foster care is an essential child welfare option for families and children (National Commission on Family Foster Care, 1991). Foster care is also considered the least restrictive form of placement for children. Care is delivered in private homes by foster parents who take on the daily parenting and nurturing activities required in caring for children. Foster care is also considerably less expensive than residential treatment center placements (Rubenstein, Armentrout, Levin, & Herald, 1978). In addition, foster family entry rates are not significantly affected by unemployment levels in the community or by initial offer of financial incentives. It is clear that foster parents do not take on the responsibility of caring for children based on economic conditions or needs (Tucker, Hurl, & Ford, 1994).

Becoming a foster parent is a complicated choice. Ninety-four percent of foster parents receive pre-service training of up to 15 days in addition to annual update training (CWLA, 1998). Prospective foster parents also undergo an extensive background, credit, and personal history investigation. Their homes, families, and history are closely scrutinized. Over 40% of the potential foster parents who complete the lengthy process of training and licensure discontinue fostering before the second year (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992). A number of attempts have been made, both qualitatively and quantitatively, to identify items such as reimbursement levels, education, age of foster mother, and agency support as critical to the retention of foster parents. The strengths and internal functioning of the foster family unit have largely been ignored as factors affecting retention. This study examined the hardiness of the foster *family* as a component of their intent to continue to foster. This pilot study was guided by the following questions: (1) Do foster families who plan to continue to provide foster care demonstrate hardiness at higher levels than the general population? (2) Do foster families who intend to continue to foster report higher hardiness levels than those foster families that do not intend to continue? (3) Is hardiness predictive of foster families' intent to continue? (4) What other foster family characteristics are predictive of their intent to continue foster-

ing? The answers to these questions have important implications for effective recruitment and retention of foster families.

Literature Review

The concept of hardiness was first identified in the literature in relation to the health status of individuals. It was argued that the *ability* to cope (i.e., demonstrate hardiness) with difficult situations was linked with improved outcomes in physical and psychological health. On the other hand, a lack of this ability was characterized by increased risk to physical and psychological well being (Kobasa, 1979; Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1992; McCubbin, McCubbin & Thompson, 1991).

Hardy persons were considered to possess three general characteristics: (1) the belief that they can control or influence events of their experience, (2) an ability to feel deeply involved or committed to the activities of their lives, and (3) the anticipation of change as an exciting challenge to further development (Kobasa, 1979, p. 3).

Hardiness

Building upon Kobasa's work, McCubbin, McCubbin and Thompson (1991) developed the *Resiliency Model of Stress, Adjustment, and Adaptation*. Hardiness refers to both internal strengths and durability and is demonstrated by an ability to find solutions in difficult situations, a willingness to accept change, and a sense of control over the outcomes to life events and setbacks. This same model also suggests that within families hardiness is positively related to resilience or to favorable outcomes for stressful events (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1992). Family hardiness refers to family members' ability to work together to solve problems, their perception that they have choice or control over outcomes in life events, their notion that change may be both beneficial and growth producing, and their active (as opposed to passive) style under duress (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1992).

Resilience

Resilience refers to the capacity for successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances. Resilience has been used to describe three types of phenomena: (1) good outcomes despite high-risk status or "overcoming the odds," (2) sustained competence under threat,

and (3) recovery from trauma (Marsten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Resiliency may also be, in part, learned behavior (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993).

METHODS

The sample included all currently state licensed foster parents within a metropolitan area of 300,000 located in the southeastern United States. Potential subjects were mailed a personalized letter and survey packet. All returned surveys were included in the sample. Data were collected at a single point in time and subjects were asked only about intent.

Data collected included gender and age of respondent, highest education level of parent(s), number of years of licensure as a foster parent, intent to continue to foster, and length of time projected to continue to foster. Survey packets included a letter, a demographic questionnaire, a return envelope, and one Family Hardiness Index (FHI) instrument.

Sample

A return rate of 43% ($n = 82$) provided sufficient sample size for analysis. In the eighty-two participating families, 95% of the respondents who completed the survey on behalf of their families were female (see Table 1). Educational level was nearly equally divided between those with less than a four year degree (54%) and those with a four year college degree or above (46%). Seventy nine-percent of those responding were between 36 and 55 years of age.

Specific to fostering, 30% of those families represented had two years or less of experience as licensed foster parents. Seventy percent reported experience above that two years. Eighty-four percent ($n = 76$) of those responding to the question reported that they intended to continue to foster. Sixteen percent reported that they intended to continue to foster for two or fewer years.

The Family Hardiness Index (FHI) is a 20-item instrument designed to measure hardiness in families. Response options for each item are on a 4 point Likert scale ranging from 0 = false, 1 = mostly false, 2 = mostly true, and 3 = true. The FHI measures control, commitment, and challenge as described by Kobasa (1979), as well as family confidence as

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics Related to Intent to Foster

Characteristic	Overall N = 76		Intend to Continue N = 64		Do Not Intend N = 12	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender of respondent						
Male	4	5	4	6	0	0
Female	72	95	60	94	12	100
Age of respondent						
25 - 35	14	18	12	19	2	17
36 - 45	26	34	23	36	3	25
46 - 55	27	35	22	34	5	41
56 - above	9	13	7	11	2	17
Education*						
< 4 years College	41	54	36	56	5	47
4 degree or more	35	46	8	45	7	53
Years of Licensure*						
Two years or less	23	30	22	34	1	8
> than two years	53	70	42	66	11	92

*Difference between foster parent groups statistically significant at $p < .01$. Education: chi square (1, 84) = 7.75, $p < .01$. Years of licensure: chi square (1, 84) = 9.89, $p < .01$, $n = 76$).

described by the scale developers (McCubbin, McCubbin, & Thompson, 1986). According to McCubbin, McCubbin, and Thompson (2000), the overall index score is the best indicator of family hardiness. For this reason, and because this was intended to be an exploratory research endeavor, only the total score was used in the analysis. The FHI has good internal consistency with an alpha of .82. The scale developers did not provide normative data, but stated that the sample of 304 non-clinical families used in their initial study provided meaningful comparison data. The overall mean for that sample was 47.4 (SD = 6.7).

RESULTS

Respondents who reported their intent to continue as foster parents were slightly younger, less educated, and had fewer years of experience as licensed foster parents as compared to those who reported that they were planning to discontinue their foster parenting (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. Logistic Regression Predicting Intent to Continue to Foster

Predictor	β	SE	Odds Ratio	Wald
Age	-.064	.405	.938	.025
Education	1.066	.707	2.903	2.269
Yrs Licensure	1.979*	1.127	7.233	3.434
FHI (hardiness)	-.118**	.064	.888	3.434

* $p = .08$. ** $p = .06$.

The FHI scores were calculated for the two groups of foster parents to determine (1) if foster parents who expressed intent to continue fostering had higher levels of hardiness than the comparison family sample tested by the scale developers, and (2) if their hardiness scores were higher than those of the foster parents who did not intend to continue fostering. The original family sample consisted of 304 families associated with a large nationally recognized insurance company (McCubbin, McCubbin, & Thompson, 1986). A one-sample t -test was conducted to compare the hardiness scores of those who reported that they intended to continue to foster with those of the non-fostering comparison group families. The hardiness scores of the intent to continue fostering sample ($M = 49.42$, $SD = 5.33$) were significantly higher than those of the non-fostering comparison sample ($M = 47.4$, $SD = 6.7$), $t(81) = 3.44$, $p = .001$.

An independent samples t -test was conducted to compare the hardiness scores of those who reported intent to continue and those who reported they did not intend to continue to foster. Again, the hardiness scores of the "intent to continue" group ($M = 49.98$, $SD = 5.12$) were found to be significantly higher than those reported by the "do not intend to continue to foster" group ($M = 46.91$, $SD = 6.17$), $t(63) = 4.80$, $p < .001$.

Logistic regression analysis was also conducted to examine the predictive value of age, education, number of years of licensure, and hardiness score on the intent to continue to foster. The chi-square statistic for the overall model was acceptable, $X^2(4, N = 76) = 9.46$, $p = .05$. When the predictive values of age, education and number of years of licensure in terms of intent to continue foster care were examined, hardiness scores and years of licensure were statistically significant predictors of intent to continue to foster at the .10 level. Specifically, higher levels of reported hardiness were associated with increased likelihood that respondents expressed their intent to continue to foster ($p = .06$), but re-

spondents with more years of licensure were less likely to report that they planned to continue ($p = .08$). Neither age nor education were found to be significant predictors of intent to continue to foster within this sample group.

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

The finding that respondents who plan to continue to foster show higher levels of hardiness than both the comparison “normal” families and foster families who do not intend to continue fostering has positive implications for practice. The finding that respondents with more years of licensure are less likely to report intent to continue is not consistent with previous studies and may be related to the weaknesses of the study. First, the small number of respondents who do not plan to continue to foster significantly reduced the amount of analysis that could be conducted on that group alone. Second, the participants self-selected. Fifty-eight percent of those solicited did not respond, and the reasons for their choice not to participate are unknown. It could be that the respondents who are planning to discontinue fostering are long-term foster parents who have reached the age and stage of life when fostering is a strain on their individual and family resources. Third, self-report is subjective. The “intent to continue to foster” question required subjective answers on the part of the participants. Recollection and intent do not always translate directly into actions. The circumstances of this study provided the researcher with no means of comparing actual continued service with intent. The sample was drawn from a relatively metropolitan area, but the respondents represented only one, albeit the largest, of several agencies that maintain foster homes in this area. Although somewhat limited by the characteristics of the sample, this study should be considered an initial inquiry into the existence and support of hardiness as an identified asset of foster families who intend to continue to foster.

Practice Implications

Foster parents and foster care workers report, anecdotally, that life experiences, both good and bad, are important sources of strength for foster parents. The results of this research indicate that foster families

who intend to continue to foster report hardiness above the levels found in non-fostering families. In addition, they report higher levels of hardiness than those families who report that they do not intend to continue to foster. The Family Hardiness Index considers four areas: commitment, confidence, challenge, and control. These are areas of specific concern within foster family retention and recruitment literature.

Consider the reasons identified for loss of foster homes: (1) a lack of support for or *commitment* to foster parents by foster care agencies, (2) a poor public image of the foster care system or a lowered *confidence* in the foster care system, (3) changes in employment patterns of society, including an increase in *commitment* of women to full time employment, (4) psychological, emotional, and/or legal threats or *challenges*, (5) disillusionment with agency goals or a lack of *control* over same, or (6) specific problems or *challenges* with the children placed in the home (Baring-Could, Essick, Kleindaug, & Miller, 1983; Brown & Calder, 1999; Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Cummins & Rindfleisch, 1994). Foster parents are also repeatedly caught in the double bind of assuming responsibility (including advocacy) for the foster child, but not having the authority or *control* to accomplish what is needed in any given situation (Silver, Amster, & Haecker, 1999).

In 1999, Denby, Rindfleisch, and Bean stated in regard to foster parent recruitment that "an effective recruiting protocol would highlight applicants who possess the qualities which are thought to best predict foster parent satisfaction and the likelihood of continuing to foster," but concluded that a "recommendation of specific categories for inclusion . . . is premature at this point" (p. 301). The findings of this study suggest that hardiness may be a quality for inclusion within recruiting protocol.

With recent legislative changes, the child welfare system has begun to make strides to provide mentoring programs, specific training for workers and foster parents, and open communication between communities and agencies. Indeed, recent research has identified several factors predictive of intent to continue to foster. These include the ability to cope with children's difficult behaviors, affiliation with a private agency, and access to social support and services (Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001). These items might also be considered external predictors but cannot be consistently operationalized across large populations. Family hardiness, at the preservice point, may be measured quickly, consistently, and accurately for comparison. Further research with larger samples is warranted.

Implications for Further Research

Research in the area of hardiness within foster families should continue utilizing a larger and more nationally representative sample. In addition, other variables, such as rapport or relationships between workers and foster families, unsubstantiated allegations of abuse, and participation in formal and informal support networks should be considered. Access to items such as health insurance and regular respite care may also be interesting secondary variables for investigation.

Family hardiness is inclusive of a shared commitment to work together to mediate or resolve a presenting problem; a hardy family redefines the hardships it experiences as challenges. Within fostering, each new child, and change of status for that child, requires a commitment to meet new challenges. For each of these changes, a hardy family unit views itself as having a sense of control and influence over the outcome.

This research establishes the basis for and necessity of further research into foster family hardiness activities. In considering hardiness as a precursor of resilience, it can be suggested that the identification and measurement of the hardiness of potential foster families may promote better retention and stability of foster family placements. Hardiness is often associated with resiliency. Resiliency is characterized by positive outcomes in the face of adversity (Marsten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). In the instance of foster parents, these outcomes may well be demonstrated as permanency for children. Certainly, as foster parents stay in the system longer, the children they care for have a better opportunity for fewer and more stable placements. The potential impact on both foster families and the children they foster are long-term in both nature and rewards.

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