Foster Parents' Experiences of Long-Term Placements Versus Placement Breakdowns for Foster Children

By

Michele Melville-Gaumont
B.S.W., The University of Regina, 1998
B.A., The University of Victoria, 1984

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK
In
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
AUGUST 2006
© Michele Melville-Gaumont, 2006
Abstract

Studies show that when children come into foster care, they experience loss of attachment with their families. When foster children are moved from one foster placement to another, there is further loss of attachment with their foster families. This loss of attachment can lead to health and behaviour problems. A qualitative study was conducted of foster parent’s experiences with long-term placements of foster children in their home in comparison to placement breakdowns. Semi-structured interviews of up to 1.5 hours were conducted with 13 foster parents from eleven foster families. An approach drawing on qualitative description was used to find common themes in long-term placements and placement breakdowns, from the foster parents’ perspectives. Foster parents identified compatibility of placements, on-going support from the child protection agency, teamwork with the professionals connected with the children, and the building of trust with children in their care and the rest of the care team as important factors in maintaining long term placements. From foster parents’ perspectives, placement breakdown was influenced by communication failures with the care team surrounding the children, inadequate planning by the care team, and the limited support to address the challenging behaviours of the children placed in the foster parents’ homes. These findings highlight the complexity of fostering in terms of the challenges, contradictions and ambiguities of the foster parents’ role within the child protection system.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract ................................................................. ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents ......................................................... iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables ............................................................. vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements ........................................................ vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication ................................................................. viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction .............................................................. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 Background ................................................... 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Research Findings .................. 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaps in Knowledge .................. 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 Methodology .................................................. 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Description .................. 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment and Selection of Participants .................. 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of Sample .................. 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Issues .................. 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Generation .................. 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis .................. 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing Trustworthiness .................. 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 Findings ...................................................... 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compatibility of Placement .................. 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-placement Information .................. 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-placement Planning .................. 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to Take Children into the Foster Home .................. 41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 ................................................................................................................................. 79
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the support of my Faculty Advisor, Dr. Brian O’Neill, whose gentle guidance, wisdom and patience have helped me navigate my way through this interesting and challenging experience called a Master’s degree.

I would also like to thank Dr. Deborah O’Connor and Mr. Bruce McNeill for their assistance as members of my thesis defense committee.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the love and support of my husband, Norm, and my children, Devon and Adam, without whom I would not have been able to take on this academic journey.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the foster parents I have had the privilege to work with, and those with whom I will work in the future. They have taught me a great deal about selflessness, caring and compassion.
Foster Parents' Experiences of Long-Term Placements Versus Placement Breakdowns for Foster Children

Introduction

Child protection agencies often consider foster care the most intrusive intervention when attempting to support families to ensure the safety and well-being of their children. Foster care is used when children are considered to be at risk as long as they continue to reside with their families. Sometimes the stay in foster care is temporary, but at other times, birth parents are considered incapable of ensuring their children’s safety and well-being, and the child is placed in the continuing custody of the child protection agency, with the goal of placing the child for adoption. All too often, due to a variety of factors such as the child’s age, the child’s behaviours, birth parent’s continuing inability to parent safely, and/or inadequate planning, the child remains in long-term foster care. The assumption, when a child is removed from their parent and placed in foster care, is that the child’s safety and well-being is ensured; that a foster parent, as a representative of the child protection agency, is going to provide a higher standard of care for the removed child. This not only means meeting the child’s basic needs for shelter, food, and clothing, but also providing a sense of stability in what has likely been a rather chaotic existence.

Permanency planning is an approach that has been popular with child protection agencies to address the issue of stability for children and youth in care. One of the more commonly used definitions of permanency planning is as follows: “the systematic process of taking prompt, decisive, goal directed action to maintain children in their own home or place them permanently with other families” (Fein & Maluccio, 1983: p.ix).
Foster care does not fit into that definition, because it is a time-limited service that is mandated to end when children reach the legal age of majority. However, too often foster care becomes the long-term plan for children that leaves them without the security of a “permanent” family once they reach the age of majority.

There are a number of studies that show when children come into foster care, they experience a loss of attachment with their families (Bowlby, 1982; Holman, 1975; Kirk, 1981; Kufeldt, 1991). When foster children are moved from one foster placement to another, studies show there is further loss of attachment from their foster families (Bowlby, 1982; Holman, 1975; Kirk, 1981; Kufeldt, 2002). This loss of attachment can lead to health problems and behaviour problems for the child in care (Dando & Minty, 1987; James, 2004).

The National Youth in Care Network surveyed former children-in-care and found one of the top three concerns for children-in-care was the number of times they were moved from foster placement to foster placement (NYICN, 1996). This lack of stability for foster children has also been of great concern for child protection agencies, resulting in the development of a variety of strategies to address the issues of stability and permanency, such as guardianship practice standards, standardized comprehensive plans of care, multi-disciplinary care teams focused on the child in care, and more comprehensive training models. The development of training models has particularly targeted foster parents because foster parents have primary responsibility for the care of the children, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with the implication that placement breakdowns can be blamed on inadequate foster parenting. Efforts have focused on foster parent training, with the assumption that better trained caregivers would result in fewer
breakdowns in placements for children in care, improving their stability and well-being (Herzog, Van Pagee, & Pasztor, 2001; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000). Despite the implementation of more comprehensive training for foster parents, and other strategies, children-in-care continue to be moved from foster home to foster home for a wide variety of reasons. Regardless of the reasons for the moves, this has a negative, long-term impact on the well-being of children-in-care, in terms of feelings of rejection, no sense of belonging, and/or inability to develop long term relationships or trust. These moves are also an ineffective and inefficient use of resources: repeatedly setting up support systems and developing new routines and relationships, all of which adds to an already overburdened, under-funded child protection system. In Canada, there were 47,625 children in the care of child protection authorities in 2001, or 8.14 children in care per 1000 (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2004). In 2005, there were 9000 children in care in British Columbia alone. Despite these numbers, information on placement breakdowns for children and youth is not readily available.

Social workers working within child protection agencies have valuable insights into issues affecting the stability or breakdown of placements for children in care, which have been explored in other studies. Studies that looked at stability and permanency for children and youth in care, based on social workers' experiences and opinions, found that support to the children, or youth, and the caregivers, as well as permanent family connections and family visits contributed to the stability of placements (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; Freundlich & Avery, 2005; Holland, Faulkner & Perez-del-Aguila, 2005). Children and youth who have grown up within the child protection system have also provided some perspective on placement disruptions and made recommendations
that included working directly with the children/youth and their caregivers (Barber & Delfabbro, 2003; James, 2004; Newton, Litronik, & Landsverk, 2000), better matching of characteristics between the foster parents and the children/youth placed in their care, with opportunities for breaks from each other and better life skills preparation (Butler & Charles, 1999), and therapeutic interventions for children and youth (Teare, Larzelere, Smith, Becker, Castrianno, & Peterson, 1999). This is not a study on the number of placement breakdowns experienced by children in care, nor is it a study of foster parent training, child protection social workers or the child welfare agencies which employ them. Rather, the goal of this study is to better understand issues that contribute to placement breakdown and also contribute to placement longevity, through foster parents’ experiences, which is a perspective that has been researched to a lesser degree. Because foster parents provide on-going care for children-in-care, they see first-hand how the child protection system affects the children they care for. Foster parents provide an important perspective on how well the system is, or is not, working, and, through their experiences, can give an informed opinion on what their needs entail in order to care for the children placed in their homes.
Chapter 1

Background:

When the foster care system was originally developed, after the creation of the first Children’s Aid Society in the 1850’s by Charles Loring Brace in New York City to care for orphaned and abused children, it was of more benefit to foster parents, who gained another set of hands to help out in the home or on the farm (Morton, 1988). However, throughout the metamorphosis of Children’s Aid Societies from child placement charities to government-sponsored or supported agencies whose primary focus is the safety and well-being of children, foster care has come to be viewed as a temporary service (DeSena, Murphy, Douglas-Palumberi, Blau, Kelly, Horwitz & Kaufman, 2005). Children are provided with permanency through either returning to their families after the families have stabilized, or, if families are incapable of making the necessary changes to have their children returned to their care, placing the children for adoption in stable, permanent families.

According to Bowlby (1973), all children need consistent, caring attachment with their caregivers, whether the caregivers are parents, grandparents or other caring guardians. Without that attachment, children can experience anxiety, mistrust, behavioural and emotional problems, and even developmental delays, affecting their ability to develop intimate relationships throughout their life. However, the reality of foster care is that children experience disruption of attachments when they are placed, regardless of the length of time they spend in care. Aside from the traumatic effects of separation from their family, there may be a severing of relationships with nuclear and extended family, possible separation from siblings, dislocation from their neighborhood
and interruption of schooling. When multiple placements within foster care are added to
this, the ability to attach to others becomes threatened.

Despite the disruption for children being placed in foster care, a better alternative
has yet to be found that provides children with temporary care when families or other
caring guardians are incapable of providing safe and appropriate care. In order to lessen
the disruption of foster care, Holman (1975) developed the concept of inclusive versus
exclusive foster care, where exclusive care “minimizes the fostering aspect” because
natural parents are excluded, whereas inclusive care emphasizes “the children’s need to
obtain a true sense of their present identity and past history” (p.10).

This parallels Kirk’s (1981) theory around adoptive relationships, in which he
identified two contrasting coping patterns: rejection of difference and acknowledgement
of difference. Similar to exclusive foster care, rejection of difference emphasizes the
child’s membership as part of the new family without acknowledgment of the natural
family, while acknowledgement of difference incorporates the child’s origins into the
new family.

Although child protection agencies have become more supportive of inclusive
care in their policies, by the very nature of their work to protect children, exclusion of
natural parents may be necessary to maintain the safety of children. Therefore, a
dissonance exists between policy and practice. Kufeldt (1991) hypothesizes that this
“dissonance may be reduced if the placement and maintenance of the child in the
substitute family are given priority, reinforcing a sense that the child has been provided
with something better” (p.11).
This hypothesis resonates especially when children are permanently removed from the custody of their natural families and are in need of stability and permanence in their lives through long-term foster placements or adoption. Kufeldt indicates that "all children need at least one adult who is irrationally committed to them, someone crazy about them" (p.14) and the child welfare system rarely provides "someone who is unconditionally and absolutely crazy about the child" (p.14). Thus, in that instance, Kufeldt feels the foster parents should do everything they can to keep the child or youth in contact with family members who do care. However, when that it not possible, Kufeldt is of the view that the child welfare system should continue to support children and youth in care, along with the families caring for them, for as long as needed, including beyond the age of majority in order to provide continuity and contributing to the stability and well-being of the child or youth.

Foster parents are a key contributor to the stability of a child’s placement. Historically, foster parents were often considered to be the clients in the relationship with the child placement agencies because of their desire to have a child (Morton, 1988). Although the desire to have a child in the home is still a motivating factor for some foster parents, foster parents have evolved from being considered clients to being considered para-professionals or partners, focusing on the needs of the children and youth placed in their homes as the clients. There are different views of foster parents, some seeing foster parents as volunteers making valuable contributions to society, while others consider them to be contractors providing services to child protection agencies. Recently, there has been a movement toward the professionalization of fostering due to the increased challenges presented by children and youth coming into care. These children and youth
are presenting with greater emotional, behavioural and psychological needs, requiring caregivers with a higher level of education and set of skills in order to meet those needs (Waldock, 2004). Advocates argue that as foster parents are increasingly acting as parent-therapists to the children and youth in their home, they should be given the recognition and training afforded to professionals. This would allow them equal status with the other professionals on the care team, contributing to increased mutual respect among care team members, and increased satisfaction and retention of foster parents, further contributing to the stability of placements (Waldock, 2004; Reichwein, 1996). There is also the argument that professional foster parents could be a cost-effective alternative to specialized care provided by institutions, where foster parents would have the time to work directly with the child in care and families to speed up reunification with birth families or adoption, as well as improve economic incentives to recruit and retain foster parents (Christian, 2002).

Critics of the movement toward professionalization of fostering argue that it is fundamentally inconsistent with the idea of family for children in care, affecting the intimacy of the parent/child relationship (Christian, 2002; Lemay, 1991). Critics also indicate professionalization would adversely affect the view of foster care as a charitable act, of giving back to society through volunteerism. However, this does not take into account the foster families who depend on the fostering income. One could also take the cynical view that the financial costs to the system, rather than the best interests of the children, in terms of quality of care, are the priority for governments or other funding agencies.
The discussion of the professionalization of foster care naturally leads to a discussion around training for caregivers. It has been argued that training for foster parents contributes to a reduction in placement breakdowns, improved outcomes for placements and improved retention of foster parents (Boyd & Remy, 1978; Fees, Stockdale, Crase, Riggins-Caspers, Yates, Lekies & Gillis-Arnold, 1998). However, recent studies have shown that effective training needs to focus on developing parenting skills to effectively manage challenging behaviours presented by foster children, which are not adequately addressed in some foster parent training programs (Puddy & Jackson, 2003).

Many child protection agencies, have introduced mandatory training programs that all foster parents, regardless of years of experience or level of education, are expected to complete. These training programs are meant to provide foster parents with the basic information they need in order to foster children, such as recognizing abuse and neglect; identifying developmental milestones for children; record keeping; integrated teamwork; strategies for working with special needs; and standards of care. The training is also intended to standardize foster care provision across jurisdictions. The assumption is that training will address placement breakdowns where lack of skill on the foster parent’s part was one of the contributing factors.

Although studies have shown that foster parent training has a positive impact on placement stability (Fees et al, 1998; Simon & Simon, 1982), training is not the only factor contributing to the success of a placement. The subject of teamwork and collaboration has gained prominence, not only in child protection settings but in all organizations, as a method of delivering effective services more efficiently. Use of care
teams, sometimes referred to as integrated case management, is a more recent strategy being encouraged by child protection agencies to gather together participants involved in the care of a child or youth, such as the foster parent, social worker, resource worker, school teacher, counselor, medical professional, and sometimes birth parents, to plan for that child or youth and ensure that all necessary supports and services are provided (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 1999).

Members of a care team all start with the common goal of working towards what is in the best interests of the child, however, there is more to developing an effective team than having a common goal. Bulin (1995) identified the characteristics of effective teams as: an openness and willingness to listen amongst team members to develop trust and build teamwork; leadership without domination; cooperation and a comfortable atmosphere; participation and commitment by all team members; decisions made by consensus; understood and accepted goals; planned assessment of progress; open debate and discussion of issues; willingness to seek common areas of agreement and use them to solve problems; and stability/low turnover of team members.

Bailey (1998) identified four challenges for managers in working with teams that can be applied to care teams within the foster care system. First, each team member should have the necessary degrees of position, power, expertise, and credibility. Second, the socio-emotional needs of the team must be identified, both individually and collectively, in order for the child protection agency to provide the team with an array of opportunities to meet those needs, which becomes the third challenge. Fourth, there must be interdependence between the team members and the leaders, as well as between the team and the rest of the child protection agency, which requires that each member receive
the concrete resources necessary to do his or her best work. The fact that care teams usually consist of professionals, such as social workers and teachers, and paraprofessionals, such as foster parents, implies a power imbalance to be taken into consideration by team members. There is also the question of team members receiving the necessary concrete resources to do their best work, which has become more of a challenge in this age of cutbacks to social services. With these challenges impeding the effectiveness of care teams, it is not surprising that care teams are not used to their full potential.

Underlying the teamwork and other aspects of fostering is the issue of communication. Foster parents play a pivotal role in the care of the children by meeting the needs of children while carrying out care plans developed by care teams. Because of this role, it could be assumed that the foster parent would be relied on as the conduit between the care team and the child in care, in terms of information sharing back and forth. Without regular communication between the foster parent and the child protection agency, the likelihood of the child’s placement breaking down is increased. Habermas (1990), in describing his theory on discourse ethics, which contributes to valuing individuality and developing a just culture through communication, explains the need for an “ideal speech situation” which has important implications for foster parents working within the child protection system. The specifics of the ideal speech situation are:

1. Equality of access: each subject who is capable of speech and action is allowed to participate in discourses;

2. Equality of participation:
   a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertions whatever;
b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse;

c. Everyone is allowed to express her/his attitudes, desires and needs;

3. Equality of enjoyment of access and participation: no speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising her/his rights to as laid down in (1) and (2). (Habermas, 1990, p.89)

The presence of the ideal speech situation should be a common occurrence for foster parents, the child protection agency and the other professionals responsible for meeting the needs of the children in care. One only has to read the literature provided by child protection agencies to foster parents that states foster parents are considered important members of the care teams surrounding each child. Research, however, suggests that this may not be the case.

*Previous Research Findings*

Research into what contributes to long-term placements for foster children has examined a wide range of issues that could be divided into personal factors and organizational factors. Studies on personal factors include: foster parents’ motives for fostering (Andersson, 2001; Dando & Minty, 1987), foster home characteristics (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001; Sallnas, Vinnerljung, & Westermark, 2004), the child or youth’s characteristics and how they fit within the foster placement (James, 2004; Sinclair & Wilson, 2003), and foster parents’ perceptions of their responsibilities (Rhodes, Orme & McSurdy, 2003). Research on organizational factors that affect placement stability include: the need for teamwork (Lewandowski,
the need for support (Gilbertson & Barber, 2004; Gilbertson & Barber, 2003; McDonald et al, 2003; Sheldon, 2002), and, overwhelmingly, the need for foster parent training (Cuddeback & Orme, 2002; Herczog, Van Pagee, & Pasztor, 2001; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000), the effectiveness of training (Fees et al, 1998; Lee & Holland, 1991; Pasztor, 1985; Pithouse, Hill-Tout, & Lowe, 2002; Puddy & Jackson, 2003), and the design of some specific models of training (Lee & Holland, 1991; Puddy & Jackson, 2003; Simon & Simon, 1982; Titterington, 1990).

Motivations for becoming foster parents were considered an important aspect of determining the success of a foster placement. Studies found successful placements were usually associated with motivations based on personal needs: in particular, foster parents who wanted children but were unable to have children of their own and foster parents "who identified with deprived/damaged children due to past personal experience" (Dando & Minty, 1987, p.397). These findings were expanded in another study that included relatives who felt responsible for a child, parents with grown up children who wanted to continue parenting, and mothers who wanted to stay at home with their biological children, although this last group had equally economic motivations (Andersson, 2001). These studies point out that motivation on its' own does not guarantee successful placements, and that factors such as support and encouragement from social workers contributed to placement stability (Andersson, 2001).

Although the assumption could be made that foster parent characteristics play an important role in maintaining long-term placements, research has focused more on the characteristics of the foster home. Salinas et al (2004) compared the rate of placement
breakdowns for teenagers in kinship care homes, family care foster homes, group homes and secure care homes, finding that kinship care homes and secure care homes had fewer breakdowns. These findings make sense in that the teenagers had a family connection and knowledge of the kinship care homes, while for teenagers incarcerated in secure care, any breakdowns would be the result of the placement not meeting the youths’ needs. Data for this study was gathered from social workers’ case files, with clarification from the social workers, and did not include any direct contact with the youth or caregivers in regards to their view of the breakdowns. A study by Kalland and Sinkkonen (2001) found that foster parents’ fertility was a factor in placement breakdown, as older children were usually placed with foster parents who had their own natural children because of the assumption that foster parents with experience in parenting would be able to cope with children’s behaviour, while infertile foster parents were given the babies and less demanding children. However this study focused more on how the foster child’s characteristics contributed to the breakdown.

Other studies that examined characteristics of children in care, as compared to the foster parents’ characteristics, and how that contributed to the stability of the placement, had different foci. A study by Sinclair and Wilson (2003) aimed to develop a model of how placements work through matching children in care with foster parents. This model found that the following factors were predictors of a placement’s success or breakdown: the child’s attractiveness (behaviourally), difficulty to care for and motivation to be in the placement; the foster parents’ warmth, persistence and ability to set limits; and the interaction between the two in terms of chemistry. The study did take into consideration that for the model to work, there needed to be a variety of foster placements available to
allow for matching, which was not a common situation. Another study looked at factors contributing to placement disruption and found that 20% of disruptions were due to the child’s behaviours, 10% were instigated by the foster parents, and 70% were a result of system or policy mandates, such as moving a child from a short term placement. What was interesting about this study was that there was more concern about the placement disruptions related to foster parent issues, such as stressors in their lives, allegations of abuse and interference by biological parents, than there was about placement disruptions caused by the system or policy mandate:

Concerns about the high number of system moves are tempered by findings...which suggests that a greater number of routine moves does not increase the hazard of experiencing a first behaviour-related placement change...While this finding eases some of the concern about the high number of system moves, this study cannot clarify whether repeated system moves contribute to other adverse outcomes (James, 2004; p.620).

This study suggests that placement moves that are system related, or child protection agency related, do not necessarily contribute to increasingly challenging behaviours by the child, which may then contribute to the child being moved because caregivers no longer want the child in their home. There was no mention of attachment issues around placement disruptions but other research supported that providing foster parents with “additional financial and emotional support translates into higher retention rates, greater satisfaction, and improved child functioning” (James, 2004; p.620).

Foster parents’ perceptions regarding factors that contributed to the success or breakdown of placements were rarely included in most studies unless they looked
specifically at the behaviour of the children or youth in their care. The one study that did focus only on foster parents’ perceptions in regard to what contributed to placement stability was limited to familial and parental factors within the foster home. Familial factors included concern for children’s welfare, a strong faith and/or support from the foster family’s faith community, and being open minded/tolerant/accepting of the child’s differences. Parental factors included strong organization and set routines, clear rules and expectations, consistency and holding the children accountable for their behaviour (Buehler et al, 2003).

Rhodes et al. (2003) studied foster parents’ perceptions of their responsibilities toward foster children and compared them to the perceptions of social workers regarding foster parents’ responsibilities. They found there were disagreements between foster parents and workers in terms of expectations of foster parents and their responsibilities toward foster children placed in their care. Further training was found to lessen the disagreements, but there remained a need for communication between foster parents and social workers regarding clarity of roles and responsibilities, which would certainly have implications for the success of foster placements.

Research on teamwork in child welfare found that communication between team members, whether it be between foster parents and the child protection agency (McDonald et al, 2003) or the child protection social worker and resource social worker (Sheldon, 2004) was an important factor in maintaining placement stability. Sheldon also identified clarity of roles and expectations as key areas that need to be addressed by child protection social workers, resource social workers and foster parents, and that social workers need to acknowledge foster parents as partners in looking after the safety and
well-being of the children in care. Molyneux (2001) also found that equality of working relationships among team members contributed to positive outcomes for the team. Inadequate communication, resources and professional respect were the greatest barriers to effective teams, according to Lewandowski (2002).

Lack of support to foster parents was identified in a number of studies as contributing to placement breakdown. Gilbertson and Barber (2003) looked at foster parents’ perspectives in regard to why they decided to end a placement and what interventions might have saved the placement. The researchers found that, in addition to inadequate support, foster parents were also provided with inadequate pre-placement information and that a shortage in available foster placements led to children being placed without matching the needs of the child with the skill set of the foster parent. Gilbertson and Barber (2004) also analyzed system reviews and audits that had been conducted on a large child protection agency and found that child protection workers were unable to maintain practice standards, which included providing support to the child and the foster home. Sheldon (2002) made similar findings when he conducted a study on foster parents’ attitudes as to whether they would recommend fostering to others. A number of foster parents indicated that they almost gave up fostering due to the treatment they received at the hands of social workers, the lack of recognition from the child protection agency that foster parents are on the job 24 hours a day 7 days a week, the feeling of vulnerability experienced when allegations of abuse arose in their home, and the perception that social workers put too much emphasis on parental rights of birth parents, to the detriment of the foster families.
Studies on foster parent training generally agreed that training was important but there was a wide range of findings regarding the effectiveness of training. One study looked at a training program used widely in the United States, the Model Approach to Partnerships In Parenting/Group Selection and Participation of Foster and/or Adoptive Families training program (MAPP/GPS), which guides potential foster parents through the challenges of fostering by using group and individual exercises. This study compared two groups of foster parents, one which had taken the MAPP/GPS program and the other consisting of members of a local foster parent association, who had not taken any training. The study found little difference between the groups in terms of parenting skills and felt the training program did not adequately prepare foster parents to care for children with challenging behaviours. Instead, the MAPPS/GPS program was better suited to assisting potential foster parents in deciding whether to become foster parents (Lee & Holland, 1991; Puddy & Jackson, 2003).

A study of the Nova model of foster parent training (Simon & Simon, 1982), which simultaneously screens and trains prospective foster parents through pre-service training, providing foster parents with a realistic understanding of fostering while allowing both foster parents and the child protection agency to mutually evaluate each other, showed that trained foster parents cared for twice as many children as untrained foster parents. High risk placements were also more likely to be accepted in the trained homes, and the rate of placement disruption was almost twice as high for untrained homes than for trained homes (Simon & Simon, 1982). These findings would lead one to assume that foster parents with training have the required skills to minimize placement breakdowns and are more likely expected to have the required skills by the child.
protection agencies, who place more children with trained foster parents and give them the high risk placements.

Studies that looked at specialized training for foster parents showed that the training did provide significant improvement in the specialized areas targeted. For example, training that focused on helping foster children keep a connection to their biological parents (Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000) and behavioural management strategies for children exhibiting clinically significant behaviour problems (McNeil, Herschell, Gurwitch & Clemens-Mowrer, 2005).

According to Herczog et al (2001), areas that should be included in foster parent training were: protecting and nurturing children; meeting children’s developmental needs and addressing their developmental delays; supporting relationships between children and their families; connecting children to safe, nurturing relationships intended to last a lifetime; and working as a member of a professional team.

Gaps in Knowledge

The majority of studies reviewed were quantitative designs, which were limited in terms of in-depth information gathering, (Herczog et al, 2001; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000) regionality (Gilbertson & Barber, 2004; James, 2004; Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001; Rhodes et al., 2003; Sallnas et al, 2004; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000; Sheldon, 2004; Sheldon, 2003), and follow up with long-term strategies/training that were the subject of a particular study (Dando & Minty, 1987; Sheldon, 2004; Sheldon, 2003). Quantitative studies may not be as effective when delving into the specifics of how placements breakdown, such as looking at the relationships between the foster parent and child in care, or
between the members of the care team, because of the inability to capture the multi-
dimensionality of the participants' experiences and delve into the nuances of both the
verbal and non-verbal cues of the participants' discourse. Also, any new strategies that
foster parents may apply in parenting the children in their care would not have been taken
into consideration if follow up was not performed to ensure that the new strategies were
being applied appropriately or if foster parents chose not to continue to apply those
strategies.

Generally, recommendations offered by those conducting previous research on
placement stability included the need for on-going communication between care team
members, and especially between the foster parents and the child protection agency; the
provision of a variety of supports to the foster home that included training, respite and
behaviour management; and a building of partnership between the child protection
agency and the foster parents, where the foster parents are treated with respect and feel
like a valued member of the team. However, the majority of these studies that looked at
long term placements and placement breakdowns from the perspectives of social workers,
who had to base their perspectives on what was told to them by the foster parents or
children in care. Social workers could not be in the foster homes on a regular basis to
observe first hand the day to day interactions between foster parent and foster child, so do
not have the knowledge to give in-depth information on why a placement breaks down or
remains stable. Social workers cannot speak for foster parents as they have not
experienced what foster parents deal with on a day to day basis. These studies did not
include the perceptions or experiences of the foster parents, who play the key role in
maintaining the stability of placements, and whose voice needs to be heard. The purpose
of this study is to explore foster parents’ experiences with long term placements versus placement breakdowns with the expectation that foster parents will be able to fill a gap in our knowledge regarding placement stability and provide further insights into how placement stability can be better maintained for children and youth in care.
Chapter 2
Methodology

Qualitative Description

To answer the research question "What are foster parents' experiences and perceptions related to long-term placements versus placement breakdowns", a qualitative study was conducted through interviews with the parents of eleven foster families who had experienced both long-term placements and placement breakdowns with foster children. The study design drew on qualitative description to provide a comprehensive summary of participants’ descriptions of their experiences with long-term placements and placement breakdowns and their perspectives on factors that contributed to these experiences. The purpose of qualitative description is to stay as close to the data as possible, using the words and events described by the participants and the meaning given to those words and events by the participants, from which the categories and codes emerge in analysis (Sandelowski, 2000). In attempting to remain as true to the participants’ words as possible, qualitative description was the appropriate choice “when straight descriptions of phenomena are desired…for researchers wanting to know the who, what, and where of events” (Sandelowski, 2000, p.339). Although Sandelowski pointed out that it was impossible for any qualitative study to be free of interpretation, qualitative description allows for “a kind of interpretation that is low-inference, or likely to result in easier consensus” (Sandelowski, 2000, p.335) by researchers and participants. This allowed for the foster parents’ voices to be heard: that it was the foster parents’ experiences, rather than the researcher’s interpretation of the experiences, that emerged from the data. This was achieved through using direct quotes from the participants to
illustrate the common themes that emerged from the data. Qualitative description was appropriate for this study because there has been very few studies on foster parents' perspectives regarding placement stability, allowing for themes to develop directly from the participants’ descriptions of their experiences and perceptions, rather than imposing preconceived themes or ideas and arranging the data to fit those themes or ideas.

In order to analyze the data in qualitative descriptive studies, which is usually collected through semi-structured, open-ended interviews such as used in this study, qualitative content analysis is generally the analysis method used. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) described three approaches to qualitative content analysis: conventional content analysis, which is generally used in studies where there is little existing theory or previous research; directed content analysis, which builds on existing theory or prior research; and summative content analysis, which identifies and quantifies specific words or content to understand their contextual use and explores usage. For the purposes of this study, conventional content analysis was the most appropriate choice because there have been few studies that have included the perspectives and experiences of foster parents regarding placement stability, therefore there are few preconceived categories or theories that could be imposed within the analysis of the data. The advantage of using conventional content analysis is that it allows for the direct information of the participants to be the source of the categories, ensuring that “analysis is based on participants’ unique perspectives and grounded in the actual data” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005: p.1280). According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), limitations of conventional content analysis include the possibility of an incomplete understanding of the context, resulting in key categories being excluded that can affect the credibility of the study. This
can be overcome through methods of establishing trustworthiness of the data, such as triangulation, member checks, and prolonged engagement. Another limitation is the similarity of conventional content analysis to other methods of analysis, such as grounded theory method and phenomenology, however, conventional content analysis does not go far enough to be able to claim theory development or an understanding of the lived experience. Rather, Hsieh and Shannon feel that concept development or model building is as far as conventional content analysis can be used.

**Recruitment and Selection of Participants**

The criterion used for choosing participants was that participants have experiences with both long-term placements and placement breakdowns. This criterion was specified to potential participants during the recruitment phase of the study.

Participants were recruited from a foster parent education program and monthly community forums that were held in both rural and urban communities, open to the public, and covered topics of interest to foster parents. The rationale for recruiting potential participants from foster parent education programs was that all foster parents in British Columbia, regardless of experience, had to complete this mandatory education program, which commenced in the year 1999. Therefore, there was an opportunity to access a large variety of foster parents, with a large variety of experiences, for the purposes of recruiting participants for the study. There was also a variety of locations where the education program and community forums were being held, thus allowing for recruitment of foster parents who had worked with various child protection social workers, resource social workers, and supervisors, and cared for a wide variety of
children and youth in different geographical settings. Recruiting at the foster parent education programs and monthly community forums also reduced the amount of phone calls or advertising needed to recruit participants for the study. The disadvantage of recruiting from the education programs and monthly forums was that foster parents who did not attend either of these events were not accessed for possible recruitment to participate in the study.

The approval and support of training facilitators at the different training locations and at the community forums was arranged in order to present the study and invite the participation of the foster parents attending, through flyers (see appendix) and announcements in classes or at the forums. A contact phone number and email address were provided for foster parents interested in participating, in order to provide further information about the study and to arrange an interview time with them at their home or at the home of the researcher, at their convenience.

Description of Sample

Purposeful sampling was used for this study in terms of choosing foster parents who had experienced both placement stability and placement breakdown. Thirteen parents from eleven foster families were interviewed and all had experience with long-term placements and placement breakdowns in their homes. Long-term placements were considered placements where the child or youth were returned to their birth families, adopted or reached the age of 19, which is considered the age of majority in British Columbia. Of the eleven families interviewed, nine of the interviews were conducted with the foster mothers alone, while two interviews had both the foster mother and foster
father. Of the nine foster mothers interviewed alone, four of the mothers were single parents and the other five were married to men who worked outside of the home. All of the families had had foster children in their home that ranged in age from infants to teenagers, with five of the families having had foster children who had reached the age of majority while living with them. Ten of the families had raised children of their own and had fostered for at least 7 years.

Ethical Issues

The purpose of the study was clearly stated, both verbally and in writing, to potential participants. Participants were informed, both verbally and in writing, that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, regardless of having signed the consent form. They were also informed that their participation would remain anonymous, unless they chose to reveal their identity themselves, and that confidentiality would be maintained through the interviewer transcribing the interviews herself, eliminating any information that would lead a reader to specifically identify the participant, and keeping the interview tapes or other identifying information safely locked in a file cabinet in her home office. Participants were informed that they would be provided with the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview to check for accuracy of the transcription and be able to edit or clarify any inaccuracies.

The researcher conducting the interviews worked for the Ministry of Children and Family Development as a Child Protection Social Worker. However, the researcher worked outside the region of the foster parents who participated in the study, so there had
not been a previous professional relationship between the researcher and the participants, nor were there any potential power conflicts. The researcher was also doing a practicum placement with the agency providing the foster parent training, producing a video production of foster parent perspectives with the supervision of the Foster Parent Education Facilitator. The researcher/interviewer was not in a position of influence over the participants in that the purpose for her presence was limited to operating the video equipment. The participants in the program were aware that the researcher/interviewer was a UBC graduate student and aware that their participation in either the video project or the research was completely voluntary, having no effect on their job security.

Data Generation

Data for this study was collected through videotaped interviews with foster parents, with the video footage allowing for the observation of non-verbal communication. Potential participants were asked to commit up to 3 hours of their time over the course of a month to be interviewed. The initial semi-structured interview lasted up to 90 minutes and participants were given the choice of where they would like the interview to take place. Most of the participants chose to have the researcher come to their home, while 3 participants chose to have the interview take place in the classroom after the foster parent education class was finished. Two participants chose to come to the researcher's home to be interviewed. The interview questions, developed in consultation with classmates from the University of British Columbia School of Social Work Master's program, and through the personal experience of the interviewer, consisted of asking participants to relate specific experiences with long-term placements and placement
breakdowns, then asking their opinions regarding the contributing factors in either the longevity of the placement or the placement breakdown. The participants were asked about services and supports provided to them, whether these services and supports were useful to them, and what improvements, in the participants' opinions, could be made in the placement of children, supports and services, communication, and training opportunities. These questions were asked in order to tap into the participants' expertise as foster parents, affecting recommendations made at the end of the study. (See appendix for list of questions)

In all cases, there was good rapport during the interviews, likely due to the relationship previously built between participants and interviewer at the foster parent training. This rapport may have contributed to feelings of trust between the participant and interviewer, which would have allowed for more openness by the participants in sharing their experiences. This rapport may also have allowed participants to feel comfortable in expressing negative thoughts about the child protection agency, of which the interviewer was an employee, for cathartic purposes, which may have influenced how they related their experiences about placement breakdown. Participants were informed before agreeing to be interviewed that the interview was going to be video-taped, which may have contributed to the relative ease demonstrated by participants when talking in front of a camera. It may also have precluded participants who were nervous about appearing on camera.

Relatively few field notes were made, as participants had little to add once the camera was turned off and the interview was over. Field notes that were made were later compared to the taped interviews and found to be reflected already on the videotape.
The foster families were emailed copies of the transcripts of their particular interview to review, none of which generated feedback from the participants.

**Data Analysis**

Data was transcribed by the interviewer from the video-taped interviews with the foster parent participants into a written transcript. The first transcription was then read over and descriptions of long-term placements and placement breakdowns were examined and noted. Conventional qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was used with the participants' interviews in order to tease out the common themes emerging from the interviews. Codes were generated from the data provided by the first interviews and then applied to data from subsequent interviews, with the flexibility of revising codes that appear not to be common throughout the various transcripts. The codes are then grouped into core categories, their sub-categories, and how these categories linked to each other within the foster parents' experiences, allowing for the emergence of themes regarding placement stability versus placement breakdown.

Relationships were looked for between the themes, and the final result was the emergence from the data of 4 broad themes relating to placement stability issues, interwoven with 3 influences affecting the relationship between foster parents and the rest of the care team.
Establishing Trustworthiness

Maxwell (2004) discusses 3 main threats to validity in qualitative research which would be useful to reference in looking at the validity of data collected for this study.

The first threat is through inaccurate description, which refers to how the data is observed and then described. By having the interviews video-taped and then transcribed verbatim, any inaccuracies or incompleteness of the data gathered in the interviews were eliminated, allowing for accurate descriptions. Also, participants were later invited to review transcripts of their interviews, sent to them by email, to ensure their words were captured correctly and they did not note any inaccuracies.

The second threat to validity, interpretation, refers to how the perspective of the participants being studied is understood so that their interpretation of their words and actions emerge from the data, rather than the interviewer imposing her own meaning on their words. To address this, member checks were done during the interviews where the interviewer reflected back what she thought participants had said and asked them to confirm that she had understood them correctly.

The third threat to validity, theory, refers to the consideration of alternative explanations or understandings of the foster parents' experiences, especially if there are discrepancies amongst the study participants' experiences. Theoretical validity becomes threatened, according to Maxwell, when one does not "pay attention to discrepant data or not consider alternative explanations or understandings of the phenomena [one] is studying" (Maxwell, 2004: p.90). To address this, Maxwell recommended "rigourously examining both the supporting and discrepant data to assess whether it is more plausible
to retain or modify the conclusions, being aware of all of the pressures to ignore data that do not fit [one’s] conclusions” (Maxwell, 2004: p.93). Examining the supporting and discrepant data, and also providing direct quotes from the participant’s interviews contributed toward addressing this particular threat to validity.

Using the opportunity brought about by the screening of the video on foster parent’s perspectives, produced with the agency providing the foster parent training, more member checks were done when participants in the study were included in the general invitation to foster parents to attend. After the showing of the video, the audience was asked for feedback about the experiences and opinions expressed by the video participants, with which audience members were in agreement, and which also emerged as themes identified in the data from the participants’ interviews.

Feedback was also solicited from research colleagues and child protection social work colleagues on the common themes emerging from the data.

Credibility of the findings was further supported by recruitment of participants from a number of different communities who had worked with a variety of social workers and other professionals. There was also a reasonable sample of participants, which was not enough to claim the development of a grounded theory, but did provide sufficient data to support claims being made. Although the participants all met the criterion for the study, in terms of experiences with long-term placements and placement breakdowns, their experiences occurred with different children, different care teams, and with different resources available to them. This reduced the risk of bias in terms of associations with other participants or the same teams of professionals. The interviewer’s own experience as a child protection social worker and care team member with foster parents lent
credibility to the findings as the interviewer had some knowledge of placement stability issues through her own experiences, thus contributing to the validity of the findings.
Chapter 3

Findings

In answering the research question: “What are foster parents’ experiences and perceptions related to long term placements versus placement breakdowns?”, foster parents who participated in the research, for the most part, were initially more focused on the positive aspects of fostering. They were complimentary about the children they cared for, diplomatic in regard to the social workers and service providers they work with, as well as charitable about any failings they may have experienced when it came to the system they worked in. However, once they began to talk about their experiences with long-term placements and placement breakdowns, their disappointments and frustrations with the system became quite evident, and the complexity of their relationships with the child in their care, the child protection agency, birth parents, and other care team members were revealed. Four main themes emerged from foster parents’ narratives of their experiences that were identified as pivotal in foster parents’ perceptions about whether a foster placement became long-term or permanent or whether the placement broke down. These themes were: compatibility of placement, the importance of on-going supports, the importance of teamwork, and the challenges, contradictions and ambiguities inherent in fostering. These themes are expanded below, along with quotes from the foster parents’ interviews that contribute to the development of the themes.

Compatibility of Placement

This theme refers to the compatibility between the foster family and the child or youth placed in their home, and how the matching of characteristics of the child to the
foster family plays a role in the stability of the placement. The importance of addressing the issue of compatibility before the placement occurs through proper preparation and planning is stressed by the participants.

Pre-placement Information

All participants identified that before a child was placed in their home, they expected social workers to look at the child’s characteristics, such as age and special needs, in an attempt to match that child with foster parents who had other children with compatible characteristics and the expertise to meet the specific special needs of that child. The foster parents also identified the expectation that they were to receive information about the children before they were placed in their home, in order to help prevent an eventual placement breakdown. This process did occur in some situations:

We got a call from a resource worker and she described this boy to us on the phone and...it was just this gut feeling, we went, he sounds perfect. We agreed to have a meeting with this resource worker and have her bring this boy by. And we met with him, he liked the home, from what we read, we got his history and there was nothing that seemed horrendous, horrendously unworkable to us. And it seemed that a lot of his issues would jell really well with our other kids.

In the above situation, the foster parent’s experience with having a child placed in her home was the ideal described by foster parents, in that they were given information about the child, the child’s characteristics seemed compatible with the other children in the home, and they were able to meet the child previous to having the child placed in their home. This participant and her partner were designated to provide care to children and youth with special needs, due to having the necessary skills and previous experience in
working in therapeutic group homes. Because of the challenging needs of these children or youth, the participant indicated that she and her partner expected, and received, detailed information and pre-placement visits before accepting a child or youth into their home. Because of the couple’s skill level, it would be feasible that the participant could go with a gut feeling when information was presented about a child or youth over the phone. However, this participant was able to have a pre-placement visit and presented with a history of the boy, thus allowing her to make an informed decision about the suitability of the boy for their home.

This particular foster parent indicated she and her partner had experienced two situations where the foster children were removed from their home. In both situations, neither of the youth had been in foster care previously, and both were removed from the foster home because they were running away regularly, resulting in the social workers removing them from our home because they felt they were not using the bed enough to qualify them being in placement and...neither child was placed back into [the child protection agency’s] care because they were not able to find any placement for them.

These placement moves, or breakdowns, support the foster parents’ perceptions that having as much pre-placement information as possible contributes to placement stability, because both of these breakdowns occurred with youth who had not been in care previously and were emergency placements, so one could assume that there was too little information on the youth to find a placement to meet their needs. The fact that no other placement could be found for the youth speaks to a lack of residential services with the appropriate skills, parameters (ie. not having the running away be a condition of whether
Despite foster parents' expectations in regard to receiving information about children before the child is placed in their home, most of the foster parents related that, in their experiences, this was not common practice. As one participant noted, "You're supposed to, theoretically, get a lot of information but it's everybody's experience that you don't get much." This foster parent talked about the discrepancy between what is expected by foster parents in terms of being provided with information about the child being placed in their home and the information they receive. The information, or lack thereof, can be a factor in determining whether the child is a proper match for the foster home and can lead to placement breakdown if the child is not matched well with the foster home.

It needs to be stressed that there are no guarantees that having a detailed history of the foster child or youth will ensure placement stability. However, situations as simple as a foul-mouthed youth being placed in a home that will not tolerate foul language, or as complex as placing a child who has been sexually acting out in a family where the other children are at risk of being exploited, have led to placement breakdowns that may have been avoided if that information had been received up front. For example:

We had visits with the siblings and all of a sudden I noticed the older girl sitting on the little boy. She's bouncing around on this little kid and I'm going, 'This isn't normal. You're poking toes into each other's crotches' ... and I'm going, 'This is not normal. What is going on here?' I told [the social worker who said]
'Oh yeah, the one girl was raped.' And they think that my oldest [foster] girl was in the same bed with her when it happened. Why was I not told that?

In this situation, the foster parent felt that her ability to protect those particular children from further abuse was compromised because she was unaware of the previous abuse. There were also concerns about how other foster children in the home were affected by the inappropriate sexual play of the children, leading to changes in visits between the siblings, friction with the birth parents, and eventually a placement breakdown for one child to keep the other children safe from the sexual acting out. Further, the trauma experienced by the siblings who had been sexually abused was not addressed, due to the information about the incident not having been shared with the foster parent, thus having implications for the children’s care and well-being. Not sharing the information was also a contradiction in policy, as many child protection agencies, including the one contracting with this particular caregiver, have written policy indicating that foster parents are entitled to all necessary background information on children in care in order to keep them safe.

Of particular note was that three of the foster families felt that child protection agency staff passed along information that may not be fact:

...they try their best, usually, and quite often I think it’s not necessarily the social worker who’s involved in the case who ... is the one that’s telling you this stuff. It’s coming from a third hand party like the resource worker, that maybe doesn’t always know all the questions and so they do fudge a little bit, just thinking they might know what the answer is.
The perception of foster parents that child protection agency staff occasionally “fudge” the truth in order to achieve placements implies there is a higher priority on placing a child than determining whether a child is an appropriate fit with the characteristics of a foster home. Despite the recognition by the participants that agency workers can’t always know all the information necessary to make the best match possible, there is the sense that even though agency workers try their best, the participants still feel suspicious.

Pre-Placement Planning

Pre-placement planning was considered important by all the participants in order to achieve the best match possible between the child’s characteristics and the foster home. This was recognized as contributing to the stability of that placement:

We’ll just say, OK, let’s have two intake meetings this week. Let’s bring him in on Thursday and then let’s bring him in next Tuesday and maybe what he can do is on next Tuesday he can stay for family movie night and the social worker can pick him up at 9:30 and take him and ask him how he liked it, and he can have dinner with us that night and then the following week, let’s have him come stay Tuesday and Wednesday, having him stay overnight and see how he likes it. So what we’ve done is sort of integrate the child into your home on somewhat of a gradual basis and usually by the third intake, things go well, OK, he’s gonna move in on Saturday.

This participant talked about taking the time for both the foster parents and the child who is potentially going to be placed in the home to get to know each other. She felt everyone needed to be able to make a mutual, more informed decision about whether this
placement is going to fit for both of them. It is also the first step in the relationship building process, which can prove to be critical to the stability of the placement, in terms of giving the child the opportunity to have some choice with whom they live with. This was considered very important by another of the participants:

There would be a pre-placement visit and the kid would come in with the social worker. I would insist the social worker be present... then the kids and the social worker would hear what my program was like and what I did... how it was set up and then I would make sure that the child had a say in what was going on, that this wasn’t just an introductory, this is them checking out my place as much as me checking out them, and that the child knew that they had a choice in whether they stayed or not. Might not like the location, might not like the combination of kids, might not like the fact that there was no man in the house... they had the choice to say, no, I don’t want to live here. And whether the social worker likes that or not, I still always made sure that the child knew they had a choice.

This participant provided placements for older youth and had indicated she felt when youth were given a choice, they were more likely to be committed to making the placement work:

I did my own little research piece for my own Master’s [degree] and I handed out a questionnaire to all my boys, both ones who had left and the ones who were in it, and just a few questions around what worked and what didn’t work. And what worked was the amount of freedom they had, the amount of respect that they felt they heard that they had coming in, that I wasn’t trying to change them. I was
trying to create a safe environment for them to be able to set some goals and work
on their stuff.

Another participant also recognized that foster parents do have some power when
she talked about not succumbing to pressure from the social worker to take the child right
away, and instead ensuring that the placement is a fit between the child and the foster
home:

So, what we’ve done in the past is that, you know, the foster parents do have
some power to orchestrate these things if they want. Like, what’s best for your
home and you don’t have to bow down to what the social worker wants to have
happen immediately. There are other resources that they can keep in place until
it’s the right time…

The difference between this participant’s situation and the situation of a participant who
felt she could not say “no” to the social worker about taking an inappropriate placement
(see next section, Pressure to Take Children into the Foster Home), was that this
participant had a partner who had worked previously in a group home setting and had
worked in the care system for a number of years, plus they had a business on the side. In
contrast, the participant who did not feel she could turn down a placement had a post-
secondary degree, had worked as a family support worker, and was fostering on her own,
but did not have the support of another adult in the home to assist her in decision-making.
This participant was dependent on the fostering income, which may have contributed to
her vulnerability in succumbing to pressure from the social worker to take an unsuitable
placement. It is interesting to note that the participant who felt foster parents had the
power to orchestrate placements left the impression that the placement would be accepted eventually, but on the foster parent’s terms.

Another participant related how pre-placement planning assisted both she and the potential foster child to make the decision not to go through with the placement:

She was a 12 year old girl and it was sort of a pre-placement visit and she was [from an ethnic minority background] and we had a couple of preschool children… plus I have my own … two teenage daughters. So she came to our house to meet us and she liked us but, number one, for her liking there were too many kids in the house, and also we weren’t [from her ethnic community], and that was, OK, sorry, can’t change either one of those. But that was fine. They went on and they found another placement for this young girl.

In this case, because the foster child could express her concerns with the placement, there was a collective decision by the child, foster parent and child protection agency that this placement was not a good match for this girl before she moved in, thus saving time and preventing the possibility of a future breakdown. It should be noted that the three participants who discussed the importance of giving foster children a choice about moving into a placement, in terms of contributing to the stability of the home, were referring to children 12 years old and older.

Pressure to Take Children into the Foster Home

Foster parents felt that social workers, in their efforts to find a placement for a child, sometimes pressured foster parents into taking a child into their home:
They said, ‘It’s only for 5 days. This family wants him out now.’ And I’m saying, ‘Well, why do they want him out now?’ They’re, ‘Oh no, it’s fine, it’s fine. It’s just they’re tired and they need a break or whatever.’ And I’m thinking, OK. Anyways, they pushed and pushed because they literally had nowhere and I found out later on, because he did move around to some other homes, that they had literally called every home. Every home, and enough people had already known about this boy, but I didn’t know about him. I was naïve and nobody would take him.

This participant not only indicated feeling pressure from the social workers to take the placement, but also recognized being manipulated by the social worker into taking the placement, regardless of whether the child matched the characteristics of the foster home.

This experience of feeling pressure from social workers to take children that were not a fit for their home was discussed by seven of the eleven foster families. In three of the cases, participants were asked to take another sibling of children already placed in the home, two of the cases involved youth with challenging needs, and the last two cases were situations where placement options were limited. One of the participants, faced with the latter situation, had previously identified some criteria as to the particular characteristics of foster children she preferred placed in her home:

I said very clearly that I would only work with boys...the first child that they referred to me was a girl, and like so many other foster parents, I gave my power away up front, thinking, ‘Oh jeez, if I say no to this one, maybe they won’t refer another one.’
This participant spoke of feeling powerless, of not really having a choice about taking a placement because of the fear of not getting more children placed with her, which affects her livelihood. Thus, foster parents will take a placement, despite feeling the placement may not be the right fit. There also emerged some underlying tension when it came to weighing the best interest of the child versus that of foster parents. In asking foster parents to take in a child that may not be the best fit for their home, it may have been in the best interest of the child to be in that placement, rather than have to stay in an abusive situation for one more day. Thus, the safety and well-being of the child or youth may be given a priority, at the expense of foster parents’ best interests.

Foster parents recognized that social workers or resource workers may not have a choice in placing a child who may not be compatible for the placement due to lack of appropriate beds:

I think that when they [child protection agency] can plan, they try and do the best they can, but sometimes it’s just, you have an empty bed and you only take preschoolers, ‘Well we have a 15 year old boy, will you consider it?’ and then as a foster parent, you have to weigh what’s going on in your life at that time and...just wing it.

This participant talked about how social workers try to place children in a home that best matches their characteristics but recognized that sometimes there are few placements from which to choose. This means that when a child is in need of a placement, social workers have to choose from what is available and that may not always be appropriate, as in the above example. Foster parents then have a choice between having a child placed with them that may not fit the characteristics of their home, or having an empty bed in
their home. This brings into focus the conflict for foster parents between fostering as a business versus the more altruistic view of a caring family wanting to provide shelter and stability to an abused and neglected child or youth.

Relationship Between Foster Family and Birth Family

An important issue affecting the compatibility of the placement is the relationship between the foster family and the birth family. Five out of the eleven foster families interviewed talked about maintaining respectful relationships with the birth parents, never criticizing the birth families around the children and welcoming the birth families into their homes for visits. They felt these contributed positively to the stability of the children’s placements:

I’m always very friendly and supportive to parents who are speaking, encouraging their good health and giving them positive feedback and doing all those things, and the kids hear that, so they don’t feel like I’m judging their parents, and this boy probably would have the most difficulty if I ever did, because he is very protective of her

This participant talked about how the stability of the placement was maintained because of her support of the birth parent. The foster child can’t feel the foster parent is negative or hostile towards the child’s birth parents. The foster mother felt that the foster child would likely have become resistant to the foster parent if she had not been supportive of the birth parent, thus leading to the possibility of a breakdown in placement.
Cultural Issues

Participants perceived that cultural issues can also be a determining factor in the stability of the placement. Different languages, different cultural practices and different religious beliefs can lead to rich life experiences for the foster family and foster child, but the differences may also be cause for incompatibility within the placement. Five of the foster parents mentioned cultural differences specifically as a factor in compatibility between the foster children and foster homes:

There were 2 boys, one because of a cultural issue and the other one because of a sexual orientation issue, that I decided that it wasn’t going to work, that is wasn’t fair to the kids coming in because I thought that the boys that I had at that particular time would be too unwelcoming and too abusive. And so, for the sake of the kids coming in, I advocated for the child I didn’t know, to say, I don’t think this is going to work.

This foster parent ran a group home for teen boys and knowing the characteristics of the teens already placed in her home, perceived there would likely be insurmountable challenges in maintaining a tolerant atmosphere for the new boys, It was, in her opinion, not in the best interests of either boy to be placed with her as it would lead to further trauma to the boys and an eventual placement breakdown. It is interesting to note that the participant recognized the boys living in her home had these undesirable characteristics, and she chose to maintain the stability of the present placements over the opportunity to teach tolerance to the boys.

Foster parents have found cultural differences may become insurmountable, especially if the birth family feels strongly that their children should be placed with
families of similar cultural backgrounds and beliefs and would therefore be unsupportive of any foster family who did not meet that criteria: “The parents took it to court that he shouldn’t be in our home because we’re not [a particular religion], though we respected the religion and followed all the things...followed as much as we knew.” In this instance, there was nothing the foster family could have done to maintain the placement, despite a willingness to assist the child in whatever way possible to maintain their cultural practices, because the birth family was not supportive of the placement. Recognizing cultural differences has had strong implications for child protection agencies, particularly in Canada with the aboriginal communities. A number of provinces have established separate child protection agencies where the aboriginal communities have authority to provide child welfare services to their own people, that include recruiting and training aboriginal foster parents, to assist aboriginal children in maintaining their culture.

**Behaviour of the Foster Child**

Whether it is due to attachment issues, mental health issues or other behavioral issues, eight out of the eleven foster families had had a child moved from their foster home due to the child’s behaviour, which put the family or the other children in the home, at risk of harm. This appears to be the most prominent reason for removing a child: “...it wouldn’t work because he was threatening ...[violence]...by law, if I allow him around when I knew this was happening, then I was not taking the proper steps to protect...” This foster parent had to look at the safety and well-being of the other children in her home, as well as her own safety and well-being. This led to the difficult decision of having a child moved from her home who had lived with her family for 12 ½
years. What also emerged in this instance was the power struggle that developed between the foster parent and child in care. In this particular situation, a younger child had been placed in the home a year previous to the placement breakdown. It was towards this younger child that most of the violence was directed by the older boy. In the older boy’s attempts to rid himself of the younger child, he was forced to leave his home of 12½ years. This was not what he wanted, as described by the foster parent, because he begged the foster parent on a number of occasions to take him back after the breakdown. This would lead to the assumption that the older boy, by virtue of his lengthy history with the foster family, may have believed he had the power advantage to have the younger child removed. What is interesting is that the foster parent chose to have the older boy, who had history with the family, removed from the home, rather than the recently placed younger child, which speaks to the relationship between the foster parent and the older boy. It not only highlights the power differential between the foster parent and the child, but also questions the attachment of the foster parent to this child after 12½ years. In this case, the opportunity for pre-placement planning and visits may not have prevented the placement breakdown for the older boy, although it does have implications for planning, highlighting the complexity of the relationships between foster parents and the children they provide care for.

In some cases it was the social worker’s decision to move the child out of the home, rather than the foster parents:

The one was a [teenage] girl and we had her for [a short time] before my daughter was born and my daughter was 6 weeks old ... when she abused her. She just beat her and shook her and slapped her around. So they moved her. We were willing to
work with her but they just moved her for safety sake and she came back to us many, many times after that.

This speaks to the foster parent’s commitment to the child, but also shows how that commitment may cloud a foster parent’s judgment. There is also the possibility that the foster parent felt an immense amount of guilt for having precipitated the breakdown by voicing her concerns about the situation to the social worker. Another way to look at this situation could be that the foster parent did not want to make the decision to move the teenage girl out of the home, so gave her power away to the social worker to make the decision for her, allowing the foster parent to preserve a relationship with the teenage girl because she was not the one to ask the girl to leave. Another foster parent provided some insight with a similar experience:

I hung in through some amazing abusive kind of language and situations, kept on thinking that, you know, it’s OK, it’s OK, I can be the rock here and take whatever he offers so that he’s got somebody who will go through it with him. And so, it took a lot of support. It took me relying on my supports to have the courage to send him away because I didn’t want to because I was connected, right? Foster parents get connected, that’s what we do.

This participant spoke to the incompatibility of the placement in terms of behaviours that were adversely affecting both the foster parent and the other children in the home, but she felt she could handle the behaviours because she did not want to be another person who failed the abusive young person, which she felt she had to do in the end anyway for the safety and well-being of the other children in her home. Again, there was a power struggle between the youth who wanted to exert his authority over others in the home,
and the foster parent who may have felt she had the power to support him to become a better person, then realizing that it wasn’t working, she had to use her power to have him removed from her home. This also speaks to the dilemma for foster parents in terms of wanting to provide permanency for the children and youth in their care but sometimes having to make a choice to do what’s best for one child that may result in having to do the very thing to another child that goes against the foster parent’s determination that they would not be just another person in a long line who had failed that particular child. This also raises the question of how foster parents define themselves as successful, because the foster parent may have stuck with the situation out of having her own sense of competence challenged. In having sent the youth away, she may have had to admit to herself that she didn’t have the capacity or skills necessary to make the placement a success because, by definition, placement breakdowns are seen as a failure.

**Importance of On-going Supports**

The second key theme to emerge from the findings was the importance of on-going supports that foster parents felt influenced placement stability. These supports ranged from tangibles, such as funding, to services and programs, to the emotional support from social workers and the care team. Although some supports may have been specifically focused on the child or youth, the foster parents also benefited, such as through the break provided while the child attends a program or counseling. Conversely, children and youth in care also benefit from supports provided to foster parents, such as specialized training programs to assist children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.
Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish who benefits the most from the supports discussed by the participants.

**Social Worker Support**

All participants valued support from social workers, but mentioned that there were not enough social workers to support the number of children in care: “...definitely the one thing I would change is I would put in more workers again, not less. There’s just not enough time. They’re so rushed, so high speed.” Foster parents generally wanted social workers to spend more time with foster children, to get to know them and to be familiar with their particular characteristics and needs. Foster parents felt that the more familiar social workers were with the children, the better developed the comprehensive plans of care were for the children and the better prepared social workers were to handle crises and assist in maintaining the stability of the placement:

Some of the contributing factors to, I believe, to the breakdown of that particular placement was the frequency of rotation of social workers, ‘cause everybody wants something different, every social worker has a different idea, and that’s the problem...There were false accusations made because of the type of kid he is, which the social worker couldn’t see his anger and his hurt and his disappointments and everything, which he threw at us. She couldn’t see through that and so she just threw it all on us and ended up removing the younger son and this boy now.

With more social workers available, the foster parents felt the social workers would have less children on their caseload and therefore more time to spend with each child and their foster families:
If we were allowed to create a perfect world, I would see social workers who would have enough time to connect with their kids, that they would have enough understanding...that they have time to come over and have dinner at a foster parent’s home and to be with their kids and to interact with them and see how they interact with others.

A few of the participants also discussed the value of support from social workers for themselves, but indicated that support was often limited:

Our Resource worker has done really well. She really seems to listen to what all we have to say and kind of what our needs are and she really works, tries to work, on our behalf in getting us what we need, whether it’s being trained on different things or funding...then when we’ve gone through difficult times, she’s been willing to give us counseling for that too, which has been really good, especially for the other kids, you know. She admitted that she would like to be able to do more but she could only provide us support within her job description, so I honestly think she’s done a good job with that.

Despite the praise for their resource worker in terms of the support she provided, there was also some implied criticism in how they described her support – that she did not go beyond her job description in providing support and they qualified that she tried to work on their behalf, rather than that she did work on their behalf, with the implication that she may not have been as successful as she could have been in providing support to them.

The participants tended to focus on the need for supports for the children or youth in their care, rather than the need for supports for themselves as foster parents. This may be
attributed to the nature of foster parents as being altruistic, or it could be they are wanting to perpetuate the view of themselves as altruistic.

An interesting finding that was common throughout all the interviews was the empathy for the social workers working within the system and how foster parents felt the system could not be trusted in that social workers were not given adequate resources to do their job:

There’s been 3 major [reorganizations] in those 25 years, this last one….was phenomenally abusive in terms of social workers. Not social workers being abusive, but social workers being abused by the system…I think [the child protection agency] is the most abusive employer I have ever seen in my entire life. They have no respect for their workers. None. I’ve yet to see a social worker that feels honoured and respected by the work that they do.

There is an implication here that the participant, by virtue of being a contractor rather than an employee to the child protection agency, sees herself as being somewhat outside the agency, unlike the social workers, who are employees of the agency. This allows foster parents to distance themselves from any negative aspects attributed to the child protection agency and contributes to an “us and them” mentality. Other participants also mentioned concerns with recent reorganizations of the child protection agency and felt these reorganizations contributed to inadequate supports and services for children in care. The “us and them” mentality was also a common theme amongst participants:

I call them and say, “OK, [child’s name] just had some horrible test. They stuck tubes up his rectum and into his bladder. They pumped him full of water, they took the water, they did MRIs, they did everything you could imagine, that child
had done to him. And I phone his worker and I said, would you like to be there? I
gave her the dates and the times. No show. Not even a call...nothing. And it’s
kind of sad in a way because, I don’t care, personally, walk out of my life, he’s
mine and don’t bother me. But when they’re starting to intrude more and more,
then at least show the concern at the time when he needs it, or butt out altogether.
This participant was particularly bitter about the child protection agency’s apparent lack
of support during a traumatic experience for the foster child in her care, indicating that
the child would be better off if the child protection agency did not interfere in her caring
for the child.

Concrete Supports

Apart from the foster parents’ perceptions of not having enough contact with the
social workers, all the foster parents indicated that their social workers often could not
provide them with the concrete supports they needed in order to maintain the stability of
the placement. This included financial support for children’s extracurricular activities,
daycare, respite, specialists to address any special needs that the child may have, special
medication or medical accessories, homemaking services, and/or transportation for visits
with birth families: “Everything I asked for, for support and that type of thing, when we
were having difficulties with the situation, are now being asked for by the present foster
parent, so what does that tell you?” This foster parent felt that her requests for support
were not unusual or unreasonable, but necessary, as the other foster parents, caring for
the same child, had requested the same supports and services. Because there are certain
expectations as to what the monthly support money should be spent on for children and
youth in care, foster parents can be denied their requests for extra support if that request is seen to be covered by the monthly support money. When foster parents persist in their request and are then asked to account for how they have spent the monthly support money, participants have indicated that they do not feel trusted by the child protection agency to spend the money appropriately. This contributes to tension between foster parents and child protection agency staff, who have a responsibility to support foster parents, but also have to be accountable to the child protection agency, economically.

This particular theme of supports being denied was not as much directed at the social workers individually, but at the child protection system as a whole:

Every child that comes into care is traumatized and comes in with absolutely huge issues. I mean, would I want my birth kids to be, for somebody to come in, in the middle of the night and seize them and take them away? It wouldn’t be about me, it would be the trauma that would instill in them. And ... that in itself is so traumatizing, and ... it’s never addressed. If there were something in place that would acknowledge that all kids that come into care are traumatized and that, at some level, they don’t have to go through a psychiatrist or psychologist or a number of tests...or anything to determine that they are traumatized, that there is an acceptance that they were, and that there were some services in place to address the psychological needs of the kids because those are never met and they are only met when the placement’s breaking down.

This foster parent was not the only participant to indicate that supports are often too little or too late in terms of helping maintain placements and to recognize that had supports or
money had been spent up front, it might have saved the system money in the future in terms of mental health intervention or criminal activity costs:

First his sister came to us and then they moved him in with us and they were there the better part of a year. His sister ... went to live with her dad. The dad would not take [boy’s name] because ... he knew that [boy’s name] behaviours would send him off the deep end. So they put him into a very high, a level 3 foster home to deal with his behaviours and he was the only child in that foster home ... that foster home burnt out and they left the country ... He went to a third foster home and I don’t think it was a good placement for him. They had a baby in that home, they had a lot of other kids ... and they sort of rushed him home because the foster home was at wit’s end dealing with him. Mom hadn’t done anything ... She was clean and she’d done no counseling on a regular basis or anything ... within weeks she was asking for respite. So when he came back to us, he came a year ago January for respite and by June he was living with us again full-time, and they’re preparing to send him home. She’s done no counseling, she’s done no parenting course, she’s shot her boyfriend with a pellet gun, but because she didn’t shoot the kid, I guess it’s OK. If [the child protection agency] send him home, that’s it. We can’t take him back because he came back to us like 4 times worse then when he left and we love him...I used to say, that’s the kid you worry about killing you in your sleep one day...and there’s no help for him.

This raises a number of issues with respect to not only addressing the needs of children and youth in care, but also the needs of foster parents in caring for children and youth who may present challenges that they have not been prepared to deal with. Without the
necessary skills and support to meet the needs of the children and youth in their care, foster parents either have to lower their expectations of what constitutes success for children or youth in their care, or become overwhelmed by what they have been tasked to do in caring for these children and youth, leading to an eventual placement breakdown.

Eleven out of the thirteen participants felt the child protection agency recognized that supports were necessary for the foster children but often did not provide that support:

I think, if there’s a situation where they sense that we can push this person and not pay them for this, that they will. And I’m not saying that that’s an overall sort of agenda. It’s just a basic...there is an overall agenda to spend as little money as possible. That is true, and so I think when there is a circumstance where a foster parent has a defeatist attitude or they back down really quickly and don’t push for, advocate or push for what they need to meet the needs of this child, I do think those situations occur quite often.

This participant pointed out that foster parents need to push for supports they feel are needed, otherwise their requests are not seen as necessary to the stability of the placement by the child protection agency if the foster parents either back down from their initial request or don’t bother asking for support because they feel they will be turned down anyway. In this case, there is no sense that the foster parents and the system are working together as they should, but rather it is foster parents versus the system. There is also the implication that neither the foster parents or the children are valued because of the feeling that the agenda is to spend as little money as possible, further contributing to an adversarial relationship between the foster parents and the care team.
The frustration of not being listened to when asking for support in order to avoid further complications was a common theme with participants:

I left all of these sort of, I wouldn’t say panicked, but these very firm messages for the social worker, she was gone at the end of the week, saying, OK now there’s a crisis, now there’s...we have a threat assessment team involved and youth crisis intervention and I’m going to be calling early psychosis intervention, and, oh, by the way, he needs to see mental health every week or they’re not going to let him back into school. So we knew this a month ago but it took a crisis for it to happen. And so I get a phone call back from the social worker, a message saying, ‘Oh well, that’ really great, so keep me posted. It sounds like we have it all under control now.’ And it’s like, thanks for your help, you know? And I don’t mean to be negative but we did this all on our own and it took a crisis to come to this and we just felt extremely frustrated that we weren’t listened to a month ago. We wouldn’t have this, maybe we wouldn’t have this kid sitting at home with slashes all up his arms.

In this situation, the participant had recognized that the child they were caring for needed psychiatric intervention, and had communicated that to the social worker, the guardian of the child. Intervention did not occur until the child mutilated himself, necessitating the participant to have to involve emergency services. The tension in the relationship between the foster parents and social worker, because of the lack of response to requests for assistance, is heightened with the social worker taking credit for being part of the solution, rather than recognizing the foster parent’s solitary efforts. All participants indicated they often had to search out their own supports, such as the foster parent above,
when dealing with the challenging behaviours of the foster children because they can’t rely on the social workers.

Knowledge of Supports

A couple of the foster parents felt that it was a general lack of knowledge about what supports were available, not only by the foster parents, but also by the social workers:

I think that documented list of services needs to be given to social workers, to foster parents, to whoever’s involved in the team so you can say, oh well, this is what’s available and I’ve got to get a hold of them so we don’t have a problem here. We’re on the way to it, I can see it coming, we need to intervene and, yeah, you could cut it off at the pass and not be as difficult as it is. But, yeah, the communication is the whole key to all of it and we’re not given all of that all the time and I’m sure the social workers aren’t either. We’re not just, as foster parents, in the dark about the services. I think a lot of people are.

This foster parent points out that if social workers and foster parents are aware of available supports and services to assist them in addressing the needs of the child in their care, that the placement might remain more stable.

Perhaps reflecting the lack of perceived support from within the child protection agency, all of the foster families interviewed discussed the need to develop their own supportive network outside of the agency:

There’s been once or twice that I’ve been really frustrated and gone to the social worker and they’ve pretty much put it right back in my lap again, and there hasn’t been a lot of empathy and a lot of, sort of, coming along side, and we have our
own supports and resources and so that’s why we’ve developed them. I mean, through our church and our church family and through the different counselors we’ve connected with over the years and people we’ve made friends with, intentionally because they’re good parents, you know?

This speaks to the foster parents’ perception that they are left to their own to meet the needs of the children and youth, which necessitates seeking out their own support system, rather than have to give up on fostering completely.

All the foster parents regarded the training offered to foster parents as valuable. However, the training was of more value as a place to develop networks with other foster parents and brainstorm about similar problems they may be experiencing with their foster children, the birth families, or the child protection system they work with:

The 53 hour course right now? I love the course right now. I think it’s invigorating every time we go there. I find that there is a ton of information from the other foster parents that’s really interesting.

Despite this participant’s enthusiasm for the training, she, along with the other foster parents, did not talk about needing any more training as they felt the child protection agency provided ample training over the years for them.

**Importance of Teamwork**

This third theme refers to the collaboration and relationships among the foster parents, social workers, and other service providers, such as teachers, child care workers, and health professionals, who are involved in the life of the child or youth in care. This group of people are referred to as a care team, and optimally are all involved in
developing the plan of care for the child or youth. The birth families are often included as a member of the care team, when appropriate.

Consistency of Team Members

All the foster parents mentioned that having a supportive relationship with their social workers contributed positively to the stability of the placement:

You get to know the worker and you know whose going to do it and who won’t. To come to see the kids when they’re doing something that they’re comfortable doing and (social worker’s name) went out of her way... She came when they did swimming, she came to the band concert, just to really get to know the kids, rather than a statistic in a breakdown of the family. So it’s worked really well when I get the help that, when somebody listens to you.

This participant felt that the described social worker went beyond the norm to get to know the children and support them in their activities. At the same time, the participant also felt like the social worker valued her input and was supportive of the care she was providing to the children. Although many of the foster parents were able to relate stories similar to the above situation, they agreed that it was mostly in the past when social workers were not only involved in with the children on a long-term basis, they also seemed to be more available to the children and foster parents. Now foster parents indicate that social workers rarely have the time to get to know the children and/or the foster parents, perhaps due to high workloads or because of a regular turn-over of social workers:

I had kids in my home who literally had a different social worker every month, every two months and never met any of them. Oh, now my social worker’s this
person, now my social worker’s this person. Never met them, never had anything to do with them. The file was just kind of passed around the office and we were informed that they had a different social worker and then maybe if you did know who your social worker was, you’d phone and they’d be off for a month on stress leave, so you would just have to deal with the intake worker.

This regular turn-over of social workers having conduct of the files meant that the social workers did not get to know the foster children or the foster parents, making it difficult to build a relationship, understand their needs, and work as a team. This leaves the impetus on the foster parents to ensure the child’s needs are met, because they know the child best. Having different social workers can also result in changes in expectations for the children’s care plans, leading to confusion for the foster parents, and sometimes resentment and resistance to change. It should be noted that there appears to be some evidence to suggest that regularly changing caseloads may also negatively impact social workers as well, with the indication by the participant that social workers are off on stress leave. There could be a number of contributing factors to social workers going on stress leave, but that is not explored in this study.

Inclusion of Foster Parents in Decision-making

Participants perceived that when they felt they were part of the team of professionals working with the child in their care, the placement worked well, long-term:

We had a wonderful resource worker and we had the world’s greatest psychiatrist, and she would come to our home bi-monthly and meet with this boy who is now moved into adult living services, and I think she was as valuable to my husband
and I as a therapist. We would meet with her first and then bring our boy up to be involved in the meeting and it was just, it was really, it was just working really, really well at that point and we had the services we needed to make life work for this young boy, and if there was a crisis, we would immediately, there would be an intervention and she would be there and we could get the resource worker and the social worker. We could call a meeting and everyone would just be there, in an instant. Things were working really, really well and that was very, very positive for us.

In this case, the foster parents appeared to have reaped the benefits of intensive team involvement with this particular long-term placement.

Another foster parent found involvement with the team of professionals working with her foster child somewhat intimidating:

If you’ve got good people on the team, it’s a great time for encouragement, one for another, but it can become a time of... it can be a little intimidating because they’re all looking at you, going, ‘Well, you should be doing this or...’ You’re kind of a bug under a microscope, right? Like, they’re looking at every little thing you’re doing with the child and everything you say, and everything you do.

This foster parent appeared more affected by the perceived power imbalance between the team of professionals and the foster parent who may not have the same education levels.

However, six of the foster families interviewed questioned the type of training that social workers receive as they did not always find them to be knowledgeable when looking for suggestions of strategies to use with children’s challenging behaviours or referring to
resources that would assist the foster parents, with the result that participants felt the social worker’s power was not warranted.

All the foster parents expressed their frustration at not being included in decisions made in regards to the children in their care:

We are not just a parent at home and they’re making all the decisions, I mean, legally there are the binding issues, but we do the day to day, in the trenches job and we know the children, and it’s us who have to advocate for what those children need and make their lives a success, with the support of the other team members.

This participant is not only frustrated, but also resentful of the lack of recognition given to foster parents for the important contribution they make in the lives of children and youth in care. When their knowledge and expertise around that particular child is disregarded, it can lead to placement instability and often placement breakdown, especially when foster parents sense that their opinions are not valued or even believed at times:

The guardianship workers, for whatever reasons – lack of funding, too high of caseloads, whatever it might be, we’ve got social workers coming in and making decisions about kids without really knowing the kid and without listening to the kid, and kids are weird because when they get into a professional relationship, I mean into a professional setting, meeting the social worker, they will be at their very best, to prove how together they are. And so the social worker then doesn’t necessarily believe the foster parent when the foster parent says, ‘Well, actually, no. He’s not together at all.’
This particular concern has led to a more adversarial attitude between foster parents and social workers, hindering the team approach.

There was a common theme amongst all the foster parents interviewed that the social workers do not know the children about whom they are making decisions and that it was important for the stability of the placement that they get to know the children. This was not only to make the best decisions, but also because of how social workers are represented to the children themselves:

Even though we deal with the family a lot, many workers are the sort of voice for the family with the kids and they're the go between. They're the rule maker too.

The kids feel like that's the person who has the power.

The power wielded by social workers over foster children was often seen in a negative light by the foster parents as it detracted from a team approach that would have contributed to the stability of the placement:

A couple of social workers, and the last one in particular, really contributed to the total breakdown. They had given the child enough of an out to always feel like that they're like his security blanket. So if we're seeing, OK, well you know the school has put this level on you that you need to be, you need to have this particular amount of homework down by Friday and if it's not done by Friday, you can't go on the school trip, right? And if that actually took place, him missing out on the school trip, that was viewed as our fault and the social worker came down on us about stuff like that. So the social worker continually undermined our parental role.
The foster parents resented social workers interfering with their parenting, especially as they were made to feel like the scapegoat. Some of the foster parents indicated that if the social workers did not have the time to get to know the children, then they should just leave the foster parents alone to do the job of caring for the children, as the social workers hindered more than they helped.

In looking at power imbalances between foster parents and other members of the care team, a number of contradictions have emerged, lending complexity to this issue. On one hand, foster parents talk about wanting more consultation with the team when it comes to decision-making about the care of children and youth, but are then critical of social workers when they provide this consultation, presenting it as undermining the parental authority. This can become a quagmire for social workers in determining whether they are team-building or interfering.

The issue of power imbalances is particularly important when it is perceived to affect the safety and well-being of the children in care and the foster families who care for them:

We have mental health involvement now... for one of our boys. He’s got to see this counselor every week. [The counselor is] very young... just out of school, and her big thing is, you’re [the foster parent] not allowed in the meeting and everything we discuss is, I discuss with him is private, to build confidence. The client, professional confidentiality, and so we’re completely out of the... loop here but we’re the people that were screaming to get this type of intervention and he lives in our home and, you know what? If he is going to be harbouring a weapon, which he was, and we had to take a knife away from him because he was
mutilating himself, or he’s going to be building a bomb in our basement, I think that we need to know if he’s having these thoughts, you know?

This foster parent was resentful of the therapist, who she felt put a priority on confidentiality over the safety of the foster family. Foster parents see themselves as the ones who have the day to day responsibility for keeping the children safe and providing for their well-being in terms of supports and services. However, they are also the first ones at risk if a child becomes violent. This is not the case for the team of professionals working with the children, who are somewhat insulated from the children on a day to day basis, yet have the power to make decisions that have an important impact on the foster family. This also highlights an interesting dilemma that frequently faces foster parents in terms of their role: they are not the natural parents, yet they are not considered professionals and afforded the courtesy given to other professionals, leaving them in limbo.

Challenges, Contradictions and Ambiguities Inherent in Fostering

This fourth theme encompasses the level of confidence and feelings of trust, or lack thereof, by foster parents for the children in their care, members of the care team, and the child protection system in general, that contributed to placement stability. It also highlights the complexity of the foster parents’ role within the child protection system.

Commitment to Foster Children

All the foster parents interviewed spoke of their love and caring for the children they foster, and the importance of making a commitment to the children. Without this commitment, foster parents feel there would be no attempt to maintain placements with
foster children who may present a challenge to their parenting capabilities. It’s their perception that this would have negative repercussions for the children who would develop a distrust of any foster home they would be placed in:

I think a lot of foster parents come into foster care for a lot of good reasons and all sort of different reasons but everybody does it because they want to help. But I think lots of, some people see it as a job and as something that if it’s not working, I can walk away from. I feel we’re like a marriage commitment or any other kind of contract. Once I invite that child into my home, I’ve made, in my opinion, a life-long commitment to them, and I’m not going to be the one that says, you gotta go.

This particular foster parent also related that she suffered a lot of abuse at the hands of one of the foster children because she would not give up on him. That particular foster child did not leave the home until he went to college, has now reached the age of 20 and was coming back to stay with the foster parent once his school year finished. An implication of this participant’s statement could be that foster parents may feel inadequate, or responsible, or guilty about placement breakdowns because they had made that offer to help initially, and by the placement breaking down, they had not helped. This implication could inform practice in a number of ways, through preparing foster parents during training, in the supports offered to the child, youth and foster parents, and the relationships between the child protection agencies and the foster parents.

Seven of the thirteen foster parents pointed out the importance of treating the foster children no differently than their own birth children. This was to ensure that they
don’t feel less valued or less loved, and trust that they are part of the family. Foster parents felt this contributed to the stability of the placement:

I feel that I have made him feel like he is extremely important to me. That I’m not his mother because I’m not trying to replace her but that I would do everything I could to do the motherly things and that I truly look at him as special to me, as special as my own children.

This participant had built a strong relationship with her foster child that gave the foster child a sense of security. This child was removed from his mother due to issues with her mental health, so having that sense of security and consistency from the foster parent allowed the child to eventually be able to face his mother’s mental health issues and see them for what they were, which he was not able to do when he first came to live with the foster parent. He was able to trust in the support of the foster parent and the knowledge that she was consistent in her caring for him.

When foster parents talked about treating the foster children like their own children, it was about creating an attachment or a genuine bond with the children that builds trust which assists in maintaining the placement. Foster parents feel they are able to recognize those children who have attachment issues, as those are the children that have difficulty bonding or do not bond at all, and are often quite disturbed, which often leads to placement breakdowns:

If you think about relationships in terms of, you meet people and you hang out in a superficial place for a period of time and then you move to the next level and the next level and, of course, as we get to know each other, there’s a stronger bond that’s created. Well, kids with attachment issues don’t want to go to a
stronger bond, so they’re going, they go through the superficial, they move to the next level and as you start to move to the next level, suddenly their acting out behaviour comes, happens. Because they don’t want to go. They don’t know how to go. They’re afraid to go. It’s like, whatever the reasons might be around, no, I can’t bond to you, then they end up in this place of acting out and the foster parent’s phoning, ‘I can’t handle this. It’s not safe for the other kids, it’s not safe for you, it’s not safe for me, I’m getting abused here, This isn’t working. I’m sorry, you’re going to have to go.’

This foster parent illustrates the lack of trust on the part of the child to develop that stronger bond with the foster parent. This leads to the acting out behaviour and the inability on the part of the foster parent to trust that child in terms of putting everyone at risk because of the acting out behaviours, thus leading to placement breakdowns.

Seven of the eleven foster families interviewed indicated they had children moved from their home because they could no longer trust that the child would not put the foster parents or the other children in the home at risk of harm:

We go through her half of one pregnancy because she came to us pregnant, and then this pregnancy, and while she’s pregnant, life is great. But, after she had [the second birth], and, of course, especially after the adoption, there’s going to be a lot of issues...she started having difficulties, not only parenting, but she started drug use again, and she met a guy...so after she’d been with us, it was just over 2 years, we told her, we love you, we love [baby’s name] but if you’re going to be doing all these unsafe behaviours, you’re neglecting your child, and she was sneaking her 19 year old boyfriend into our home at night, which, I mean, you just
can’t have that. It’s not safe for...I mean, besides the point that it pissed me off severely, you can’t, when you have other foster kids in the home, risk that. So we said, ‘It’s up to you. We will continue a relationship with you, if you move on, but you ain’t doing’ that in our home.’ And so she made the choice to move on.

In this particular situation, there had been a level of trust between the youth and the foster parents that changed as the youth had to take on the responsibilities of parenting. The foster parent indicated that it was the choice of the youth to leave the placement, which was, interestingly enough, the common theme amongst the foster parents. Specifically, most indicated that they had given the child the choice of changing their behaviours in order to continue living in the foster home or leaving. An unfortunate repercussion of this choice may be that it would appear to feed into any attachment disorder the child or youth may have.

Establishing Trust Between Foster Families and Birth Families

The issue of trust between the foster parents and birth families is also a contributing factor in the stability of a placement. Four of the foster families indicated that including the birth parents in decisions about the children’s care and developing that co-parenting relationship led to some trust that the birth parents do not feel they are not being replaced:

I think, finally, when we get to know the parents a little bit, they kind of understand a little bit where we’re coming from too. That we’re here for, just taking care of their kids while they’re, while they’re with us, that’s all. In most cases it’s been like that...you know, they phone and ask questions, how do you,
and what happens if... Even parents [of] kids [who] have moved out of the house still phone and they have ideas or they have a problem, they'll phone us about how can I fix this?

This foster parent described how developing a relationship with birth parents contributed to birth parents being more supportive of the placement, thus improving the stability of the placement. However, foster parents found it a balancing act as birth parents can interfere in the functioning of the foster home. This could add stress to the placement and ultimately lead to the breakdown of the placement. One of the foster parents interviewed illustrated this point:

This young lady was [older] by the time that she came to me. Her mother taught her to steal, she taught her all the things she knew and prostitution was one of them... so I tried to protect her from following in her mother’s footsteps and her mother at the same time just said, [foster parent] ... doesn’t understand. So, of course, that doesn’t support me and I’m not saying that I was always right about the situations but I had those values that I needed to give her and so there were those problems... she would be angry and just take off because she didn’t feel I was right.

Not only was there a lack of trust on the foster parent’s part towards the birth mother, there was the perception that the birth mother was bad, which the foster child picked up on, and contributed to the placement breakdown. This also highlights the importance of trust needing to be reciprocal, in that the foster parent needs to display trust in the birth parent, but the birth parent also has to display trust in the foster parent in order to contribute to the stability of the placement. This may necessitate a need for the social
worker to work with the birth parent to explain the value of not destroying the foster parent's credibility as being in the best interests of their child, as well as the birth parent's best interests. This is where it may be useful to portray foster parents as being outside the child protection system so they are seen as not having any responsibility in having removed the child from their birth parents, but rather, can be seen as a support to the birth family in caring for their child while they work out the situation with the child protection agency.

Trust Issues Between the Foster Parents and the Child Protection Agency

Lack of trust between foster parents and the child protection agency was identified by foster parents as having contributed to half of the placement breakdowns discussed in this study. In three of the breakdowns, unfounded allegations were made against foster parents and the children were moved from the foster home. Throughout the investigations into the allegations, the foster parents expressed that they did not feel supported or informed about the process, despite written policy stating that foster parents are entitled to support, guidance and information from the child protection agency. Instead, they felt they were treated as if they were guilty of the allegations. Although the investigations concluded that there was no wrong-doing on the part of the foster parents, the children were not returned to the foster home. One of the participating foster families who talked about their experience had indicated that their differing philosophies of parenting with the social worker had allowed the child in care to triangulate the situation. This would play out in such as way, according to the foster parents, that when he was asked to do something that he didn't want to do, such as complete his homework, or was
not allowed to bike home alone, which the social worker had indicated would be OK for him to do, he would threaten to call the social worker. In the foster parents’ perspective, the death of one of the child’s family members and the choice of the foster parents to go on a trip without the children appeared to have contributed to an escalation in challenging behaviours by the child, culminating in allegations made about the foster parents, who felt that moving the child out of the home had a negative influence on the child:

He [the foster child moved] doesn’t trust adults anymore. He doesn’t trust anybody. It’s horrible. This one social worker, she was mean. She was brand new and we could tell...I mean, she’d say the things that social workers are trained to say, like this is in the best interests of the child. We hear that an awful lot and you know, as idealistic as that might sound, I fully understand the real world and how it works and you know, people do things sometimes not in the best interest of the child. Sometimes it’s to save face. Sometimes it’s to appease the supervisor.

This foster family conveyed a lack of trust in the actions of the social worker, who, they felt, had undermined their parenting through such contributing factors as a disagreement with their parenting philosophy, her lack of in-depth knowledge of the characteristics of the child in care and the foster parents, and her inexperience as a child protection social worker. The perception of the participants was that the social worker was not considering what was in the best interests of the child and this contributed to the placement breakdown.

This theme of not believing the motives of the social workers and the child protection agency was prevalent throughout the foster parent interviews:
I was reading an article... saying that [the child protection agency] really believes that children belong with their biological families and [the child protection agency’s] mandate over the next year is to try to place as many of those children back with their families because [the child protection agency] want[s] to keep the families together and it was written very eloquently and if I was a person not in the know, I would read this and go, yes, you know, children really should be back with their families, but anybody who does foster care and is in the know goes, well, you know, [the child protection agency is] trying to slash 3 million dollars from their budget and something or however much it was at the time, and so removing these kids from care really helps them save money and number two, the reason these kids were taken out of their homes was because the [homes] were completely dysfunctional, many of them were being abused and it was dangerous for them.

This foster parent was cynical of the motives of the child protection agency, demonstrating the tension between foster parents and the system. This belief was supported by other participants when relating their experiences, indicating that they had been let down or mislead on a number of occasions. Because of this, the foster parents’ relationship with the social workers and other professionals had been negatively affected:

I think that foster parents on the whole don’t trust their resource [social] workers. They only tell them the information that they have to tell them because they’re afraid of being flagged you know? They’re afraid of, they know that there’s no point in going to media or anything if there are issues because your flags are high and your chances of being penalized are high, so it’s pretty isolating, that way.
This foster parent talked about a restriction on information sharing between foster parents and resource social workers, such as when foster parents were frustrated with a child’s behaviour and wanted to vent their frustration, because they could not trust that the resource social workers would not use the information in a way that may penalize the foster parents. Conversely, all foster parents interviewed indicated that when social workers or professionals withhold information from them, they are contributing to placement instability. This highlights a dual contradictory function served by social workers where they are supporting foster parents while simultaneously scrutinizing them to insure the child is protected. This raises the issue of how a child protection system can continue to operate with these serious contradictions and inconsistencies, and expect to attract foster parents willing to work under these conditions.

One of the participants explained the need for trust between foster parents and the child protection agency this way:

You’ve got to lay your cards out, you got to communicate, you got to be open with use, because if we are a team, cliché, there’s no ‘I’ in team, but it’s true, it’s true. If it’s the teachers and the foster parents that are working with the child and the social worker’s playing this spy mission, it’s going to break down. We’ve had social workers where the cards are laid out and everybody is working towards the benefit of the child, and it’s like, that’s when you have your best results.

The foster parents all spoke about the need for communication with the other professionals working with their children and that included trusting in the capabilities of the foster parents. Only one foster parent verbalized that she felt trusted by a social worker:
I had an awesome, awesome resource worker and she was great. She was super positive, super helpful, I just, I couldn’t say enough about this woman. Never ever did she ever lack trust in me...she never ever questioned my abilities, put it that way. She made me feel good.

This participant felt empowered and respected by her resource worker, conveying that it was not a common characteristic of resource workers or social workers.

Through the telling of their experiences, it was clear that the foster parents’ perceptions were that it was their role to act as advocates for the children they care for as they felt that they could not trust the system to look after the best interests of the children:

Thank goodness we have the wherewithal to take care of them. They won’t be stranded, they won’t be left and pushed out the door. I might have to pay room and board but they can go to school and get an education, get a trade, and I’ll make sure that they have the ability to take care of themselves. I think maybe one of them will be able to. The other two I’m not sure of, where they are going to end up.

In this case, the participant’s commitment goes above and beyond what is expected by the child protection agency, but is a common theme amongst the foster parents’ narratives, where there are many examples of doing more and providing more than expected in order to maintain the placement long-term.

In summary, four main themes emerged from the foster parents’ narratives of their experiences that proved pivotal in whether a foster placement became long-term or permanent or whether the placement broke down. These themes of compatibility of placement, the importance of on-going supports, the importance of teamwork, and the
challenges, contradictions, and ambiguities inherent in fostering are further explored in the discussion section.
Chapter 4

Discussion

This chapter will discuss how the findings answer the research question and then go on to discuss the findings in relation to theories and previous research. The implications of the findings on foster care policy will then be explored and the strengths and limitations of the study will be identified. Finally, recommendations for future research and changes in social work policy and practice are included for consideration.

Findings in Relation to the Research Question

This study set out to explore foster parents' experiences with long-term placements and placement breakdowns, and their perceptions of what contributed to the stability or breakdown of those placements. Four themes emerged from the interviews conducted with foster parents: compatibility of placement, the importance of on-going supports, the importance of teamwork, and the challenges, contradictions and ambiguities inherent in fostering, which will be referred to as placement stability issues. Weaving throughout the foster parents' experiences and influencing all of these placement stability issues were relationship influences between the foster parents and the rest of the care team, which could be identified as communication, power imbalances, and discrepancies between policy and practice, regarding whether a placement remains stable or breaks down. (See Table 1)
Table 1: Placement Stability Factors and Relationship Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship between Foster Parents &amp; Care Team</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Power Imbalance</th>
<th>Discrepancies between Policy and Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Placement Stability Influences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compatibility of Placement</td>
<td>Inadequate information-sharing</td>
<td>Pressure to comply with inappropriate placement request</td>
<td>Contradiction between stated procedures and reality of SW practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of On-Going Support</td>
<td>Lack of familiarity with child’s/foster parent’s needs</td>
<td>Fear of perception of incompetence in requesting support</td>
<td>Lack of provision or watering down of stated supports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Teamwork</td>
<td>Inappropriate care plans</td>
<td>Powerless in team decision making</td>
<td>Discrepancy between stated collaborative decision-making and actual inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges, Contradictions and Ambiguities Inherent in Fostering</td>
<td>Lack of relationship-building</td>
<td>Fear of loss of child or position</td>
<td>Feelings of exploitation and mistrust</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Communication

One of the most important factors contributing to long-term placements and placement stability, which emerged from the interviews with foster parents, was communication between foster parents and the child protection agency. Foster parents’ experiences with stable placements started with adequate information sharing about the foster child at the pre-placement stage, which allowed the foster parent to make an informed decision about whether the child’s needs matched the characteristics and abilities of the foster home. It then progressed through to clarifications of expectations around the plan of care, and to being kept informed of events affecting the child’s life, such as court proceedings regarding custody status, changes in the child’s social worker, or birth family issues.
The lack of communication between foster parents and the child protection agency, especially in terms of information sharing regarding the children in their care and clarification of expectations around the plan of care for the children was often identified as a contributing factor to placement breakdown. Without sufficient information regarding the child, foster parents were unable to determine whether a child would be an appropriate fit for their home or even to be able to consider whether they could respond to the child’s needs. A poor match between the child and the foster home can lead to further complications, such as behaviour problems, putting other children in the home at risk, and ultimately leading to a placement breakdown.

In providing sufficient information to foster parents about potential placements, a situation may occur where there is no suitable or “ideal” placement. This could leave social workers with the dilemma of how to protect the child or youth without an appropriate placement. This places foster parents in a position of power when they are aware of the challenges presented by the child or youth needing placement, as they can negotiate up front for the necessary supports. This could disadvantage the child protection agency because they have little option but to provide those supports or risk not having a placement. Foster parents have indicated they are suspicious when they receive very little information about a child or youth because they are wondering if they are being set up to take a placement that they would have refused if they were aware of all the challenges that came with that placement. There are legitimate situations where confidentiality may be a consideration that prevents social workers from sharing information with foster parents and that has little bearing on the care of the children, but suspicion of social workers, whether it is warranted or not, contributes to the tension
between foster parents and the child protection agency. This then contributes to communication breakdown, and placement instability may then follow.

On-going communication contributed to the development of supportive relationships amongst foster parents, the child protection agency, and the rest of the team of professionals working with the foster parents in meeting the needs of the child in their care. Through regular communication, the child protection agency and other professionals working with the child became familiar with the child’s particular needs and could make referrals to appropriate support services, rather than wasting time and money by referring the child and foster parents to services that were not helpful. On-going communication also allowed for problems to be addressed before they turned into crises.

Without on-going communication between foster parents and the child protection agency, social workers were not familiar with the needs of children in care, so could not make appropriate care plans or provide the appropriate supports for the children and foster parents. Foster parents were also unaware of appropriate supports or services available to assist them in meeting the needs of children, and thus often became overwhelmed in caring for the more challenging needs of children, again leading to placement breakdowns.

Communication within the care team was seen as intrinsic to the stability of the placement by foster parents. Communication results in the building of bonds amongst team members; developing of an understanding and a common language; and a sense of being heard by other team members. When foster parents were able to share their knowledge of the children’s day to day behaviours with the care team, members of the
care team were able to make appropriate assessments and develop comprehensive care plans that met the child’s needs, assisting in the stability of the placement.

Lack of communication amongst the team members can result in important information not being shared. An example of this was given by the foster parent when the mental health clinician refused to share information due to confidentiality, despite the child having a history of self-harm and hiding weapons. Although there are laws in place that obligate the mental health clinician to divulge information that may put the child or others at risk of harm if the information was withheld, this may not have been known by the foster parents. Communicating this obligation to the foster parents would not only have provided some reassurance to the foster parents that there was no imminent risk of harm, it may also have contributed to some positive team-building. This is a more extreme example, but demonstrates that lack of information sharing can lead to false assumptions being made, and creates tension amongst the team members. Without communication, it is very difficult to build a sense of team.

Communication was important in developing feelings of trust, which were also important factors in placement stability, not only between foster parents and other care team members, but also between care team members and the children they cared for. The foster parents related that when they felt the social workers and other team members took time to get to know the children in care and were in tune with their needs, children in care were more comfortable opening up to the care team and communicating their needs, trusting that the care team were looking after their best interests, thus contributing to the stability of the placement. This could also be said about the care team getting to know the foster parents and becoming knowledgeable about the foster parents’ needs as they relate
to providing for the children's needs. It should be noted that constant social worker turnover and inadequate staffing interfered with this process.

Communication between foster parents and birth parents, usually in situations where the plan is for the child to return home, was also an important factor in placement stability. When foster parents regularly shared information about the child’s progress with birth parents, conveying a sense that they were co-parenting and not replacing birth parents, birth parents were more trusting of the foster parents’ decisions in caring for their children and were less likely to sabotage the placement. This was demonstrated by the participants who indicated that birth parents continued to call them for parenting advice after the children had returned home, implying that the birth parents trusted the parenting of the foster parents.

Without regular communication between the children in care, the foster parents, the birth parents (when appropriate) and the care team members, in particular their social workers, foster parents worried the children were often wary or suspicious about decisions made about their care.

*Power Imbalance*

Foster parents who were confident in their role as caregivers and realized their value to the child protection agency, felt comfortable in insisting on pre-placement planning or refusing to take a placement that they felt would not be an appropriate fit for their home, thus avoiding a possible placement breakdown. However, foster parents often perceived a power imbalance between themselves and the child protection agency, particularly when they felt pressured to take children who may not have the
characteristics that would be an appropriate fit for their home for fear that they may not be offered other children if they refuse, affecting their livelihood and with the possible result of an incompatible placement.

Foster parents who had developed relationships that they perceived put them on an equal footing with the child protection agency and other care team members were the most comfortable in requesting supports and felt entitled to receive support. Again, these were the foster parents who realized their value to the child protection agency and saw their role was one of advocating for the child in their care.

When there was a power imbalance perceived by the foster parents, it affected their ability to advocate for the children placed with them. Some foster parents, after experiencing a number of refusals when requesting specific supports for the children in their care, would give up asking for supports. This was related to concerns that they may be seen as not skilled enough to care for the child, thus jeopardizing the future placements of other children, or an acknowledged sense of futility. One of the participants verbalized her fear that if she complained too much or “rocked the boat” she would be seen as a troublemaker, affecting her contract with the child protection agency.

When foster parents expressed feelings of inclusion on the team of professionals working with the child in their care, the feeling that their opinion was valued by the team, and the feeling they were treated as an equal, they were describing their experiences of long-term, stable placements.

Foster parents perceived a feeling of powerlessness when social workers and other professionals made decisions about the children in care without consulting the foster parents or discounting the foster parents’ opinions, despite foster parents’
familiarity with the children in their care. This feeling of powerlessness contributed to a weakened identification with the team and resentment by the foster parents of the rest of the team, affecting their motivation to want to work with the team, which in turn affected the cohesiveness of the team. This lack of cohesion with the care team was a contributing factor to placement breakdowns, in the experiences of the foster parents.

When foster parents experienced a power imbalance between themselves and the rest of the care team, it was often associated with feelings of mistrust. Foster parents all experienced instances of not feeling they could speak honestly with the child protection agency when they had concerns about the supports or services provided by the agency due to the power of the agency to give or take away placements and how that affects the foster parents’ livelihood.

It should be noted that, with the exception of the foster parents who admitted that their timing for going on a trip may have contributed to the escalation of their foster child’s challenging behaviours, none of the participants identified themselves as an active contributor in any way to a placement breakdown. This may be a reaction to the lack of inclusion in decision-making within the care team and feeling of powerlessness that foster parents do not see themselves as being responsible for decisions made by the care team that contributed to the placement breakdown. It may also be that foster parents who are frustrated with the system are using their participation in this study to vent their frustration and are overlooking any possible contribution they may have made to the breakdown of the placement. There is also the possibility that the participants, by the very nature of their role as care providers, may see themselves, or wish to be seen, in an altruistic light. By admitting they contributed to the placement breakdown would create
discord around their image of themselves or the image they want to portray to others, as caring, accepting people.

The perceived power imbalance amongst the care team members not only affected the foster parents’ relationship with the child protection agency, but also the children in their care. Foster parents believed that children and their birth families were conscious that the child protection agency and the rest of the care team made many of the important decisions affecting their lives, which resulted in a great deal of wariness and little trust.

Discrepancies between Policies and Practice

Despite formal practice standards and policies put in place by child protection agencies, it was the experiences of the foster parents interviewed that what was expected to occur was not always what did occur when it came to placing children in their home. Foster family handbooks, provided to foster parents by child protection agencies, indicate that foster parents are entitled to all the known background information about the child placed in their home that is relevant to the care of the child (Manitoba Family Services and Housing, 2006; Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2001). As noted earlier, foster parents expected to receive information about the child in terms of age, gender, behaviours, education level, health information, and concerns as it related to why the child was in care. Foster parents’ experiences were that children were often placed with them with very little information provided about them. Sometimes this was due to the child protection agency not having information due to a lack of familiarity with the child and family, however, foster parents talked about situations where children were hurriedly dropped off, providing no opportunity for the social worker to share
information with the foster parent regarding the child, that there was a delay in
information being passed along, or social workers were not forthcoming about the more
challenging attributes possessed by the child. Thus, foster parents’ experiences appear to
contradict the recognition that foster parents have a right to information regarding the
child in their care.

The rights of foster parents, as identified by a number of child protection agencies
in their foster family handbooks, indicate that foster parents are entitled to receive
support from and be able to consult with social workers in order to meet the needs of
children in care (Durham Children’s Aid Society, 2006; Government of Alberta, 2004;
Government of Saskatchewan, 2006; MCFD, 2001; MFSH, 2006). Foster parents’
experiences that they do not have enough contact with social workers and that they don’t
receive the necessary services to stabilize the placement would appear to contradict foster
parents’ rights.

Despite foster family handbooks indicating that foster parents are entitled to
involvement as members of the care team for the children in their care and are entitled to
actively participate in the decisions affecting the children in their care, (Alberta Foster
Parent Association, 2004; DCAS, 2006; MCFD, 2001; MFSH, 2006), foster parents’
experiences did not always reflect that right, in terms of participating in the decision-
making process or being treated as a member of the team. The foster parents who
experienced being included in decision-making regarding the child living in their home
and feeling like a member of the Care Team, reported that the child’s placement was
stable. Those foster parents who did not feel like members of the team or feel included in
the decision-making process, described feeling unsure about what the goal for the child’s
care was, leading to nothing being accomplished in terms of the child’s plan of care, thus contributing to placement instability and, eventually, placement breakdown.

All the foster parents interviewed experienced situations where there were discrepancies between policies and practice by representatives of the child protection agency, leading to foster parents losing trust in the social workers, resource social workers, or other care team members. This loss of trust started with information sharing, where information about the child is considered a right of the foster parent and is contained in a foster family handbook as,

Foster parents are entitled to receive pertinent information for the care of the child, including but not limited to, medical, education, personal care information, significant family personal history as well as care, guardianship, custody and access arrangements. (MCFD, 2001: pg. 47)

Foster parents indicated they experienced not getting all the necessary information, which is not unusual when social workers have not had previous history with a family from which children are removed. However, there were often situations where foster parents were skeptical of the information, or lack thereof, shared with them due to concerns by the child protection agency that the foster parent would not accept the placement if they were aware of the challenging behaviours that the child may exhibit, making the child difficult to place. Foster parents then expressed they felt exploited by the social workers placing the child.

Trust is further eroded when foster parents perceive that agency policies are not being adhered to by agency staff. Examples of this include when promised supports are not provided, when foster parents are not included in the decision making process around
the child’s care, and especially when allegations arise regarding the care of the child in the foster home and foster parents feel the child protection agency is not following policy when investigating those allegations. Written policy for a number of child protection agencies indicate that foster parents are entitled to be treated with respect, trust, honesty and fairness throughout the investigation of allegations within the foster home, as well as receiving support, guidance, and information from the child protection agency or foster parent association. (AFPA, 2004; DCAS, 2006; MCFD, 2001; MFSH, 2006) Of all the foster parents to go through an investigation, whether it be to resolve concerns issues between themselves and the social worker, right up to being investigated for allegations of abuse, none of the foster parents were able to say they felt respected or trusted, and most of them did not feel supported or informed about the process. Not only did foster parents perceive this investigation process as damaging to their credibility, regardless of whether the allegations were unfounded, it was also damaging to their relationships with the child protection agency and the rest of the care team, as they no longer trusted the team or felt trusted by the team.

Findings in Relation to Theories

The evidence that emerged from foster parents’ experiences with long-term placements versus placement breakdowns points to the importance of teamwork, collaboration and communication. Interestingly enough, there was very little evidence in the findings to suggest that permanency planning had a substantial effect on the stability of the placement. Rather, it was the effect of rotating social workers on the consistency of
planning and implementation of those plans for the child or youth’s care that emerged as contributing to placement instability. This will be discussed later in this section.

Bulin’s definition of team as “a group of people who are interdependent and who recognize that the success of each one of them hinges on the success of the group” (Bulin, 1995: pg. 124) is applicable to foster parents’ experiences with placement stability and breakdown. When the child’s needs are met through care team members each fulfilling their role: such as social workers gathering as much information about the child as is available to then determine the best match available amongst the foster families; the psychiatrist completing an assessment in a timely manner then sharing it with the care team, which gives them the ability to develop an appropriate plan of care through open communication, and provide the necessary supports, as their roles dictate, then the placement’s stability is maintained and the care team has been successful. One of the foster parents found that when they would call a team meeting to address crises with their foster child’s behaviour, and the team of professionals, including the social worker, resource worker and psychiatrist, would meet and work together to address the crisis, they felt supported in meeting the needs of the child in their home in order to maintain stability. The foster parents who indicated they did not feel like part of the care team, due to factors such as lack of communication or power imbalances, also did not feel the care team was successful in meeting the needs of the child in their care.

The experiences of the foster parents supported Bulin’s (1995) identified characteristics of effective teams, which emerged from the data as having an effect on the placement stability or placement breakdown for the foster parents. Bulin identified openness and the willingness to listen amongst the team members as important to
developing trust and building teamwork; leadership without domination; cooperation and
a comfortable atmosphere; participation and commitment by all team members; decisions
made by consensus; understood and accepted goals; planned assessment of progress;
open debate and discussion of issues; a willingness to seek common areas of agreement
and use them to solve problems; and stability/low turnover of team members. These
characteristics were all identified by the foster parents as contributing to the stability of
long-term placements.

When the challenges identified by Bailey (1998) in working with teams were not
met, that placement stability was adversely affected, according to foster parents’
experiences in this study. For example, foster parents who: a) expressed a perception of
discrepancies in power between care team members; b) felt pressured into taking children
who were not an appropriate match for their home; c) perceived necessary support was
not provided to meet the needs of that child; or d) felt isolated in caring for the child
because of a lack of communication with the rest of the team, all say that the placements
did not remain stable and often broke down. Those foster parents who were confident in
their expertise, who felt they made a valuable contribution to the team, were provided
with necessary supports, and were treated with respect by the care team and the child
protection agency they worked for, were more successful at maintaining the stability of
the placement.

In terms of communication, foster parent’s experiences with long-term
 placements versus placement breakdowns are support for Habermas’s argument that a
just culture can be attained through a process of communicative ethics, or “discourse
ethics” (Habermas, 1990). Foster parents’ experiences demonstrated that when they were
able to communicate with the care teams in such a way that came close to the "ideal speech situation", as laid out by Habermas, with equality of access to participate in discussions about the child or youth's care; equality of participation in the discussions with the ability to question or introduce assertions, and express attitudes, desires and needs; and equality of enjoyment of access and participation in the discussions; that the issues of communication, power imbalance, and discrepancies between policy and practice did not arise. This resulted in strengthening the relationships between the care team members, and contributed positively to placement stability due to timely interventions by the care team. However, given foster parents' indications that they did not feel part of the team, Habermas' "ideal speech situation" seems to have been a seldom occurrence. Conducting care team meetings that included foster parents was not enough to ensure the "ideal speech situation", as indicated by the foster parents who described their perceptions of not being listened to or their fear of speaking out because of their perception that they may be penalized for their opinions.

The subject of permanency planning, as defined by Fein & Maluccio (1983), did not emerge substantially in the findings as an issue for foster parents in terms of placement stability. This may be partially due to the view of fostering as being temporary by nature. However, of the foster parents who indicated that they had made a long-term commitment to their foster children, with the expectation that they would continue to support their children in care beyond the age of majority, those placements were reported as remaining stable. This would be in keeping with Kufeldt's (1991) theory that children who have at least one adult who is unconditionally committed to them experience stability, continuity, and, thus, a sense of permanency.
What emerged strongly in the findings, which can be related to permanency planning, was the effect of rotating social workers on plans of care for children and youth. When the responsibility for a child or youth's file transfer from social worker to social worker with increased frequency, as indicated in the findings, there is less of an opportunity for the social worker to become familiar with the needs of the child or the foster family caring for the child. Thus, planning for the child's care becomes an issue that can affect the stability of the placement, if not done adequately or appropriately. This issue goes back to the concept of teamwork, collaboration and communication among the foster parents and team of professionals involved in the child's care.

Findings in Relation to Previous Research

In many ways, foster parents' experiences with long-term placements versus placement breakdowns were consistent with findings in previous research that addressed the themes in Table 1.

Compatibility of placement in terms of matching the child's or youth's characteristics with the characteristics and skill set of the foster home was intrinsic to maintaining placement stability, in the foster parents' experiences. This was consistent with Sinclair and Wilson's findings that 'matching, chemistry and interaction' between the child and foster parents were important to maintain long-term placements. (Sinclair & Wilson, 2002, pg.883)

Despite findings that recommended child protection agencies should be providing on-going support and communication to foster parents (James, 2004; Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001; McDonald et al, 2003), foster parents' experiences showed this was an
inconsistent practice. All of the foster parents interviewed stated that they thought social workers were overloaded with work, which gave them little time to develop relationships with the children in their care or the foster parents providing the care for those children. These perceptions may contextualize Andersson's findings that “there is much evidence that social workers fail to give support and encouragement in their everyday fostering work.” (2001, p.245-246).

Training is considered a support to foster parents in that it provides them with the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the children in their homes. What was particularly interesting was that when the foster parents talked about their experiences with long-term placements versus breakdowns, the perception that they lacked the skills or knowledge necessary to do the job did not emerge strongly. There was a general consensus that the foster parents had more than enough training and that often the training was repetitious. However, what was valuable for participants were the opportunities in training to connect with other foster parents, share parenting solutions, and build peer support networks. These findings appear to challenge previous research, which pointed to foster parent training as contributing to placement stability (Boyd & Remy, 1979; Herczog, Van Pagee, & Pasztor, 2001; Jacobs, 1980; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000), as the findings suggest that systemic issues are the underlying problem in placement breakdowns, not the skills of the foster parents. The findings further suggest that an unintended benefit of the training may be that it assists foster parents in recognizing that they are not the problem, but that the system is the root issue.

Foster parents related that placements remained stable when foster parents felt supported by the social workers and other professionals on the team, that everyone was
on the same page in terms of the care plan for the child in care, and appropriate supports and services were available to assist the foster parent in meeting the child’s needs. This was consistent with the findings of Roberts et al (1994) that factors contributing to team effectiveness were common goals, leadership support, compatibility of organization design and sufficient financial resources. This was also in keeping with research by McDonald, Burgess, & Smith (2003) that found multi-disciplinary support teams “can have a positive effect upon the psychological well-being of foster carers, their child management, and upon the children them-selves.” (McDonald et al., 2003: pg.831). Herczog, Van Pagee & Pasztor (2001) went further to suggest that foster parent training should include strategies on how to work as a member of a professional team, which would be quite useful if the rest of the team were employing the same strategies.

Trust and relationship building were woven throughout the foster parents’ experiences with long-term placement versus placement breakdown and were an integral part of teamwork. Factors such as lack of respect from social workers, a sense that the foster parents’ opinions were not valued, a lack of recognition from the child protection agency of the foster parents’ expertise regarding a child for which they provide on-going care, and the suspicion cast on their integrity when false allegations are made against them, contributed to poor relationships between foster parents and the child protection agency, leading to placement instability or breakdown. This was consistent with Sheldon’s (2002) findings that these factors contributed to foster parents wanting to give up fostering and not recommending it to friends and neighbors.

Foster parents’ experiences that lack of communication was the main factor contributing to placement breakdown was also consistent with a number of studies that
identified inadequate communication as the greatest barrier to team effectiveness (Cooley, 1994; Lee & Holland, 1991; Lewandowski, 2002; Resnick & Tighe, 1997; Taylor & Tilley, 1990; Titterington, 1990). Further, other factors identified by foster parents as contributing to placement breakdown, such as lack of information sharing, the power imbalance among care team members, and lack of clarification around expectations or goals for the child’s plan of care, were supported in previous research that found obstacles to team effectiveness included differential power and authority (Dane & Simon, 1991; Molyneux, 2001), uncertainty about information sharing (Harris, 1999), and lack of common goals and unified purpose (Mouzakis & Goldstein, 1985). Rhodes, Orme & McSurdy (2003) further identified that lack of communication in terms of foster parents’ roles led to inconsistent expectations of foster parents and created problems for the children, families and child protection agency.

The issue of discrepancies between policy and practice that affected the stability of the placement, in foster parents’ experiences, were also supported in the research findings of Gilbertson & Barber (2003), who found that 70 percent of placement disruptions were systemic or policy related, and James (2004), whose findings identified various ways in which system factors impeded best practice, failing foster parents and the children in their care by contributing to placement instability or disruption.

Foster parents’ motives for fostering did not emerge strongly as factors contributing to placement stability, which was identified as important in previous research (Andersson, 2001; Dando & Minty, 1987). Foster parents did, however, talk about their commitment to children contributing to the success of a placement, which supported previous research (Rhodes et al, 2003).
Implications for Foster Care Policy and Future Research

Implications

Many jurisdictions have amended their legislation to encourage extended family and others with significant relationships to commit to providing care for children who can no longer live with their families due to abuse and neglect, with the assumed result of a reduction in the number of children in foster care. However, in British Columbia, the introduction of this new legislation coincided with the downsizing of the child protection agency by the government, resulting in a reduction in the number of social workers and resource social workers, and foster parents' experiences would indicate that social workers are struggling to meet the needs of the children and the foster parents on their caseloads due to workload issues. The implications of this lack of capacity on the part of the social workers and resource social workers are far reaching in that it will have a drastic impact on foster parents and the children they care for. Child protection/guardianship social workers don’t have the opportunity to become familiar with children on their caseload so cannot provide all the necessary information in order to match that child with an appropriate foster placement. This is perceived by foster parents to be an indication of a lack of trust and/or discounting their expertise. Resource social workers don’t have the opportunity to become familiar with their foster parents and their needs, so cannot provide the appropriate supports or do the necessary monitoring to ensure the foster parent is able to meet the needs of the children placed in the home. Both guardianship social workers and resource social workers don’t have the time to participate in the building and nurturing of effective and efficient care teams. All of the
above leads to important issues that are not addressed appropriately with the child and the foster parent, which negatively affects the relationships with the child and the foster parents. Having large caseloads reduces social workers' ability to communicate with foster parents and the children in their care adequately, the social workers make decisions without appropriate consultation so they can move on to the next crisis on their caseload and foster parents are left feeling devalued, and the social workers' jobs are so crisis driven that they do what they can to keep the child safe, without the ability to meet every practice standard laid out for them. Working under these conditions has implications for the child protection agencies in terms of social workers going on medical leave or resigning their positions, foster parents giving up fostering due to burnout, and a reduction in the number of inquiries from people interested in becoming foster parents because of a lack of positive endorsement from current or former foster parents regarding fostering. This further impedes the ability of child protection agencies to keep children safe. Foster parents want clear communication with social workers, who need to take more time to clarify roles and expectations, as well as follow through on rhetoric.

This issue of having social workers who are overloaded and who often lack the capacity to meet practice standards is a common concern internationally. Studies in other countries, such as Australia (Gilbertson and Barber, 2004), Britain (Sellick & Connolly, 2002), and Sweden (Andersson, 2001), are finding the same issues exist for their child protection agencies and the foster parents who contract with them.
Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Direct inclusion of foster parents' voices in discourse lent strength to this study. Having thirteen parents from eleven foster families participate in the study with a high degree of consensus also lent strength to the findings, as did the consistency of the findings with previous research literature. By the researcher/interviewer attending many of the training classes and the community forums, many of the participants became familiar with the interviewer and felt comfortable in participating in the study. As the interviewer has not fostered children, that factor was used in establishing that the participants were the experts in fostering and that the interviewer wished to learn from their experiences. The strength in choosing to have foster parents share their experiences was that the researcher heard not just their opinions on why the placements were long-term or why they broke down, but rather their experiences of how these two situations took place. Thus the researcher, as an outside observer, was able to pick out the factors contributing to those situations, which may be different to the foster parents' opinion as to what contributed to the situations. The researcher's experience and expertise as a child protection social worker also provided a good knowledge base on the subject of fostering and placement stability.

Limitations of this study were that foster parents interviewed lived within same region, had training from the same agency, and had access to many of the same social workers and services. Therefore, there was more of a regional influence on foster parents' experiences with placement stability versus placement breakdown that may have presented different findings if this study had included foster parents from more rural settings or the more isolated communities in the North. It should be noted that the
participants were either in the midst of taking the foster parent education program or had completed the education program, which would have influenced their perception regarding the need for further training. This would affect the generalizability of the study as there may have been a different perception on the need for training if participants had not yet taken the education program. The fact that the interviewer was a social worker from the child protection agency that these foster parents contracted with would likely raise some power imbalance issues, regardless of whether the social worker worked in their region or not, thus restricting the number of foster parents willing to talk about their experiences for fear of consequences from the child protection agency. However, some foster parents may have felt empowered that a social worker was interested in their experiences and point of view. Foster parents may also have attributed more positive attributes to themselves or their social worker/resource worker in order to be seen in a positive light. On the other hand, foster parents may have focused more on the negative aspects of their relationship with the child protection agency as they had the opportunity to vent their frustration to the interviewer. The use of the video camera to record the interviews may also have been intimidating for the foster parents, inhibiting those foster parents from participating in the study who otherwise may have had granted an interview if an audio recorder had been used instead.

There were occasions where participants would indicate that they would forget salient points they wanted to make while in front of the camera. However, the benefit of video-taping the interviews allowed for opportunities to observe, at a later date, the non-verbal cues of the participants communicated during their interview.
Future Research

In terms of further research, another study with foster parents on their experiences and perceptions regarding long-term placements versus placement breakdowns may be appropriate with participants who had yet to take the mandated foster parent education program to note any differences on their views of the need for foster parent training.

It was interesting that foster parents in many jurisdictions are mandated to take foster parent training, but, until 6 months ago, there was no formal training for the resource social workers who are expected to recruit and support foster parents. This lack of training may be a factor in placement breakdowns when resource workers are not provided with the necessary knowledge to recruit and support foster parents, although systemic issues, such as inadequate staffing levels and unclear guidelines may play a greater role in placement instability. Therefore, a study with resource social workers and child protection social workers regarding the need for training in recruitment and retention of caregivers would be a logical next step. Also, the foster parents’ perspectives that there is a lack of consistency with social workers and resource workers in regards to expectations for the care of foster children, as well as a lack of knowledge around available supports and services, may also be a result of a gap in training for resource workers and social workers. This is a subject that requires further research in terms of assessing what skills and knowledge are required by resource social workers and child protection social workers, assessing their current skills and knowledge, and how best to facilitate their training. Interviewing resource social workers on their experiences with long-term placements versus placement breakdowns would also be a logical step in the research process of what contributes to placement stability.
It would appear from the foster parents’ experiences with long-term placements versus placement breakdowns, that on-going communication and collaboration amongst the team working with the foster child play major roles in maintaining stability in the placement. Although much research has been conducted recently on the necessity for teamwork and collaboration in order for organizations to become more effective and efficient, putting those ideals into practice appears to be proving difficult, if one is to go by the experiences of the foster parents. It may be valuable to conduct further research focusing on motivation and team-building amongst foster parents and social workers as it relates to maintaining placement stability for the child or youth in care.

**Recommendations**

Team building between the foster parents and the child protection agency would be good start towards addressing the issues of communication, power imbalance and lack of trust that have arisen in this study. Joint training, not only in developing effective care teams and the importance of integrated care management, but also in clarifying role expectations between foster parents and the child protection agency, and problem solving around support needs, would be useful in building relationships and developing trust.

Workload issues for social workers and resource social workers also need to be addressed, either through the hiring of more staff or redefining roles and responsibilities so that they have the capacity to address the needs of the children and youth in care, and provide the necessary support to the foster parents who provide the care.

Supports to foster homes in general need to be reinstated. Having the availability of respite, 24 hour crisis intervention, behaviour management, and the support of a care team has proven to be valuable to foster parents in maintaining long-term placements.
Finally, the complexity of the foster parents' role needs to be recognized by the professional community through addressing the dissonance created by the view of fostering as a profession versus fostering as altruism. The importance of the tension related to the foster parent's position on the care team has emerged strongly in the findings and the dissonance surrounding the view of fostering has contributed strongly to this tension. A contributing factor to this dissonance may be the lack of professional standards associated with being a foster parent, such as the code of ethics associated with such professions as social work or nursing. It is also unnecessary to have a degree or diploma, including a high school diploma, to become a foster parent, because foster parents are provided with training after they are approved as foster parents, which is unlike other professions that require a formal education and a degree or diploma before becoming a social worker or nurse. If foster parents truly wish to be treated as a professional, with the respect and consideration afforded to the other professionals on the care team, opportunities need to be made available to them, in terms of education and recognition, to increase their professionalism. Foster parents also have to take responsibility for making use of the opportunities provided for them to become professional, because if they are not prepared to do what is necessary to become a professional, they will likely not be taken seriously as a professional.
References


Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your understanding of how the decision is made to place a specific child in your home?

2. Tell me about your experiences with foster children that have been placed long-term in your home. By long term, I mean the child has lived with you until they have either returned to their birth family, have lived with you until they were 19, or have been adopted by you.

3. What were the contributing factors to the success of that long-term placement, in your opinion?

4. Tell me about your experiences with foster children that have been placed in your home and that placement has broken down. By placement breakdown, I mean that the child has been moved to another foster home or the child has been returned home unexpectedly.

5. What were the contributing factors to the breakdown of that placement, in your opinion?

6. What kind of services or supports have you been provided with as a foster parent? Which services have been useful and which have not been useful?

7. What improvements could be made in:
   - Placing children initially in your home;
   - Supports and services provided to you as a foster parent;
   - Communication with the team of professionals working with the child placed in your home;
   - Training/education options or opportunities.