

SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT FOR FOSTER FAMILIES: UNDERSTANDING THE  
EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS OF THE BIOLOGICAL CHILDREN OF FOSTER  
PARENTS

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By

Lauren Ann Smith, M.Ed.

Dayton, Ohio

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SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT FOR FOSTER FAMILIES: UNDERSTANDING THE  
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PARENTS

Name: Smith, Lauren A.

APPROVED BY:

---

Susan Davies, Ed.D.  
Advisory Committee Chair  
Professor  
Department of Counselor Education & Human Services

---

Elana Bernstein, Ph.D.  
Committee Member  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Counselor Education & Human Services

---

Brenda Gerhardt, Ph.D.  
Committee Member  
Clinical Faculty  
Department of Counselor Education & Human Services

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## ABSTRACT

### SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT FOR FOSTER FAMILIES: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS OF THE BIOLOGICAL CHILDREN OF FOSTER PARENTS

Name: Smith, Lauren Ann  
University of Dayton

Advisor: Dr. Susan C. Davies

Foster families face a range of experiences during the fostering process that affect all members of the family both positively and negatively, including the biological children of foster parents. While recent research has begun to focus on support for foster families, most research focuses on training and support for foster parents. Where research does address effects on biological children, there is a gap in the literature concerning long-term supports for these family members. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of the biological children of foster parents while investigating suggestions for school-based supports. Following the phenomenological, qualitative method of research, ten participants ages 10-24, whose families chose to foster one or more children in their homes, were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. Through a thematic analysis, categories and themes emerged, including: positive experiences (new siblings, diverse experiences, helping others, closer relationships with parents and biological siblings, and sharing in a unified family mission) and negative experiences (foster kids' trauma and behavior, ending/temporary nature of placements, older siblings carrying weight for younger siblings, busy schedule,

split attention and effect on academics). Three specific recommendations for supports emerged from the data: community, someone to talk to, and validation of experiences. The findings from this study can be used to inform school-based supports for the biological children of foster parents.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Foster parenting is a noble and necessary part of our society. Nevertheless, it is not without its challenges. Foster families need support throughout the entire fostering process. Many foster children have experienced trauma (Tarren-Sweeny, 2008), which can lead to academic, behavioral, and social-emotional struggles both at home and at school (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017; Pears, Heywood, Kim, & Fisher, 2011; Scherr, 2014; Viesel, Lowell, Davis, & Castillo, 2014). The effects of these struggles can touch everyone living in the foster home, including the foster parents' biological children. There is an insufficient number of placements for these foster children in the United States (Scherr, 2014). Thus, in order to support the entire foster family and create lasting, healthy placements for foster children, school-based professionals must understand and meet the unique needs of the biological children of foster families.

According to Höjer, Sebba, and Luke (2013), many foster parents report concerns regarding the impact fostering a child will have on their biological children and that this was a barrier to fostering. Additionally, several fostering placements were reportedly ended due to negative emotional effects of fostering on the biological sons and daughters of foster parents. Researchers have explored the experiences of the biological children of foster families (Pugh, 1996; Raineri, Calcaterra, & Folgheraiter, 2018; Stoneman & Dallos, 2019; Sutton & Stack, 2013; Younes & Harp, 2007). While the overall effects of fostering are largely positive, many foster children report feelings of jealousy, competition, fear, and anxiety (Younes & Harp, 2007).

School psychologists' training in academic, behavioral, and social-emotional accommodations, coupled with their understanding of school and family systems puts them in a position to be allies and advocates for foster families. There is a wide range of research regarding how school-based mental health professionals can support foster students; however, there is little research on how we can extend these services to the biological children of foster families. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of the biological children of foster parents and what school-based professionals can do to support the academic and/or social-emotional needs of these students before, during, and after the fostering process.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review begins with a discussion of the characteristics and needs of foster children; academic, behavioral, and social-emotional issues are explored. This is followed by an examination of the changes that take place within families upon the decision to foster a child. This includes a focus on the unique experiences faced by the biological children of foster parents. The review concludes with a literature-based summary of current recommendations for family training.

#### **Characteristics of Foster Children**

Foster children experience unique circumstances during their time in the foster care system (Scherr, 2014). Many of these children are removed from situations of severe abuse and neglect. Approximately 50% of children experiencing foster care enter the foster system by 5 years old with the mean age of children in foster care being 8.3 years old. According to the AFCARS report from the Children's Bureau, these children remain in foster care for a mean duration of 19.7 months. By the time these students are 18 years old, roughly 34% have been in five or more schools. The experiences of these children, combined with a lack of stability, often leads to academic, behavior, and social-emotional challenges, both at home and at school.

An epidemiological study of 347 individuals in foster care in Australia found that only 7% of participants had not experienced neglect or abuse (Tarren-Sweeny, 2008). Additionally, children entering foster care have a greater likelihood of one or both biological parents suffering from a mental disorder or substance abuse. (Tarren-Sweeny,

2008). As a result of these experiences, students in foster care often struggle in school due to lack of exposure to educational materials, social-emotional delays resulting from abuse and neglect, and lack of consistent support. In schools, foster children are frequently referred for interventions to address a range of academic, behavior, and mental health difficulties (Scherr, 2014).

**Educational difficulties.** Young children who live in foster care often show signs of early literacy delays (Pears, Heywood, Kim, & Fisher, 2011). Additionally, students in foster care qualify for special education at nearly double the rate (21%) of the national average (13%) (Kids Count Data Center, 2015). Furthermore, roughly 24% of foster students were suspended or expelled at least once (Scherr, 2014). By the time foster students are 18 years old, roughly 34% have attended 5 or more schools (National Working Group, 2008). Additionally, the majority of youth initially entering foster care have to change schools and may need to continue changing schools with each new foster placement. This transient lifestyle can lead to academic and behavioral difficulties as student records are often incomplete and students have a difficult time maintaining meaningful relationships (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017).

**Behavioral difficulties.** Students in foster care demonstrate greater difficulties with behavior, which may be a result of a lack of effective coping strategies (Viezel, Lowell, Davis, & Castillo, 2014). The reason for high rates of behavioral referrals for these students may be the cause of two factors: (1) students actually have difficulties with behavior due to their circumstances and/or, (2) this group of students may be disproportionately targeted because school staff expects to find behavior difficulties (Palmeri & LaSalle, 2017).

**Social-emotional difficulties.** Many school-readiness skills stem from social-emotional health. Palmeri and LaSalle (2017) explained that students who experience foster care tend to show a greater risk of maladaptive social skills and struggle to establish healthy relationships. Further, children form new relationships based on patterns previously established by their earliest relationships. Therefore, when children have unhealthy or abusive relationships with their caregivers early in life, they tend to try to establish similar relationships with their peers. Additionally, foster students struggle to regulate their emotions effectively, which can lead to behavioral outbursts, acts of aggression, or difficulty moving beyond academic setbacks. These skills are just as important to the educational process as academic skills since students who struggle to follow instructions, self-regulate, and form relationships tend to perform poorly in school (Thompson & Raikes, 2007).

### **Support for Foster Families**

To provide holistic care to students in foster care, school-based mental health professionals must support foster families as a whole. Fostering children takes a physical and emotional toll on families. There is a general transition period at the outset of fostering that disrupts the normal routine of the family. Some biological children of foster parents have described this period as “awkward” because it feels like there is a stranger in the house (Sutton & Stack, 2013). Other biological children reported initial feelings of hope and excitement that were soon followed by feelings of jealousy, fear, and anxiety (Younes & Harp, 2007). During the fostering process, parents have to find the balance between maintaining their routine and adjusting for the needs of the new family members. Additionally, when foster parents have a negative or abrupt ending to their

foster experience, they are much more likely to give up fostering for good (Pugh, 1996). Foster parents have also reported giving up fostering when they noticed negative effects on their own biological children (Noble-Carr, Farnham, & Dean, 2014).

When foster families feel equipped to face these challenges and supported throughout the process, they can provide better care at home (Cameron, 2016; Randle, 2013). Providing adequate support for foster families may help reduce the burnout rate and keep homes open for children in need of a safe placement. Cameron (2017) describes how foster care agencies can encourage and empower foster and adoptive parents with the *Emotional Warmth Model*. Cameron's model trains foster parents to receive foster children based on the following six key components: 1) an over-arching psychological theory of vulnerability; 2) foster parent support for children's trauma-based emotional problems; 3) the importance of close relationships; 4) enhanced parenting skills; 5) self-management of dysfunctional behavior; and 6) effective utilization of realized and unrealized signature strengths. Programs, such as the one created by Strauss and Washburn-Moses (2017), to prepare foster families for fostering, are increasingly emerging. This program takes common issues related to fostering, such as a child coming into the home who had been sexually abused and conveys them via learning modules that can be understood by young children. The modules also provide practical "do's and don'ts" for biological children. For example, in the instance of sexual abuse, children are taught that even though they might enjoy a hug when they are upset, children who have experienced abuse may not want to be touched.



## **The Experiences of the Biological Children of Foster Parents**

Fostering can result in challenges for the biological children in the foster families (Strauss & Washburn-Moses, 2017). Biological children may have difficulty adjusting to the addition of a foster child and may mourn the loss of a foster child if/when he/she changes placements or returns to their biological parent(s).

There has been a recent shift in ideology to focus on the biological children of foster parents as active agents in the fostering process. Due to this shift, training for foster families in the literature now includes a focus on the experiences of biological children as an essential part of the fostering experiences. Following are some of the common themes noted in the literature:

**Active involvement in the fostering process.** A resounding theme in the current literature is the importance of including biological children in the decision to foster. (Pugh, 1996; Martin, 1993; Williams, 2017; Younes & Harp, 2007) Children who are not included in the fostering decision feel that they were not taken seriously and that their needs were not met prior to fostering (Martin, 1993). Conversely, some biological children reported that their parents made them feel like active participants throughout the entire fostering process. Within foster families, biological children of foster parents might be given multiple roles. These roles may vary widely but could include: babysitting, changing diapers, helping with schoolwork, and so forth (Williams, 2017).

**Positive impacts of fostering.** Children of foster parents consistently report that participating in the foster care process impacted them in a positive way. Some people said that fostering made them feel like they were part of a team with their family (Sutton & Stack, 2013). Others noted that they enjoyed having brothers and sisters to share

experiences with and that they have kept in touch even after their placement ended. They also felt like they had gained a bigger extended family (Noble-Carr, Farnham, & Dean, 2014).

**Emotional maturity.** As a result of their experiences, many biological children interviewed report that they grew in their emotional maturity throughout the fostering experience (Pugh, 1996; Sutton & Stack, 2012). This growth was partially credited to the fact that these children had to move beyond their own selfishness in order to think about somebody else's needs. They also had to learn skills of sympathy and empathy. Additionally, these children were put into difficult emotionally and morally ambiguous situations. For example, Martin (1993) noted that several of the participants interviewed in his study reported that the child staying with the family would share personal details about his or her past experiences. This became especially difficult when the child shared information about physical or sexual abuse. The biological child of the family felt torn between maintaining confidentiality and reporting the known abuse.

Additionally, some participants reported a general loss of innocence about the world after fostering (Pugh, 2016). Children of foster parents reported that they had a new understanding about the brokenness in the world. Fostering, no matter what the reason, is the resulting outcome of a broken situation. Therefore, nearly all children moving into foster placements are bringing along baggage of some kind. After hearing about the negative situations that these children are brought out of, the biological children were forced to come to terms with the state of depravity of the world in a way they hadn't before (Pugh, 2016). Some foster parents report a melancholy shift in their own

children's behavior after prolonged exposure to these difficult situations. (Noble-Carr, Farnham, & Dean, 2014).

**Having to share.** Many children of foster parents have reported that the greatest point of adjustment upon fostering was sharing their resources (Watson & Jones, 2012; Martin, 1993; Noble-Carr, Farnham, & Dean, 2014). For some children, this “sharing” referred to their physical toys and space. Other children, however, noted that it was most difficult to share their parent's time and attention. Many foster parents expected their children to look to the needs of the foster child first, which can be a challenging adjustment, especially for younger biological children who are still egocentric.

**Ending of placements.** According to participants in Younes and Harp's 2007 study, one of the more difficult aspects of fostering is the termination process. These endings can come up quickly due to the nature of fostering decisions, which are made by child welfare agencies that must act in the best interest of the foster child with a common goal of reconciliation of foster children to their biological parents. Those making placement decisions are not tasked with looking to the best interest of the biological children of foster parents; therefore school-based mental health professionals need to provide support for these students throughout the transition out of fostering.

### **Rationale for Study**

Much of recent literature primarily focuses on support for foster students and foster parents (Biehal, 2014; Clemens, Klopfenstein, Lalonde, & Tis, 2018; Lo, Roben, Maier, Fabian, Shauffer, & Dozier, 2015; Neiheiser, 2015; Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). Further, even when studies identified points of distress for the biological children of foster parents very little attention has been paid to how children process through these stressors (Sutton & Stack, 2011). Currently, fostering agencies are training foster

families before they receive a foster child (Cameron, 2017; Strauss & Washburn-Moses, 2017). While this is a good practice, there seems to be little push for ongoing support for foster families, especially regarding the biological children of foster parents. Many people reported that even though they had prepared for the arrival of a foster child, their experienced reality was different than they had expected. Others said that there was no way to know what fostering is like until you participate in it (Thompson & McPherson, 2011; Younes and Harp, 2007). This points to the importance of providing ongoing support for these children as they experience fostering. Schools have the ability to serve as an effective service delivery point for this kind of ongoing support, but there is a gap in the literature regarding how this support is currently provided in an educational setting.

The present study sought to explore the experiences of the biological children of foster parents, including how school-based professionals can provide ongoing academic and social-emotional support for these students.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

#### **Research Questions**

The current study explored the following research questions: 1) What are experiences of the biological children of foster parents? and 2) What can school-based professionals do to support the academic and/or social-emotional needs of these students before, during, and after the fostering process?

#### **Research Design**

This study utilized a phenomenological, qualitative method of research with a thematic analysis approach to data evaluation. This methodology was chosen to gather information about the experiences of the biological children of foster parents and to evaluate how school-based professionals can provide ongoing social/emotional and academic support for these students. Qualitative methodology was chosen so that participants could provide in-depth accounts of their experience with fostering.

#### **Participants**

Previous literature has focused on participants ages 5-18+ (Stoneman & Dallos, 2019; Sutton & Stack, 2013, Younes & Harp, 2007). To be eligible to participate in this study, participants were required to be between the ages of 10 and 25. This was intended to ensure that participants are old enough to recount with accuracy their fostering journey, but not so far removed from the experience that their memories have deteriorated. Participants must also have had a foster care placement in their homes. Participants were recruited via word of mouth and emails sent to educational

professionals in the southwest Ohio region. The convenience sample limited participants to a single region, which allowed for face-to-face interviews. Most participants were recruited via snowball sampling from contacts at the lead researcher's church. When participants volunteered, the researcher found a time and place that was acceptable to the participant (and his/her parents) to conduct the interview in order to protect the participant's confidentiality. These interview locations included a home and a private room in a school building.

Ten children and adults who have participated in foster care volunteered to participate in this study. Participants ranged from 10-24 years old and included eight females and two males. A pseudonym assigned to each person prior to transcribing the interview will be used in papers and presentations about the study to protect each participant's identity. The identity of foster children and the entire foster family was kept anonymous throughout all interviews and transcriptions, and will be kept anonymous in any future papers and presentations. Following is a brief description of each participant provided during the interview via self-report. A chart of participant demographic information can be found in Appendix A.

**Julia.** Julia is a 24-year-old female. Her family has fostered 7 times and has adopted 3 children. Julia has 2 biological siblings.

**Meghan.** Meghan is a 21-year-old female. At the time of the interview, Megan was in her junior year of college. Her family has fostered 10-15 times. She has one biological brother and one biological sister.

**Amanda.** Amanda is an 18-year-old female. At the time of the interview, Amanda was in her senior year of high school via homeschooling. She has two biological

siblings, a brother who is 14 and a sister who is 20, and lives at home with both of her parents and her younger brother. Amanda's family has had two foster placements in their home.

**Valerie.** Valerie is a 17-year-old female. At the time of the interview, she was in her junior year of high school. Valerie's family has fostered 5 times. She has one biological brother who is 19 and one adopted sister who is 14.

**Alex.** Alex is an 18-year-old male. At the time of the interview, Alex was in his freshman year of college. Alex has two other biological siblings, Nick who is 21 and a brother who is 16, and one adopted brother, who is 11. His family has fostered one time with the goal being adoption.

**Nick.** Nick is a 21-year-old male. At the time of the interview, Nick was in his junior year at college. Nick has two other biological siblings, Alex who is 18, and a brother who is 16, and one adopted brother, who is 11. His family has fostered one time with the goal being adoption.

**Ally.** Ally is a 17-year-old female. At the time of the interview, Ally was in her senior year of college. Ally has one biological sibling and her family has fostered 3 times.

**Leslie.** Leslie is a 24-year-old female. Her family has fostered 15-20 children over 12 years. She has one biological brother who is 20 and seven adopted siblings whose ages are 17, 17, 12, 10, 7, 6 & 5.

**Jalynn.** Jalynn is a 15-year-old female. At the time of the interview, Jalynn was in her junior year of high school. Her family has fostered two times and has participated in respite care many times. She has three biological sisters, Lucy who is 10, a sister who is 6 years old and a sister who is 19 years old. Lucy also participated in the study.

**Lucy.** Lucy is a 10-year-old female. At the time of the interview, she was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Her family has had two foster care placements and has participated in respite care many times. Lucy has three biological sisters, Jalynn who is 15, a sister who is 6 years old and a sister who is 19 years old. Jalynn also participated in the study.

## **Materials**

The materials for this study included a participant personal information form (see Appendix B) and a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix C). This protocol was designed using qualitative interviewing guidelines (Seidman, 2006) and a thorough exploration of key ideas that emerged from the literature. This methodology allows the researcher and participant to engage in a non-hierarchical dialogue, whereby the participant can feel free to lead the interview where he/she feels is more important. The interview protocol was designed to examine each participant's experiences of having a foster child in his/her home, what kind of support was received, and suggestions for schools to provide support to students.

The interview protocol was pilot tested with one biological child of foster parents prior to interviewing participants. Through pilot-testing, the lead researcher established a realistic estimate of how long the interview would take and gathered feedback from the student regarding the phrasing and ordering of questions.

A demographic sheet was used to gather relevant information from participants. This information included the participant's age, family status at the time of fostering, the amount of time spent fostering, the number of foster placements, and the age at the time fostering began. This information was used along with the interview transcriptions to



identify emergent themes in the data. Finally, the researcher used a recording device, a transcription device, and coding materials (i.e., pens, colored pencils and/or highlighters).

### **Research Team**

The research team consisted of the lead researcher, three University of Dayton faculty members serving as a thesis committee, an undergraduate research assistant, and a trained colleague who assisted in coding.

**Primary investigator.** The primary investigator, Lauren Smith, is a second-year graduate student in school psychology. Interest in this topic began when her brother-in-law and sister-in-law participated in foster care with the goal of adoption. Additional interest stemmed from religious convictions surrounding the importance of foster care and adoption.

**Research assistant.** An undergraduate research assistant aided the lead researcher in transcribing interviews. She was a senior psychology major at the University of Dayton. Interest in this research project stemmed from a desire to gain experience in research.

**Trained colleague.** A trained colleague participated in transcribing which helped to establish the study's inter-rater reliability. She was a second-year graduate student in the school psychology department at the University of Dayton.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected following the phenomenological tradition of research, whereby the researcher seeks to understand the participants and their unique experiences related to fostering. Before data collection began, the research team secured approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). After participants were recruited, the lead

researcher informed each participant about the purpose of the study and their right to voluntary participation and confidentiality. Participants signed an informed consent sheet prior to the interview (see Appendix D). If the participant was a minor (under 18 years old), the participant's parent or guardian was also informed of the purpose and implications of the study and asked to sign the informed consent sheet (see Appendix E). Minor participants were then asked to sign an assent document (see Appendix F). Participants were also given a demographic information sheet prior to the interview.

The lead researcher conducted all interviews independently (one participant at a time) in a location that was agreed upon by the participant and his/her parent/guardian. The researcher asked questions in line with the semi-structured interview format. Utilizing a semi-structured interview format (Seidman, 2006), the researcher asked set questions while allowing room for the conversation to be controlled by the participant. For example, opening interview questions were designed to be broad, such as "Tell me about your family's fostering experience." Participant's responses to broad questions helped determine the order of successive questions, and specific follow-up questions asked by the interviewer. Throughout the interviews, questions were asked in the order that made sense for each individual participant's dialogue. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked to share any information about their experiences of fostering that they felt was important to their story but was not adequately covered in the questions. Each new interview was compared to previous interviews utilizing a constant-comparison protocol (Seidman, 2006). If multiple participants addressed a common theme that was not included in the interview protocol (e.g. busy schedule), a question was added to future interviews to include said theme. Interviews were audio recorded and

transcribed word-for-word for later analysis, with identifying information removed. While transcribing, verbal fillers (e.g. um, like) were removed to improve readability except in the instances where removing such words would change the meaning of the text. The transcriptions were kept in a password-protected Dropbox account. Once transcriptions were de-identified, they were stored on the lead researcher's password-protected laptop for coding and analysis purposes. Participant data will be stored in a password-protected Dropbox account for seven years, and then it will be destroyed.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis in order to identify common themes among participants' experiences and recommendations for school-based support. Thematic analysis consists of collecting audiotaped data, identifying data that relates to already identified patterns, combining these patterns into "sub-themes", and deciding which sub-themes are most significant for reporting (Aronson, 1995). An undergraduate research assistant assisted in the transcription and thematic analysis of the data. The research assistant did not have access to identifying information about the participants, such as the participant personal information form or the consent/assent documents.

Interrater reliability was established by having a trained colleague examine the interview data for themes. After both researchers analyzed the data, they met to discuss thematic conclusions. The research team also established internal validity by conducting data audits, whereby the lead researcher made a case for the proposed themes to the other members of the research team in order to make sure that enough evidence existed in the data to make such thematic claims (Rodgers, 2008). Next, the lead researcher established internal validity by utilizing member checking (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Member checking

consists of taking the data back to the participants and asking for feedback. This allowed the research team to be confident that the themes reported are a correct representation of the data gathered from participants. These steps aid in producing ethical qualitative research by reducing opportunities for fraudulent conclusions.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of the present study was to explore the experiences of the biological children of foster parents, and to investigate how school-based professionals can provide ongoing academic and social-emotional support for these students.

#### **Experiences of the Biological Children of Foster Parents**

While investigating the experiences of the biological experiences of foster parents before, during, and after the fostering experience, analysis of interview transcripts yielded themes that fit into two broad categories: *positive experiences* and *challenging experiences*. Under the positive experiences category, the following themes emerged: new siblings, diverse experiences, helping others, closer relationships with parents and biological siblings, and a unified family mission. Under the challenging experiences category, the following themes emerged: foster kids' trauma, foster kids' behavior, ending/temporary nature of placements, older siblings carrying the weight for younger siblings, busy schedule, parents' spit attention, and effect on academics (see Table 1). A more comprehensive table of categories and themes with their supporting quotes can be found in Appendix G.

Table 1. *Experiences of the Biological Children of Foster Parents*

Categories and Themes
<i>Positive Experiences</i>
New Siblings
Diverse Experiences
Helping Others
Closer Relationships with Parents and Biological Siblings
Unified Family Mission
<i>Challenging Experiences</i>
Foster Kids' Trauma
Foster Kids' Behavior
Ending/Temporary Nature of Placements
Older Siblings Carrying the Weight for Younger Siblings
Busy Schedule
Split Attention
Effect on Academics

**Positive experiences.** Each of the ten participants reported that, most of the time, fostering was a positive experience. The addition of a new sibling into the house and along with them, the opportunity to experience diverse cultures and experiences was reported as a positive aspect of fostering. Additionally, participants described that they felt a sense of satisfaction because they knew that they were helping a child. Finally, participants said that they enjoyed closer relationships with their biological family members as well as a unified family mission through fostering.

**New siblings.** Participants reported that one of the best parts of fostering was obtaining a new sibling. Some participants simply enjoyed the addition of a new person/personality in their family. For example, Lucy (age 10), in describing one of her

favorite parts of fostering, remarked “I have more people to play with and more people my age because my biological sisters aren’t that close to me in age.” Valerie (age 17) also stated, “[One of the best parts was] there’s another person around to bring another personality in.” Jalynn, (age 15) shared about the time her family went to Kings Island with their foster siblings. She said:

“...They were all arguing over who got to sit with me on the roller coasters. It was awesome. And like my family [plays] games all the time. And if the issue is that there's too many people that want to play and not enough spaces, that's great. That's funny at times and it's just, it's fun. Siblings are fun and you look at us, and you can't pick out from the crowd which ones are fostered and which are your bio by the way we act around each other.”

Amanda, (age 18) said that she was surprised how quickly she was able to emotionally connect with her foster siblings and that it wasn’t long before they began to call her a “sister”.

Seven of the ten participants conveyed that their family began the fostering process with the ultimate goal of adopting the foster children. For these participants, the arrival of a foster child was particularly exciting because they felt like they were meeting their soon-to-be-adopted brother or sister. For example, Julia (age 24) said “So it was awesome because we had this new person in the house. He really, really felt like family. It really felt meant to be.” Additionally, Ally (age 17) shared that she had always wanted a little sister, so she was happy when her family found out that they were able to foster a little girl. Alex (age 18) also reported that the best part of fostering was gaining his adopted brother.

***Diverse experiences.*** Another common theme reported among participants, was the ability to understand different ways of life beyond their own personal experiences.

Nick (age 21) stated:

“But just getting new brothers is exciting and the diversity of it was also exciting because [our foster brother] had had a different upbringing. So just getting to know him, getting to know what made him special and what made him different and all that different stuff was just really, really exciting.”

Valerie reported that she enjoyed hearing the different perspectives of the foster children who came to their house. Additionally, Megan (age 21) stated that she enjoyed how fostering allowed her to interact with people from various walks of life. She described how one of her family’s foster children had to come home on oxygen, and that she found satisfaction in caring for a child with medical needs. Currently, she is studying to be a nurse. Julia indicated that fostering has helped her develop empathy for others. She recounted:

I'd say one of the best things that's come out of it for me is how much I learned in the sense of having an open mind now. You see so much of this world that I was lucky enough not to be born into. And it really made me understand and like, not prejudge someone. Like I, I can totally understand why these people are the way they are, with the struggles they go through and can't seem to get out of. That has really helped me to like have a heart for people who are in these situations. I think that's the best thing that's happened to me out of it.

Leslie (age 24) agreed that fostering has helped her to love children “at whatever stage they’re at because you never know what they’re going through.”

***Helping others.*** Helping others was a particularly strong theme that emerged from the data. Participants reported that they found immense satisfaction in knowing that they were helping children. Amanda said:

One thing was just knowing that I was making a difference and although like it didn't feel like it sometimes because I didn't have the right words, I couldn't fix



anything for them, but just knowing that they were in a safe place that was really good.

Leslie reported that, since several of her siblings were adopted from overseas, everyone understood that positive benefit of fostering to the children and that this understanding helped them be patient when things became difficult. Megan, Ally, and Julia all said that helping others was the main reason why their family began fostering. Nick reported that one of the best things to come from fostering is knowing the impact that adoption had for his adopted brother. He stated:

I know there's a saying like, you can't change everybody's world, but you can completely change one person's world. And we were able to, I mean, we really just picked [my brother] up out of the foster system and he's just...it's so lucky for him that he was able to do that...So it's just an incredible way for one family, if they have the means and they have the resources, you can completely alter the life path of somebody who is, just because of who they were born to, they're just not, not that good of a position and you can completely change the track of their life.

Alex echoed this by saying, “He is my brother there's no question about it... And just the chance I've had to play a small role in letting [my brother] live a life that isn't going to be dominated by a drug use [etc.].” He emphasized that he thinks it's one of the most loving things someone can do for another person.

***Closer relationship with parents and biological siblings.*** Many participants reported that they grew closer to their parents and biological siblings during the fostering experience due to the shared experiences, both positive and negative. Meghan recounted, “I think it made us closer, like everyone closer because there were times where we didn't know what we were doing or there were times when there was nothing else we could do other than rely on each other.” Similarly, Ally said “With my parents and brother [we] definitely, if anything, we got closer during all of it.” Throughout the interviews, participants shared that it was easier to talk to immediate family members because they

felt understood. Julia, Valerie and Amanda stated that they all felt closer to their parents and biological siblings after the ending of difficult foster care placements because they chose to debrief together and lean on one another for support. Julia further explained:

Basically, it's really hard to comprehend and understand unless you're going through it. So no one else can really understand. The best support that we had was our family that I lived with cause...no one else can really understand it as well. So I think we just pretty much looked to each other for that just because we've all under actually understood it and could help each other.

Nick and his brother, Alex, both recalled that their parents communicated well with them throughout the entire fostering process, which allowed them to grow closer as a family. Likewise, Leslie also reported having a close relationship with her mom, which allowed her to verbally process any difficult fostering experiences.

***Unified family mission.*** Some participants conveyed that they shared in a common mission with their immediate family members which led the family to feel unified when approaching fostering. Nick described this experience with his parents:

I knew why they were doing what they were doing and I, I was also brought into their mission of why they were doing it. So they did a good job of telling me like, this is why we believe we should foster. And I was like, “you know what? Thumbs up, like I agree with what you're doing.”

Similarly, Valerie and Ally both explained that their parents approached them regarding fostering prior to beginning the process to make sure that the family was on board. By including the biological children in the decision-making process, the family was able to approach fostering cohesively. Meghan reported that she shares the same religious convictions as her parent, which fueled their collective desire to foster. A significant facet of many religions, but specifically the protestant Christian faith in Meghan’s case, is a charge to seek and serve those less fortunate; especially when those less fortunate are children.

**Challenging experiences.** Every participant reported that fostering was not without its challenging moments. Due to the nature of situations that require children to be taken from their homes, most participants reported that they witnessed trauma and behavioral difficulties in their foster siblings. Participants also described challenges related to the ending of placements, pressure put on older siblings, parents' busy schedules and split attention, and the effects of fostering on academics.

***Foster kids' trauma.*** Seven participants recounted how difficult it was to see the trauma their foster siblings had experienced. Ally and Nick both reported that one of their foster placements ended due to the effects of trauma on the foster children that required more intensive help for them. Ally explained:

The trauma with the oldest was just hard to understand that him being angry wasn't, it might've been directed at us, but it wasn't him being mad at us necessarily all the time. I think that was probably one of the hardest things too... He would yell a lot, which I mean coming from a four-year-old, you think, you shouldn't be that traumatized at that young age. And just knowing that that came out of him... I think it was just hard because you knew that he had been hurt a lot and that that hurt you because you see this precious little boy and he got hurt. So that was just, that was hard.

Meghan remembered going to a hospital with her mom to pick up one of her foster sisters who experienced physical abuse that resulted in a broken rib and arm. She described:

... they don't say these things out in the news, but this happens on a nightly basis. And I will never forget that night just like I was carrying the toddler and she was just screaming. Cause obviously she's scared to death. She doesn't know me, but you know, it's just like knowing that I never had to go through that.

Meghan also recounted her experience with a teenage foster brother who made sexual remarks to her. She knew that his behavior stemmed from the trauma he had previously experienced. This is what she had to say about the occurrence:

He has so much past and so much history that is hurting him and he's in this position for a reason. And there's so much more to that. He just comes in and puts

on a front. . . . But then I was in the position of feeling uncomfortable, but feeling like I couldn't, and this is also me being like too immature at the time, but feeling like he would say things to me, like sexual remarks. He never did anything but he would say those things to me and I felt like I couldn't say anything because he was already so broken and so hurt coming in here, why would I make him leave?

Other participants described the personal stress caused by the knowledge of their foster siblings' home life and trauma. Amanda stated that one of the most difficult aspects of the fostering experience was understanding the physical environment that her foster siblings had to go home to. Until she started fostering, she hadn't fully realized the conditions of some of the homes in her community, in terms of cleanliness and dysfunction. Finally, Jalynn shared that one of her foster siblings struggles with anxiety, which leads to mood swings and requires a great deal of attention. Jalynn confessed that she knows she can't hold her foster sister's mood swings against her, but it is difficult not to become frustrated by them.

***Foster kids' behavior.*** Whereas the foster kids' trauma experiences mostly occurred prior to their arrival, most participants reported that a significant challenge in fostering was how this trauma manifested in behavior challenges upon their arrival. These behaviors varied across foster children's ages. For example, Nick and Julia both reported that their younger foster siblings initially presented with a lack of discipline instruction that resulted in daily conflicts. Teaching appropriate self-regulation and behavior skills requires foster families to give significant time and patience as Amanda explains:

At home it was frustrating cause they would misbehave and we were trying to teach them what they need to do it was just like our whole night could be, like, ruined. Like if we had something planned and one of the misbehaved you had to deal gently with them and, like, it often took a long time just to make, like, them understand that you were doing this out of love and we were really patient but it's like if we had plans to do or something, we would spend more time with them

because that's what they needed and it would ruin, like, the plans we had with like my siblings...biologically.

Leslie also described how her younger foster siblings would respond with violence during regular behavior correction, such as directing them to their seat at the dinner table.

Similarly, Valerie recounted how her teenage foster siblings would “go into my brother’s bathroom and smoke” and “would just argue with our parents the whole time”.

***Ending/temporary nature of placements.*** Ending placements and the temporary nature of placements was a resounding theme among participants. Specifically, participants stated that it was hard to become emotionally involved with a child only to have them leave abruptly and never hear how their story end. Julia said “They just leave and you don't know where they're going. You don't know if they're okay. You don't see them again.” Lucy stated “It was a little bit of a surprise that I would be so sad when they went back... I remember just crying with them and I don't want them to go.” Meghan explained that even when she understood that the foster placements had to end, parting ways with the foster siblings still felt like “giving up.” She said “you put all your heart and soul into something and then after six months of them being there, you don't really know anything else about them after they leave.” Leslie and Jalynn also echoed the sentiment that, while they understand how the foster care system is designed, it doesn’t always feel just. Leslie said:

So, it was just gut-wrenching because...you got to know their situations and you got to know their family members and other siblings and the things they’ve gone through and you hear these things from their social workers and stuff like that. So you know the horrible situations that they could potentially be going back to. So that’s gut-wrenching too because you know that they’re safer and, you know, better taken care of in your home, but the system is the system and they think, you know, whatever they say goes and is best. So that was definitely hard.

Ally said that she struggled with the constant change of information about whether or not her foster siblings would be staying with her. She recalled, "...And then they would change [the plans] and be this is what's going to happen. And that happened a couple of times. And then when it happened, it was just, it was all gone." Participants also explained how foster families who are working to adopt are at the mercy of the system because until they are officially adopted, the goal of the foster care system is reunification with their biological family. Leslie describes her experience with this process:

...by far the hardest thing was...you know we had one girl for almost three years and we were planning to adopt her and then somehow her family came in and then took her so that was by far the hardest.

***Older siblings carrying the weight for younger siblings.*** Four of the participants described how they felt real or perceived pressure to carry extra weight in an effort to protect their younger siblings. Nick explained the role he felt pressure to step into for his younger brothers:

For me it was hard ... to not step into a bit of a parenting role, especially like a little bit more down the road as I got older. Because it was hard for my parents to manage five kids...So, me finding kind of the line between where am I still just their son and where they need me to kind of help fill in on watching kids and where's my authority and that kind of thing. So just kind of the family dynamic was a little tough. Because since I was more mature, they, not expected me, but they probably did appreciate me stepping into some of those roles where I became a little bit more of a caretaker and a parent than I was a brother. But that was just tough finding that line. My brothers would get frustrated with that too, knowing "you're not my dad" blah, blah, blah, when I would tell them to do things, but you know, it just had to be done because sometimes my parents would be off taking care of [our foster brothers] and whatnot and I would just have to pick up the slack there. So that was one thing that was definitely tough.

Nick also reported playing a role in mediating spats between his younger brothers so that his parents could focus on bigger behavioral problems with his foster brothers. Amanda too reported feeling pressure to help her parents with daily tasks and babysitting. Her family is a very loyal homeschooling family where each family member is expected to help around the house. When her family began fostering, Amanda felt that she needed to increase her familial input. She said:

...I was trying to stay home as much as possible instead of doing what I want to do or going to youth activities...Even my schoolwork started to like fall behind because I was focusing on helping her out... once I started helping my mom, she started relying on me a little more. And then like when my brother started falling behind, I kind of pushed him to keep up and instead of, like, bearing, like sharing the weight, I pushed him because I wanted him to succeed...

Likewise, Ally described feelings of pressure to be “okay” emotionally so that her younger brother could rely on her when he was struggling. Similarly, Jalynn shared her experiences of being an emotional support for her biological and foster siblings:

I'm the oldest in the house now, which means that I get asked about things. Like one of the foster girls began discussing her period with me. She's 11 and she's getting close and she's scared. That came up and one of the other ones has boy problems and those come to me and I don't even know that I mind that necessarily, but I don't understand why that's on me.

***Busy schedule.*** Another emerging theme in the data was the busy schedule that resulted from the foster care experience. Ally reported that she hadn't expected her daily schedule to change, but her family had to create their schedule around foster classes, social working visits, and scheduled visits for the foster children to see their biological family members. Leslie recounted that their family's schedule would change each time they received a new foster placement. She said:

And then I would say the third [hard] thing would be the change in dynamic all the time because you know we're used to having so many kids and then you come in and you get used to these kids and then they leave and then you come in with

more or different ones so sometimes it would go from one kid to three. So, just the inconsistency I think in the daily routine and norm was a little difficult.

Amanda also reported that her family experienced a schedule change because they had to shift from a homeschool schedule to a public-school schedule. Additionally, Nick explained that increasing the number of children in his family from three to five created a more hectic schedule for everyone. He recounted:

So, we're having to sort out who's getting rides where? Who's ended up going to appointments that aren't theirs just because they need a ride? How are we going to make sure all the kids are watched and you know, all these different things? So just the logistics of our family definitely got more intricate because we had to make sure that me, [my biological brothers] and [my foster brothers] had somewhere to be all the time, which was hard.

***Split attention.*** Adding a foster child to the family requires foster parents to divide their attention in new ways which can be a challenging adjustment for biological children. Ally stated that even though she and her biological brother understood why their parents gave extra attention to their foster siblings, it required adjusting on their part. Nick said that he also felt an attention shift when his family went from three boys to five, especially since one of his foster brothers required significant attention: “It was now like 50% [of my parent’s attention] on our one foster brother and the other four kids kind of had to split up the rest of mom and dad, you know. So that was really, really tough.” Similarly, Leslie shared that she had many siblings prior to fostering which meant that individualized attention from her parents was never coming. Nevertheless, she said that, as a result of fostering, her house was “crazy all the time.” During his interview, Alex recounted this recent conversation with his dad:

But you know, I, I remember a conversation I had with my dad it was later on past the messiness. And I'm not sure if it was within a year or a couple years later. But he said the biggest thing he regretted from the process of adopting and fostering



was not doing enough for us as the biological brothers...because there is nothing, nothing an 11-year-old boy wants more than a one on one time with his dad.

Nick also described how smaller conflicts among siblings often were overlooked due to the attention that his foster brother necessitated. He said, “you [had to] bandage the wound that's bleeding the most, if you know what I mean.”

***Effect on academics.*** Some participants reported that the fostering experience had a significant effect on their academics. During her interview Meghan described that she felt uncomfortable going to school because her foster brother was close to her in age. She also said:

And sometimes if we had more of like an intensive... placement it was, it did [have an effect on my academics] because as soon as I got home from school, like my mom just helped the baby all day. I wanted to hold the baby first of all, but just taking care of them and like helping out my parents cause like they don't need to do everything. So just like putting them first but in a way that it was before my academics as well because I was thinking about them and not school.

Amanda shared that it was hard to do school work in her house because she had grown used to doing schoolwork when the house was quiet, but, upon the arrival of her foster siblings, quiet time became scarce. Jalynn reported that while she was still getting good grades in school during the fostering process, she struggled to find the motivation to do homework. Finally, Lucy said, “Well, sometimes they bother me when I'm trying to work or do school...It's hard to do homework. And I share a room with one.”

### **Suggestions to Support the Biological Children of Foster Parents**

While exploring how school-based personnel can support foster families throughout the fostering process, an examination of interview transcripts resulted in the following two primary themes: *ways to support biological children* and *advice for biological children about to begin fostering*. Within the theme titled *ways to support*

*biological children* are the following subthemes: community, someone to talk to, validating experiences, and additional supports. Within the theme titled *advice for biological children about to begin fostering* are the following two themes: be patient and loving, and invest in relationship with parents (see Table 2). A more comprehensive table of categories and themes with their supporting quotes can be found in Appendix H.

Table 2. *Suggestions to Support the Biological Children of Foster Parents*

Themes and Subthemes
<i>Ways to Support Biological Children</i>
Community
Someone to Talk to
Validating their Experiences
Additional Supports
<i>Advice for Biological Children about to Begin Fostering</i>
Be Patient and Loving
Invest in Relationship with Parents

**Ways to support biological children.** All ten participants provided specific suggestions for supporting biological children. Participants shared the importance of being involved in a community. Additionally, participants reported the importance of having someone to talk to without judgment who would validate their experiences.

**Community.** Seven participants reported that one of the most important supports throughout the fostering process was participation within a community that understood their experiences. Amanda, Julia, and Valerie all reported that their friendships were strengthened by a friend whose family was fostering at the same time. Amanda said, "...we were both struggling and we could help each other through it..." while Valerie

said, "...we just had another thing in common that we could talk about and we could help each other through." Likewise, both Meghan and Nick responded that they found support in a family at their respective churches who had fostered and could understand what they were going through. Meghan said:

It wasn't until one of the other families at church started fostering and they have a son that's my age, ... And we started talking a lot, which helped because he was experiencing the same things I did. And that was another thing. I felt like no one understood and like it's not a very common thing to be in this position... but it wasn't until there was another family that started fostering that I felt that [things] got a little better.

Nick said that this experience was so helpful for him that he would recommend a foster family matching process to ensure that every family could have a support system outside of themselves. Valerie reported that, not only did she benefit from friendships, but her mother also benefited from a support group of other foster moms in their region, which in turn provided more support for herself and her biological brother. Ally stated that she did not have the support of other biological children, but she wished she had. Finally, seven participants reported that they found support in their local houses of worship.

***Someone to talk to.*** Nine participants reported that it is helpful for biological kids to have someone to talk to about their experiences. Leslie, Jalynn, Julia, and Nick all said it would be supportive for school counselors to talk with the biological children. Nick specified that it was important that biological children had access to an impartial third-party where they can talk openly without fear of judgement. Julia said that she had wished the school counselor would have sat down with her entire family to talk about the fostering experience. Additionally, Jalynn shared that she wished her school counselor would have reached out to her so that she knew it was okay to ask for help. She said:

...And I guess I didn't, it took a long time for me to fully grasp that I also was allowed to have issues like, the first bit of this, it felt more like a "we're here to help them". And I wasn't really processing that it was also going to affect me. And that was okay. Like you have to get to the point where asking for help doesn't feel selfish when you're looking at, well, my, one of my frustrations pale in comparison to people who are deal with abuse or whatever.

Meghan reported that no one at her school acknowledged that her family was doing foster care, which made her feel like the subject was off-limits at school. She said, "...I knew that they knew that, but they should have, someone should have just been like, 'Hey, I know that this is going on, I'm here'. Just something as simple as that." Nick also suggested that school personnel reach out to biological kids, especially when they are younger, so that they know they are welcome to talk. He said:

So, having somebody to talk to them and just say, okay, like "I know you have two new brothers or children that you're fostering now. Like, how's that been going? What concerns do you have with it?" Like things like that just to kind of open the door for them to talk about it because it's not something that an eight-year-old kid is going to be like, 'you know what, I'm struggling emotionally, I need to find somebody who's qualified to help me work through these things.' That's not a thought that an 8-year-old going to have. So, to have somebody kind of work through that with them I think would be really good.

Meghan and Ally both said that they found some support from their family's case worker. Meghan reported her case worker would check in with her during home visits to make sure she was still willing to continue fostering. Similarly, Ally said that the case worker assigned to her family remembered her interests and would ask questions about how her activities, like volleyball, were going. Lucy reported that she wished her family's case worker would invest more time in her. She suggested, "Maybe like once a month or something, they could like talk to me and, help me, and give me advice and stuff on what to do or if there's anything that's bothering me." Amanda stated that her main source of support came from talking to friends and adult women from her church. Finally, Valerie

shared that it would have been helpful for her to "...Just someone saying that they were there to talk to, if anything, if I needed to talk to anybody."

***Validating their experiences.*** Participants also reported that they wished more people understood the challenges of fostering for the biological children of foster families. Alex shared that he had never had anyone approach him to learn about his experiences before. Meghan recalled that most of the focus from stakeholders throughout the fostering process was on the actual foster children. She said, "I guess, it was more geared towards these foster placements, which it should be 100%, but there's also other people that's affected by that placement too." Amanda also said:

I think it's just when you are encountering a parent, or like a family who is fostering, don't just care about, "Oh how are the foster kids doing?" But do ask the family, how are the other kids doing? How are the parents doing? Because we would constantly have people come up and they're like, "Oh, how are the littles doing?" We're like, "they're doing good." and then they would like walk away and then it would just get frustrating. Because you're like, we're as much in this system as they are.

Jalynn reported that it can be challenging to see supports, such as respite care, available to her foster sisters while receiving so few supports herself. She shared about the challenges surrounding her experience with anxiety:

Like no matter how stressed out I am, overcrowded, arguing with my mom because she's stressed out too. I don't get to do anything with that. Like the girls, all have therapists coming in and stuff and at times I feel like I need that. And we had to go outside to find me someone because I had also developed recently some severe anxiety... but they didn't even, they don't have people looking for that. If you ask for it, the agency does have a thing to, they'll pay for like six [sessions] a year or something. So, they'll pay for that, but you have to go ask for that. Like they don't look for that. Like if my mom and I hadn't realized that there was something going on, nobody would have. Life would have just sucked for a while...life did suck for a while.

***Additional supports.*** In addition to the specific support recommendations above, participants shared additional suggestions for supporting foster families. Leslie stated that

people should specifically ask foster families what they need rather than assuming.

Meghan and Leslie both reported that having meals and other tangible goods provided for their families was particularly helpful. Leslie also remembered how her mother was also able to leverage community resources. She said:

And out of all this, my mom started to do a program for backpacks. So she would go to the local social services where these kids would be taken first and then go to their placement homes, and she'd create these backpacks with toothbrushes and underwear and things that they wouldn't have if they were taken abruptly out of their homes – which happens often.

Ally remembered how friends and family members were willing to complete background checks so that they would be available to do any babysitting. Finally, Amanda shared that she wished she'd had someone to help her balance her roles and responsibilities throughout the fostering experience.

**Advice for biological children about to begin fostering.** Many participants stated that the only people who truly understand what foster families go through are those who have been involved in the foster care process. As such, participants presented advice for biological children whose parents are about to begin fostering, which included being patient and loving, and investing in your relationship with your parents.

***Be patient and loving.*** One theme that echoed among participants was the need to be patient and loving with the foster children. Meghan and Amanda both stated that it is not the responsibility of foster families to “fix” the foster children, therefore, instead of trying to solve problems, let them know that “...they're safe and that they can rely on you and that you're...consistent and you're a constant in their life...” Leslie suggested that biological children consider the environment the foster children were raised in, which

might impact how you act with them and the things that you say. For example, Leslie said:

...even for these little kids, you just have to be careful what you say around them. You have to be careful how you respond to them because at any moment you could trigger something in them that they could not necessarily know is there that could send them spiraling and would not be good for anybody else too.

Ally asserted that biological children should love the foster children in the same manner that they would love any other child while understanding the temporary nature of the foster placement. Additionally, Julia suggested:

I would say like the number one thing is to keep an open mind and try to put yourself in this person or child, whoever it is, situation and just be patient and really think about what they're going through and the situation that they're in. And also be welcoming, because I'm sure they're terrified. And just love on them. Don't be afraid to.

***Invest in your relationship with your parents.*** Multiple participants asserted the importance of biological children investing in their relationship with their parents throughout the foster care process. Leslie stated, "I would say, have grace with your parents because just like it's uncomfortable and new and strange to you, it's more so for them." Likewise, Nick said that while every family is different, due to the nature of neural development in children, it is essential for biological children to be in good communication with their parents who are more likely to be making informed decisions. Finally, Ally asserted:

...be aware of the fact that your parents are trying their best to, I guess a kid could probably get pretty upset with their parents if they weren't getting enough attention and didn't realize that it's not necessarily how, that's not necessarily how the parents want things to be. And I think that would be beneficial for a kid to know and be aware of that the parents aren't the bad guy.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### **Review of Purpose**

The results of this study are the product of an in-depth analysis of the experiences of ten biological children of foster parents using a phenomenological approach to research, with the purpose of developing school-based strategies for ongoing support for these students. These research findings may be used to increase awareness of the experiences of foster families, especially those of the biological children, and to generate specific interventions for these students.

#### **Interpretation of Findings**

As highlighted by the findings presented here and in other research literature (Raineri, Calcaterra, & Folgheraiter, 2018; Stoneman & Dallos, 2019; Sutton & Stack, 2013; Williams, 2017; and Younes & Harp, 2007) the biological children of foster parents play an instrumental role in the foster care process and as such experience first-hand repercussions of fostering, both positive and negative (Raineri, Calcaterra, & Folgheraiter, 2018). Similar to the findings of Younes and Harp (2007), participants indicated that they wished stakeholders in the foster system had a greater understanding of their role in the foster care process as well as the effects fostering has on them.

Among the noteworthy findings, participants positively described their knowledge of the foster care system and expressed a feeling of satisfaction that they were able to help children in need. This feeling of satisfaction can both create a sense of unity within the biological family at the outset of fostering as well as sustain them through difficult



challenges with the day-to-day aspects of fostering (Stoneman & Dallos, 2019). This knowledge of, and participation in, the foster care system is also difficult for the biological children of foster parents as it sheds light onto some of the more difficult realities of our society. Participants felt frustration when they became aware of the trauma, nature of home life, and abuse that the foster children had experienced. Some participants also shared a general level of frustration for the foster care system in general.

The findings of this study also highlight the challenges that the biological children of foster care experience. Biological children often sacrifice their sense of “normal”, including time spent with their parents, the day-to-day activities of their households, and their personal responsibilities, in order to accommodate for the needs of the foster children residing in their homes (Stoneman & Dallos, 2019). Other challenges faced by biological children include daily disruptions due to foster children’s behaviors which are a product of their trauma. Finally, as a result of the “others-focused” nature of fostering, biological children may struggle to feel validated in their feelings of stress, anxiety and/or anger.

### **Strategies and Recommendations for Practice**

The following school-based strategies were drawn from the results of the present study for the biological children of foster parents who may be experiencing social and emotional repercussions and are recommended for practitioners. School-based personnel should not use a “one size fits all” approach, but should instead consider the needs of each child individually when deciding the best approach. Additionally, school personnel should consider the ages of the biological children and the needs of elementary-aged children will differ from the needs of teenagers.

**Initiate contact.** Among other findings from this study, the importance of school-based personnel approaching students first emerged. Through interviews, it became apparent that participants viewed their role in the foster care system as a “helper”. This means that biological children of foster parents may not give themselves permission to need help, and may need someone else to give them that permission. Biological children may also be unaware of the options that are available to them. As such, they may not know that it is okay for them to ask for extended time on assignments, or visits to the school psychologist or counselor. Meghan reported that no one in her school ever acknowledged that her family was fostering, which made her feel like the topic was off-limits. When school-based personnel learn that a family is participating in foster care, it would be beneficial to approach the biological child, normalize any emotions they might be feeling, and offer options for school-based services and supports.

Throughout interviews, when asked what supports would be helpful for foster children, many participants stated that they were “unsure” or “[couldn’t] think of anything”. However, upon being provided with a few suggestions of supports available to them (e.g. support groups, time with a school counselor, additional training prior to fostering), participants responded with resounding affirmation. This suggests that school-based personnel cannot assume that the biological children of foster parents will ask for help or express their needs. Instead, practitioners should make available supports known to students as well as provide a way for these students to ask for supports in the future.

**Community/support groups.** A resounding theme within the data was the benefit of having a community. As such, school-based support groups with other biological children of foster parents may help students who are feeling isolated. Support

groups provide many benefits such as providing a place for individuals to feel heard, allowing participants to work through problems with one another, and creating a sense of solidarity for those experiencing similar circumstances (Corey & Corey, 2018). Within school-based support groups, it would be beneficial for a qualified mental health professional to lead the group in understanding foster care policies and practices, evidence-based strategies for dealing with frustrations at home, self-reflection and evaluation skills, and interpersonal skills for communicating needs to others.

Not all schools have enough families who foster in order to create an effective group. In such cases, school mental health professionals can communicate with local fostering agencies to see if county-wide groups are available. If deemed appropriate, school personnel could also help connect biological children of foster parents to online support groups.

Participation in community groups may also be beneficial for the biological children of foster children. All ten participants in the present research study reported that they found a sense of support and community in their local churches; therefore, practitioners could recommend participation in a local church or youth group. Other local organizations that students may find benefit in are Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H, Boys/Girls Scouts, and other school-based or community based groups and clubs.

**Whole-family approach.** Through an ecological lens, school-based practitioners should look at foster families as a whole, understanding that children do not experience life in a vacuum. School personnel can communicate with all members of the foster family (parents, biological children and foster children) and offer support where needed, which can foster healthier families. Nick suggested that biological children of foster

families may benefit from whole-family conversations prior to receiving a foster child that would lay out what family members can expect from the fostering process.

Biological children of foster children may also benefit from facilitated conversations with their biological families. It is important to the overall wellbeing of a foster family that members of the family remain in open communication with each other (Williams, 2017).

School-based mental health professionals may provide benefit to foster families as whole by teaching healthy communication and problem-solving skills, talking about potential challenges, and creating a general feeling of trust between family members.

### **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

In order to make sure ethical conclusions have been drawn, it is important to understand potential limitations of this study. Despite efforts to recruit a diverse group of participants, the respondents were relatively homogeneous. While this increased confidence in identifying themes, it significantly limits this study's external validity. First, the majority of respondents reported that their families chose to foster out of a desire to help others who had been less fortunate than them. Therefore, the findings reported in this study may vary drastically from the experiences of families who participate in kinship care out of familial obligation. Second, all ten participants shared that they hold to devout religious beliefs, which they reported played a significant role in initiating and sustaining their desire to participate in foster care. Findings related to motivation and support may not be generalizable to all populations that are involved in foster care. Finally, the study consisted of a relatively small sample size (10) of individuals in the Midwest region of the United States. Experiences of the foster care system and school based supports may be different across other geographical regions.

Future research examining the experiences of the biological children of foster parents should address the limitations of this study by recruiting a larger and more diverse sample. Instead of recruiting participants from personal and church connections, researchers may want to recruit participants from a department of family and human services in the future. Additionally, future studies should further investigate the experiences of the biological children who participate in kinship care. Researchers should also continue to develop training materials for the biological children (Strauss & Washburn-Moses, 2017). Finally, future research should evaluate the efficacy of intervention and methods of support for the biological children of foster parents, both in and out of school settings.

## **Conclusion**

This study investigated the experiences of the biological children of foster parents, as well as strategies for school-based supports for these students. Participants reported positive experiences of fostering, including: new siblings, diverse experiences, helping others, closer relationships with parents and biological siblings, and sharing in a common mission with family. Negative experiences reported by participants include: foster kids' trauma, foster kids' behavior, ending/temporary nature of placements, older siblings carrying the weight for younger siblings, busy schedule, split attention, and effect on academics.

Participants reported recommendations for supports including: community, having someone to talk to, and validating their experiences. Advice to children whose families are about to begin fostering are to be patient and loving and to invest in relationship with parents. Suggestions for school-based personnel include pursuing

relationships with students who are fostering, encouraging support groups for students, and using a whole-family approach to support. The findings from this study can be utilized to generate specifically tailored strategies to support the biological children of foster families.

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## APPENDIX A

### Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Number of times fostering	Average length of placement(s)	Age when fostering began	Number of biological siblings	Who do/did you live with during fostering?
Alex	1	<1 year	9	2	Mom, Dad, biological brothers (21, 16), adopted brother (11)
Ally	7	7 months	11	1	Mom, Dad, biological brother
Amanda	2	10 months	17	2	Mom, Dad, brother (14), sister (20)
Jalynn	2	1.5 years	11	3	Mom, Dad, sisters (6, 10, 19)
Julia	7	6 months	15	2	Mom, Dad, 2 biological siblings.
Lucy	2	1.5 years	8	3	Mom, Dad, sisters (6,15,19)
Leslie	>10	<1 year	16	1	Mom, Dad, biological brother (20), adopted siblings (17, 17, 12, 10, 7, 6, 5)
Meghan	10-15	<6 months	16	2	Mom, Dad, biological brother, biological sister.
Nick	1	< 1 year	12	2	Mom, Dad, biological brothers (18, 16), adopted brother (11)
Valerie	5	2 months	13	1	Mom, Dad, biological brother (19), adopted sister

## APPENDIX B

### Participant Personal Information Form

<b>PARTICIPANT PERSONAL INFORMATION</b>
---

**TITLE OF STUDY:** School Based Supports for Foster Families: Understanding the Unique Experiences of the Biological Children of Foster Parents

NAME (First and Last): \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

PREFERRED PSEUDONYM (for us to use when sharing results): \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

GRADE (if still in school): \_\_\_\_\_

NUMBER OF TIMES YOUR FAMILY HAS FOSTERED: \_\_\_\_\_

HOW LONG HAVE THE PLACEMENTS LASTED: \_\_\_\_\_

WHO DO YOU LIVE WITH? \_\_\_\_\_

ARE YOUR PARENTS MARRIED? \_\_\_\_\_

DO YOU HAVE BIOLOGICAL SIBLINGS? YES NO

HOW MANY? \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

### Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

#### **School Based Supports for Foster Families: Understanding the Unique Experiences of the Biological Children of Foster Parents**

##### Demographic Survey

**First I'm going to ask you to fill out a sheet that has some basic informational questions**

##### Your Experience

**Now I'm going to ask you more in-depth questions about your experiences.**

1. How did the fostering experience begin for your family?
2. What were your expectations regarding the fostering experience?
  - a. Have those expectations been met? How or how not?
3. Can you tell me your family's motivation for fostering?
4. What was the transition into foster care like for your family?
5. What kind of support did you experience during this transition (agency, church, school, friends, etc.)?
6. What are/were the three best things about having a foster child in your family?
7. What are/were the three hardest things about fostering? *\*Ask follow-up questions about specific incidents*

8. What did you struggle with at home?
9. When you think about what was challenging about fostering, what was helpful to you and your family? What was not helpful?
10. What was the ending of foster care placement(s) were like for you?

School Support

**As you know, I am training to be a school psychologist. Now I'm going to ask you questions about what school professionals (like me) can do to support children of foster families on an ongoing basis.**

11. Did fostering have an effect on your academics? Your relationship with your parents? Your friendships?
12. What did—or could—school personnel do to provide you with support?
  - a. If the school did anything, what was most helpful?
  - b. Was anything not helpful/hurtful?
13. Who did you talk to when you needed a friend?

Wrap up

**Now we're wrapping up with the last few questions**

14. What kinds of advice would you give to someone your age who is about to welcome a foster child into their home – to help them adjust to these affects or stressors?
15. Are there any personality or character traits you have developed as a result of fostering? (more aware of the brokenness of the world, heart for others, etc.)

16. If you were designing this interview, what other questions would you have asked?

17. Is there anything you wish you could say to the rest of us regarding fostering?



## APPENDIX D

### Informed Consent

#### **UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON - CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

**TITLE OF STUDY:** School Based Support for Foster Families: Understanding the Experiences and Needs of the Biological Children of Foster Parents

We are inviting you to be a part of a research study led by Lauren Smith at the University of Dayton. Participation is not required. Please read the information below to learn more about the study. Before participating, ask questions about anything you do not understand.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to examine the unique experiences of the biological children of foster parents as well as how school-based professionals can provide ongoing academic and social-emotional support for these students.

#### **PROCEDURES**

Participants can expect to meet with a researcher and fill about a brief demographic survey followed by an audio-recorded interview that is expected to last approximately 30-60 minutes. You will be interviewed using open-ended questions according to standard procedure of qualitative research. The interview will last be semi-structured so that you may direct the conversation, taking it wherever you believe is the most useful for communicating your perspective. The researcher will ask you to share your perspectives, experiences, and insight about your fostering experience. Questions will involve verbs such as “describe”, “explain”, “identify”, “help us understand”, “tell us your perspective”, etc. Some areas that we may ask you to address are the dynamics of your home, positive and negative experiences of fostering, what kinds of support you received, and recommendations for school-based mental health professionals. Interviews will be audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis

#### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

Due to the nature of the questions asked, you may feel some discomfort, anxiety or sadness. To minimize this risk, the researcher will ask if you would like to take a break or stop the interview when she notices signs of anxiety or distress.

## **ANTICIPATED BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS**

By participating in this study, you will be to add to the existing research about families who foster. You have the opportunity to be a voice for the biological children of foster children as well as provide insight to others about the unique stressors and experiences of participating in fostering. Your participation in this study may also help inform school-based practices for supporting foster families as a whole.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any and all information obtained in the research will be kept confidential by all researchers in this study. Prior to transcribing the interviews, the researcher will assign pseudonyms to all participants, which will insure no demographic information will be traceable to the individuals involved. Audio recordings will be deleted after interviews are transcribed.

## **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You do not have to be in this study. If you do not participate, your relationship with us is not affected. You may stop participating at any time, without giving any reason, and without penalty. You may be stopped from participating if the study is not good for you.

## **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

Please contact one of the investigators listed below if you have any questions about this research.

Lauren Smith, M.Ed., Lead Researcher  
University of Dayton, School Psychology Department  
(740)-606-6919, [smithl40@udayton.edu](mailto:smithl40@udayton.edu)

Dr. Susan Davies, Faculty Advisor  
University of Dayton, School Psychology Department,  
937-229-3652, [sdavies1@udayton.edu](mailto:sdavies1@udayton.edu)

## **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

You may contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Dayton if you have questions about your rights as a research participant: Candise Powell, J.D., (937) 229-3515, [irb@udayton.edu](mailto:irb@udayton.edu).

<b>SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT (or legal guardian)</b>
--

I have read the information above. I have had a chance to ask questions and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been given a copy of this form. **I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.**

Name of Participant (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

*Signature of Participant* \_\_\_\_\_ *Date* \_\_\_\_\_

<b>SIGNATURE OF WITNESS</b>
-----------------------------

My signature as witness certifies that the Participant signed this consent form in my presence.

Name of Witness (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

*Signature of Witness* \_\_\_\_\_ *Date* \_\_\_\_\_  
(Must be same as participant signature date)

## APPENDIX E

### Parent Consent For Minors To Participate In Research

#### UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

##### Parental Consent for Minor/Child to Participate in a Research Project

Project Title:	School Based Support for Foster Families: Understanding the Experiences and Needs of the Biological Children of Foster Parents
Investigator(s):	Lauren Smith (Graduate Student, University of Dayton) under the supervision of Dr. Susan Davies (Professor, University of Dayton)
Description of Study:	<p>The purpose of this study is to examine the unique experiences of the biological children of foster parents as well as how school-based professionals can provide ongoing academic and social-emotional support for these students. I will be interviewed using open-ended questions according to standard procedure of qualitative research. The interview will be semi-structured so that the participant may direct the conversation, taking it wherever s/he believes is the most useful for communicating his/her perspective. As is typical of qualitative research studies, the researcher does not have a list of questions that she expects to ask every participant. The researcher will ask each participant to share his/her perspectives, experiences, and insight about their fostering experience. Questions will involve verbs such as “describe”, “explain”, “identify”, “help us understand”, “tell us your perspective”, etc. Interviews will be audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis.</p> <p>One of the benefits of this study will be to add to the existing research about families who foster. This study will hopefully give a voice to the target population as well as provide insight to others about the unique stressors and experiences of participating in fostering. This study may also help inform school-based practices for supporting foster families as a whole.</p>
Adverse Effects and Risks:	Due to the nature of the questions asked, participants may feel some discomfort, anxiety or sadness. To minimize this risk, the researcher will ask the participant if s/he would like to take a break or stop the interview when she notices signs of anxiety or distress.
Duration of Study:	Participants can expect to meet with a researcher and fill about a brief demographic survey followed by an audio-recorded interview that is expected to last approximately 30-60 minutes.
Confidentiality of Data:	Any and all information obtained in the research will be kept confidential by all researchers in this study. Prior to transcribing the interviews, the researcher will assign pseudonyms to all participants, which will insure no demographic information

will be traceable to the individuals involved. Audio recordings will be deleted after interviews are transcribed.

Contact Person: Parents or guardians of participants may contact:

Lauren Smith, M.Ed., [smitl40@udayton.edu](mailto:smitl40@udayton.edu), (740)-606-6919

Dr. Susan Davies, Ed.D, [sdavies1@udayton.edu](mailto:sdavies1@udayton.edu), (937)-229-3652

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant you may also contact the chair of University of Dayton's Institutional Review Board, Candise Powell, J.D., at (937) 229-3515, [IRB@udayton.edu](mailto:IRB@udayton.edu).

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Student's Full Name (please print)

---

Parent's Full Name (please print)

---

Parent or Guardian Signature

Date

## APPENDIX F

### Minor Participant Assent Form

<b>University of Dayton - Participant Assent Form</b>
---

**TITLE OF STUDY:** School Based Support for Foster Families: Understanding the Experiences and Needs of the Biological Children of Foster Parents

**Who is doing this research?**

Lauren Smith, School Psychology Student, Primary Researcher

**Why should I do this?**

The purpose of this study is to examine the unique experiences of the biological children of foster parents as well as how school-based professionals can provide ongoing academic and social-emotional support for these students.

**How long will it last?**

You will be interviewed in one session that will last approximately 30-60 minutes.

**What will happen?**

You will meet with an interviewer to answer some general questions about yourself and some questions prompting you to describe your fostering experience.

**How will you feel?**

You may feel some anxiety or stress when asked to recall your fostering experience. In order to minimize this, the lead researcher will give you a break or stop the interview if she detects that you are feeling anxious.

**Will anyone know I'm doing this?**

All of your information will remain secure and private. The lead researcher will audio-record your interview so that we can remember what you said, but your name will not be associated with your responses. If we talk or write about your answers, we will not include your name.

**What if I have questions or am worried about something?**

If you have questions, you may talk to Lauren Smith, School Psychology student, University of Dayton. If any interview questions make you feel uncomfortable, you may skip them, ask to take a break, or stop the interview.

**Consent to Participate**

I agree to work with Lauren Smith and her team on this project. I understand all that is expected of me and promise to do my best. Lauren has answered all my questions. I understand I may stop this activity at any time.

Participant's Name\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX G

### Themes Matrix: Experiences of the Biological Children of Foster Parents

Themes	Subthemes	Quotes
<b>Positive Experiences</b>	<i>New Siblings</i>	<p>So it was awesome because we had this new person in the house. He really, really felt like family. It really felt meant to be. (Julia)</p> <p>Getting new siblings is always fun. I didn't remember too much of it from when I was a kid because our biological siblings are all pretty close together. So I was four when the youngest one was born. But just getting new brothers is exciting. (Nick)</p> <p>[One of the best parts was] there's another person around to bring another personality in. (Valerie)</p> <p>I always had wanted a little sister, so having a little girl in the house was really neat for me, just being younger and that was, that was neat. (Ally)</p> <p>I have more people to play with and more people my age because my, my biological sisters aren't that close to me in age. (Lucy)</p> <p>I love them, I love them. The foster girls, like it sucks sometimes but I wouldn't give up the chance to get, have them. Like we got Kings Island passes for the summer and it was because their mom paid for theirs and it was the most fun. They were all arguing over who got to sit with me on the roller coasters. It was awesome. And like my family games all the time. And if the issue is that there's too many people that want to play and not enough spaces, that's great. That's funny at times and it's just, it's fun. Siblings are fun and you look at us, and you can't pick out from the crowd which ones are fostered and which are your bio by the way we act around each other. (Jalynn)</p>



		<p>I think when going into it, I kind of expected it to be more, like they didn't really connect with me. I knew they would connect with my parents. I assumed I would just be an outsider and I definitely was not. One of the groups we had, they definitely like started calling me sister, things like that. So it was definitely a lot more emotionally connected to them than I anticipated.(Amanda)</p> <p>When we actually did start fostering, it was, “these are two more of your brothers now.” Cause it was definitely pitched to us as like we're fostering to adopt. So that's definitely how we kind of took it. (Nick)</p> <p>Like only even if it was those couple days at least we knew they were taken care of here. And I mean we adopted two of my siblings out of it. So I guess that was like the third best thing. I got two new siblings. (Julia)</p> <p>So the best part is I mean, honestly, the best part has been today, yesterday, the last three years because XXXX is a punk and is annoying and a brat, but I don't say those things because he's my adopted brother. I say those things because he's my 11 year old brother and any 11 year old brother is going to be obnoxious...And you know, he's in that stage right now and that's not a lot of fun. But at the end of the day, like I look and I think about and you know, my parents know way, way more than I do about the things he went through. But when I think about the limited stuff that I do know I think just breaks my heart. And so the, the chance to have a brother would, you know, want to change, want to give that up for anything in the world, the chance to not just to have a brother, but to have him to have him specifically. Because I mean I have, I have three other or two other brothers. I am one of three, but it's him specifically. (Alex)</p>
	<i>Diverse Experiences</i>	<p>Getting new siblings is always fun. I didn't remember too much of it from when I was a kid because our biological siblings are all pretty close together. So I was four when the youngest one was born. But just getting new brothers is exciting and the diversity of it was also exciting because [our foster brother] had had a different upbringing. So just getting to know him, getting to know what made him special and what made him different and all that</p>

		<p>different stuff was just really, really exciting. And you know, kind of having a younger kid back in the house was, was fun as well. (Nick)</p> <p>You get to know about more stuff because you get to hear their thoughts on things, not just the people you're always around. (Valerie)</p> <p>And then another thing would be I got to honestly like, so I'm in nursing school right now and there was one of our placements had some like came home on oxygen. And so just seeing that honestly was really fun for me. Obviously not fun, but it was good experience. So I really liked getting more experienced with all different kinds of people, all different walks of life. (Meghan)</p> <p>I'd say one of the best things that's come out of it for me is how much I learned in the sense of having an open mind now. You see so much of this world that I was lucky enough not to be born into. And it really made me understand and like, not prejudge someone. Like I, I can totally understand why these people are the way they are, with the struggles they go through and can't seem to get out of. That has really helped me to like have a heart for people who are in these situations. I think that's the best thing that's happened to me out of it. (Julia)</p> <p>I think it opened my eyes to how hurting our children are in America. And you're very blind to that if you don't see it firsthand. I would also say it taught me to love children at whatever stage they're at because you never know what they're going through (Leslie)</p>
	<i>Helping Others</i>	<p>I know there's a saying like, you can't change everybody's world, but you can completely change one person's world. And we were able to, I mean, we really just picked [my brother] up out of the foster system and he's just...it's so lucky for him that he was able to do that...So it's just an incredible way for one family, if they have the means and they have the resources, you can completely alter the life path of somebody who is, just because of who they were born to, they're just not, not that good of a position and you can completely change the track of their life. (Nick)</p>

		<p>I really enjoyed having kids to pour into their lives and being able to help them and meet them where they're at. (Ally)</p> <p>One thing was just knowing that I was making a difference and although like it didn't feel like it sometimes because I didn't have the right words, I couldn't fix anything for them, but just knowing that they were in a safe place that was really good. (Amanda)</p> <p>And of course I love like loving on these kids. (Julia)</p> <p>I think a lot of us were truly blessed in all the situations as far as my siblings realizing what was going on and realizing they were helping and I think a lot of it helped because a lot of them were adopted so they knew the impact they were having on these kids' lives so I feel like they were a little bit more understanding. (Leslie)</p> <p>And they knew that there were just so many kids out there that needed help and fostering was not necessarily adopting them, obviously, so that's where that motivation came from, but they have always loved kids. We always went on missions trips as kids so that's where I feel like all of that kind of filtered out of. (Leslie)</p> <p>They just saw such like a heart and a need for kids and how broken this is. Not even like only across the world but like even in our own community. So just seeing that brokenness and everything. (Meghan)</p> <p>And the same thing. Just the chance. And, and you know, I don't, I don't really take credit for this because, you know, 12 year old Alex didn't make the decision on whether we adopted or not. But it's a chance to, I didn't, when I, I believe we're called I believe God calls us to help with those orphans in their distress. And I say just by growing up, being blessed to live in America, we have wealth like very few other people not just in the world today, but quite literally the history of the world. And I think with such a high calling placed on our lives to pursue Christ and to pursue his people, I think it's one of the most loving things you can do to another human. And so the best thing about it is at the end of the day, you know, love him to</p>
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		<p>death, you know, he is my brother and there's no question about it. And just the chance there's the chance I've had to play a small role and letting [my foster brother] have the chance to live a life that isn't going to be dominated by a drug use isn't going to be dominated by all these other things. (Alex)</p>
	<p><i>Closer Relationships with Parents and Biological Siblings</i></p>	<p>With my parents and brother [we] definitely, if anything, we got closer during all of it. (Ally)</p> <p>I definitely think that we were closer after they were removed. We definitely all leaned on each other because we were all very frustrated, upset. So we definitely learned to talk through our feelings more than I think we ever have. (Amanda)</p> <p>I think my family, I think after the first placement we felt closer just because we had all gone through so much and then it was just suddenly all over. I think we got closer through it because we had to like learn so much and keep open minds that it helped. It helped my family I think. (Julia)</p> <p>I think it made us closer, like everyone closer because there were times where we didn't know what we were doing or there were times when there was nothing else we could do other than rely on each other. And we really had to build a trust with each other that we're doing this because we love Jesus and we love these kids and we really want to show them that, there's love in the world and that we can, there are great families and stuff like that. So it's just it was, there was more trust with, as a whole with all of us and they definitely got a lot closer and a lot better at communication through it, because we had to talk with each other or otherwise we'd be left in the dark and confused about everything. So it definitely helped. (Meghan)</p> <p>And then I would say as well just talking to my mom about it. My mom has always been an open book. But, it was hard in some situations because you know she's hurting even more than I am because I'm just the sibling in the situation, so I would just talk to her or I would talk to some of my siblings because, we all have different personalities and such, but we're going through the same thing ultimately. I would say that for sure. (Leslie)</p>

		<p>Basically it's really hard to comprehend and understand unless you're going through it. So no one else can really understand. The best support that we had was our family that I lived with cause...no one else can really understand it as well. So I think we just pretty much looked to each other for that just because we've all under actually understood it and could help each other. (Julia)</p> <p>So I mean, everyone claims their parents are rock stars and you know I am the middle child and I am as typical of a problematic middle child. So by no means am I coming at this from the point of view of me and my parents have never fought. But my parents are they, they really are. Just absolutely amazing. And the way my parents the way my parents loved us through it. There has never been any doubt in my mind of, "Oh, maybe my parents don't love me anymore. They just love him instead." And you know, that's, that's a good feeling. I know there's plenty of people who, who, you know, it's like they've ever had foster or adopted siblings and they still don't feel loved by their parents. So it is definitely an amazing thing and an amazing blessing the way my parents have loved me. (Alex)</p> <p>Like right after the kids would leave, we would all just have a big meal together and just talk about everything that went on with that. And there were times when we would all take turns going out with our parents so we could just talk through everything that's happening at home. (Valerie)</p> <p>So my relationship with my parents has always been pretty solid. So I was fine with, you know, that lack of attention because I knew that they respected me, and I respected them, we had that established relationship pretty early on and that's still the way it is today. But I think it was probably harder on my little brothers especially because they were only like eight and 10 years old. (Nick)</p>
	<i>Family Shared in a Unified Mission</i>	And then my parents brought it to us and wanted to know whether or not we would be interested in doing it. And I had picked up on the fact that they had been talking about it for a

		<p>couple of years and so I was ready. And then my brother was onboard with it, so we went ahead with it. (Ally)</p> <p>And so first my parents asked us if we were okay with it and then we looked into all the options of how to help her and we settled on fostering her and then with the goal of adopting. (Valerie)</p> <p>Hey, we want to get started and think about fostering kids and we just really think that God's leading us to do that. And of course we were like all in for it too. We had some concerns in general cause it was so new. We didn't know what to expect. But basically they just asked us if we were all okay with it and they moved on from there. We all said we were good to go for it. (Meghan)</p> <p>I knew why they were doing what they were doing and I, I was also brought into their mission of why they were doing it. So they did a good job of telling me like, this is why we believe we should foster. And I was like, "you know what? Thumbs up, like I agree with what you're doing." (Nick)</p>
<b>Negative Experiences</b>	<i>Foster Kids' Trauma</i>	<p>For me, the hardest was when we had to let go of the siblings set that we first had because of the trauma that the oldest had gone through, we just couldn't really help him to the extent that we needed to be able to help him... Um, then just again, the trauma with the oldest was just hard to understand that him being angry wasn't, it might've been directed at us, but it wasn't him being mad at us necessarily all the time. I think that was probably one of the hardest things too. He would yell a lot, which I mean coming from a four year old, you think, you shouldn't be that traumatized at that young age. And just knowing that that came out of him... I think it was just hard because you knew that he had been hurt a lot and that that hurt you because you see this precious little boy and he got hurt. So that was just, that was hard. (Ally)</p> <p>But I think just also the trauma, our first sibling set, they had a... the brother had a lot of trauma. So just seeing how that affected him. So they're definitely a couple of different things that made me say, "Oh, okay Not what we expected." (Amanda)</p>

		<p>So, I would say that a lot of the kids that we did get in, I would say if they were older, like if they were, I guess knowledgeable of their situations they were coming from...that, that, those were the harder kids out of anybody because they're lashing out at you because they think you took them away from their parents, and stuff like that. (Leslie)</p> <p>He has so much past and so much history that is hurting him and he's in this position for a reason. And there's so much more to that. He just comes in and puts on a front. The first two weeks were probably really good. They were really good cause he was like, Oh this is good. I like this here. Then after that he just started to let his guard down, which is good. But it became an issue with saying things to me and making me uncomfortable or saying things to my little brother. Not making him uncomfortable but just kind of mean things just cause he was younger or whatever. And he's doing things that my parents told them not to do but doing them anyway cause he didn't care. His behavior made us just want to love on him more. But then I was in the position of feeling uncomfortable, but feeling like I couldn't, and this is also me being like too immature at the time, but feeling like he would say things to me, like sexual remarks. He never did anything but he would say those things to me and I felt like I couldn't say anything because he was already so broken and so hurt coming in here, why would I make him leave? (Meghan)</p> <p>But I would say that that was just the most shocking because... for example the little kids would want to watch these shows of like people murdering people and the comments they would make were just kind of shocking and horrible, because you're like "Okay, if this is normal to you...or if it's your desire to watch you cop shows or killing shows at 7 or 8 years old, there's definitely something you've seen or been around that has made you think that that's okay". (Leslie)</p> <p>One of the twins that the babies that we had that I picked up from the hospital with my mom was, had a broken rib and a broken arm. Oh my goodness. And so we had them for a month or two and then one of mom's sisters or the grandma got her back and it's like, do you really think they're not gonna see the same family again? So that's kinda, it was kind of hard because</p>
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		<p>she didn't have an interest, but then, Like, you know, that they're going to the same area. So it's always hard not to wonder and it's really not your place to go ask about anything. So it's just kind of unsettling a little bit. (Meghan)</p> <p>[One of my sisters has] anxiety and it gets really annoying sometimes I feel like an awful person because she's got that because of her past. But I have to deal with that. One of them is, just being mean lately because of stress with her mom and like, I'm not allowed to hold that against her because it's because of her stress with her mom. But she's being a jerk. (Jalynn)</p> <p>The trauma with the oldest was just hard to understand that him being angry wasn't, it might've been directed at us, but it wasn't him being mad at us necessarily all the time. I think that was probably one of the hardest things too. (Ally)</p> <p>He would yell a lot, which I mean coming from a four year old, you think, you shouldn't be that traumatized at that young age. And just knowing that that came out of him... I think it was just hard because you knew that he had been hurt a lot and that that hurt you because you see this precious little boy and he got hurt. So that was just, that was hard. (Ally)</p> <p>So one of the hardest things probably was just like understanding how rough their homes were. I don't think I ever really noticed that in my community...how rough some of these kids live, just because like I was never around them. And so just realizing how young people can't understand what their parents are doing even when you're talking to them. They think they're stupid because that's what you call them...things like that. (Amanda)</p> <p>Like before I got into this, like they don't say these things out in the news, but this happens on a nightly basis. And I will never forget that night just like I was carrying the toddler and she was just screaming. Cause obviously she's scared to death. She doesn't know me, but you know, it's just like knowing that I never had to go through that. (Meghan)</p> <p>But seeing [my foster bother] and seeing the repercussions of growing up with a drug using mother for a few years with foster homes. And I don't want to paint a picture of abuse. That's</p>
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		<p>not realistic, but there was definitely at least some level of it...there's a big difference, at least in my mind, between spanking a kid when they earned a punishment and you know, laying hands on your kid and that's so hard because that impacts the kid and that impacts the way they think, the way they act. And even today, the way I see how that's impacted [my foster brother] because, you know, me and my biological brothers had been set up so perfectly. You know, like I, I couldn't ask for a better setup. (Alex)</p> <p>Right. So that was actually a really, really hard time because like I said, we assumed when we fostered, when we started fostering both of them in 2012 like "we are going to adopt both of them." That was 100% our plan. And then with XXXX's just massive attention requirement, like it got to the point where my parents were like, "we cannot effectively raise all five of you because XXXX is not just one...like he's taking up a vast amount of our attention and energy and all these different things." So that's where we had to make the hard decision to stop fostering XXXX and he started being fostered by a single guy, but he lives like maybe 12 minutes away, so we still get to see him and things. But it ended fostering XXXX when he went to, the guy's name is Unc, everybody calls him Unc, and he was adopted by Unc and then we ended up adopting XXXXX. And so that was, that was definitely probably the most frictional time, um, with fostering because it was just a build up from the day we started fostering all the way to when we made that decision. It was just like massively stressful because having XXXX in the house was just very, very stressful for everybody. And again, not really his fault, but just the amount of energy and time and attention that he required was just too much for our family. And my parents kind of had to put the family unit as a whole in front of just the one, the one kid. (Nick)</p>
	<i>Foster Kids' Behavior</i>	<p>And then probably third hardest thing was just that [my foster brothers] both caused a lot of problems in school just because they were not parented for five years and four years respectively. So just learning how to deal with that. I mean it's, it's kind of like getting a free agent on a sports team. Like you just inject them into the culture of that new team and they're just expected to adjust. So having [the kids] come in and coming from kind of a survive-anything-goes kind of environment to our house where there's rules and expectations and things was definitely hard. (Nick)</p>

		<p>At home it was frustrating cause they would misbehave and we were trying to teach them what they need to do it was just like our whole night could be, like, ruined. Like if we had something planned and one of the misbehaved you had to deal gently with them and, like, it often took a long time just to make, like, them understand that you were doing this out of love and we were really patient but it's like if we had plans to do or something, we would spend more time with them because that's what they needed and it would ruin, like, the plans we had with like my siblings...biologically. (Amanda)</p> <p>I don't know. I think, I think probably like the discipline, because there are two instances I'm thinking of that were the hardest, especially on my parents. They were placements who, you know, nobody really has parental figures. So it was just hard for kids to come in to my house and my parents would be pretty strict, not mean but they ran a tight ship. (Julia)</p> <p>Some of them will like go into my brother's bathroom and smoke and we didn't like completely say they couldn't smoke, they just had to go outside, but they wouldn't listen to the rules that they weren't hard rules to follow. They just wouldn't do that. It was just frustrating because outside is only a couple steps away from the bathrooms. (Valerie)</p> <p>You know, they'd hit somebody because they moved their food to where they were supposed to be sitting or, you know, just like their lashing out. I guess, was surprising to me, because I just grew up in a healthier environment. (Leslie)</p> <p>And then there were kids that would just argue with our parents the whole time. I would just try to stay away from whatever was happening, but a lot of them weren't fun to be around. (Valerie)</p>
	<i>Ending/Temporary Nature of Placements</i>	<p>I think the hardest by far for me was loving these kids because a lot of the kids we got were babies so, I mean at 17,18, or going off to college, even when I would come back, we create bonds with these kids like they're your own sibling and by far the hardest thing was...you</p>

		<p>know we had one girl for almost 3 years and we were planning to adopt her and then somehow her family came in and then took her so that was by far the hardest. (Leslie)</p> <p>Probably when they latch onto you, cause like you don't know where they're going and you may not ever like hear about them again or whatever. So it's when they go back to a situation when you know it is not the best... And like, even after like really good placements left, it was just not the same for a while at home because they were there and everything revolved around them as it should, but then all of a sudden it goes to nothing and then we don't hear anything and then you don't know anything. So it's all like, again, what we signed up for, but not a lot of closure with it I guess. I really struggled with that being, not very mature at that time and just wanting to know everything and not accepting that sometimes I'm not going to know everything and that's okay. But it's just really hard when you put all your heart and soul into something and then after six months of them being there, you don't really know anything else about them after they leave. So yeah, it's just a little unsettling. (Meghan)</p> <p>So, we would just love these kids like they were going to be our siblings... So, it was just gut-wrenching because ...you got to know their situations and you got to know their family members and other siblings and the things they've gone through and you hear these things from their social workers and stuff like that. So you know the horrible situations that they could potentially be going back to. So that's gut-wrenching too because you know that they're safer and, you know, better taken care of in your home, but the system is the system and they think, you know, whatever they say goes and is best. So that was definitely hard. (Leslie)</p> <p>The first placement was pretty traumatic when it ended just because it was at first we thought maybe we would get to keep the baby girl and then it wasn't going to happen. And it was very wishy washy because the county was very unsure of what they wanted to do and they seem to constantly be changing their mind about it. So I think that made it really difficult because we would think, Oh, this is what's going to happen. And then they would change it and be this is what's going to happen. And that happened a couple of times. And then when it happened, it was just, it was all gone. (Ally)</p>
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		<p>The first placement we had was definitely the worst. Ultimately, he had decided to leave on his own. He chose to leave, which was really, really hard cause we had basically from the beginning decided that we were going to adopt him and he chose not to. So that was pretty bad. The case workers just came and picked up his stuff from our house and then picked him up from school and we didn't see him again. So that was really hard. They just leave and you don't know where they're going. You don't know if they're okay. You don't see them again. (Julia)</p> <p>It was a little bit of a surprise that I would be so sad when they went back... I remember just crying with them and I don't want them to go. (Lucy)</p> <p>Although the older three kind of wanted to go back, but it didn't seem like it was good. We struggled. We struggled with that. It feels like we could do better for them than their bio mom could. We were doing better and then they went back. So the three of them seemed to be pretty conflicted about it. Like they obviously just instinctively wanted to go home, but to some extent it felt like they were. (Jalynn)</p> <p>For me, the hardest was when we had to let go of the siblings set that we first had because of the trauma that the oldest had gone through, we just couldn't really help him to the extent that we needed to be able to help him. So that was, that was definitely the hardest part. Just letting them go and knowing that they weren't going to stay with us for long-term. (Ally)</p> <p>I'd say it was pretty bad. Even when our first placement left and all that was hard. And even though it wasn't a great experience, it was still really hard because it was like I felt I was giving up and it was just such a heartbreak. And like, even after like really good placements left, it was just not the same for a while at home because they were there and everything revolved around them as it should, but then all of a sudden it goes to nothing and then we don't hear anything and then you don't know anything... you put all your heart and soul into something and then after six months of them being there, you don't really know anything else about them after they leave. (Meghan)</p>
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	<p><i>Older Siblings Carrying the Weight for Younger Siblings</i></p>	<p>For me it was hard to, again, since I'm more mature than my other brothers are naturally, it was hard for me to not step into a bit of a parenting role, especially like a little bit more down the road as I got older. Because it was hard for my parents to manage five kids...So, me finding kind of the line between where am I still just their son and where they need me to kind of help fill in on watching kids and where's my authority and that kind of thing. So just kind of the family dynamic was a little tough. Because since I was more mature, they, not expected me, but they probably did appreciate me stepping into some of those roles where I became a little bit more of a caretaker and a parent than I was a brother. But that was just tough finding that line. My brothers would get frustrated with that too, knowing "you're not my dad" blah, blah, blah, when I would tell them to do things, but you know, it just had to be done because sometimes my parents would be off taking care of [our foster brothers] and whatnot and I would just have to pick up the slack there. So that was one thing that was definitely tough. (Nick)</p> <p>...I was trying to stay home as much as possible instead of doing what I want to do or going to youth activities...Even my schoolwork started to like fall behind because I was focusing on helping her out. (Amanda)</p> <p>...once I started helping my mom, she started relying on me a little more. And then like when my brother started falling behind, I kind of pushed him to keep up and instead of, like, bearing, like sharing the weight, I pushed him because I wanted him to succeed. So again, it's like the helping people. So then I took on his portion of helping as well. (Amanda)</p> <p>So it definitely felt like I had to mediate some problems that I didn't have to before because my mom and dad were focusing on the...you know, kind of like you bandage the wound that's bleeding the most, if you know what I mean. (Nick)</p> <p>I'm the oldest in the house now, which means that I get asked about things. Like one of the foster girls began discussing her period with me. She's 11 and she's getting close and she's scared. That came up and one of the other ones has boy problems and those come to me and I don't even know that I mind that necessarily, but I don't understand why that's on me. (Jalynn)</p>
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		Um, and I think as the oldest too I constantly wanted to be okay enough so that my brother was not seeing me being a mess and then having more issues. (Ally)
	<i>Busy Schedule</i>	<p>I think going into it I didn't realize how busy things are going to be just because in my head they were just going to come and be another sibling, which they were. But there were all the visits and my parents had these classes they had to go to, which I think to a certain extent I didn't realize how much that was going to be a part of the whole process. (Ally)</p> <p>So that, and just shifting our schedules to fit with visit times because my brother and I are homeschooled, so we had to take our school with us to visits and just a lot of scheduling, transitioning and then just, I don't know really how we did it. We just did it. But just getting used to having attention span being different. (Ally)</p> <p>Even going from not being on a school schedule to being on the public school schedule is definitely interesting cause we kind of just go out for half the day cause we had to be home to make sure they got off the bus. So just like the whole schedule change was definitely something that was like, "Oh well this is kind of frustrating some days." (Amanda)</p> <p>The time commitment was definitely hard because we started fostering my brother when he was five. So my parents were literally pulled in a lot more directions because instead of having to get three kids around, it's now five. So we're having to sort out who's getting rides where? Who's ended up going to appointments that aren't theirs just because they need a ride? How are we going to make sure all the kids are watched and you know, all these different things? So just the logistics of our family definitely got more intricate because we had to make sure that me, [my biological brothers] and [my foster brothers] had somewhere to be all the time, which was hard. (Nick)</p> <p>And then I would say the third [hard] thing would be the change in dynamic all the time because you know we're used to having so many kids and then you come in and you get used to these kids and then they leave and then you come in with more or different ones so</p>

		<p>sometimes it would go from one kid to three. So, just the inconsistency I think in the daily routine and norm was a little difficult. (Leslie)</p> <p>I just remember thinking it was a little weird when all of the social workers came by the house because it was like they would come and interview my parents and they'd interview us as a family and they'd interview us individually and stuff. So I definitely remember this very, very extensive process before we even started fostering. (Nick)</p>
	<i>Split Attention</i>	<p>I think, I don't know, it's been while I think transitioning, we just, we had to get used to having two other kids in the house because it had been the two of us for so long. So our parents had to split their attention a little bit differently than they had in the past. But at the same time, we, we understood that these kids were younger. They were four and a baby. So there was just, we knew that they needed more attention than we did... but just getting used to having attention span being different. (Ally)</p> <p>So one thing that we personally struggled with, and I don't know if this would be something that affects all different families, but just having the two extra people. Once we did start, the attention was spread differently for sure. Because when you have two extra people that are under three, I mean, that's a big increase... And that was really, really hard on our family because then where it used to be spread, you know, I'd like to think a third, a third, a third between the biological children. It was now like 50% on our one foster brother and the other four kids kind of had to split up the rest of mom and dad, you know. So that was really, really tough. (Nick)</p> <p>But you know, I, I remember a conversation I had with my dad it was later on past the messiness. And I'm not sure if it was within a year or a couple years later. But he said the biggest thing he regretted from the process of adopting and fostering was not doing enough for us as the biological brothers... because there is nothing, nothing an 11-year-old boy wants more than a one on one time with his dad. (Alex)</p>

		<p>Maybe just the managing time. But as far as my parents trying to spend time with us individually, that just wasn't really a thing and I'm not sure we were used to that to begin with. And it's not that they didn't want to do that – but it was hard to separate their time into spending quality time with each of us because it was just a crazy house all the time. (Leslie)</p> <p>Smaller conflicts would kind of end up going a little bit unnoticed and probably weren't resolved in the best way because where my parents would have been able to just step in and like say something in a problem or a conflict or an issue, you were just kind of forced to eat it or bear it because they were dealing with bigger issues because of [the foster kids] getting sent to the principal's office for cussing at kids at school and then [my biological brothers'] little squabble about something like they'd just have to you know, figure shit out. Like they can't be bothering mom and dad with that. So it definitely felt like I had to mediate some problems that I didn't have to before because my mom and dad were focusing on the...you know, kind of like you [had to] bandage the wound that's bleeding the most, if you know what I mean. So like there's bigger problems going on usually with the foster children, than the biological children more often and they're just naturally forced to kind of solve their own problems more than they might have ideally been um, you know, asked to. (Nick)</p>
	<i>Effect on Academics</i>	<p>I felt like everything I wanted to do, I had to see if it...like I didn't want to leave my mom in like a place where she was overwhelmed. So I felt like I was trying to stay home as much as possible instead of doing what I want to do or like going to youth activities or things like that. Even my schoolwork started to like fall behind because I was focusing on helping her out. (Amanda)</p> <p>It did. Like I said, like just trying to...especially with us having younger children who weren't always quiet. I struggled to do school when it's not quiet. So even like trying, because I shared a bedroom with the two girls. So it was like there was no space where I could go for quiet. So it was a struggle just trying to focus but also wanting to be there for them as much as possible. I did like fall behind on my schoolwork. A little bit of that. (Amanda)</p>



		<p>I was kind of like embarrassed to go to school, so I just wanted to like get in and get out and not do anything. I think right away it was, it did have an effect on like academic wise. And sometimes if we had more of like an intensive, like it needed to be a baby placement it was, it did because as soon as I got home from school, like my mom just helped the baby all day. I wanted to hold the baby first of all, but just taking care of them and like helping out my parents cause like they don't need to do everything. So just like putting them first but in a way that it was before my academics as well because I was thinking about them and not school. (Meghan)</p> <p>Well, sometimes they bother me when I'm trying to work or do school...It's hard to do homework. And I share a room with one. (Lucy)</p> <p>Probably. Eighth grade was really hard, [and going] into freshman year. I just got stressed and stuff doing homework. So like I was still acing the tests, but it's really hard for me to convince myself that it's worth doing the homework when...but like eighth grade especially, which was about a year into foster, I guess. (Jalynn)</p>
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## APPENDIX H

### Themes Matrix: Suggestions to Support the Biological Children of Foster Parents

Themes	Subthemes	Quotes
<b>Ways to Support Biological Kids</b>	<i>Community</i>	<p>I think it actually strengthened one of my friendships because my friend was, her family was doing foster care about the same time. So we were both struggling and we could help each other through it. Just knowing that I wasn't alone because there's not a lot of people who I knew who had ever done this. (Amanda)</p> <p>It strengthened the one that with the person who also fostered, because we just had another thing in common that we could talk about and we could help each other through. (Valerie)</p> <p>The [Johnsons]. So I'm still best friends with their second oldest child just because he had gone through a lot of...they had a really tough loss situation as well. So I was talking to him almost every day. I'd go over there like sometimes it would get to the point of our house where I just needed a break. So I go over and spend the night at his house. So he's somebody I leaned on a lot through our process. (Nick)</p> <p>One of my best friends, her family had adopted and done foster care too. So we've been talking about it a lot. (Julia)</p> <p>It wasn't until one of the other families at church started fostering and they have a son that's my age, like biological that I was good friends with or in good terms with. And we started talking a lot, which helped because he was experiencing the same things I did. And that was another thing. I felt like no one understood and like it's not a very common thing to be in this position. So I just felt like no one understood what I was thinking or feeling other than my family. And I didn't want to always put that on them because they're going through the same exact thing I am. So it was like I didn't want to overload that or start worrying about me. So, it was nice from our church, to get that and they definitely gave us</p>

		<p>support and love, but it wasn't until there was another family that started fostering that I felt that [things] got a little better. (Meghan)</p> <p>The most helpful thing by far would have been the [Johnsons] just because it's so helpful to have somebody lead you through that process when they are doing it themselves or have already done it because it's just a great resource to have. So, I don't know what the system is now, but like matching current foster parents up to prospective foster parents would be really, really good because then instead of, you know, having to go to some poorly run website or calling somebody where you're going to be on hold for 30 minutes, you kind of have a personal connection with somebody who can help you be successful with that. (Nick)</p> <p>The only thing that was helpful was getting a community. I know my mom really branched out and found other foster moms in our area and she talked to them a lot, which then, helped all of us a lot more too because we found their siblings or we talked to those foster placements that they had or I talked to those moms and it was just a lot. (Meghan)</p> <p>And then I have other friends that foster, so having someone that understood what was happening to talk to about it. It was nice to have. (Valerie)</p> <p>The only thing that I would see as like a benefit that we didn't have would have been something like a bunch of biological kids of foster parents. Like, like a group like that, which in our area there aren't a lot of families that do foster care outside of the foster agency. We didn't really know a whole lot of people like that. So I think that'd be something that would have been beneficial to us. (Ally)</p> <p>(On peer mentoring) Absolutely. Yeah. And like the people that really understand it best are the people who have fostered because it's not like working at McDonald's where it's 4:00 PM to 8:00 PM commitment. Fostering people is a 24 hour commitment seven days a week. They're just fully integrated into your life. So the only people that are going to really understand it are going to be the people that have also fostered. (Nick)</p>
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	<i>Someone to Talk to</i>	<p>I think people just being willing to listen to our frustrations as the sibling. Whether we're being frustrated with the system or being frustrated with the fact that we could see that the foster child was happy where he was and he or she didn't need to be moved. Just being able, someone being able to listen and being willing to listen. Also acknowledging the fact that they can't fix it, but they can listen and be ready to give us the support through the listening and being able to, if it were an adult that like close friend of the family recognizing that maybe you need to come spend some time with our kids and just get away a little bit. Stuff like that. Just recognizing, "Hey, I could help you with this. Let me talk to your parents:" kind of thing. So definitely important. (Ally)</p> <p>I think it was definitely, like, texting my friends and just making sure they understood what I was going through and just having adults who I could come to and be like, "okay, these are what we're struggling with now. How do I react to this in order to help my parents out with these kids?" And I definitely had a lot of people from church and friends parents who were definitely like, "okay, like we're going to pray about this and we're going to get through this and here's how you can start helping." (Amanda)</p> <p>But having like support like that and whether it's a school counselor or a counselor at a church or, you know, whatever it is, just having somebody to talk to you about that, not because you're necessarily struggling, but a lot of it is just you're confused and you know, as a 6, 8, or 10 year old kid. You're just confused when stuff like that happens. So just kind of talking through it. Especially with younger kids because there's a lot of emotions that younger children feel during something like that where they don't know how to express it. And a lot of times it ended up being expressed as, you know, anger or fighting or things like that at the house. Instead of, you know, if they've maybe had somebody who knew, "Hey, um, they just got two new brothers dropped on them and now they're just expected to figure out what that means." So having somebody to talk to them and just say, okay, like "I know you have two new brothers or children that you're fostering now. Like, how's that been going? What concerns do you have with it?" Like things like that just to kind of open the door for them to talk about it because it's not something that an eight</p>

		<p>year old kid is going to be like, "you know what, I'm struggling emotionally, I need to find somebody who's qualified to help me work through these things." That's not a thought that an 8 year old going to have. So to have somebody kind of work through that with them I think would be really good. (Nick)</p> <p>So like having a school counselor for a newly fostered kid or for the siblings who are like also going through that would just be super helpful because...and making sure that they know that anything they say, unless it's like dangerous and like the official report, all that stuff. But unless it's, like, dangerous, like, knowing what they say isn't going to leave that way they can, legitimately say what they're feeling about the situation because otherwise younger kids aren't mature enough and their brains aren't developed enough to be able to work through those emotions effectively.” (Nick)</p> <p>So having something like that happen, you have to make sure that the kids, especially in that situation have somebody that's objective and a third party could talk to where they can just be completely frank and say what they need because there's a lot of things that, kids that age who are being fostered or in a family that is fostering, or going through and having somebody who like you, who knows the questions to ask would be just super beneficial. (Nick)</p> <p>Definitely from my church. I mean, being homeschooled, I didn't have a ton of support from school, but my friends a lot of times like my best friend would call me. She's like, “do you need out of the house? Just come over, spend the night at my house” just to like have some of that still, like, normal, like what I was used to. So being able to hang out with friends and not babysitting. (Amanda)</p> <p>So, having people to talk to was good and my parents always made sure that they talked to us about the different changes as they came or beforehand if they knew beforehand what they were going to be like. Just being very upfront and open with us about everything. (Ally)</p>
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		<p>(Would have been) I think the only thing that I thought about like before the interview that like would have been helpful when we were fostering counselor in a school. Like if there was someone like a counselor or something who could sit down with my whole family and whichever kids we had at the time and just talk through things. We never had that. The case workers would come in and talk to my parents, but they're not counselors, you know, and they're extremely busy. They don't have time to do this extra stuff that was probably needed rather than just my parents trying to figure everything out on their own. So if there was another person, maybe that would have made things smoother sometimes. (Julia)</p> <p>And I just really appreciated that she recognized that I was interested in it and was willing to listen and answer questions and just checking on us when she just asked us how school was going or I was playing volleyball at the time (Ally)</p> <p>(Would have been) Just someone saying that they were there to talk to, if anything, if I needed to talk to anybody. (Valerie)</p> <p>(Would have been) Just being there to either talk to or like if you need to get out of the house for a little bit, like offering to let them come over for a little bit or something like that. (Valerie)</p> <p>(Would have been) I honestly don't even remember anyone acknowledging that my family did foster care or he was in the foster, like anyone, like teachers or guidance counselors or principals. No one ever came up to me and said anything about it. So I think if somebody made that like, "Hey Meghan, like I know you're fostering, you have this placement. I know that you guys are a foster family. So we know that and we're here to help if you need anything." Just acknowledging that and putting it out there, would it have helped me? I don't really feel like anyone did that and I knew that, I know they knew because obviously he was new and we had to explain all that and everything. But I just kind of felt like no one, it was kind of like forbidden to talk about it. No one wanted to talk about how this kid came in and he didn't have a family. So now he's foster care. It was like no one</p>
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		<p>wanted to hurt his feelings or something. So it's just like no one talked about it. It would have been more inviting to talk to someone because I didn't want to have to go and explain everything, we're fostering at home and all this stuff. I knew that they knew that, but they should have, someone should have just been like, "Hey, I know that this is going on, I'm here". Just something as simple as that. And it just sort of opens more comfort for me I guess. (Meghan)</p> <p>Maybe like once a month or something, they could like talk to me and, help me, and give me advice and stuff on what to do or if there's anything that's bothering me (Lucy)</p> <p>I don't know. We've got two counselors in our school and one of them is like the guidance counselor for like college work and stuff like that. Academic counselor and the other ones like the emotional stuff. And I have only met that one like twice. So I don't know what she does do... But I only learned where her office was like this year. And I guess I didn't, it took a long time for me to fully grasp that I also was allowed to have issues like, the first bit of this, it felt more like a "we're here to help them". And I wasn't really processing that it was also going to affect me. And that was okay. Like you have to get to the point where asking for help doesn't feel selfish when you're looking at, well, my, one of my frustrations pale in comparison to people who are deal with abuse or whatever. (Jalynn)</p> <p>Like the girls, all have therapists coming in and stuff and at times I feel like I need that. And we had to go outside to find me someone because I had also developed recently some severe anxiety, which may or may not be related to the foster thing, no idea. It's possible that when you're 11 years old you don't really manifest symptoms of anxiety very much. (Jalynn)</p> <p>But I would say for the younger kids I would just probably have a counselor, like a school counselor or psychologist talking to them, because sometimes they don't feel comfortable talking to their parents in these situations because I know that a lot of my siblings felt like they couldn't complain or couldn't, I guess, talk about it sometimes because they didn't want to come across as ungrateful or anything like...selfish, or whatever. (Leslie)</p>
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		<p>The only thing I remember is hearing someone from the County would come and do their visits with the social worker and she would talk to us each individually. Like, "how is this going?" They would ask us questions and make sure that we're still like 100% in it (Meghan)</p>
	<i>Validating their Experiences</i>	<p>I guess, it was more geared towards these foster placements, which it should be 100%, but there's also other people that's affected by that placement too. So I think at school and at church and everything, everyone would just praise our family. Like my parents were being kind for bringing people into our home. But it was never like, what's really going on? (Meghan)</p> <p>I'm more so excited than anything else, I think, I mean foster care is hard. It really is. Foster care and adoption is hard. It wasn't that my parents didn't prepare us enough, but there was no idea of how to prepare kids to be like, "yeah, there's going to be new people who are your brothers." I've never had anyone even be interested in [my experiences]. So for me, this is just awesome. This is such a cool idea. (Alex)</p> <p>I think it's just when you are encountering a parent, or like a family who is fostering, don't just care about, "Oh how are the foster kids doing?" But do ask the family, how are the other kids doing? How are the parents doing? Because we would constantly have people come up and they're like, "Oh, how are the littles doing?" We're like, "they're doing good." and then they would like walk away and then it would just get frustrating. Because you're like, we're as much in this system as they are. (Amanda)</p> <p>There have been several times in the last few years where like one of my foster sisters a couple times has gotten fed up, which is the whole thing and gone to respite for like a weekend or whatever. I don't get that as an option. Like no matter how stressed out I am, overcrowded, arguing with my mom because she's stressed out too. I don't get to do anything with that. Like the girls, all have therapists coming in and stuff and at times I feel like I need that. And we had to go outside to find me someone because I had also</p>



		<p>developed recently some severe anxiety, which may or may not be related to the foster thing, no idea. It's possible that when you're 11 years old you don't really manifest symptoms of anxiety very much. But it's possible that it caused PTSD or whatever, I dunno, but they didn't even, they don't have people looking for that. If you ask for it, the agency does have a thing to, they'll pay for like six [sessions] a year or something. So they'll pay for that, But you have to go ask for that. Like they don't look for that. Like if my mom and I hadn't realized that there was something going on, nobody would have. Life would have just sucked for a while...life did suck for a while. (Jalynn)</p>
	<i>Additional Supports</i>	<p>(When asked what would be helpful) I would definitely say just ask. Just be straight forward and ask the parents that are fostering, "What do you need specifically? If you don't need anything right now just message me or call me if you do end up needing anything." Because I think the most helpful thing is somebody who's willing to help. (Leslie)</p> <p>I think just kind of helping me figure out the balance there. I mean figuring out, yes I do want to help, but also I need to take care of myself. And I think it's just hard for me to do because I do want to serve people. So just finding that balance that would work would be it was hard. And I think it was, like, even it was even different for me than my siblings because my older sister was away at college and so she didn't struggle with that balance as much. (Amanda)</p> <p>They would cook dinners and ask if the kids needed anything. And out of all this, my mom started to do a program for backpacks. So she would go to the local social services where these kids would be taken first and then go to their placement homes, and she'd create these backpacks with toothbrushes and underwear and things that they wouldn't have if they were taken abruptly out of their homes – which happens often. (Leslie)</p> <p>A lot of with having to have background checks, a lot of them came up to my mom, my dad saying, you know, if you need extra babysitter, like let us know, we can go through</p>

		<p>background checks and everything. And then just all of my friends and my brothers friends just, they always loved the kids. (Ally)</p> <p>Honestly, and this might not be something that you're, looking for, but honestly people bringing us food, like meals really, really helped because, that's the last thing we wanted to think about. And that just took a lot of stress off of a lot of things, especially the transition like right away. When we first got a placement after those first two weeks, that really helped. We were getting in the swing of things, but then, people bringing us, if we got a call and we didn't have clothes for a three-month-old boy, they were bringing clothes for him or just being surrounded by people who supported us and would do anything to help us in those situations was really encouraging and helpful. (Meghan)</p>
<b>Advice to Kids about to Begin Fostering</b>	<i>Be Patient and Loving</i>	<p>I would say have grace. That's number 1. These kids are not coming from the same background as you. They're not coming from stable environments... Be patient. Be kind. Just like you would do for your own sibling – you have to extend that even further for them. (Leslie)</p> <p>I think one would be to give the kids the amount of love that you would give any other kid and not to hold back on that. It's really hard to do. And they always said, don't get your hopes up. But I think just recognizing that and being aware and the rest of your mind all the time that it might not work. And like I said, it's really hard to do that. We definitely didn't master that at all because how can you love a person and not get your hopes up that it, it just doesn't quite work. So I guess if you can balance that, do it, but if you're doing it right, I don't know how you would do that, honestly. So I think if you can do that and just love the kids, I think that's about the best advice I would give. (Ally)</p> <p>I think you just need to remember just to love on them and you don't have to fix their problem because that's not your job and you need to realize that because otherwise you're just going to try so hard and you're going to break yourself. (Amanda)</p>

		<p>I would say like the number one thing is to keep an open mind and try to put yourself in this person or child, whoever it is, situation and just be patient and really think about what they're going through and the situation that they're in. And also be like welcoming, because I'm sure they're terrified. And just love on them. Don't be afraid to. (Julia)</p> <p>They're not looking to be like fixed. They're just looking to be loved on and know that they're safe and cared for. So you don't have to worry about saying the right thing. It's just love on them and put them first and show them that they're safe and that they can rely on you and that you're., I think a big thing for kids and the system is consistency and knowing that you're consistent and you're a constant in their life, that's a huge thing and that makes them feel safe. So, yeah, pretty much it. (Meghan)</p> <p>But, even for these little kids, you just have to be careful what you say around them. You have to be careful how you respond to them because at any moment you could trigger something in them that they could not necessarily know is there that could send them spiraling and would not be good for anybody else too. (Leslie)</p>
	<i>Invest in your Relationship with your Parents</i>	<p>I would say, have grace with your parents because just like it's uncomfortable and new and strange to you, it's more so for them. (Leslie)</p> <p>There's a lot of dynamic moving parts because it depends a lot on like the family dynamic in my opinion, but make sure that you're in really good communication with your parents because your parents are...like, your brain doesn't stop developing until you're like 25 so your parents are obviously well passed that point and making really grounded thought-through decisions with the process. (Nick)</p> <p>And be aware of the fact that your parents are trying their best to, I guess a kid could probably get pretty upset with their parents if they weren't getting enough attention and didn't realize that it's not necessarily how, that's not necessarily how the parents want things to be. And I think that would be beneficial for a kid to know and be aware of that the parents aren't the bad guy. (Ally)</p>