

FOSTER PARENT SURVEY

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Joan Shireman, Ph.D., Principal Investigator
Diane Yatchmenoff, M.S., Project Manager
Bart Wilson, M.S.W., Management Information Liaison
Barbara Sussex, M.S.W., Field Coordinator
Lynwood Gordon, M.S.W., Research Assistant
Claire Poirier, B.A., Research Assistant
Charles Benitez, M.S.W., Research Assistant
Wendy Howard, Ph.D., Research Assistant
Kate Swanson, M.S.W., Research Assistant
Jeff Alworth, M.A., Support Staff

*Portland State University
Graduate School of Social Work
Portland, Oregon*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The System of Care being implemented by the State Office for Services to Children and Families (SOSCF) resulted from an agreement between the Juvenile Rights Project and that agency, and is intended to change the process by which services are delivered to families and children in the child welfare system throughout Oregon. The foster parent survey is part of the evaluation of the System of Care, being carried out by the Regional Research Institute for Human Services, in collaboration with the Child Welfare Partnership of the Graduate School of Social Work at Portland State University.

Crucial to the implementation of the entire System of Care is the provision of foster home resources such that the child's needs can be matched with the capacities of the foster home, so that if safety needs dictate that a placement is necessary, attachment needs can be met by a single placement for the time the child must be in care.

A statewide survey of foster parents was undertaken to assess the well-being of those families currently providing foster care for SOSCF. As improvement in foster care is one of the goals of the System of Care, it is planned that the survey will be repeated in two years in order to identify changes. A random sample of 1200 foster homes distributed across the state received a mailed survey; 346 surveys were returned, a 30% return rate. In order to identify any differences between respondents and non-respondents, a random sample of 40 non-respondents from Multnomah County, and a random sample of 50 non-respondents from the rest of the state, were surveyed by telephone. Respondents were asked to consider a child in their home, or recently in their home, who seemed "typical" as they responded.

- Reflecting national statistics, a higher proportion of children in this sample than would be expected from population statistics were children of color. Almost one third of the children were African American, Hispanic, and Native American children (n=116), and 47% of them were placed in ethnically different foster homes.
- Seventy-eight percent of the foster parents thought the "fit" of the child to their home was very good. Only 6% thought that their preferences regarding a child had not been met.
- Though 42% of the placements had been emergency placements, about half of the families thought that they had adequate information about the child prior to placement, and three-quarters thought that within a reasonable time they had adequate information to help them care for the child.
- Foster parents work to help children maintain attachment to the biological family. Only 15% of the children in this sample had no contact with biological parents or relatives. One-quarter of the foster parents thought visits helpful to the child, and about half thought visits were upsetting to the child. In comments on the survey, foster parents often discussed the difficulties of supporting visits with biological parents. Sixty-one percent of the children in this sample were not placed with their siblings; however, some contact with these brothers and sisters is maintained for three-quarters of the children.

- For the most part, foster families were pleased with their involvement in planning and delivery of services for foster children. Eighty-one percent of the families thought the caseworkers listened to some extent to their views about the needs of the children. Eighty-three percent felt they had involvement in planning services for the children, and all were highly involved in service delivery.
- Foster parents also thought the needs of the children were being met. Seventy percent thought the children's needs were correctly identified, and 70% thought the children's needs were being met fairly well or very well.
- Foster parents use the caseworker as the major source of support in their task of fostering. There is an association between the responsiveness of the caseworker, the level of foster parent satisfaction, and the degree to which foster parents felt involved with the agency in caring for the child.
- Prompt return of telephone calls is a simple action of the caseworker which can foster good working relationships with the foster parent. Fifty-one percent of the foster parents reported that when they telephoned with a problem or question, their caseworker returned the call the same day or, at latest, the next day, and an additional 32% said calls were returned within four days. When a call is returned, 86% found the response at least somewhat helpful.

Telephone contact with 40 Multnomah County foster parents who had not returned the survey developed a picture very similar to that of the mailed surveys; if anything, the experiences of those telephoned was somewhat more positive. The same pattern of responses appeared among the 50 non-responding foster parents living in the remainder of the state who were telephoned. Thus it appears that these 346 families represent the common experiences of foster parents.

Overall, although foster care resources are stretched, the foster parent survey would suggest that relations between foster parents and SOSCF are generally positive and provide a solid basis for the System of Care.

THE FOSTER PARENT SURVEY

Crucial to the implementation of the entire System of Care is the provision of foster home resources such that the child's needs can be matched with the capacities of the foster home, so that if safety needs dictate that a placement is necessary, attachment needs can be met by a single placement for the time the child must be in care. The foster parent survey was developed to assess the well-being of those families currently providing foster care for State Office for Services to Children and Families (SOSCF). Based on anecdotal information, the expectation of the survey was that there would not be many foster parents experiencing the characteristics of Strengths/Needs Based service at this time, but that when the survey was repeated in two years there would be change on this dimension.

METHODS

The survey was discussed to some extent with caseworkers and CWP trainers as it was developed; it was pretested with 10 foster parents and their ideas incorporated. The greatest problem was creating a survey of such length that families would complete and return it; many more questions could certainly have been asked.

The constructs around which the survey were built are those of particular interest in Strength/Needs Based service delivery: (1) the careful "match" of child to foster home so that the child's needs are met insofar as possible, (2) the maintaining of the child's attachment to siblings, parents, and other meaningful relatives, (3) the use of the strengths of the foster parent in discovering child's needs, planning, and delivering services, (4) the involvement of the foster parent in decision making, and (5) the provision of support to maintain the placement. In addition, a few demographic characteristics to describe our foster parent sample were collected, and three items of particular interest to the foster parent trainers were included.

The foster parent survey was mailed at the end of March 1997 to a random sample of foster parents across the state. Working from a list of foster parents arranged by zip code, 1200 of the approximately 3600 foster homes in the state were sampled. The resulting pool was proportionate to the distribution of foster parents across counties. Foster parent associations were alerted, and stories explaining the survey and urging its return have been in some newsletters. Families were mailed a \$5 check if they included their name and address with the returned survey.

The 346 surveys, on which this data is based, represents a 29.5% return rate. Because of concern that those who returned the survey might differ in important characteristics from the non-respondents, a telephone follow-up of 40 randomly selected non-respondents from Multnomah County and 50 from the rest of the state was conducted.

FINDINGS

DESCRIPTION OF FOSTER HOMES

Foster families from all over Oregon replied to the survey; there was at least one reply from every county with the exception of Curry, Gilliam, and Sherman. Table 1 groups the counties by region, and shows the distribution of replies.

TABLE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS BY REGION

Metro	70
Western	145
Southern	84
Eastern	44
Not reported	3

Some of the smaller counties were over-represented in these returns, while most of the larger counties, including Multnomah, were under-represented.

About 27% (n=19) of the homes in Multnomah County were relative foster homes, as were only 9% (n=30) in the rest of the state. Two-thirds of the respondents (n=223) described their foster homes as “regular.” There were 23 medical foster homes and 18 therapeutic foster homes in the sample, and a scattering of other types of foster homes.

Eighty percent (n=271) of the foster parents were Caucasian. In Multnomah County 72% (n=50) were Caucasian, with 14% (n=10) Black. A little more than two and one-half percent (n=9) of the foster homes were Hispanic.

These were not large families; only 17 families reported more than three biological children, and only 10 families more than three adopted children. Fifty-four percent of the families had one or two foster children (n=186). Surprisingly, 21% (n=73) of the families reported that they did not currently have a foster child in their home.

The length of time families have served as foster parents ranged from one month to 45 years, with a median of 3 years. Eighty-three percent of the respondents had been foster parents for a year or longer.

Foster parents were asked to select a child being served under the System of Care and answer the survey with reference to that child, or to select a “typical” child in their home and use that child as a reference, or, if there was no child currently in the home, to select a “typical” past

placement. Foster parents seemed to have little idea about whether their children were part of this new system, but almost all respondents were able to select a child on whom to focus their replies.

Of the children they selected, 60% had been in the homes more than a year. Length of stay for these foster children ranged from weeks to 10 years with the modal placement length one year. Eighteen parents told us that they were in the process of adopting their foster children and 4 relatives told us that they expected the placement of the foster child to be permanent. The median length of time these children had been in the home was 1 year, with a range of 6 months to 3 years 6 months.

Almost two-thirds of the children were described as Caucasian (n=216). Table 2 displays the ethnicity of the children in the sample. The 25 children described as “other” were almost all children of mixed race. It is thus apparent that African American, Hispanic, and Native American children are represented in this sample of foster children in greater numbers than one would expect from their proportion in the general population.

THE MATCH OF CHILD AND FOSTER HOME

Foster parents were asked about the placement process, about the degree to which their preferences regarding a child had been met, and about the “goodness of fit” that they thought the child had in their home, all of these rough indicators of the work and success of SOSCF in matching children and families.

Forty-two percent of the foster care placements had been emergency placements, and 45% of the placements were made before the certification process was complete. Despite this, 60% (n=206) of the families thought that the certification process had given them adequate information about fostering, and 51% of the homes (n=178) reported that the worker had adequately reviewed the needs of the child with the foster parent prior to placement.

Sixty-eight percent of the foster parents (n=236) reported that their ethnicity and that of all of the children in their home was the same. Forty-six foster parents reported that their ethnicity did not match that of their children. In order to discover whether any particular groups of children were more likely to be in ethnically different foster homes, Table 2 was developed.

TABLE 2
FOSTER HOME WITH AT LEAST ONE CAREGIVER OF SAME
ETHNICITY AS CHILDREN CURRENTLY IN HOME, BY ETHNICITY OF
CHILD IN THIS SAMPLE

Ethnicity of child in sample	One caregiver of same ethnicity as children		
	No	Yes	Total
African American	10	15	25
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	4	5
Hispanic	16	17	33
Native American	7	27	34
Caucasian, non-Hispanic	5	211	216
Other	13	11	24
Total	52	285	337

As is evident in Table 2, in this sample almost half of the Hispanic children (n=16) are placed in homes in which the foster parent is of a different ethnicity, as are 40% of the African American children (n=10) and 20% of the Native American children (n=7). Twenty-four children were described as “other;” most of these are of mixed non-Caucasian race; 54% of them were placed in foster homes in the ethnicity of the foster parent was different. Though there are a higher proportion of Hispanic children in placement outside the metropolitan area (11%, n=30), and a higher proportion of black children in placement in Multnomah County (19%, n=13), the percentage of homes in which the ethnicity of children matches that of foster parents is almost identical.

Foster parents were asked if their preferences about the type of child they would like to have placed in their home had been met with this placement. Fifty-seven percent (n=197) replied that their preferences had been fully met; only 6% (n=17) thought that preferences had not been met. Seventy-eight percent (n=269) thought the “fit” of the child to their home was very good, while less than 2% (n=5) thought it a poor match.

MAINTAINING THE CHILD'S ATTACHMENT TO FAMILY

Two actions which SOSCF can take to help maintain attachment of child and birth family are arranging for visits and placing siblings together. Among the foster children in the sample, visits were difficult or impossible for almost a quarter; 83 biological mothers were either dead or incarcerated, as were 103 biological fathers. However, only 15% (n=51) had no contact with parents or relatives. Children were not commonly placed with their siblings. Of the 304 respondents who had children with siblings, 61% (n=185) were not placed with their siblings.

Only 20% were all placed together. In 19.5% of the cases, some of the siblings were placed with the child. In 26% of the cases, some of the siblings were in the biological parents' home, either never placed or returned from care. Almost a quarter (n=70) of the children who have siblings not in the foster home have no contact with them.

The foster parent is an important partner in helping the child maintain attachment to the birth family. Twenty-two percent (n=76) of the foster families do not know either parent of the child in their care; an additional 31 families do not know the mother, and 81 families do not know the father. Of the 270 families who know one or both parents, 27% (n=74) think one or both parents have a great deal of interest in the child, though capacity may be limited. Only 9% (n=31) of the foster parents state that the foster home is the usual place for visits, though 38% (n=133) have had parents or relatives visiting in the foster home at some time. Sixteen percent (n=56) have worked with parents and/or relatives on parenting skills. About a third (n=99) of foster parents whose children had visits reported that they had some role in the decision making regarding the visits. Visits are powerful; only 25% (n=64) of the 257 foster homes which answered the question describing the impact of visits stated that they made no difference. More than half thought the visits upsetting to the child (59%, n=151).

USE OF FOSTER PARENT STRENGTHS

For the most part, families were pleased with their involvement in planning and delivery of services for foster children and thought the needs of the children were being met. Needs of the children were at least partially reviewed with families 81% (n=273) of the time, and fully reviewed more than half of the time. These foster parents thought that SOSCF correctly identified the child(ren)'s needs 70% (n=243) of the time, and the caseworker listened to the foster parent's views about the child(ren) at least partly in 81% (275) of the cases. Finally, 83% (n=286) of the families were asked to help plan services for their foster children.

Foster families were involved in delivery of a host of services for the foster children. Most common was taking the child to the doctor, transporting the child for visits, meeting with the caseworker, and meeting with the teacher at the child's school. Table 3 displays this range of activities.

TABLE 3
FOSTER PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN PROVISION OF SERVICES TO CHILD

Service	Number	Percent
Taking child to doctor	320	92.4
Met with caseworker	291	84.1
Met with child's teacher at school	257	74.2
Transported child to visits with parents/relatives	232	67.0
Met with service providers	205	59.2
Attended CRB hearings or other case reviews	199	57.5
Gone to court	144	41.6
Attended planning meetings at SOSCF	140	40.4
Had parents or relatives visit in home	133	38.4
Worked with parents / relatives on parenting skills	56	16.1

Asked what the hardest part of their work as a foster parent was, 45% (n=154) replied that it was managing the behaviors of the foster child(ren) in their home. Only 12 foster parents replied that being asked to do too much was their major problem as foster parents.

PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING

After a child is placed, the foster parent has access to information about the child which is known to no one else. Foster parents were asked about the worker's listening to their views about the child's needs. Almost three-quarters replied that they were indeed consulted. Fifty-eight percent (n=199) replied that they and the caseworkers had talked a good deal about the foster parent's observation and ideas. Another 22% (n=76) said there had been some discussion. Only 16% (n=56) replied that they were really not asked much at all about observations or ideas. (Very recent placements and foster parents who did not reply to the question constitute the remaining percentages.)

Foster parents were also asked whether they had helped plan services to meet the needs of the child. Eighty-three percent (n=286) replied affirmatively, though 20% (n=68) qualified this by reporting that they did not participate very much. As is detailed in Table 3, planning was most often done with the caseworker, though 140 foster parents had attended planning meetings at SOSCF, 177 had attended Citizen Review Board meetings, and 144 had gone to court.

PROVISION OF SUPPORT TO MAINTAIN THE PLACEMENT

Support networks are not used as extensively by these foster parents as one might expect. Only about a third of the foster parents responding to this survey were active in a foster parent group or network. Foster parents in Multnomah county were a little more likely to be active in a foster parent support group or network; 39% (n=27) were so involved, as were only 31% (n=84) outside the metropolitan area. Only 8% (n=27) listed another foster parent as the first person they would call on for help with a problem. Their own family members were important in helping them resolve their feelings after a foster child left the home, but only 16% (n=55) listed a family member as the first person they would call on for help.

Foster parents seem to use the caseworker as a major source of support in their task of fostering. Given a list of choices, the caseworker was cited by 43% (n=152) as being the first person foster parents would call for support and advice during a crisis with the child. Fifty-eight percent (n=201) listed someone at SOSCF (caseworker, certifier, or supervisor) as the first person they would call. Fifty-one percent (n=177) of the respondents reported that when they telephoned with a problem or question, their caseworker returned calls the same day or, at latest, the next day, and an additional 32% (n=112) said they received calls within 4 days. Once the call was returned, 86% (n=296) of the foster families described the response as at least somewhat helpful; of these, 47% (n=161) call the response very helpful. Asked about the hardest part of their work as foster parents, only 12% (43) of the foster parents noted lack of contact and follow-through from caseworkers, and 9% (n=31) noted agency bureaucracy around payments and services. In comments appended to the survey, many foster parents emphasized the inadequacy of foster care payments, allowances for clothing, and reimbursements for expenses.

There does seem to be some connection between the responsiveness of the caseworker and the level of foster parent satisfaction. Eighty-five percent (n=150) of the 177 foster parents whose caseworkers returned calls immediately thought the agency had identified the child's needs correctly; and 90% (n=153) of these foster parents thought services were meeting the child's needs fairly well or very well. Caseworker responsiveness is also associated with the level of connection of foster parent to the agency. Foster parents who said their calls to the worker were returned immediately were also more likely to say that the agency was their first resource when a problem arose with the child. Foster parents who said the worker typically did not return their calls within four days were more likely to call someone not connected with the agency when they had a problem.

Foster families report that just over half of their caseworkers respond promptly to telephone calls from foster parents. This prompt response seems to be linked to a foster parent feeling that the agency is meeting the child's needs, and to participation with the agency in the care of the foster child. These are scant indicators of association, but are those which common sense would suggest. And they suggest a way in which a rather simple action of the caseworker can foster a good working relationship with foster parents.

QUALITATIVE DATA

Foster parents were asked on the survey what, in their own words, SOSCF could do to

help them as foster parents, and they were asked for any additional ideas. Sixty written responses received from Multnomah County by June 1st were reviewed, and they were compared with 60 randomly selected qualitative responses from outside Multnomah County. This was done by a single reviewer, reading the responses and looking for themes in the writing. The data is reported here because of its interest, but these responses would have to be handled much more comprehensively before conclusions are drawn.

In writing, foster parents often seemed to be describing their whole experience of fostering, rather than focusing on their experience with the child currently in the home. The structure of the questions also focused foster parents on describing unmet needs.

Twenty percent (n=24) of the responses were unqualifiedly positive. There might be a need mentioned, but it was overwhelmed by positive comments about the children and about the experience of fostering. Eight of these totally positive responses were from Multnomah County.

In describing unmet needs, 15% (n=18) wrote about enjoying the children, but noted unmet needs; another 20% (n=24) noted unmet needs without adding the comments about children. Twelve Multnomah County foster parents added material about enjoying the children; it is quite possible that these are a variant on the positive responses first reported. Four additional foster parents wrote about a “system” which does not meet children’s needs, despite caseworker efforts. Need was expressed for day care, respite, prompt payment, reimbursement for expenses, information, prompt response from workers, recognition of time demands made on foster parents, and (in rural areas particularly) transportation.

Twenty-eight percent of the foster parents (n=33) wrote about problems with the caseworker and with SOSCF; often there was an angry tone to this writing. Three-quarters of these 33 negative responses were from Multnomah County. Complaints centered around lack of involvement in planning, anger about accusations of neglect, SOSCF slowness and lack of follow-through, failure to recognize the emotional, financial, and time drain on foster parents, and lack of respect shown foster parents.

Thus, while the overall survey described a group of foster parents involved with the agency and believing that the needs of the child currently in their home were being met, these comments developed a picture of unmet needs. Both aspects of the data are important, for unmet needs will erode foster parents’ ability to meet the needs of children, and make retention more difficult.

THE NON-RESPONDENTS

Of concern in analyzing the data from this survey was the 29.5% return rate. It seemed possible that those who promptly returned the survey might be our “happiest” foster parents, or those most involved with SOSCF, and that those who did not return the survey might answer the survey questions quite differently. Forty foster homes from Multnomah County who had not responded to the survey were randomly selected, telephoned, and asked to complete the survey in a telephone interview. The responses of Multnomah County foster parents who had returned the survey by mail, and those who had been telephoned, were then compared. Additionally, 50

randomly selected foster parents from outside Multnomah County were telephoned, and their responses compared with those who had returned the survey by mail.

Those who returned the survey by mail and those who were queried by telephone appear to be very similar. About 30% of the homes in Multnomah county and 10% of the homes outside were relative foster homes. A slightly higher proportion of those telephoned had been foster parents for more than a year. Ethnicity was similar with a few more non-white foster homes being reached by telephone. Preferences for the type of child placed were met about equally often in the two groups. About 70% of each group thought the child's needs correctly identified. More than two-thirds of each group said they had a good deal of input in the planning of services for the child, and all foster parents were highly involved in service delivery. Only about 10% of each group thought that services delivered did not meet the needs of the child at all well. Managing behaviors of the child(ren) in the home was most frequently chosen as the most difficult part of foster parenting by all groups except those telephoned outside Multnomah County; that group described a wide range of difficulties (some of which included managing difficult behaviors) which were coded as "other."

Table 4 displays important items in which fairly substantial differences appeared in at least one pair between those who returned surveys by mail, and those who completed the survey over the telephone. Overall, as detailed in Table 4, where there were differences, those who were telephoned reported more positive experiences with fostering and with the agency. A higher proportion got an immediate response when they telephoned the caseworker. A higher proportion thought the fit of child and family very good, and a higher proportion thought services met the needs of the child very well.

Those telephoned were somewhat more likely to have had an emergency placement, and to have not received sufficient information prior to the placement, though eventually about two-thirds of both groups thought they received adequate information about the child. Sixty-five percent of the children in those homes called in Multnomah County were not placed with siblings (though most had contact with siblings); however almost half of the homes telephoned in the remainder of the state reported sibling groups placed together.

Foster parents in Multnomah county who were telephoned were less likely to be involved in a foster parent support network than were those from Multnomah County who returned the survey by mail. It is possible that involvement with other foster parents may have been a factor connected with return of the survey by mail.

TABLE 4
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FOSTER PARENTS WHO RETURNED THE SURVEY BY
MAIL, AND
THOSE WHO WERE SURVEYED BY TELEPHONE

Item	Multnomah		Non-Multnomah	
	Mail respondents n=70	Telephone respondent n=40	Mail respondents n=276	Telephone respondents n=50
Less than one year as foster parent	27%	8%	15%	12%
Child in home more than one year	67%	87.5%	50%	56%
Emergency placement	46%	65%	43%	34%
Needs not reviewed before placement	23%	50%	18%	32%
Services meet needs of child very well	33%	41%	36%	52%
Fit of child with family is very good	83%	90%	79%	82%
Get immediate response when call caseworker	54%	69%)	52%	78%

Thus it appears that the mailed survey responses did not draw from an unusually positive group of foster parents, but rather these 346 families can be presumed to represent the common experience of foster parents working with SOSCF.

DISCUSSION

Foster care is a core service in child welfare, and without a healthy foster care system improvement of services to children and families is seriously handicapped. One of the tenets of the System of Care is that when placement in a foster home is necessary for a child, it will be carefully made and extensively supported, so that “the first placement will be the last placement.” Another focus of the System of Care is maintaining the attachment of the child to biological parents and relatives during a foster care placement.

The state-wide survey of foster parents reported here is intended to provide a “snapshot” of the relationship between foster parents and SOSCF. It was mailed to 1200 randomly selected foster parents. The 346 responses include replies from most counties, and present a picture of a basic service on which caseworkers rely as they plan services for children. With a 30% return rate, there was concern that these respondents might differ from the foster parents who did not return their surveys. Forty Multnomah County foster parents who had not returned surveys were telephoned, as were 50 foster parents from the remainder of the state, and responses were very similar to those of the mailed surveys. One can thus have confidence that those foster parents who returned their surveys were not in some way vastly different from those who did not.

The responses were surprising, and unlike the anecdotal material about foster homes which team members had heard throughout their work with SOSCF. Along dimensions of (1) the “match” of the child to the foster home, (2) the involvement of foster parents in discovering the child’s needs and in planning and delivering services, and (3) the involvement of the foster parent in decision making, responses were generally positive. Thus many of the elements of Strengths/Needs Based service delivery seem to be in place in the agency’s work with foster parents, not only in pilot counties, but across the state.

The data on the ethnicity of the foster children, and their placement in ethnically similar foster homes, is disturbing. As is true in foster care statistics nationwide, children of color seem to be over-represented in this sample, probably reflecting issues of poverty and raising question about whether family preservation services are equally available to the community of color in Oregon. The high proportion of these children who are not placed in ethnically similar foster homes is also disturbing. Doubtless the shortage of foster homes is reflected in this, and the need for aggressive recruitment of ethnically diverse foster homes is apparent. The trauma for a child undergoing the disruption of placement is surely lessened if the child can go into a home which is similar in language and culture to that of his own home.

Maintaining attachment to the biological family is an area of difficulty for foster parents, and they commented on the stress of this involvement. This is clearly an area in which foster parents have mixed feelings, but indicate willingness to expend considerable energy to meet the needs of the child. Only 15% of the children in the sample had no contact with their biological families. Though 61% of the children were not placed with siblings, three-quarters of these had contact with them.

One of the ideas current in discussions of foster care is that foster parents can, perhaps, take greater responsibility for working directly with biological parents to teach the skills of

parenting the individual child. However, there are indications that extensive training might be necessary before many foster parents were ready to undertake this task. The majority of foster parents in this sample do not display the positive attitudes toward biological parents which would seem to be necessary to create this type of mentoring relationship. Only 27% of the foster parents who know the biological parents think that they have a great deal of interest in the child. Only 16% of the foster parents viewed visits with biological relatives as helpful to the child. Comments written on the surveys often reflect negative attitudes toward biological parents. Nevertheless, a third sometimes have biological parents or relatives visiting in their homes, and 16% have worked with parents or relatives on parenting skills.

Foster parents use the caseworker as the major source of support in their task of fostering. Prompt return of telephone calls is a simple action of the caseworker which can promote good working relationships with the foster parent. Half of the foster families reported that caseworkers returned telephone calls immediately--that day or at the latest the next day. There is an association between the prompt return of telephone calls, the helpfulness of the response, the level of foster parent satisfaction, and foster parent participation with the agency in caring for the child. This is clearly concrete action which caseworkers can take which will improve their work with foster parents, without any increase in caseworker workload (as almost all calls are, according to foster parents, eventually returned).

Reflecting the increasingly difficult children who are coming into the foster care system, foster parents identified meeting the needs of children with severe behavior problems as their most difficult task, and asked for additional training. Other unmet needs commonly noted were for day care and respite care, supports increasingly recognized as necessary to maintain placements of very demanding children. In rural areas, transportation was noted as a need.

When asked about their needs, foster parents also asked for greater financial recognition of the difficult work they are doing. They requested prompt payment and full reimbursement for expenses.

Most importantly, the findings of this state-wide survey indicate that many foster parents are engaged in good working relationships with the agency. The agency needs to provide support services and some specific training to enable foster parents to meet increasing responsibilities. Extensive recruitment of new foster homes, particularly those of differing ethnic backgrounds, and extensive efforts to retain current foster homes will be important. However, contact with the caseworker, the caseworker's responsiveness when contacted, and the caseworker's inclusion of the foster parent in assessing and planning to meet the needs of the child seem to be keys to the working relationship of foster parent and agency. An important part of the development of foster homes into valuable resources for children, and the retention of those foster homes, seems to rest in the actions of the individual caseworker.