What Makes Good Foster Parents?

ISABEL DANDO AND BRIAN MINTY

Isabel Dando is currently a social worker in the Church Adoption Society, London. Previously she did research into the motivation and background of foster parents, while a student on the Manchester University MSc Course in Psychiatric Social Work. Prior to that she worked with Cheshire Social Services in the field of child care.

Brian Minty is Lecturer in Psychiatric Social Work in the University of Manchester, and Senior Social Worker with Salford Social Services. He has been a foster parent, and still is an adoptive parent.

SUMMARY

The assessment of prospective foster parents is an important task based on skilled, but largely unvaluated, methods. This study attempts to describe the characteristics, personal background and motivation of all the foster mothers used by two inner city teams who had had at least one child placed with them for a year or more. The chief motivations and childhood experiences of the foster mothers were compared with ratings made by the fostering officers of their excellence as foster parents.

The study confirmed that two motivations for fostering, which have often been held to be reasonably good predictors of 'success' in caring for deprived children, were, in fact, associated with an acknowledgement on the part of experienced fostering officers that the parents who claimed to act from such motives had a good capacity to fulfill the demanding role of a foster parent: firstly, a desire to parent a child, when it was impossible to conceive a child of one's own; and secondly, an identification with deprived children as a result of unhappy experiences in childhood—experiences which the foster mothers had had the resilience to cope with, and use creatively. In addition, it emerged (somewhat to our surprise) that foster parents who claimed to act from motives of social concern and altruism were also seen by fostering officers to have demonstrated a real ability to foster children.

Nearly three-quarters of the foster mothers were emphatic that the experience of fostering had enhanced the quality of family life. For childless couples, the satisfaction seemed to come from caring for children; but for couples who had children of their own, the satisfaction seemed particularly to lie in helping children who had been deprived of a normal home life, and in bringing up children whom they could not see as extensions of themselves.

Correspondence to Brian Minty, Lecturer in Psychiatric Social Work, Department of Psychiatry, University of Manchester, Stopford Building, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PT.
The assessment of couples and individuals who apply to become long term foster parents is an important and time-consuming activity. Each assessment, whether approved or not, represents many hours of interviewing and report writing. All this is more than justified if it leads to a number of children being successfully placed.

Unfortunately, unless trends have changed, about half of the long term placements are subject to breakdown or disruptions within five years (Trasler, 1960; Parker, 1966), and there is rightly much concern over this. There is also a high wastage rate of foster parents. Some research studies have indicated that a considerable proportion of successful applicants give up fostering within less than a year. Jones (1975) found this figure to be as high as 40%.

Although selection is officially done by committees, the members rely heavily on the advice of social workers who make full use of their experience and professional know-how, but who do so against a background of uncertainty. Hapgood's rather pessimistic comments (Hapgood, 1984) about adoption might equally have been levelled at the assessment of foster parents:

at best adoption practice is based on possibly skilled but largely unevaluated methods, whilst at worst it is based on an unsatisfactory blend of guesswork and goodwill

There is some research about the structure of foster families and the ages and characteristics of foster children that tend to make for successful placements (Parker, 1966), but there are large 'areas' in which selection is influenced more by certain 'rules of thumb' and intuition. For example, one commonly held opinion amongst fostering officers and social workers is that successful fostering is associated with strong personal needs of two specific kinds. Kay (1966) suggests, from his own personal experience, that two motivations are consistently associated with success: the first is a desire to parent a child, where a couple are unable to conceive, and the second is an identification with deprived or unhappy children, as a result of past personal experience during childhood. Unless one or both of these motivations are present, then applicants are 'rarely motivated to survive the usual stresses and strains involved in long-term fostering'. These two motivations represent strong personal needs which are able and necessary to offset the upheaval, hard work, anxiety and potential disappointments involved.

Kay believes that emotional maturity is the single most important aspect to explore when assessing applicants, especially where past personal deprivation has occurred, since such experiences can either 'sensitise' or 'inhibit' individuals (i.e. develop resilience, insight and tolerance, or damage the personality leading to neurotic tendencies).
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This view is echoed by Josselyn (1952), an American psychiatrist. Where applicants have experienced an unhappy or deprived childhood, it is vital to establish whether or not they have built up emotional reserves and are capable of giving.

Motivation for fostering may be understood in terms of two layers. There are frequently not only the more conscious and 'public' reasons for wishing to take a child into one's home, but also others, more underlying, private and less understood motivations which need to be carefully and skilfully explored during assessment. Josselyn suggests that selection is made more difficult by the fact that professed motives often operate as partial masks, so that basic motives are not readily known through either words or actions. Even when they are clear to the assessor, they would not by themselves solve the problem of determining whether a family could assimilate a child and meet his needs. Motivation is likely to be only one of a number of factors within the foster home which determine success or failure. Nevertheless, Kay and Josselyn suggest that certain motivations are likely to be associated with a better outcome than others.

To see if Kay and Josselyn's views were likely to be true, we undertook a research project in an inner city area between November 1983 and June 1984. One of our aims was to link motives for fostering with 'outcome', that is, the standard of care provided in subsequent placements, as judged by fostering officers. We wished to explore the complex area of motivation for fostering in greater detail than had been done in previous research, and to discover what kinds of personal experiences of childlessness and past loss, deprivation or unhappiness—if any—were common amongst foster parents currently fostering children on a long term basis.

In doing so, we were testing out various 'hunches' held by fostering officers concerning their foster parents. They felt that there were a number who were providing an excellent standard of substitute parenting. Were there any common characteristics pertaining to this group in terms of social factors, personal backgrounds and motives? If so, were these linked in any way—for example, did they apply to foster parents as a result of a strong identification with deprived children, resulting from past personal experiences? Or were they, as a group, mostly childless?

In addition, we wished to explore the foster parents' role, and the attitudes of long term foster mothers towards their foster children. The degree of 'possessiveness' expressed by foster mothers has been measured by others; for example, Adamson (1973) used a Likert scale for this purpose, concluding that 43% were 'possessive' or 'very possessive', i.e. they rejected the role of foster mother and liked to think of the children as 'their' children.

Much has been written about the role of foster parenting and how it relates to the requirements of social work agencies. Holman (1980)
conceptualized the issue in terms of 'exclusive' and 'inclusive' fostering, and strongly implied that an inclusive approach was much more satisfactory, not only from the social work agency's point of view, but also for the child, because contact was encouraged between the child and his natural family. 'Exclusive' fostering, he asserted, was less likely to lead a child to a true sense of personal history and identity, and stemmed from an overriding need on the part of foster parents to be free of any fear that the placement might be jeopardized.

Although we did not intend to study either 'possessiveness' or the notion of exclusiveness vs. inclusiveness, we were interested in the extent to which childlessness, or notions of what foster parents felt to be an ideal family in terms of size and composition, were a part of the motivation for fostering, and to what extent they were associated with fostering officers' assessments of 'excellent' or 'barely adequate' fostering. Childless foster mothers, their reproductive history and subsequent views on fostering were therefore of particular interest.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

There were three main areas that we wished to explore in the study:

1. Firstly, we were interested in building up a picture of current long term foster parents in an inner city area by gathering sociological data, and by asking respondents to express their attitudes towards fostering and its impact upon family life.
2. Secondly, we wanted to explore the personal experience of foster parents during their childhoods, and ask them to assess the strength and nature of their early relationships.
3. Thirdly, we intended to focus particularly upon the different types of motivation for fostering amongst a sample of foster parents who had shown themselves, at the very least, to be committed to their task. We also wanted to assess their personal needs insofar as these appeared to be related to the motives for fostering, and its rewards and possible disappointments.

The fostering officers who collaborated in this study were aware of a number of foster parents who were providing a particularly good level of substitute care. One of our aims was to discuss whether foster parents judged to be 'excellent' differed in any of the three main areas referred to from other foster parents, who, although meeting the needs of their foster children, were judged to be less than excellent. An evaluation of role performance was therefore implicit from the start. We asked the fostering officers to rate the performance of all the foster couples involved in the
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study, and this rating exercise became an integral part of the research
design.

In this way, we pursued two lines of enquiry:

1. What were the characteristics of long term foster parents?
2. What were the characteristics of really excellent long term foster
   parents, as distinct from parents who were just adequate?

METHOD

Our study took place within one metropolitan district in a major Northern
conurbation ('North town'). Our sample consisted of all the foster parents
used by two inner city teams who were fostering on a long term basis. The
foster parents lived in a very wide geographical area, throughout one of the
largest conurbations in Britain, including suburbs and semirural areas. The
criteria for selection were that the foster parents were still fostering, and
that they had had one foster child with them for over a year, i.e. from the
date we started the study. A second criterion, adopted for reasons of time
and expense, was that the foster parents resided within the conurbation
boundaries—an area covering over 600 square miles. The total number of
foster couples who met these requirements was 89, of whom 80 agreed to be
interviewed. For practical reasons, such as limited researcher time, and
other resources, it was possible only to interview the foster mothers. We
regret that we were unable to study foster fathers. The neglect of foster
fathers is, of course, just one aspect of researchers' relative neglect of
fathers in general. We believe that the role of foster fathers is important,
directly in relation to the child, and because of the marital relationship, and
the quality of the support they give to the foster mother. It is likely that
their attitude to Social Services Departments and to social workers is at
least as crucial for the success of placements as the foster mothers' attitudes.
Cautley and Aldridge (1975) discovered that certain aspects of a
foster father's background were highly correlated with 'success' in foster
parenting over an 18 month follow-up period: i.e. not being an only, or the
eldest, child; not having very religious parents, and perceiving their own
fathers as warm and affectionate.

We decided that the only way in which to obtain valid information was
by personal interview, and we devised a schedule using closed and open-
ended questions. All the interviews were conducted at the homes of the
foster mothers and lasted between 1 and 2 hours. The open-ended
questions were post-coded. This was necessary because the answers to
questions, for example, concerning motivations, and as to how it was felt
fostering had affected family life, were varied, as one would expect, and
therefore needed to be categorized at the end of data collection, and then
This was not too difficult since most of the categories were fairly distinct; for instance, stated motivations for fostering broke down more or less into five main categories: childlessness, altruism and social conscience, identification with deprived children, wanting a larger family and wanting to nurture children. The choice of categories, and the allocation of answers to categories, was made by both of us, at first independently, and then by discussion. A full list of the categories used is provided in Table 4. We did not restrict foster mothers either to choosing from a prescribed list of reasons, or merely stating their ‘major’ motivation. Up to three different reasons were recorded and respondents were then requested to identify what they felt was their chief motivation.

The ratings of the standard of care were carried out by the fostering officers who knew the foster families. In most cases they had been working with them for a number of years (and in all cases for at least one year).

Rating foster parents is a somewhat problematical area and raises a number of practical and ethical issues. After several discussions, the two fostering officers and researchers agreed on a brief set of criteria that provided a degree of inter-rater reliability and (hopefully) a measure of validity. In asking ‘What qualities and capacities were required of foster parents?’ it was agreed that the following three areas seemed particularly important:

1. **AGENCY-ROLE UNDERSTANDING**

The understanding and acceptance of the procedures of Social Services Departments and other placing agencies.

(i) Ability to cope with possible impermanence;
(ii) Capacity to cope with the legal ramifications of looking after a child who is in care;
(iii) Capacity to cope with the natural parents;
(iv) Ability to cope with social work involvement over a period of years.

2. **BASIC CHILD CARE**

(i) Being warm and affectionate;
(ii) Capacity to be with, play with and talk to children;
(iii) Capacity to control and discipline children appropriately;
(iv) Maintaining adequate standards within the home.

3. **SPECIAL CAPACITIES**

(i) Capacity to handle the child’s identity difficulties;
(ii) Capacity to cope with discrepancies between chronological age and ‘developmental age’ in a child;
(iii) Capacity to help a child vis-a-vis natural parents;
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TABLE 1. Ratings of foster parents by social workers/fostering officers in Rowe’s study and our own

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rowe’s study</th>
<th>Our study</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent home</td>
<td>Excellent (category 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good in most respects</td>
<td>Generally good (category 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths and weaknesses balanced</td>
<td>Barely adequate (category 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many needs not met</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home cannot meet major needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(iv) Being able to communicate with withdrawn and difficult children using insight and tolerance.

It was found to be impossible to rate each foster couple on each of these 12 individual points, since some had not been ‘tested’ in all respects (e.g. coping with natural parents), but it was feasible to use the three broad categories as a basis for the ratings. Each foster couple were given a rating of A, B or C for their performance in each category; A represented a very good performance, B a good performance and C meant that the fostering officers had some reservations concerning their performance in this area. Those couples who were allocated three A’s were placed in the first category (rating 1), those who were allocated at least two B’s made up the second category (rating 2), and those who had been given two or three C’s were placed in the third category (rating 3).

It was stressed by the fostering officers that those foster parents in the third category should not be understood to be ‘poor’ foster parents. The officers felt that current placements were reasonably satisfactory, despite their reservations; and they did not wish to remove the children from the homes. Rather, the third category represented those foster parents who were not likely to have further children placed with them, and whose application to foster might not, given the benefit of hindsight, have been approved. They were performing their role at a ‘barely adequate’ level.

A number of other researchers have included an evaluation of foster parents as part of their research design. Notably, our ratings compared very closely with those recently published by Rowe et al (1984) as Table 1 indicates.

Unlike Rowe et al., who asked social workers to rate foster parents according to how well they were meeting the needs of the children placed with them at the time, we asked the fostering officers to rate the overall performance of the foster parents. This meant taking into consideration...
previous placements. The fostering officers preferred this approach because they felt less limited to one placement and one set of circumstances.

The finding that fostering officers are reluctant to label foster parents as 'poor' is not confined to this study. Rowe et al. found only 10-5% were considered not to be meeting the needs of children currently placed. This figure was even lower when the research team made a separate rating following their interviews. There are a number of possible explanations for this situation:

1. Firstly, there may be political reasons for caution. Continuing to use foster parents who are considered to be poor is likely to be a rather sensitive issue.
2. Secondly, since the task of fostering is a difficult one, and foster parents are such a valuable resource, it is understandable that professionals would not wish to be too ready to criticize.
3. Thirdly, it is also possible that tensions within foster households are not always fully explored, so that inadequacies remain concealed. Foster parents and children may be reluctant to admit to serious difficulties.

### Table 2. The distribution of social class, based on foster father’s occupation and Registrar General’s five-class system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social class</th>
<th>Number of households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclassified</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. The age of foster mothers by ratings of excellence (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Rating 1</th>
<th>Rating 2</th>
<th>Rating 3</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21-40</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-60</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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4. Fourthly, we have clearly studied a group of foster parent survivors. In the first place, they survived the selection process, and, secondly, the stresses of caring for a foster child (or children) for at least a year, and often for much longer periods. If the stresses had grossly outweighed the satisfactions for prolonged periods, it is likely many would have given up.

MAIN FINDINGS

On the whole, the foster parents interviewed were working class, living in homes which gave an impression of a concern for people taking precedence over being house proud. Pets were very much 'part of the scene', with nearly 90% of households having at least one pet, and often two or three.

Very few foster mothers had a job outside the home, and the majority of fathers were in full time employment. There was a high degree of marital stability, with 95% of households 'intact'.

Based on the occupation of the foster father (unless absent or unemployed) and the Registrar General's five class system, the distribution of social class was as seen in Table 2.

The age of the foster mothers ranged between 27 and 60 with a mean of 44. The foster fathers tended to be slightly older than the foster mothers in each case, but the range of ages and mean were very similar—24–66, with a mean of 47.5. Parker (1966) found a slight increase in the success rates of older foster parents compared to their younger counterparts. Adamson's (1973) findings, however, suggested that younger foster mothers (i.e. below 40) combine a better role understanding with better role acceptance than do older foster mothers.

We cross-tabulated the age of foster mothers with their ratings and we found that the majority of the 'barely adequate' foster mothers (category 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chief motivations for wishing to foster a child</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Childlessness</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting a larger family</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting to replace grown-up children</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting to replace children who died</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism/social conscience</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification with deprived children due to past personal experience</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting home-based child care employment</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family reasons (initially de facto placements)</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting to nurture children</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
were over 40 whilst a high proportion of the 'excellent' foster mothers (category 1) were 40 and under. A $\chi^2$ test showed this to be a significant result at the 0.05 level: $\chi^2 = 7.12$, with 2 d.f., $p = 0.029$ (Table 3).

We explored the possibility that, on the whole, older foster mothers were fostering adolescent children; this was not the case, although where we did find older foster mothers with adolescent children they tended to have the worst rating.

**MOTIVATION**

As already stated, we recorded up to three separate responses to the question of why foster mothers applied to foster, which gave us two sets of data; the frequencies of all responses and the frequencies of chief motivations. There were a total of 167 responses, i.e. an average of just over two per foster mother. The most frequent were: wanting to nurture children, 19; wanting to offer a home to children in care (altruistic motive), 38; wanting to 'replace' children who have grown up, 15; wanting a child and unable to conceive, 14; and identification with deprived children because of personal experience, 10 responses.

All the respondents gave a chief motivation for their wish to foster children. Expressed as percentages of the sample, these were as seen in Table 4.

The last category—wanting to nurture children—was made up of foster mothers who had said that wanting to look after children was primarily for its own sake rather than to establish, complete or replace their own family, or care for deprived children. When we cross-tabulated the nine major reasons for fostering with the foster parent rating we found that the motives most associated with ratings 1 and 2 ('excellent' and 'generally good' respectively) were:

1. Childlessness.
2. Altruism/social conscience.
3. Identification with deprived children, due to past personal experience.

One motive—wanting to nurture children—was associated with rating 3 ('barely adequate'). Half of those with this chief motivation were rated in this category. When compared with all the other motivations together, there was a significant association at the 0.002 level: $\chi^2 = 9.81$, 1 d.f.

**CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES**

The data concerning childhood experience were obtained in a number of ways, including open-ended questions and five point scales. One of the questions asked respondents to assess their childhood as a whole and to say...
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which point on the following scale seemed the most appropriate description: very happy, mostly happy, a balanced mix of happy and unhappy, mostly unhappy or very unhappy.

The majority of answers to this question, despite its difficulty, were direct and unhesitating: 18% rated their childhoods as very or mostly unhappy, 70% theirs as happy or very happy, and 5% used the mixed category.

We found that the ratings on childhood experiences were significantly associated (at the 0.05 level with the ratings given to them as foster mothers by the fostering officers. More than half of those who said they had unhappy childhoods were in the ‘excellent’ category (rating 1). None were in the lowest category (Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Happy Childhood</th>
<th>Unhappy Childhood</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ \chi^2 = 6.93, 2 \text{ degrees of freedom}, p < 0.05. \]

This finding was surprising in view of the fact that many people would feel that an unhappy childhood was not a good preparation for fostering. It is widely held that such experiences in childhood (loss, lack of care, deprivation, etc.) can lead to lack of emotional maturity and difficulties in parenting. Our findings suggest that in fact the opposite could be true: over half of the foster parents who had had disturbed or difficult backgrounds were rated in the most excellent group.

The interview schedule allowed considerable detail concerning childhood experiences to be obtained. In particular, a group of eight foster mothers described their early relationships with their own mothers in terms of lack of care and emotional deprivation for prolonged periods of time. Only two of these were received into the care of the local authority; the others remained at home. Descriptions were given of mothers who demonstrated no love or affection towards their children, or who treated them harshly, using excessive forms of punishment. Other mothers abandoned their children inexplicably, leaving them with relatives for long periods, whilst some tended towards the opposite extreme, and were self-centred, attention-seeking and hypochondriacal.

In addition to the two foster mothers of this group who were received
into care themselves, three others were in care but were not subject to prolonged lack of care in their natural families. The two groups overlap as Figure 1 indicates.

The foster mothers who were received into care but were not subject to lack of care in their natural families \((N = 3)\) had generally fared better than others. One was adopted after her first three years of life were spent in an orphanage; she subsequently had a happy childhood and rated her childhood as 'mostly happy'. Another spent five years in foster care—in four different placements—and described her childhood as 'rather mixed' but happiest when with foster parents. The third spent six years in a Children's Home and rated her childhood as 'mostly happy'. Four of the five foster mothers who had been in care themselves were rated in the 'excellent' category.

Although there were no personal interviews with foster fathers, we did obtain some data concerning their childhood experiences from the foster mothers. We wanted to find out how many couples had roughly similar experiences as children and how many had contrasting experiences. We also wondered if there were any significant associations with performance ratings. We found only one couple in which both partners had been in care as children, and two couples who had both been very unhappy. All three couples were rated in the highest category. On the whole, we found that most (almost three-quarters) of the couples had had similar, rather than contrasting experiences as children, in terms of happiness or unhappiness.
CHILDLESSNESS AND THE NATURAL FAMILY

When we looked at the broad issue of childbirth versus fostering as a means to 'parenthood', our sample of foster mothers divided with surprising neatness into four equal 'segments'. The simplicity of this division is rather more apparent than real, since the last segment comprises a number of different categories, and the first three subgroups are not completely homogeneous within themselves. The division is shown in Figure 2.

One quarter of our sample of foster mothers had never been able to conceive a child, and of these, all but one woman would have liked a natural family.

The remaining three-quarters had had natural children (between one and nine children), although this did not preclude miscarriages, stillbirths and other gynaecological problems. This group divided again into three equal subgroups, each representing a quarter of the total sample:

1. One-quarter wanted more children and were hopeful of having some; they tended to have small numbers of natural children (mostly one or two).
2. One-quarter felt that their natural family was complete, and therefore had no wish for further children. They tended to be older foster mothers (beyond child-bearing age) and over half had had four or more children.

3. The last quarter of the sample was made up of women who, for very different reasons, had decided not to have more natural children. The reasons were ideological, i.e. not wanting to add to the population; personal, e.g. an experience of post-natal depression; and there was also a group of twelve women who had lost children through miscarriage, stillbirth or post-natal death (or a combination of these) or had had serious difficulties during delivery.

Most of the childless foster mothers had a deep wish for a child. Their inability to conceive or give birth had caused varying degrees of distress or a sense of loss, and some felt 'biological failures'. Six had experienced one or more miscarriages. These women had turned to fostering as a way of 'filling a void' in their lives—as one of them expressed it—and generally found the role immensely satisfying. On the whole, they were a highly motivated and highly rated group. Many had applied for foster children whilst waiting to adopt, and of these, some were in the process of adopting the children placed with them, or were hoping to do so. Some couples, however, had seen fostering as a preferable alternative to adoption, and saw their 'ideal family' as a large number of foster children—preferably of different ages. There was a strong element of altruism/social conscience in their motivation for fostering.

FOSTERING AND FAMILY LIFE

When we consider the difficulties that foster parents face, it might be expected that the stresses often outweigh the rewards, or at least that the two balance out equally. Certainly, there was a small proportion of our sample (7%) who felt that fostering had been an unhappy, or even disastrous experience, but we found that over three-quarters of the foster mothers said that fostering was either completely rewarding or mostly rewarding, but with a manageable degree of stress. As we have already commented, this may be a consequence of the fact that we are studying survivors! We asked a further question of our respondents on the subject of the rewards of fostering: 'In what ways does fostering enhance family life?' Three-quarters of the foster mothers were emphatic that fostering enhanced family life, and were able to say in what ways. The types of benefits seemed to be closely related to the motivations for fostering, as in the case of childless foster mothers who had found satisfaction in nurturing children. A large group of foster mothers (24%) said that the main satisfaction, for them, was meeting the needs of deprived and damaged
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children. Most of these had expressed an altruistic/social conscience motivation for fostering. A typical comment was, 'You realize just how much some children have suffered, and it makes you aware of the other side of life'.

Some foster mothers went even further by saying that they felt foster children 'add another dimension to life'. These women, notably, emphasized the difference between natural children and children placed with them. One foster mother said, 'your own children are an extension of yourself—you know them intimately—but foster children come from so many different backgrounds that knowing and caring for them makes life richer and more varied'. Five foster mothers said that they actively encouraged contact between foster children and their natural parents. They believed it was part of their role to 'parent the parents' so that children could be rehabilitated wherever possible. They did not regard their foster children as 'their own' children, and welcomed social workers as colleagues. It is not surprising, therefore, that all five foster mothers were rated as being 'excellent' substitute parents.

The 7% of respondents who said that they found fostering extremely stressful remarked that strains had been added to their marital relationship; and that they had regretted their decision to foster. In all these cases, the foster mothers were having difficulties with the children placed, but there were two further factors associated with this group: firstly, they were fostering at least one teenager; and secondly, they had been fostering for two years or less.

We did not, however, find a strong association with a particular rating since all three rating categories were represented in this group of six foster mothers. This finding indicated that being rated 'good' or 'excellent' was not the same as current satisfaction with a foster child.

DISCUSSION

The main finding of our study lent some support to the views of Kay and Josselyn that a high standard of fostering is associated with motivations which are based on or derive from strong personal needs. Amongst those foster parents who had successfully fostered for a year, there were two subgroups: (1) those foster couples who were childless; (2) those foster mothers who identified with deprived/damaged children due to past personal experience.

Both these groups were highly rated by the fostering officers.

We are not, of course, arguing that either childlessness or a deprived background are, by themselves, sufficient motivation for fostering, nor that a proper evaluation of motivation is all that is requisite by way of an assessment of foster parent applicants. Nor would we wish to argue that
these motivations are necessary for good fostering. Where they exist they need to be combined with other important personal and family characteristics—quite apart from considerations of matching parent and child. However, strong motivation of the right kind does seem very important; and that which derives from the two personal needs we have referred to does seem to be a very considerable asset—provided that foster parents have, to some extent, come to terms with their handicaps and pain, and are able to use their experience creatively.

Surprisingly, a further subgroup of foster mothers (who expressed an altruistic/social conscience motive) also seemed to do well. Mothers who said their chief motive was 'liking children' were not highly rated.

HOW GENERALIZABLE ARE OUR FINDINGS?

Although our foster parents were not confined to living in inner city areas, most of the children they fostered came from such socially deprived localities. It is possible that children admitted from areas of greater material advantage might contain a slightly higher proportion of children with personal handicaps or problems, or who experienced severe emotional rejection, and that some otherwise excellent foster parents might find such children particularly difficult to understand; but this is very speculative. It is difficult to gauge how typical our sample is when compared with other foster parent samples. However, we felt strongly that our foster parents conformed to the 'traditional' picture of foster parents, as described, for example, by Shaw and Hipgrave (1983) and Rowe et al. (1984).

We were, of course, studying only relatively successful foster parents, i.e. those who had been fostering for at least one year. We did not compare these relatively successful foster parents with prospective foster parents. Equally, we did not address ourselves to the processes by which some foster parent applicants are not approved, or to those which lead foster parents who have been approved to drop out within a year. Perhaps the next stage for research is to look at prospective foster parents to see if a high proportion of childless applicants and those who identify with deprived children are rejected. If they are rejected, why is this so? Such considerations do not invalidate our findings. They are hopefully a step on the road to better selection. 'Survival of the fittest' should never be by itself the preferred policy in relation to the selection of foster parents. Unplanned disruptions and breakdowns of placements can be very painful and destructive to the children and the foster parents involved.

As far as the ratings of the foster parents are concerned, we are still uneasy about the figure 10% being in the lowest 'barely adequate' category. Although it was somewhat reassuring that Rowe et al. (1984) had very similar findings to our own, there remains a suspicion that social workers
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are a little over idealistic in their assessment of some foster parents—even when full allowance is made for the fact that they are undertaking an immensely difficult task. However, the foster parents studied by Rowe et al. (op. cit.), like those we have studied, may have been particularly good foster parents, since they have already withstood many of the stresses of fostering, and survived. On the other hand, it would be an unwarrantable assumption that the foster parents she and her colleagues studied, or those described by us, would continue to care for their foster children as long as the children needed them, or even continue to act as foster parents for as long as Social Services required their help. Long term follow-up studies of children in foster care show that some placements, even of several years standing, continue to break down (Parker, 1966; Minty and Ashcroft, 1987).

Our findings about the great strengths of at least some mothers with very poor childhood experiences have a wider importance, and lead to the question why they were able to use adversity, and grow as a result, instead of being damaged and stunted by their experiences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks are due to the Social Services Department of North Town, and especially to the Fostering and Adoption section for encouragement and permission to undertake the study and for their very full help to us as we did it.

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