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Foster parent disciplinary strategies and child behaviors

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Abstract

Foster parents are tasked with creating a safe and stable environment for the youth while also trying to parent and address challenging behaviors (Elgar, Mills, McGrath, Waschbusch, & Brownridge, 2007). Although these behaviors can also be found in youth in the general population, they are more common among foster youth (Van Holen & Vanschoonlandt, 2017). This mixed-methods study involved using an Internet questionnaire to measure influential factors of parenting (i.e. stress, satisfaction, involvement) and the qualitative questions explored foster parents' experiences with behaviors and which parenting strategies have been helpful and non-helpful. The quantitative results of this study concluded that involvement, use of positive parenting, and consistent use of monitoring strategies were all associated with lower levels of stress. Additionally, stress was negatively associated with foster parents' intent to continue fostering. Results of this study indicated that aggression, tantrums, violence, self-harm, and defiance were the most commonly reported challenging behaviors. Helpful discipline strategies included time-in, earning or removing privileges, and implementing clear communication; and non-helpful discipline included corporal punishment, time-out, and yelling. While the findings were expected, the recommended improvements for foster care to compensate for these challenges include adequate training, more agency support, and group/familial/individual therapy.

Keywords: *foster parent; foster youth behavior; stress; intent to continue*

Foster Parent Disciplinary Strategies and Child Behaviors

Historical Context and Introduction

The foster system is a complex system that can present multiple challenges for stakeholders at all levels (e.g., children, biological parents, foster parents, child welfare caseworkers, and administrators). The National Adoption Center (n.d.) defines foster care as an arrangement in which adults temporarily care for a child or children whose primary caregiver has been unable to provide an appropriate living environment for the youth. The concept of fostering youth has been present for generations. In the Old Testament of the Bible, there is documentation of children being taken care of by widows in the church while the widows were being supported with resources by the church (James 1:27, King James Version). An official system or movement was not developed until centuries later. The more formalized system of foster care originated around the mid-1800s (National Foster Parent Association [NFPA], 2016). Moving forward to the modern form of foster care, Charles Loring Brace had a passion for social services for troubled youth and realized that there were many poor, homeless, and immigrant children who were at risk (Children's Aid Society [CAS], n.d.). Brace began to reach out to local families who could offer the children free housing and support (NFPA, n.d.). The movement, also known as The Orphan Train Movement, found housing for over 150,000 neglected and abandoned children across the country by train and became the staple for foster care today (CAS, n.d.).

By the end of 2016, there were close to 430,000 children in foster care with around 270,000 entering that year (AFCARS, 2016). Of that population, 49% of fostered youth were placed in a non-relative foster home and 30% of youth were in kinship foster homes (AFCARS, 2016). Foster parents are tasked with creating a safe and stable environment for the youth while also trying to parent and address challenging behaviors (Elgar, Mills, McGrath, Waschbusch, &

Brownridge, 2007). This context can create a complex relationship between foster youth and foster parents. This paper will explore perceptions and parenting behaviors of foster parents as they work with challenging behavioral problems of children and youth in their care.

Foster Youth and Behavior

Foster youth often present with behavioral concerns due to their experiences of abuse and neglect (Maaskant, Rooij, Overbeek, Oort, & Hermanns, 2016). One study found that 12-15% of youth experienced physical abuse, 50-75% of youth experience neglect, 2-9% of youth experience sexual abuse, 9-35% of youth experience abandonment, and 15-30% of youth had parents who were incarcerated or unable to provide care (Gramkowski, Kools, Paul, Boyer, Monasterio, & Robins, 2009). Youth's behaviors can range from internalizing problems, such as depressive symptoms or emotional disturbances, to externalizing problems, such as disruption, aggression, or destruction (Elgar et al., 2007). Some of the most common behaviors can include but are not limited to disconnect, aggression, sexually acting out, self-harm, and many other behaviors (Gramkowski et al., 2009). Although these behaviors can also be found in youth in the general population, they are more common among foster youth (Van Holen & Vanschoonlandt, 2017).

Due to being displaced from their homes, foster youth often experience trauma from their environment changing and shifting. This can lead to a sense of helplessness and lack of control (Reibschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2014). These traumas can trigger instinctive maladaptive coping responses such as repression, isolation, running away, substance abuse, self-harm, and lashing out (Reibschleger et al., 2015). Kang-Yi and Adams (2015) explain that traumatic experiences impact more than 80% of children in foster care who are at risk of developing behavioral and emotional health problems. Though efforts are being made to ensure more

trauma-informed care is available, current service providers are still lacking adequate knowledge to help youth cope with the effects of the disruption (Reibschleger et al., 2015). Not only do the changes in foster youths' circumstances cause them to be in a frequent state of adjustment, this recurring state of adapting can also impair their development (Brown, 2008). To put this into perspective, every time a child is uprooted and moves to a new foster home, their development can regress six months (Kang-Yi & Adams, 2015). Compared to peers, foster youth must face adulthood with different and more difficult challenges because they often do not have the same level of support from family or significant others (Dworsky, Dillman, Dion, Coffee-Borden, Rosenau, 2012).

Foster youth and trauma. Many foster youth have experienced some variation of trauma (e.g., maltreatment) and according to findings, similar traumatic experiences among youth are associated with higher rates of mental health problems and engaging in risky behaviors (e.g., substance abuse; Reibschleger et al., 2015). It has been found that post-traumatic stress disorder diagnoses in foster youth were nearly twice as high as United States war veterans (Gomez, Ryan, & Norton, 2015). Under-recognized risk factors (i.e., substance abuse, closeness to current caregiver, current in-school status) can be massive contributors to how the youth will behave and cope as adults—when there are fewer accessible resources (McMahon & Fields, 2015). Though many foster youth participate in programs like independent living services that are intended to prepare them for adulthood, a large number still feel ill prepared and report that services were unsatisfactory (Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galan-Cisneros, 2015).

Because of multiple disruptions in their life, foster youth can face deeper identity crises than experienced by their peers. Kools (1997) investigated the impacts of long term foster care based on the perception of foster youth. Foster youth are in a constant state of adapting;

therefore, they may struggle with developing beliefs, values, and identity (Kools, 1997). In contrast, most young adults have parental and family supports to instill moral behavior and the freedom of self-autonomy (Kools, 1997). Kools (1997) writes that in order to achieve identity-status, youth need to be able to experiment and explore without any internal or external consequences; however, stigmatization makes this difficult. As media often associates foster youth with dysfunction, foster youth can view themselves as failures according to societal definitions of themselves, and in turn, self-fulfill that prophecy (Kools, 1997).

Foster Parenting

Satisfaction in doing something is a strong contributor to desiring to continue doing it, and foster parenting is no different (Marcenko, Brennan, & Lyons, 2009). Having satisfaction in completing or performing a task is related to the quality of effort and service provided. This study in 2009 related the satisfaction of fostering to the intent to continue and then explained that having a desire to continue fostering is vital in offering quality parenting and maintaining stability for the youth being cared for (Marcenko et al., 2009). Managing the behaviors of youth can be challenging for foster parents (Cooley, 2014; Greeno, Lee, Uretsky, Moore, Barth, & Shaw, 2016). Previous research has indicated that foster parents can be hesitant to correct challenging behavior because they are often unsure of how to do so (Zuniga, 2012). Because foster parents are the front line of care for the youth, they need to be trained intensively. There are strict limitations for disciplining foster youth (Dorsey, Farmer, Barth, Green, Reid, & Landsverk, 2008). Disciplinary actions that come from an attitude of intimidation are inappropriate and harsh discipline is prohibited when working with foster youth (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). For example, any form of punishment that belittles or shames the youth is unacceptable, such as, physical touch, verbal aggression, physical restraint or blocking,

or neglect (i.e., denying basic necessities; Spielfogel et al., 2011). Having these limitations and these behavioral issues can often lead to higher levels of stress (Maskaant, Rooij, Overbeek, Oort,& Hermans, 2016). Previous research indicates that parental stress can be associated with child development and child behaviors (Goemans, Geel, & Vedder, 2017) and as discussed in the previous paragraph, can lead to a decreased likelihood to continue fostering.

Evidence-Informed Parenting Strategies

For foster parents, it is imperative that they are trained to be role models for the youth so that they can develop at the appropriate level, despite the circumstance of being in foster care. There are multiple parent trainings that began to form in the late 1960s with evidence-based interventions, popular programs being The Incredible Years, Parent Management Training, Parent-Child Interaction Therapy, Triple P Positive Parenting, Parent Management Training-Oregon Model (PMTO), and Treatment Foster Care-Oregon Model (Akins, Yan, McDonald, & Moon, 2017). An investigation in 2016 studied the most commonly used curricula for foster parent trainings and interventions to reduce problematic behaviors. Findings concluded that skills-based techniques have little impact on parenting styles and youth behaviors because they are intensive and too short (Maaskant et al., 2016). The best results come from behavioral parenting and attachment based programs, as well as spending more time on utilizing foster parent skills in scenario trainings and getting optimal feedback for improvement (Maskaant et al., 2016). However, there is an apparent need for more research in this area.

The Parent Management Training – Oregon model is a popular parenting training intervention program used commonly in foster care training. The primary theory of this model, as well as other parenting trainings such as The Incredible Year, is SIL and the use of positive parenting to combat defiant behaviors (Kjobli, Hukkelberg, & Ogden, 2013). This study

conducted in 2013 emphasizes successful outcomes of parent training as well as the role of environment outside of the home plays in behaviors in youth (Kjobli et al., 2013). Another aspect of this study is the significance in of the relationship between negative parenting practices a predictor for child conduct problems. Patterson (1982) is sited in this source explaining that negative social interactions in the home can be amplified and lead to more severe antisocial and defiant behaviors.

Separate from formal training, there are parenting strategies that may be helpful. Common principles in effective discipline include: different options that give the child a choice regarding the consequences, confirming the child understands why they are being punished, taking into consideration the child's past experiences, maintaining clear and consistent rules, ensuring that the consequence is relevant to the current situation, using positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior, and sustaining open communication with the youth's case worker (Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, 2004). Foster youth struggle with behavioral problems, and if foster parents are in discussing and teaching them about how their decisions have consequences, control and accountability can be developed (A Series on Adoption and Foster Care Issues, n.d.). Carlo and colleagues (2015) analyzed parenting styles to see what was associated with prosocial and acceptable behaviors in youth. Variables such as communication, sympathy, rewarding, and compliance were identified. The results of the study concluded that, though there are two dimensions of parenting (responsiveness and control), the main contributor to healthy parenting is communication and sympathy. For foster parents to incorporate these features into their parenting practices, it can show the desire of a healthy and positive relationship with the youth and could result in healthier attachments and fewer disruptions (Price, Chamberlain, Landsverk, Leve, & Laurent, 2008).

In current psychology, four major themes in parental strategies are present: authoritative, which involves high expectations and high structure; neglectful, which involves little structure or involvement; permissive, which involves high involvement but low structure; and authoritarian, which involves high structure and demands but little involvement or responsiveness (Mgbemere & Telles, 2013). Of these parenting styles, authoritative is most beneficial while neglectful is most harmful. Since many foster youth come from neglectful homes, it is important for foster parents to exhibit an authoritative parent style to result in a healthier environment and a productive parent-child relationship. Authoritative parenting is driven by responsiveness, involvement, structure, and warmth which are also factors in positive parenting (Piko & Balazs, 2012), which is a common theme in current foster parent trainings.

Parental monitoring is understood to be the parental awareness of their youth's interests, whereabouts, and relationships (Dishion & McMahon, 1988). High parental monitoring has been found to protect against problems concerning externalizing behaviors (Barnes, Hoffman, Welte, Farrell, & Dintchef, 2006). While monitoring is having the knowledge of the youth's participations, involvement is a positive-interaction between the parent and child. When studying internalizing and externalizing behaviors and their association with cognitive development and academic achievement, Yingling and Bell (2016) found that higher levels of involvement were related to decreased problematic behaviors. Luenga, Honorado, and Rush (2007) found that of their tested risk factors associated with cognitive, social, and behavioral problems in youth, inconsistent discipline is directly related to higher levels of problems in the tested areas. They also found that harsh discipline is an associated risk factor. When thinking of harsh discipline, corporal punishment can come to mind. Corporal punishment involves physical punishment against a child as a reaction to misconduct (Zolotor, 2014). While corporal punishment can be

effective to achieve an immediate change in behavior, it has also been associated with long-term consequences such as aggression, antisocial behavior, and mental health because of the fine line between corporal punishment and physical abuse (Zolotor, 2014).

Theoretical Perspective

Attachment Theory. Colmer, Rutherford, and Murphy (2011) describe attachment theory as a way of conceptualizing the bonding relationship between mother and infant. This theory offers a perspective that helps social workers and other counseling personnel determine the effects of attachment in early development (Colmer et al., 2011). Bennett and Saks (2006) claim that the relational experiences within the first year of infancy are the most important in relation to this theory. A child's internal working model of attachment is their understanding of self and others, and this model includes secure, anxious-resistant, or avoidant attachment styles. These styles of attachment will affect how individuals will connect and interact with others and even predict future patterns of relationships and interactions (Bennett & Saks, 2006).

This theory assumes that the role of the parent during the early life of the child affects how the child will interact with others later in life. Fraley (2010) defines infant security as having a parent who comforts them when anxious. It is argued that children with this security establish better relationships later in life due to their ability to find comfort in the presence of their friends and family (Fraley, 2010). The emotional connections and interactions that develop during infancy and childhood can impact an individual's tendency to obtain certain anxiety disorders (Fraley, 2010). Overall, attachment theory can provide valuable insight into how an individual may interact with relationships around him or her.

In regard to foster care, foster youth often struggle to form secure attachments that carry into adulthood (Gomez et al., 2015). As stated above, the disruption to their home life is

correlated with a plethora of behavioral challenges. A study analyzing the effects of broken attachments and the impact on youth outcomes showed that youths' physical needs, such as food intake and emotional attunement, can be impacted when separated from parents (Scheungel, Oosterman, & Sterkenburg, 2009). Regarding foster parents, children tend to misbehave and disengage when they are taken away from their family, regardless if the new environment is more stable (Scheungel et al., 2009). Youth are in a constant state of adapting and they may struggle with learning what they believe in as well as who they want to be. Youth may be particularly challenged with understanding themselves without the stability and encouragement of exploration and safety from their caregivers (Cooper, Hoffman, & Powell, 2000). Foster youth can face more intense identity crises than youth who do not grow up in foster care because of their habitually challenging attachments (Dozier, Lindhiem, Lewis, Bick, Bernard, & Peloso, 2009). These crises may carry on into adulthood due to attempts to be secure in their identities as well as their relationships. Considering early childhood relationships can impact future interactions and that foster youth may suffer developmentally from their experience of being moved from their biological parent or being in multiple foster homes, building healthy foster parent-child relationships is imperative (Bennett & Saks, 2006; Kang-Yi & Adams, 2015).

A study in 2016 (Bovenschen et al., 2016) found that foster youth tend to secure their attachments based on their relationship with their biological parents and may result insecure (or disordered) attachments, regardless of the secure placement. This study also found that insecure or disordered attachments are associated with elevated internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Bovenschen et al., 2016). This means that the associated challenging behaviors with foster youth may be associated with insecure or disordered attachments from their biological family.

Social Interaction Learning Theory. Social interaction learning (SIL) theory emerged more than four decades ago and is the underlying theory behind parental training (Akins, Yan, McDonald, & Moon, 2017). Lev Vygotsky, who is the creator of this theory, identified that social learning is precedent to development because it impacts development. This theory combines social interaction, social learning, and behavioral perspectives in a way that claims behaviors are established from observing the behaviors of the people in their social environment (McLeod, 2014). Foster youth experience disruption in their social interactions because of their displacement into a foster home, often multiple homes. Their social interactions change when their environments change and they may not accustomed to healthy interactions in their previous living situation. Therefore, it is important that foster parents are trained to combat this by providing healthy social interactions, as negative parenting practices are correlated with problematic behaviors in youth (Forgatch & Kjobli, 2016). Whereas, positive parenting practices encourage prosocial behaviors in youth (Forgatch & Kjobli, 2016).

Parents and parental figures are needed to encourage exploration but also be attentive and present when comforting is needed (Cooper, Hoffman, & Powell, 2000). This means that when youth feel like their exploration, curiosity, and processing is being nurtured, they will continue to learn and venture out appropriately. Additionally, when they feel anxious, insecure, and it has been displayed to them that the parent is a safe place for them, they proceed to learn. Foster parents need to exhibit prosocial behavior and positive coping strategies and docile discipline techniques (Carlo, McGinley, Hayes, Batenhorst, & Wilkinson, 2010). In a recent study, parenting styles were not as significantly related to prosocial behaviors as anticipated but rather parenting practices that involve sympathy and communication were the most significant

contributors to prosocial youth (Carlo et al., 2010). From these results, it can be anticipated that positive parenting through adolescence can be a beneficial role for foster parents to take.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to explore behaviors that foster parents find challenging and which strategies are helpful or unhelpful. This proposed project intended to fill gaps in the literature regarding: (a) foster youth behaviors (b) foster parenting strategies and (c) foster care improvement. There are few studies that examine and discuss which disciplinary strategies work best with problematic behaviors of foster youth, specifically from the lens of the foster caregiver. To determine the answers to the questions, foster parents completed a mixed-methods survey and the results were analyzed to answer the following questions:

(1) Is there a relationship between foster parent parenting behaviors (i.e., positive involvement, supervision and monitoring, use of positive parenting, consistency of discipline, and corporal punishment) and parent stress?;

(2) Is there a relationship between foster parent stress and their perception of their satisfaction, challenges related to fostering, and intent to continue fostering?;

(3) What experiences do foster parents have in using disciplinary strategies and working with the behavioral problems of their foster youth?

Methods

Sample and Recruitment

This was a cross-sectional, mixed-methods study that focused on effective disciplinary strategies among foster parents who have experienced troubled behavior in their foster youth. The sample included a purposive, convenience sample of foster parents. All foster parents were above the age of 18 and were licensed, which could have excluded some kin foster parents because a license is not often required for family members. Participants were recruited via a convenience sample of online Facebook foster parent groups and word of mouth.

[Insert Table 1 here.]

Data Collection

All data were collected through an online survey. The author used Qualtrics to collect all data from participants. Data were collected over approximately two months.

Measures

Parenting behaviors. Foster parenting behaviors were measured using the 42-item Alabama Parenting Questionnaire (APQ), which specifically examined: (1) positive involvement with children, (2) supervision and monitoring, (3) use of positive discipline techniques, (4) consistency in the use of discipline, and (5) use of corporal punishment (Frick, 1991). This scale has demonstrated appropriate levels of internal consistency (Frick, 1991).

Foster Parent Satisfaction and Stress. Foster parent satisfaction and stress was measured with the and confidence and satisfaction (4 items) and challenging aspects of fostering (12 items) subscales of the abbreviated Foster Parent Satisfaction Survey (FPSS; Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999; Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006). The confidence and

satisfaction subscale utilizes a seven-point Likert scale and the challenging aspects of fostering subscale utilized a four-point Likert scale. The scales have demonstrated appropriate reliability.

Child problem behaviors. Problematic child behaviors were assessed using the 25-item Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), which specifically examined: (1) emotional symptoms of children/youth, (2) conduct problems, (3) hyperactivity/inattention, (4) peer relationship problems, and (5) prosocial behavior (Goodman, 1997). This measure has demonstrated appropriate reliability (Goodman, 1997).

Demographic characteristics. These variables included age, sex, partner sex, race/ethnicity, state of residence, relationship status, income, educational attainment, employment status, partner employment status, length of time as a foster parent, receipt of foster care stipend, receipt of government aid, type of foster care currently providing, times the participant has taken a break from foster parent, participation in a foster parent support group, number of foster children cared for, number of children removed from home, and information about the children currently in the household.

The qualitative measures included the following questions:

(1) What have your experiences with foster children been like, specifically dealing with problematic behaviors?

(2) What types of behaviors are the most problematic for you?

(3) How do/have you addressed or coped with problematic behaviors from your foster youth?

(4)What types of discipline strategies have you found to be most effective or helpful?

(5) What types of discipline strategies have been less effective or helpful for you?

(6) What do you need to be more effective in disciplining your foster youth?

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were run to describe the variables of interest. Please see Table 2. Then, a correlation was run to determine whether significant relationships existed between each of the parenting behaviors and parent stress before addressing the research questions guiding this study. Please see Table 3. Lastly a simple linear regression was run for each significant parenting behavior on parent stress.

[Insert Table 2 here.]

[Insert Table 3 here.]

In order to analyze the open-ended questions, both descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies) and qualitative coding was used to identify emerging themes. A grounded theory procedure was used to analyze the qualitative data. Grounded theory incorporates three coding stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Open coding allowed for the information given by participants to be rephrased ensuring that the participant's intent is captured and understood in a way that can be compared to other answers. Axial coding allowed the breaking down of information into slightly broader themes that recognize the relationships and connections between the open codes. Selective coding involved collecting the axial themes and identifying the primary patterns among and within the data (Ke & Wenglensky, 2010). A content analysis procedure was used to categorize foster youth behaviors and foster parenting techniques in a way that frequencies could be reported, identifying major trends among the participants responses.

Results

Parental Stress and Involvement

A significant regression equation was found ($F(1, 54) = 12.293$; $p < .05$), with an R^2 of .185. For each unit increase in involvement score (constant of 76.132), the foster parent stress score decreased by 1.116. Participants who reported higher levels of involvement with their foster child reported lower levels of stress. Please see Table 3.

[Insert Table 4 here.]

Parental Stress and Monitoring

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict the foster parent participants' stress levels based on their reported levels of monitoring their foster child. The regression equation was not significant ($F(1, 55) = .050$; $p > .05$), with an R^2 of .001. Lower levels of parental monitoring were not significantly related to foster parent stress levels. Please see Table 4.

[Insert Table 5 here.]

Parental Stress and Positive Parenting

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict the foster parent participants' stress levels based on positive parenting. A significant regression equation was found ($F(1, 56) = 4.494$; $p < .05$), with an R^2 of .074. For each unit increase in positive parenting score (constant of 61.910), the foster parent stress score decreased by 1.058. Participants who reported higher usage of positive parenting with their foster child reported lower levels of stress. Please see Table 5.

[Insert Table 6 here.]

Parental Stress and Consistency in Discipline

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict the foster parent participants' stress levels based on inconsistent disciplining. A significant regression equation was found ($F(1, 54) =$

14.048; $p < .05$), with an R^2 of .206. For each unit increase in inconsistent discipline score (constant of 31.345), the foster parent stress score increased by 1.681. Participants who reported higher instances of inconsistence in discipline with their foster child reported higher levels of stress. Please see Table 6.

[Insert Table 7 here.]

Parental Stress and Corporal Punishment

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict the foster parent participants' stress levels based on use of corporal punishment. A significant regression equation was found ($F(1, 55) = 18.498$; $p < .05$), with an R^2 of .252. For each unit increase in corporal punishment score (constant of 36.064), the foster parent stress score increased by 5.175. Participants who reported more corporal punishment with their foster child reported higher levels of stress. Please see Table 7.

[Insert Table 8 here.]

Satisfaction, Challenges with Fostering, Intent to Continue to Fostering, and Parent Stress

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict the foster parent intent to continue fostering based on reported levels of satisfaction. The regression equation was not significant ($F(1, 57) = 3.055$; $p > .05$), with an R^2 of 0.051. Lower levels of parental satisfaction were not significantly related to foster parent intent to continue fostering. Please see Table 8.

[Insert Table 9 here.]

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict the foster parent intent to continue fostering based on reported challenges related to foster parenting. The regression equation was not significant ($F(1, 53) = 0.511$; $p > .05$), with an R^2 of 0.010. Higher reporting of challenges

related to foster parenting was not significantly related to foster parent intent to continue fostering. Please see Table 9.

[Insert Table 10 here.]

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict the foster parent intent to continue foster parenting based on reported levels of stress. A significant regression equation was found ($F(1, 56) = 15.995$; $p < .05$), with an R^2 of .222. For each unit increase in parental stress score (constant of 8.027), the foster parent stress score decreased by -0.077. Participants who reported higher levels of stress reported less likelihood to continue foster parenting. Please see Table 10.

[Insert Table 11 here.]

Youth Behaviors

Frequencies were calculated to determine which behaviors were most commonly reported as most problematic for the foster parents participating in the survey. There were six behaviors that were most reported: aggression, tantrums, violence, self-harm, lying, and defiance. The behavior that was reported most problematic by 15 (24.59%) of the participants was aggression. Tantrums and physical violence were equally reported problematic for eight (13.11%) of the participants. The last three behaviors—self-harm, lying, and defiance—were all reported problematic by six (9.83%) of the participants. Aggression was separated from violence because some foster parents reported behaviors that were either verbally or nonverbally aggressive but not to the severity of physical violence. Other behaviors that were reported included sexual behaviors, attention seeking, destruction of property, and mental health issues such as ADHD.

Effective and Ineffective Disciplinary Strategies

Participating foster parents were asked to identify disciplinary strategies that have been most effective in their experiences. The data (i.e., helpful techniques and strategies for managing

child behavior) were coded by theme the most commonly reported practices were (a) allowing youth to earn or lose privileges, using time-in/out, and communicating clear expectations and consequences. The highest reported technique was placing the child in a time-in or time-out after challenging behaviors so that they can reflect on their reactions. This method was reported effective by 26 (40.98%) of the participants. Earning or removing privileges, such as electronics or recreation time, was the second most effective strategy reported by 20 (42.78%) of the participants. Lastly, communication was the third most reported effective method by 13 (21.31%) of the participants. Other parenting approaches included redirection, consistency, self-control, and being adaptable in practices.

The foster parents were then asked to identify which strategies have not been effective in combatting challenging behaviors in their foster youth. The technique reported least effective was corporal punishment by 21 (34.42%) of the participants. Surprisingly, the second least-effective strategy reported was also the top result for effective methods, time-in/out for the youth after demonstrating challenging behaviors, which was reported by 17 (27.86%) of participants. The third commonly reported practice was verbal outbursts or yelling at the youth, which was reported by 14 (22.95%) of the participants. This approach was reported less effective because yelling will often lead to escalating the situation or could even result in establishing fear or intimidation over the child. Other strategies reported ineffective included negative attitude/shaming, removing privileges, and adding extra chores or write-offs. Please see Table 12.

[Insert Table 12 here.]

Improvements for Future Foster Parenting Practice

The participating foster parents were asked to identify ways that current foster care systems could improve their services for both the youth and the parents. Many foster parents reported feeling unprepared with their fostering experiences. Interestingly, the most commonly reported request for improvement was to better equip parents with adequate training, which was reported by 28 (45.9%) of the participants. One foster parent explicitly asked for more exact and realistic case scenarios to practice critical thinking for working with youth who have experienced trauma. The second most commonly reported request was for more support from the agency, caseworker, and opportunities to connect with other foster parents. This was requested by 19 (31.14%) of the participants. The third most commonly reported improvement was therapy, which was reported by seven (11.7%) of the participants. Other improvements included having better resources and practicing self-care.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to obtain a better understanding of foster parents' experiences with challenging behavior as well as conceptualizing what factors influence parent stress and likelihood to continue fostering. The study aimed to answer three core research questions. Results indicated that parenting behaviors (involvement, monitoring, positive parenting, consistency, and corporal punishment) are all related to parent stress. However, supervision and monitoring was not significantly associated with parent stress. In addition, foster parent satisfaction and challenges related to fostering were not associated with parent stress; however, foster parents with higher stress were less likely to continue fostering. The open-ended questions revealed that externalizing behavior problems appear to be the most challenging for foster parents. Lastly, the most effective strategies for combatting behaviors included using time-in/out as a time of reflection, earning/removing privileges, and communication. On the other hand, corporal punishment, time-in/out, and verbal outbursts were reported least effective.

Parenting Behaviors and Foster Parent Stress

More involvement with their foster youth was associated with lower levels of foster parent stress. Although there is little research on foster parent behaviors, the finding that the increased levels of parental involvement are associated with lower levels of stress are congruent with previous research with biological families. In a recent study on the impact of stress on family involvement, participants were asked to report their stress levels and discuss contributors to their stress in relation to parental motivation and beliefs (Semke, Garbacz, Kwon, Sheridan, & Woods, 2010). Semke and colleagues (2010) found that parents' stress levels were significantly related to their perceptions of their role in their child's life and their child's learning outcomes; higher levels of stress were associated with more negative perceptions of their parenting.

Another study found that lower levels of temporal involvement, or length of time spent with children, were associated with lower quality of relationships between parent and child (Roeters, Van Der Lippe, & Kluwer, 2010). Comparing the current study, it could be assumed that parental stress can be influenced by the quality of the parents' involvement or perceived role in the parent-child relationship. It appears that parental stress can inhibit positive parent-child relationships. For example, Guajardo, Snyder, and Peterson (2008) found that high levels of parenting stress result in less responsive, unaffectionate behaviors among parents.

Interestingly, parental monitoring was not associated with parent stress at all. Although these variables have not been studied with foster parents, this is not consistent with previous research. Researchers have found higher use of parental monitoring is associated with more security among youth who have experienced emotional and sexual trauma (Oberlander, Wang, Thompson, Lewis, & Proctor, 2011). If youth report more security, they exhibit less behavioral problems, which decreases stress for foster parents. A study found that toxic stress, which is a result of instability at home, causes poor academic performance, lack of social competence, and an inability to regulate emotions (Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013).

Positive parenting was significantly associated with lower parent stress. Research has indicated that the more a child is acting out, the more parents' stress will increase (Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012). There is no previous research to compare this study to. However, this finding could be a result of positive parenting promoting healthy interactions and a better environment for the youth, which can lead to reduction in challenging behaviors (Morawska & Sanders, 2011). When parents practice positive parenting, they must express interest and sustain an ongoing, consistent relationship with the child for it to be effective (Seay, Freysteinson, & McFarlane, 2014).

The results of this study found that consistent use of discipline related to lower levels of parent stress. Lewallen and Neece (2015) found that increased consistency in discipline among biological parents resulted in higher levels of self-control among youth. This supports that youth may display more positive behaviors when parents are more consistent, which may explain why foster parent stress was associated with more consistent behaviors. A side benefit of consistency in discipline is that it can strengthen parent-child interactions (Lewallen & Neece, 2015). Another article confirmed that the best way to use discipline effectively and achieve a decrease in negative behaviors is to be firm and consistent with rules, consequences, and clearly communicate expectations (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2004). Using consistent responses to child behavior can result in fewer problematic behaviors and a lower level of stress for parents (Neece et al., 2012).

This study also found that corporal punishment was not associated with foster parent stress. Corporal punishment is a form of correction that results in the punished individual using some sort of physical reprimand (e.g., spanking). Perhaps the lack of association is because corporal punishment is prohibited in foster care in most states, and foster parents may not have felt comfortable talking about it in a study. However, it is hoped that the lack of association is because they do not use it. The reason for this strict policy is because youth in foster care have experienced trauma, and if a foster parent partakes in physical discipline, it can be difficult for the child to differentiate it from physical abuse (Alvarez, 2016).

Foster Parent Stress, Satisfaction, Challenges, and Intent to Continue Fostering

The only variable to be related to foster parent intent to continue fostering was foster parents' reported satisfaction. This result is confirmed in a study by Mihalo, Strickler, Triplett, & Trunzo (2015), where foster parents' satisfaction and its association with retention was analyzed.

Their results conclude that if agencies use measurements like the Treatment Foster Parent Satisfaction Scale, programs could be improved because agencies would be able to better understand their strengths and weaknesses in supporting their parents to limit turnover rates. The Mihalo et al. (2015) findings also reported that a major contributor to satisfaction is retention and agencies could benefit by focusing on interventions that increase foster parent efficacy. Perhaps satisfaction could be improved by better preparation and support from foster care agencies, which could result in foster parents having an increased intent to continue fostering.

Experience with Child Problem Behaviors and Discipline

The behaviors that were reported most challenging in this study were externalizing behaviors such as aggression and tantrums among foster youth. According to a study by Kiel and Price (2006), 42% of children in-care express externalizing behaviors that can lead to placement disruptions and future, more severe, problematic behaviors. These behaviors were also related to a child's history of displacements and abuse, which could be a factor for foster parents and agencies to take into consideration when making placements to minimize disruptions (Chueng, Goodman, Leckie, & Jenkins, 2011). Foster parents who reported these behaviors in the current study also reported the need for better intervention practices to best limit disruptions and displacements that could result in further complications for both parent and child.

As stated in the literature review, there is an abundance of emotional, mental, and behavioral risks associated with the traumas that are going unaddressed. There are no policies on the federal level that require behavioral health checks and care coordination for transitioning youth (Kang-Yi & Adams, 2015). When emotional and mental health is ignored and behavioral problems go untreated, it can lead to a life of continued delinquency (McMahon & Fields, 2015). McMahon and Fields (2015) claim that disregarding risk factors such as antisocial behavior,

lashing out, disconnectedness, inappropriate coping techniques, and not having proper training in the foster caregivers are variables that what lead to higher rates of criminal involvement in foster youth. Therefore, helping foster parents deal with externalizing behavior is critical to foster youth well-being.

Of the parenting techniques reported to combat these behaviors, positive parenting methods were concluded to be most effective, whereas, disengaging methods were considered least effective. The use of time-in/out was ranked among the most effective, as well as ineffective techniques. According to Morawska and Sanders (2011), for time-in/out to be effective as a discipline as well as a tool for developing positive behaviors, parents need to achieve multiple steps. The authors note that it is primarily important for the parents to create a nurturing and engaging environment, which will result in fewer behavioral issues. The second most important step, the authors note, is that a time-out should not be used to isolate the child but a time to use as a time of correction, reflection, and learning positive behaviors and coping skills (Morawska & Sanders, 2011).

Limitations

One of the most obvious limitations of this study is that the majority of the participants are Caucasian females who are in the middle class. The sample for this project was also only 62 parents of the thousands registered in the nation, which generalizability of the results. Although this population is similar the a majority of research on traditional foster parents, the lack of representations of more diverse foster parents can influence the results of the study. Sample bias was an element to be aware of when analyzing the qualitative data because the statistics represented in this study do not entirely represent the responses of the entire target population. Response bias was another influence to be cautious of because often, participants answer

questions in surveys by how they perceive themselves or how they want others to perceive. For example, when asking foster parents about their levels of involvement, they might not want to admit their true level because they do not want to be perceived as disengaged. Lastly, the lack of previous research on discipline among foster parents presented a challenge in interpreting the results of this study. More research is needed to best compare and contract the findings of this research.

Implications and Recommendations

Based upon the results of this study, future research should further explore what contributes to foster parent stress, perhaps by using biological parent research as way of identifying potential factors. Another area that would be beneficial to current practices could be what practices could lessen stress among foster parents, for example types of therapy, support groups, resources, or interventions. The last area of needed research would including a larger sample size that studies the effective parenting techniques, specific ways that children's behaviors are improved, and identifying what makes those methods efficient. Answering these questions could bring a greater understanding to foster parent experiences and agency efficacy.

These findings could enhance the way that social workers and clinicians work with foster parents. Foster parents are greatly challenged by youth behaviors and feel unprepared by their agencies. Foster parent training, therapy, and social support could all be effective strategies. Better trained foster parents result in parents that are self-aware of their limits and are more competent in their practices. Having better access to therapy and support groups can be associated with a better sense of support from the agency, as well as offer a form of self-care by having safe and healthy way to vocalize their frustrations. A possible solution to encouraging better parent-child relationships from the start could be pre-placement therapy and counseling

between the child and parent to establish trust and a relationship within a safe place. Based on the feedback from foster parents in this study, agencies could enhance their foster parent training to include more realistic case scenarios and discuss more severe behaviors. Foster parents should also have access to support groups and therapy at different levels (individual, familial, and group) to ensure they are not feeling overwhelmed or alone.

Future policies could be more supportive of foster parents by requiring more intensive interventions that focus on skills of the parents and realistic scenarios so that foster parents could be better prepared for their youth and even have a better understanding of their own limits. Another policy that could be implemented is encouraging agencies to take recurring evaluations of satisfaction and have access to support groups for added support from the agency which could result in decreased turnover rates, better quality agencies, and more competent parents. Overall, the biggest need for policies are parental resources and agency involvement.

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APPENDIX A

Table #1: Demographics Table

Demographic Characteristic	Frequency (%)	Mean (Range)
Age		37.56 (23-60)
18-35	31 (47.7)	
36-50	30 (46.2)	
51-65	4 (6.1)	
Years Fostered		3.63 (1-19)
1-3	41 (63)	
4-6	8 (12.3)	
7-9	3 (4.6)	
10+	7 (10.7)	
Missing	6 (9.2)	
Gender		
Male	0 (0)	
Female	59 (90.8)	
Missing	6 (9.2)	
Race/ethnicity		
White	53 (81.5)	
Black/African American	1 (1.5)	
Hispanic/Latino	1 (1.5)	
Asian or Pacific Islander	1 (1.5)	
Missing	7 (10.8)	
Relationship Status		
Married	41 (63.1)	
Partnered But Not Married	5 (7.7)	
Single	11 (16.9)	
Widowed	1 (1.5)	
Divorced	1 (1.5)	
Missing	6 (9.2)	
Income		
$10, 001-20,000	4 (6.2)	
$20,001-30,000	4 (6.2)	
$30,001-40,000	7 (10.8)	
$40,001-50,000	6 (9.2)	

Demographic Characteristic	Frequency (%)	Mean (Range)
$50,001-60,000	5 (7.7)	
$60,001-70,000	8 (12.3)	
$70,001+	25 (38.5)	
Missing	6 (9.2)	
Educational Attainment		
Some High School, No Diploma	1 (1.5)	
High School Graduate, Diploma or GED	6 (9.2)	
Some College Credit, No degree	11 (16.9)	
Trade/Tech./Vocational	5 (7.7)	
Associate Degree	4 (6.2)	
Bachelor's Degree	19 (29.2)	
Master's Degree	11 (16.9)	
Doctorate Degree	2 (3.1)	
Missing	6 (9.2)	
Primary Foster Care Provided		
Long-Term	16 (24.6)	
Kin Care	1 (1.15)	
Medical	2 (3.1)	
Respite	3 (4.6)	
Therapeutic/Treatment	10 (15.4)	
Traditional	21 (32.3)	
Foster-to-Adopt	21 (32.3)	
Other	2 (3.1)	
Missing	6 (9.2)	

Table #2: Descriptive Analysis

	Mean (SD)	Minimum	Maximum	Kurtosis		Skewness	
				Stat	SD	Stat	SD
Involvement	4.17	21	40	.93	.618	-.49	.314
Positive Parenting	2.68	12	24	-.03	.608	-.27	.309
Poor Monitoring	3.82	0	16	1.21	.613	1.28	.311
Inconsistency	2.86	1	13	-.41	.618	.29	.314
Corporal Punishment	1.20	0	6	3.92	.613	1.66	.311
Stress	10.57	18	65	-.20	.613	-.15	.311
Satisfaction	5.28	4	28	5.50	.613	-.28	.311
Challenges	6.00	0	25	.10	.634	.62	.322
Intent to Continue	1.69	0	6	2.26	.613	-1.75	.311

Table #3: Correlation of Parental Behaviors

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Involvement	____								
Positive Parenting	.519*	____							
Monitoring	-.081	-.188	____						
Consistency	-.367*	-.457*	.309*	____					
Corporal Punishment	-.200	-.323*	.214	.383*	____				
Parental Stress	-.431*	-.273	.030	.454*	.502*	____			
Satisfaction	-.152	-.073	.060	-.131	-.218	-.291*	____		
Reported Challenges	.111	.076	.242	.190	.139	.255	-.387*	____	
Intent to Continue	.031*	-.093	-.044*	-.217	-.269*	-.471*	-.228	-.098	____

(1 = involvement, 2 = positive involvement, 3 = monitoring, 4 = consistency, 5 = corporal punishment, 6 = parental stress, 7 = satisfaction , 8 = reported challenges, 9 = intent to continue)
**. Correlations significant at least at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table #4: Parental Stress and Involvement

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Parental Involvement	-1.116	0.318	-0.431
R^2		.185	
F for change in R^2		.170	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. (2-tailed)

Table #5: Parental Stress and Monitoring

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Parental Monitoring	.084	.373	.030
R^2		.001	
F for change in R^2		-0.017	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. (2-tailed)

Table #6: Parental Stress and Positive Parenting

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Positive Parenting	-1.058	0.499	-0.273
R^2		.074	
F for change in R^2		0.058	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. (2-tailed)

Table #7: Parental Stress and Disciplinary Consistency

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Discipline Consistency	1.681	0.448	0.454
R^2		0.206	
F for change in R^2		0.192	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. (2-tailed)

Table #8: Parental Stress and Corporal Punishment

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Corporal Punishment	5.175	1.203	0.502
R^2		0.252	
F for change in R^2		0.238	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. (2-tailed)

Table #9: Intent to Continue and Satisfaction

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Satisfaction	0.072	0.041	0.226
R^2		0.051	
F for change in R^2		0.034	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. (2-tailed)

Table #10: Intent to Continue and Challenges

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Reported Challenges	-0.028	0.040	-0.098
R^2		0.010	
F for change in R^2		-0.009	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. (2-tailed)

8, 38) = 4.05, with R^2= .487 and F change in R^2 = .379.

Table #11: Intent to Continue and Stress

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Parental Stress	-0.077	0.019	-0.471
R^2		0.222	
F for change in R^2		0.208	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. (2-tailed)

Table #12: Effective and Ineffective Strategies

Strategies	n(%)
Helpful	
Communication	13 (21.31%)
Write-Off's	2 (3.27%)
Earn/Remove Privileges	20 (32.78%)
Time-In/Out	26 (40.98%)
Ignore Neg. Behaviors	2 (3.27%)
Patience	1 (1.63%)
Calm	3 (4.91%)
Consistency	3 (4.91%)
Processing	2 (3.27%)
Redirecting	4 (6.55%)
Adapting bt. Child/Behavior	3 (4.91%)
Punishment	1 (1.63%)
Honesty	1 (1.63%)
Unhelpful	
Punishment	1 (1.63%)
Abuse	1 (1.63%)
Corporal Punishment	21 (34.42%)
Yelling	14 (22.95%)
Negativity/Shaming	8 (13.11%)
Removing Privileges	5 (8.19%)
Fear	1 (1.63%)
Time-In/Out	17 (27.86%)
Anger	1 (1.63)
Extra Chores	2 (3.27%)
Write-Off's	2 (3.27%)
Inconsistency	1 (1.63%)