

EXPLORING PARENTING STYLES AND BEHAVIORS AMONG FOSTER PARENTS

by

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This mixed methods study with a triangulation design aimed to review the impact of parenting styles and those that most make up parenting care among foster parents today. It hoped to assess how foster parents individually view their management of childcare, perceived levels of support, and education opportunities surrounding foster care parenting practices or level of received preparedness. Furthermore, this study offered insight into if parental styles change or alter with a parents perceived stress level or if parenting practices differ based on the length the child remains in the care of the foster child. Preexisting secondary data from the Fostering Healthy Relationships study was utilized (Mallette, 2019). This study contained national survey data and focus group transcriptions from licensed foster parents, which were collected during 2018-2019. The survey provided 457 foster parents responses were as 12 participants provided unique perspectives via the qualitative transcriptions. Overall, the results indicated most parents who responded to the survey revealed having participated in authoritative parenting practices, authoritative and authoritarian parenting practices had more stress, and authoritative more attachment.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the United States of America there are currently more than 400,000 children in foster care. Ranging from infants to twenty-one years old in some states, foster children enter the foster care system daily, though most who are older “age out” of the system upon finishing high school. The median age a child enters the system is roughly six years old and over half of those who enter are boys. The median amount of time spent in foster care is 15.5 months. Of those who enter the foster care system 44 percent are white non-Hispanic, 23 percent are Black or African American non-Hispanic, 21 percent are Hispanic of any race, 8 percent are multiracial, 2 percent are American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 1 percent are Asian (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). Many of the children who are placed in foster care whether in kin or non-kin family homes enter because of experiences with physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological abuse and/or neglect. Those in foster care have increased risk for several negative outcomes that encompass emotional, behavioral, neurobiological, and social domains. (Leve et al., 2012). Approximately one million cases of abuse and neglect are noted to occur in the United States yearly and approximately 50% of those identified as victims of abuse and neglect are referred to live in out-of-home or foster care (Leve et al., 2012).

In fact, most studies focus solely on the risks that foster children face indicating that children placed in foster care have an increased risk of developing several mental health, behavioral, and psychosocial concerns (Dalgaard et al., 2020, Fuentes et al., 2015; Gopalan, 2009). Compared to children not in the foster system, children in foster care have poorer mental and physical health. Those placed in foster care are twice as likely to have learning disabilities, developmental delays, and speech problems, three times as likely to have ADD/ADHD, five

times as likely to have anxiety, six times as likely to have behavioral problems, and seven times as likely to have depression (Dalgaard et al., 2020).

Understanding these potential hurdles foster children face emphasizes the need to recognize these risks early and help foster parents in their role of addressing and managing these preexisting developmental, mental, and behavioral discrepancies. Dalgaard et al. (2020) emphasizes that while some consider foster placement an intervention itself, unless those providing these children assistance understand the possible risks and how to assist via positive parenting skills, these children will continue to have decreased developmental delays. Many of these children, having experienced trauma and loss, rely on their new foster families--those who are of kin and those who are not--to help them cope.

Once more, these children, having experienced the realities of the real world and their child-like personas being stripped away from them, now require stability as they continue to learn and grow. For these reasons--though they are not the only reasons a child's foster placement is important--a foster parent aids in not only helping a child cope with loss and trauma but provides stability and gives love to their foster children, some of which have never experienced either. Providing stability is not easy, as these children often face insecurity and have mistrust, especially when building relationships with authority figures. Providing stability to foster children involves building rapport, forming positive attachments, and implementing positive parenting styles and practices as often these children do not have preexisting, positive parent-child relationships (Conn, 2011).

Foster children are frequently exposed to a variety of traumatic experiences and hold insecure and negative attachments to both parents and other adult figure heads as a result of negative, and at times neglectful, parenting practices. This, in turn, affects their social,

emotional, and physical wellbeing (Jago et al., 2012; Leve et al., 2012; Park & Watson-Moss, 2012). Those in foster care show risks for emotional and behavioral deficits, impaired neurological development, and problems in building social relationships or participating in social activities. These risks result most of the time because of prenatal exposure to substances, and or trauma or maltreatment--such as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse and neglect--increasing decreased support or attachment (Leve et al., 2012). These risks also increase mental and medical health issues. It is up to their foster parents to form positive parenting practices, implement working attachments and provide support, if even for a limited time, in order to help them cope with these possible risks and delays. It is crucial that children, especially those having been placed in such vulnerable situations, have positive parent-child relationships or positive adult figureheads in order to further appropriate and positive development (Park & Watson-Moss, 2012). While often foster placements rarely last past one-year, foster parents play a key role in establishing connections and making sure their foster children are successful in development (Karavasilis et al., 2003; Lang et al., 2016). In fact, some studies suggest that positive parenting and the effects of affective parent-child relationships not only associate with positive attachment building but that both significantly reduce associated risks for children without positive relationships present (Karavasilis et al., 2003). Fortunately, studies also indicate that children and their foster care families are capable of forming secure attachments within the first year of foster care with their foster families (Kungl et al., 2019).

Research today, though limited, further analyzes parenting styles and often their correlation to forming positive attachments in foster care and its impact on trauma related experiences. This study will further analyze the role of parenting style and or a parent's behavior or attitude in foster families. Specifically, we will question the impact of perceived parental

stress and perceived stress and closeness or attachment on a foster family's parental behavior and attempt to understand which parenting style foster families implement into practice. Thus, by reviewing the literature and examining the impact of parenting styles in foster families we hope to gain better insight into the practices of foster parents. The review may also offer insights into how developing positive parent-child relationships affect both foster parents and children as placements change. For the purpose of this study all literature will focus on parenting styles, though due to its combinability, attachment may also be reviewed. Due to the increasing number of those placed in foster care who have experienced abuse and neglect, it is pertinent that we continue to research this population as the information gained from new research is significant in aiding and providing beneficial information. This information may also help in providing resources to social workers, foster homes, medical practitioners, and current and future foster parents. Furthermore, this population needs established homes and interventions that foster parents can apply to better foster children who have experienced trauma and therefore are at risk for developmental delays. Providing interventions for foster parents is crucial, as those handling both grievances and the risks associated with wrongful parenting need a lot of support and guidance. It is crucial that we also recognize the overarching problem for this population in that it continues to grow, increasing the number of children without proper support and positive developmental upbringing in our society.

Summary

To clarify the purpose of this study was to examine parenting styles and interpret the impact of forming positive parent-child relationships within foster care and foster family forms in order to increase our understanding of how alternative family structures promote positive development. Examination of this topic can promote further understanding of the importance of

foster families and parenting behaviors among a variety of professionals such as social workers, medical practitioners, and other professionals, and current or existing foster families. By delving further into how parenting styles and additionally positive attachment impacts foster children this study aimed to encourage additional research by decreasing the preexisting gap in the literature.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

By way of reviewing the literature, this chapter analyzes parenting style's role in foster families by addressing and discussing common themes found within today's existing literature related to the topic. Common themes found within most of the literature include pondering the true impact of parenting styles; parenting styles association with secure attachments and forming attachments early; parental behaviors, underlining parental stress and its impact on parenting style; parenting styles impact on children's behavior; parenting style and foster care, and parenting style and foster care training.

Much of the literature today discusses foster family forms, reviews, and implements both Dianna Baumrind's and Eleanor Maccoby and John Martin's parenting styles. Another theory that commonly helps to expand our understanding of foster families and the impact of foster parenting is John Bowlby's and Mary D.S. Ainsworth's attachment theory. We reviewed both parenting styles and attachment theory and their relation to foster families in hopes of identifying how these theories not only expand our understanding of foster families but also how these theories reiterate why positive parenting and secure attachments are important for a child's development and overall well-being.

Overview of Parenting Styles

Today as researchers, psychologists, and human family professionals investigate family structures and children-parent interactions they often rely on developmental psychologist Dianna Baumrind's parenting styles theory. In the 1960's Baumrind developed this theory by observing preschoolers' behaviors and interviewing parents (Cherry, 2020; Li, 2021). Upon analyzing her results, she soon connected a child's behavior with parental interactions and how they choose to provide instruction and discipline. Baumrind insisted that there is a close relationship between

parenting style and children's behavior. (Cherry, 2020; Li, 2021; Muraco et al., 2020) Thus, different parenting styles result in different children's behaviors and ultimately impacts a child's development, interaction with others, and a child's overall outcome (Muraco et al., 2020).

Baumrind's groundbreaking work on parenting attempted to further differentiate between patterns of parenting behaviors and authorities where she identified three parenting styles: authoritative parenting, authoritarian parenting, and permissive parenting (Baumrind, 1971). Authoritative parenting is warm and responsive, with clear rules, high expectations, supportive, and a relationship that values and encourages independence (Cherry, 2020; Li, 2021; Muraco et al., 2020). Both authoritative parenting skills and responses are associated with higher academic performance, more self-esteem, better social skills, less mental illness, and lower risks for potential delinquency (Li, 2021). Most importantly, authoritative parents provide reasoning and explanation for actions. This is important as research indicates that explanations allow children to develop a sense of self-awareness and teaches children values, morals, and goals (Li, 2021). Parents who display a more authoritative approach also allow bidirectional communication which in turn develops not only better communication but a level of unspoken trust and respect between parent and child (Cherry, 2020; Li, 2021).

Authoritarianism is often referred to as disciplinary parenting within research (Cherry, 2020; Li, 2021; Muraco et al., 2020). Authoritarian parenting is indicated as parents display unresponsive interactions, implement strict rules, have high expectations, and expect blind obedience (Muraco et al., 2020). A common example of blind obedience is indicated in the age-old statement "Because I said so!" (Cherry, 2021). Baumrind, as well as current research, reiterate that this parenting style often is associated with lower academic performance, lower self-esteem in children, poorer social skills, and decreased ability to interact with others, as well

as risk for mental illness, drug, and alcohol abuse, delinquency, and other conduct behavior concerns (Li, 2021; Thompson et al., 2003). Unlike authoritative parenting, authoritarian parenting results in one way communication, as children’s missteps and attempts to communicate are seen as “backtalk” (Li, 2021). It is important to note that authoritarian parents are typically considered non-nurturing and usually they justify their actions as a means of discipline and order (Cherry, 2020; Li, 2021).

Finally, permissive parenting, though warm and responsive, have few rules or a total absence of rules, indicate indulgent behavior such as excessive gift giving, and ultimately result in extreme leniency (Li, 2021). Permissive may also be labeled indulgent or a “rigid ruler” (Cherry, 2020; Li, 2021; Muraco et al., 2020). Permissive parenting is associated with impulsive behavior, where children display egocentric behaviors, poorer social skills, and problematic relationships (Cherry, 2020; Li, 2021). Permissive parents often are identified as severely relaxed and children within permissive households frequently display an inability to follow instruction (Li, 2021; Muraco et al., 2020).

In the 1980’s Stanford researchers Eleanor Maccoby and John Martin expanded Baumrind’s theory establishing and incorporating a fourth parenting style called neglectful parenting (Li, 2021). Neglectful parenting is often referred to as uninvolved or indifferent within the literature (Muraco et al., 2021), and is indicated when parents are cold, unresponsive, have no rules, are uninvolved or indifferent (Cherry, 2020). Children’s behaviors as a result of neglectful parenting result in highly impulsive behavior, increased risk for delinquency, drug, and alcohol abuse, and some studies have indicated increased risks for acts of self-harm and suicide (Li, 2021). Parents that display a neglectful or uninvolved parenting style often indicate having high risks for mental issues such as depression, substance abuse, and past trauma, specifically

childhood trauma themselves (Li, 2021). By expanding Baumrind's theory, Maccoby and Martin allowed researchers to again consider the effects of what many would consider poor parenting and established consequences and further outcomes of neglect and abuse.

Parenting styles are thought to consist of two dimensions: demandingness and responsiveness. Demandingness includes parental control of child behavior and an insistence on maturity (Li, 2021), whereas responsiveness includes parental warmth, acceptance, and sensitivity, especially with child emotional and developmental needs (Li, 2021). Authoritative parenting displays areas of high demandingness and high responsiveness, as they show high expectations for achievement but also display a warm emotional response (Cherry, 2020). Authoritarian parents display high demandingness and low responsiveness as they are strict in rules but show limited empathy and remorse (Cherry, 2020). Oppositely, permissive parents indicate low demandingness but high responsiveness (Cherry, 2020; Li, 2021). Unlike authoritarian they do not set rules but like authoritative they show support and careful responsiveness. Finally, neglectful parents indicate both low demandingness and responsiveness as often these parents are completely detached (Cherry, 2020).

Some researchers believe that while it is true that parents can be more or less warm and more or less demanding, that if parents display both traits, they display the authoritative parenting style (Li, 2021). Regardless, several studies indicate that authoritative parenting results in the most and best positive outcomes for children and often it is considered the best parenting style by psychologists, psychiatrists, and researchers today though there continues to be much debate given differences in culture and understanding of what classifies as "good" parenting (Cherry, 2020; Li, 2021). For instance, while authoritative parenting appears to be superior in Western societies, and greatly supported in countries such as the Czech Republic, India, Israel,

and Palestine others argue that authoritarian parenting fares well in China as this style is often related to training and a offers the children a sense of responsibility (Muraco et al, 2020).

Baumrind, Maccoby and Martin's recognition of parenting styles and its effects have significantly contributed to how we view children's behaviors and interactions. This theory often establishes a base for further research in areas such as addiction within the home, mental health outcomes for children or children with parents who have mental outbreaks, and the impact of teachers and positive instruction on children's behaviors. This theory may also benefit research which questions the role of parenting styles in adverse family living and adverse childhood experiences and when exploring alternative lifestyles and alternative caregivers such as grandparents who play the role of the primary parent, same-sex couples, single parents, and while limited, foster parents.

Overview of Attachment

To better understand how foster children develop positive attachments, one must also have a basic understanding and definition of attachment. For the purpose of this literature review, attachment may be defined as a relationship or bond formed between two or more people. The originators of attachment theory, John Bowlby, and Mary D.S. Ainsworth, primarily focused on patterns of attachment and the integral bond between parent and child. Bowlby, having given attachment theory its start by studying both animal and human attachment processes, expanded societal concerns and considerations for attachment promotions (Crain, 2010). While Bowlby paved the way for this profound theory, Ainsworth provided great expansion and progress to Bowlby's crucial theoretical concepts. Having said to increase attachment theory's popularity, Ainsworth established key differing attachment styles (Crain, 2010). Today, because of Bowlby and Ainsworth's theoretical discoveries, society more easily recognizes the importance of

positive bond formations and consideration of parental attachment styles in spaces such as schools and hospitals.

Ainsworth, best known for her work in expanding Bowlby's original attachment theory, discovered that children often use their mothers as a secure base. To clarify, when free to roam about, the child may still look back for mother to feel secure with proceeding to roam. Most famous for her experiment labeled the Strange Situation, she observed three different attachment styles: secure, insecure-avoidant, and resistant-insecure. A fourth attachment, labeled disorganized-insecure, was later recognized, and created by Main and Solomon (Crain, 2010). These, as well as other concepts of attachment, are still used today, as society now recognizes the importance of a parental presence and promoting bonds between parent and child. Attachment theory's reputable reputation not only allows one to validate their research but is often used as a means to verify the effects of possible trauma, for those with disorganized or negative attachments, such as those in foster care, are more at risk for developmental delays and other mental, physical, emotional, social, and behavioral difficulties (Gabler et al., 2014; Oosterman & Schuengel, 2008).

Parenting Styles: Do they Matter?

Much of the literature surrounding parenting styles ultimately questions the true impact and importance of parenting styles by questioning whether parenting styles matter. While some believe that they do and others believe that a parent's significance is over emphasized, often this questioning brings to light both the positive and negative impacts of parenting practices. Several studies today, while reviewing parent/parent and child relationships and the use of positive parenting behaviors, suggest that positive parenting regardless of its definition can impact a child's behavior, physical health, self-esteem, identity, and even their mental behaviors and

cognitive capability (Gralewski & Jankowska, 2020). Gralewski & Jankowska suggest that not only do positive parenting practices and behaviors impact a child's self-esteem, but they impact creativity and one's creative self-efficacy. The ultimate argument then is what does positive parenting look like? Some suggest that authoritative parenting, one with a balance of warmth and discipline is best while others argue that authoritarian parents while less warm are more prevalent in non-westernized and more ethnic households. They, therefore, suggest that one cannot determine what parenting practices are best as every culture and environment are different and that there are benefits in authoritarian practices too (Buskirk-Cohen, 2011). However, most research does indicate that authoritative parenting contributes to the majority of beneficial or positive outcomes in children.

Considering the benefits of positive parenting practices is even more relevant when working with alternative family forms such as foster families, as often those who enter the system do so as a result of previously negative parenting practices or even in several instances when neglectful parenting occurs (Skrallan et al., 2015). As a result, these children may enter foster homes with behavioral concerns, mental health concerns, physical health concerns, insecure attachment measures which often result in untrusting of adult figureheads, decreased self-efficacy, decreased self-esteem, and inability to socialize and make friends (Conn, 2011; Fuentes et al., 2014; Gabler et al., 2014; Jago et al., 2011; Park & Watson-Moss, 2012). Therefore, it's important that foster parents understand positive parenting and the benefits of positive reinforcement in order to implement better parent behaviors within their foster families. The hope is that once foster children are in alternative care, they will be welcomed and introduced to a more positive environment, one that allows for adequate warmth and positive reinforcement.

Parenting Styles and Forming Early Secure Attachments

It is important to note that most research today emphasizes both positive parenting practices and styles with early implementation of secure attachment forms as they are easily interchangeable. Previous research suggests that those who have better parenting behaviors in turn have more secure parent-child relationships and attachments (Lang et al., 2016). Therefore, as we examine foster families and their implementation of more positive parenting measures, we too must consider if and how foster parents implement positive attachments.

The concept of a secure base has and will continue to be at the forefront of all studies relating to attachment. Some studies within today's established research identify the ideal of developing a secure base (Kunl et al., 2019; Oosterman & Schuengel, 2008). By definition, developing a secure base entails a child's ability to both be independent and free to roam while also having someone to which they can rely on when they become unsettled (Crain, 2010). Most foster care research implementing Ainsworth's idea of the secure base have infants or toddlers as their sample, as Ainsworth original study titled the Strange Situation used a similar sample (Crain, 2010; Kunl et al., 2019). Her study, having changed how we define positive parent-child relationships, emphasizes the importance of developing attachment early, again providing reason for why many use younger samples.

However, other studies examining foster care reject this notion, recognizing the need for the study of attachment throughout the ever-changing life of foster children. For example, Lang et al., (2016) emphasized the importance of identifying a secure base within the system and concluded that most children are able to form secure attachment bonds to their new parents. They posited the attachment bond between foster child and foster parent may serve as a long-term protective factor to mitigate against possible negative impacts stemming from the adversity and

risk factors associated with placement in the foster care system. In other words, establishing a secure base or a secure attachment may be a positive and successful intervention for foster parents and foster children. This method of intervention has been proven to successfully aid in allowing the foster child to not only cope with past circumstances, but it increases their chances for more positive development in the future.

Some studies claim that foster children's ability to connect should and can occur as quickly as the first year within a new placement (Kungl et al., 2019). Kungl et al. aimed to further address the behaviors behind how foster children attach so quickly, reiterating that those within the system often show increased dependency on their foster parents, especially in the midst of strangers. These authors argued that this dependency adequately portrays a secure connection and that it is a positive indicator to be used in future research. Foster children showed an increased ability to adapt and build connections. Some believe this ability to be a result of circumstance, others ponder further that it may be a sign that establishing a secure connection is once again a positive intervention regardless of age.

Parental Behaviors

Foster parents' behaviors, such as their sensitivity to their children and their parenting style, can affect their ability to form connections with their foster children (Gabler, 2014). Most foster placements rely on the ability to form parent-child connections, and most changes in placement occur because foster parents are unable to establish a quality connection (Gabler, 2014). Foster homes with both foster and biological children have greater difficulty, as often placements are deferred if the foster parents begin to believe the foster child's needs are exceeding their ability to manage both children (Thompson et al., 2014). In other words, biological children's needs tend to be prioritized. A foster parent's level of sensitivity may be

measured based on both acknowledgement of support required, and risks associated with those in the foster system. In fact, parental sensitivity and attachment security are linked (Oosterman & Schuengel, 2008) such that an attachment figures' sensitivity to children's signals allow children to build assumptions of themselves and the surrounding world which affect and organize their behavior in their social environment (Gabler et al., 2014).

Parenting Styles: Impact on Behavior and Temperament

How one parents can also affect a child's temperament and ultimately associates with how a child behaves. Studies have shown that mothers and fathers often adopt different parenting practices and styles and therefore, behavioral concerns often present and arise differently in boys and girls (Braza et al., 2015). One must also consider age as the age of the child can also determine differences in temperament and risk for aggressive behavior (Barone et al., 2018). Richardson (2002) also suggests that a family's functioning also determines a child's behavioral patterns, to clarify families who are not functioning very well report having children with more behavioral concerns. Ultimately, a child's temperament and risk of behavioral aggression is in turn associated with their parents parenting style (Braza et. al., 2015). Some studies have determined that if the relationship between foster parents and child has warmth, sensitivity, and involvement then it is associated with fewer behavior problems in the child (Fuentes et al., 2014). In fact, Braza et al. (2015) suggest that authoritative parenting skills are positively correlated with a child's internalizing and externalizing behaviors and that often if both parents implement authoritative parenting practices that the child has less risk for developing aggressive behaviors. The basis for this reasoning is that research on parenting styles has found that foster children are better able to adapt to their foster family if what they encounter is authoritative parenting. Thus, when foster parents are able to set limits and more importantly explain the basis

for why they are establishing rules and giving instruction, then foster children tend to have and or present fewer behavioral concerns. A more communicative, warm, sensitive, and empathetic approach seems to especially decrease a child's risk for internalizing behavior (Fuentes et al., 2014).

Understanding that age, gender, and parenting style can impact a child's behavior and temperament is crucial for parents and professionals especially for foster parents and those working to help foster family's form (Barone et al., 2019). For instance, considering age may be useful as older foster children have more risk for behavioral concerns as often the fear of aging out of the system causes adolescent foster children to act out or misbehave (Schelbe, 2017). Foster children are already at risk for displaying behavioral concerns given that most enter because of ineffective parental care or neglect even more so require care that may help reduce behavioral concerns and support positive practices such as positive communication efforts and building positive relationships with adult figures. Therefore, foster parents must assess their foster children's needs and understand the following risks for inadequate parenting practices as this population is very vulnerable (Barone et al.,2019).

Parenting Styles, Stress, Coping and Placement Stability

Often parenting styles are heavily influenced by a parents or family's ability to cope with stress as the amount of stress a parent feels can often determine their parenting practices (Rogers, 2015). For instance, if a parent experiences increased stress with work in that their lifestyles require more time at work, then with their children, they may have less structure and discipline at home resulting in a more permissive parenting approach. In other words, stress is simply just another factor to consider when determining why parents approach parenting differently. Specifically, studies have determined that foster families may be better parents if first they

consider how they cope with stress surrounding finances and things that would ultimately impact a foster placement's stability (Rogers, 2015). Foster parents are significant in providing adequate care for foster children just as these children are predisposed to form attachments to adults who they trust. Though we must remember that forming these attachments are often dependent on the connections foster parents build and therefore are impacted by their parenting approach. Therefore, Skrallan et al. (2015) suggest that foster parenting use a task-oriented coping approach as if foster parenting focus their stress per task, they are more easily prepared to handle the many stresses that occur with fostering children and therefore the children have better behavioral effects.

Foster Care Education and Training in Parental Styles

As much of the literature insists that authoritative parenting is most effective, especially among those experiencing the foster care system, it also brings to question how those who implement authoritative parenting learn about its effectiveness. While we assume that most authoritative techniques are just habitual or that they occur by chance, research calls for further education of effective parenting and specifically promotion of authoritative parenting practices (Conn, 2011; Fuentes et al., 2014; Park & Watson-Moss, 2012). The King et al. (2007) study suggests that those more likely to implement authoritative parenting practices differ significantly based on educational level and level of experience as a foster parent signified by the number of years the parents had fostered children. Therefore, those with more education surrounding the benefits of authoritative parenting and a potential underlying understanding of child development were more likely to implement authoritative approaches. Though not all foster parents will have forms of higher education, this study signifies that with additional education, authoritative parenting is likely to be incorporated into practice via the foster care system.

Recent research has signified a need for and therefore as increased efforts in providing parenting programs for parenting education purposes, but few are designed to address the specific needs of foster parents and parents (Roberts et al., 2016). Therefore, once more there is a need for better parenting education and training within and for this population. Due to a foster child's risk for having adverse early life experiences, insecure attachment relationships, behavioral problems, and increased stress and ineffective coping strategies upon placement several intervention programs have arisen and developed to help foster parents to overcome these challenges though many interventions fail to incorporate and focus on parenting during instruction (Schoemaker et al., 2020). This results in unanswered questions for how foster parents will cope and manage new parenting responsibilities. Those who have initiated parenting training among foster parents while limited have insinuated improvement in positive parenting, gain of clearer parenting expectations, and fewer child externalizing problems (Linares et al., 2006). Though due to the limitation of training accessed, more training and education for foster parents should be considered and some would argue this population due to the adverse experiences may benefit more.

Current Study

The call for support, interventions, education, and training is prevalent in almost all of the existing literature today, as many researchers agree that more needs to be discovered about how those within the foster care system manage. Providing interventions and parenting styles education for foster parents is crucial, as those handling both grievances and the risks associated with wrongful parenting need a lot of support and guidance. Therefore, this mixed methods study with a triangulation design reviewed the impact of parenting styles and hoped to determine which parenting style is most practiced among foster parents today. The current study assessed

how foster parents individually view their management of childcare, perceived levels of support, and education opportunities surrounding foster care parenting practices or level of received preparedness. We must question how foster parents cope with the surplus amount of concerns and challenges the foster children population face. Furthermore, this study examined whether parental styles change or alter with a parents perceived stress level or if parenting practices differ based on the length the child remains in the care of the foster child. Thus, using a quantitative approach, we examined the following research questions and hypotheses:

Quantitative Research Question, No Hypothesis

1. How many foster parents use and implement parenting behaviors that align with an authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, or neglectful/disengaged parenting style? Due to the gap in literature on this subject, there was no priori hypothesis.

Quantitative Research Questions and Hypotheses

2. Is there a relationship between a foster parent's parenting style/parenting behaviors and their perceived parenting stress level? It was hypothesized that parenting behaviors that align with an authoritative parenting style will be associated with decreased parenting stress, while parenting behaviors indicative of authoritarian or permissive parenting will be associated with increased parenting stress.
3. Is there a relationship between a foster parent's parenting style/ parenting behaviors and closeness/attachment with their foster children? It was hypothesized that parenting behaviors that align with an authoritative parenting style will be associated with increased closeness and attachment, while parenting behaviors indicative of authoritarian or permissive parenting will be associated with decreased closeness and attachment.

Additionally, in order to obtain more insight into the process of parenting through the perceptions of active foster parents, we also intended to examine the following qualitative research questions:

Qualitative Research Questions

4. What experiences do foster parents have with parenting and caring for foster children and implementing positive parenting practices?
5. What behaviors do foster parents report implementing to develop secure attachments?
6. What preparation do foster parents have for parenting foster children

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

For the purpose of this mixed methods study, preexisting secondary data from the Fostering Healthy Relationships study was utilized (Malette, 2019). This study contains national survey data and focus group transcriptions from licensed foster parents, which were collected during 2018-2019. Both the data set and the transcriptions are well suited for this mixed methods approach with a triangulation design as they both examine the experiences of licensed foster parents and question their perceptions of perceived stress, levels of attachment, length of stay for foster placement, perceived level of support, and allow for the expression of experience and perceived challenges. A triangulation design is a research approach that attempts to combine both qualitative and quantitative information in order to gather and interpret data. The goal of this study was to understand the association between how foster parents implement care while taking into consideration one's stress level, a child's length of placement and a foster parent's perceived level of support when coping and managing challenges associated with foster children. The qualitative and quantitative data in the Fostering Healthy Relationships study, as well as sampling and data collection procedures, were approved by the East Carolina University institutional review board.

Survey Design

Cross-sectional data were collected from a national sample of 457 foster parents via an online survey. Participants were recruited in 2019 from a variety of Facebook foster parent support groups, local parenting Facebook groups, and by word-of-mouth. The survey was left open for three months and reminders were sent sporadically to notify foster parents about the opportunity and the deadline to participate. Researchers used virtual real-time fraud protection software to filter and block bots or fraudulent users from accessing the survey. Because of the

nature of online survey participation, it is unknown how many foster parents were exposed to the survey overall. Participants were required to self-report being a licensed foster parent in the United States. They were told that the survey would ask them about their foster parenting experiences, with a goal to understand how best to assist them through formal and informal support and trainings. Participants were asked to focus on their youngest child in the home, and asked questions about their demographic characteristics, their current family members and quality of familial relationships, their experiences with and history of foster caregiving, and their current informal and formal support systems. Participants received a small e-gift card incentive for survey completion.

Focus Group Design

Three focus groups were held over six months in 2018 in two counties from which all participants resided. The focus groups ranged in size with two, six, and four foster caregivers, respectively. Foster caregiver participants were provided with a \$30 gift card incentive for participation. Focus groups were recorded with a video recorder that captured audio and video simultaneously. The facilitator utilized a semi-structured approach; the facilitator had a list of baseline questions to ask the participants, but also allowed the conversation to develop organically.

Procedure of Data Collection

Participants

For the current study we examined the preexisting secondary data from the Fostering Healthy Relationships study (Malette, 2019). We examined quantitative survey data collected nationwide, as well as qualitative data collected via several focus groups conducted in both Greenville, North Carolina and Wilmington, North Carolina. Foster parents who participated in

either the survey or the focus groups were required to be licensed foster parents at the time of participation. All foster parent participants were eligible to participate if they were either currently fostering children in their home or had past foster children and placement experiences. Licensed foster parents who had not yet experienced a placement were not eligible to participate. Some foster parents had only foster children in the home while others had a mix of biological, stepchildren, adopted children and or foster children within the home when they participated in the study.

National Survey of Foster Parents

Our final sample of 430 participants had complete data for all relevant study variables. Foster parents were born between the years 1944-1998; their ages ranged from 21 years old to 74 years old ($M = 38.4$; $SD = 7.7$). 131 Males (30.5%) and 294 females (68.4%) were surveyed. Race in the survey was represented by 17 Black/African American participants (4.0%), 360 White/Caucasian participants (83.7%), 7 Asian participants (1.6%), 8 Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander participants (1.9%), 13 American Indian or Alaska Native (3.0%) and 8 who identified as other (1.9%). In addition to their foster children, 62.5% of parents had biological children, 60.2% had adopted children, and 20.4% had stepchildren. The number of foster children living in the home ranged from 1 – 8. Over half (50.7%) of the focal children for this study were male, 49% were female, and 1 (.3%) was non-binary. Focal children ranged in age from birth – 18 years old.

Level of education was considered with 8 participants with a high school GED (1.9%), 2 who attended high school but did not earn diploma (.5%), 11 who had a high school diploma (2.6%), 23 who completed a vocational/technical school certification (5.3%), 91 who indicated that they had attended some college but did not complete their degree completion (21.2%), 70

who had an associate's degree (16.3%), 153 who had a bachelor's degree (35.6%), and 72 had a master's degree/advanced degree (16.7%). Employment status was represented by 57 who were not currently employed (13.3%), 277 who had a full-time job (35+ hours/week; 64.4%), 83 who had a part-time job (1-34 hours/week; 19.3%), and 10 who had temporary employment, occasional, seasonal, or odd jobs for pay (2.3%). Levels of total household income were also assessed, and the participants ranged from making less than \$7000 combined annually to \$100,000 plus annually.

Relationship status was represented by 45 of the participants being single (9.7%), 1 talking/dating but not committed (.2%), 9 were committed as in not engaged or married (1.9%), 4 were engaged to be married (.9 %), 394 were married (85.3%), 2 were separated (.4%), 5 were divorced (1.1%) and 1 was widowed (.2%). Participants were also represented by foster home type, with 95 represented as relative foster care (20.6 %), 44 working with a specific child or children who were not related (9.5 %), 92 were considered an emergency foster home (19.9%), 336 were considered regular foster homes (72.7%), 85 identified as an infant care foster home (18.4%), 38 were considered treatment foster home (8.2%), 23 were medically fragile foster homes (5%), and those who considered another type of care were asked to specify care.

Focus Groups of Foster Parents

The sample consisted of foster parents licensed in the state of North Carolina (N = 12). Foster parents were recruited from three counties in Eastern North Carolina. Flyers were distributed to social workers at local social service agencies, who gave them out to foster parents during mandatory meetings and were provided to local foster parent support groups. Most of the foster parent participants were female ($n = 10$; 83.3%). The parents ranged in age from 26 to 75, with an average age of 41.73 years ($SD = 13.55$). 58.3% of the foster parent participants were

married ($n = 7$), one was dating (8.3%), and 33.3% reported being uninvolved romantically ($n=4$). For those in romantic relationships, the length of their relationships ranged from six months to 21.83 years, with an average relationship length of 11.6 years ($SD = 7.94$ years). The majority identified as white ($n = 8$; 66.7%) with the remainder identifying as Black or African American ($n = 4$; 33.3%). Most ($n = 10$; 83.3%) of the parents had completed some college or a 4-year college degree; one had a high school diploma (8.3%), and one had an associate degree (8.3%). Ten of the parents worked outside of the home either part- or full-time (83.3%), one was retired (8.3%), and one was disabled and unable to work outside of the home (8.3%). Household income of the parents ranged from \$25,000 to over \$100,000, with the majority ($n = 7$; 58.3%) falling in the \$40,000–\$75,000 range.

Quantitative Measures

Independent Variable

Parental Style/Behaviors.

Caregivers with children 0-11 months old responded to 19 items from The Infancy Parenting Styles Questionnaire (Arnott & Brown, 2013), on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 5 (*Strongly Disagree*). This scale has been demonstrated as both reliable and valid (Brown & Arnott, 2014). Sample items include the following: “I hold or touch my child in an affectionate way” and “I listen to my child’s feelings and try to understand them”. Caregivers with children 1-5 years old responded to 19 items from The Parent Behavior Inventory (Lovejoy, Weis, O’Hare & Rubin, 1999), on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all true today – I did not do this at all today*) to 6 (*Very much true today – I did this throughout the day*). This scale has been demonstrated as both reliable and valid (Dallaire et al., 2015). Sample items include the following: “When my child misbehaves, I let him/her know what will happen if s/he doesn’t

behave” and “I demand that my child does something (or stops doing something) right away”. Caregivers with children 16-18 years old responded to 21 items from the Ghent Parental Behavior Scale (GPBS; Van Leeuwen & Vermulst, 2004), on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Never True*) to 7 (*Always True*). This scale has been demonstrated as both reliable and valid (Van Leeuwen et al., 2004). Sample items include the following: “I threaten with a punishment, but in the end, I don’t carry it out.” For all age groups, parenting style was determined by calculating the mean scores for responsiveness and demandingness associated with the survey questions. If one’s mean score for responsiveness and demandingness were both higher than this indicated authoritative parenting. If the mean score for responsiveness was high and the mean score demandingness was low this determined a permissive parenting style. If the mean score for responsiveness was low and the mean score for demandingness was high this was indicative of authoritarian parenting. Finally, if the mean scores were low for both responsiveness and demandingness then the results were indicative of neglectful parenting.

Dependent Variables

Parenting Stress.

Caregivers responded to 10 items from the Parental Stress Scale (Berry & Jones, 1995), on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Very Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Very Strongly Agree*). This scale has been demonstrated as both reliable and valid (Roger & Farmer, 1999; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Sample items include the following: “Caring for children sometimes takes more time and energy than I have to give.” Mean scores were calculated with higher scores indicating more parenting stress.

Closeness and Attachment.

Caregivers responded to 3 items involving the length of time a foster child stayed with them the longest (days, months, years). Sample items include the following: “Have you cared for at least one foster child in the past 12 months who has since left your home?” where (1=Yes; 2=No), “Thinking about the foster children you cared for during the past 12 months, please describe the foster child who lived with you the longest and who has since left your home. Length of time in household (days, months, years).

Determination of the foster parent-foster child closeness will be determined using a single item: “Thinking about the foster children you cared for during the past 12 months, please describe the foster child who lived with you the longest and who has since left your home. How would you describe your relationship with this child?” where (1 = *Not close at all*; 2 = *Somewhat close*; 3 = *Very close*). Higher mean scores will indicate more closeness. Caregivers also responded to 9 items from the Foster Parent Grief Scale (FPGS; Hebert, Kulkin, & McLean, 2013), on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Very strongly disagree) to 7 (Very strongly agree). The internal consistency of this adapted scale has been demonstrated (Richardson et al., 2019). Mean scores were calculated from responses for the Foster Parent Grief Scale with higher scores indicating a higher level of attachment to that foster child.

Alpha Measures

As part of a preliminary analysis, a MANOVA was ran to better determine if there were significant differences among the variables. Among this test, alpha measures were determined. In Table 1 of the results section, you may find the alpha measure results. This measure was used to determine the reliability of the scales implemented for this study.

Quantitative Data Analysis

In order to answer our quantitative research questions, we analyzed the national survey data using IBM SPSS statistic software. For research question number 1, we examined frequencies of foster parents who exhibit behaviors consistent with each parenting style. Before running the regressions for research question one 2 and 3 we ran a MANOVA as a preliminary analysis of the variables. For research question number 2, we analyzed the data from the National Survey of Foster Parents using regression analysis to determine the significance of the relationship between parenting style and a foster parents perceived level of stress. For research question number 3, we also analyzed the data from the National Survey of Foster Parents using regression analysis to determine the significance of the relationship between parenting style or parental behaviors and the perceived level of closeness and attachment the foster parents believe they have or had with their foster child.

Qualitative Data Analysis

By assessing the transcriptions and identifying common themes via the coding software NVIVO, we explored foster parents' perception of support and education surrounding adequate foster parenting styles and techniques given a foster child's demands and challenges.

Coding.

In order to further assess the foster group transcripts, two coders first began by reading through all of the transcriptions making notes of our first impressions. Secondly, we re-read the transcripts a second time as a whole to further our understanding of the foster group's responses and experiences. Next, we began labeling relevant keywords (e.g., positive, attachment, trust, support, bonding), phrases, sentences, or sections as they related to our three qualitative research questions. Labeling was also color coded based on its relation or significance to the proposed qualitative research questions. Coded items were assessed for relevance to the research

questions proposed. Throughout the coding process, the faculty investigator was contacted for consultation and debrief.

Relevance was best determined if the concept or keyword was heavily repeated, if the response was surprising, if the focus group interviewee deemed their response as important, or if the response greatly related to findings of today's literature associated with parenting styles and foster parenting. While coding the foster group transcripts our aim in interpreting and understanding the transcripts relied heavily on both the conceptual framework associated with this study as well the identification and conceptualization of common patterns.

Thematic Analysis.

After initially coding all of the transcripts, the coding was reassessed for level of importance and relevance and grouped in hopes of creating patterns and themes, thus beginning the thematic analysis. The groups created were then labeled with a title that we believed best covered the codes that were associated or those that were grouped due to their compatible responses or associations. Thus began our process of working to determine how our themes were interconnected. In order to best determine how the themes are interconnected, we once more relied on the conceptual frameworks, attachment theory and parenting styles associated with our study. How we determined the connection of the themes we created helped to better establish our results.

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

As a preliminary analysis in hopes of determining if there were significant differences in parenting outcomes assessed, (stress, closeness, attachment) a MANOVA was ran. Results from the MANOVA indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in parenting outcomes (stress, attachment, and closeness) based on foster parents' parenting style, $F(9, 732.7) = 7.38, p < .001$; Wilk's $\Lambda = .81$, partial $\eta^2 = .068$. Post hoc analyses indicated that parenting style had a statistically significant effect on both parenting stress ($F(3, 303) = 16.72; p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .14$) and attachment ($F(3, 303) = 8.72; p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .08$), but not on parental closeness ($F(3, 303) = 1.16; p = .325$; partial $\eta^2 = .01$). Specifically, mean scores for parenting stress were statistically significantly different between authoritarian and permissive parents ($p < .05$), and permissive and authoritative ($p < .001$), but there was no significant difference between neglectful and other parenting styles. On average, authoritarian had the highest parenting stress, and permissive had the least parenting stress. Mean scores for attachment were statistically significantly different between permissive and authoritative parents ($p < .001$). but there was no significant difference between the scores of the other parenting styles. On average, permissive parents had the lowest attachment scores, while authoritative parents had the highest attachment scores. Table 1 below shows the results of the preliminary MANOVA analysis.

Table 1

Univariate Statistics for all Study Constructs

Variable Name	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Min-Max	Alpha
Parenting Stress	3.7110	1.15198	-.264	-.222	1.00-6.70	.888
Closeness	2.46	.640	-.768	-.438	1-3	--
Attachment	34.15	11.502	-.675	-.444	1-57	.869
Parenting Style						
0-1 Responsiveness	5.0813	.62510	-.660	.012	3.33-6.11	.615

0-1 Demandingness	4.7060	.60847	-.142	-.986	3.50-5.70	.561
1-5 Responsiveness	5.4425	.68543	-.681	-.466	3.38-6.54	.917
1-5 Demandingness	3.3825	.97696	.245	-.454	1.00-6.14	.802
6-18 Responsiveness	5.6018	1.05068	-.515	-.928	3.14-7.00	.901
6-18 Demandingness	5.3625	.64291	-.397	-.864	3.93-6.54	.857

Quantitative Results

RQ #1

Of the participants surveyed using the preexisting secondary data from the Fostering Healthy Relationships study (Mallette, 2019) frequencies in response were assessed to determine the parenting style most indicated among the foster parent sample, in hopes of determining which parenting style was most implemented into practice. The frequencies were processed using only the response associated with the youngest child in the household per each age group. After assessing for frequencies, the responses indicated, most parents who responded to the survey revealed having participated in authoritative parenting practices (48.7%) as observed via balanced responsiveness and demandingness responses. Whereas (35.9%) of parents indicated practicing permissive parenting, (2.2%) of parents indicated implementing authoritarian practices, and (.9%) were determined to promote neglectful parenting practices.

RQ #2 & 3

We ran separate multiple regression analyses (using categorical dummy-coded variables) to examine the influence of parenting style on parenting stress, closeness, and attachment, using authoritative parenting as the comparison variable. Results are shown in Table 2. For the parenting stress outcome, results indicated that authoritative parents had significantly more parenting stress than the other parenting styles and permissive parents had significantly less parenting stress. Authoritarian and disengaged parenting were not significantly associated with parenting stress. For the closeness outcome, results indicated that the authoritative parents had

significantly more closeness, while all other parenting styles (authoritarian, permissive, and disengaged) were not significantly associated with closeness. Finally, for the attachment outcome, results indicated that the authoritative parents had significantly more attachment than the other parenting styles and permissive parents had significantly less. Authoritarian and disengaged parenting were not significantly associated with attachment.

Table 2

Regressions for parenting styles and outcome variables

Regressions	B	SE	p
Parenting Style and Parenting Stress			
Authoritative → Parenting Stress	4.026	.072	<.001
Authoritarian → Parenting Stress	.314	.351	.372
Permissive → Parenting Stress	-.784	.111	<.001
Disengaged → Parenting Stress	-.126	.548	.818
Parenting Style and Closeness			
Authoritative → Closeness	2.463	.047	<.001
Authoritarian → Closeness	-.463	.244	.058
Permissive → Closeness	.006	.073	.930
Disengaged → Closeness	.037	.449	.935
Parenting Style and Attachment			
Authoritative → Attachment	4.156	.084	<.001
Authoritarian → Attachment	.133	.383	.729
Permissive → Attachment	-.716	.131	<.001
Disengaged → Attachment	-.017	.597	.977

Qualitative Results

After coding and conducting a thematic analysis for the quantitative data using NVIVO software several themes were discovered. Those themes were wanting to build secure attachments, providing new experiences while fostering, combating past trauma, prioritizing positive care, and feelings of lack of preparation when fostering children. Below these five themes will be discussed in further detail.

I. Building Attachments

The theme of building attachments was brought to attention in several instances as foster parents discussed wanting to be a part of their foster child's growth by providing love and support. Several construed elements of fostering secure attachments as they discussed developing trust between the child and themselves indicating that this initial attachment was necessary. Secure attachment was indicated in expressions such as "I am her parent, her dada" or in statements that blatantly referred to positive attachment behaviors via being someone present and significant in the child's life. One participant indicated the importance of being present and a significant part of a child's life signifying the need for attachment when she reflects on a child's need for support, saying, "These kids need someone, and I feel that's my strongest thing; that's what God gave me to give to the children." Others show their willingness to build bonds and attachments by expressing their want to give love to those in need. One participant expressed the reason they foster is so they "can give back to some children that are less fortunate, that need the love, and need a stable home, you know, so that's why I wanted to foster, you know, because I can show kids so much love and do a lot of things."

However, there was an underlying concern, which was that many foster parents also hesitated in establishing these connections in fear that the others in the foster system such as their social workers may believe they were getting too attached and thus, would be more willing to remove them from their care and home. One participant expresses their concerns of social worker and agency perceptions of attachment indicating that "They want you to love them like they're your bio kid, but they don't want you to fight for them like they're your bio kid."

Another participant suggests that social workers and agencies need to understand the common occurrence of attachments, signifying that often they are told as foster parents to avoid becoming attached as seen in the statement below

I think the social workers and people involved with the agencies need a better understanding of how we operate and how our minds' working. It's almost like you're a social worker, did you not take any psychology classes? Do you not realize we're going to get attached? You can't bring a kid into our home and not get attached.

This theme ultimately signified feelings of uncertainty as foster parents shared similar experiences with struggling to indicate how attached they should be.

Not only do foster parent's express fears that secure attachments may be bad for the child if a removal from the home is necessary, but they themselves will feel the repercussions of losing a child that they connected with. One foster parent claimed "If you do speak your mind, it's like oh you're too attached, it doesn't count" as if when expressing concerns, foster parents often are dismissed and labeled as "too attached" to offer clear perspective. Foster parents seem to agree that becoming attached is strictly up to the foster parent themselves; thus, they must determine how attached they want to become. One foster parent even suggests "if you have a foster parent who's not attached, you should probably think about that." Though the level of attachment must be determined based on the needs and the priorities of the foster children, and many foster parents agree that the child's needs come first.

II. Providing New Experiences

When analyzing the data, the second theme that appeared was the discussion of both new and positive experiences. Most of the positive experiences expressed were related to being with the child(ren), bonding with the child(ren), and giving and encouraging the child(ren) to participate in new experiences. Such positive experiences were instances of taking children out to eat in restaurants or spending quality time with the child during bath time. One participant recalled a similar experience with her foster children stating

We went to a Mexican restaurant and they were like, 'oh is this free, like the chips and salsa and stuff, is it free?' and I was like, 'yeah it's free' and then when we were leaving after I paid the bill and they were like, 'are we just going to leave all this stuff on the

table like this?’ and I said, ‘it’s a restaurant’ and I was like, ‘you guys never?’ and they were like, ‘nah’ and I was like, you know, and for a 10 and 12 year olds, it’s kinda like really so they have really never been to a sit down eat restaurant before?

Others discussed feeling positive about providing basic necessities such as clothing, book bags, and food. Those fostering seemed to express joy in providing for their foster children because their efforts were greatly appreciated. One foster parent expressed joy and gratitude when recalling the time, she fostered three young boys who had not been to school for years and who had been seriously neglected in care. She stated that one of the boys “said he never seen so much food in his life” when she allowed them to go to the pantry and pack a lunch to go.

While several of the narratives described disheartening realities, the overarching theme was gratitude to have been able to provide new and positive experiences via the foster care system. One foster parent even discussed the experience and joy associated with encouraging their foster children to try new things in school, saying, “She came home she says, ‘Can you sign this paper? I wanna do teen court.’ And she says, ‘I can see like certain things that are going on in court and mistakes that people make and then I won’t make them.’ And then we talked about her. She had scored high, 10.8 on her reading level. And she’s in seventh grade. And I said, well if they’re talking to you about battle of the books, but she says ‘eh’. So, I encouraged her to do it and she signed up, so she’s doing battle of the books too”.

III. Combating Mental Health Concerns and Behavioral Issues

Negative experiences were characterized by feelings of frustration associated with handling the common mental health issues often associated with foster children and the traumas many foster children face. Some of the mental health and behavior issues discussed were ADHD, bipolar disorder, withdrawal, and trauma associated with sexual abuse and neglect. One foster parent revealed experiencing challenges with children who had difficult mental health concerns stating, “I have had children ADHD, Bipolar, I had one who was totally mentally ill.” Another

foster parent described a group of brothers stating, “The oldest boy, who was far gone ADHD, he had issues. The second boy was like mild ADHD. . . ., my baby, he was okay”. Additionally, one foster parent shared their experience fostering a baby who was experiencing withdrawal symptoms

We brought in this two-month-old that was crazy with withdrawal symptoms and just cried all the time. Our friends and family were like, “that’s part of having a baby,” and this and that, but they didn’t really understand because when they were there she was sleeping or they didn’t really keep her on their own.

Most foster parents claimed to view these experiences as negative not only because they were forced to recognize the pain and trauma their foster child had endured but also because they now too were responsible for helping the child adjust to a new normal and cope with their past.

IV. Providing and Prioritizing Care

Additionally, the theme of prioritizing positive care significantly appeared while examining the data. Providing positive care seems to be a priority among foster parents as many expressed wanting and contributing to a child’s clothing, school supplies, and hygiene products. Others discussed the importance of understanding when and where the foster child needed to go to the doctors and paying careful attention to their mental and physical health needs. A foster parent described her experience with keeping up with therapy appointments stating, “I have to take him to, he’s required to be in therapy. He was born drug addicted”. Another foster parent recalled preparing her foster children to have forms of identification and medical insurance cards stating

‘Cause I teach my boys, carry a wallet, put your Medicaid card in there. I have it shrinked down and put the plastic coating on it at the, the Office Depot. And then I do their social security card and everything so that I can get them the drivers ID.

Additionally, others referred to providing time for exercise and extracurricular activities as a means of positive care. For instance, one foster parent described keeping their foster children active and engaged by allowing them time to go to the gym

I'm another firm believer in keeping them active. My boys go to the gym. They come home from school; they go to the gym....So I take them to the gym. They'll go to the gym after they do their homework and everything....'Cause I give them that free time for their self.

Furthermore, many described positive care as providing financial funding for said necessities such as car seats for young infants and trending clothing so that teenagers feel that they fit in at school.

V. Lack of Preparation

Finally, much of the participants in the study described a feeling of lack of preparation among the foster parents surveyed. Parents expressed a need for additional classes and education for helping foster parents navigate the unknowns of working with foster children. One foster parents report, pinpoints this notion as they describe the mats course required for foster care licensure and their opinion in its effectiveness

There is never any...this is how to parent. They talk about, 'Oh, these are things that work well.' A lot of the MAT class is from the perspective of the child, which is great, but it doesn't prepare you. It was also, 'This is what the child's experiencing.' Then the case studies, you were right. It's all geared towards the 7, 8, 9, teenagers. It's not the younger ones even when you do the stuff in class.

Another foster parent stated, "None of the training was about us, it was all about how to take care of trauma induced children," clarifying that, while important, more needed to be covered in the course.

Additionally, many parents discussed their concerns or feelings about being told not to collaborate with other foster parents. One foster parent stated that they "learn more from one of those meetings than I have in years of trainings at the agencies," when recalling how meeting with other foster parents has shaped their experience navigating the system. The foster parents claimed to have experienced backlash for discussing their stressors and adverse experiences amongst each other. Though alternatively, those that were surveyed claimed that talking to other

foster parents seemed to be the most beneficial in providing feedback and resources for working with foster parents. Others wished that there was more preparation for foster parents and felt that due to the legality of the foster system that they were often left in the dark about how their care was being received. For instance, one foster parent claimed “I feel like there’s a lot of the information stuff I just don’t get. I get it from foster parents, but it’s all stuff they should be telling you,” in reference to DSS providing information. One can question, if foster parents feel ill prepared, how then their feelings may impact not only their relationship with the foster child but how their feelings impact their attempts to continue fostering children who need placements.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

The results of this study further our understanding of how foster parents today modify and adjust to new parenting roles and adjust to fostering children as the results of the study not only further our understanding of how parenting practices modify parenting stress, but the qualitative themes reveal countering perspectives of the foster parent role.

Quantitative Discussion

Having examined the quantitatively the results show that foster parents are incorporating more authoritative parenting practices as their responses indicated a significant balance of both control and responsiveness. This suggests that foster parents generally understand the positives of finding a balance between giving children independence and autonomy while also remaining an authority figure but providing empathy and support when needed. Thus, understanding and acknowledging positive parenting practices with foster parents will continue to be beneficial, as positive parenting practices aid in assisting foster parents. Ultimately as we continue to assist foster parents in providing positive parenting practices, we help to produce better fostering experiences for future foster placements.

The results of this study also signify that parents who implement more permissive parenting practices such as parents who allow for more autonomy and provide less restriction have less parenting stress. Whereas parents who implement more authoritarian or stricter and authoritative or warm and balanced structured practices have more parenting stress. One may assume that due to a more relaxed parenting style, parents using a permissive practice may have less stress as children have more autonomy and less structure. Children with more permissive parenting practices are also more inclined to have behavioral difficulties which can thus lead children to experience more impulsive behaviors, a result from permissive parenting practices

that incorporate less strain, stress, and structure (Li, 2021; Cherry, 2020). Whereas those using authoritarian and or authoritative parenting practices may have more parenting stress as these parents play a more active role in the parenting process, carrying greater responsibility and caring into how their children are disciplined and or catered to. Thus, we need to assist foster parents in finding ways to keep structure a balanced interaction of responsiveness and control in hopes of maintaining their stress level, creating a balance of both positive and negative stress, or having a better understanding of how parenting practices affect stress. Finally, the results signified that when compared to all other parenting styles authoritative practicing parents showed significant attachment and closeness. One may assume that authoritative practicing parents were the only parents to show significant attachment because their balance of autonomy and empathy give rise to building bonds that last as the child develops. Additionally, although permissive parents indicated less stress, they too indicated having significantly lower levels of attachment. Those implementing permissive parenting practices may have lower stress because they are less focused on their child, known for their laid-back, less structured approach. One may then question, if foster parents are encouraged to have a more hand-offs approach, one that allows for more autonomy and freedom for the child to determine the relationship such as in permissive parenting, how than will these foster parents ever build positive attachments which we know by way of research to be beneficial? While some literature today focuses on parenting styles and children's associated stress and risks, there seems to be a gap in the literature surrounding permissive parenting and the level of stress parents perceive (Mak et al.,2020, Park & Watson-Moss, 2012). Understanding the impact of building significant relationships with foster children, as a foster parent is crucial to having significant foster parent-child experiences and placements.

Qualitative Discussion

Additionally, the qualitative results bring to light the belief that foster parents want to build secure attachments as determined by their discussion and implementation of care. However, many foster parent's carry an underlying fear of becoming too attached. This fear seems to surface when foster parents fear experiencing the pain of losing a foster child they have connected with or vice versa, when they fear, the child will become too attached and then will experience displacement. Though, lack of preparation when parenting foster children seemed to be the biggest concern as foster parents in this study claimed to feel underprepared to understand and handle the challenges associated with foster children. Some challenges discussed were financial challenges and limited resources in understanding how to get reimbursed for food and clothing purchases, shifts in routines and accounting for more appointments and meetings when fostering, and lastly, accounting for differences in behavior as some children in the system may have underlying traumas or reactions to being displaced from their biological family. By way of understanding, a foster parents experiences, and perceptions of the foster care system, we has researchers may better understand ultimately why they chose to implement certain parenting practices or whether they feel comfortable enough forming attachments. Thus, the basis for a foster parent's ability to positively parent is grounded in their initial perceived foster parenting preparation.

This study signifies not only the importance of furthering our understanding of foster parents as future human services professionals and researchers but allows for us to consider how we can better prepare foster parents when fostering children. Some foster parents have never had children themselves thus, their fostering is their first experience caring for children. Whereas, others may have biological children and foster children, which in turn increases their parenting experience. We must also recognize that not only does one experience determines their

understanding of fostering but that so does the child in which the foster determine how foster parents' experiences may differ. Not all foster children will have the same needs, nor will they require the same resources. Thus, preparing foster parents to foster should encompass a variety of resources and scenarios.

As we interpreted that data and the results following specifically our thematic analysis, it became more evident that not only were there areas of confusion in regard to financial resources and availability in funding, but that many parents themselves felt under prepared to handle every tasks for foster parents such as balancing a routine with a foster child's various appointments and meetings with social workers. Those that wished to express their frustrations with other foster parents claimed that they found comfort in confiding in others with similar experiences and scenarios. We must too consider if future fostering education and preparation should include providing safe opportunities for foster parents to collaborate. Ultimately, the study itself calls to question if the current foster care system provides the best care and resources to assist foster parents in adequately providing for foster children.

Implications

While much of the information surrounding foster care and attachment reiterates both the importance of foster care and the risks that many children within the system face, we must recognize that level of trauma and experience is individualistic. When studying foster care, many carry the stigma that all foster children experience trauma. Those who do not have experience working with those in the system hold an internal bias that says all children within the system are troubled. Just as with any stress, differences in age, development, and outlook affect how one interprets their own trauma. We must question the stigma that all foster children are troubled and

discredit a call for change and need for intervention when unnecessary, as many carry a sense of hopelessness for changing behaviors and delays after such harsh and traumatic experiences occur. Researchers often identify a child's level of trauma based on their perception of the effects. When examining early adverse influences it is important to also recognize that not all children observed may have experienced negative outcomes, some may indicate having very limited if not even minor negative experiences (Leve et al.,2012). Researchers examining positive attachment interventions in infants within the foster care system may see that their population has perceived less trauma and stress than those able to fully understand their predicament, such as school aged children.

Therefore, as we continue to assess the literature, we have to also consider the perceived level of stress and trauma of not only the individual but for our population of interest, school-aged children. We must question how age and personality play a role in the child's perception of their own trauma. Developing attachments with children who have experienced trauma and therefore tend to be weary of establishing new relationships is difficult. Both the foster parent and child have to be ready and willing to bond, and truthfully some--especially those of school-age--are not ready to trust again. Some children may be more timid, others may be willingly to pursue new relationships as they crave attention and love. Studies exploring the role of foster children's temperament, such as in the De Schipper et al. (2012) study, suggest that a foster parent's temperament was more important than the foster child's in that, regardless of how shy or unwilling, if the foster parents were both willing to surpass the existing emotional boundaries and were more sensitive to the child's needs than a secure attachment was more likely to form (De Schipper et al., 2012).

Limitations

There are several limitations that exist within this study. First the majority of the participants of the survey were white/Caucasian. Thus, due to the differences in racial and cultural perspective the results of the study may have been skewed. Research indicates that parenting practices can differ among different cultural and racial groups (Dixon et al, 2008). For instance, Asian communities are more likely to instill authoritarian practices as they are more culturally accepted and may have different cultural meanings (Ang & Goh, 2006; Xie & Li, 2019). Additionally, when observing the data, the respondents were only supposed to answer the survey questions with their youngest child in mind. This too may have altered the results of the study as parenting styles can adjust and adapt as a child ages and societal expectations shift (Joseph &John, 2008; Worthy et al.,2020). After reviewing the transcripts for the qualitative portion of this study, one may question whether the number of participants in the foster groups and their opinions and experiences may be generalized to the whole foster care system. Thus, another limitation would be smaller sample size for the qualitative portion of this study. Another limitation of this study is associated with the parenting style variable implemented when conducting the quantitative analysis. The scales referenced in this study were originally broken down into subscales based on parenting behaviors, however, in order to best determine the parenting style most used among foster parents in our study we categorized and combined the subscales into measures of responsiveness and demandingness. Thus, the scales were adapted and were not implemented with regards to their original intent. Additionally, each scale asked different questions per each age group, which too may have limited our study, as this factor limited our ability to decode applicable parenting styles across the sample. Additionally, it is possible due to the fact that we used subscale scores to calculate parenting styles that our alphas for the 0-11 months scale were low.

Recommendations

Following the results and analysis of the data, it should be suggested that we continue to advocate for change and increased support for foster parents today. The more that we continue to advocate for better resources and further parenting education for those wishing to foster the more we as future human service professionals and or researchers help foster children themselves. If foster parents feel more confident in the parenting role and are less wary of building attachments, then the more secure the children may feel in their placements.

The call for support and interventions is often prevalent in today's existing, as there seems to be agreement that more needs to be discovered about how those within the system manage. Providing interventions for foster parents is crucial, as those handling both grievances and the risks associated with wrongful parenting need a lot of support and guidance. This need for support surpasses the understanding that foster children parents need financial and tangible support but as this study pinpoints there is a strong need for both social support and emotional understanding. Thus, we need to study this topic further in hopes of seeking and providing better intervention and support for foster children and parents, especially social support from those experiencing similar circumstances. As future professionals working with families and children, we also must consider the effects of trauma especially in those with alternative family structures such as foster families. We must question whether we adequately prepare foster parents to handle the psychological and behavioral effects often associated with a child's placement into the system. For the better we prepare foster parents for possible scenarios the longer the placements may last and additionally the more the child in the foster parent's care may benefit.

Conclusion

This study established the importance of understanding and emphasizing effective parenting behaviors among foster parents today in hopes of bettering the foster care system and ultimately foster children's experiences and development as a whole. The major findings of this study reveal that by examining a foster parent's parenting approach and behavior, as well as their stress and willingness to develop attachments, one may better determine areas of need, understanding and preparedness to foster. Foster children having increased risks for mental health, behavioral, and past traumatic experiences and concerns require a solid parenting foundation in hopes of bettering their development and reducing the effects of previous inadequate care. Thus, it is the responsibility of future researchers and human family service professionals such as nurses, doctors, social workers, child life specialists, and educators to advocate for proper training, counseling, supervision, and preparation of foster parents. The hope is that with better direction, preparation, and support foster families become more adequately able to provide, encourage, and meet the needs of their foster children. To reiterate, we as researchers and human service professionals need to encourage, advocate for, and initiate further studies surrounding foster care and parenting practices to seek and provide better intervention and support for foster children. We must not only consider the effects of trauma foster children and families endure, but we must initiate action and change by helping foster parents provide a solid developmental foundation for their children. A foster parent should feel supported and secure in their role regardless of the amount of time the child is placed in their care. Ultimately, this study highlights that a foster parent's level of perceived support can often play a role in not only how they establish their parenting practices but how they then manage their stress, and therefore, form positive attachments. By understanding how parenting behaviors, parenting stress, and parent-child attachments interconnect we not only become more educated

and ample to promote positive fostering experiences and we further a foster parent's willingness and excitement in continuing to foster. For not only is it important to understand and empathize with the foster parent's role, responsibilities, and grievances but in doing so we help to better establish ways in which we help foster children. Children in which we, the researchers of this study identify as being a population very much in need of unyielding support and management.

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