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Foster Parent Attitudes Toward Birth Parents and Birth Parent Visitation

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FOSTER PARENT ATTITUDES TOWARD BIRTH PARENTS
AND BIRTH PARENT VISITATION

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
in
Social Work

by
Katherine Kim Person
June 2019

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Approved by:

Dr. Janet Chang, Committee Chair, School of Social Work

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ABSTRACT

Foster parents are a vital component to the child welfare system and play an important role, one of which is supervising parental visitation (Muniz, 2018; Neil et al., 2003). With visitation as the primary intervention for family reunification (Haight et al., 2003), foster parents and birth parents are more than likely to interact with one another at some point in time. The purpose of this research study was to examine if foster parent attitudes toward birth parents influence foster parent attitudes toward birth parent visitation.

Data was collected from 40 participants, 36 females and 4 males, from a foster family agency based in California and Texas. The study used a survey design and questions were distributed in a group setting, a mailed hard-copy, and a web survey link. The study's findings revealed that that when foster parents had a more positive attitude toward birth parents, they had a more positive attitude toward birth parent visitation.

The study concludes with recommendations for public child welfare agencies and foster family agencies to develop trainings for foster parents and for social workers to increase efforts in assisting foster parents and birth parents build cooperative relationships.

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DEDICATION

Thank you, mom for always answering the phone whenever I call and for always being there when I need you. Thank you for all your guidance, love, and endless encouragement. You have shaped me into the woman I am today. I could not have done any of this without you.

I would like to thank my older sister, Gabrielle, for always being my biggest cheerleader. You have been why I keep pursuing my dreams. I hope I always make you proud. I would like to thank my younger sister, Hannah, for challenging me to become a better me. You tell me you look up to me. Well, I look up to you. To my both my sisters, if anyone can change the world, it's you.

Dad, I was scared you were going to be disappointed in me when I resigned from the Sheriff's Department. I appreciate you proving me wrong. Thank you for your support and belief in me.

Vincent, I began this program as your girlfriend and ended it as your wife. This has not been an easy road for us. You have helped me through so much these past two years from planning a wedding to helping me recover through five emotional and life-changing surgeries. You have been and are a blessing to me. You will forever be my person.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Nationwide, in fiscal year 2016, 273,539 children entered out-of-home care, while 250,248 exited out-of-home care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). On September 30, 2016, there were 437,465 children in out-of-home care throughout the United States (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Out-of-home care refers to “non-relative foster homes, relative foster homes, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, and pre-adoptive homes” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). When children are removed from their homes and placed into out-of-home care, the goal is to achieve permanency for the children. Permanency planning focuses on reunifying the child with the biological parents and is the preferred outcome for child welfare services (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

Family Reunification is the primary goal of child welfare services (Haight, Kagle, & Black, 2003; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2002; Wulczyn, Chen & Courtney, 2011) and approximately half of the children placed in out-of-home care will return to their birth parents (Wulczyn et al., 2011). In 2016, 240,605 (55%) of the 437,465 children in out-of-home care had a case plan which listed family reunification as the primary goal and 223,107 (51%) of children were reunified with their parents (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). When children were placed in out-of-home care, majority of the children were either placed in

non-relative foster homes or relative foster homes, 45% and 32% respectively (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

The primary intervention for family reunification is parent visitation (Haight et al., 2003). The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (PL 96-272), a federal statute, explicitly requires parental visitation to be included in reunification efforts (Haight, Black, Mangelsdorf, Giorgio, Tata, Schoppe, & Szewczyk, 2002). According to Haight et al. (2003), visitation is considered critical in maintaining the parent-child relationship and achieving permanency with the biological parents. Most children in the foster care system have contact with their parents through supervised visits; foster parents and the agencies are the most common monitors for visits (Muniz, 2007; Neil, Beek, & Schofield, 2003). Because visitation is prevalent in family reunification cases, there is a need for deeper investigation and research about foster parents' attitudes toward birth parents and their attitudes toward birth family visitation. It is essential to promote positive relationships between foster and birth families and when foster parents are sensitive, understanding, and accepting of birth parents, it helps children understand their place in both their foster family and birth family (Gerring, Kemp, & Marcenko, 2008; McWey, Acock, & Porter, 2010; Neil et al., 2003).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and attitudes toward birth parent visitation. Child welfare practice is

changing, and foster parents have more responsibilities than ever before. Not only do foster parents play an important role in creating a safe and nurturing environment for the child, but they play an important role in helping the birth parents succeed. There has been research conducted on the continuity and frequency of birth parent visitation yet little documentation about the relationships between birth parents and foster parents (Browne, 2002; Chateauneuf, Turcotte, & Drapeau, 2017).

This study was to help identify if foster parent attitudes about the birth parent influences how they view birth family visitation. Since most foster children's plan is family reunification, it would be safe to assume that foster parents will need to communicate with birth parents at some point during the case. The better communication and support between both set of parents would allow for co-parenting to occur and increase the child-caregiver attachment with the birth parents and foster parents. Overall, positive and supportive attitudes between foster and birth parents could potentially decrease the challenges that both families face during a foster placement.

The research design to be employed for this study was a survey design. The study's research participants were foster parents certified with a Non-Profit Foster Family Agency serving counties in California and Texas. The research participants included non-relative foster parents. The study did not include kinship parents, guardianships, or non-related extended family members. The survey consisted of thirty questions including demographic questions, questions

regarding foster parent's attitudes toward birth parents and questions regarding foster parent's attitudes toward birth parent visitation.

Significance to Social Work Practice

The research impacts child welfare services on several levels. Improving the relationship between foster families and biological families can ease the challenges each set of parents' faces, can positively affect the self-esteem of the child and the child's placement (Browne, 2002). Developing an understanding of foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and birth parent visitation should help guide child welfare social workers to assist the birth and foster families into cooperative relationships for the child's well-being while in out-of-home care. Gerring, Kemp, and Marcenko (2008) found when birth parents began to trust foster parents, birth parents began to reveal information about the child that helped the foster family understand the child better and foster parents began to realize the love that children have for their birth parents. Findings of the study will help social workers better understand foster parent attitudes about birth families and may help them find methods and approaches to increase communication and support between foster families and birth families. The child welfare worker has an important role in helping both families come together to create a safe and nurturing environment for the child. The social worker should have an open discussion with all their foster parents to see what difficulties they are facing with birth families to offer them guidance, assistance, and support.

On an agency level, child welfare agencies and foster family agencies can use the findings from this study to develop trainings and offer services to help foster parents understand how to communicate effectively with birth parents, promote positive relationships with birth parents, and understand why these relationships are important for their own family and for the foster children. Becoming a foster parent voluntary but having a child welfare case for a birth parent is not, therefore foster parents have a more important role in creating cooperative and supportive relationships with the birth parent.

Information gathered from this study may help child welfare agencies develop new policy and protocol for child welfare social workers when working with foster parents and birth parents. Public child welfare agencies, private child welfare agencies, and foster family agencies could develop additional trainings and increase education for their social workers as well as for the foster parents.

Research Question

Do foster parent attitudes toward birth parents influence their attitudes toward birth parent visitation?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on past research on foster parent attitudes. The subsections are divided into foster parent attitudes toward birth parent and foster parent attitudes toward birth parent visitation. In this chapter and the subsequent chapters birth parent, biological parent, and natural parent will be used interchangeably. The theories guiding conceptualizing is attachment theory as this theory is the reasoning behind parent-child visitation.

Foster Parent Attitudes toward Birth Parents

Few researchers have studied the one unavoidable relationship between foster parents and birth parents. There is limited data about why foster parents have certain attitudes about birth parents and how these attitudes impact the well-being of the child, the child's placement, and the success of reunification.

Browne (2002) found four main attitudes that foster parents expressed about birth parents including being negative (42%), indifferent (10%), sympathetic (38%) and difficult to relate to (17%). Even though 38% of parents were sympathetic, the remaining 62% were not as tolerant and accepting of birth parents and the attitudes ranged from bitterness, hostility, anger, disapproving and even hostile. Browne (2002) recognized four categories for the problems that foster parents had with the birth family, untrustworthy/unreliable (26%),

insufficient care of child (18%), refuse to release for adoption (10%), and religion (0.8%).

Muniz (2007) showed that 47% of foster mothers had positive perceptions of birth parents because they felt bad for the parents and that the positive perceptions positively influenced their perception of parent-child visitation. Of the other foster mothers, 47% had negative perceptions of birth parents because of their immaturity and their poor decision making. Foster mothers said these negative perceptions did not influence parent-child visitation because the foster parents acknowledged they do not have a say in the matter of visitation.

Communication plays a factor in the relationship between foster parents and birth parents. The findings from Prat's (2010) research showed that 83% of foster parents stated that communication between them and birth parents was vital in building a positive relationship. These foster parents reported building collaboration and rapport (66%), having a non-judgmental attitude (33.3%), modeling behavior (50%), providing photographs (41.6%) and discretion during visitation (41.6%) were important in developing communication and a cooperative relationship with birth parents.

According to Chateauneuf, Turcotte, and Drapeau (2017), 50% of non-relative foster parents reported having a positive relationship with the birth parents and were generally inclined to recognize the impact and influence the biological family has on the child. Non-relative foster parents were found to have a more accepting view of birth parents when compared to relative foster parents.

However, foster children have fewer behavioral problems when placed with relative foster parents than when placed with non-relative foster parents (Chateanuef et al., 2017; Vanschoonlandt, Vanderfaeillie, Van Holen, De Maeyer, & Andries, 2012).

Foster Parent Attitudes toward Birth Parent Visitation

When family reunification is listed as the primary permanency plan, parent visitation is the primary intervention (Haight et al., 2003; McWey et al., 2010; Wulczyn et al., 2011). A study found that 34% of foster parents complained that visitations with the birth parents were not in the best interest for the child and 49% found that visitation causes the child to become disruptive and increase behavior problems (Moyers, Farmer, & Lipscombe, 2006). Neil et al. (2003) found that at least 33% of children in foster care experienced stress after natural parent visitation and over half of adolescents stated that most of their visits with their parents were unhelpful. Some studies have found that foster parents experienced behavior problems with children after birth parent visitation and children experienced a loyalty conflict between birth and foster families (Leathers, 2003; Neil et al. 2003; Sinclair, Wilson, and Gibbs, 2005), whereas other studies have shown that continuous visitation with biological parents can reduce depression, reduce acting out and can help children develop new healthy relationships (Finzi, Ram, Har-Even, Shnit, & Weizman, 2001; McWey & Mullis, 2005). McWey, Acock, and Porter (2010) found that children with continuous

contact with their biological mother had significantly lower externalizing behaviors whereas children with no contact with biological mothers had the highest.

However, according to Leathers (2003), the correlation between the frequency of maternal visitation and the child's depression, was not statistically significant.

According to Sinclair, Wilson, and Gibbs (2005), foster parents should be able to work with birth parents and when they include them in the placement team, it lessened the likelihood of a loyalty conflict while in out-of-home care and potentially later in life. Approximately 12% of these foster parents had nothing to say about the satisfaction of visits because there were no visits, 18% were dissatisfied, about 40% were satisfied with visits, and about 30% had mixed feelings (Sinclair et al., 2005). Muniz (2007) indicated that 87% of foster parents found the visits to be difficult for the child with the child returning home needy, clingy, angry, crying, defiant and with anger tantrums. The main challenges these foster parents faced after visits were dealing with the change in the child's behavior (the child became rude, withdrawn or manipulative) as well as the parent being absent at scheduled visits, inappropriate behavior by the parent, and aggressive behavior by the parent (Muniz,2007; Sinclair et al., 2005). Taylor and McQuillan (2014) reported that authorized telephone contact and unsupervised direct visits with birth parents had a negative impact on the placement.

Foster parents are responsible for managing the child's outbursts and behavior changes before or after a scheduled visit as well as deal with the child's

refusal to attend the visit. Coordinating visits, transportation to visits, and supervising visits may create additional stress on the foster parents. All these challenges may make it difficult for foster parents to support the relationship between the birth parent and the child. For contact visits to be beneficial for the child, birth family and foster family, Salas Martinez, Garcia-Martin, Fuentes, and Bernedo (2016), found visits need to be supported, supervised by professionals, and correctly planned. These researchers also reported that foster parent attitudes toward birth parent visitation will influence the way the child approaches the visits and the negative prejudice the foster parent has about the birth parents will negatively influence the outcome of these visits.

Theory Conceptualization

The attitudes that foster parents have about birth parents may affect the way a child adapts into the foster home as well as how it affects the child's sense of identity. It is not uncommon to hear that certain individuals should have refrained from having children and certain children should never be returned to their care. These negative perceptions of birth parents may interfere with developing healthy attachments between the birth family and their children (Browne, 2002). Grigsby (1994) found that disrupting the parent-child attachment which is built during visitations can be damaging to the well-being of the children in foster placements (as cited in McWey, Acock, & Porter, 2010).

One theory that will be guiding this study will be Attachment Theory. In Attachment Theory, there are three types of attachment styles, secure

attachment, insecure attachment (anxious-avoidant and anxious-ambivalent), and disorganized attachment (Blakely & Dziados, 2015). Marcus (1991) found that there was a negative correlation between children in foster care who exhibit externalizing behaviors and secure attachments (as cited in McWey, 2004).

Children whom have been maltreated and have developed insecure attachments, may still long for their parents' presence even if these parents maltreated them (Goldsmith, Oppenheim, & Wanlass, 2004; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2002).

Insecure attachments developed during infancy and early childhood have been linked with psychosocial disorders, aggressive behavior toward their peers, problems adjusting in school, and psychopathology in their teens (Haight, Kagle, & Black, 2003). If a child has been identified with an insecure attachment, contact visits without supervision are more likely to be unhelpful and can potentially be harmful for the child (Haight et al., 2003).

Children between six months and three years can be strongly affected by separation (Haight et al., 2003). During this stage of life, the child begins to form attachments to their primary caregivers; This is essential for social work practice because birth parent visits with children under the age of three should be more frequent and longer in duration even if family reunification is not a viable option. Infants and young children removed from their biological parents and placed in the foster care system may find their secure base and begin attachment with the primary caregiver in the foster home (Haight et al., 2003). If an attachment was formed between a parent and their child in their early years and it was distorted

by abuse and neglect, establishing an attachment with the foster parents may be essential (Haight et al., 2003).

Children's attachment to their parents is positively correlated with their ability to attach to others (McWey, 2004). "Internal working models become the framework by which the child forms expectations about the predictability of the caregiver's responsiveness and their ability to elicit reactions" (Mcwey, 2004, p.440). Internal working models are ideally to be formed with their primary caregiver during infancy (McWey, 2004) and occur within the first few years of life (Blakely & Dziados, 2015). Bowlby (1969) found that when the internal working models are developed, it becomes very difficult to change over time, but not impossible (as cited in Blakely & Dziados, 2015). A negative working model forms when a parent or caregiver is unresponsive to the child thus creating the child to feel rejected. Feelings of rejection can lead to feelings of worthlessness and a lack of trust in others which is related to insecure attachment styles (Blakely & Dziados, 2015).

Mental health professionals, child welfare workers, and legal professionals should have a basic understanding of attachment theory to help maintain and improve foster children's attachment to their biological parents (Goldsmith, Oppenheim, & Wanlass, 2004). Birth parents should be given education, resources, and support to guide them during visitations to develop a secure attachment with their children. "If changes to attachments can indeed be made,

the transgenerational cycle of disrupted attachments exhibited in the foster care system may be broken” (McWey, 2004, p. 449).

Summary

This chapter discussed the past literature on foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and birth parent visitation. The literature review showed that there are mixed findings and that more research needs to be done to understand these attitudes and how they impact the biological family and the children. This study looked at foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and see if these attitudes impact birth parent visitation. The following chapter will discuss the methods of the study.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study was designed to examine foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and birth parent visitation. This chapter explains how the study was performed. This section will focus on the study's design, recruitment of research participants, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of the study was to examine foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and attitudes toward birth parent visitation. The study was completed through a quantitative survey design and was accomplished using a web survey, mailed survey, and distribution in a group setting. The specific research question was: Do foster parent attitudes toward birth parents influence their attitudes toward birth parent visitation?

The rationale for using a web survey was its accessibility. Potential participants may have access to the internet and email via their phone, tablets, and other technology that will allow them to complete the survey in any location. One of the limitations of using a survey design is usually a low response rate. In an effort to increase response rates, the researcher also mailed a hard copy of the survey to the home addresses on file and distributed the survey in a group

setting. The envelope contained an introduction letter, the informed consent, the survey, and a stamped return envelope addressed to the local FFA office. The researcher attended one monthly meetings at the agency's local office to distribute surveys to foster parents.

Without a large sample size and a high response rate, it is difficult to generalize the findings to a larger population. A second limitation of this study was with a quantitative design, there was no way to ask follow-up questions or to have the research participant explain their response.

Sampling

A list of foster parents was provided by a Foster Family Agency (FFA) with two offices in California and one office in Texas, from which a non-probability availability sampling was taken. There were currently 108 foster families certified with this FFA. In a two-parent foster home, each parent was considered one research participant. Taking into account households with two certified foster parents, there were 160 potential participants contacted. Requesting the survey to be completed by both parents was important because they may have had differing attitudes about birth parents and birth parent visitation. Out of the 160 potential participants, 40 foster parents elected to participate in the study.

Therefore, only foster parents whose email address and home address were valid in the agencies' system were able to participate in the study as well as the foster parents who attended the February monthly meeting. Participants in this study excluded relative foster parents (kinship foster parents) and non-

related extended family members. The participants were diverse in age, ethnicity, and gender.

Data Collection and Instruments

Quantitative data was collected through a self-administered web survey, mailed survey, and in person survey. In January, there were 100 emails sent to the foster parents who had emails on file with the FFA. The email included a Qualtrics Survey Link for the foster parents to complete the survey online. The researcher attended a meeting with the same families approached via email to complete the survey online. At the meeting, there were four foster parents physically present and 12 foster parents present via webcam. The researcher introduced self and discussed the prior email requesting their participation in the study. Third, one hundred letters containing the web link and a hard-copy of the survey were mailed to the same foster families. These three points of contact resulted in 17 weblink responses, 20 mailed-in hard copies, and three hard copy responses returned to the researcher in person.

There were no existing instruments measuring foster parent attitudes toward birth parents. Therefore, for this current study, a newly developed instrument was used to measure foster parent attitudes toward birth parents (independent variable). A pre-existing instrument was used to measure foster parent attitudes toward birth parent visitation (dependent variable).

The dependent variable in this study was foster parent attitudes toward birth parent visitation. An instrument developed by Bernedo et al. (2016)

Evaluation of Contact Visits, was utilized to measure the dependent variable. This instrument was composed of nine statements with Likert-type scale responses to measure foster parent's perceptions of contact visits. The responses are limited to, "strongly disagree", "somewhat disagree", "neither agree nor disagree", "somewhat agree" and "strongly agree". Six of the nine statements were "I/We" statements. For this study, the questions were only "I" statements so that foster parents respond to the survey individually and not as a pair. The reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of this instrument was 0.73.

The independent variable for this study was foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and was measured by using an instrument developed by this investigator for use in this study. This instrument was created by developing specific questions the researcher sought to explore. A strength of this instrument was it was tailored specifically for foster parent attitudes toward birth parents. A limitation to this instrument was it was not tested for reliability and validity; therefore, the validity and reliability of this instrument was unknown. The instrument consisted of nine statements with Likert-type scale responses.

Participants were asked to respond to five demographic questions including marital status, age, gender, ethnicity and education level. There were an additional seven questions about being a foster parent such as their role in the foster home, length of time as a foster parent, number of foster children currently in their care, current foster children with visitation plans, if any formal training was given to foster parents about working with birth parents, if their

social worker helps and offers support when having challenges with birth parents, and the city of their agency. The purpose of gathering demographic and foster parent information was to get a fuller understanding of the population being surveyed.

The survey was distributed via email, mail, and group setting to the prospective research participants during the month of January and February 2019. The completion of the survey took no longer than 20-30 minutes. If the foster home had two or more foster parents, it was recommended for each parent to complete their own survey due to the possible differences in attitudes among couples. There was no incentive to research participants to respond to the survey and is completely voluntary.

Procedures

This survey was self-administered by the research participants and was completed online or was filled out and returned to the researcher. The research participants got an email with a link to take them to a Survey Link Program that recorded their survey responses. The Survey Link Program was anonymous, and the researcher was unable to link the research participant to their responses. Permission to send the link via email was obtained through approval and review by the Foster Family Agency. The research participants were able to complete the survey in any location that offered a wireless network. Completion of the survey took no longer than 20-30 minutes.

An introduction letter was sent through the mail informing the potential research participants about the study and its purpose. The envelope was marked with the agency's logo to increase responses from the participants. Along with the introduction letter, the envelope contained the informed consent, the survey, and a stamped addressed envelope. The letter instructed the participant willing to participate in the study to sign an "X" on the informed consent to maintain the participants confidentiality and to return the consent with the survey. The purpose of sending the hard copy survey was for the research participants who did not have a valid email address on file or did not check their email regularly. The letter included the web link in case the participant wanted to complete the survey online. The researcher sent out a stamped, addressed envelope to make the return process easier for the participant. In addition to the mailed letter, a follow-up email was sent out weekly as a reminder to the potential participant's complete the survey.

The researcher attended a monthly meeting at the local FFA office to meet with the foster parents to distribute the surveys to those willing to participate. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and provided the foster parents with the informed consent. The participants signed the informed consent and returned the completed survey to the researcher immediately after completion.

Each research participant was provided with an informed consent form. The consent form was included in the web survey, the mailed survey, and given to the participants in the group setting. Before the research participants could

answer any questions from the survey, they were required to read the informed consent and agree to the terms. The informed consent explained the purpose of the study, description of the study, confidentiality statement, duration of survey, risks and the benefits.

The survey link was delivered via email during January 2019. The hard-copied survey and the distribution of the survey in the group setting was completed in February 2019. The researcher was the only one collecting data and data collection occurred between January and March 2019. After the data was analyzed, the survey link was destroyed and after five years, the data will be erased.

Protection of Human Subjects

The protection of the anonymity of the research participants was a primary concern for the researcher. Before any data was collected, the research participants had to read and sign the informed consent prior to answering any of the survey questions. The informed consent notified the potential participants that their participation completely voluntary and they could stop taking the survey at any time without consequence. Clients were notified that their participation or non-participation would not affect their certification with the Foster Family Agency.

To protect the research participants in the study, there was very limited personal identifying information collected by the survey. The research participants did not disclose their names, names of children, addresses, or date

of birth on the survey. Each research participant received the same survey link. The researcher guaranteed there was no misuse of the data and would not attempt to link the responses to individual participants.

This researcher and faculty advisor were the only individuals to be reviewing the data collected. The researcher was the only one to access the recorded data via the online program and maintained the security of the hard-copies. The data was not released to any third party including the Foster Family Agency; the data will be reported only in group format. After the data was analyzed, the survey link will be destroyed and after five years, the data will be erased.

Deception was not utilized in this study; therefore, no debriefing statement was necessary. There were no risks nor benefits for completing the survey. The faculty advisor's contact information was provided to the research participants through the informed consent. Participants were informed of when the results of the survey will be available and where they can access the information.

Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed using quantitative data analysis techniques. There were one independent and one dependent variable for this study. The data collected from the survey was inputted into a system called SPSS, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, which was utilized for statistical analysis. The independent variable was foster parent attitudes toward birth parents. The dependent variable was foster parent attitudes toward birth

parent visitation. Independent and dependent variables were analyzed using a correlation analysis.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic information collected from research participants. The descriptive statistics included univariate statistics such as frequency distributions, measures of central tendency and measures of variables. Inferential statistics included a simple analysis of the variance to determine the relationship between foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and attitudes toward birth parent visitation.

Summary

The survey was sent out via email, mail, and distributed in a group setting. The information gathered was utilized to examine foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and attitudes toward birth parent visitation. Research participants were recruited using availability sampling by utilizing foster parents from a foster family agency. Research participants completed the survey online or a hard copy and responded to 30 questions pertaining to demographics, foster parenting, attitudes toward birth parents and attitudes toward birth parent visitation. Each research participant read and agreed to the informed consent prior to answering the survey. The participants were notified that participation was voluntary, anonymous and informed of the risks and benefits to ensure their protection.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine if foster parent attitudes toward birth parents influence their attitudes toward birth parent visitation. This chapter is to present the findings of the research study. The chapter includes a summary of the demographic information of participants and a summary of the foster parent characteristics. The correlation between foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and foster parent attitudes toward birth parent visitation is discussed.

Data Results

Demographics of Participants

There was a total of 40 participants in this study. Of the 40 participants, 25 (62.5%) are married, 14 (35%) are single, and 1 (2.5%) is cohabitating. Nearly half of the participants (47.5%) are 50 or more years of age, 6 (15%) participants are 46-50 years of age, 6 (15%) participants are 41-45 years of age, 5 (12.5%) participants are 36-40 years of age, and 4 (10%) participants are 31 to 35 years of age. The participants were made up of 36 (90%) females and 4 (10%) males. Out of 40 participants, 16 (40%) are African American, 11 (28.2%) are Latin American, 10 (25.6%) are White American, 1 (2.6%) is Asian/Pacific Islander American, and 1 (2.5%) classified themselves as Other. Regarding education levels of participants, 13 (32.5%) have some college, 9 (22.5%) have a four-year

degree, 7 (17.5%) have a professional degree, 5 (12.5%) have a two-year degree, 4 (10%) are a high school graduate and 2 (5%) have less than high school (see Table 1. Demographics of Participants).

Table 1. Demographics of Participants

Variable	Frequencies (n)	Percentages (%)
Marital Status:		
Married	25	62.5
Single	14	35.0
Cohabiting	1	2.5
Age:		
31-35	4	10.0
36-40	5	12.5
41-45	6	15.0
46-50	6	15.0
51+	19	47.5
Gender:		
Male	4	10.0
Female	36	90.0
Race/Ethnicity:		
White American	10	25.6
African American	16	41.0
Latino American	11	28.2
Asian/Pacific Islander American	1	2.6
Other	1	2.6
Highest Level of Education:		
Less than High School	2	5.0
High School Graduate	4	10.0
Some College	13	32.5
2-year degree	5	12.5
4-year degree	9	22.5
Professional degree	7	17.5

Foster Parent Characteristics

Out of the 40 participants, 31 (86.1%) classified themselves as the foster mother, 4 (11.1%) as the foster father, and 1 (2.8%) as the foster grandmother. Over 27% of participants have three to five years' experience as a foster/resource parent, 22.2% have five to seven years, 16.7% have seven or more years, 16.7% have one to three years, and 16.7% have less than one-year experience. In regard to the number of foster children currently in their care, 11 (32.4%) participants have two children, eight (23.5) have one child, seven (20.6%) have three children, 4 (11.8%) have no children, and 4 (11.8%) have 4 or more children.

Nearly 59% of participants currently have foster children participating in visitation with birth parents and about 41% of participants do not have foster children in their care participating in visitations. Out of the 40 participants, 28 (77.8%) report having received formal training from their foster family agency regarding how to work with birth parents, whereas 4 (11.1%) did not receive formal training and 4 (11.1%) do not know if they received formal training. Over half of participants (52.8%) "strongly agree" that their social worker helps them deal with challenges when working with birth parents whereas only 2.8% "strongly disagree". Of the 40 participants, 5 did not disclose their office's location (See Table 2. Foster Parent Characteristics).

Table 2. Foster Parent Characteristics

Variable	Frequencies (n)	Percentages (%)
Role in the Foster Home:		
Foster Mother	31	86.1
Foster Father	4	11.1
Foster Grandmother	1	2.8
How long have you been a foster/resource parent?		
0-1 years	6	16.7
1-3 years	6	16.7
3-5 years	10	27.8
5-7 years	8	22.2
7 or more years	6	16.7
Number of foster children currently in your care:		
0	4	11.8
1	8	23.5
2	11	32.4
3	7	20.6
4 or more	4	11.8
Are any of the foster children in your home having visitation with birth parents?		
Yes	20	58.8
No	14	41.2
Have you received any formal training from your foster family agency regarding how to work with birth parents?		
Yes	28	77.8
No	4	11.1
I Don't Know	4	11.1
My current social worker helps me when having challenges working with birth parents:		
Strongly Agree	19	52.8
Somewhat agree	8	22.2
Neither agree nor disagree	7	19.4
Somewhat disagree	1	2.8
Strongly disagree	1	2.8

Foster Parent Attitudes Toward Birth Parents

The instrument used to measure foster parent attitudes toward birth parents was created by the researcher for this study. The instrument's internal consistency reliability is adequate (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.72). The responses to the questions were answered on a Likert Scale and scored with the value of 1 meaning strongly agree and the value of 5 meaning strongly disagree. Foster parent attitudes toward birth parents has a mean score of 2.55 (SD=.61). A mean score of 2.55 represents that the participants have a more positive attitude toward birth parents. The statements the participants were more likely to agree with included, "I talk about the birth family positively when the child asks" (mean=1.59), "I cooperate with birth parents" (mean=1.62), "Birth parents' past trauma impacts the decisions they've made" (mean=1.87), and "I empathize with birth parents when they make mistakes" (mean=2.34). (See Table 3. Foster Parent Attitudes Toward Birth Parents).

Table 3. Foster Parent Attitudes Toward Birth Parents

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Abusive Parents should be able to reunify with their children	3.44	1.34
I believe I can offer a better life for the child than their birth parents*	3.72	1.02
Biological parents cause emotional harm to their children who are in foster care*	3.66	1.07
I talk about the birth parents positively when the child asks	1.59	.80
I cooperate with the birth parents	1.62	.91
Birth parents have positive qualities and strengths	2.28	1.17
I empathize with birth parents when they make mistakes	2.34	1.33
Birth parents past trauma impacts the decisions they've made	1.87	1.04
If children were removed from their parents' care, they should not be reunified*	2.12	1.23

* *Items have been reversed coded*

Foster Parent Attitudes Toward Birth Parent Visitation

Foster parent attitudes toward birth parent visitation was measured by using the Evaluation of Contact Visits (Salas Martinez et al., 2016). The instrument's reliability is adequate (Cronbach's Alpha= 0.802). The responses to the questions were answered on a Likert Scale and scored with the value of 1 meaning strongly agree and the value of 5 meaning strongly disagree. Foster

parent attitudes toward birth parent visitation has a mean score of 2.30 (SD=0.72). A mean score of 2.30 represents that the participants have a more positive attitude toward birth parent visitation.

The statements participants are more likely to agree with included, “I give positive messages to the child about his/her parents” (mean=1.58), “I encourage the child to attend the contact visits” (mean=1.94), and “I facilitate telephone contact between the child and his/her parents” (mean=1.97). The statement participants are more likely to agree with also included, “Contact visits have a negative impact on the child’s behavior (See Table 4. Foster Parent Attitudes Toward Birth Parent Visitation).

There is a positive moderate correlation between foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and attitudes toward birth parent visitation (Pearson’s $r=0.422$, $p=.012$). The findings show the relationship between both variables is statistically significant. This means that the more positive attitudes foster parents have about birth parents, the more positive attitudes foster parents will have about birth parent visitation.

Table 4. Foster Parent Attitudes Toward Birth Parent Visitation

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
The child accepts the visitation agreement	2.12	1.16
I accept the visitation agreement	2.03	1.07
The child is usually distressed prior to the visits*	2.97	1.24
Contact visits have a negative impact on the child's behavior*	3.63	1.11
I give positive messages to the child about his/her parents	1.58	.79
I encourage the child to attend the contact visits	1.93	1.02
I facilitate telephone contact between the child and his/her parents	1.97	1.10
I have difficulties taking the child to the contact venue*	3.64	1.30
I believe that contact visits are positive for the child	2.51	1.15

* *Items have been reversed coded.*

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter will present the discussion of the major findings from the study as well as their relevance to existing literature. Also presented in this chapter are the limitations of the study, social work implications, and recommendations for social work practice, policy and future research. Lastly, the chapter will conclude with a summary of the study.

Discussion

The participants in the study were diverse in terms of marital status, levels of education, and ethnicity. Of the 40 respondents, 36 were females and 4 were males. Most of the participants were African American with only one participant an Asian/Pacific Islander American. Almost half of participants were over the age of 50. The data showed that older foster parents (50 years or older) were overrepresented in this study's sample. It appears as an individual gets older, they are more likely to become a foster parent.

Over three-quarters of the participants stated that they have received formal training from their agency regarding how to work with birth parents. As foster parents' roles and responsibilities have changed over the past years, it is important for child welfare agencies to adapt and develop trainings to help foster parents learn how to work cooperatively with challenging birth parents. In this

study, over half of participants “strongly agree” that their social worker helps them when facing challenges with birth parents. These findings are consistent with those of Austerberry et al. (2013) who found that majority of foster parents felt “well supported” by the social worker in helping manage contact with the birth parents.

This study’s findings showed that foster parents have a more positive attitude toward birth parents. This finding is consistent with the study finding of Chateauneuf et al., (2017) who found that 50% of non-relative foster parents reported having a positive relationship with birth parents. These researchers found that non-relative foster parents were more likely to recognize the positive impact and influence biological families have on the child. However, this study’s findings are not consistent with Browne (2002) and Muniz (2008) who found foster parents have more negative attitudes toward birth parents.

The findings from this study showed that foster parents have a more positive attitude toward birth parent visitation. These findings are not consistent with all current research. Sinclair et al. (2005) found that 40% of parents were satisfied with birth parent visitation whereas Moyers et al. (2006) reported that 34% of parents stated visitations were not in the best interest for the child. This study may have produced a different finding due to this sample’s comparatively small sample size and the population the sample came from.

The findings from this study also showed that the foster parents were more likely to agree that contact visits have a negative impact on the child’s

behavior. This finding is consistent with Moyers et al. (2006) that visitation causes children to become disruptive and increase behavior problems. Muniz (2008) found that 87% of foster parents found visitation to be difficult with the child returning home needy, crying, angry, defiant with anger tantrums. Due to these consistent findings, it is important for the foster families to prepare the children for visits with their parents and important for the birth families to learn how to help the children smoothly transition back to the foster family. Even though the participants were more likely to believe that contact visits negatively impacted the child's behavior, the participants still had more positive attitudes toward birth parent visitation. This is significant because this finding shows that foster parents' personal beliefs of the impact of visitation on the child's behavior did not influence their overall attitude of birth parent visitation.

In this study, the data showed a positive correlation between foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and foster parent attitudes toward birth parent visitation. The results from this study suggest that if foster parents develop a more positive attitude toward birth parents, their attitudes toward birth parent visitation may also be more positive. There is limited research conducted examining the relationship between attitudes toward birth parents and birth parent visitation. Muniz (2008) found that foster parents had negative perceptions of birth parents, however their negative perceptions did not influence parental visitation because foster parents acknowledged they do not have say in the matter of visitation. This relates to the finding that foster parents are more likely

to agree that they encourage the child to attend visitation even though they believe that contact visits negatively impact the child's behavior. More research needs to be conducted to ensure that negative perceptions of birth parents do not influence attitudes toward visitation because visitation is the primary intervention for family reunification (Haight et al., 2003; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2002; Wulczyn et al., 2011).

In this study, 40% of participants stated that the children in their care are not having visitation with their birth parents. Family reunification services are not always offered to birth parents, but those who do have reunification services are allowed visitation. Haight et al. (2003) found that children between six months of age and three years can be strongly affected by separation. McWey (2004) reported that children's attachment to their parents is positively correlated with their ability to attach to others. Child welfare agencies and social workers need to ensure that foster parents are adhering to the visitation agreement because an effective and positive visitation plan relies on collaboration (Salas Martinez et al., 2010, p.481).

Limitations

The most significant limitation of the study was the sample size. There were 160 potential participants for this study, but only 40 foster parents participated in the study. The population of participants came from only one foster family agency and from only the offices in California; No potential participants responded from Texas. The small sample size and the population

from which they came limits the generalizability of the findings because the population was not inclusive of foster parents outside of this one agency. The gender variation of participants was limited. Of the 40 participants, only four were male. The gender variation also compromised generalizability because not enough males responded to allow for a more representative attitude from male foster parents.

A second limitation was the instrument used to measure foster parent attitudes toward birth parents. This instrument was created for use in this study by this researcher and was not pre-tested for reliability and validity. The wording of a question in the instrument could have negatively influenced participants. For example, the question, “Abusive parents should be able to reunify with their children” would have been more neutral if the researcher had used people first language such as, “Parents who have abused their children should be able to reunify with them

Implications for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

The study’s findings provided insight on foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and their attitudes toward birth parents visitation. Social workers should continue working with foster parents in learning how to overcome challenges with birth parents. Only half of the participants “strongly agree” that their social worker helps them when facing challenges with birth parents which shows quite a bit of room for improvement. Social workers need to be available and empathic to

foster parents when they are facing difficulties with birth parents. The findings from this study show that foster parent attitudes toward birth parents positively influence their attitudes toward visitation. If social workers can help foster parents understand why birth parents may be uncooperative and hostile toward them, their attitudes toward birth parents may also become more positive.

Birth parents have been traumatized themselves, have mental health issues, and substance abuse problems. Social workers need to work alongside foster parents in guiding them to better understand that the negative behavior and attitudes coming from birth parents are not personal. As Salas Martinez et al. (2010) found, the visitation agreement relies on foster parent collaboration with birth parent. If social workers practice includes building collaboration skills and communication among foster parents and birth parents, it will increase foster parents' positive attitudes toward birth parents and birth parent visitation and decrease the loyalty conflict the child may face in placement and later in life (Sinclair et al. 2005).

The child welfare agency is responsible for educating their workers on how to effectively work with birth parents and how to assist foster parents in working with birth parents. Policies within the agency and organization level should incorporate additional trainings for social workers to build upon their existing knowledge of empowering foster parents to overcome birth parent challenges. The agencies should conduct evaluations of their foster parents' views of the helpfulness of their social workers. The data could be used to

evaluate what their foster parents need from their social worker and the agency. It is challenging to recruit foster parents, so it is the agency's responsibility to work toward ensuring the current foster families' passion for foster parenting does not disappear. This would not only benefit the current foster families, but it could create a more supportive environment for future foster families. Lastly, the agencies should review and implement relational interventions from the Birth Family-Foster Family Connections (Gerring et al., 2008). The relational interventions were aimed to support connections between foster families, birth families, and the child welfare system and resulted in a strong relationship among the parents and the social worker, increase in parent-child visitation, and extensive positive contact between foster parents and birth parents.

There is little documentation about the relationship between birth parents and foster parents (Browne, 2002; Chateaufneuf et al., 2017). There is a need for more in-depth research about why there are negative attitudes toward birth parents and where these attitudes come from. Future research should be of a qualitative design because it allows for deeper investigation into what is being studied. In this study, 40% of respondents stated that the children in their care were not having birth parent visitation. A qualitative design would allow for the researcher to investigate why the children were not participating in visitation. The findings from this study are meant to improve on the current research and to guide future research.

Conclusions

Foster parents are a vital component to the child welfare system. Foster parents play an important role and hold many responsibilities and one of which is supervising parental visitation (Muniz, 20018; Neil et al., 2003). With visitation as the primary intervention for family reunification (Haight et al., 2003), foster parents and birth parents are more than likely to interact with one another at some point in time. Therefore, the purpose of this research study was to examine if foster parent attitudes toward birth parents influence foster parent attitudes toward birth parent visitation.

Data was collected from 40 participants, 36 females and 4 males, from a foster family agency based in California and Texas. The study used a survey design and questions were distributed in a group setting, a mailed hard-copy, and a web survey link. From the participant's responses, the findings were that foster parents had more positive attitude toward birth parents as well as a more positive attitude toward birth parent visitation. This study also found that the more positive attitudes foster parents have toward birth parents, the more positive attitudes they will have toward birth parent visitation.

Public child welfare agencies and foster family agencies should develop trainings for their foster parents to educate them on the importance of parent-child attachment and how visitations are meant to help build and/or strengthen that attachment. Social worker practice needs to include building collaboration

skills and communication among foster parents and birth parents in order to improve their experiences within the child welfare system.

The results of this study are consistent with some prior research but not all. Due the mixed findings in literature, future research should continue to examine foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and attitudes toward birth parent visitation.

APPENDIX A
FOSTER PARENT ATTITUDES TOWARD BIRTH PARENTS
INSTRUMENT

Foster Parent Attitudes Toward Birth Parents

(Developed by Researcher)

- 1= Strongly Disagree
- 2= Somewhat disagree
- 3= Neither Agree or Disagree
- 4= Somewhat Agree
- 5= Strongly Agree

Using the 1-5 scale above, rate each of these statements.

1 Abusive parents should be able to reunify with their children.

1 2 3 4 5

2 I believe I can offer a better life for the child than their birth parents.

1 2 3 4 5

3 Biological parents cause emotional harm to their children who are in foster care.

1 2 3 4 5

4 I talk about the birth family positively when the child asks.

1 2 3 4 5

5 I cooperate with the birth parents.

1 2 3 4 5

6 Birth parents have positive qualities and strengths.

1 2 3 4 5

7 I empathize with birth parents when they make mistakes.

1 2 3 4 5

8 Birth parents' past trauma impacts the decisions they've made.

1 2 3 4 5

9 If children were removed from their parents' care, they should not be reunified.

1 2 3 4 5

APPENDIX B
EVALUATION OF CONTACT VISITS INSTRUMENT

Evaluation of Contact Visits
(Salas Martinez et al., 2010)

- 1= Strongly Disagree
- 2= Somewhat Disagree
- 3= Neither Agree or Disagree
- 4= Somewhat Agree
- 5= Strongly Agree

Using the 1-5 scale above, rate each of these statements.

1. The child accepts the visitation arrangement

1 2 3 4 5

2. I accept the visitation arrangement

1 2 3 4 5

3. The child is usually distressed prior to the visits

1 2 3 4 5

4. Contact visits have a negative impact on the child's behavior

1 2 3 4 5

5. I give positive messages to the child about his/her parents

1 2 3 4 5

6. I encourage the child to attend the contact visits

1 2 3 4 5

7. I facilitate telephone contact between the child and his/her parents

1 2 3 4 5

8. I have difficulties taking the child to the contact venue

1 2 3 4 5

9. I believe that contact visits are positive for the child

1 2 3 4 5

APPENDIX C
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee

Researcher(s) Katherine Person

Proposal Title Foster Parent Attitudes Toward Birth Parents
and Birth parent Visitation

SW1908

Your proposal has been reviewed by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board. The decisions and advice of those faculty are given below.

Proposal is:

- approved
- to be resubmitted with revisions listed below
- to be forwarded to the campus IRB for review

Revisions that must be made before proposal can be approved:

- faculty signature missing
- missing informed consent debriefing statement
- revisions needed in informed consent debriefing
- data collection instruments missing
- agency approval letter missing
- CITI missing
- revisions in design needed (specified below)

James Chen
Committee Chair Signature

12/17/2018
Date

Distribution: White-Coordinator; Yellow-Supervisor; Pink-Student

APPENDIX D
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate in is designed to examine foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and birth parent visitation. The study is being conducted by Katherine Person, an MSW student under the supervision of Dr. Janet Chang, a faculty advisor and professor in the School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Committee, California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to examine foster parent attitudes toward birth parents and attitudes toward birth parent visitation.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked to respond to five demographic questions, seven foster parent questions, nine questions regarding attitude toward birth parents and nine questions regarding attitudes toward birth parent visitation.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation is completely voluntary, and you do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. You may skip or not answer any questions and can freely withdraw from participation at any time without any consequence. The Foster Family Agency will not be notified of participation or non-participation.

ANONYMOUS: Your responses will remain anonymous and data will be reported in group form only. The researcher will be unable to link responses to individuals.

DURATION: It will take 20 to 30 minutes to complete the survey.

RISKS: There are no foreseeable risks to the participants. Participation will not impact your certification with the Foster Family Agency.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Janet Chang at 909-537-5184 (jchang@csusb.edu)

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the California State University, San Bernardino ScholarWorks Database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu>) after September 2019.

CONFIRMATION STATEMENT: I have read the information above and agree to participate in your study.

NON-CONFIRMATION STATEMENT: If you do not wish to proceed with the survey, you may close the browser. Thank you for the time you took to read through the informed consent.

If you have any questions regarding the survey, please feel free to contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Janet Chang, at 909-537-5184 or at jchang@csusb.edu

If you are interested in the results of the study, visit the California State, University San Bernardino ScholarWorks database (<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) after September 2019.

California State University, San Bernardino
Social Work Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee
APPROVED 12/17/2018 VOID AFTER 12/16/2019
IRB# SW 1908 CHAIR Janet Chang

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