

A Comparison of Family Foster Parents Who Quit, Consider Quitting, and Plan to Continue Fostering

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We examine why some foster families continue to foster whereas others do not. Reasons for quitting include lack of agency support, poor communication with caseworkers, lack of say in foster children's future, and difficulties with foster children's behavior. As compared with continuing foster parents, former foster parents and foster parents planning to quit say that they receive less postlicensure training and are less likely to have a foster-parent mentor. As compared with continuing and former foster parents, current foster parents planning to quit are more likely to say they need day care, transportation, and help with health-care costs.

High dropout rates of family foster parents concern most child welfare agencies. Despite trends away from out-of-home placements (Pecora et al. 1992; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1997), the number of children in foster care increased from 262,000 in 1982 to 547,000 in 1999 (Tatara 1998; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

2000). Seventy-four percent of children in foster care on March 31, 1999, were living in family foster homes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000). The remaining 26 percent were in other types of care, such as residential or group homes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000). Approximately two-thirds of the children in family foster homes reside in nonkinship homes and the remainder in kinship homes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000), although considerable variation exists across states in the percentage of children in kinship and nonkinship homes (U.S. General Accounting Office 1999).

Family foster parents are thus the main front-line service providers. David Fanshel and Eugene Shinn (1978) observe, "we can think of no greater influence on the well-being of foster children while they are in care than those who directly minister to their needs" (p. 496). Family foster homes are increasingly crucial resources for agencies because federal and state funding for child welfare has not kept pace with the needs of children and families (Trupin et al. 1993; Burns et al. 1995; Blumberg et al. 1996; Glisson 1996; Risley-Curtiss et al. 1996). Faced with the disparity between children's needs and the availability of social, mental health, and medical services, agencies rely on family foster home placements to alleviate problems of children in care.

Unfortunately, there is a shortage of family foster homes, and a large and increasing number of children in out-of-home care need family foster homes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1993; Pasztor and Wynne 1995; U.S. General Accounting Office 1995). The shortage limits case-planning options and jeopardizes the quality of services provided to foster children. It contributes to placement disruptions, placement in unnecessarily restrictive and otherwise inappropriate environments, overcrowding, and mismatched children and foster families (U.S. General Accounting Office 1989; Pasztor and Wynne 1995; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1995; Denby and Rindfleisch 1996).

Recruiting new family foster homes is one way of ensuring an adequate supply. However, recruitment is a costly, time-consuming activity that has not yielded enough foster families to meet the demands for placements (Friedman et al. 1980; Rodwell and Biggerstaff 1993). Retention of qualified foster families decreases the reliance on recruitment. It also increases the chances that children are placed with skilled, experienced foster parents and, ultimately, that they experience placement stability (Cautley and Aldridge 1975; Stone and Stone 1983; Walsh and Walsh 1990).

Although agencies expect a certain number of homes to close because of normal family circumstances or retirement, there are reports that some foster care agencies lose 30–50 percent of family foster homes each

year (Chamberlain, Moreland, and Reid 1992; Pasztor and Wynne 1995). Most research suggests that foster parents quit because they do not have enough information about foster care and are dissatisfied both with agency interactions and the level of agency services for them and their children (U.S. General Accounting Office 1989; National Commission on Family Foster Care 1991; Rodwell and Biggerstaff 1993; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1993; Pasztor and Wynne 1995). However, little of this information is comparative, because studies do not examine foster parents who quit, those who continue fostering, and those who plan to quit. The latter group is of particular interest because it can benefit the most from an agency's retention efforts.

Foster parents have varying levels of knowledge about child welfare, foster care, child maltreatment, child development, and parenting. Families also have a wide range of personal, financial, and community resources that contribute to their ability to care for children and their willingness to continue as foster parents. In order to train foster parents and best allocate scarce agency resources, foster care agencies need systematic information about which activities and services are associated with foster parent retention.

Empirical Background

Factors Related to Home Closures

Descriptive reports of closed foster homes suggest five main reasons for foster parents' leaving fostering. First, foster homes close because of normal life changes in family circumstances. Approximately 20 percent (Jones 1975; Ryan 1985; Triseliotis, Borland, and Hill 1998) to 65 percent (Baring-Gould et al. 1983) of foster parents reported leaving because of family changes such as moving, changes in employment, pregnancy, changes in health, and death of a spouse. Homes also close after parents adopt a foster child (Triseliotis et al. 1998). Second, foster parents quit because they are dissatisfied with agency relationships, have poor communication with caseworkers, perceive caseworkers as unresponsive, and receive inadequate services (Jones 1975; Baring-Gould et al. 1983; Triseliotis et al. 1998). Third, some are not prepared to foster. Fewer than half of foster parents report receiving training (Jones 1975; Baring-Gould et al. 1983), and Patricia Ryan (1985) finds that 32 percent of foster parents without training dropped out as compared with 11 percent of trained foster parents. Fourth, foster parents quit because of many stresses associated with caring for foster children, including those arising from children's difficult behavior, interactions with birth parents, allegations of abuse, and lack of respite care (Baring-Gould et al. 1983; Triseliotis et al. 1998). Finally, foster parents quit because of problems

in relationships between foster children and their biological children (Baring-Gould et al. 1983; Triseliotis et al. 1998).

Comparison of Current and Former Foster Homes

Several studies identify differences between samples of currently licensed foster parents and former foster parents whose homes closed. Lois Urquhart (1989) examines how separation and loss affected foster parents. She finds that current foster parents were more likely to receive training to prepare them for dealing with loss. She also found that current foster parents were more involved in case-planning activities than were former foster parents.

Ramona Denby and Nolan Rindfleisch (1996) examine conditions that influence willingness to continue as foster parents. They find significant differences between African- and European-American foster parents and between current and former foster homes. Current African-American foster parents were more concerned about dealing with children's behavior problems than were their European-American counterparts. Former foster parents were less concerned with behavior problems than were current foster parents. African-American foster parents registered more concerns about children returning to undesirable circumstances and about the low board rates for fostering. European-American foster parents were more influenced by conflict with the child's caseworker. Both groups reported that agency red tape affected their decision to continue, but European-American foster parents reported this concern more often than did African-American foster parents. African-American foster parents felt more positively toward the agency and workers. Groups also differed in their understanding of agency expectations. More current European-American than current African-American foster parents reported that they understood agency expectations clearly. Former African-American and European-American foster parents did not differ on how clearly they understood agency expectations, but they were less clear about this matter than were current foster parents. Current and former European-American foster parents expressed concern about the time involved in fostering. This matter concerned African-American foster parents less.

Rindfleisch, Gerald Bean, and Denby (1998) surveyed 720 closed homes and 804 randomly selected current homes to test a model predicting continuance or discontinuance of foster parents. Foster parents' inability to adopt and negative perceptions of agency procedures predicted quitting, as did inadequate support from other foster parents, having more than one foster care worker assigned to their home, and perceiving foster care workers as not available. Also, foster homes were more likely to close if foster parents were named in abuse allegations, perceived the

payment as too low, had a significant personal loss, or believed that children are returned to unfavorable situations.

Foster Parent Satisfaction

A general consensus from studies is that foster parents quit because they are dissatisfied with agency policies and practices (U.S. General Accounting Office 1989; National Commission on Family Foster Care 1991). Bronwyn Fees et al. (1998) find that foster parents' assessment of the usefulness of training was related to greater role satisfaction. Andrew Sanchirico et al. (1998) report that foster parents involved in service planning were more satisfied than those who did not take an active part in decision making. Training and interaction with social workers increased foster parents' involvement. Denby, Rindfleisch, and Bean (1999) find that factors predicting low levels of satisfaction include a lack of confidence in handling the types of children placed in care, problems dealing with children's difficult behaviors, and concerns about the time invested in children. High levels of satisfaction were related to wanting to take children who need loving parents, perceiving that foster care workers give needed information, and seeing foster care workers as approving of their efforts.

Denby et al. (1999) also examine how foster parents' satisfaction is related to their intent to continue as foster parents. When they considered satisfaction with fostering, agency affiliation, agency responsiveness, shared experiences with other foster parents, and foster parents' willingness to call the child's social worker, satisfaction with foster parenting exerted the strongest influence on foster parents' decisions to continue. Other factors predicting intent to continue included being able to deal with children's difficult behavior, being affiliated with a private agency, and having access to social services and social support.

In summary, previous research suggests that retention of foster parents is influenced by training, communication between foster parents and caseworkers, foster parent input into and agreement with case planning, and access to social services. However, there is limited research examining the reasons some foster families continue fostering and others do not. Even less is known about families currently fostering who intend to quit. For the most part, what is known is based on local samples of unknown representativeness. Furthermore, most studies have examined a relatively circumscribed number of potential variables of interest. Clearly, more and better data are needed to determine what agencies can do to retain foster parents in order to decrease the negative impact of foster family shortages on foster children, families, and agencies.

The purpose of this study is to examine why some foster parents continue to foster whereas others do not, using a nationally selected sample of current and former family foster homes. The study examines three groups of foster parents: (1) current foster parents who plan to continue,

(2) current foster parents who plan to quit, and (3) foster parents who already have quit fostering. The study asks if these groups differ demographically and if differences are evident in their perceptions of foster parent training, the services they need, the services received, and unmet service needs. What is learned from this analysis can be applied to understanding factors related to retention, to dissuading families at risk from leaving foster care, to screening foster parent applicants for their potential to continue as service providers, and to understanding the varied needs of foster families.

Methods

The data for this analysis are from the National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents (NSC&FFP) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1993). The NSC&FFP was conducted in 1991, and it is the only study of current and former foster families that is based on a nationally selected sample. The purpose of the NSC&FFP was to collect extensive information that would be useful in agency and public policy planning regarding recruitment and retention of foster parents. However, the analysis of these data has to date been limited to that presented in the initial report. The survey authors observe "it is important to note that the extent of the analysis conducted under this contract was limited by available resources. The foster parent data bases provide a rich source of information which can be used by others to further examine foster parent recruitment and retention issues." (p. 11)

The NSC&FFP used a case-control design (Schlesselman 1982). In a case-control study, subjects with a particular condition (e.g., foster families who quit fostering) are selected for comparison with individuals who do not have the condition (e.g., foster families who continue fostering).

Sample

The NSC&FFP uses a multistage stratified sampling design with probability sampling at each stage so that the findings generalize to the U.S. population of approved, licensed, or certified foster families. States are stratified by level of foster care payment. Counties are stratified by the degree of urbanicity and the level of unemployment. Foster parents are stratified by their current and former status. Current foster parents are further stratified by their length of service. Ultimately, data were collected from foster parents living in 27 counties in nine states. The unweighted sample contains 1,048 current and 265 former foster homes.

Samples are selected based on lists of current and former foster parents provided by the counties. Twenty-two percent of the original sample was excluded because of various problems in these lists, including undeliverable surveys, wrong or disconnected telephone numbers, deceased

foster parents, incorrect identification of a parent as a foster parent, or failure of sites to permit direct follow-ups.

Former foster parents selected for the sample in this study started as foster parents in 1985 or later. For purposes of comparability, only current foster homes started by 1985 are examined in our study. Also, the focus of this article is on nonkinship family foster homes. Nonkinship family foster care is the most prevalent type of substitute care for children. Studies of kinship foster care suggest that kinship foster parents often are grandmothers or aunts (Dubowitz, Feigelman, and Zuravin 1993; Berrick, Barth, and Needel 1994; Dubowitz et al. 1994; Berrick 1997), have different placement experiences (Inglehart 1994), and see their roles with children, birth families, and the agency somewhat differently than do nonrelative foster parents (Berrick et al. 1994; Le Prohn 1994; Pecora, Le Prohn, and Nasuti 1999). The concerns of those providing kinship or group care might be different in important ways from those providing nonkinship family foster care. Consequently, family foster homes approved to provide kinship care, group care, or unspecified "other" types of foster care were excluded. Additionally, some foster parents indicated they did not want to complete the survey. Those who did not complete the mail survey were asked to complete the survey by telephone. Data were collected from these respondents using a short telephone interview. Only foster homes completing the long version of the survey questionnaire are included in this analysis, because there is extensive missing data for respondents completing the short telephone interview.

Of the total sample of 1,048 current foster homes, 336 were approved in 1985 or after. Of these homes, 317 completed the long interview form (94 percent), 294 indicated they were approved as family foster homes, and 267 family foster homes were not approved as a kinship, group, or an "other" type of foster home.

The subsample of 267 current foster families was further divided into parents who planned to continue fostering and parents who planned to quit fostering. This was done to identify the percentage of current foster family homes at risk for discontinuance and to identify factors that might explain why some current foster families plan to continue and others do not. Of the 267 current family foster homes, 193 planned to continue fostering, 59 said they did not, and 15 did not answer this question and were excluded from analyses. Thus, a total of 252 current homes are included in the current study.

Of the total sample of 265 former foster homes, 144 completed the long interview form (54 percent), and 109 of these were approved as a foster home in 1985 or after. Of these cases, 92 were approved to be a family foster home. Those approved to provide kinship, group, or "other" types of foster care were excluded, and analyses were conducted with the remaining 86 former family foster homes.

The population-weighted sample was used in order to obtain representative national estimates. Estimates were computed using the Jackknife (JK1) replication approach. The replicate and full-sample weights were used in the analyses. The weighted sample sizes for the three groups examined in the current study are as follows: (1) former foster families, 21,842; (2) current foster families who planned to quit fostering, 13,507; and (3) current foster families who planned to continue fostering, 41,603. Thus, the total weighted sample is 76,952. Data were analyzed using WesVar (Version 3.0, SPSS 1998). WesVar PC is used to analyze data collected using complex sampling designs. It has estimation procedures that produce unbiased rather than biased standard errors. Accordingly, to allow for population weighting, analyses are limited to the statistical tests available on this software program.

Survey Data Collection

The NSC&FFP is a large and complex data set. For this study, variables from five categories are used: (1) demographic characteristics of foster families and parents, (2) reasons for quitting as a foster parent, (3) licensure, (4) information and training, and (5) services needed and received.

Demographics

Socioeconomic and background data provide structural and demographic information about families that might be vulnerable to quitting fostering. Family-level demographic data include marital status, information about children, and yearly family income. Demographic data for foster mothers and fathers include age, race, employment status, and education. For former foster parents, demographic information reflects their characteristics at the time they quit fostering rather than when the data were collected.

Discontinuing as a Foster Parent

Foster parents who consider quitting foster care are important to study when planning strategies for retention. Agency activities are most likely to influence the decisions of this group. Current foster parents were asked if they intended to continue as foster parents over the next 3 years. Those who responded "yes" are referred to as continuing foster parents. Those who responded "no" are referred to as foster parents planning to quit.

Reasons for Discontinuing as a Foster Parent

Former foster parents were asked, "Why did you stop being a foster parent?" Foster parents who planned to quit fostering were asked, "Why do you intend to stop being a foster parent?" Respondents indicated rea-

sons for quitting from a list of 21 items that included the following categories: (1) normal changes, (2) financial reasons, (3) interaction with the agency, (4) lack of services, (5) the child's behavior, and (6) problems with the child's parents. Each reason and the total number of reasons are examined here.

Licensure

All homes included in the study were licensed as family foster homes. In addition, some homes were approved to provide other types of family foster care, including emergency placements and specialized care. Respondents also indicated the number of children they were licensed to accept at one time.

Long waits to be licensed and have a child placed can be frustrating for new foster parents. Experiences with agency licensing procedures include (1) the number of months between application and licensure, (2) the number of months between licensure and first placement, and (3) the response to the question, "Had you been interested in adopting any of your foster care children, but were not able to do so?"

Information and Training

Prelicensure.—For each of 21 training topics respondents were asked if they received "no information," "some information," or "enough information" before licensure. Given that the main concern of this study is whether or not families receive enough information, for each of these variables "no information" and "some, but not enough information" are combined and categorized as "not enough information." Topic areas include foster parent roles, temporary nature of foster care, agency policies, and the kinds of children needing foster care. Here we also consider the total number of topics for which enough information was provided.

Respondents were asked, "Overall, how well did the information you receive prepare you for becoming a foster parent?" Response options included "very well prepared," "somewhat prepared," "somewhat unprepared," and "unprepared." "Somewhat unprepared" and "unprepared" were combined because of small cell sizes.

Postlicensure.—Respondents were asked if they received more training after becoming foster parents. Those who answered "yes" were asked if they received training on the following topics: (1) fostering teenagers, (2) fostering handicapped children, (3) fostering a child of a different race or culture, (4) disciplining a foster child, (5) supervising a foster child, (6) fostering a sexually abused child, (7) teaching a child skills for growing up and living on his or her own, (8) children's feeling about own parents, (9) working with child's own parents, and (10) other topics. We also use a variable indicating the total number of topics for which additional training was provided.

Sources of information.—Respondents were asked to indicate where or how they received information, including (1) orientation or training session provided by the agency before being approved, (2) talking with agency staff, (3) talking with other foster parents, (4) written information from the agency, and (5) written information from the foster parent association.

Foster parent buddy and foster parent association membership.—Respondents were asked if they had a foster parent “buddy,” that is, another foster parent whom they could call for advice or support. Respondents also were asked if they belonged to local, state, or national foster parent associations.

Services

Services needed.—Respondents were asked if they needed each of the following: (1) day care, (2) respite care, (3) liability insurance, (4) health-care costs not covered by Medicaid, (5) transportation for medical appointments or other services needed by the child, (6) physical changes to the home necessary to accommodate a disabled child, (7) child or family counseling, (8) recreational activities for the child, and (9) other services. We also consider the total number of services needed.

Services received.—Respondents were asked if they received each of the above services (if a need was reported). We also use a variable indicating the total number of services received.

Services needed but not received.—An examination of services needed and services received is important, but neither alone indicates the extent to which there are unmet service needs. Therefore, we created a variable for each of the nine service areas that indicated the presence of an unmet need. There was an unmet need if a foster parent reported that a particular service was needed but was not provided. We also created a variable indicating the total number of unmet service needs.

Results

A case-control design is characterized by the identification of the study samples on the basis of the presence of the outcome, and consequently the distribution of the outcome is fixed by the sampling design. Given that the distribution of the outcome is fixed by the sampling design, the results of case-control designs are analyzed by examining variation among samples in the antecedent variables under study (Fleiss 1981; Schlesselman 1982; Agresti 1990). In the current study, the outcome is foster parent continuance, and the study samples include foster parents who are active, have quit, or are contemplating quitting. Antecedent variables include demographic characteristics, licensure experiences, and other variables described above. Differences among the three groups of foster parents were examined in terms of these antecedent variables hy-

pothesized to influence foster parent continuance. In a sense, antecedent variables are treated as dependent variables. This is the reverse of most designs in social work, in which variation in the outcome is analyzed as a function of antecedent variables.

To examine differences among foster parents who are active, have quit, or are contemplating quitting, we use two-tailed tests. The .05 level of statistical significance is used.

When categorical dependent variables are analyzed, Satterwaite's approximation to χ^2 (RS3) is used to test differences among the three groups of families (SPSS 1998). All dichotomous variables were coded as zero (e.g., no service received) and one (e.g., service received).

Odds ratios (OR) are reported to quantify the strength of statistically significant relationships between group membership and categorical dependent variables (Lindsey 1992). The odds of an event is the ratio of the probability that the event will occur to the probability that it will not occur. For example, if 75 percent of a sample of continuing foster parents received training and 25 percent did not, the odds of receiving training would be .75/.25, or 3. An odds ratio greater than one indicates that the odds were greater for a given group than for another. An odds ratio less than one indicates that the odds were less for a given group than for another. An odds ratio of one indicates that the odds were the same for both groups.

For quantitative dependent variables, bivariate linear regression is used to test differences among the three groups of families. The R^2 is reported to quantify the strength of these relationships. Dummy coding is used in these analyses. Linear regression might not be ideal for analyzing variables such as the number of services received (Greene 2000; Orme and Buehler, in press), but alternative methods such as negative binomial regression and multinomial logistic regression are not available with WesVar PC or related software.

Of the 265 former foster parents, 54 percent completed the long survey questionnaire. Former foster parents completing the long questionnaire and those completing the short telephone interview were similar in marital status ($\chi^2 = 1.61, p = .20$) and race and ethnicity of foster mothers ($\chi^2 = 0.79, p = .58$) or foster fathers ($\chi^2 = 1.39, p = .24$). This is the only demographic information collected with the short interview.

The majority of information in the current study was provided by foster mothers alone (continuing = 64.2 percent, plan to quit = 69.0 percent, and former = 68.2 percent) or jointly by foster mothers and foster fathers (continuing = 30.4 percent, plan to quit = 20.8 percent, and former = 26.1 percent). A small percentage was provided by foster fathers alone (continuing = 5.4 percent, plan to quit = 10.2 percent, and former = 5.7 percent). Type of respondent did not differ across groups ($\chi^2 = 1.34, p = .57$).

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 shows family demographic characteristics of continuing, planning to quit, and former foster parents. Marital status and family income did not differ across groups. Most foster families were married couples. Income levels varied, with 50 percent of families having annual incomes of \$30,000 or more. Over 20 percent of the foster families had adopted children, and no group differences were present in terms of adoption experience. However, a smaller percentage of former foster parents had given birth to one or more children as compared with continuing foster parents (OR = .25) or foster parents who plan to quit (OR = .29).

Continuing foster mothers were older than those planning to quit ($t = 2.88, p < .01$) and those who had quit already ($t = 2.79, p = .01$). Foster father's age, respondent's race, educational attainment, and employment status did not differ across groups (see table 2).

Reasons for Discontinuing as a Family Foster Home

Table 3 shows reasons for discontinuing as a family foster home. Several of the reasons why some foster parents planned to quit or had quit already centered around communication with the child welfare agency and inadequate services. About 40 percent of the total sample reported receiving inadequate agency support. About one-third reported poor communication with foster care workers, and 34 percent said that they quit because of behaviors exhibited by children in their care. Many parents also reported a lack of specific needed services, including day care, respite services, and financial reimbursements. Also, foster parents reported conflict between the foster child(ren) and their own child(ren) as a reason for quitting.

There were differences between former foster parents and foster parents who planned to quit in seven areas. As compared with those who had quit already, a higher percentage of foster parents who planned to quit said they were doing so because of health problems, returning to work full-time, receiving inadequate financial reimbursement, lacking day care, experiencing problems with the child's birth parents, anticipating difficulty seeing the child leave, and not having a say in the child's future. Former foster parents and foster parents who planned to quit did not differ in the total number of reasons given for discontinuing.

Licensure Experiences

Former foster parents were approved to accept fewer foster children than both those planning to quit and continuing foster parents (see table 4). The three groups did not differ in approval to provide emergency placements or to provide specialized care.

Table 2
 PARENT CHARACTERISTICS OF CONTINUING, PLANNING TO QUIT,
 AND FORMER FAMILY FOSTER HOMES

	FOSTER PARENT GROUP			χ^2	<i>p</i>
	Continuing (%)	Planning to Quit (%)	Former (%)		
Mother's race				3.17	.17
European-American.....	73.4	80.2	82.6		
Other	26.6	19.8	17.4		
Father's race				1.54	.38
European-American.....	89.7	77.5	81.6		
Other	10.3	22.5	18.4		
Mother's education.....				8.50	.09
< High school.....	17.4	5.6	4.4		
High school/GED.....	21.4	18.9	25.2		
Some college	43.0	54.1	48.1		
4-year college or more	18.2	21.3	22.3		
Father's education.....				5.60	.27
< High school.....	14.4	4.3	8.8		
High school/GED.....	27.2	21.8	18.0		
Some college	38.6	46.6	47.4		
4-year college or more	19.8	27.3	25.8		
Mother's employment.....				.54	.38
Not employed.....	43.6	40.4	40.1		
Employed full time.....	40.6	40.4	44.5		
Employed part time	15.8	19.2	15.4		
Father's employment .....				.17	.78
Not employed.....	8.4	11.2	7.9		
Employed.....	91.6	88.8	92.1		

NOTE.—The percentage of missing data ranged from 2.0% to 5.0%, with a median of 2.9% missing data.

The three groups did not differ in the number of months from application to licensure. On average, it took approximately 9 months to go through the licensing process. Groups did not differ in the time from licensure until first placement. Most families waited approximately 3 months to have a child placed with them after being licensed. The three groups did not differ in the ability to adopt.

Training and Information

Prelicensure.—Table 5 shows the percentage of respondents who said they received enough information prior to licensure. The majority of foster parents reported receiving adequate information about the temporary nature of foster care, foster parent roles, types of children needing care, and child discipline. A minority of foster parents reported receiving enough information in the remaining areas. The three groups differed in areas of information. Fewer foster parents who planned to quit than continuing foster parents reported receiving enough informa-

Table 3
REASONS FOR DISCONTINUING AS A FAMILY FOSTER HOME

REASONS FOR DISCONTINUING	FOSTER PARENT GROUP		Odds Ratio	χ^2	<i>p</i>
	Former (%)	Planning to Quit (%)			
Too old.....	8.6	9.4	...	.06	.81
Divorce/marital problems	3.6	4.9	...	.07	.79
Health problems.....	3.3	17.0	5.98	6.44	.01
Moved/relocated.....	9.9	8.9	...	.47	.88
Conflict between foster child/ own child.....	16.0	18.1	...	.10	.75
Have more of own children	9.9	18.8	...	1.36	.24
Expect to adopt	27.7	18.0	...	1.25	.26
Return to work full time.....	10.1	31.5	4.08	7.49	.006
Inadequate reimbursement	8.0	26.9	4.22	12.19	.001
Can't get type of child	12.3	15.9	...	.65	.42
Poor communication with worker	38.1	26.2	...	.91	.34
Lack of support from agency ..	40.5	36.3	...	.21	.64
No say in child's future.....	25.1	46.3	2.56	6.32	.01
Lack of respite services.....	13.0	18.9	...	.43	.51
Lack of day care.....	10.5	29.9	3.65	9.73	.002
Lack of other services.....	12.8	13.2	...	.01	.94
Problems with child's biological parents.....	7.6	23.4	3.70	6.96	.008
Child's behavior.....	36.0	29.7	...	.69	.41
Health care needs too much...	4.8	13.0	...	3.07	.08
Hard to see child leave.....	8.3	46.0	9.35	23.02	<.001
	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²
Total number of reasons	3.63 (2.69)	4.95 (2.64)	4.15	.06	.05

NOTE.—The percentage of missing data ranged from 4.4% to 9.2%, with a median of 4.9% missing data. The odds of an event is the ratio of the probability that the event will occur to the probability that it will not occur. An odds ratio is the ratio of one odds to another. Percentages of reasons for discontinuing do not add to 100% because respondents could give more than one reason.

tion about contacting the agency (OR = .44). Fewer former foster parents reported receiving enough information about fostering teenagers than did either continuing foster parents (OR = .36) or foster parents who were planning to quit (OR = .23). The three groups did not differ in the number of areas in which respondents reported receiving enough information prior to becoming a foster parent. The mean number of areas in which parents said they received enough information ranged from only 9.44 to 9.96 across groups out of 23 possible areas.

Slightly over half of respondents said they were "somewhat prepared" before beginning to foster. The three groups differed in reported overall preparation. A higher percentage of those planning to continue said they were "very well prepared," whereas a higher percent-

Table 4

LICENSURE EXPERIENCES

EXPERIENCE	FOSTER PARENT GROUP			F	p	R ²
	Continuing M(SD)	Planning to Quit M(SD)	Former M(SD)			
Approved no. of children	2.65 (1.23)	2.42 (1.21)	1.99 (1.17)	11.28	<.01	.05
No. months application to licensure	8.32 (11.66)	7.89 (13.09)	9.93 (16.22)	.23	.80	.01
No. months licensure to first placement.....	3.26 (7.81)	3.01 (4.31)	3.30 (4.62)	.13	.88	.00
	%	%	%	χ^2	p	
Approved emergency placement.....	29.3	19.7	14.3	3.07	.14	
Approved specialized care	11.6	10.7	11.2	.03	.98	
Ability to adopt.....	27.8	35.5	27.8	1.04	.56	

age of former foster parents and those who planned to quit said they were “unprepared.”

Postlicensure.—Slightly over half of foster parents received postlicensure foster parent training. Fewer former foster parents reported receiving additional training than did either continuing foster parents or those who planned to quit (OR = .45) (see table 6).

Over one-third of the respondents said that they received additional training on discipline and on supervising foster children. A much smaller percentage of foster parents reported receiving postlicensure training on working with a child’s parents, fostering teenagers, fostering children with handicapping conditions, or fostering those whose race differs from the foster parent’s. As compared with continuing foster parents, a smaller percentage of former foster parents and foster parents who planned to quit said they received additional training in four areas. First, fewer former (OR = .35) and planning-to-quit (OR = .24) foster parents reportedly received additional training about fostering children of a different race or culture. Second, fewer former foster parents (OR = .40) and those planning to quit (OR = .46) said they received additional training about fostering teenagers. Third, fewer former (OR = .23) and planning-to-quit foster parents (OR = .15) reported that they received additional training about teaching life skills to foster children. Fourth, fewer former (OR = .49) and planning-to-quit foster parents (OR = .61) claimed to have received additional training on foster children’s feelings about birth parents. Fifth, fewer former foster parents (OR = .47) reported that they had received training about working with

a child's birth parents than did continuing foster parents. Finally, former foster parents said that they received additional training in fewer areas than did foster parents planning to quit and continuing foster parents. Across groups, the mean number of areas in which parents said that they received additional training ranged from 1.84 to 3.04 out of 10 possible areas.

Sources of information about foster care.—As seen in table 7, most foster parents received information about fostering from training sessions provided by the agency and from talking with agency staff. Fewer former foster parents said they received information about fostering from other foster parents than did continuing foster parents and those planning to quit (OR = .39).

Foster parent buddy and foster parent association membership.—A higher percentage of continuing foster parents had a foster parent buddy than did former foster parents (OR = 2.84) or foster parents planning to quit (OR = 2.74) (see table 8). Approximately one-third of the foster parents belonged to a local foster parent association. Fewer foster parents belonged to a state or national association. These percentages did not differ across groups.

Service Needs

Services needed.—Table 9 shows the percentage of homes in which respondents needed different types of services. All three groups said that they needed services in all areas, with the highest percentage needing child or family counseling, transportation for medical appointments, and help with health care costs that were not covered by Medicaid.

There were group differences in the percentage of families who said they needed day care and transportation for medical appointments (see table 9). Fewer former foster parents said they needed day care than did continuing foster parents (OR = .29). Also, as compared with foster par-

Table 7

SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT FOSTER PARENTING

INFORMATION SOURCE	FOSTER PARENT GROUP			χ^2	<i>p</i>
	Continuing (%)	Planning to Quit (%)	Former (%)		
Agency training sessions	92.2	90.5	84.6	2.40	.22
Talks with agency staff.....	69.6	76.3	71.8	.97	.52
Talks with other foster parents.....	64.5	66.9	44.1	7.36	.02
Written information from agency.....	74.1	78.9	72.9	.45	.78
Written information from Foster Parent Association.....	36.6	34.4	40.8	.36	.80

NOTE.—The percentage of missing data ranged from 2.3% to 3.0%, with a median of 2.6% missing data.

Table 8

SUPPORTS

SUPPORT	FOSTER PARENT GROUP			χ^2	<i>p</i>
	Continuing (%)	Planning to Quit (%)	Former (%)		
Foster parent buddy	35.0	16.4	15.9	13.27	.01
Local association	33.3	29.2	30.2	.52	.75
State association	19.2	14.4	8.5	3.07	.12
National association	8.7	3.6	8.9	1.95	.25

NOTE.—The percentage of missing data ranged from 7.6% to 8.1%, with a median of 8.0% missing data.

ents who planned to quit fostering, fewer former foster parents needed transportation for a child's medical appointments (OR = .34). On average, respondents claimed to need approximately three of nine listed services. The three groups did not differ in the number of needed services.

Services received.—A high percentage of respondents said they received child or family counseling, but a minority of families received other services (see table 10). The three groups differed in the percentage of families who received transportation for a child's medical appointments. Fewer former foster parents received transportation than did continuing foster parents (OR = .24). On average, respondents received approximately two of nine listed services. Groups did not differ in the number of services.

Services needed but not received.—Table 11 shows the percentage of homes in which respondents said they needed but did not receive different types of services. Unmet needs were common across groups in all service areas. The highest percentage of unmet needs are in day care, liability insurance, extra help with health care costs that are not covered by Medicaid, transportation for medical appointments, child or family counseling, and recreational activities.

Only one difference in unmet service needs was statistically significant across groups. A smaller percentage of former foster parents had unmet health-care costs that were not covered by Medicaid, as compared with foster parents who planned to quit (OR = .25) and continuing foster parents (OR = .33). On average, respondents had approximately one unmet service need out of nine listed services. Groups did not differ in the number of unmet service needs.

Discussion

The limitations of this study should be considered when drawing implications. Respondents who did not want to complete the survey answered demographic questions during a short telephone interview.

Reasons these families declined to participate are not known, and so we were unable to assess how their nonresponse affected the representativeness of the sample. This nonresponse was minimal in the subsample of current foster parents, but it was more prevalent in the former foster parent subsample. There also were problems in the enumeration of current and former foster parents that might have limited the representativeness of the sample. Some of the agency records used to select respondents might not have been kept up-to-date.

The use of a point-in-time sample might have led to overrepresentation of current foster families with longer service, and those families might differ in important ways from those with shorter service. In addition, the NSC&FFP relied entirely on the reports of foster parents, primarily foster mothers. Although foster mothers form the foundation of functioning for many foster families, the exclusion of data collected also from foster fathers limits the richness of the information gleaned regarding retention. This study also focused only on nonkinship foster family retention, and the findings are not necessarily applicable to the increasing number of kinship foster families. Future research will need to examine retention issues in kinship foster families.

Another issue of potential concern is that relatively few of the comparisons we made in this study indicated statistically significant differences between continuing, planning to quit, and former foster parents. Even though many univariate statistical tests were conducted, we found more significant differences than would be found by chance. The NSC&FFP survey was extensive in its examination of foster parents' experiences and resulted in many variables that we used to compare groups. We did not expect to find differences on all or even most of the variables. This study was exploratory in nature and was done to draw descriptive profiles of former foster parents and foster parents who were planning to quit fostering. Information about differences on a few key variables that can be addressed by agency policy or practice potentially might increase retention by improving training and service delivery for foster care families.

Finally, the NSC&FFP used a retrospective rather than prospective research design. This reliance on retrospective reports produced some findings that are difficult to interpret. For example, foster parents who have quit fostering or who are contemplating quitting fostering might have "reconstructed" their training or early service experiences to conform with their decision to quit fostering. To the extent that this reformulation occurs, some parents who believed they were adequately trained or who believed they had received adequate support and services will change their minds about these judgments of adequacy as they move through the decision process about quitting. Prospective data collected on a yearly basis would help address this issue of cognitive reframing during the fostering process.

With these limitations in mind, the national sample and the comprehensive set of survey items regarding foster parents' experiences produced findings that can be used to shape training and services that can improve retention, particularly because they stem from a national sample. The use of this information for improved retention is critical given the shortage of foster homes.

Reasons for Discontinuing

Most foster parents cited more than one reason for discontinuing foster care. As has been found in previous research on retention, common reasons for quitting were lack of agency support, poor communication with workers, and children's behaviors (Baring-Gould et al. 1983; Rindfleisch et al. 1998; Triseliotis et al. 1998; Denby et al. 1999). As compared with previous research, a smaller percentage of foster parents in this sample cited normal life changes, adoption, lack of respite care, and problems between foster children and their biological children as reasons for quitting (Baring-Gould et al. 1983; Ryan 1985; Triseliotis 1998). Further, the findings from this study are unique because former foster parents were compared with those who were currently fostering but planning to quit soon. The findings from these comparisons suggest that several variables are more critical to current parents who were planning to quit than to foster parents who had already quit. Foster parents' health problems, foster mothers' full-time employment, inadequate reimbursement, lack of day care, having no say in the child's future, difficulty seeing a child leave, and problems with the child's biological parents were cited more frequently as reasons for leaving by current foster parents contemplating quitting than by former foster parents. Perhaps decisions to leave are based on a number of concerns, which if left unresolved over time, accumulate until a deciding event results in discontinuance. For example, a current foster parent who perceives he or she has little input into case planning for children and has problems dealing with birth parents over several placements might decide to leave if he or she does not get needed support for a particular child.

The most predominate normal life change affecting decisions to foster was anticipating that health problems would interfere with an ability to parent. This might be addressed if agencies allowed families to use their already existing informal family and community resources for child care or if agencies provided day care and respite care. Some parents stated they were contemplating quitting because foster mothers planned to return to full-time employment. Adequate financial reimbursements and day care could help ease these concerns. Some parents who plan to quit fostering felt they did not have a say in the child's future. Taking foster parents' insights and observations into account when making decisions about the child seems to increase satisfaction with fostering and, there-

fore, probably influences decisions about continuing as a foster parent (Sanchirico et al. 1998; Denby et al. 1999).

Some foster parents anticipated quitting because it was difficult for them to see a child leave. This issue centers on the family's ability to handle ambiguity and loss (Eastman 1982; Mietus and Fimmen 1987). Agencies can address these concerns by using a preservice inventory to examine the family's ability to handle ambiguity and loss, providing pre- and postlicensure training that addresses issues of ambiguity and loss, and improving communication between the caseworker and foster families regarding future plans for the child.

Some current foster parents reported difficulty working with birth parents as a reason for quitting. This presents a dilemma. Birth parent involvement enhances children's adjustment to out-of-home care (Milner 1987; Simms and Bolden 1991) and increases the possibility of reunification (Mech 1985; Hess 1987). Although beneficial to children, contact with birth parents often is stressful for foster parents (Gean, Gillmore, and Dowler 1985; Poulin 1985). Pre- and postlicensure training about working with birth families can be an effective component of retention efforts. Having information about working with birth parents prepares foster families to deal with problems that might arise about visitation and to have fewer conflicts with goals for reunification.

Training and Retention

Our findings provide insights as to how training can be used more effectively for retention. A minority of foster parents in this sample reported being very well prepared before fostering, but a higher percentage of those who thought they were prepared planned to continue. However, foster parents who participate in training are not necessarily satisfied with the information they receive (Kriener and Kazmerzak 1994) nor do they evaluate themselves as prepared to meet many of the challenges they encounter as foster parents (Jones 1975; U.S. General Accounting Office 1989). Moreover, foster parents' experiences might have affected their recall about training. Unsuccessful foster parents retrospectively might consider that their training was inadequate. This interpretation is consistent with the idea that people reshape prior positive thoughts following negative experiences (i.e., cognitive consistency).

Most foster parents reported being oriented to the agency, the nature of foster care, foster parent roles, and agency expectations for the supervision and discipline of children. However, less than one-third of foster parents reported having enough information about the legal aspects of foster care, or about working with children who were of a different race, handicapped, or sexually abused. Nor did they feel prepared to work with birth parents.

The areas where groups differed reflect two important dimensions of

foster parents' roles: parenting and working with the agency (Rhodes, Orme, and McSurdy, in press). Former foster parents were more likely to report not having enough information about fostering teenagers, whereas continuing foster parents reported additional training on this topic. Continuing foster parents were more likely to have training on teaching children life skills and on fostering a child of a different race or ethnicity. Foster parents who planned to quit did not have enough information about how to contact the agency. These findings suggest that after quitting, foster parents might perceive they lacked information about the unique parenting demands of foster children, whereas agency relationships might be a deciding factor that results in qualified homes planning to quit. The issue of not knowing how to contact the agency is a relatively new finding in the research on retention and needs to be addressed in future research that addresses the progression from faulty communication between workers and parents to foster parent dissatisfaction and the decision to quit fostering.

Only half of the foster parents received additional training after being approved as foster parents. Those who did were likely to continue fostering. The effects of additional training on retention should be examined in more detail in future research. It is possible that foster parents who participate in training after approval are motivated to continue to foster. Having information about a topic does not necessarily change attitudes or behaviors (Lee and Holland 1991). More foster parents reported additional training on discipline and on supervising children than on other topics. Child discipline also was an area where most foster parents reported that they had enough information from prelicensure training. However, difficulty dealing with children's behavioral problems was one of the most frequently cited reasons for quitting; one-third of foster parents cited child behavioral problems as a reason. This brings into question whether or not training in child discipline is providing foster parents with the information necessary to address difficult behavioral problems of children in care.

One of the unique findings from this study was that only a small percentage of foster parents received postlicensure training on working with teens, children who had been sexually abused, children with disabilities, and children of a different race than the foster parent; these were areas where they also identified prelicensure training as inadequate. Training to work with these special populations of children might be crucial given the finding that continuing parents were more likely to have received training in these areas than were foster parents who had quit or who were planning to quit. It is likely that training on working with special groups of foster children and understanding children's birth family relationships is relevant and useful to foster parents, increases their confidence to handle children's behaviors, and enables them to work through problem areas rather than quit.

An additional issue relevant to training is the source of information about foster parenting. Most parents received information through group training or from talks with social workers. Former foster parents were least likely to receive information from foster parents. Previous studies have reported that talking with other foster parents has a positive effect on retention (Wasson and Hess 1989; Chamberlain et al. 1992; Rindfleisch et al. 1998). Foster parents can develop relationships through foster parent associations. However, fewer than one-third of the foster parents reported receiving information about foster parent associations during preservice training. Pairing foster parents with a foster parent mentor or buddy who can be called for advice and using foster parent associations to provide information and support, especially to new foster parents, might increase retention. The Internet also could be used to connect foster parents with one another.

Service Needs

Our findings suggest that foster parents are receiving services where they identify need. Only a small percentage of foster parents reported unmet service needs. Counseling was the most frequently needed and also the most frequently provided service. Day care was the most frequently cited unmet social service need. Foster parents who planned to quit were more likely to report needing day care services for children in their care. They also were more likely to believe they were not receiving this needed service. However, unmet needs for day care did not differ across foster parent groups. This finding regarding the importance of day care services is relatively new in the retention research and needs to be addressed in future research and program planning. It was not clear whether this need was not being met because of a lack of adequate and convenient care options or because of a lack of financial ability to purchase services.

The inability to distinguish foster parents who intend to quit by identifying unmet social service needs was surprising considering previous research (Baring-Gould et al. 1983; Triseliotis et al. 1998; Denby et al. 1999). It appears foster parents' beliefs that services are available differ from their perceptions that service needs go unmet. Our findings call for careful assessment of resources available to foster parents and for further investigation about how foster parents use social services and about how their agency relationships might influence perceptions of service availability.

In summary, many of the foster parents who intend to quit fostering believe that their families and foster children are not receiving adequate services and that they have no say in the children's futures. Many also have problems with biological parents and lack preservice training about how to contact the agency. Foster parents who plan to continue receive more training about how to work with a child's biological parents.