

Foster Parent Satisfaction Survey

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FOSTER PARENT SATISFACTION SURVEY

Arizona State University
College of Public Service & Community Solutions
School of Social Work
Center for Applied Behavioral Health Policy
500 N. Third Street, Suite 200
Phoenix, AZ 85004
<http://cabhp.asu.edu>

Prepared by:
Jennifer M. Geiger, Ph.D.
Francie J. Julien-Chinn, MSW
Cynthia A. Lietz, Ph.D.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Department of Child Safety (DCS) requested the assistance of Arizona State University with the development, administration, and analysis of a survey to solicit active foster parents' feedback regarding their motivation to foster, and their experiences with fostering, licensing agencies, DCS specialists and supervisors, training and support. The survey also sought to obtain information about foster parents' thoughts and suggestions regarding plans for fostering, barriers to fostering, and how to best serve foster parents in Arizona.

The Department is committed to recruiting and retaining qualified foster parents and strives to improve current policies and procedures to best serve foster families and the children they care for. The purpose of this study was to understand what is currently done well and what areas show room for improvement. As the number of children entering foster care in Arizona increases, there is an increased need for foster families to provide a safe and stable home for them. Trends in Arizona show an increase in new licensed homes each reporting period (a 58% increase from March 2012 to March 2014), while foster home closures remain fairly consistent. It is critical to understand why families choose to become licensed, why they might consider leaving, and what can be done to support them and the children they care for.

The current survey included responses from over 1,095 foster parents across Arizona, approximately one quarter of the total licensed foster care providers in Arizona. More than half (54%) of the respondents were in Maricopa County and just more than half of the sample had been fostering for 1 to 5 years (53%). Seventy-eight percent reported having 1 to 3 children placed in their home.

Foster parents in the study were asked what their motivation to become licensed was. Almost a quarter reported they felt being a foster parent was a calling. Fourteen percent reported they were motivated to become licensed because of the continued need for foster homes. In addition to reasons provided in the survey, foster parents identified adoption and family growth as reasons to become licensed. Further motivation included: parents' work and experience with children in need; parents' own personal experiences; wanting to contribute and give back to the community; and an empty nest. Many foster parents reported becoming licensed after first being a kinship placement and learning about the need.

The majority of foster parents (86%) reported that placements made in their home were consistent with their placement preferences. However, some foster parents reported that there were inconsistencies regarding their indicated placement preferences related to the child's medical and behavioral health and sibling groups. In addition, many reported not yet having any placements, experiencing communication issues with DCS and licensing, and frustration and confusion with licensing regulations.

Foster parents responded to questions about their licensing agency and representatives. Overall, foster parents were satisfied with their experiences in terms of the frequency of visits from the agency, support, and training. Foster parents agreed they received return phone calls in a timely manner and received support in times of crisis. However, half reported being encouraged to participate in the recruitment of new foster parents, and half reported that their licensing agency had an adequate method to encourage and support peer mentoring between foster parents. Foster parents offered positive feedback regarding their licensing agency and workers. They appreciated the support,

professionalism, care and concern, advocacy on behalf of the family, consistent visits, availability, and responsiveness.

Foster parents also identified potential areas for improvement related to training, support, the need for respite and resources, and a concern about staff turnover, and communication. Survey respondents talked about the need for more specialized, accessible, and innovative trainings. Many cited the need for more informal support, mentoring, and network groups for foster parents. In addition, foster parents had concerns about a lack of respite care and resources, and how staff turnover and a lack of communication affects foster parent longevity.

Foster parents provided feedback regarding their interactions and experiences with DCS specialists and supervisors. The majority (79%) of foster parents participating in the survey knew who to contact in the case of an emergency and 76% reported receiving regular visits. However, 57% reported receiving a return call in a timely manner from their DCS specialist or supervisor. Less than half (46%) reported receiving adequate background information about the children placed in their home. Sixty percent of the foster parents felt they were considered as part of the team by DCS. Foster parents provided open-ended responses regarding what they felt DCS does well in addition to where they perceive areas in which the department could improve. When describing positive experiences, foster parents reported appreciating regular communication, reinforcing the importance of foster parents being kept informed on the child's case, services, and meetings. Specialists were also praised for being professional, knowledgeable, and helpful. Foster parents highlighted instances where DCS specialists were flexible and responsive, supportive, and worked to establish a positive relationship with the foster parent and family. Many offered positive remarks regarding DCS performance in spite of the challenges faced by DCS staff associated with a 'strained' system and high caseloads.

Many survey respondents offered suggestions for ways DCS could enhance their interactions with foster parents. Comments were related to challenges with the DCS workforce, the need for improved communication, the desire for enhanced teamwork, and the importance of support. Foster parents consistently acknowledged the need for additional qualified, caring and dedicated specialists so that caseload numbers could be reduced, allowing specialists to spend more time, attention, and focus on their cases. Many foster parents would like to see an improvement in communication between DCS specialists and supervisors with foster parents. This communication includes prompt return calls and emails, providing adequate information about the children and the case, and regular visits to the home. Foster parents discussed a need for enhanced teamwork, including foster parents being heard, informed, and valued as members of a team that works to serve the children.

Training is an important component in the process of becoming a foster parent and maintaining an active license. Foster parents offered ideas about topics, format, and content for pre-service and annual training. Foster parents would like additional information regarding financial aspects and tax implications of fostering, information about system policies and procedures, skills and information about how to improve the care they provide to children, and training that relates to obtaining and offering support. With regard to pre-service training, foster parents suggest improving some aspects of the training format, materials, and content. Overwhelmingly, foster parents would like to have more online options for annual training, increased accessibility, and child care options during training.

Foster parents were asked to reflect on the reasons they choose to continue their role as a foster parent. Many described the rewards of fostering such as the love, the experiences of joy, satisfaction,

and the commitment to children and to their families as the reasons they continue to foster. Others discussed the personal and family benefits associated with fostering that motivates them to continue fostering. Foster parents also described their continued calling to care for children and the desire to continue to make a difference in the lives of children.

Over 85% of foster parents said they would recommend becoming a foster parent or respite provider to friends or relatives. Many also acknowledged potential barriers that might prevent someone from becoming a foster parent or continuing to foster children. Foster parents offered reasons such as the time involved to complete the mandatory trainings, and the ongoing time commitment to attend various meetings, appointments, and visits. Foster parents noted that obtaining accurate information about the process or criteria to becoming a foster parent is difficult. Many foster parents discussed fear as a barrier to fostering. They described the fear of loss and fear of the unknown. In addition, several parents mentioned how potential and existing foster parents may have unrealistic expectations or misunderstand the role of foster parents.

In terms of barriers to continue fostering, parents describe the emotional toll fostering can have on the parents and the family. Others discussed barriers related to licensing requirements, a lack of respite care and quality childcare, and minimal reimbursement. Other foster parents cited not being included as part of the team as a reason they would consider discontinuing to foster, while other foster parents' homes were 'full'.

When asked about how to best honor a foster parent, many (41%) agreed personal or tangible items (e.g. gift cards, movie vouchers) would be a good way to honor foster parents. The majority of foster parents who responded to the open-ended portion of the question stated they did not need formal recognition for fostering, and that the love and affection they receive from the children was enough. Others stated that changes in the system, such as being treated with respect and as part of the team, would be a way to honor them.

Recommendations and opportunities for consideration include:

- Use information regarding motivation to foster provided by foster parents as a guide for recruitment *and* retention of foster parents.
- Continue to pursue targeted foster parent recruitment for adolescents ages 13 and older.
- Consider evaluating the process for placement in foster homes to better match foster home licensing parameters and preferences.
- Consider evaluating the process for amending foster home licenses to accommodate sibling groups.
- Encourage licensing agencies to create and support new opportunities for foster parents to become more involved in recruitment efforts, mentoring, and support of other foster parents.
- Encourage licensing agencies to evaluate their policies and procedures regarding the provision and coordination of respite for foster families.
- Consider new and innovative ways for DCS Specialists to obtain and promptly disseminate accurate and concise information about children placed with foster parents in order to best care for the children in their home.
- Continue efforts to implement training for DCS Specialists and Supervisors regarding best practices in collaborating with foster families.

- Consider evaluating current pre-service training to incorporate new content and modalities to best prepare and support the needs of new foster parents.
- Consider offering online training and education to satisfy annual training requirements and more accessible means of notification for available trainings.
- Explore options for providing childcare for pre-service and annual training for foster parents.
- Consider publicizing and supporting resources for foster parent groups, events, and opportunities.
- Consider new opportunities to recognize foster parents and families.
- Future surveys with foster parents should be conducted bi-annually and include questions about the court/legal system and dependency process and transportation.
- Acknowledge DCS workers and licensing agencies who provide quality services to foster parents.
- Consider offering training regarding DCS policies, procedures, and legal processes to licensing agencies to improve communication and support for foster families.

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1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

As of March 31, 2014, there were 15,751 children placed in out of home care in Arizona, of which 39% were living in licensed family foster homes. This is a slight decrease from the previous year, where 41% of the 14,314 children in out of home care in Arizona were placed in licensed family foster homes (Arizona Department of Child Safety, 2014). Nationally, however, almost half (47%) of children were placed in non-relative foster homes according to the 2013 AFCARS Report.

Licensed foster homes may include family foster homes, professional family foster homes, respite foster homes, receiving foster homes, and developmentally disabled homes. Foster home licenses with the state specify the age range, gender, and maximum number of children that can be placed in a home. Licensed foster parents, in conjunction with the licensing agency, decide the type of physical, behavioral, and psychological needs of children they can accommodate based upon their own skill level, experiences, and desires.

In March 2014, there were 4,329 licensed foster homes in Arizona (9,049 spaces). This represents a 21% increase from March of 2013. There has also been a 58% increase in newly licensed foster homes in the state since March 2012, from 663 homes to 1,050 homes in the last reporting period ending March 2014. Between October of 2013 and March of 2014, 787 licenses closed, compared to 715 in the previous reporting period (Arizona Department of Child Safety, 2014; 2013).

MOTIVATION TO BECOME A FOSTER PARENT

Individuals become foster parents for a variety of reasons. Foster parents are charged with making decisions regarding the duration of fostering, the number of children they are able foster at a time, and whether they choose to adopt. Research conducted with foster families reveals motivations related to the family such as wanting to adopt children, providing a companion for an only child, and filling an 'empty nest' (Andersson, 2001; Denby & Rindfleisch, 1996; Edelstein, Burge, & Waterman, 2001; Isomaki, 2002; Redding, Fried, & Britner, 2000; Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006). Other studies identified an altruistic motivation for becoming a foster parent such as wanting to provide a safe and stable home for children, wanting to love and care for children in need, and/or wanting to give back to the community (Barth, 2001; Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999; Hudson & Levasseur, 2002; Testa & Rolock, 1999). In a 2012 study with 650 foster parents in Arizona, more than half (55%) reported wanting to save children from further harm as their motivation for becoming a foster parent, and a third reported wanting to take in children who needed loving parents. Almost a quarter reported wanting to provide care because of a religious calling (Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz, 2012). Many foster parents wanted to 'give back' to the community and knew of the need for foster parents through working or knowing someone working in the system. These individuals had space and wanted to make a difference in the lives of children, and even the parents of the children who needed help. Several participants stated they were kinship caregivers and became licensed to access more resources and to help more children.

Understanding the motivation that led past and current foster parents to become licensed foster parents has implications for recruitment and retaining of future foster parents. Both child welfare

agencies and licensing agencies can utilize the insight to develop and improve targeted recruitment efforts and in further understanding how to best support and engage foster parents.

FOSTER PARENT TRAINING AND SUPPORT

Foster parents typically complete a pre-service training during the process to become licensed. This training includes instructions on working with the child welfare agency and biological family, as well as basics about parenting children in care, and providing for the children in their care. It also provides knowledge, support, resources, and connection with other foster parents (Burry, 1999; Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Fees et al., 1998). Foster parents are also expected to participate in on-going training each year in accordance with their licensing agency requirements and the age and needs of the children in the home as well as the interests of the foster parents.

Training is provided to ensure stability of the children in the home and to provide support to the foster parents. It is critical in preparing foster parents to meet the needs of the children in their care. Several studies have found that effective pre-service training leads to more successful outcomes for foster parents and for the children in their care (e.g., Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Dorgan, 1974; Fees et al., 1998; Urquhart, 1989), greater foster parent satisfaction (Fees et al., 1998), enhanced foster parent well-being, and an increased willingness to support children in connecting with their biological family (Sanichirico & Jablonka, 2000; Whenan, Oxlad, & Lushington, 2009).

Research indicates that foster parents face challenges related to managing children's difficult behavior, collaborating with the legal and child welfare system, and understanding and accessing medical, health, and educational systems and services (Heller, Smyke, & Boris, 2002). Studies have also indicated that foster parents often do not feel adequately prepared after initial pre-service training (Cuddeback & Orme, 2001; Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz, 2012; MacGregor et al., 2006). In a recent study with foster parents in Arizona, 27% reported feeling prepared and 39% reported feeling somewhat prepared to foster after initial training. In the same study, the majority of parents felt prepared in areas such as cultural sensitivity, roles and expectations, and caring for the child, but others felt they were not as prepared in areas such as programs and services, financial aspects of fostering, and contacting the department (Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz, 2012). Studies continue to highlight the need for additional training and training options (Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz, 2012; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, & France, 2011; Whiting, Huber, & Koech, 2007).

A previous study asked foster parents to identify areas in which they would have liked more training. Findings indicated that training in areas such as specialized training about medications, specific mental health disorders and conditions, attachment, trauma, and how to help children who have been abused and neglected would be helpful in caring for the children in their home. Foster parents also would like to learn more about advocating (for self and child), foster/adoptive parents' rights, building connections, and events for families to attend (Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz, 2012).

Several participants in the Foster Parent Study of 2012 identified wanting to learn more about the effects of fostering on their family/children, self-care, parenting skill development, accessing respite, communicating with birth parents/families, and training on child development. With regard to systemic issues, foster parents would have liked more training on working with the child welfare agency, attorneys, and other professionals involved in the cases, as well as learning more about court processes and policies on reunification, navigating the system, community resources, and the Indian Child Welfare

Act (ICWA). Many foster parents stated they would have liked a clearer picture of what foster care is like and be provided with an array of 'real life' examples (Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz, 2012).

INTERACTIONS WITH LICENSING AGENCIES AND WORKERS

Licensing workers work directly with foster parents and are charged with various aspects of recruiting and retaining foster parents. They are responsible for approving and monitoring placements, providing pre-service and ongoing training, and ensuring placement stability and support. A qualitative analysis of 68 interviews revealed eight qualities identified by licensing workers (resource workers) in Canada to being successful in their work (Brown, Anderson, & Rodgers, 2014). These eight qualities were: the need for good conflict management; an understanding of family functioning; knowledge of policy and practice; having a voice in decision making; sense of confidence and self-awareness; and the 'right kind' of personality.

Support from licensing workers and other professionals has also been shown to play a role in the retention of foster parents (Esaki, Ahn, & Gregory, 2012; Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz, 2013). Foster parents feel supported when they receive regular visits and communication from child welfare professionals and can easily access them when in need. In addition, foster parents want to feel like they are part of the team, and have access to resources and services to best care for the children in their care.

INTERACTIONS WITH CHILD WELFARE SPECIALISTS & SUPERVISORS

Research suggests there are several interpersonal traits, professional skills and attributes that promote optimal working relationships between child welfare workers and foster families. Child welfare workers who have a physical presence, show appreciation for the efforts of foster parents, have good communication, and have knowledge about the community, resources, the system, and demonstrate good professional skills tend to have better working relationships with foster parents. A lack of support from the child welfare agency may also lead to increased placement disruption and/or a foster parent's decision to discontinue fostering. One study found that a lack of responsiveness and poor communication with the child welfare agency was associated with foster parents leaving before completing a year of fostering (Rhodes et al, 2001). Higher level of external locus of control was also associated with intentions to leave fostering (Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz, 2013). Conversely, open communication and a positive rapport with child welfare workers is related to increased satisfaction among foster parents (MacGregor et al, 2006; Rhodes et al., 2003). Foster parent satisfaction is also associated with foster parents being recognized as part of the child welfare team whose opinions are valued and respected (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003; Hudson & Levasseur, 2002).

2. STUDY DESIGN

The current survey was administered by the Center for Applied Behavioral Health Policy (CABHP) at Arizona State University's School of Social Work in partnership with the Arizona Department of Economic Security, Division of Children, Youth, and Families (DES/DCYF), now the Arizona Department of Child Safety (DCS) to obtain a better understanding of the experiences of licensed foster and adoptive parents across Arizona. DCS seeks to use feedback from foster care providers and adoptive parents to improve their service delivery and ultimately outcomes for children and families.

The survey consisted of 77 questions, 64 of which were closed ended multiple choice and scaled questions and 13 open ended questions. The questions were classified into 6 overarching areas: 1) demographic information, 2) child placement preferences, 3) relationship with licensing and support agency, 4) relationship with DCS specialists and unit supervisors, 5) training, and 6) support and recruitment.

A link to an anonymous online survey was sent via email to 3,892 licensed foster parents in Arizona by the Department of Child Safety. The online survey was open from 3/14/2014 through 5/30/2014. A paper survey was mailed with a self-addressed envelope to 630 families who did not have an active email address listed on file. Twenty-three were returned as 'undeliverable'. Paper copies of the survey were entered individually into a database where the online surveys were managed. Paper copies were destroyed after entered into the database.

Confidentiality and anonymity were explained in a cover letter in the electronic and paper versions of the survey.

Data analysis of quantitative measures includes presenting descriptive findings such as total numbers and percentages across questions and responses. Qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses involved reviewing each participant's response and recording common themes in the data. Quotes were paired with the final list of themes and included in the report.

3. SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

A total of 1,095 foster parents participated in the survey, which represents 25.3% of licensed foster care providers in Arizona. Twenty-eight percent ($n = 308$) had been fostering less than one year. More than half (53%, $n = 570$) had been fostering for 1 to 5 years. Twelve percent ($n = 142$) had been fostering for 6 to 10 years, and 7% ($n = 75$) had been fostering for 11 years or more. Seventy percent of foster placements ($n = 757$) included 2 licensed foster parents and 85% of the parents ($n = 925$) completing the survey were female.

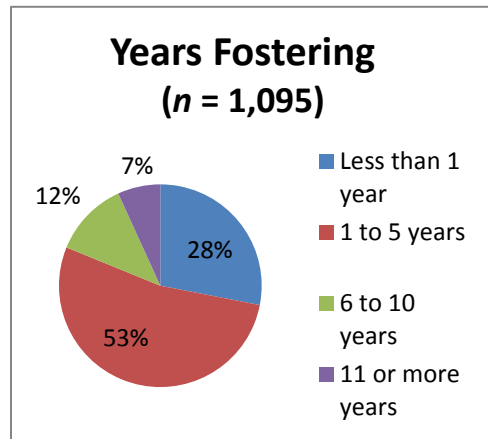


Figure 1

Almost three-quarters (71%, $n = 775$) of the respondents identified as Caucasian/White, 12% identified as Hispanic ($n = 127$), 7% identified as African American/Black ($n = 77$), and 5% identified as multiracial ($n = 54$). Thirty percent were between the age of 40 and 49, 29% ($n = 325$) were 30 to 39 years old ($n = 319$), 23% were 50 to 59 years old ($n = 255$), 10% were 60 years or older ($n = 114$) and 7% were ages 21 to 29 ($n = 74$).

Twenty-nine percent of the sample had completed some college ($n = 306$), 25% of parents had a 4 year degree ($n = 270$), and 16% had a 2 year degree ($n = 168$). More than half (53%) of the sample reported an annual income of \$50,000 or more ($n = 716$).

All counties across Arizona were represented in the sample. More than half (54%) of respondents were in Maricopa County ($n = 583$). Twenty percent were in Pima County ($n = 216$), 6% in Pinal County ($n = 69$), 5% in Yavapai County ($n = 52$), 4% in Mohave County ($n = 41$), 3% in Yuma County ($n = 28$), 2% in Cochise County ($n = 25$), 1.3% in Coconino County ($n = 14$), 0.5% in Gila County ($n = 6$), 1.1% in Graham County ($n = 12$), 0.8% in Navajo County ($n = 9$), and 0.9% in La Paz County ($n = 10$). Three respondents were in Apache County, 1 was in Greenlee County, and 1 was in Santa Cruz County.

4. STUDY FINDINGS

FOSTER PARENT MOTIVATION AND PREFERENCES

Table 1. Foster Parent Motivation for Fostering (n = 1,048)

<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Percent Reporting as Primary Motivation</i>	<i>Percent Reporting as Secondary Motivation</i>
<i>I know there continues to be a need for foster homes in Arizona</i>	14	31
<i>I saw a presentation through my faith community and became aware of the opportunity</i>	4	2
<i>I believe I've been called to be a foster parent</i>	24	12
<i>My traditional values drive me to care for children</i>	8	13
<i>I was troubled by the news media reports of what's happening to children and families in Arizona</i>	3	6
<i>I have a family member who was a foster parent</i>	4	3
<i>I knew someone else who was a foster parent</i>	6	6
<i>I personally experienced the system in the past</i>	2	1
<i>I have a family member who experienced the system in the past</i>	3	3
<i>My profession or hobby brings me in contact with children who are in foster care</i>	5	4
<i>I have a professional experience in the child welfare system</i>	2	3
<i>Other</i>	26	15

Table 1 includes the primary and secondary motivations for becoming a licensed foster parent. When asked about their primary motivation for becoming a licensed foster parent, almost a quarter (24%) of foster parents reported having a calling to become a foster parent, and 14% reported becoming licensed because they were aware of the continued need for foster homes in Arizona. Based on these findings, it appears a large proportion of foster parents become licensed due to a calling, traditional values, or to provide a home for children in need. This information provides direction for recruitment efforts by acknowledging the sense of a calling many foster parents experience along with parents' desires to care for vulnerable children.

OTHER REASONS FOSTER PARENTS CHOSE TO BECOME LICENSED

Seven hundred and sixty-one survey respondents (73%) identified additional motivators for choosing to provide foster care.

Adoption and Family Growth. More than 185 foster parents chose to become licensed foster parents with the goal of adopting children from the foster care system. Many of those foster parents were unable to have their own biological children, had a desire to provide siblings to biological children, or wanted a large family. For example, one respondent stated, "I am not able to have children we went in to this with hopes of adoption." Another foster parent explained, "I had one child and I did not want her to be raised as an only child so I figure why not help other children and my daughter can have children to grow up with." Because many foster parents enter fostering due to a desire to adopt, it is not uncommon for this group to leave fostering once they have accomplished their goal. In these situations,

it is important to see adoption as a successful outcome to fostering, not a failure to retain a foster home. There are multiple ways to evaluate success in fostering, adoption being one example of success.

Kinship care provider. The second most common reason resource parents identified as their initial motivation to become licensed was as a result of being a kinship placement. For example, one caregiver reported, "I adopted my granddaughter and decided to continue to do fostering after I adopted her." Another parent stated, "After I fostered a family member, I continued fostering non family children and felt I owed this to the children since I had room in my home for placements." This is an important finding because it suggests once individuals are introduced to fostering through kinship, they become open to be licensed for non-relative foster care. Considering the need for foster parents, this is a worthwhile group to target for recruitment.

Child and community need. Foster parents responded that they were motivated to foster for the needs of the children. This included giving back to the community after seeing the need and to make a difference. One foster parent stated, "I was looking for a way to give back to my community." Another described his/her motivation when stating, "My upbringing led me to believe that it takes a village to raise a child, I am part of a village and I am willing to help." These positive appraisals are important for foster parents. Feeling a sense of self-efficacy in one's capacity to make a difference can be essential to a foster parent's ability to continue fostering despite the stressors associated with this role.

Safe and stable home. Respondents reported that they wanted to provide safe and stable homes for children, and that children deserved to be cared for. For example, one parent shared that her desire to foster was grounded in "the overwhelming need for children to have a safe and loving home while their biological families receive the help and support they need to parent in a positive manner." Another explained, "Children are our future. They are precious and should be loved and protected." This desire to protect is essential to the role of a foster parent. This means that foster parents see themselves as an advocate for child safety and will speak up if they perceive decision making is not in a child's best interest. This may create challenges when the decision being made by a caseworker or at court contradicts the foster parent's assessment. Understanding that the foundation for this advocacy is grounded in one's desire to protect can help workers to better understand the meaning of these efforts.

Experience and work. Some respondents indicated that they discovered the need for foster parents through their current or past work experience. The knowledge of the need motivated these respondents to become foster parents. For example, one stated, "I am a public librarian and I often worked with children in group homes, I saw the need for families that would take in older children and try to help sibling groups stay together. Those kids had lost everything." Another explained, "I was a NICU nurse and babies would sit waiting 2 weeks for placement. I decided I could do it and applied and was licensed", and another respondent stated, "I was a youth Corrections Officer and saw that often times the youth that were being released often didn't have a stable environment to return to." Targeting recruitment efforts in helping fields that interact with children such as health, education, and human services might be fruitful based on these experiences.

Personal experience. Some foster parents expressed that their motivation to become licensed foster parents was a result of a personal experience. Examples of personal experiences were: having a family or friend that fostered, growing up in a home that had foster children, being a foster or adopted child themselves, or personally knowing a child who needed a placement. For example, one foster parent shared, "My husband was in the system, so he wanted to help others." Another stated, "My parents

were foster parents and I had many foster brother and sisters.” Others talked about knowing other families and growing up in families with foster children in the home, “I have known people who are foster parents, children in foster care, and I knew there was a great need” and, “My parents growing up were foster parents to other children in the system.” It is important not to pathologize previous experience, even when negative. Personal experience may sensitize someone to the needs of foster children and youth. Although some negative experiences do translate into unhealthy boundaries, the experience of resilience suggests many people who experience personal challenges grow into healthy adults. In fact, some research suggests these experiences help people to become more compassionate, with an enhanced responsibility to help others. Tapping into this resilience may be one way to identify foster parents who can relate to and care for foster children and youth in a unique and meaningful way.

Spiritual calling. Some resource parents expressed that their motivation to foster was due to a spiritual calling. Illustrating this point, one respondent stated, “I just felt it was my calling in life”. Another shared, “I believe I was called to be a foster parent.” Some attached this calling to a spiritual identity such as one who explained, “This was my purpose from God,” and another who stated, “We saw the need and believe that our faith calls us to action.” Understanding the role of the value of service and caring for others that exist in many spiritual traditions as a main element in making the choice to foster is important. Culturally responsive practice involves respect of racial and ethnic identities, but should also include respect for spiritual identity as defined by the foster parent. As parents feel respected for their spiritual identity, their desire to serve their calling can be enhanced.

Empty nest. A small number of participants reported that their motivation was due to having an empty nest, and the desire to fill their home with children. For example, one stated, “I was retiring from teaching and wasn't sure what I'd do in all my spare time.” Another offered, “my children are grown and I miss children in my life. I would like to help make a difference in their world.” Parents who have raised their children can offer experience, wisdom, and an open bed that used to be occupied by their now grown children. This group represents another important resource as agencies seek to recruit more homes to meet the growing needs in Arizona.

FOSTERING GOALS AND EXPERIENCES

When foster parents were asked about their primary goal for becoming a foster parent when first licensed, 73% ($n = 766$) reported wanting to provide care for an unknown child/children in the community, and 27% ($n = 282$) reported a desire to care for a specific child who they knew (either relative or non-relative).

When first licensed, foster parents reported differing anticipated years of commitment as foster parents. Thirty-two percent ($n = 337$) of foster parents had planned on providing care for children in foster care for 10 years or more, 26% ($n = 268$) for 2 to 5 years, 20% ($n = 208$) for 5 to 10 years, 14% ($n = 145$) for 1 to 2 years, and 9% ($n = 89$) for up to a year.

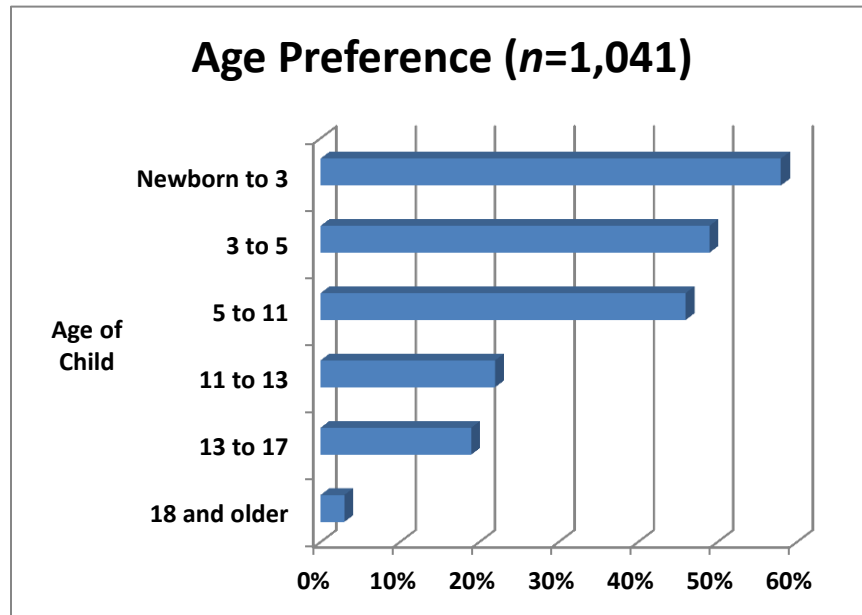


Figure 2

More than half (58%, $n = 600$) of foster parents in the study preferred to care for infants and toddlers (0-3 years old), 49% ($n = 508$) preferred to care for young children ages 3 to 5, 46% ($n = 484$) children ages 5 to 11, 22% ($n = 230$) children 11 to 13, and 19% ($n = 198$) ages 13 to 17. Three percent ($n = 30$) preferred to foster youth 18 or older.¹ As seen by these preferences, there is great need for an increased number of families who have interest in fostering preteens and adolescents. Although this problem extends

beyond Arizona, and has become a national issue, having just 30 families who prefer caring for young adults represents a significant gap that must be addressed.

Eighteen percent ($n = 191$) of foster parents reported they preferred to care for female children, 12% ($n = 126$) reported they preferred to care for male children, and 70% ($n = 746$) had no preference. Eighty-three percent of respondents ($n = 862$) reported they would care for sibling groups. Foster parents often have experience or an expertise for caring for children with special needs. Of the 611 respondents reporting such experience and expertise, thirty-eight percent ($n = 231$) reported an ability to care for medical fragile children, 69% ($n = 419$) had experience or expertise working with children who were educationally delayed, 57% ($n = 348$) worked with children with behavioral health needs, 14% ($n = 84$) with children who may act out sexually, and 16% ($n = 98$) had experience or expertise working with children who were pregnant teens and/or teen parents. The number of families willing to serve sibling groups is striking and speaks to the commitment these families have toward keeping sibling groups together.

When asked about the total number of children foster parents have provided foster care for (overall), more than half (56%, $n = 584$) reported providing care for 1 to 5 children, 20% ($n = 200$) reported providing care for 6 to 10 children, 12% ($n = 127$) reported caring for 11 to 20 children, 6% ($n = 57$) reported caring for 21 to 40 children, and 4% ($n = 41$) reported caring for 40 or more children over the course of their fostering. Two percent ($n = 25$) did not have a placement at the time of the survey.

¹ Numbers may not equal 100% as some families foster across ages

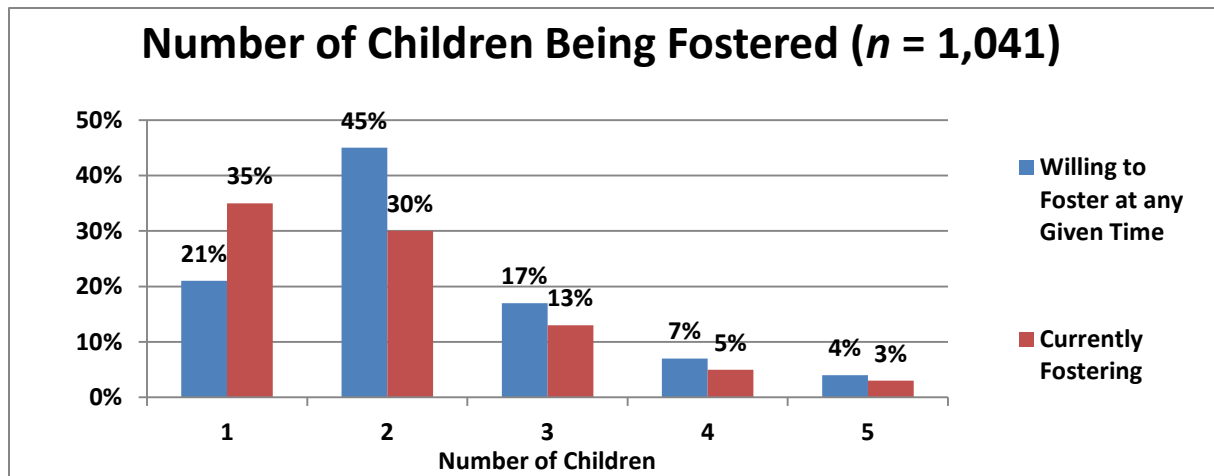


Figure 3

Forty-five percent ($n = 470$) of foster parents said they were prepared to care for two children through the foster care system at any given time, and 21% ($n = 218$) said they were prepared to care for one. Seventeen percent ($n = 179$) reported being able to care for three children at any given time, 7% ($n = 75$) said four children, 4% ($n = 38$) reported being able to care for five children at any given time, and 17% ($n = 179$) had no preference for how many children they could foster at any given time.

Foster parents reported the current number of children they had placed in their care. Thirty-five percent of the foster parents ($n = 359$) in the study reported having one child placed through DCS, 30% ($n = 306$) said they had 2 children, 13% ($n = 138$) had 3 children placed, 5% ($n = 55$) had 4, 3% ($n = 30$) reported 5 children placed, and 14% ($n = 146$) said they had no children currently placed with them.

Eighty-six percent ($n = 896$) of foster parents reported the children placed in their home were consistent with their placement preferences. Thirty-five percent ($n = 361$) of foster parents reported providing respite care for another foster family within the last 12 months.

Inconsistencies in Placement Preferences. Foster parents were asked about the circumstances where placements were not consistent with their placement preferences and how they felt about it. Of the 125 open-ended responses provided, many parents did not yet or did not currently have placements. Others described the inconsistency resulted due to communication issues with DCS and/or licensing agencies, and as a result of confusion with licensing regulations. Some of the inconsistencies foster parents noted were receiving children with medical and behavioral issues, sibling groups, ICWA, and children who were unavailable for adoption.

Foster parents reported frequently that they had children placed with them who were outside of their original age/race/gender criteria, often as a result of a sibling group placement. For some, this was a positive experience, for others there were negative outcomes.

Participants reported that confusion and frustration with their lack of placements. Foster parents reported either having no children placed with them or having additional empty beds in their homes.

This proved discouraging for foster parents who continue to hear about the need for homes for children, yet have empty beds.

“I have been approved for a couple of months now and still have no placements or even been called which I thought the state needed homes. I have decided not to do this but look into helping in another area.”

“This child left in late December and our placement agency has yet to place another child with us as of then. We have been considering terminating our brief tenure as foster parents.”

Although these comments may represent isolated events, they do suggest that DCS may want to evaluate their process for placing to ensure systemic barriers are not hindering efficient placement.

Communication with DCS and licensing. Foster parents reported a range of minor to major communication issues with DCS and Licensing. Most of the communication issues were surrounding details regarding the initial placement of children in their home. For example, one stated, “When called we were told the kids were 2 and 4. The 4 year old was really 5 and almost 6.” Another shared, “Calls would come for placement then never show. That was very frustrating.” In addition to misinformation, some foster parents felt that the DCS workers purposely withheld information from them, information that in turn caused negative consequences. For example, as one parent explained,

“Workers aren't always truthful about behaviors the child has prior to the placement. Foster parents need to know about prior behaviors in order to insure that the home remains safe and functional after the placement is placed.”

Medical and behavioral issues. Participants reported having inconsistencies in their desired and actual placements because they felt unprepared or unable to care for the behavioral or medical issues of the children placed in their care. In many of these instances, foster parents reported not being made aware of the behavioral or medical issue of the child prior to placement. For example, one parent explained, “The children that have been placed in our home have presented with a number of behavioral challenges. Since my husband and I work full-time, our schedules don't allow us to give these kids the attention they deserve.” Another parent stated, “We had our first placement of a medically fragile child who needed 1:1 care and we were not prepared to meet his needs.”

Frustration and confusion with licensing regulations. Some foster parents reported inconsistencies due to a lack of understanding of the placement decisions made by the Office of Licensing and Regulation (OLR) related to the age of children, number of children, and certain rules. There appeared to be some confusion about how and why decisions were made. For example, as one foster parent explained, “In less than a year we have amended our license four times in order to fit the needs of the children we have or are caring for.” Another described their experience, “Our first set of children we asked to have the number moved up from 2 children to 4 children to accommodate the sibling group and then the age group went to 9. Our current set of children, we said we wanted to stay under 4 so they put us at 5 and we ended up with a 6 and 5 year old. Can't figure out the system!”

Sibling groups. Foster parents reported often amending their licensing preferences in order to take sibling groups. Foster parents were willing to take children outside of their preferred age range, and were willing to open up additional beds for siblings. For example, two parents explained,

“We took a baby that was 4 months old. Then we found out she had a 2 year old sister, and we felt they should be together so we took her in as well. We just took in their newborn baby sister as well. We had no intention of adding 3 kids to our family. We just fell in love with them and felt it was the right thing to do.”

“We have taken larger sibling groups than we originally intended, in an effort to keep the children together. This also means that we have taken older children than what we had intended in an effort to keep siblings together.”

This commitment to keeping sibling groups together is highly valued. Working to amend a license to meet these needs allows children to remain connected to siblings, something that is critical to their growth and development.

FOSTER FAMILY INTERACTIONS WITH LICENSING AGENCIES

Table 2. Licensing Agencies of Survey Respondents² (n=977)

<i>Licensing Agency</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Arizona Children’s Association</i>	216	21.0
<i>Aid to Adoption of Special Kids (AASK),</i>	94	9.2
<i>Christian Family Care</i>	76	7.4
<i>Catholic Charities or Catholic Social Services</i>	73	7.1
<i>Devereux</i>	69	6.7
<i>Human Resource Training (HRT)</i>	66	6.4
<i>RISE</i>	59	5.7
<i>Baptist Children’s Services</i>	42	4.1
<i>Ameripsych (General Health Corporation)</i>	36	3.5
<i>Agape Adoption Agency of Arizona</i>	35	3.4
<i>Child Crisis Center – East Valley</i>	31	3.0
<i>Black Family and Child Services</i>	25	2.4
<i>Casa de Los Ninos</i>	25	2.4
<i>La Paloma Family Services</i>	25	2.4
<i>West Valley Child Crisis Center</i>	18	1.7
<i>Providence of Arizona</i>	17	1.7
<i>Arizona A Place to Call Home</i>	16	1.6
<i>Crisis Nursery of Phoenix</i>	16	1.6
<i>Intermountain Centers for Human Development</i>	15	1.5
<i>Arizona Partnership for Children</i>	14	1.4
<i>FSR Integrative Services</i>	9	0.9

² Five percent (n=51) preferred not to reveal their licensing agency

FREQUENCY OF VISITS FROM LICENSING AGENCY

Licensing agencies are critical in ensuring foster families are able to care for the children in their homes. A large part of supporting foster families is ensuring they visit the home on a regular basis. Visitation frequency depends on the needs of the family and children in their care.

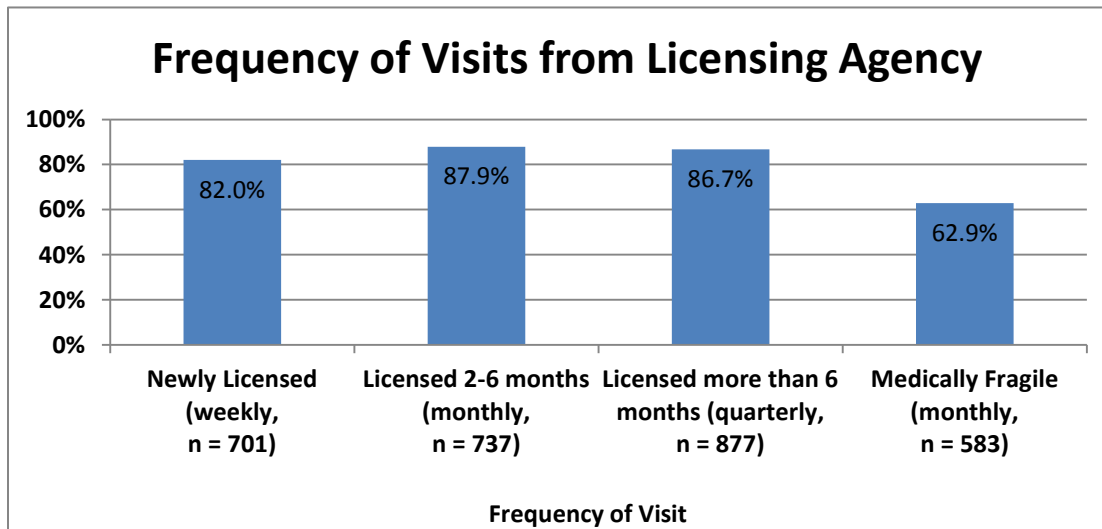


Figure 4

Figure 4 presents foster parents' reports of the frequency of visits from their licensing agency. The licensing agency is charged with providing the initial pre-service training as well as ongoing annual training to families. Licensing agencies are also responsible for providing the necessary support to foster families on a regular basis and in times of crisis. Therefore, it is important to assess the level of support, responsiveness, accessibility, and involvement licensing agencies provide to families. Figure 4 provides an overview of the level to which foster parents agree that they received support from their licensing agency in times of crisis, received phone calls in a timely manner; whether their licensing agency has an adequate method for contact and response after hours and on weekends; specialized training needed; networking opportunities with other foster parents; involvement in recruiting new foster parents; encouraging and supporting peer mentorship between foster parents; and coordinating respite care for foster parents.

SUPPORT AND TRAINING FROM LICENSING AGENCY

Overall, the majority of foster parents surveyed (82%, $n = 834$) reported being satisfied with the support they receive from their licensing agency. Most foster parents (91%, $n = 928$) agreed that they received return calls in a timely manner from their licensing agency and received support in times of crisis (84%, $n = 845$).

Eighty-two percent ($n = 836$) reported their licensing agency enabled them to receive the type of training and education they needed and 68% ($n = 696$) agreed that their licensing agency offers networking opportunities with other foster parents that are helpful to them.

Half of the survey respondents ($n = 507$) reported their licensing agency encouraged their involvement with the recruitment of new foster parents and half ($n = 497$) of the respondents reported their licensing agency having an adequate method to encourage and support peer mentoring between foster parents. Sixty-one percent ($n = 621$) reported that their licensing agency had an adequate method for coordinating respite care.

Eighty-six percent ($n = 868$) of foster parents were satisfied with the interactions they had with their assigned licensing worker. More specifically, they felt interactions were handled in a professional and courteous manner and input was taken seriously when concerns arose regarding the licensing status of their home or concerns about the children in the home were addressed. Findings suggest a high level of overall satisfaction with licensing agencies. Levels of satisfaction were a bit lower in the area of training and the capacity to coordinate respite care. These may represent two areas of enhanced focus in the year to come. With that said, licensing agencies should be commended for the high level of satisfaction in many other areas. Examples of these successes are provided in the following section of open-ended comments.

Licensing Agency Support (n = 1,020)

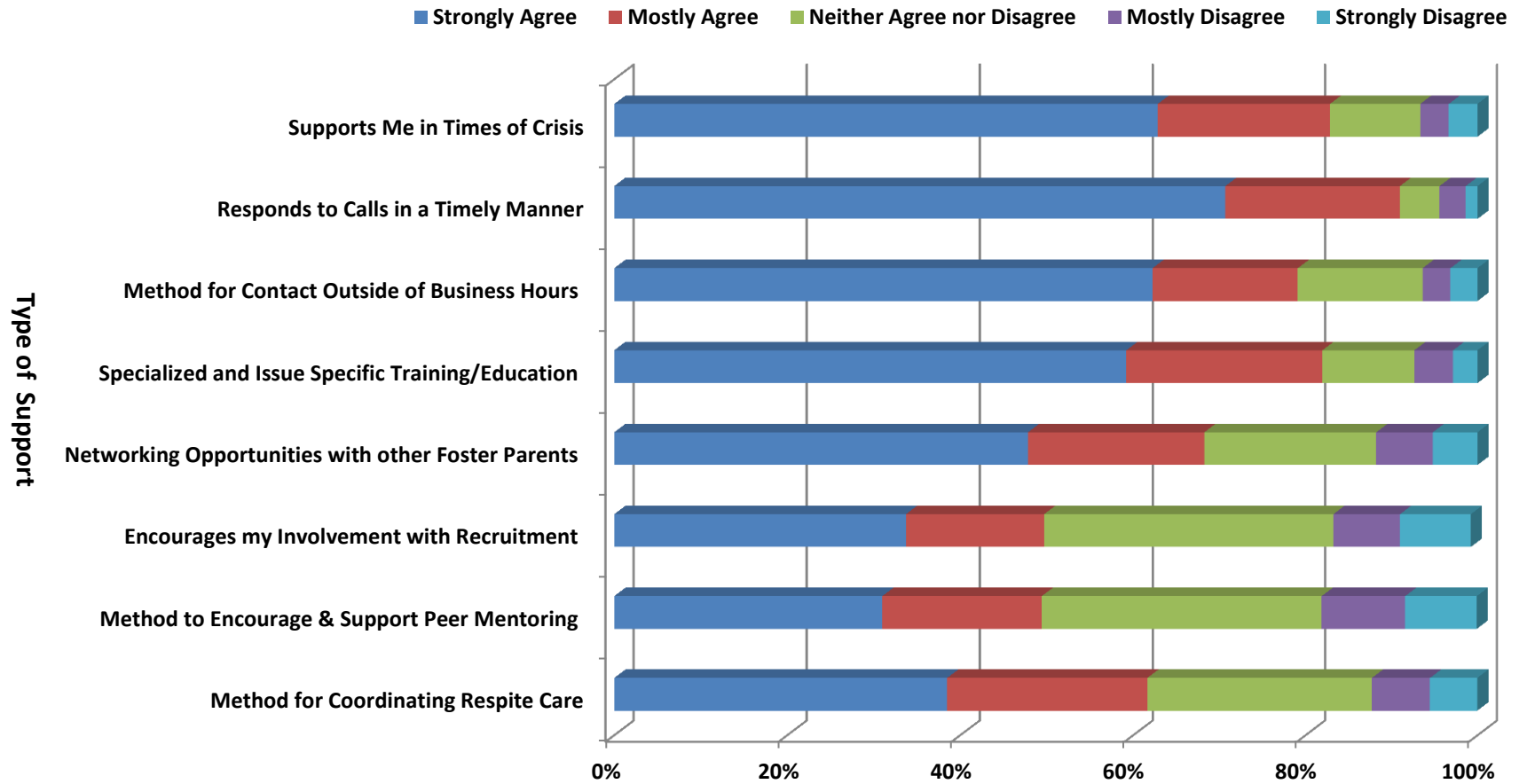


Figure 5

FEEDBACK REGARDING WHAT LICENSING AGENCIES ARE DOING WELL

A total of 537 foster parents responded to the open ended question to offer feedback regarding what they believed their licensing agencies were doing well. Foster parents were pleased with the high level of support, professionalism, advocacy on behalf of the family, consistent and regular visits, availability, and responsiveness. Foster parents expressed that they want to be listened to, have someone available to support them, be treated respectfully and professionally, and have a licensing worker that cares about their entire family unit.

Support was frequently associated with availability and responsiveness, including open communication and responding timely for requests for information. For example, one respondent stated, “My licensing agency is a tremendous support to me simply because my licensing agent works so hard and is always available to me and gives me the help, answers, support, etc. that I need. She has recently started a foster care support group and I feel that it will also be a great source of support and strength.” Foster parents also expressed feeling supported when their licensing worker attended court hearings and CFT’s either with them or for them. Many foster parents simply indicated that they felt supported by their licensing worker. To several, this support was the primary reason they remained foster parents, for example, one foster parent reported, “Our worker is an amazing support system. She is there for us always in a time of need. She is the reason we will continue fostering because of the ease and support she provides us.”

Advocacy. Foster parents also felt supported when their licensing worker and agency advocated not only on their behalf, but also on the behalf of the children in their care. They wanted someone to be “in their corner” when they were advocating for the children in their care. For example, one foster parent stated, “When I am having issues getting responses from the case manager or other interested party, my licensing worker will work toward getting them to respond. He is a bull dog for our foster kids!”

Professionalism. The professionalism of individual licensing workers was important to foster parents. Foster parents consistently reported that they felt most supported by licensing workers who were professional, respectful, punctual, and caring. The respondents also spoke to the influence one worker can have on fostering, both positive and negative. For example, one foster parent stated, “I feel that they are experts and act professionally at all times providing answers and support immediately and consistently.” And, another reported, “They provide very professional and prompt communication.”

Care and concern. Foster parents expressed that they appreciated licensing workers who showed care and concern about their entire family which included themselves and their biological or adopted children, rather than their sole focus being on the foster children. As one foster parent explained, “It is nice that my agency is not only concerned with us as foster parents but also for our family as a whole.” Foster parents wanted licensing workers to understand their family system and to know which children would be most successful in their homes as illustrated in one respondent who stated, “Care about the families overall - they do not place a child simply to fill a bed. They attempt to make a successful match WHEN the time is right.”

Regular home visits. One of the most common responses regarding what licensing agencies are doing well was regular home visits. In addition to this being a licensing requirement, foster parents felt supported with regular home visits, and indicated that these visits were a way licensing workers communicated their support. For example, one parent stated, “They do monthly visits regardless of how

long you have been a provider to ensure the safety of both the resource parent(s) and the child(ren), which I find amazing.” Another parent described their experience, “They hold all visits and are very thorough in obtaining the necessary information from me and providing me with anything I need.”

The monthly visits were also described as an opportunity for agencies to listen to the families and their needs, which resource parents reported they have been doing well. For example, one parent reported, “I feel supported and listened to about my concerns when I have issues needing resolved concerning my foster daughter.” Other parents really felt heard by licensing agency representatives. As one foster parent reported, her agency “listens to my concerns and offers help whenever.”

Availability and responsiveness. Foster parents overwhelmingly appreciated when licensing workers were both available and responsive. They wanted to know that there was someone to contact at all hours in case of a crisis in addition to responding to calls and e-mails in a timely manner. For example, one foster parent stated, “My licensing worker responds quickly to emails/phone calls and does her best to answer my questions. She shows up on time to home visits and does her best to help when issues arise.” Another parent reported, “Any question I have are answered in a timely manner; those needing more time are still responded to and I am made aware of more time needed by them.” Another parent expressed appreciation for the agency’s availability, “They are just a phone call away anytime I need them. 24/7.”

FEEDBACK REGARDING WHAT LICENSING AGENCIES COULD IMPROVE UPON

Six hundred and thirty foster parents offered suggestions regarding what their licensing agencies could improve upon. Suggestions were related to training, support, the need for respite and resources, and a concern about turnover and communication.

Training. Foster parents provided feedback related to several aspects of training. Many suggested providing childcare during trainings. Consistent with the findings on the closed-ended items, respondents had suggestions related to improving training content and accessibility. Respondents mentioned the need for more specialized trainings, trainings available closer to their homes and training opportunities available during evenings and weekends. Parents would like to have more dynamic, expert trainers and more options in general for training.

Support. Respondents frequently cited the need for informal support, mentoring or network groups with other foster families. Many asked for networking groups within their agency or geographic location. Foster parents wanted the ability to connect with others, exchange ideas, and provide support for each other. For example, one foster parent stated she would like, “more networking opportunities to connect foster/adoptive parents in geographic regions or with similar interests to provide a support group.” Another reported, “We need local support groups for foster families to share resources and discuss the issues we have.” Resource parents also reported wanting more knowledge of how to access resources and what resources were available from their licensing agencies. For example, one foster parent stated, “So many foster parents are not told about WIC or stores that give any discount to foster parents.” One foster parent suggested licensing agencies “provide a resource directory for foster children. Show support by occasionally bringing things like wipes, diapers, or gift cards.”

Respite and resources. Foster parents strongly expressed the need for additional respite care and the need for increased respite pay for those that provide respite. Foster parents reported that respite would increase their ability to remain foster parents by providing a break when needed and allowing them to do activities such as a night out with their partner. For example, one felt that “Respite is a real struggle for us due to limited providers” and another agreed stating, “I never had any luck receiving respite the few times I asked within my agency.”

Staff turnover. Foster parents consistently discussed how licensing agency turnover affected their relationship with the agency and their ability to care for the children in their home. There were concerns that the transfer of information to the new licensing worker was not complete, requiring additional paperwork and time from the resource parents. Foster parents also expressed difficulty in establishing relationships with their licensing workers due to the frequent turnover. As one parent describes, “turnover like this is extremely detrimental to building trust and establishing any feeling of support. We've had new family specialist show up to our house and say, ‘I haven't had time to read your file.’ It's disheartening to hear that, a waste of our time to have to go over information we know is in the file.”

Communication. Although many parents identified communication as a strength, other foster parents discussed the need for improved communication between DCS and the licensing agency, between their licensing agency and themselves, and directly with DCS. Foster parents highlighted the need for transparency and to be treated as part of the team. They requested timely communication and responsiveness to their needs.

INTERACTIONS WITH DCS SPECIALISTS AND SUPERVISORS

The relationship between foster parents and their assigned DCS Specialists is critical to the ability of foster families to provide care to the children in their home. In addition, DCS Policy requires regular visits by the DCS Specialist to the child’s placement, for DCS to return calls in a timely manner, and regular communication about the child’s background information and important information regarding events such as staffings, court hearings, changes in case plan, and visitation.

Seventy-six percent ($n = 758$) report receiving regular visits from their DCS Specialists and 57% ($n = 575$) report receiving return calls in a timely manner from their DCS Specialists and/or Unit Supervisors. 79% ($n = 777$) stated they knew who to contact and had accurate contact information when there is an emergency with the child or children placed in their home.

Regarding the information that was received, 46% ($n = 456$) reported receiving adequate background information on the children placed in their home; 74% ($n = 728$) were aware of the permanency plan for the children placed in their care; 67% ($n = 666$) reported being kept up to date on court hearings, visitations, and staffings related to the children placed in their home; and 63% ($n = 626$) reported receiving adequate notification of important meetings, appointments, and placement changes and/or reunification related to the children placed in their home.

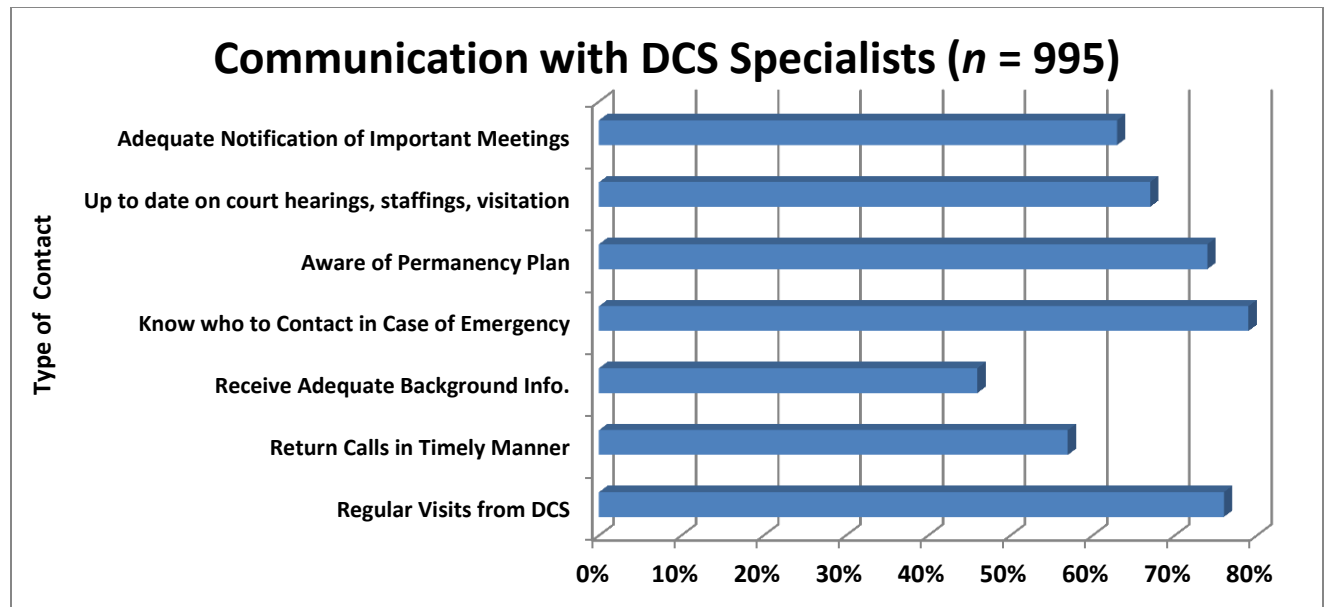


Figure 6

Overall, 60% of foster parents ($n = 595$) surveyed were satisfied with their interactions with DCS Specialists. When concerns regarding the child(ren) placed in their foster home was addressed, they felt it was done in a professional and courteous manner and that their input was taken seriously.

Of foster parents who had interactions with DCS Unit Supervisors, 47% ($n = 455$) reported being satisfied that their concerns regarding the children placed with them were addressed in a professional and courteous manner.

Previous research demonstrates that when foster parents feel they are part of the team, they are more satisfied with their fostering situation. In the current survey, 60% ($n = 590$) of foster parents felt as if DCS considered them as part of the team that supports and cares for the children placed with them and 55% ($n = 648$) felt DCS valued their work with the children placed in their home. Overall, 55% ($n = 540$) of respondents were satisfied with the support they receive from DCS Specialists or DCS Unit Supervisors.

Many foster parents consider themselves as part of the team to support and care for the children placed in their home, and 73% ($n = 722$) were satisfied with their current level of involvement, and 27% ($n = 262$) would like to be more involved. These findings suggest that although many foster parents do feel included, there is a substantial number who would appreciate increased involvement highlighting a potential area of growth for the department.

FEEDBACK REGARDING WHAT THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILD SAFETY DOES WELL

Five hundred and thirty seven study participants offered extensive feedback on an open-ended item regarding the positive experiences they had with DCS Specialists and the system. When describing positive experiences, parents reported appreciating regular communication, reinforcing the importance of foster parents being kept informed on the child's case, services, and meetings. DCS specialists were also praised for being "professional", "helpful", "knowledgeable", "friendly", and "proactive". As one parent stated, "My case manager is always on-time, calls me back immediately, gives me court reports,

includes me in decision-making, invites me to court and other meetings, and I am aware of the permanency plan at all times. I feel as though it's been a blessing to have my case manager."

Flexibility and responsiveness. Foster parents appreciated DCS specialists' ability to be flexible with scheduling, responsive with regard to the child and families' needs, and availability in responding to calls and emails from foster parents. Foster parents reported how helpful it was to have a monthly meeting and visit from the assigned DCS specialist. For example, one parent shared, "My current and last placement's CPS involvement has been great. The caseworkers have held a meeting every single month and responded to emails and phone calls in a timely manner. They have been open and shared information about the case. They have been respectful, kind and appreciative toward me."

Support. Respondents felt appreciated and supported by their DCS specialists when they perceived the workers a) listened to them, b) were responsive, c) advocated for the children and the families caring for them, and d) actively included foster parents as "part of the team." One parent stated, "I always had calls returned and I was kept up to date on court dates...kept informed on things I needed to know to keep my children safe. I felt part of the team." Another stated, "They go out of their way to help the kids and to make sure they get the help and emotional support that they need." When communication was strong and reciprocal, respondents reported high levels of satisfaction.

Establishing a relationship. Foster parents commended DCS specialists who were able to establish a relationship with the family and the children. One explained this stating, "Our case manager knows us and knows our case. She doesn't have to say 'wait, let me pull our file' or 'remind me of your situation again...'. She is fully aware of what is going on." Parents were especially thankful for DCS specialists who were able to understand the needs of the children and help to access necessary services, such as one parent who explained, "We have had some amazing specialists. They are compassionate to all parties involved. They listen to our concerns, help us develop a useful and healthy relationship with bio-family, and truly work to understand the children and their needs. Also they are experienced and know how to advocate for the kids. They push for behavioral health plans, educational screenings, and help judges understand multiple facets of the child's life."

Understanding of "strained" system. Many respondents offered positive remarks regarding DCS performance along with an understanding of the challenges they face with high caseloads and a "strained system." As one parent described, "Given how strained the resources are, I believe DCYF/CPS does a great job in supporting the kids in my home. They are responsive and communicative, and clearly value what we do as foster parents." Another shared, "I believe CPS has a hard job because of their high volume caseloads and it is hard for them to give the individual attention to each case/child. They go out of their way to help the kids and to make sure they get the help and emotional support that they need." Another spoke to understanding the difficulties associated with working as a DCS Specialist when explaining, "I do believe that DCYF/CPS is over worked, understaffed and under paid for the job that they have to do," and another concurred stating, "CPS is overloaded and overworked. I am amazed that they are able to complete all of their caseloads."

In summary, respondents were greatly appreciative of workers who are available, responsive, and partner with foster parents in caring for children and youth in care. Respondents recognized how strained the system is and were quick to acknowledge workers who were able to overcome the challenges of a strapped system.

FEEDBACK ON AREAS IN WHICH THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILD SAFETY COULD IMPROVE

In addition to describing positive experiences, 630 parents offered suggestions through their responses to an open-ended item regarding ways DCS could enhance their interactions with foster parents.

Respondents' comments were related to four distinct categories: a) challenges with the DCS workforce, b) need for improved communication, c) the desire for enhanced teamwork, and d) the importance of support. Foster parents offered suggestions and feedback and many had varying experiences depending on the case and specialist they were working with.

Challenges with the DCS workforce. Many foster parents acknowledged the need for additional qualified, caring, and dedicated DCS specialists hired and trained adequately so that caseload numbers could be reduced, allowing specialists to spend more time, attention, and focus on fewer cases. As one foster parent stated, "Hire more workers so the ones we have are not so overloaded. If they didn't have such big caseloads they would focus on the kids more effectively."

Several foster parents mentioned that they believe that most specialists are dedicated to their work and to the children, however many do not have the time, resources, and support to do their job effectively. For example, one parent stated, "With the number of cases each case manager is responsible for, I think they do an awesome job. I honestly don't know how they manage. I would love to see their number of cases lowered, giving them more time to interact with each placement."

Foster parents discussed the high rates of turnover and a lack of transition when a new DCS specialist is assigned. For example, one parent offered, "I believe that the best thing that could help the children is continuity in case workers, if the case worker must leave then some sort of review or report made so the next person getting the case could be up to date with what is going on." Respondents were very concerned about the impact higher caseloads, high turnover, and how the need for more specialists and DCS staff is affecting the well-being of the children, permanency, case progression, and the relationships with foster parents. For example, one parent suggested a need to, "reduce the caseloads of each of the CPS caseworkers so that they can focus the appropriate amount of time and energy to each individual case" and another explained, "there has been lots of turnover in our case. We have had 4 different case workers with our current set of foster children...it would be great if CPS could find a way to keep good, solid case workers."

Need for improved communication. Overwhelmingly, foster parents who participated in the survey would like to see an improvement in communication between the DCS specialists/supervisors and foster parents. Some discussed the need for an improvement in communication between DCS specialists and the children in their homes. For example, one parent suggested that specialists "could communicate the reunification process more clearly to the child. We have now been assigned a 3rd CPS case manager within 5 months, too much transition for the child, continuity of the reunification process is impeded by this."

Foster parents also reported a need to be kept up to date and notified of important dates and meetings such as CFTs, court hearings, and visitation. Survey respondents often reported a lack of returned emails and phone calls from DCS specialists and supervisors such as one who asked that DCS staff "Return phone calls and e-mails in a timely manner." Quotes regarding the need for timely communication corroborate the earlier statistics where 57% of foster parents reported receiving return phone calls in a timely manner and many reported not having regular visits from DCS specialists. Foster

parents discussed how critical it is for them to receive timely and accurate information regarding the children in their care (and prior to placement) for them to effectively care for and access services for the children. One parent explained, "Getting all of the information about the kiddos in the beginning would help us parent them better." Many parents reported wanting to regularly exchange information about the children to DCS specialists to help inform decisions regarding the case plan, visitation, and care in order to best care for the children and reduce disruption. The following quote provides greater detail into these experiences:

"Information provided and released to the FP at the time of placement is minimal and seemingly guarded. In my experience, the more information we have as FPs regarding the child we have taken into care, the better we are able to help them heal and get them the care they need. In each case I have been either left in the dark for days/weeks or left scrounging up information strategically from the corners of the case over time. Had the full facts been given soon after the time of placement many days of frustration and difficulty in adjustment could be avoided."

Desire for enhanced teamwork. In addition to requesting increased communication from DCS, foster parents would like to be heard regarding their observations, experiences, and day-to-day interactions with the children in their care. Specifically, respondents consistently reported a need to feel valued, respected, and a part of the team. For example, one foster parent expressed a desire for "respect that we know these kids better than most people and we are in this because we are genuinely concerned about their well-being." Similarly, another suggested that DCS "improve communication among team members, and make the foster parent a more involved and respected member of team." Another concurred when asking that DCS "value foster parents more. Understand that we are striving for the best interest of the children and are wanting to be helpful in the case plan." Many foster parents discussed their need to be respected as the caregivers for the children in their care, as a member of the team, and as individuals and members of a family. They expressed a desire to be treated with honesty and respect and as someone who cares and is concerned for the well-being of the child. Foster parents responding to this survey see themselves as a reliable and important source of information and would like to see their perspectives valued throughout the case. Foster parents reported feeling respected when they are provided with adequate and accurate information, communicated with regularly, and treated as a partner.

Foster parents would like to be part of a collaborative relationship and team that advocates for the best interests of the child. Many parents reported wanting to work together with DCS specialists, birth families, and service providers to provide a support network for the children. For example, one foster parent stated, "It would be amazing if tools were available to allow children, bio families, and their former foster placements to stay in touch in healthy ways and provide ongoing support for one another."

Importance of support. Many respondents identified a need for more consistent support from DCS. For example, one stated, "I understand that the case managers have a lot on their plate but it's important for them to understand that as foster parents we heavily rely on their response, communication and the documentation they are able to provide. Caring for these children is important to us. We need to know that CPS is supporting our decision and respects our position." Increased support through communication, availability, and advocacy was highlighted by many parents in this study.

Survey respondents also expressed requiring additional support from DCS with transitioning children in and out of their home. Foster parents noted the need for extended transitional periods with support from professionals in order to best serve the developmental, emotional, and attachment needs of the children. For example, one parent suggested needing more, “Communication especially when transitioning kids home. You can't move a child from the home he/she has known for a year to family they don't know at the drop of a hat. Not enough time for a transition.”

Foster parents also discussed a need for a greater understanding regarding the grief and loss they experience when children leave the home. For example, one parent explained, “I think there needs to be more sympathy/empathy when taking a child out of a foster home, after that child has been there for years. It is hard on the child and the foster family and the CPS workers try to rush things.”

In summary, foster parent satisfaction with their interaction with DCS staff is mixed. Many are satisfied and are quick to acknowledge excellent caseworkers who clearly go above and beyond in the level of communication and support provided to foster parents. These workers should be acknowledged for these efforts. This level of support is critical to the success of fostering. At the same time, foster parents identify mixed appraisals of their interactions with DCS staff. Although many interactions are professional and supportive, foster parents responding to this survey cite examples of other workers who are less responsive and at times, even perceived as disrespectful. Foster parents were quick to acknowledge the systems-level issues that hinder quality care. However, despite the cause for problems such as lack of information or phone calls not being returned, respondents of this survey highlight communication, support, and teamwork as essential to their capacity to care for vulnerable children in Arizona.

FOSTER PARENT TRAINING AND SUPPORT

Training is an important component of the process in becoming a foster parent. Formal pre-service training is not only an opportunity to learn about the child welfare system and becoming a foster parent but is also a time to become oriented to the licensing agency, resources, learn new skills, and develop relationships with other foster parents and professionals. In Arizona, the current programs used to train new and prospective foster parents are *Partnering for Safety and Permanence – Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting* (PS-MAPP) and *Deciding Together*. PS-MAPP training typically involves 10 weeks of 3 hour instructional sessions (30 hours total). Licensing agencies may also require additional training as it pertains to their agency policies and procedures. In order for new and prospective foster parents to feel confident and become effective and successful foster parents, it is important for them to feel prepared following their training. The current survey asked foster parents whether or not they felt were adequately prepared to foster, and 34% ($n = 322$) stated they completely agreed, and 42% ($n = 395$) mostly agreed the training adequately prepared them. Thirteen percent ($n = 126$) reported they mostly disagreed or completely disagreed with this statement. Eleven percent ($n = 100$) reported that they neither agreed nor disagreed.

Training Topics. Licensed foster parents are also required to complete 6 hours of annual training to maintain their license and 12 hours if they are a HCTC (therapeutic) licensed foster home. Current training opportunities vary by agency in terms of method of delivering training, topics, and availability. Eighty-nine percent ($n = 838$) reported being able to meet the annual training hours required by their specific agency for continued licensure. Seventy-four percent ($n = 695$) reported that the content of the

annual training is relevant to their current needs and 72% (n= 675) were satisfied with their access to the annual training.

In general, annual training should relate to the age and needs of the child the parent cares for or is planning to care for, but this also varies depending on the agency and the needs of the family. Foster parents were asked about specific topics they had adequate information about, what topics they would benefit from obtaining general information about, and advanced information regarding topics they could benefit from.

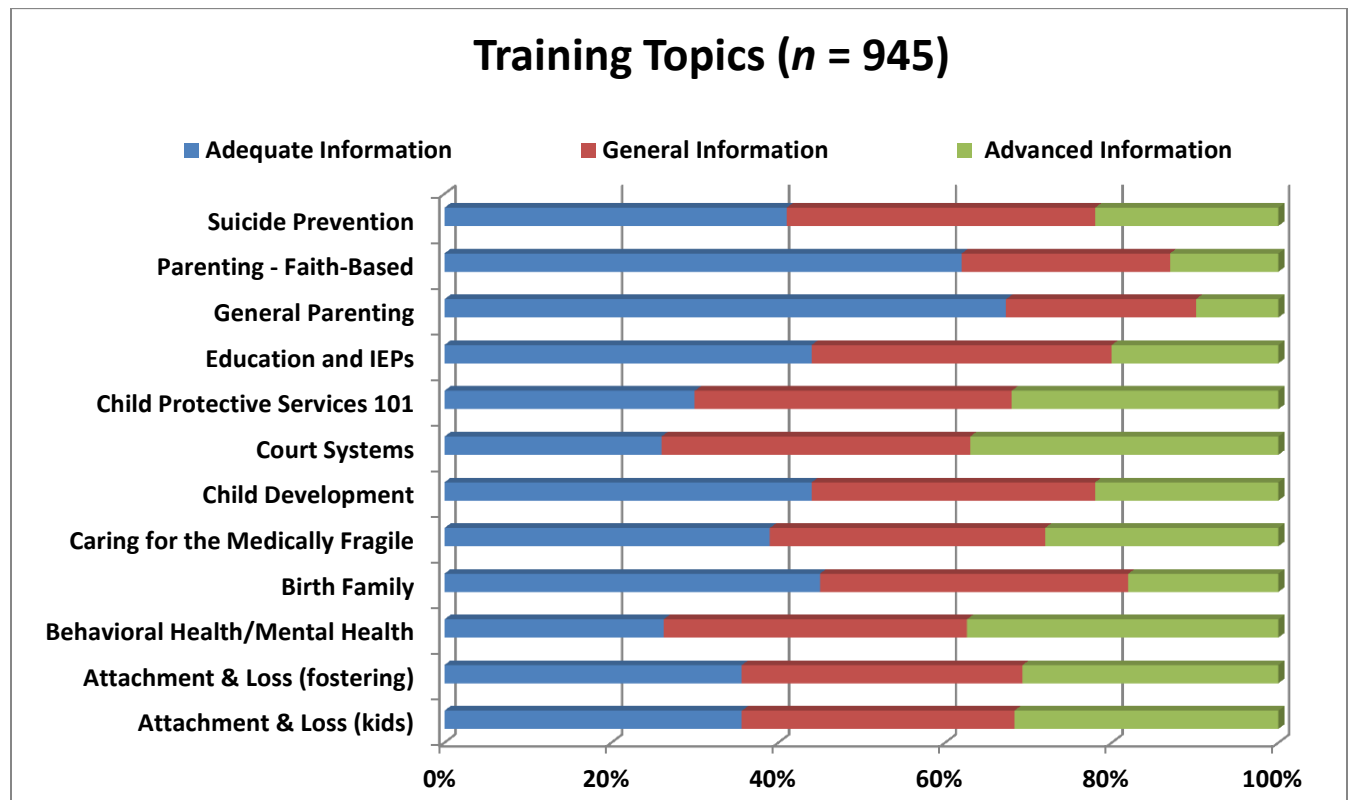


Figure 7

In addition, foster parents offered ideas and suggestions for other topics of interest for training. The majority of suggestions were training opportunities for foster parents to better support the children in their care. Other areas were related to support, information about the system, and financial and documentation aspects of foster parenting.

Financial aspects and tax implications of fostering. Foster parents participating in the survey would like to learn more about financial aspects of fostering as well as the tax implications. They wanted to know more about documentation, financial education and savings, completing paperwork more efficiently, and effective forms of recordkeeping in various points in time (e.g. when a child first moves in).

System policies and procedures. Survey respondents were also interested in learning more about various systemic policies and procedures such as policies regarding visitation (hourly, overnight), respite care, concurrent case planning, the adoption process, the Arizona state welfare system, guardianship, court processes including severance and reunification, information regarding the key players involved in

the legal system (e.g. Guardian ad Litem (GAL), Assistant Attorney General (AAG), Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)), the services offered to biological parents, and the level of and how to be involved in court proceedings.

Support. Foster parents offered other topics for training related to support of the child and family such as dealing with grief (and finding support for grief and loss), transitions, working with and establishing boundaries with biological families, blending families (biological and foster children), improving relationships with service providers and DCS specialists, finding activities and community resources for children and families, family counseling, foster parent rights and advocacy, same sex parenting, networking, and ways to create helpful and efficient schedules for children and families.

FOSTER PARENT OVERALL SATISFACTION

Overwhelmingly, foster parents wanted information and new skills about how they can better care for the children in their care. Many wanted to learn more about psychiatric conditions and disorders (such as PTSD, bipolar disorder, autism, depression, reactive attachment disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), psychotropic medications, behavioral problems (such as stealing, self-harm, nightmares, sensory issues, biting, aggression and violence), and how to manage these conditions and behaviors. Foster parents wanted to know more about specific developmental stages and processes experienced by teens, infant care, school-aged children and how to best support these age groups (e.g. nutrition, tantrums, potty training, education, and brain development).

Foster parents wanted to learn more about how to teach children about sexuality and preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Foster parents wanted more information about trauma, attachment, and bonding and how to help children dealing with histories of trauma. In addition, foster parents wanted to learn more about other cultures, customs and practices, and how to promote and support multiculturalism. Many suggested trainings related to overall parenting techniques, discipline, dealing with behavior concerns after visits, de-escalation and basic counseling skills.

Foster parents were also interested in learning more about substance abuse prevention for the children in their care, substance abuse by the biological parent(s), and the effects of prenatal substance abuse and substance-exposed newborns.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WAYS TO IMPROVE PRE-SERVICE TRAINING

As DCS and statewide licensing agencies consider ways to improve pre-service training, 470 parents offered suggestions on ways to enhance the current pre-service training. Most foster parents who offered suggestions in the open-ended responses were satisfied with the pre-service training and found it to be helpful as new foster parents. Many parents also provided suggestions for ways to improve the pre-service training.

Pre-service training format and materials. Some foster parents suggested changing the format to include a hybrid and/or online components to the training; possibly condense the training into fewer days with longer classes and/or combine material to avoid redundancy. Some parents suggested offering a study guide that could be provided prior to classes so that parents could come with thoughtful questions.

Most foster parents suggested having varying modes of delivering information as opposed to a format including just lecture/presentation, such as having guest speakers, using videos, role playing, homework, discussion, and lecture. They prefer to have practical information, real life experiences, scenarios, and stories from seasoned, resilient, successful foster parents, former foster youth, and professionals working in the field. As one foster parent stated, it would be helpful “having more foster parents, birth parents and foster children share their stories and answer questions.”

“I think it would be beneficial to have a designated Q&A segment for potential foster parents to be able to question current or past foster parents with a minimum of three years of experience. In addition, it would also be nice to have a designated advocate or mentor foster family to newbies in an effort to help get services in place and address the needs of the children in a timely manner.”

“Have more current foster parents share their experiences with families doing the PS-MAPP. So it's more reality of what will actually happen with foster kids in your home and how it affects others in your home.”

“Foster parents need to hear more from good, successful foster parents before becoming licensed. You can't really learn what you need to know in a class. Just sitting and talking to other foster parents and foster children has been an invaluable resource.”

Many foster parents mentioned that although PS-MAPP training is helpful and informative, it is difficult for foster parents to be prepared for all scenarios prior to a child being placed. Therefore, several suggested having a ‘refresher’ 4-6 months after licensing or when a child is first placed to help deal with case and child-specific issues or concerns.

“There was so much you just didn't learn in classes. The entire first year of fostering was an ongoing learning experience. I would stress new foster parents to create a support network, link up with an experienced foster family to learn the fine details of CPS, dealing with visitations, parents and the behavioral health system.”

Pre-service training content. Many foster parents expressed a desire to hear more realistic accounts of fostering and exactly what happens when a child is placed. Foster parents wanted to have more content regarding the court process, what happens when a child is removed, who will be in contact with the foster family, who they have to meet with, and what they have to do for the child when placed and

throughout their time in the foster home. “I think an overview of how children come into care and the court process would be a good way to open the class.” Foster parents wanted to know more about what their role is in the court process and how they can become more involved. Foster parents also wanted to hear positive stories of fostering and how to improve their fostering experience.

“I think it could have been improved by speaking a bit more about the positive side and outcomes of foster care. After so many classes, we came away with a feeling of doom and gloom, like in agreeing to be a foster home we were never going to be happy again and the children in our care were always going to be miserable. It was honestly through meeting with friends who were fostering that we were shown the joy that can be given and received through opening your home.”

Foster parents were interested in having more information about documentation, setting boundaries with how children use technology, and age-specific topics (for example, teenagers or very young children). In addition, pre-service training would be improved if it were trauma-informed.

Many parents emphasized a need to include content about grief, loss, and emotions as it relates to fostering. Although they acknowledge that this is difficult to teach and learn prior to the actual experience, it is important to discuss to better prepare for when a child leaves the home. One parent suggests adding content on “teach[ing] new foster parents to be able to separate emotions for foster children (able to give them up).” Another foster parent stated, “The classes teach you that they ARE supposed to go home, but they don't teach you how to deal with how this makes you feel.”

Pre-service trainers. Although most foster parents who received PS-MAPP training had positive feedback regarding the trainers, many suggested having foster parents lead the trainings along with someone who has experience working with the system and who can offer real life scenarios and experiences.

Some foster parents also suggested having a mentoring component or a matching process to pair new foster parents with experienced foster parents.

“A mentor foster parent match up would be good. So many questions it has always been nice to have someone to go through this WITH.”

Pre-service training barriers and accessibility. Parents expressed a need for child care during the pre-service training, for training to be offered in more rural locations, meals, and for training to be more accessible by offering multiple modalities.

“Make child care available for attendees. For evening classes, consider offering a meal option to attendees (attendee would pay but the meal would be arranged by the agency hosting the training); helpful for working parents. Possibly offer a hybrid class, half the time in the classroom, half the time online.”

SUGGESTIONS FOR WAYS TO IMPROVE ANNUAL FOSTER PARENT TRAINING

Foster parents were asked about their preferred method of training. Figure 6 presents respondents' first or second most preferred methods of training. Many survey respondents prefer self-guided online training (45%, $n = 423$) and in-person training in a classroom or workshop (48%, $n = 449$). Forty-three percent also prefer receiving training in a conference format ($n = 410$).

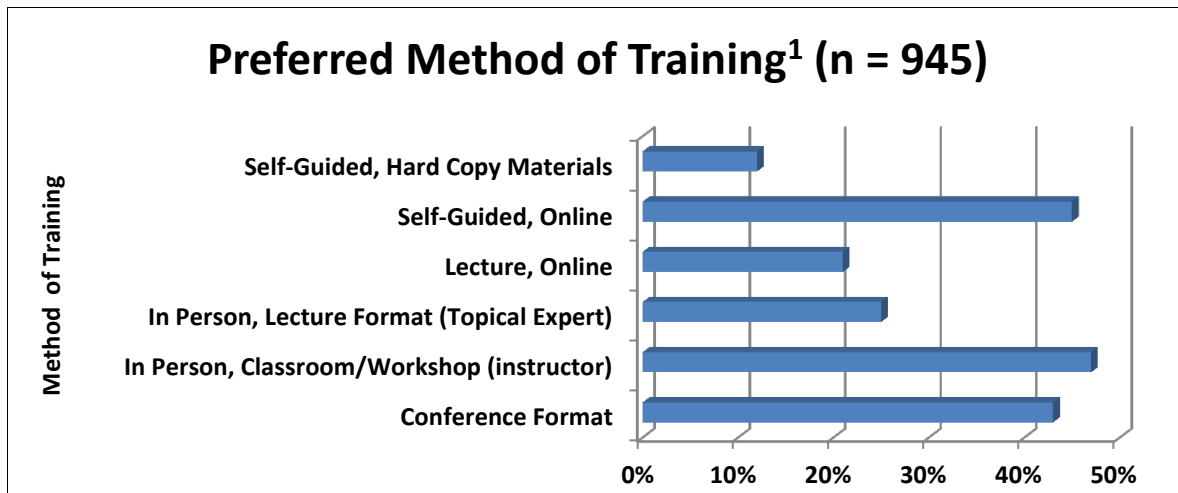


Figure 8

¹First or second most preferred method of training format

There are a variety of potential barriers for foster parents in accessing and obtaining ongoing annual training, such as transportation, child care, topics available, schedules, and cost. Eighty-seven percent of foster parents ($n = 821$) agreed that on-line training formats would reduce barriers to attending and completing training in terms of schedule, distance, transportation, childcare, etc. The majority of foster parents participating in the survey (99%, $n = 934$) reported having access to the Internet and 88% ($n = 821$) agreed that if training were available online, it would be easier for to find topics that are more relevant to them and the children they are caring for.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS IN ANNUAL TRAINING

Five hundred and fifty-five parents offered suggestions on how the annual training could be improved. Overwhelmingly, foster parents would like to have increased accessibility, more variety of training options provided (see section on topics), and greater availability of training. In addition, many foster parents discussed the need for childcare during training. To increase accessibility, foster parents suggested having online options for training, all day trainings, webinars, and other non-conventional options such as independent study. Foster parents would like to have experts and professionals presenting at the in-person and online trainings. Parents also would like to be notified about new training options through email, mail, or an online website. Foster parents in rural areas discussed offering more options for training nearby or online to reduce the burden of traveling. Foster parents

also would like to have more training that offer opportunities to network and meet other foster parents. These suggestions are feasible and innovative and should be considered. Clearly, foster parents have time constraints related to family and work but want to learn more about how to care for the children in their home.

FOSTER FAMILY RESOURCES AND EVENTS

There are many local, regional, and statewide events, celebrations, and resources available to families caring for children in foster care ranging from support groups to recognition campaigns. Some parents are aware and/or utilize resources and services and participate in events and others may not be aware of or may choose not to participate. Such events and resources can provide the support and networking opportunities to families caring for children in foster care. It is important to gauge and increase the level of awareness and encourage involvement for those interested. For example, the Arizona Blue Ribbon Campaign has been held for several years to raise awareness of the foster care system. Fifty-two percent of survey respondents reported being unaware of the event but may participate in it in the future. Almost half of foster parents reported being unaware of, but may use or become involved with the Arizona Foster and Adoptive Parent Association.³

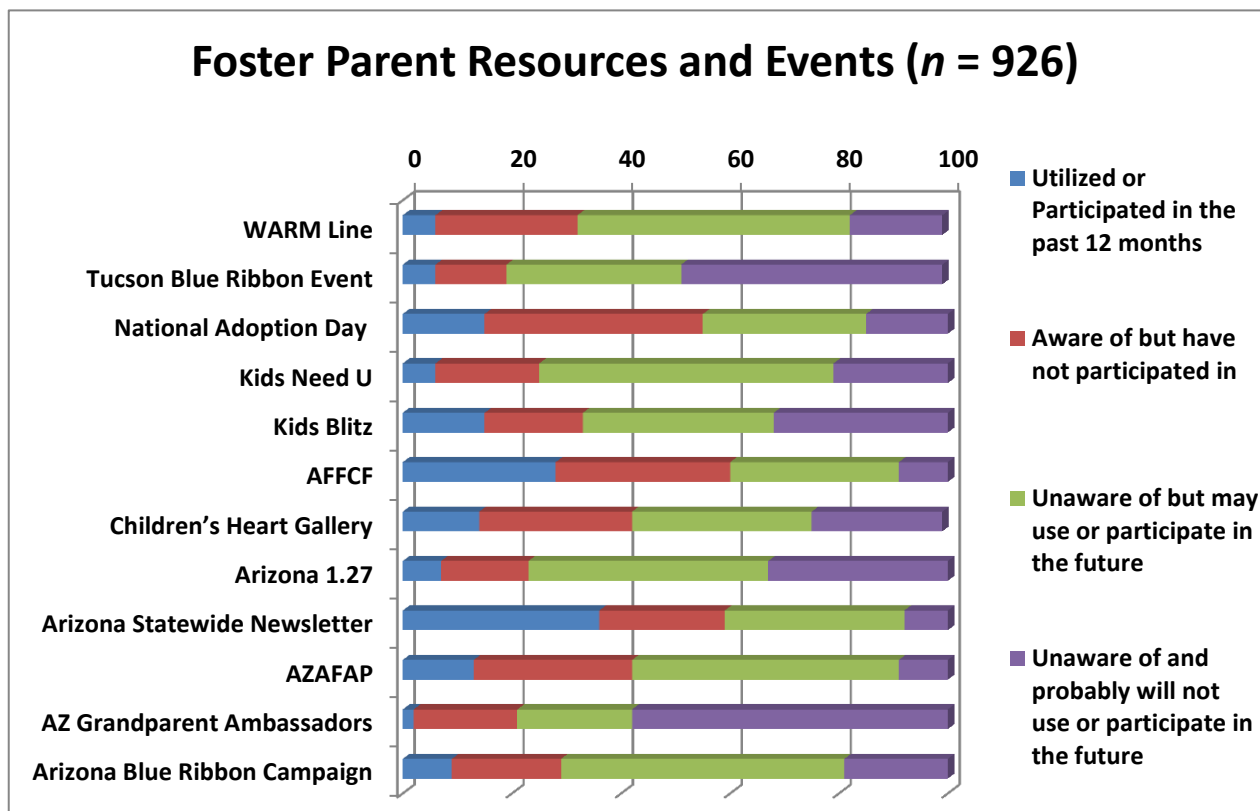


Figure 9

³ Details about individual resource/event are provided in Appendix A

FEEDBACK REGARDING THE ARIZONA STATEWIDE FOSTER PARENT NEWSLETTER

The Arizona Statewide Foster Parent Newsletter is currently being mailed out on a quarterly basis to all foster, adoptive, and kinship care providers. It includes topics such as news, features of families and children, articles about programs, events, updates, and changes at DCS, as well as resources for families caring for children in foster care in Arizona. When asked about preferred method of distribution, 40% of respondents ($n = 371$) who reported receiving a hardcopy via U.S. Mail, 22% ($n = 205$) would prefer email delivery with a link to the newsletter, 21% ($n = 197$) an email with the newsletter content included, and 17% ($n = 153$) had no preference. More than half would like to receive the Arizona Statewide Parent Newsletter monthly ($n = 471$, 51%), 47% would like to receive it quarterly ($n = 433$), and 2% ($n = 16$) reported preferring another frequency such as bi-annually or bi-monthly.

FOSTER PARENT PLANS FOR CONTINUING TO FOSTER

As previously discussed, there are many different reasons individuals become licensed to provide foster care and many set goals of how long they will foster. At various times, foster families decide to continue or discontinue fostering despite these goals being met. When foster parents in the current study were asked how much longer they plan on providing foster care/respite care services once their caregiving goals have been met, more than a quarter (26%, $n = 241$) stated 0 to 2 years, 11% ($n = 105$) stated 2 to 4 years, 13% ($n = 123$) reported 5 to 10 years, and 38% ($n = 355$) said indefinitely.

REASONS PROVIDED REGARDING PLANS TO CONTINUE FOSTERING

Foster parents were asked to reflect on the reason that motivated them to become a foster parent and why they have continued in their role as a foster parent. Seventy-one percent ($n = 775$) offered their thoughts on why they have continued to foster. Most foster parents stated they continue fostering for the same reasons they started fostering, for reasons such as wanting to provide a caring home for a child. "For all the same reasons I started and more. Now that I have been doing this for a while, my reasons are even stronger."

Rewards. Many talked about their love and experiences of joy, satisfaction, and commitment to children and their families as reasons for continuing to provide foster care. Foster parents discussed their continued motivation when they see change and growth in the children in their care. For example, "I enjoy having the children in our home. It's very rewarding to see them grow and develop and gain confidence in themselves." Another parent shared, "I love living with kids. I love helping families stay together. I love helping kids learn and grow." Another talked about being able to see the children flourish, "Foster parenting is addicting. The unbelievable reward from spoiling a child and then watching them grow makes it worth it. We have the ability to treat these children the way they should be treated and it's awesome to watch them become kids for the first time in some cases. There is no greater reward than being a foster parent."

Personal and family benefits. Some foster parents reported continuing because they were personally affected by the experience of fostering, they saw the positive effect on their family, and they had a continued desire to care for children. As one parent describes, "It has changed our family forever and become part of who we are. Also, there are so many babies that need families, how could we even imagine stopping now?" Many are waiting and hoping to adopt children and therefore continue to foster.

Spiritual calling and great need. Several foster parents discussed their continued calling by a higher power and felt energized through their spiritual calling. As one parent explains, “Continued conviction and spiritual motivation. We have seen our family grow in faith and in love through this privilege in serving others. Not just our immediate family but our extended families and our friends have grown in exposure and understanding to the needs of children in our state. Also, knowing that the need is so great and seeing how so many are working so hard every day to help these children sitting back and not helping seems unreasonable.”

Making a difference. Many foster parents spoke about their desire to make a difference in the lives of children and their communities. One parent describes, “I have a personal commitment to improve my community around me.” And another stated, “We love being foster parents.....we feel this is our calling and we are committed to being advocates for these children in every part of their lives. Seeing them overcome huge obstacles and living up to their full potential is so rewarding to us.”

Many parents spoke about their desire to continue fostering despite the barriers and difficulties they’ve experienced. For example, one parent shared,

“I’m passionate about loving and caring for children who need someone to love and care for them. I want to make a difference in their lives and give them a hope and a future. Because of the grief and anguish involved, I’ve thought many times about quitting. We LOVE these children and give our all to them. So we have continued on.”

And as other parents share,

“While it is probably one of the hardest things we have ever done it is also the most rewarding. We enjoy meeting and having the children in our home, watching them grow! It is a blessing and privilege.”

“As frustrating as the system can be, we continue to do it because the kids need us and they have brought unimaginable joy to our lives. We are better people for having been foster parents and, though we may from time to time rant about some aspects of it, knowing we’ve helped make life better for these kids and shown them the world is a bigger place than they knew make it worth all the frustration and tears.”

BARRIERS TO BECOMING A FOSTER PARENT AND BARRIERS TO CONTINUATION OF FOSTERING

An overwhelming 88% ($n = 814$) said they would recommend being a foster family or respite care provider to friends and relatives. However, many acknowledge the barriers that may prevent an individual from becoming a foster parent or prevent one from continuing to foster.

Foster parents were asked their thoughts about what barriers might exist that prevent someone from becoming a foster parent and what barriers might prevent continuation of foster parenting. Six hundred and seventy-four respondents offered ideas about barriers in both becoming and continuing to foster.

Many foster parents stated that individuals may not become licensed to foster for various reasons related to the person, their current circumstances, misconceptions or fears about fostering, or due to being unwilling to work with the systems involved with fostering. Foster parents stated that perhaps

families would choose not to become licensed because they didn't have the time, available childcare, or information to participate in the required pre-service training or ongoing time commitment for meetings, visits, and appointments. For example, one foster parent stated, "The training is LONG and there is no childcare. I think that it is TOTALLY worth it, but for some people, they can't do a 10 week class to get certified when they have little kiddos at home." Another stated, "Some people may be unaware of the qualifications. I would have become a foster parent long ago had I not thought that you have to be married and own your home." Some respondents simply stated that fostering is "not for everyone" and although they may want to help a child, they might fear becoming attached to the child, a "lack of freedom" that comes with fostering, and a general fear of what might happen. One parent explains,

"I don't think foster care is for everyone. There is a lot of heart break in being a foster parent and there are a lot of factors to consider when deciding to do foster care. Foster children can have an impact on family dynamics, birth children/friends/family will experience the loss of a child, and not everyone can support reunification. Families and friends do not necessarily "understand" what it means to be a foster parent or be aware of the challenges in parenting traumatized children."

Another discusses fear as a barrier, "I believe fear is the greatest barrier of preventing someone from becoming a foster parent, fear of the unknown, fear that they'll become too attached to the children and unable to let them go, fear of having to work with CPS or the system". Foster parents also spoke about fearing the loss associated with a child leaving, "The biggest issue I hear is that they are afraid of the loss when the child leaves their home." Foster parents suggested that perhaps prospective foster parents had misconceptions or unrealistic expectations of fostering. Some suggested the process to become a foster parent was too extensive and lengthy, and others stated that perhaps potential foster parents perceived the system to be too complicated and difficult to work with. One foster parent describes prospective foster parents hearing "stories from other foster parents about how horrible "the system" is." Another parent states, "I constantly hear how badly foster families are needed in Arizona, but honestly they make it very hard to become certified, and even harder to continue. The classes are enormous time commitment." Another shared, "It is hard to find information about fostering. You pretty much need someone to help you. Most discontinue after they adopt. There are a lot of misconceptions about fostering."

Several foster parents who participated in the survey discussed how potential and existing foster parents might have unrealistic expectations or might misunderstand the role of the foster parent in caring for children. For example, one parent stated, some may:

"...not correctly understanding the role of a foster parent within the scope of the child welfare system is a barrier I encounter often. Also, the excessive failings of CPS and their reputation for being unsupportive and unresponsive is enough to inhibit people who are otherwise interested in becoming foster parents from actually doing so."

Foster parents who participated in the survey offered several possible barriers to continuing to foster. Many mentioned the emotional toll related to their attachment to the children in their care and the loss they feel when children leave. One parent described the:

“...emotional strain that comes from putting yourself out there, loving a child fully, without any guaranteed result. Seeing children you have invested your lives in for a long period of time (or short)...The helplessness of the reality of it all. It takes a toll on foster families. A lot is asked of you, emotionally and time wise. Lots of appointments, being available for visits, etc. and it is hard to go through the losses and it how many people it affects.”

Some parents discussed their experiences and others' experiences regarding systemic issues that caused frustration and thoughts about discontinuing providing foster care. For example, some mentioned the frustration with the process related to adoption and licensing, paperwork and delays in the case and court system, along with a lack of services provided to the children. One parent shared her “Frustrations with the system, the length of time some children are in care, not being treated like a part of the team (especially by some judges), lack of communication (mostly by CPS).” Another talked about not getting the support related to services, “the lack of support especially with mental health. We find it hard enough to parent foster children but when you have so little resources and or wait list to get the resources you feel that you cannot continue to give them the care they need.”

Another parent discussed the barriers related to licensing requirements,

“The rules regarding how many children under the age of 5 in one home has been a road block for us. Because we have young children of our own and fost/adopt children, special case plans have to be made for each child we consider now. This extends the process and makes it almost not worth going through the hodge-podge of government paperwork to just be scrutinized over a technicality.”

Foster parents also discussed issues such as a lack of respite, quality daycare, reimbursement, and not being included as part of the team. For example, one parent reported “The largest barrier, especially for those of us that provide for children with high needs, is getting a break and knowing that the respite providers are well trained and able to maintain the child's need for care.”

Foster parents provided other reasons for discontinuing as foster care providers, such as adoption, having a “full” house, a lack of additional room or space in homes or vehicles, health, and age.

HONORING FOSTER PARENTS

Foster parents were asked what the best way would be to honor them as foster parents. Four options were provided as well as an ‘other’ response. Forty-one percent ($n = 378$) agreed personal or tangible items such as gift cards or movie vouchers would be a good way to honor foster parents. Eleven percent ($n = 101$) were supportive of local agency sponsored events such as holiday celebrations, and 5% ($n = 46$) reported having a large sponsored event would be a good way to honor foster parents. Ten percent ($n = 95$) believed that media or community recognition and sharing stories of foster parenting would be a nice way of honoring foster parents. A third ($n = 306$) offered other ideas about ways to honor foster parents.

The majority of foster parents who responded to the open-ended portion of the question stated they did not need formal recognition for fostering. Many stated that the love and affection they receive on a regular basis from the children they care for is enough. For example, one foster parent stated, “For us it's just the smile on our children's faces and when they feel safe and loved! But thank you!” Another shared, “Honestly there is no greater honor then the smiles on these kids' faces or the hugs and kisses

they give.” Others agreed that being able to see the children grow, learn, thrive, and be happy is how they feel honored. “What we do is out of love. The greatest reward is the changes in children!” Another foster parent stated, “I’m honored by the children, when I see the changes they have made being in my care, and the smiles they share.”

Some fosters stated that they would feel honored by changes being made to the system, with improved services for the children, increased reimbursement, and having better support from the Department. As one foster parent reported,

“I don't want to be recognized as a foster parent. I want a system that encourages good foster parents to get and stay licensed. I don't know any foster parents that are in it for recognition - it is truly about providing love, stability and safety to children who so desperately need it. These children are the future of our community and the number of children coming into care each day is heartbreaking and concerning.”

Foster parents reported feeling honored when professionals listen and value them as members of the team and are treated with kindness, respect, and appreciation. For example, “A simple thank you letter is good for me and respect for what I do by being a true-partner would mean the most.” And another stated, “Being treated with respect by the partners in the child case” as a way of being honored. Others would like to see an increased positive depiction of fostering in the media, through stories of families being reunited and completed through adoption. For example, one foster parent shared, “Stories of foster parenting successes would be AMAZING, getting the word out about what we actually do and how we impact the community.”

Other foster parents stated that tangible items such as a day out with the family or other tickets, memberships, or discounts for activities with the family would be appreciated. “A day out with my all of my kids, example: a ball game, the zoo, dinner. They are shy and do not want the world to know that they are in foster care.” Some foster parents said that childcare and/or paid respite would be helpful and would make them feel honored so that they could have time with a partner and/or support other families.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

At the end of the survey, foster parents were asked if there were any additional thoughts they wanted to share. Four hundred and sixteen respondents offered their ideas and thoughts. Several parents expressed their thanks for DCS administering the current survey and offered ideas about what to include in future surveys, such as questions about the court system, other professionals (e.g. GALs and AAGs), and transportation for the children. Many ideas reflected previously shared thoughts regarding needed changes in the system, services offered to the children, and foster parents needing to be heard, respected, and appreciated. Foster parents reinforced their expressed need for additional support from the Department, behavioral health agencies, additional respite options, and coordination among agencies and service providers. Many foster parents would like to see a shift in a perceived focus on parents involved in the child welfare system to a focus on the children affected or a child-centered system focus. Some foster parents called for systemic change and many discussed their optimism for positive change and hopefulness for the future. Some expressed their hope for a more positive depiction of foster families in the media as well as the media being used strategically for recruiting new families interested in fostering.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The purpose of this survey was to solicit feedback from foster parents with active licenses in Arizona regarding their motivation to become licensed to foster and their experiences with fostering, licensing agencies, DCS specialists and supervisors, training and support. The survey also sought to obtain information about foster parents' thoughts and suggestions about their plans for continuing to foster, barriers to fostering, and how to best serve foster parents in Arizona.

1. Use information regarding motivation to foster provided by parents as a guide for recruitment *and* retention of foster parents.

Foster parents in this survey identified three (3) primary reasons for becoming licensed to foster *and* for continuing to foster: (1) a calling to foster, (2) a continued need in the community, (3) benefits to the family and community. Recruitment and retention efforts should reflect these motives and reinforced in training and communication with foster parents.

2. Continue to pursue targeted foster parent recruitment for adolescents and young adults ages 13 and older.

There continues to be a shortage in families willing to foster adolescents and young adults. Targeted campaigns to recruit foster parents who will care for these youth should use information about potential barriers foster parents perceive in fostering older children and young adults. The department should consider funding for services and programs as well as options for childcare of older children to prevent barriers to placement for youth who need support and supervision.

3. Consider evaluating the process for placement in foster homes to better match foster home licensing parameters and preferences.

This survey revealed differences in the number of children families were licensed to foster and actual number of children fostered. For example, families were fostering a fewer number of children than they had space for. It is unclear why this is the case. It would be helpful for the department to re-evaluate and communicate their policies related to emergency and planned matching placement procedures.

4. Consider evaluating the process for amending foster home licenses to accommodate sibling groups across ages.

Eighty-three percent of foster parents expressed a desire to accept sibling groups, but several reported being unable to due to individual licensing issues. Research consistently shows the benefits of siblings residing together in foster homes. The process for amending licenses to accommodate this should be evaluated to best serve the children.

5. Encourage licensing agencies to create and support new opportunities for foster parents to become more involved in recruitment efforts, mentoring, and support of other foster parents.

Foster parents are an excellent resource and support to each other. This survey demonstrates the willingness of many parents to become more involved in recruitment of new foster parents. Many respondents also expressed a willingness to mentor foster parents in accessing resources and services and to provide overall support.

6. Encourage licensing agencies to evaluate their policies and procedures regarding the provision and coordination of respite for foster families.

Foster parents consistently identified the need for additional respite. Foster parents in the survey discussed a lack of accessibility and availability of adequate respite care. The lack of respite was linked to increased burnout, family stress, and barriers for foster parents and their families to travel and attend training and other events. A lack of respite care was also cited as a reason for families choosing to discontinue fostering. The department should consider targeted recruitment funding and reimbursement for respite purposes. Additional support for specialized respite care (e.g. medically fragile and behavioral health) would also improve foster parent longevity.

7. Consider new and innovative ways for DCS Specialists to obtain and promptly disseminate accurate and concise information about children placed with foster parents in order to best care for the children in their home.

Survey participants identified the need for additional and accurate information about the children in their care at the time of initial placement and throughout the case. Less than half of foster parents reported receiving information about the child or children in their home. Qualitative responses revealed a need for information in order to provide the best medical, behavioral, and overall care for the child. Investigators placing children with families should consistently provide families with a completed placement packet which includes useful information about the child (e.g. age, gender, diet & medical needs, counseling needs, first court date, name of assigned DCS specialist, GAL, and other members of team), possibly 5-10 important details a caregiver needs to know. The Department should evaluate the current format for the notice to provider form to streamline necessary information into 1-2 pages for foster and kinship families. The Department may consider providing foster families with information about the child and case via secure email or access to certain information in a database by licensing agencies.

8. Continue efforts to implement training for DCS Specialists and Supervisors regarding best practices in collaborating with foster families.

Child welfare specialists and foster parents have a common goal of providing safety, wellbeing, and permanency for children in care. Development of a research- and expert-informed training is currently underway about ways that foster parents and child welfare specialists can best work together to serve children involved in the foster care system.

9. Consider evaluating current pre-service training to incorporate new content and modalities to best prepare and support the needs of new foster parents.

Overall, foster parents were satisfied with the pre-service training provided by the Department and licensing agencies. Many provided areas for improvement such as possibly incorporating new formats and materials as well as evaluating their choice for trainers. For example, the Department might consider offering a hybrid or online component, offer a study guide prior to training, and use varying modalities of instruction such as videos, role playing, discussion, lecture, and guest speakers. Foster parents discussed the need for more direct and 'real-life' accounts in the training. It is also important to assess prospective parents' skills and needs prior to training to best tailor the structure of the training. Oftentimes, families do not have a placement immediately following training and might require a

“refresher” or training that could address their current needs as a new foster parent 6-9 months after the first placement or initial pre-service training. Additionally, parents suggested providing childcare, meals, and other supports to reduce barriers to attendance.

10. Consider offering online training and education to satisfy annual training and more accessible means of notification for available trainings.

Foster parents acknowledged the importance of pre-service and annual training and appreciated the opportunity to acquire knowledge and learn new skills. Many had suggestions about how to make annual training more accessible, innovative, and available to foster parents. In the age of technology, online training and educational formats could provide more diverse subjects and more opportunities for participation, interactive options, and monitoring. For example, webinars by national experts in the area of trauma, brain development, behavior modification, and accessing services are readily available online. Online training options could be more cost-effective, would remove barriers related to physical attendance, and would provide more specialized and advanced training for foster parents to allow them to further develop their skills and networks. When foster parents are equipped with more skills, they can better manage their circumstances and the needs of the children they care for. A centralized location for which trainings are available would be helpful in allowing foster parents to choose which trainings are best suited for them and the children they care for.

11. Explore options for providing childcare for pre-service and annual training for foster parents.

Throughout the survey, foster parents discussed the need for increased childcare options in order for them to be able to attend pre-service and annual training. Some offered suggestions such as negotiating discounted costs from a childcare facility and some stated they would be willing to pay a nominal fee for childcare that enables them to participate in events and training.

12. Consider publicizing and supporting resources for foster parent groups, events, and opportunities.

Many foster parents reported several foster parent events and resources that they had not been aware of but would consider taking advantage of in the future, such as the WARM Line and the Arizona Association for Foster and Adoptive Parents. In addition, foster parents reported wanting more positive and realistic depictions of foster families in the media and Department marketing materials. Ensuring a positive depiction of foster families and children in the foster care system not only contributes to increased recruitment opportunities, but also to the retention of quality foster families. The Department should make efforts toward increased collaboration with foster family-serving organizations such as AZAFAP and AFFCF to ensure the needs of children in foster care are being met. The Department could share information about these organizations in their newsletter and on the Department’s website and perhaps create a centralized location for information and resources for foster parents.

13. Consider new opportunities to recognize foster parents and families.

In an effort to support foster parents, new ways to recognize foster parents and families should be considered. Although most foster parents do not feel the need to be publicly acknowledged, families could be celebrated and supported through the provision of tangible items such as gift cards and events that families can do together. Foster parents could also benefit from hearing positive stories in the media, having an increased voice in systemic change, and feeling heard, respected, and appreciated.

14. Future surveys with foster parents should be conducted bi-annually and include questions about the court/legal system and process and transportation.

A bi-annual survey with foster parents regarding their experiences could be beneficial in measuring improvements in programs and services. Future surveys should include questions about the court and legal systems (including interactions with judicial officers and attorneys) as well as questions about transportation, visitation, and services for the children (medical, dental, and behavioral services). The Department might consider partnering with the legal/courts system to solicit feedback from foster parents on how to improve interactions and collaborations within these systems.

15. Acknowledge DCS workers and licensing agencies who provide quality services to foster parents.

Throughout the survey, foster parents discussed how much they appreciated when they felt valued by DCS and licensing workers. Many examples were provided illustrating high quality practice. Examples of positive worker/foster parent collaborations should be highlighted and celebrated.

16. Consider offering and requiring on-going training to licensing agency partners regarding DCS policy and procedures and legal processes so that they can better support and train foster parents they work with.

Licensing agencies and their workers should be provided with opportunities for trainings on policies and procedures as well as legal processes so that they can better support and train the families they work with. This will allow for consistency in information sharing and will allow licensing agency representatives to also be included as part of the team serving children.

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APPENDIX: FOSTER PARENT RESOURCES AND EVENTS

- 1) The Arizona Blue Ribbon Campaign is an initiative of a Hope & A Future, ArizonaSERVES, and the Arizona Department of Economic Security (now the Department of Child Safety) to celebrate foster families during the month of May (Foster Care Awareness Month).
- 2) Arizona Grandparent Ambassadors is a support network for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren.
- 3) The Arizona Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (AZFAP) is a non-profit, statewide organization that serves families that adopt and provide foster and kinship care. They work in partnership with child welfare professionals and the community to support, educate, empower, and provide a unified voice for Arizona's foster and adoptive families.
- 4) The Arizona Statewide Newsletter is published by the ADES (now the Department of Child Safety) to inform foster, kinship and adoptive families across the state.
- 5) Arizona 1.27 is a church-based movement aimed at engaging the local church in the Arizona child welfare system.
- 6) Children's Heart Gallery features Arizona children who are free for adoption and want a forever family. It is a community collaboration led by DES (now DCS) and the ArizonaSERVES Task Force.
- 7) Arizona Friends of Foster Children Foundation (AFFCF) is a non-profit organization that aims to promote the self-esteem and enrich the lives of children in foster care in Arizona by providing funding for activities, education, and other needs that provide them with quality experiences as they live through difficult circumstances.
- 8) KidsBlitz is hosted by the Kids Consortium for families in Maricopa County. It is a day-long advanced training that provides six hours of renewal training credits for licensed foster parents.
- 9) Kids-Need-You is hosted by DCS and provides six hours of advanced training for foster families that can be applied to license renewal.
- 10) National Adoption Day is an effort to raise awareness of the children in foster care waiting for permanent loving families and is held across Arizona each year in November.
- 11) The Tucson Blue Ribbon Event is a free event that occurs annual the first Saturday in May. It involves food, entertainment, and activities for the kids.
- 12) The foster parent WARM Line is a toll-free number for resource parents who are experiencing crisis situations and cannot reach their DCS specialist.