Pilot Randomized Controlled Trial of Foster Parent Training: A Mixed-methods Evaluation of Parent and Child Outcomes


Issue

The authors note that the quality and stability of a child's foster placement has been consistently associated with positive developmental, educational, physiological, and emotional/behavioral outcomes. Yet, many foster parents report feeling unprepared to manage the emotional and behavioral problems that are often present among children entering foster care. Thus, foster parent specific training is a necessary starting point to providing foster parents with the knowledge, skills, and support needed to manage child emotional and behavioral problems and develop positive parent-child relationships. Although some studies have found improved parenting skills and/or child outcomes as a result of foster parenting programs, the unique aspects of parent training that contribute to effectiveness for foster parents are unknown. It is possible that addressing the unique needs of foster parents is an important component of successful foster parent training.

Findings

The study used the school-aged Incredible Years (IY), a trauma-informed, evidence-based group parent training program. The authors augmented the program to provide foster parent specific support. They hypothesized that foster parents who completed the IY training would demonstrate improvements in measures of parenting stress and attitude and child behavior compared to those who received services as usual (SAU). An exploratory qualitative component was included to generate hypotheses regarding what contributed to effective foster parent training. The quantitative design was a pilot, non-blinded randomized controlled trial. Eligible families were randomly assigned to an experimental (IY) or control group (SAU). Qualitative data was gathered from participants who attended (1) a focus group held the week following the final group and/or (2) an in-depth individual interview conducted 6 to 12 months post intervention.

The final sample consisted of 38 families who met the inclusion criteria of English-speaking family-based foster care parents of children aged 2 to 7 years who lived in Monroe County, NY. Random assignment resulted in 19 families in the intervention group and 19 families in the control group.

In addition to socio-demographic information, foster parents were asked to complete the following standardized measures at both baseline and follow-up: Child Behavior Checklist, Parenting Stress Index-Short Form, and Adult–Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI-2). Parent satisfaction with the IY program was measured at the end of each weekly session.

Overall, the intervention and control groups' sociodemographic factors and social-emotional functioning at baseline were relatively similar. However, the following characteristics were significantly different (p ≤ 0.05): the children in the intervention group were on average 10 months older (53.33 versus 42.88 months) and 15 months older at entry into foster care (33.14 versus 17.94 months). The intervention group had fewer Black children (20% versus 53%). In addition, more foster parents in the intervention group reported that the child in their care was in need of mental health treatment (87% versus 41%). There was no significant difference between groups in the number of children receiving mental health treatment.

Quantitative Findings

Post intervention results were mixed. For example, a between group analysis of scores on the Child Behavior Checklist found no significant differences in the behavioral functioning between children in the intervention and control groups. Likewise, the Parenting Stress Index showed a trend in decreased stress pre- and post-intervention for total stress and all subscales but found no statistically significant differences within or between groups.
Foster parent attitudes measured on the AAPI-2 demonstrated a trend toward improvement for the intervention groups (scores increased in four out of five domains). These improvements were significantly different from improvements seen in the control group. Both groups demonstrated statistically significant increases in parental empathy. However, foster parents in the intervention group showed a significant decrease ($p = 0.009$) in scores on parent-child family roles compared to the non-significant decrease seen among control group foster parents, suggesting worsening attitudes in the intervention group.

Foster parents in the intervention group were less likely to report their child in need of mental health care at follow-up compared to baseline (from 89% to 56%), while foster parents in the control group reported an increase in need (47% to 59%). Between group analysis revealed that, compared to foster parents in the control group, those in the intervention group had 92 percent fewer odds of reporting their child in need of mental health care post-intervention, despite no differences in foster parent reports that the child received mental health treatment. Foster parents reported high levels of satisfaction with the IY intervention.

Qualitative Findings
Examination of focus group data found that three interacting themes described parents’ acceptance and perceived effectiveness of the IY foster care parenting program. These are:

1) Need for validation
Foster parents found validation through unique peer support from other foster parents. This general theme emerged repeatedly within each focus group. In fact, this theme emerged so strongly, it appeared to be the most important contributor to foster parents’ satisfaction with the intervention and renewed satisfaction with their role. Several of these foster parents reported an actual change in their desire to foster as a result of the intervention.

2) Parents as playmates
Parents developed new perspectives on the value of play and noted changes in the way they viewed the children they cared for. For example, many parents reported a clearer understanding of the impact of trauma on child development. Parents believed this new understanding of trauma enabled them to view the needs of the child differently, leading them to value the importance of just “being a child.” As a result, parents prioritized the Incredible Years skill of “child directed play” and saw great value in implementing the prescribed daily play time.

3) Parents as mechanics
Foster parents learned many different skills to build positive behaviors so they would have a toolbox to draw from in any given situation. Foster parents said most of these skills were effective and that seeing tangible changes in child behavior was not only a benefit but also a motivator to continue utilizing the newly learned skills. Foster parents also noted the benefit of group meetings in sustaining newly learned skills, as the ongoing support impacted motivation.

Long-term Effects
The in-depth interviews identified two major themes contribute to the sustained impact on parenting skills from a foster care parenting program. These themes were closely aligned with those found from focus groups:

1) Play as a life skill
Foster parents’ style of play had been permanently altered. Parents typically allowed the children to do more of the leading while playing and directed the child only when they feel it is absolutely necessary. This crucial aspect of the program, while difficult to implement at first, is an aspect that most parents incorporated as a key parenting value that was sustained over time.

2) Changing the rules
a. The foster parenting program impacted foster parents’ attitudes toward implementing rules, and the skills learned regarding clear rules and limit setting can generally be maintained on a daily basis over a long period of time.

b. Ignore behaviors and they go away. The foster parenting program helped foster parents effectively ignore their children’s unwanted behaviors, and the use of this technique led to a decrease in negative behavior in the children that lasted for a long period of time.
Delivering the augmented IY training program to foster parents resulted in changes in their attitudes alongside high parental satisfaction. While quantitative findings from this small sample did not support the hypotheses regarding improved child behavior and reduced parent stress, mixed methods data revealed changes in parenting attitudes and improvements in parents’ perceptions of child behavior problems and mental health needs.

The following observations identify a basis for using a trauma-informed parent education program tailored to meet the unique needs of foster parents:

1) Intervention group foster parents seemed most pleased about the changes in their own behavior and noted, almost secondarily, the impact this had on the behavior of the child. Foster parents reported notable improvements that were sustained over time.

2) Foster parents seemed to gain an increased competence that led to greater satisfaction in their role. The finding that intervention foster parents scored lower on the measure of parent-child family roles was surprising. However, it is possible that the construct of parent-child family roles functions differently in foster families. Perhaps, as foster parent and child begin as strangers, the development of family roles evolve over time, from artificial and arbitrary to loving and person-centered.

3) Foster parents reported many positive benefits from two specific focuses of the parenting intervention: child-directed play and the impact of trauma. Benefits include increased understanding of the child’s behaviors, increased bonding, and a more positive view of the foster parent-child relationship. These perceived positive benefits could have contributed to a changed dynamic in the foster family roles. However, it is also plausible that these foster parents did regress in this area. Further research is needed to explore this finding.

4) Many parents reported reduced stress as a function of the peer support provided for the very specific parenting issues only foster parents struggle with. Thus, it may be that the types of parenting stress measured on the Parenting Stress Index are not what causes distress for these parents. Rather, stresses such as navigating the court system, fear of losing the child, or managing the relationship with child welfare workers or the birth parents are more typical foster parent stressors. Consequently, it is possible that the Parenting Stress Index is not as sensitive to the unique type of stressors foster parents face.

5) One interesting finding relates to the new understanding foster parents appear to gain of child development and behavior from the trauma-informed Incredible Years parenting program. They developed a heightened awareness of the role of play in building the parent-child relationship, obtained new insights into the impact of childhood trauma on child development, and formed increased empathy that allowed for subsequent changes in family roles that focus on the child’s unique needs.

6) The authors conclude that while quantitative findings were limited, the qualitative findings from this study provide a beginning understanding of what factors may support the success of foster parent training and point to areas for further exploration with larger samples. Given the current difficulty in recruiting and retaining foster parents, additional research to support these findings could be used to help attract and retain more foster parents.