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Views from birth children: exploring the backstage world of sibling strangers

Alyson Rees, ReesA1@cardiff.ac.uk
Andrew Pithouse, Pithouse@cardiff.ac.uk
Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

This article reports on an in-depth qualitative case study of 10 foster care families across England and Wales, and focuses on the birth children and their experiences of supporting the young people placed with them. We explore with these children and young people some of the challenges they perceive, the benefits they reap, as well as the skills and strengths that they bring to fostering. Their accounts of caring indicate that birth children engage in careful strategies of 'sibling-like' mediation with the fostered 'strangers' who first enter their homes and which, over time, brings an indispensable 'glue' to relationships that may all too often go unrecognised. The importance of learning from their contribution to placement stability and supporting them in their role concludes our exposition of this critical but sometimes neglected realm of fostering relationships and family life.

key words birth children • foster care • siblings

Introduction

Erera (2002: 142) observes that the foster family is a unique 'bi-nuclear extended family'. It is distinctive in its complex dynamics and requires adaptation from its members, including the children, whose voices and needs have not always been paid the attention they deserve (Hojer, 2004). There are no accessible UK statistics on how many current foster families have birth children. Many studies of birth children in foster families have been retrospective in nature; a recent systematic review by Hojer et al (2013) found some 17 studies focusing on birth children, and of these, 10 had been undertaken in the UK. Several of the qualitative explorations in their review utilised a small sample of between six and nine participants. Since Hojer et al (2013), our search of international social science abstracts found two studies involving birth children (Williams, 2016; Roche and Noble-Carr, 2017) and a third where adult carers comment on the fostering experiences of their own children (Thompson et al, 2016). Overall, we might contend that the topic has attracted scant research curiosity and limited reflection from the caring professions about the needs of birth children. Indeed, the fact that the impact of fostering on their lives appears rarely to be considered might well suggest that many birth children come to believe their interests to be secondary to those of the foster child(ren), and clearly some do feel this way (see Williams, 2016). However, there have been clear and insistent voices on behalf of birth children but perhaps more noticeable for their rarity. For example,

Fox (2001: 45) recognised some years ago the critical contribution made by birth children to the fostering endeavour:

Consideration of the significance of natural children in foster families ... would ensure a more holistic approach which would ultimately lead to quality, safe and total care for all involved.

Given the paucity of research it would be unwise to assume some universal experience for birth children in the UK. However, from the relatively few studies in this field we can speculate that there are distinct negatives and positives associated with being a birth child in the foster family that we briefly rehearse by way of context for our own study. First is the critical aspect of being heard by key professionals. Doobar (1996) ran workshops with birth children and concluded that they were rarely listened to in placement planning. Poor planning creates risk for birth children who can be exposed to potential and actual harms by ineffective matching, which can, in turn, end in distressing placement breakdown (Fox, 2001). Likewise, being vicariously a party to the difficult and sometimes traumatic past life events of fostered children can be upsetting for birth children who may get little professional support in dealing with this (Twigg and Swan, 2007). Birth children may have to live through some of the ongoing difficulties experienced by children in foster care and witness a more complex and disturbing emotional world. Some foster families have allegations made against them, including against the birth children which, if unwarranted, bring with it a sense of resentment and injustice that can be hard to cope with (Plumridge and Sebba, 2016).

Birth children sometimes struggle with fostering, particularly with sharing their parents, their belongings and their space within their home. It can also be difficult dealing with social workers who do not always acknowledge or appreciate their distinctive contribution. On this point, Nutt (2006) notes the difficulties of living in a 'bureaucratised family', that is, a family subject to external regulation and surveilled by social workers. Furthermore, such regulation may not always invite the views of birth children in the way professional decisions are made despite the likelihood that they would welcome more involvement in such processes (Spears and Cross, 2003; Roche and Noble-Carr, 2017).

More positively, Twigg and Swan (2007) suggest that birth children have an enhanced awareness of social issues and gain satisfaction from seeing foster children develop and grow. Both Part (1993, 1999) and Pugh (1999) found that birth children enjoy fostering and the inherent benefits therein. For example, Pugh identified positives such as looking after younger children, companionship and improved self-esteem garnered from helping others. Farmer (2010) concluded that many adult carers received emotional and practical support from their own children, and this helped to stabilise foster placements, resulting in fewer disruptions for the foster child. Such studies are notable for their richness of analysis and their infrequency. This lack of a mature corpus of research into the multiple worlds of childhood in the UK extends more generally to sibling dynamics. These are much less examined than most other family relationships and even less explored are the complex 'sibling' relationships between birth and foster children – a topic to which we now turn with the aim of bringing some modest illumination through the following study design.

Method

The data presented here are from a small, multi-method, qualitative longitudinal study (18 months) of a purposive sample of 10 foster families across England and Wales (see Table 1). We recognised that long-term fostering has clear potential to provide stability and the sense of belonging needed by young people (Biehal, 2014), hence our selection criteria for the families required that they had been caring for at least one year, over which time they had provided stable placements. As with Chase et al (2006), we chose to select stable placements as we did not want to focus on deficits, but take a strengths-based perspective, highlighting what worked well in the fostering relationship. Our definition of 'stable' drew on Leathers' (2006) usage as those that had lasted as long as they were needed and had not broken down. More specifically, the sample comprised families where stability also denoted what Boddy (2013: 1) refers to as the fostered child enjoying a 'sense of belonging and mutual connectedness'. The sample was identified with the help of participating statutory and independent foster services operating from three different settings to reflect aspects of the mixed economy of foster care. These comprised (i) an independent fostering agency; (ii) local authority foster carers who were supported by a voluntary sector project; and (iii) local authority foster carers receiving no additional support, although no distinctions between these sources were found in respect of the specific fostering relationships we discuss in this article.

First, demographic information about the families was collected via a postal survey. Of the 10 families, 8 were headed by couples (all females and males) and 2 by single female carers. All were white British with an average age of 50 and had been fostering for an average 9.5 years. Within the families some 9 birth children participated in the study: 7 were aged between 13 and 17, including one former foster child who had been adopted; 2 were adult birth children in their twenties whose earlier years were involved in fostering, and while no longer at home they provided support to their parents who continued to foster. The age span of participating birth children is diverse (see Table 1), and thereby presents some limitations, but nonetheless does contain a range of age-related experiences from child to adult. The inclusion of the adopted child in this group adds a different dimension and speaks to the adaptability of some families that can absorb new members while continuing to provide a foster home.

We employed a broad range of data collection tools when working with the families (vignettes, ecomaps, semi-structured interviews and individual audio-recorded diaries) (see Pithouse and Rees, 2014). This allowed some shared exploration of their beliefs, values, problem-solving and caring orientations that might be expected to be found within families more generally (Barter and Renold, 2000; Holland, 2010). More specifically, all the birth children (under 17) were asked to draw ecomaps of their families to display the significance of different relationships and emotional boundaries. This helped introduce a participatory sensibility (O'Kane, 2008) to the study, and over time they engaged in a sequence of interviews and diary keeping. Thus, all participated in semi-structured interviews and at a later point in the study were asked to keep a digital audio diary for a week, capturing home routines and events of day-to-day living within the family. Their use of a digital diary allowed for a more internal and natural reflection about events and a less boundaried communication that might occur with a researcher (Arthur et al, 2014: 164). The coding, categorisation and thematic analysis of these multiple data sources was undertaken via NVivo together with

additional close readings of interview transcripts and manual notation to promote internal validity (Richards, 2009). This article draws on semi-structured interview data to draw out both comparable and disparate reflections of birth children about family life with a foster child.

Table 1: Family composition

| | Male carer age band | Female carer age band | Birth children at home, male (M) and female (F), actual age | Foster children, male (M) and female (F), actual age | Birth children not at home, male (M) and female (F), age band |
|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---|--|---|
| Family 1 Agency 1 | 55–60 | 50–55 | F13 (+ F9 adopted) | F13 | F20–25 |
| Family 2 Agency 1 | 40–45 | 35–40 | 0 | F15, M14, F12 | 0 |
| Family 3 Agency 1 | 50–55 | 45–50 | F16, M17 | M11, F10, F9 | 2 × M20–25 |
| Family 4 Agency 2 | 45–50 | 50–55 | M21 (stepchild) | M18 | M20–25, M30–35 (stepchildren) |
| Family 5 Agency 2 | 45–50 | 45–50 | F20 | M13 | F20–25 |
| Family 6 Agency 2 | 45–50 | 45–50 | F16, M15, M13 | M11, M9 | 0 |
| Family 7 Agency 2 | 0 | 50–55 | M30 | F14 | F30–35 |
| Family 8 Agency 2 | 60–65 | 55–60 | 0 | M16, M15 | 2 × F25–30 F30–35, M30–35 |
| Family 9 Agency 3 | 50–55 | 50–55 | M18, M23 | 0 | M20–25 |
| Family 10 Agency 3 | 0 | 55–60 | F20 | F16, F12 | 2 × F20–25 |

Ethics

Ethical issues were of paramount importance for a study entering the foster home and discussing potentially sensitive and difficult areas. University Ethics Committee approval was obtained, as was parental consent and consent from the young people themselves who were provided with child-friendly information sheets and given time to consider their involvement. Gaining access to children and young people in the privacy of their own homes can be difficult (Dyblie Nielson and Rogers, 2005), and it was important that they did not feel obliged to take part just because their parents had given their consent. Children were interviewed alone in the home and it was made clear that what they said would not be shared with their parents, unless issues of safeguarding arose. Care was taken to preserve the anonymity of all participants and pseudonyms are used in this article – any potential identifying information has

been removed. All data are stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. The possibility of payment was not mentioned at the outset to avoid any form of inducement (Head, 2009), but book tokens were given at the end of the study to acknowledge the significant contribution they had made.

Findings

The findings are presented within three sections: those of (i) backstage caring, including aspects of self and space; (ii) issues of polarisation, positioning and displacement; and (iii) the positives of being a foster child.

Backstage caring: aspects of self and space

Punch (2008) undertook a study based on children who were full birth siblings and utilised Goffman's (1959) conceptualisation of performance as being either frontstage (in public) or backstage behaviour (in private), that is, in the home, in order to explore the dynamics between siblings. This conceptualisation of the family in relation to display and performance, of 'doing' family to the outside world (see Finch, 2011), helps us to grasp how the home environment allows for the relaxation of a sense of guardedness that we typically bring to the public world, with less attention paid to the rules of etiquette and politeness. Thus, Punch (2008) found that for siblings the home can also be a venue for competition and tension where tempers are easily lost. In this sense, the home can be a double-edged environment where people can relax and be themselves, but when niceties are dispensed with, this can create an environment where discord can easily surface (Meyer, 2015). This is an interesting notion when applied to the foster home, where there are relative 'strangers' in the persona of the fostered child with whom the birth child cannot easily act in a 'backstage' manner until they better understand the situation in which they find themselves, and can gauge how far they can adopt an unguarded manner. This gauging of the acceptable boundaries of interaction calls forth a particularly sensitised and nuanced understanding of the transition between frontstage and backstage by birth children who adopt a very conscious approach towards the foster child. This dilemma was mentioned by several of the birth children who stated that they were not always able to relax fully when foster children were around. A home environment where perhaps one's guard may never be truly dropped does suggest a dynamic untypical of the warm inclusive family that we assume to be the norm and on 'offer' to a fostered child. Indeed, the birth children's accounts very much depict a home setting where the more formal rules of etiquette and politeness were likely to reign, particularly when foster children first arrived.

Charlie (birth child, Family 6) spoke thoughtfully about aspects of sharing and dress code that became more consciously applied when foster children were around. For example, he would not eat sweets in front of the foster children, as he might be expected to share them, which he might with a sibling but perhaps not with a new and unknown entrant to the home. He also noted the need to wear dressing gowns and not just pyjamas at bedtimes, for modesty and to prevent possible allegations about inappropriate behaviour. Similarly, John (adult birth child, Family 7) recollected that "you couldn't really lounge around ... you can't wear a pair of shorts or whatever". In brief, managing the foster child's transition into the home calls forth intuitive and sensitive engagement by birth children to promote a smooth, safe and also welcoming

environment (Hedin et al, 2011). They play a significant part in helping the foster children settle in when they first arrive. Some families would first look to the material needs of the child as a ready and tangible way to express care. Thus, Helen (Family 1) described her initial involvement when Melonie first came to stay:

‘When she came we all went to [shops in town] to buy her a few things to get her nice and settled in. I went up into her room to help her.... I was just helping her to relax and unpack so she would feel more welcome and everything.... We went into Church Road to buy her more stuff so she would feel more welcomed into this home.’

Other birth children described their approach to first settling the emotional concerns of an anxious new arrival. For example, Charlie (Family six) saw it as his role to:

‘... basically make sure that the foster child isn’t tummy, feels safe in the house, making sure that they don’t feel uneasy living here.’

Charlie went on to describe the subtle art of welcoming to include judicious use of games. As with most children, game-playing implicates inclusivity, membership and status as winners and losers; Charlie recognised this and its potential for the new entrant’s early socialisation into the family:

‘Well, like, if they is on the play station game – we’ll let them win for like the first week, so they enjoy it....’

Many foster homes over time care for a succession of strangers who birth children must come to learn and appraise in terms of threat or trust that might allow or inhibit censure over some issue. Charlie, for example, reflected with some insight into the way arguments with foster children would necessarily be muted, not least because a more unrestrained exchange might generate irreparable rifts, whereas with siblings a harsh comment could more likely be forgiven or overlooked. As Charlie said, regarding potential hostilities with a fostered child:

‘...if something happened you would not necessarily be able to make up....’

The birth children’s conscious orientation of ‘backstage’ behaviour towards the foster child would evolve over time into more relaxed and instinctive engagement when trust and affect replaced caution and distance.

Space and belongings

As with all families, there are times when children wish to moderate the strains of group living by retreating to their bedrooms to seek some temporary ‘seclusion’ from siblings and from foster children too (Twigg and Swan, 2007). Yet, for birth and adopted children this sanctuary may not be entirely private and available, as some find themselves inevitably sharing a bedroom with a sibling, while for foster children it was a requirement that they be given their own room. Thus Carla, an adopted child (Family 1) who had previously had her own bedroom in the home while fostered,

has to share with a sibling, her former bedroom now occupied by another foster child. When asked what she wished for most in her life, she said, “My own room. I have to share, as foster girls and boys have to have their own room.” Similarly, Steve (birth child, Family 7) wanted “To have my own room, I don’t mind sharing with Bob [brother] but...”

Birth children in the sample described being given bedroom space, which had been converted for them from ground floor extensions and from former garages, whereas foster children enjoyed more well-appointed bedroom accommodation nearer to foster carers and household amenities (Younes and Harp, 2007). John (adult birth child, Family 7) recollected that “there had been times when I have had to swap my bedroom over ‘cos the foster kid didn’t want the smaller bedroom or whatever.” Such spatial and territorial features of the foster home are likely to give rise to understandable resentments if these are interpreted as preferential treatment for the foster child.

Other sources of tension in any family reside around children’s belongings, such as toys and games. These artefacts are part of a child’s sense of identity and position in the family, and sharing is unlikely to be without difficulty or negotiation (see Ram and Ross, 2008). Sharing belongings was sometimes problematic at the beginning of a placement as birth children felt that it took some time for the foster children to learn to both identify and respect their property. Where birth children had their own room and where foster children could only enter by invitation (as was the ‘rule’ in most of the families), this helped demarcate ownership. Several birth children noted that foster children would, mistakenly, take their property at the beginning of a placement, as Megan (birth child, Family 3) explains:

‘When they first come they don’t realise that our property is ours and they just go and take it, but after a while they learn that their property is theirs. Like things that are in my room, games and things. But they are fine now.’

Learning the informal rules of family membership can take time, and birth children have to become adept at teaching the foster child the boundaries and tacit codes of group living.

This section has briefly addressed aspects of self and space in order to outline something of the negotiable order that underlies the fostering experience for birth children. They have to ‘learn’ the foster child and make all manner of graded judgements about when and where and how to lower or raise their guard. They must judge when it is safe to move from a sense of watchfulness to a less measured and more instinctive caring. However, before that can occur, their own sense of location in the family’s affections, constellation and ‘pecking order’ needs to be secure, a critical point to which we turn next.

Polarisation and positioning: Perceptions of displacement

Children typically have to find their own niche within family hierarchies (Sulloway, 1996), and here sibling rivalries can be divisive and troubling (Meyer, 2015). There is no uniform and universal hierarchy but more a ‘pecking order’ that is unique to each family. Thus, when families sometimes coalesce or reform through parents’ divorce and re-marriage or cohabitation, so birth children may have new siblings arriving,

and this may threaten their position, particularly if they are close in age. Similarly, formerly youngest children can become middle children and older children can become younger children in new family configurations. In such circumstances they may perceive family life as no longer comfortable, but emotionally precarious. Such events are well known to families in foster care, and the birth children in this study often commented on their status and positioning in the family. Most difficulties seemed to occur when children of a similar age were placed together, as noted elsewhere (Twigg and Swan, 2007). Complicating factors can occur when not only is the foster child close in age to a birth child, but is also of the same gender and has the same given name. Indeed, gender identity and position in the family is an ongoing and malleable construction reproduced in part through sibling interactions (Edwards and Weller, 2014), and this can be impacted by foster 'siblings' whose arrival may unintentionally disrupt the birth child's innate sense of self. Two of the birth children in this study had experienced this and found it disconcerting. An adult birth child (Sara) recalled her sense of being displaced when a teenage girl close in age and with the same name arrived:

'You know they did actually place someone with the same name, which was horrible. It was really horrible! I was big Sara and she was little Sara. That was awful. ... Well I didn't like being big Sara [laughs]. I'm not big, I'm little. Um, and the name shouldn't come into it, but it is difficult. ... I don't know what it was really. It's hard to imagine what it's like to have someone else there the same [as you]. I guess it's a bit of role removal as well. ... I hated them copying. I remember with Sara, the one with the same name, Mum was taking me clothes shopping and it was quite a rare thing 'cos I always had hand-me-downs from my older cousins. And my Mum had taken me clothes shopping and then Sara had, had her clothing money through and she went out and bought just exactly the same thing and that was like, ugghh, the copying especially at like 14, 15 years of age. ...' (Sara, birth child, Family 5)

It is perhaps difficult to understand what this might feel like from a child's viewpoint, to perceive another person as almost 'replicating' you in your own home, implicitly threatening your integral sense of self and position within the family system. Yet birth children are expected to cope with such challenges in foster care and without complaint. For example, Stuart (Family 4) found it difficult to accept that his father and stepmother were going to foster, especially as the first child to be placed was also called Stuart and near in age. His marked discomfort at this threat to his recently settled position in this reconstituted family was resolved after much upset and angst. The issue of the name, emblematic of deeper tensions around attachment, was resolved by the family calling the foster child 'Stu' and the birth child 'Stuart'. Such pragmatic solutions had a more profound effect in marking out and reinforcing their respective identities and easing Stuart's fears of displacement. In this family, the foster mother was also a stepmother to the birth children, hence there had been a recent history of change and assimilation.

Another adult birth child, Paul (Family 3), experienced occasional feelings of displacement not for himself but for his own young children, when his parents fostered infants of a similar age. Paul discussed the challenges of being in a three-generation family in which fostering tended to dominate the emotional climate and

the priorities of the carers, who in this instance were now grandparents. Paul, a father of two infants, reflected on his feelings about his parents not finding much time to play with their grandchildren because of their caring responses towards similarly aged young children in their care:

‘...I also used to find it hard to see the two little ones that they had, the foster children on their laps.... I never felt like that when we fostered kids and I was living at home.’

Paul expressed no resentment at his own time as a birth child in the family living with many fostered children over the years, yet felt some sense of loss on behalf of his own offspring, seemingly deprived of the undivided affections and affordances of their grandparents. Such subtle, emergent and discordant aspects of identity, affect and attachment in the foster family, as outlined above, do not always get recognised and factored into placement planning, and with the best will, may sometimes be difficult to do so. Such emotional complexities are part of the dynamics of our increasingly diverse family structures (Smart, 2006). While there is literature on the psycho-analytical aspects of sibling rivalry stemming from the arrival of new birth children to a family (Mitchell, 2013), it is the case that few foster children would arrive as would a new birth child. Relatively little is known from a psycho-social viewpoint about the multiple impacts of the foster child as a temporary or long-term sibling. By contrast, adoption is likely to feature lengthier preparation and readiness for a new sibling. Comparison across birth, fostering and adoption sibling relations would be a fruitful area of inter-disciplinary study.

Risk and allegations

The spectre of unfair allegations of abuse are thought to cast a shadow over some foster carers and their birth children (Sinclair et al, 2005). Thus there are instances when some birth children experience false and harmful allegations that can have a profound effect on the individual and family, as Sara described:

‘That came from the last placement when he was in one of his mad rages he decided to say that I’d restrained him and that came at the same time as when I was doing my AS levels [her school exams at age 17]. It was terrible. It was awful. He withdrew it almost as soon as he said it. The authorities didn’t investigate or anything as there were loads of people in the room, but it’s still hard and you don’t want it to happen to anyone else really. So I think my role now, I’ve taken on the role of watching any interaction between my own family and the foster placement because you never know what might happen....’ (Sara, birth child, Family 5)

While the local authority never investigated this allegation, it had a significant impact on Sara who recalled how she had become more cautious in her involvement with the child:

‘You can’t afford to take your eyes off Harri [the foster child], really ... because of what can happen.... I think with Harri I was the second pair of

eyes for my Mum, because he didn't have quite the same attachment to me as he did to Mum. I guess I learned the skill of watching and I could read his face 'cos with him you could tell whether something bad had happened 'cos you could read his facial expression ... just changes in facial expression because he could be so violent. You were always on guard really....'

Sara felt that her experiences had led her to become risk-averse and to apply a heightened sense of watchfulness and emotional distance from foster children:

'I've learned from past experience never to touch or cuddle or anything with children.'

It is important that the needs of all children involved in fostering are considered and any potential risks to birth children identified (Williams, 2016). This was highlighted by Twigg and Swan (2007), who noted that some of the risk situations in which birth children are placed might well be considered as harmful and could trigger child protection proceedings were these to happen to a foster child. For example, Helen (Family 1) talked about such an event: "Sometimes he used to kick me and stuff", and how she was injured by a foster child over a Christmas holiday period when no professional support was available. Helen also recalled that this particular boy would 'spy' on her: "... then he knew I was getting changed or something he always used to look or do anything, so I used to be really unsafe with him, but I am not now...."

Her mother had sought to avoid similar incidents by choosing to foster girls only; such incidents did not re-occur, albeit gender in fostering is no predictor of pro-social conduct. It is an obvious but nonetheless compelling point that birth children need to be given equal priority with those being fostered when it comes to safe care, and social workers need to be cognisant of this and to the potentially conflicting needs of both sets of children. Professional decision-making must reflect the best interests of the child – this principle is enshrined in Article 3 of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNICEF, 1989) – and should be applied equally to foster and birth children. Yet there are no minimum standards and allied policies relating to the rights and needs of birth children, according to the UK Fostering Network (2008), that recommends that government strengthens regulations, guidance, standards and research in this area. Having focused on some of the difficulties and challenges of being a birth child in a foster family, it is to the consultation process, role and positive contribution that birth children play that we now turn.

Consultation

All of the birth children strongly believed that they should be consulted by their parents when a new foster child came to their home. Indeed, nearly all claimed they *were* consulted, yet few could give examples of when and how this had actually occurred. There were some differences within the sample over whether they were in a position as consultees to influence events, or whether they were simply 'informed' in advance of the new arrival. None of the birth children could think of contexts past or hypothetical where 'no' would be their response to a new child coming to live with them. For example, Helen believed that she was always consulted:

‘My Mum wouldn’t accept a person into the house without asking, ‘cos it’s my home too and she would want me to feel safe as well as my parents.’
(Helen, birth child, Family 1)

By contrast, Sara felt that she was informed of a decision rather than being part of the decision-making process:

‘When Chris was coming, Mum said it’s another little boy. But you don’t really get a choice. When we were getting approved we, Mum, specified the type of child and they asked what Dad and I thought too. I have never said no to a child and cannot think of any circumstances when I would say “no”.’
(Sara, birth child, Family 5)

Sara said that she would never say ‘no’ despite recalling numerous difficulties with the behaviour of foster children in the past.

The amount of notice and information children were given varied. For example, Carla, (adopted child, Family 1) spoke of coming home and seeing an unexpected child in the kitchen – “and I was all happy going to get a drink, and then I went ughhh, and I felt shy.” Helen had quite a different experience and described being told in advance selective details about the backgrounds of the children soon to be arriving:

‘Mum would know about the problems and tell me, so I would then know what my safety is ... she would tell me about what type of home they have come from so I know what type of things I could help them with. My Mum don’t tell me the really secretive ones because they are confidential.’ (Helen, birth child, Family 1)

It may be that real consultation and children’s agency is limited in a world of decision-making by adults involving sensitive information (Thomas, 2001), and further curtailed by the time-limited window for matching and arranging placements. That information about the foster child’s life may be missing, mediated or carefully censored by parents and professionals (ironically, a matter of frequent complaint by adult carers about social workers and fostering services; see Sinclair et al, 2005), it is the more impressive that birth children not only cope with the ‘stranger’ but quickly ‘learn’ their needs, interests and foibles and judge how much trust to give or withhold until time and experience suggest otherwise (Williams, 2016).

Positives of being a birth child in a fostering family: vicarious learning and self-esteem

Most birth children, as in other studies (Pugh, 1999), felt that the fostering experience had been positive, as did their parents. Most felt that they had learned vicariously about ‘life’ through learning about the adversities faced by foster children. A form of ‘guilty knowledge’ was acquired (Spears and Cross, 2003) whereby their conversation with and observations of the fostered child admitted them to a more dangerous and risky world that they would otherwise have known little about. This virtual word of the foster child, albeit removed from their own lives, allowed for a form of learning without having to experiment or involve themselves in risk-taking. After being

exposed to attitudes, values, behaviours and needs that were decidedly not their own, the birth children, notably the older ones, often spoke about their realisation that their home comforts and security were all too easily taken for granted:

‘Well it is really hard when you see them come in and they are dressed in rags and dirty and you think to yourself what a hard life those kids have had and we have been pretty lucky.’ (Paul, adult birth child, Family 3)

‘I had a brilliant upbringing, you know what I mean? And then considering what these kids, what they have gone through, it was shocking. It was a shock to the system, I can tell you. These boys....’ (John, adult birth child, Family 7)

The birth children, while recognising the needs of the fostered child and the consequences of this in sharing their parents’ affections and time, also found much to enjoy, and took pride in fostering and felt part of a family team. The act of fostering and living with someone less fortunate seemed to lend the young people a capacity for altruism and empathy. For example, Charlie (birth child, Family 6) explained what he thought it must feel like to be a foster child arriving in a new home:

‘Well, you just don’t want to put a foot out of line, you just don’t want to do anything wrong, that we would find unacceptable, um, I just, it would be hard....’

Charlie’s sister, Rhiannon (birth child, Family 6) noted unprompted her brother’s willingness to befriend and care:

‘[Charlie] is very good with children. He is very understanding and kind and he joins in with them more. He can be their friend, not just someone who the foster child lives with, he can be their friend.’

The birth children in this study clearly enjoyed the social contact and being in a helping role. In this, there was a sense of reciprocity as the ‘gift’ was not one-way, thus the birth children spoke of the opportunities it gave them to be ‘grown up’ in the way they could help and sometimes protect the foster child. An example can be seen in Helen’s account of providing guidance and a watchful eye over Melonie (foster child) who had threatened to run away:

‘She goes “Oh my Auntie lives down by that road.” I goes, “Oh there’s nice” and she says “I’ll run away” or something, but I talked her through it to stop her from running away. I told her all the bad stuff that would happen, like the police would be after her, maybe she’d have to get moved to another home after another. Then I told her all the good stuff, like if you stay, the foster people [social services] might think you are getting better and you go home to your parents more sooner than you think. And as soon as I started to put all them good ideas into her head, she started to come round to the idea that she was getting more welcomed into the home and that was starting to secure her and that I wouldn’t let anything bad happen to her if she ran away.’ (Helen, birth child, Family 1)

Foster children are not unaware of the fostering system, its procedures and idioms and power (Pithouse and Rees, 2014). In the above extract we can see that Helena's 'insider' knowledge of the fostering system and caring intervention lent some stability to the moment, and to the placement more generally. Indeed, foster children may well prefer to first approach birth children to share a concern or test some idea rather than risk an unwanted response from the adult foster carer (Pugh, 1999; Spears and Cross, 2003). Thus, it was often the birth child who foster children sought out when they felt unsettled or were struggling with their new environment. Helen described such an event and how it gave her a sense of self-worth as well:

'Like when sometimes when Melonie says "I am going to have a fight today" ... so you're like trying to help them and stopping them from getting hurt and like protecting them at the same time, which is really helpful to them.... It makes you feel warm hearted and kind and considerate when you are doing it. It makes me feel good about myself....' (Helen, birth child, Family 1)

If we conceive of fostering for the birth child as an informal curriculum comprising learning 'on the job', acquiring 'guilty knowledge' of the unhappy lives of others and the hard knocks of experience, there is also the acquisition of more formal knowledge and elements of a professional argot, particularly in relation to handling difficult conduct. For example, one of the older teenage birth children displayed insights into challenging behaviour and therapeutic approaches based on her training and its application. Thus, Sara (birth child, Family 5) discussed issues of stress in the foster home, noting that:

Sara: 'There is a lot of stress I think and a lot of people don't understand about the way, like different behavioural techniques of managing behaviour'.

Researcher: 'Do you ever use such techniques?'

Sara: 'I do if I know I need to, like the child we had before, we had him for so long, it was effectively that, that I did use them.'

Of all the birth children, only Sara had attended training with her parents in dealing with behavioural difficulties (a course on 'Working with sexually abused children' provided by the independent fostering agency). She had found the training informative and felt that it assisted her understanding and how to respond. Sara had also briefly attended support groups for birth children, run by a local authority. None of the other birth children in the sample had been actively engaged in training or in events to support them in their roles as informal carers. It is evident that training for birth children is an aspect that could be greatly improved (Williams, 2016), and that such instruction (as in Sara's above) can add to the skills and resilience that birth children obtain through the caring experience. Nonetheless, the birth children are not mini-professionals and should not be treated as such. Furthermore, the social exchange that is fostering is by no means one-sided with the birth child as 'giver' and those fostered as passive recipients (Pithouse and Rees, 2014). Instead, there is an indistinct reciprocity, varied in its meanings, timing and significance, but profound in the way the birth children learned about the world of others, and through caring grew in maturity and stature in their own eyes and those of others. And like the adult carers (Williams, 2016), they grew attached to the fostered child and felt a sense of bereavement when

they left the family (see Twigg and Swan, 2007; Thomson and McArthur, 2009), even when this might relieve them of testing behaviour:

‘He just made you laugh. He was such a ray of sunshine – although very violent. We still miss him....’ (Sara, birth child, Family 5)

This sense of loss was palpable and lasting for some:

‘Most of the time I do feel sad [when a foster child leaves].’ (Helen, birth child, Family 1)

‘With the babies you get so attached and when they have to go its rotten ... emotional, very emotional....’ (Megan, birth child, Family 3)

Loss and separation, while a predictable aspect of the fostering experience for adult carers and birth children, is not much acknowledged by professionals (Blythe et al, 2012). Yet it is self-evidently part of the family contract, and in that sense has a structural and institutional character given its frequency, which should, in turn, invite a closer gaze from foster care providers and researchers.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges and sense of loss for most birth children when their foster sibling left the home, the experience did little to diminish their positive regard towards the fostering mission, and most expressed a clear intention to become carers in later adult life. Given their distinctive sibling and support role that in some instances may become a lifetime contribution, there is even more importance attached to the view that birth children should be better involved in information sessions and (age-appropriate) training in order to nurture a valuable resource and bolster their resilience. It is also clear from this small study that birth children should be more readily and meaningfully consulted by their parents and the relevant social worker about the implications for them and the family of prospective placements, and to have the support they need. Importantly, professionals and adult carers need to better understand the unique and often subtle part that birth children play in sustaining a placement and building capacities within the fostered child. They do this through skills, sharing and the multiple reciprocities that over time arise in most families but which for these children define a more thoughtful sense of care for the strangers they welcome to their homes.

While every birth and foster child is unique, they nonetheless share in a relational process that requires both to negotiate a complex set of identities, settings, meanings and actions. This negotiated order that is ‘family’ as frontstage and backstage does not simply present itself to the participants, but is wrought from countless interactions over time in which the birth children reveal themselves to the fostered ‘stranger’ in ways that are perhaps ‘sibling-like’, or as caring friend, or in some instances wary cohabitant awaiting the clues and cues that invite trust, or its opposite. This temporal and emergent process is performed routinely in the everyday world of fostering, and we would argue with relatively scant understanding by both professionals and fostering adults who typically define what stands as appropriate care. We suggest there is still

much more to be learned about how foster care works, particularly from the birth children such as those in this study, to whom we extend our sincere appreciation for their valuable insights reported above, and for their often over-looked virtues and altruism in sharing parents and home.

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