Processing the Removal and Managing the Moves or Removals of Foster Children: A Qualitative Exploration of Foster Parents' Experiences

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Abstract

Foster parents are crucial to the function of the child welfare system. Despite developments in research related to the grief and loss of foster parents, more research would be helpful in building a stronger understanding and knowledge base for helping foster parents manage the removals of foster children in their home. This study included ten foster parents from the United States and explored their experience with loss and the stress associated with the expected or unexpected removal of a foster child from their home. The findings of the data analysis yielded three overarching themes: (1) managing or coping with ambiguous loss; (2) systemic impacts of a move or removal on a family; (3) need for helpful preparation or support for dealing with the loss of foster child. Implications include better preparation and support for foster parents dealing with moves and removals of foster children, as well as considering less abrupt removals of children from foster homes.

Keywords Foster care · Foster parents · Foster care transfers · Grief · Ambiguous loss

Children are removed from their homes in cases of severe abuse and neglect, and there are currently more than 440,000 youth in foster care in the United States (USDHHS, 2014). Children are removed from their home of their biological parent or primary caregiver when they experience significant abuse or neglect and it is deemed unsafe for children to remain in the home, and subsequently, they are placed in the home of a relative or nonrelative foster parent (see Children's Bureau, 2019 for a description of the multiple policies associated with administering the U.S. child welfare system). Nonrelative foster parents provide approximately 45% of the placements for foster children (USDHHS, 2014); thus, they should be a central focus of research. Foster parents are crucial to the function of the child welfare system; however, fostering is stressful (Adams, Hassett, & Lumsden, 2018). Adams et al. (2018) identified that stressors tend to be both individual-level, such as managing child behavioral

issues, as well as stressors that come from involvement with the child welfare system.

It has been well established that there are multiple stressors that can influence foster parents' decision or intent to continue fostering. For example, (a) the lack of relationship between the foster parents and the foster agency; (b) training inadequacies by the agency as reported by the foster parents; (c) issues foster parents face with the biological families of foster youth; and (d) difficulties foster parents experience within their own biological family (Gross, 2007; Höjer, 2004, 2007; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, & France, 2011; Whiting & Huber, 2007). Researchers have also identified that there is a relationship between foster parents' desire to continue fostering and their stress associated with loss experiences (e.g., the removal of a loved child; Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Buehler, Rhodes, Orme, & Cuddeback, 2006; Hudson & Levasseur, 2002; Urquhart, 1989). Despite developments in research related to the grief and loss of foster parents, more research would be helpful in building a stronger understanding and knowledge base for helping foster parents manage the removals of foster children in their home.

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Research on Grief and Loss Among Foster Parents

Despite the longstanding history of foster care in the United States, there are few contemporary studies that explore the impact of a foster child's removal on foster parents. Historically, foster parents have been expected to provide a safe physical environment, make a positive emotional investment in the foster child, and then be able to gracefully separate from the child once the child leaves the home, whether departure is abrupt or planned (Edelstein, 1981). Older studies have identified that when a foster child does leave the foster home, which may be due to the child's reunification with the biological family, the placement of the child in another home, or the adoption of the child, foster parents may experience grief for several reasons (Edelstein, 1981; Edelstein, Burge, & Waterman, 2001). However, Edelstein (1981) identified multiple barriers that appear to prevent or interfere with foster parents' ability to appropriately grieve the removal of the foster child: the demanding role of foster caring, characteristics of the foster parent's personality, and professional expectations of the foster agency or foster care system (Edelstein, 1981). Some studies have indicated that personal or interpersonal challenges related to seeing a foster child leave the home were a primary reason foster parent planned to discontinue fostering (Buehler et al., 2003; Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001). Foster parents usually have several children, both foster and biological, in the home and when one leaves, the demands of the others give them limited time to experience grief (Edelstein, 1981). In addition, agencies may need to place another child in the home as soon as one other child leaves since there usually are a limited number of foster homes available for placement. Professional expectations often do not support parents getting attached to foster children, and when foster parents grieve, it is often labeled as a misunderstanding of their role (Edelstein, 1981). Foster parents have also reported struggles in coping with the grief of other family members after the child leaves, such as the foster parents' biological children (Edelstein et al., 2001). Despite this historical context, within the past decade there has been very limited research examining how foster parents experience loss and the stress associated with a foster child's removal from their home.

There is limited contemporary research on foster parent grief and loss or stress associated with a child's removal specific to the United States. However, this does appear to be an international phenomena. For example, in Australia, Riggs and Willsmore (2012) explored the context of disenfranchised grief among four foster families, finding that foster parent grief is not typically recognized or treated.

In a United States sample, 45% of foster parents reported that no one would ever take the place of their foster child (Hebert, Kulkin, & McLean, 2013). Qualitative findings from this study indicated that foster parents found it difficult to let go of children, felt high levels of loneliness, thought foster parents should be entitled to grief counseling, and that their feelings were not taken into consideration by the child welfare system (Hebert et al., 2013). Similarly, birth children of foster parents report a range of negative emotional reactions to the planned and unplanned moves of foster children in their home (Williams, 2017). Although Hebert and Kulkin (2016) found that grief and loss training could be helpful for foster parents, they acknowledge a continued need for more updated research that explores the context of foster parent loss (Hebert & Kulkin, 2016). Despite the growth in research, there is still a need for more research and more updated research to understand the experiences and support needs of foster parents dealing with a foster child's move or removal from their home, particularly among foster families in the United States.

Theoretical Perspective: Ambiguous Loss and Contextual Family Stress Theory

This study and the research questions were developed using ambiguous loss and contextual family stress theory (Boss, 1980, 1993). Stress related to ambiguous loss and role ambiguity in foster parents has been a topic explored by other researchers (Hebert et al., 2013; Thompson & McArthur, 2009; Urquhart, 1989; Whiting & Huber, 2007). However, more research, as well as more recent research, is needed to examine the unique experiences that foster parents have when dealing with the experience of a foster child being removed from their home. According to Whiting and Huber (2007), foster parents may be hesitant to develop a closer relationship to a foster child because they recognize that a child would likely remain with them for only a short amount of time. Another study found that foster parents who had discontinued fostering reported they had less support from the agency and did not feel like they, as foster parents, were involved in the decision-making process when the child left (Urquhart, 1989).

In regard to the context surrounding foster parents' experience of the removal of a foster child, there are other aspects that influence the way they process and manage this experience. For example, some foster parents experience the removal of a child due to an abuse allegation. Within this context, Thompson and McArthur (2009) found that foster parents exhibited ambiguity as they wondered whether the child would come back to the foster home again. Ambiguity also exists after children leave the foster home. Examples include foster parents ruminating over how their foster

children are faring, and coming to recognize that they know nothing about their foster child's future (Hebert et al., 2013; Thompson & McArthur, 2009; Whiting & Huber, 2007). Despite these initial attempts to document stress experiences, a more in-depth exploration of the experience and context of a foster child's removal from the home is needed.

Purpose

As previously mentioned, this phenomenological study was developed using ambiguous loss and contextual family stress theory (Boss, 2002), which allowed for the exploration of how foster parents processed and managed the loss of a foster child. The primary purpose of this study was to examine the stories that the foster parents shared about their experience of loss and stress following the expected or unexpected removal of a foster child from their home. The secondary purpose was to explore how that stress impacted their family and their decision to continue fostering.

Methods

Sample and Recruitment

This cross-sectional, qualitative study included a sample of 10 foster parents (1 male and 9 females) living in North Texas in the United States. Foster parents were licensed to foster and/or adopt by the Texas Department of Family Protective Services at the time the data were collected. Eight foster parents were married, one was divorced, and one was single. The majority of the group identified as Caucasian ($n=8$) and the remaining two identified as Hispanic. Foster parents were at least 21 years of age ($M=45.6$), had earned at least a high school diploma or GED, and had been foster parents between 1 and 9 years ($M=4.1$). The only criteria for participation was that foster parents had to hold a current

license to provide foster care services and experienced the removal of at least one foster child from their home. Demographics of the foster parents are presented in Table 1.

Purposive and snowball sampling was used, as foster parents are a unique population of parents that are often located and most easily identifiable within the specific context of a foster care agency (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015). The first author contacted foster parent associations and foster agencies in North Texas requesting that a recruitment flyer be posted to their websites. In addition, participants were asked to share the recruitment flyer with their friends who were also fostering. This study was approved by the [Texas Woman's University] Institutional Review Board. Interested participants contacted the first author via email. The first author called the individual to ensure they met the minimum qualifications for the study. If individuals met the qualifications and were interested in participating, they were then mailed a consent form and a demographic survey.

Data Collection

After the ten participants returned the demographic survey and consent form, the first author contacted them via phone or email to schedule at a face-to-face interview at a place identified by the participant (i.e., all interviews were in-person). Participants were asked to choose a private place such as their home, church, office, or a library in order to help ensure their confidentiality. The first author conducted the audio-recorded interviews at the homes of nine participants and at one participant's place of employment. The consent form stated that interviews would be audio-recorded; however, the first author repeated the consent information prior to the actual interview and obtained verbal permission to audio record prior to each interview. To ensure confidentiality, no others were present in the room besides the participant and the first author when the interview took place. Participants were given the opportunity to stop the interview

Table 1 Foster parent demographic characteristics (N = 10)

Name	Age	Relationship status	Race/ethnicity	Years fostering	Biological/adoptive children in home
Janet	41	Married	Caucasian	5	2
Lynn	50	Married	Caucasian	6	1
Martha	52	Married	Caucasian	5	1
Robert	39	Married	Caucasian	1	0
Julie	37	Married	Hispanic	4	1
Lucy	36	Married	Hispanic	1	2
Karen	49	Single	Caucasian	7	1
Sara	68	Divorced	Caucasian	9	0
Laura	42	Married	Caucasian	1	1
Joann	72	Married	Caucasian	2	1

at any time to ensure they did not feel coerced to participate. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, the interviewer ensured that participants had a copy of the consent form with the first author's contact information after each interview in case the participant needed any additional support following the interviews. Participants were not compensated for participation as funding was not available for remuneration. The interviews consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions, and each interview ranged from 23 to 60 min. Audio recordings were reviewed by the first author in order to gain the social and emotional aspects of the interview situation (Creswell, 1998; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Participants were asked to respond to the following four research questions:

1. How did you experience of having a foster child removed from your home, whether the removal was scheduled or unscheduled?
2. What formal training about grief and loss did you receive from your child welfare workers or foster agencies that helped you cope with the experience?
3. How did you and your family cope with your grief and loss following the removal of your foster children?
4. How did your experiences of having your foster child removed affect your desire to foster in the future?

Data Analysis

A phenomenological thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Participants' responses were analyzed for meaning and then codes were developed (Moustakas, 1994). A priori codes were developed by the first author of this study using both previous literature and the data generated by the four research questions in this study. In order to confirm the codes were appropriate, the researcher then consulted with the second author of this study to code two transcribed interviews using the a priori codes. After codes were discussed, refined, and no true discrepancies were noted, the researcher then trained a graduate student how to code the data. The graduate student read an article and practiced coding with the researcher until it was clear the student could independently code. After the two independent coders finished analyzing the data, the researcher and graduate student cross-checked the data to determine that the same codes were derived independently. Although there were no discrepancies since the codes were already formulated, the coders identified points in the data that needed a more specific or descriptive codes. In these situations coders discussed the codes until a more refined resolution was agreed upon. The researcher used this coding process to develop themes that gave a textural description of the experiences reported by the sample (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

Validity of the coded qualitative data was confirmed in several ways. The researcher triangulated the data collection by making audio recordings of each interview, taking field notes, and making analytical memos. Themes were established and justified by examining evidence from each of these sources (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Validation of the data analysis procedures was achieved by using member checking and peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The researcher sent transcripts with specific highlighted themes to four participants by email for member checking (only four participants agreed to participate in member checking; Creswell, 2009). All participants selected by the researcher returned the transcripts indicating that they felt the researcher had captured their meaning accurately. Peer debriefing was achieved by reviewing the data with the second author of this study (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Miller, 2000). For transparency, both the first two authors are university professors with experience working with vulnerable families and children. Both are knowledgeable in qualitative data analysis.

Results

The findings of the data analysis yielded three overarching themes: (1) managing or coping with ambiguous loss; (2) systemic impacts of a move or removal on a family; (3) need for helpful preparation or support for dealing with the loss of their foster child. Pseudonyms are used to protect the original identify of participants while also differentiating between each interviewee.

Managing or Coping with Ambiguous Loss

Nearly all foster parents indicated feeling like the foster children who were removed from their home psychologically felt like members of their family. Several of the foster parents identified that they struggled with the physical absence of their foster child and had to find means of managing the move or removal, before and after the child was gone. During interview, some parents even showed the primary researcher the pictures of the children that they kept displayed prominently in their homes, baby books, and other mementos. At the beginning of her interview Karen reported, "there are a number of pictures here of my family but there are also pictures of all the kids I've had in my home and I keep them out." Janet emphatically stated that they would like to see foster children "again 1 day when they are older to see how they are doing and let them know that they were, at one time, a part of this child's life". Foster parents also reported that they were able to cope with the loss more effectively if they felt the foster children were going back to

a safe environment. When comparing her most recent foster child removal with a previous one Lucy discussed:

The first one was a bit easier because we knew that the grandmother, even though she initially said she couldn't handle [him] was, what's the nice word, [she was] stable. You know, she was a good home for him. And he was going with his other half siblings. But the last one, I mean everyone said that they weren't sure that it was a good home... if the official people are saying that we kind of got an idea that it was not a great place for [the children] to live. So that's what makes it hard.

Other foster parents reported that seeking emotional closure was important, such as finding appropriate ways of saying goodbye to the children before they left the home. When Lucy found out the two brothers she was fostering were leaving the home she told the interviewer, "we did fun things. Asked the kids what they wanted to do before they left. So we went to the zoo and [did] other things". Other participants noted the importance of including friends and family. For example, Martha discussed having her friends come say goodbye before foster children left. "[My friends] almost always come over the night before to say goodbye. We've had several of those... Fred's leaving tomorrow and people will stop by and give him a hug." Other foster parents reported that putting items away such as car seats and toys helped to provide some emotional closure for them after the foster child left. When speaking to a difficult loss Sara stated, "I guess a part of closure was taking car seats out and putting them away in the garage. I think that is when we said they're not here anymore."

Participants indicated that it was important for them to engage in self-care to manage their stress and deal with their grief. Foster parents indicated that when they experienced the loss of a foster child through removal it was important to have a break to grieve before another foster child entered the home. Unfortunately, all too often, the foster parent was asked by the agency to take another child very soon after the other child had been removed. Lastly, multiple foster parents indicated that they needed their personal faith to get through moves and removals. For example, Lucy reported:

Knowing that God sees from beginning to end and He knows the comings and goings over our house, and also watches over the kids [helps us as foster parents]... So even if it doesn't make sense to me, somehow, I have to hope that it will all make sense in the end.

Lastly, the foster parents in this study did not report much difference in their experiences related to scheduled and unscheduled losses, and some found that the ability to reframe the loss as a positive experience for the child was

helpful in managing their reactions. When asked if she thought the removal of a foster child was challenging, Martha reported that she felt as if she was like:

A paramedic that comes on the scene of an accident... they come in and they stabilize the patient, take them to the hospital and they leave. And they turn them over to the doctor and they leave. I just here right now for this time I am needed and then I relinquish them and turn them over to the next phase... I am off to the next baby but that doesn't diminish that these babies are real humans that I love.

Multiple foster parents identified that the impact of a move or removal of their foster child extended beyond them, as the foster parent. Participants spoke about the relationship their adoptive and/or biological children had with the foster children who entered their homes, as many of their children had trouble coping with the loss of their foster sibling. Only two participants reported that, at times, their biological children had problems adjusting to having foster children in the home. When speaking about the removal of one of her foster children, Karen stated:

I closed my home for a while after [one removal]. I think I went through a normal grieving process, but more for my son because he lost his brother basically. You know they just, the two of them did everything together. They went to the same day cares. They did all the same stuff together, you know.

Foster parents also mentioned that the removal of a foster child from the home impacted their adult children as well. Lynn described how her two adult daughters reacted to the removal of Lynn's foster children, and how it influenced their relationship.

I think [my daughters] were more concerned with me getting hurt over [children's names redacted]. [For my daughters], it was like oh my God I can't even imagine how you could do this cause now they'd experienced being a mom and fostering changed the dynamics [of the family] if that makes sense.

As can be expected, participants discussed how fostering impacted their relationships with significant others. Some foster parents indicated that the removal of a foster child caused stress in their relationships while others stated it strengthened their romantic relationships. When speaking of her husband, Joann, a foster parent of 2 years said, "and he misses them too... but I think [the loss] helped us more than divided us. It helped us to grow closer together." Foster parents also reported that the loss of the foster child negatively affected their adult family members including their parents and siblings as well as friendships. Lucy disclosed her parents had a hard time with a loss. She stated:

[Losing] the two boys, I think that was another really hard thing for my parents. I mean they were attached. They don't even live here. They live in [state redacted] but they were attached to them. So just seeing that our decision to foster, which was our family's decision, hurts other people... I remember my mom saying why are you wanting to do that, you know? You're going to lose some of them, but that hurt to know that we were not causing pain but kind of bringing that into their lives. [Something] that they didn't ask for.

When discussing friendships, the reports were mixed. Some foster parents reported that their friends were supportive while others felt that their friends were upset to see them hurting and did not understand why they continued to foster.

Need for Helpful Preparation or Support for Managing the Loss of Foster Children

All foster parents in this study reported that they felt training regarding personal grief and loss would be helpful; however, most foster parents indicated they did not remember receiving any information about grief and loss during their preservice or continuing education training. Only three foster parents reported receiving either online or face-to-face continuing education training related to foster parent grief. When asked about training Karen reported, "[preservice training] is more on how to handle the kids, the process of adopting, but that's something we do need to address, grief and loss. And I think individually we all go through it." A few participants in this study felt it was more important to have training on this subject after they had been fostering a while instead of in preservice training. Some participants have reached out to other foster parents support. When speaking about the support group she attends, Joann stated:

We've gone to other things but when we've [gathered] foster parents together to share their experiences, that's when we have learned the most about what to expect or not to expect, or how it's really supposed to be...

Other foster parents reported that it was helpful to hear how more experienced foster parents had managed their losses or that senior foster parents taught them ways to effectively manage grief when a foster child leaves the home. Foster parents also identified the support of family and friends as ways of coping with the losses of foster children from their homes.

Although other foster parents are important, participants did express that they needed to feel supported by foster care agencies and workers in order to be successful in coping with grief and loss. Participants in this study generally wanted the agency staff to acknowledge their loss and to be prepared to provide them with psychoeducational and support resources.

When asked what was needed from child welfare agencies to help foster parents prepare for losses Robert reported, "What would really be nice is some counseling services.... You know I think some grief services would be very, very helpful." Others identified that the support of the child care worker, communication, the ability to say goodbye to the child prior to the removal, and having time to cope with the loss prior to having another child enter the home were also important means of managing loss. Foster parents indicated they wanted changes to be made to the foster care system, such as increased communication and more emotional support from agency workers, particularly for helping them manage the grief and loss of having a foster child removed. Laura reported the following:

You know I think it's so important that agencies support their foster families, not just through this required training but by having resources available, you know, when a child leaves or whatever.

Foster parents in this study reported that they desired having more clear communication with agency workers and much more support surrounding the removal of the foster child from the home. Joann stated, "The CPS workers and our agency probably could have really let us know up front that the judge has the final say and nobody else."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine foster parents' experience of loss following the expected or unexpected removal of a foster child from their home and the impact of that stress on foster parents. Although participants did not consistently share the desire to stop fostering altogether, many considered quitting and all described a range of stressors and challenges associated with the loss of their foster children. The story that emerged from this study found that foster parents were quick to describe the different ways they learned to manage or cope with ambiguous loss while also considering how a child's move or removal had a larger impact on themselves and the rest of their family. Foster parents also described how they were in need of more helpful preparation and support for dealing with the loss of their foster child.

Managing or Coping with Ambiguous Loss

This study is only one of a few that have looked at the concept of ambiguous loss (Hebert et al., 2013; Uruquart, 1989; Whiting & Huber, 2007). Unlike previous studies, foster parents in this study noted that although they felt sad at the physical absence of the child after the foster child was removed from their home, they worked hard to keep the

child psychologically present in their family. Others have identified that foster parents experience ambiguity when they think and talk about the uncertain future of their foster child after the child was removed from their home (Hebert et al., 2013). Boss (1999, 2006) has found that people who experience ambiguity related to physical loss often keep the family member psychologically present in their minds. According to family stress theory, when a person (e.g., a foster child) is physically absent the remaining family members (i.e., foster parents) might cope by continuing to focus on the psychological presence of the child in the household (Boss, 1999, 2006).

Several aspects of the foster parent narratives in this study suggest that they struggled with the physical absence, such as hoping for a future meeting or time when they would have the opportunity to be with the child again. This is supported by previous research identifying that foster parents are often left to wonder how children who left their home were doing and if they would be part of their child's life in the future (Hebert et al., 2013; Thompson & McArthur, 2009; Whiting & Huber, 2007). Other foster parents in this study reported concerns about whether the child was going home to a safe environment. Similarly, Thompson and McArthur's (2009) study found that foster parents reported that they were able to cope with loss more effectively if they felt that foster children were going back to a safe environment. Foster parents reported that they needed their personal faith, emotional closure, and self-care opportunities to help them manage their stress. Consistent with previous research (Hebert et al., 2013), several foster parents reported that faith in a higher power was an important factor in helping them manage their stress, especially related to the loss of a foster child through removal. This was one of the first studies to discuss how foster parents actively tried to obtain emotional closure. For example, participants described doing things their foster children wanted to do, bringing friends over to say goodbye, or packing up things around the house that were used by a previous child.

Systemic Impacts of the Move or Removal of a Foster Child on the Family

A number of foster parents in this study noted that their children—both school age and adult children—were impacted by the removal of the foster child from the home. Similarly, Watson and Jones (2002) found that biological children of foster parents experienced serious emotional issues related to saying goodbye to foster children siblings and managing the pain of never hearing from their foster siblings again. This study extends upon previous research in the finding that adult children of foster parents, as well as other adult family members are impacted. Previous research has shown that foster parents are concerned about the negative emotional impact that

transitions of foster children have on their families (Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz, 2013), which is congruent with some of the participants' feelings or experiences in this study. However, as identified in this study and suggested by study by Höjer (2004), other foster parents reported that the unexpected move or removal of a foster child strengthened their relationship with their romantic partner.

Need for Helpful Preparation or Support for Managing the Loss of Foster Children

Although some participants discussed getting in-service training related to the loss of a foster child, most foster parents in this study reported a lack of preparation and agency support in managing the removal of a child from their foster home. Participants in previous studies reported that it would be beneficial to have training related to grief and loss pertaining to the removal of a foster child (Cooley & Petren, 2011; Geiger et al., 2013). Similar to MacGregor et al. (2006) study identifying that foster parents desire more communication and support from fostering agencies, foster parents in this study reported that they desired having more clear communication with agency workers regarding the removal of a foster child and more support following the removal of the foster child from the home. One parent in this study identified that her support group helped her manage the removal of a child from her home. Octomon and McLean (2014) identified that foster parents found it helpful to have peer support groups led by trained foster parents and personal support from other foster parents.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations, including a small sample from one state. Although the ten foster parents provided a rich narrative of their fostering experience, they may not be a representative sample of all foster parents who have experienced the removal of a foster child from their home. Because the sample was recruited from foster parent associations and foster and adoptive ministries, participants may be receiving extra support when compared to other foster parents. This support may have impacted their perceptions and responses. Additionally, the sample consisted mostly of Caucasian females who were married, thus the findings may not be representative of foster parents of a different race or gender.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study the authors found several recommendations for further research. Further research considerations include conducting a study that includes a larger

sample of more diverse foster parents. For example, perhaps there are differences in the experience of loss when comparing foster parents who hope to adopt versus foster parents who only intend to provide foster care services. Quantitative research should also be done to explore potential risk or protective factors that mediate or moderate the relations between moves/removals and foster parent stress or grief, as well as consider the longitudinal impact of multiple moves or removals. For example, does it get easier to process a move or removal or does it contribute to greater increases in stress over time? Essentially, research should more thoroughly consider how moves and removals impact foster parents. Researchers should also conduct evaluation research on available trainings related to grief/loss to assess relevance and effectiveness as this is an underdeveloped area of study (Hebert & Kulkin, 2016).

In order to retain foster parents, it is crucial for child welfare agencies to better prepare foster parents with specific preservice or in-service training on the potential impact of a move or removal of a foster child. The context of fostering is already both complex and stressful for foster parents. For example, research has identified that foster parents report similar levels of compassion fatigue as child welfare workers and those who report higher compassion fatigue also report lower fostering satisfaction and report being more likely to quit fostering (Hannah & Woolgar, 2018). Thus, more substantial preparation for the challenges of fostering and managing of child removals may be helpful. Researchers have also identified that foster parents report only moderate engagement in self-care and this varies by gender, relationship status, health status, and current financial status (Miller, Cooley, Owens, & Fletcher, 2019). One way that agencies can promote self-care is by encouraging and supporting foster parents in exploring other support systems like family, friends, or other foster parents when managing the loss of a foster child.

On a more systemic level and when possible, it is recommended that child welfare agencies provide foster parents with more advanced communication about an impending removal. Because of the stress and complexity of the child welfare system and the challenge of being a caseworker, this may be particularly difficult (Thompson, Wojciak, & Cooley, 2015). If advanced communication is not possible, child welfare caseworkers may need to provide more consistent and repeated communication about the uncertainty of child cases in a sensitive manner, while also being open and understanding of foster parents' attachment to their foster children. Although foster parents receive preservice training to help prepare them for fostering and they should understand that the mission of the child welfare system is to return children to their parents, foster parents may need additional reminders and training to understand the importance of reunification, attachment between children and

their biological parents, and the benefits of kinship care. Because foster parents may not have the same educational background or professional experiences as caseworkers (e.g., caseworkers function under the goal of reunification, adoption, or concurrent planning while foster parents function as substitute parents with daily attachment-oriented interactions with children), child welfare workers may need to be ready to show higher levels of empathy to foster families coping with a removal of a foster child. It is also important that agencies ensure ongoing access to support groups, counseling, and other appropriate resources for foster families who may struggle with the loss of their foster children.

Conclusion

The move or removal of a foster child will likely be a frequent or ongoing experience in the lives of foster parents and families, as the goal of the foster care system is to assist children in being reunified with their parents, when possible. Grief or loss over the move or removal of a foster child was a common experience among foster parents in this study, which is congruent with previous research on foster parents. This study also identified that the removal of a foster child impacts not only other members in the household but other family and friends as well. Foster parents manage multiple stressors and responsibilities in their role within the foster care system and may need additional training or support. Agencies will likely need to create a context of openness and support to ensure foster parents' needs are appropriately met.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee (Texas Woman's University IRB, Reference # 17011) and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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