The Impact of Fostering on Natural Children and their Involvement in the Fostering Process: Invisible, Vulnerable or Valued?

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CARL Research Project

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- promote and support public access to and influence on science and technology;

- create equitable and supportive partnerships with civil society organisations;

- enhance understanding among policymakers and education and research institutions of the research and education needs of civil society, and

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Executive summary

Background to the Study

Fostering is an activity that involves the family as a whole and has an impact on all members of the family unit. Adults aren't the only people that foster: children are also involved in fostering. In Ireland, foster children placed with foster carers' is the most popular form of alternative care for foster children (HSE,2012). While there is a body of research carried out on foster care, most of the research focuses on foster carers' and foster children. There is reference in the literature on the effects natural children may have on placement outcomes. One of the risk factors in foster placement breakdown is the presence of foster carers' own children (Bebbington and Miles, 1990). This implies that children who foster are pivotal in the success or otherwise of a foster placement. However, limited research has been published on the experiences of foster carers' natural children. Lemieux (1994) reports a correlation between the satisfaction of natural children with fostering and their parents fostering decisions; therefore, it is important for the child welfare system to attend to the needs of natural children as well. Berrick, Frasch, and Fox (2000: 157) stress the importance of considering the view point of foster carers' children. The assert, "children are the primary child welfare system, yet their voices are muffled by an array of difficult impediments". Therefore the aim of this research is to find out from natural children[1], the effects fostering has on them. It also aims to establish how involved natural children are throughout the fostering process.

Objectives

The overall objectives of this piece of research were negotiated between the researcher and Civil Society Organisation (CSO). The objectives include:

- To investigate what foster care literature says about the effects of fostering on natural children.

- To explore the positive and negative effects of fostering on natural children.

- To identify the extent in which natural children are involved in the fostering process.

- To explore the implications of the findings for foster care practice in terms of training and support for foster families.

Methodology

This research is based on both primary and secondary research methods. The researcher carried out a comprehensive literature and policy review on existing research, policies and legislation in relation to this topic. The researcher also conducted primary research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight natural children of foster carers'. Due to ethical considerations, this research focused on natural children who are over 18 years of age.

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[1] In this research natural children/children is those children who are born into families whose parents are foster carers.

Results

This study revealed that fostering has both positive and negative effects on natural children. This study also found that most natural children were excluded throughout the fostering process. While the majority of natural children had a discussion with their family prior to becoming involved in fostering, few were included in the assessment carried out by link workers/social workers. Similarly, natural children were excluded throughout the fostering process. The participants' reported that they would have liked link workers and social workers to include them throughout the fostering process.

In terms of support, most natural children felt they were adequately supported by their parents and felt it would not be beneficial to meet with a social worker for support throughout the fostering process. However, an interesting finding revealed in this study is that all natural children felt informal groups where they could meet with other natural children would be a good source of support for them. Finally, this study found that most natural children felt it would be beneficial if they had access to training prior and throughout the fostering placement.

Authors Conclusions

In conclusion, this study has fulfilled its aims and objectives and answered its core research questions. The findings of this research revealed that fostering has positive and negative effects on natural children. It also found that for the most part natural children are invisible and powerless throughout the fostering process. Participants' would like more training and they identified the need for support groups to provide a safe, supportive space for natural children.

Recommendations

The author argues that in order to support natural children throughout the fostering process age appropriate information about different topics should be given to natural children to help improve their understanding and knowledge about fostering. This could be available in the form of DVD's or information packs. These mechanisms have been established in the UK and have proved to be very useful and effective for natural children (Fostering Network, 2011).

The findings of this research suggest that there is a need for on-going support for all foster families particularly when a foster child leaves. It is in my view that support groups for natural children need to be considered by fostering agencies. There appears to be a consensus about their potential benefits to natural children who at times feel isolated and need reassurance.

The Irish Foster Care Association provides training programmes for fostering families. This training includes *New Beginnings* and *Foundations for Fostering*. However, from this study it is evident that none of the

natural children participated in this training. The author believes that by providing training opportunities for natural children would prepare them to take on the challenges that come their way.

Natural children need to be empowered through representation of their interests and needs in foster care policy and practice at all levels. At present, best practice suggests that natural children of foster carers' should be intrinsically involved in the whole process of fostering from initial assessments through to reviews. Most of natural children in this study were not consulted by social workers before or during the fostering process. The author argues that to ensure best practice fostering link workers should meet with natural children regularly and include them throughout the fostering placement. This would provide natural children with the opportunity to express their feelings and be heard by agencies.

The researcher argues that natural children need to be more visible in policy and guidelines. This is something that requires consideration by agencies so that the natural child's role is truly acknowledged and their contribution to fostering is actively reviewed. It is in the researcher's view that guidelines and legislation needs to make reference to natural children in more of a direct way to ensure that they are fully included in the fostering process.

Declaration

Research Title: The Impact of Fostering on Natural Children and their

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Supervisor: Dr Simone McCaughren / Eilish Forrest

Science Shop Tutor: Dr Kenneth Burns

I hereby declare this thesis is my own work. I also declare that all names and any other identifying information has been changed to protect the identity of all individuals involved in the research.

Signed_____   **Date_____**

Abstract

Fostering is an activity that involves the family as a whole and has an impact on all members of the family unit. Adults aren't the only people that foster: children are also involved in fostering. In Ireland, foster children placed with foster carers' is the most popular form of alternative care for foster children. While there is a body of research carried out on foster care, most of the research focuses on foster carers' and foster children. There is little research that focuses on the effects of fostering on natural children. Therefore, this research aims to fill a gap in the literature by exploring natural children's experiences of living with foster siblings.

This study reports on the findings of a qualitative study that was conducted using semi-structured interviews with eight natural children of foster carers'. Due to ethical considerations this research focuses on natural children who are over 18 years of age. This study found that fostering has both positive and negative effects on natural children. It also found that for the most part natural children are voiceless and powerless throughout the foster placement. The results of this small scale research have implications for social work practice. The author argues the importance of recognising the role natural children play in the foster placement and the importance of their active involvement in all aspects of the fostering process. It is in the author's view that training and support groups need to be established to support natural children in their role. This study also argues that natural children need to be more visible in policy and legislation and they need to be heard in all aspects of the fostering journey from assessments through to reviews.

Keywords: Fostering, Biological Children , Natural Children, Support, Positive and Negative Effects, Impacts of Fostering, Involvement in the Process,

Table of Contents

Chapter Three: An Exploration of Existing Literature on the Topic

Chapter Four: The Experiences of Living with Foster Siblings

5.2 Part One: Discussion of the Research Questions

Appendices

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<div align="center">***Chapter One: Introducing the Research***</div>

1.1 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter will introduce the research topic. In doing so, it will first introduce the study. It will then discuss the rationale for carrying out this research. The research aims, objectives and research questions of the study will then be outlined. The chapter will conclude with a chapter outline which will briefly summarise each of the chapters in this research.

1.2 Introduction to the Study

Fostering is an activity that involves the family as a whole and has an impact on all members of the family unit. Adults aren't the only people that foster: children are also involved in fostering. In Ireland, foster children placed with foster carers' is the most popular form of alternative care for foster children (HSE,2012). While there is a body of research carried out on foster care, most of the research focuses on foster carers' and foster children. For example, there is reference in the literature on the effects foster carers' natural children[2] may have on placement outcomes. One of the risk factors in foster placement breakdown is the presence of foster carers' own children (Bebbington and Miles, 1990). This implies that children who foster are pivotal in the success or otherwise of a foster placement. However, limited research has been published on the experiences of foster carers' natural children. Lemieux (1994) reports a correlation between the satisfaction of natural children with fostering and their parents fostering decisions; therefore, it is important for the child welfare system to attend to the needs of natural children as well. Berrick, Frasch, and Fox (2000: 157) stress the importance of considering the view point of foster carers' children. The assert, "children are the primary child welfare system, yet their voices are muffled by an array of difficult impediments".

Therefore the aim of this research is to find out from natural children, the positive and negative effects fostering has on them. It also aims to establish how involved natural children are throughout the fostering process and what support they receive.

1.3 Rationale

As part of the Masters in Social Work programme, students have the option to undertake a Science Shop Project as part of completing the mandatory research component of the professional qualification. Science Shop Projects are a service provided by research institutes for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in their region (UCC,2011). The aim of the Science Shop Project is to give students the opportunity to complete real life research which may impact positively on the lives of participants'. This is completed with a view to providing valuable research to the organisation on an identified topic specific to them (Living Knowledge, 2012).

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[2] In this research, natural children are those children who are born into families whose parents are foster carers'.

This research is part of this initiative on behalf of the Civil Society Organisation (CSO), The Waterford Branch of the Irish Foster Care Association. In terms of background, The Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA) was established in 1981 by a group of foster carers' and social workers. IFCA offers support and information to foster carers' and keeps them informed to changes in law in relation to foster care (IFCA,2011). IFCA works in partnership with the Health Service Executive (HSE) to promote foster care as the best alternative for children who cannot live with their own families. They provide a space where all those interested in foster care can get together to support one another, air their views and where necessary, campaign for improvements in regulations (IFCA,2011).

The Waterford Branch of The Irish Foster Care Association commissioned this piece of research in order to generate information to support foster families and I was assigned to carry out this research.

Another motivating factor for the researcher is that this research explores the impact of fostering from the perspective of natural children. As discussed above, natural children are often excluded from literature and policy. This research aims to fill a gap in the literature and provide prospective foster families with critical information that will enable them to make informed decisions related to fostering and to realise the impact that such a commitment could have on the family. The fostering process alters natural children's lives permanently, so it is only fair to consider their views.

The researcher is a student social worker. The values she holds such as social justice and human rights are featured heavily in the new code of ethics for the discipline (Social Workers Registration Board, 2011). Researching a topic from the perspective of natural children fits well with the human rights perspective that all people have a voice.

Consequently, a motivating factor for choosing this project is the researcher's interest in the area of fostering. However, as the researcher has no past experience of working in the area of foster care, the Science Shop Project enabled the researcher to gain knowledge in this area of social work thorough direct interaction with service providers.

1.4 *Research Aims and Objectives*

The overall objectives of this piece of research were negotiated between the researcher and the Waterford Branch of the Irish Foster Care Association. The aims and objectives include:

- To investigate what foster care literature says about the effects of fostering on natural children.

- To explore the positive and negative effects of fostering on natural children.

- To identify the extent in which natural children are involved in the fostering process.

- To explore the implications of the findings for foster care practice in terms of training and support for foster families.

1.5 Research Questions

The research questions were a vital component of this piece of research as they guided the researcher and ensured a focus at all times. The process of designing the questions involved examining the synopsis of the Waterford Branch of the Irish Foster Care Association, speaking with the CSO so as to ensure the questions and findings would be relevant to the organisation, speaking with the researcher's tutor and coming to a conclusion that appeared achievable and justified. The research questions were:

- What are the positive and negative effects of fostering on natural children?

- How involved are natural children in the fostering process? Are they part of initial assessments through to reviews?

- What supports both (formal and informal) are available to natural children during the fostering placement?

1.6 Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research

This chapter has introduced the study and briefly outlines the chapters that are to follow.

Chapter 2: Designing the Research

Chapter two will discuss and justify the research approach that will be used for this research. The theoretical perspectives as well as the data collection and data analysis methods will be examined with scrutiny. Finally, the ethical considerations and limitations will be explored.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Chapter three will provide a comprehensive literature review of the research topic. Previous research on the topic will be examined in detail. This chapter will also examine both Government and agency policies that are relevant to the research topic. Finally, a UK policy comparison will be made.

Chapter 4: Presenting and Analysing the Findings

Chapter four will present the finding of the research and analyse the data through the lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This chapter will illustrate the findings of the analysis by exploring and analysing the meanings of the findings in relation to available research. The limitations of the findings will also be discussed at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

Finally, chapter five will conclude this study. This chapter will first draw conclusions from the study in relation to the research questions proposed. It will then outline recommendations for social work practice based on themes that emerged from the findings.

1.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter introduced the research topic. In doing so, it first introduced the study. It then discussed the rationale for carrying out this research. The research aims, objectives and research questions of the study were then outlined. The chapter concluded with a chapter outline which briefly summarised each of the chapters in this research.

Chapter Two: Designing the Research

2.1 Introduction

"Knowing what you want to find out leads inexorably to the question of how you will get that information" (Miles and Huberman, 1984:42).

A choice of research designs reflects decisions about the priority being given to a range of dimensions of the research process (Bryman, 2008). Shaw and Gould (2001:3) argue that social work research should "contribute to the development and evaluation of social work practices, enhancing the moral purpose and strengthen social works disciplinary character and location".

This chapter will outline the most appropriate methodology to use for this research. The methods used in this research- a comprehensive literature review and semi-structured interviews as well as the method of analysis will be explored. The theoretical framework that underpins this research namely interpretivism will be discussed. Finally, this chapter will discuss the ethical issues taken into consideration for this research, as well as the limitations of the study.

2.2 Methodology

According to Silverman (2000:88) "methodology is a general approach to studying strategy as your methodology shapes which methods are used and how each method is used". Methodology can be broken down to three main types: qualitative; quantitative; or a combination of both (Bryman, 2008). The researcher's intention is to gain an insight into the effects of fostering on natural children through gaining an insight into their experiences. In selecting a research approach for this study, both quantitative and qualitative methodologies were evaluated for appropriateness.

2.2.1 What is Difference between Quantitative and Qualitative Research?

Ritchie and Lewis (2003) argue that qualitative research aims to provide an in-depth and interpreted understanding of research participants', by learning about their social circumstances, their experiences, perspectives and histories. It allows the researcher to understand the position of the participant in a meaningful way (Blaikie,2010). In contrast quantitative research is numerically based and often works with a large number of participants' (Blaikie, 2003). Similarly a feature of quantitative research is their highly structured nature. They are usually located within a research design that includes a set of predetermined stages (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011).

2.2.2 Why Adopt a Qualitative Research Approach for this Study?

The aim of this study is to gain an insight into peoples' behaviour and perceptions of the world in which they live in from their own environment and in their own words (Punch, 1998). A qualitative research design is proposed as appropriate to explore the effects of fostering on natural children as its methods focus on the views of people involved in the research and their perceptions and meanings of that experience (Burns and

Grove, 2003). This enabled the researcher to gain a better understanding of the participants' experiences or views that cannot be identified as effectively through quantitative methods (Houser, 1998).

Also as this research aims to reflect participants' experiences, by incorporating a qualitative research design, it allows freedom for in-depth probing of issues and yields great detail in response. Therefore, it enabled participants' to express themselves more freely than quantitative methods (Balnaves, 2001).

2.3. The Epistemological Question

According to Della Porta and Keating (2008) epistemology is about how we know things. It requires the researcher to ask themselves how they will interact and interpret the phenomenon of which they are interested in studying. Matthews and Ross (2010) outline the three different epistemological positions- positivism, interpretivism and realism. Under the ontology of constructivism the epistemology of this research is interpretivism (Blaikie,2003). In contrast to the positivist approach to measuring the social world, this view holds that how we understand and write about human knowledge must be through interpreting the social world by how individuals themselves experience it (Richie and Lewis, 2003, Bryman, 2008).Using an interpretivist framework allows the researcher to gain an insight into participants' experiences. The approach also stems from the idea that events and experiences may have different meanings for different people (D'Cruz and Jones, 2004). Therefore, this study acknowledges that everyone's experience of living with foster siblings is different. Neither positivist nor realist epistemologies would be applicable in this study as they adopt an objective approach and "assert that knowledge of social phenomena is based on what can be observed or recorded" (Bryman, 2004:56), rather than subjective interpretation.

2.4 Research Approach

This research used both primary and secondary methods. Primary research is original data which is generated by a researcher who is responsible for the design of the study, and the collection, analysis and reporting of the data. (Blaikie,2010). Secondary data is raw data that has already been collected by someone else, either for general information purposes, such as a government census or other official statistics, or for a specific research project (Lewis, 2003)[3]. In this research primary data was used to gather the views of natural children's experiences of living with foster siblings. Secondary data would not have enabled the researcher to gather an in-depth account of their experiences. However, it was beneficial in order to gain an insight into previous research carried out on the topic and aided the researcher with her research questions. It also enhanced the analysis of primary data (Carey, 2009).

2.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

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[3] See Appendix A for secondary data review.

Selecting a method of data collection is not a haphazard exercise (Silverman, 2000). The method chosen reflects the values of the investigator and also the type of research being carried out (Barbour and Barbour, 2003). Data collection methods usually used in qualitative research are focus groups or interviews (Burns and Groves, 1993).

To gain a full insight into the experiences of foster carers' natural children, the researcher had discussions with both her tutor and the CSO in order to establish what method would elicit the information required. Initially, it was decided that the researcher carry out focus groups with participants'. Focus groups are an appropriate method of data collection in this study as they enable the researcher to enter the participants' world (Dicicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). Also, interaction among participants' can stimulate new ideas and thoughts that may not arise during interviews (Krueger, et al, 2009). In interviews, participants' are rarely challenged, however, in the context of a focus group, participants' will often argue with each other and challenge each other's views.

However, after reflecting and discussing this method with the researcher's tutor and the CSO, it was felt that focus groups would not be a suitable method. The researcher was aware that in order for a focus group to take place, at least six participants' should participate. The researcher was not able to guarantee that a sufficient number of participants' would turn up on the day. Also, the CSO contacted the researcher and informed her that many of the participants' were interested in taking part in the research; however, they showed resistance towards a focus group discussion. Many were uncomfortable about speaking about their own personal experiences of living with foster siblings in a group setting.

It was decided that interviews would be a more suitable method. The researcher felt that semi-structured interviews would be the more appropriate than structured interviews for gathering the relevant information for the research. In a structured interview, strict adherence is given to the order and wording of the questions. The interviewer is expected to act in a neutral manner, using the same style, appearance, prompts, probes and shows no initiative, spontaneity or personal interest in the research topic (Sarantakos, 2004). In contrast, semi-structured interviews enables the researcher to have a sense of topics that they wish to explore (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) while providing flexibility to further explore participants' responses (Whittaker, 2009).

This method was chosen because, although the researcher is provided with an interview guide[4], there is ample freedom to formulate questions and to determine the order of questions (Sarantakos,1994). This is beneficial in order to elicit all the relevant information needed for the research. They enabled the researcher to gain an insight into the participants' personal experiences of living with foster siblings as they are a means of exploring the perspective of individual social actors (Pole and Lampard, 2002) through as Mason (1996) argues not at first hand but their personal recollections. This reflects the interpretivist position of the study. Finally, they ensured that participants' are in control of the depth and content of their responses (Krueger, and Casey, 2009). As this research is sensitive in nature, during semi-structured interviews participants'

maybe more open and may feel safer than if they are partaking in a group discussion (Wellington and Szczerbinski,2007). Therefore, this method is more accessible to people who might find a group encounter intimidating.

2.5 Sample Selection

According to O'Leary, (2010, 162) "sampling is a process that is always strategic. The goal is to select a sample that is large enough to allow you to conduct the desired analysis and small enough to be manageable".

The CSO made contact with all participants' explaining that a researcher will be in contact with them. A database was provided from the CSO to the researcher containing contact details of all natural children who gave permission to be part of the research. To ensure the anonymity of participants', the researcher sent a letter to all participants' explaining the purpose of the research, what the research involves and the ethical aspects of the research[5]. An information sheet was also sent to all participants'[6]. Those willing to participate in the research were asked to complete the consent form[7] and return it to the researcher using the stamped addressed envelope. A sample for the research was picked from the first eight replies[8]. A small sample was chosen became it is a small scale exploratory study. A small sample gave the researcher the time to carry out the research and analyse it in the given time frame (O'Leary, 2010). Finally, participants' had to meet certain criteria. They had to be over the age of 18 years so as to eliminate the need to apply for consent and they had to have experience of living with foster siblings. A purposive sample was deliberately chosen on the basis that participants' are the best available people to provide data on the issues researched (O'Leary, 2010).

2.6 Data Analysis

The taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis which is a form of thematic coding. According to Smith and Osborn (2003:46) "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis aims to explore how participants' make sense of and understand their personal and social world, in particular, the meaning they attribute to experiences, events and states of mind." The analysis involved the identification of emerging themes and key points which were then used to distil findings.

Another important aspect of the analysis was the use of a research journal. This was used to document themes and became an invaluable tool when it came to putting the analysis together in a cohesive manner.

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[4] See appendix B
[5] See appendix C
[6] See appendix D

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2.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethics tend to be based on moral obligations but put a professional spin on what is right, wrong, fair or just (O'leary,2010). In order to ensure the researcher protected the interests of participants' the following ethical issues were adhered to throughout the fieldwork.

2.7.1 Ensuring Participants' have been given Informed Consent

Participants' can only give informed consent to be involved in a research study if they have full understanding of their requested involvement. To have informed consent for a study, "the researcher should explain as fully as possible, and in terms meaningful to participants' what the research is about, who is undertaking it and why it is being undertaken" (Gomm,2004:307). It also implies that participants' are competent i.e. they have reasonable intellectual capacity and psychological maturity. Informed consent should inform participants' that they are under no obligation to continue involvement and they can drop out from the research at any time without giving reasons why or being penalized (O'Leary, 2010).

Initially, a letter and information sheet was sent to all participants' giving them details of the study, what is involved etc. The letter contained the researcher's contact details so they could get in contact with the researcher if they needed more information upon which to base a decision.

Those interested in taking part in the research were asked to complete a participatory consent form which was provided to each participant prior to the commencement of the research. The consent form contained information so that participants' had full understanding of their required involvement-including time, commitment, topics that will be covered and all physical and emotional risks that are potentially involved (O'Leary,2010). Participants' were also informed about the anonymity, the recording of the interviews and the process of transcribing it. The researcher obtained each participant's consent on record for the interview to be audio taped. Interviews were not conducted until such time as full permission had been granted by each participant.

The consent form also informed participants' that they are under no obligation to continue involvement and they can drop out from the research at any stage without giving reasons why or being penalised.

2.7.2 Ensuring No Harm comes to Participants'

This includes emotional or psychological harm as well as physical harm. Physical harm is relatively easy to recognise but risks of psychological harm can be hard to identify and are difficult to predict. Psychological harm can be unplanned and detrimental yet common place (O'Leary, 2010). As this research is sensitive in nature, the researcher applied to the UCC Research Ethics Board prior to commencing the research for

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[7] See appendix E
[8] Participants included in the study are part of families that involved in short and long term foster care.

ethical approval[9]. Ethics must always take precedence even if this means the research design needs to go through a process of modification (O'Leary,2010).

The researcher is aware given the nature of the research that it may invoke emotional responses from participants'. With this in mind, the researcher decided to include participants' over 18 years for the study. This would be more ethical as they would be more psychologically mature than under 18 year olds. If a participant became distressed during the interview, the researcher allowed the participant to terminate the interview and leave the room. Social workers were organised to be available that would spend time with participants' if they became distressed. At the end of the interview, the researcher checked in with all participants' and discussed with them how they found the experience. Participants' were given a list of contact numbers of 24 hour help lines and details of a designated person that they could contact after the research if they are affected in any way.

2.7.3 Ensuring Confidentiality/ Anonymity

Confidentiality involves protecting the identity of those providing research data, all identifying data remains solely with the researcher. Anonymity goes a step beyond confidentiality and refers to protection against identification even from the researcher. As well as masking identity, protection of confidentiality should also involve secure storage of raw data, restricting access to the data, the need for permission for subsequent use of the data and eventual destruction of raw data (O'Leary, 2010). All aspects of confidentiality were outlined to research participants' in both the initial letter, the consent form and at the beginning of the interview. All participants' were guaranteed that their identity would not be revealed to the organisation and all of the research would be anonymised to ensure this. Therefore, the write up did not include any identifying information. Once participants' responses were transcribed, their names were replaced with pseudonyms.

The researcher saved the interview transcripts in Google Docs within umail.ucc.ie, making sure that the sharing function is turned off. The dictaphone was stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home, and the researcher only knew the location of the key.

The researcher has access to the audio tapes and transcripts for 5 months (February-June 2012) to cover the unlikely circumstances that the researcher may have to resubmit the thesis. In the beginning of June, the dictaphone and transcripts will be destroyed. Participants' were made aware of this.

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[9] Please see appendix F

2.8 Limitations

There are limitations incurred in all research and inevitably this research will include some aspects of these. Although the researcher aimed to remain as objective as possible throughout the research process, May (2001:127) argues that it is "difficult to create the right environment to gain qualitative data, while also being detached and objective". By using an interpretative framework in this research and by using semi-structured interviews, the researcher immediately imposes some methodological limitations on the study.

Due to the time and volume restrictions it was only feasible to conduct a small scale study involving eight participants'. There would not have been sufficient time to carry out and analyse in any meaningful detail a greater number than eight participants'. Only participants' over 18 years old were included in the research, this excluded the views of natural children under 18 years. Therefore, the time frame and age profile of participants' limited the study.

A final limitation to this research design is that the researcher aimed to have equal representation from both male and females. However, the CSO's database only contained names of three males. Therefore, this research is over-represented by females. The researcher feels it would have been beneficial to include more male participants' to establish whether there were different experiences based on gender.

2.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter discussed and justified the research approach used. An interpretivist epistemology and a qualitative methodology was appropriate for the research aims, objectives and questions. This chapter then discussed research design issues that were taken into consideration before the research was conducted. Documentary research of the literature was crucial in making these methodological decisions concerning sample selection, data collection and data analysis. In conclusion, this chapter reflected on the ethical considerations undertaken throughout the research process and looked at the limitations of the research design

Chapter Three: An Exploration of Existing Literature on the Research Topic

3.1 Introduction

This literature review will examine literature that is linked to my research topic. In doing so, it will provide a comprehensive examination of books, articles, electronic articles and legislation and will provide a snap shot of the foster care system in Ireland. It will firstly give a brief historical overview of the Irish foster care system. It will then discuss a theory that is very relevant to natural children. The literature will be examined under four headings namely, the characteristics of placement success and failure, the effects of contact with birth parents, the positive and negative effects of fostering on natural children and finally, the involvement of natural children in the fostering process. Following a review of the literature, it will then outline the policies that are in place for natural children in Ireland and will compare this to policy in the UK. A limitation to this literature review is its reliance on recurring theorists due to lack of literature in this area.

3.2 Historical Overview of Foster Care in Ireland

Fostering is not a new phenomenon. Up until the late eighteenth century it existed in the traditional form of supplemented kinship under Brehon Law (Horgan 2002). The current fostering system has its origins in the Irish Poor Law Amendment Act 1862 (Gilligan, 1990) which introduced the "boarding out" system. The Health Act of 1953 reinforced this system by empowering the Health Boards to "have a child cared for either by boarding him out (foster care), by sending him to an approved school, or if the child was over fourteen years old, by placing him in employment" (Powell, 1992, Doyle, 2004). This was followed by the introduction of the Boarding Out of Children Regulations of 1954 which set down for the first time the obligations of the Health Boards with regard to the "boarding out" or fostering of children (Horgan, 2002, Gilligan, 1990). The *Kennedy Report* was published in 1970 and fundamentally changed the Irish child care system. This emphasised de-institutionalisation, family protection, and the setting up of a child-centred system (McCarthy et al, 1996, Kelleher et al, 2000). The preferred solution to residential care was fostering, with residential care to be viewed as a last resort.

The 1970 Health Act, divided Ireland into eight Health Board Regions, each of which provided a programme of community care. Social workers were given according to McCarthy et al (1996:3) "the primary responsibility for supporting families in need and placing children in care". The few remaining institutions were closed down and numbers in residential child care fell dramatically, while those in foster care simultaneously increased (McCarthy et al, 1996). This remains the case. According to the Department of Health (2010) there are currently approximately 5,357 children in foster care in Ireland[10].

Section 39 of the 1991 Child Care Act obliged the Minister to make regulations regarding the placement and welfare of children in foster care. This lead to the introduction of the Child Care Regulations in 1995. Following the publication of the Working Groups Report in 2001, a committee was established which led to

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[10] See Appendix G

the publication of The National Standards of Foster Care in 2003. These standards form the main basis for best practice and quality in the provision of foster care services[11].

3.3 Grief and Loss

One theory that is very relevant in foster care and one that is a recurring theme in foster care literature is grief and loss.

Foster families have to deal with grief in many guises: the grief of the parents whose child they are caring for; the grief of the child in their care; their own grief upon losing a child to reunification, another placement or adoption; and the grief of other family members as a foster child leaves (Edelstein et al 2001). The foster child is also experiencing loss. This includes a loss of identity, a loss of environment, a loss of their parent and this loss comes with an overwhelming array of emotions for children (Fahlberg, 2006). Even though the child's previous family environment and relationships may have been less than perfect and sometimes even abusive and traumatic, the child grieves the loss. Finally, the foster carers' natural children are also experiencing loss. This might include loss of privacy, loss of parental attention, loss of identity. An implicit aspect within the discussion in the literature about the impact of separation and loss for natural children is that the essence of the relationship between them and foster children can be those of siblings. As Jeweth (1994:15) comments about foster siblings loss "they have lost a playmate, companion, and rival, and all the familiar interactions and expectations that were connected to those relationships".

It can be argued that it is more difficult to define grief. Grief with regards to foster care has many definitions, including "unresolved emotional distress that can result from being removed from family, experiencing a parent's death, being abandoned by a parent, entering foster care or between placements (Weller at al,1996). Fiorini and Mullen (2006:10) definition of grief is further expounded on by the following statement "grief is an inevitable, never ending process that results from a permanent or temporary disruption in a routine, a separation, or a change in a relationship that may be beyond the person's control. Although loss is a universal experience, the causes and manifestations of it are unique to each individual and may change over time". Grief touches every aspect of a person and may involve physiological, behavioural and physical symptoms. It is said that foster families move through the stages of grief in a similar way as a family who lost a loved one (Exline et al, 1996).

Another aspect to consider in grief and loss is that while most people expect to feel severely distressed if someone close to them dies, foster families may not expect to feel grief after the loss of a foster child. Theirs is "disenfranchised grief"(Kubler-Ross,1973). Since the foster parent knew all along that the relationship was temporary, placement endings should not elicit grief (Anderson et al, 1989; Doka, 1989; Doka, 1996). The foster family, however, has invested in the child in a multitude of ways. As the child moves on, the foster family loses the unique relationship that has been formed with the child.

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[11] See Appendix H for more information on Irish Foster Care

3.4 Foster Placements-Why they Succeed and Why They Fail?

Success in foster care is not easily defined due to varying degrees of successes displayed. Some placements display clear success in terms of the attitude of foster children with school attendance and grades of the child are on par of the child's ability and close relationships with foster parents is evident (Sinclair et al, 2005a). Once the child's basic needs are met it is accepted that fostering is an effective form of alternative care. Equally clear distinctions can be made when placements fail and these often include the opposite of the characteristics of successful placements. Berridge and Cleavers (1987) study takes a more holistic view of the child in placement. Fewer breakdowns were evident where siblings were placed together, children did not change school when placed, and there were other unrelated foster children in the foster home.

Sinclair et al (2005b) study found that the foster child's motivation was also important. Those who were seen by their carers' as wanting to be in their placements were more likely to succeed in them. Their study produced evidence that matching, fit and affinity were all related to outcomes. Placements for children who were not liked by others in the household were likely to fail. Conversely, children to whom the carers' were attached to were likely to do well (Sinclair et al 2005b).

An earlier study by Sinclair et al (2004) found that some carers' were consistently more likely than others to experience placement breakdowns. Their findings showed that when carers' where rated as authoritative, participated in foster children's activities and who were emotionally attuned were less likely to fail.

Finally, Triseliotis (2002) found that children placed in foster care at a young age have an increased chance of placement success. Conversely from the 8-12 year age group, he found there were increased chance of breakdown rates.

3.5 Effects of Contact with the Birth Family

Contact with the birth family for fostered children is very important for the child's identity and possible reunification. (Gilligan,2000:56) states "you can take the child out of the family but you can't take the family out of the child". Thorborn (1999) underlines the importance of siblings, since these relationships are even more long-lasting than parent-child relationships. It is also important to acknowledge the yearning that parents feel when the child is taken into care (Ryburn,1995). Sinclairs (2005) and Farmers et al (2002) study identifies foster carers' relationships with birth parents as one of the variables in placement stability. An unresolved ambivalent parental relationship was found to be detrimental to establishing permanence in fostering placements. (Cleaver, 2000, Sinclair et al, 2005b) found foster children generally want contact with their birth families and often want it more frequently than it happens. Such involvement requires commitment from the foster family. For this to work there is a need to ensure there is adequate support for all involved.

Most recent studies challenge earlier assumptions that contact promoted good outcomes for foster children. Sinclair (2005) study portrayed a more complex relationship, with ongoing concerns noted by foster carers

and social workers that within some birth families, there remained ongoing risk of abuse from some members of the birth family household. Contact brought the realisation that their birth-parents continue to blame the foster child for their disclosure and the parents had not accepted responsibility for their behaviour. Further studies indicate that contact with specific people may be harmful, particularly to those who had previously been abused (Sinclair et al, 2005a, Sinclair,2005).

While contact with the foster child's family can promote positive outcomes for the foster child, many studies (Pugh, 1994, Younes and Harp, 2007, Hojer, 2004, Swan, 2002) report that such contact negatively affects the lives of foster carers' natural children. Studies found that natural children worried about the safety of their parents during visits (Pugh, 1994, Younes and Harp, 2007, Hojer, 2004, Swan, 2002). Similarly, Hojer (2007) found that many natural children worried about drug/alcohol abuse and feared that foster children would be subjected to violence or otherwise exposed to dangerous situations during visits.

3.6 Effects of Fostering on Natural Children

This research will now review literature on the positive and negative effects of fostering on natural children. Initially, the focus will be on the positive effects of fostering. The personal development of natural children is one of the main themes highlighted in the literature. Spears and Cross (2003) and Triseliotis et al (2000) study made reference to improved communication and social skills, increased confidence and being more empathic, as well as the fun aspects associated with gaining a new friend with whom to share activities as positive effects (Watson and Jones, 2002). Hojer (2004) found that natural children of foster carers' reported that fostering gave them more empathy.

Other authors found that respondents offered some form of altruistic answer such as meeting new people, helping those who need it, seeing the child be happy, helping them appreciate what they have in life and providing love (Pugh, 1996, Spears and Cross, 2003, Hojer, 2007, Watson and Jones, 2002). They found that fostering provides natural children with an understanding of the difficulties foster children have been through and therefore, it taught them to appreciate their own circumstances (Pugh, 1994, Spears and Cross, 2003, Hojer, 2007, Watson and Jones, 2002).

In terms of the negative impacts of fostering on natural children, one of the main themes reflected in the literature is loss. Both Poland and Groze (1993) and Twig (1994) found that children reported that the presence of foster children created distance between family members. Hojer (2007:78) described how it was not only sharing parental time that caused concern, that "their parents' involvement in fostering made them less accessible".

Natural children in research also reported themes of loss in relation to their personal space and belongings. Part (1993) reported that loss of privacy was rated as one of the three worst aspects of fostering, a finding supported in other studies (Reid, 1997, Swan, 2002, Younes and Harp, 2007). This may be a direct result of children having to share their bedroom with their siblings, in order for the foster child to have a bedroom. Similarly, natural children reported that they did not like sharing their belongings, although, it seems that

many of these children had possessions stolen or broken by a foster sibling (Martin, 1993, Reid, 1994, Watson and Jones, 2002).

It is reported that natural children of foster carers' also experience a loss of identity. Martin (1993:19) reports that natural children mentioned that their place in the family "was difficult to preserve and they find themselves having to share a role, such as 'the middle one'". Younes and Harp (2007) study also reported on the displacement felt when a child was no longer the oldest or youngest in the family, highlighting that these interchangeable roles can make the child feel as if they do not have a set place within the family.

Most of the literature consulted mention that when natural children form close relationships with foster children, a disadvantage for them is coping with the impact when the foster child has to leave (Spears and Cross, 2003, Younes and Harp,2007,Watson and Jones, 2002, Kaplan, 1988, Part, 1993, Swan, 2002, Twigg,1995) as they have to adjust to the loss of their foster sibling and its impact on other family relations.

Natural children in all the studies shared that the removal of foster children from the foster family was the most difficult part of the process leading them to experience loss and sadness (Younes and Harp, 2007, Watson and Jones, 2002, Hojer, 2007). In Younes and Harp (2007:35) study children recalled the removal like "losing a sister". They reported worrying about the well-being of foster children. In the midst of sadness, the loss presented an opportunity for the family to return to some normalcy even if it was short-lived until the entry of the next foster child. Children reported having more quality time and attention from their parents, a sense of control over their house, and a brief return to the family structure they enjoyed before the entry of foster children into their home (Younes and Harp, 2007).

Natural children also reported different expectations of behaviour and discipline for themselves and their foster siblings (Pugh,1994, Spears and Cross, 2003). Research on differential treatment has consistently been correlated with conflict and hostility between siblings, which may be linked to competition for parental interest and attention (Dunn, 1992). Children in a study carried out by Younes and Harp (2007) reported feeling jealous, angry and unimportant.

Natural children reported that they found it difficult to cope with their foster siblings conduct, such as sexualised behaviour and bad language (Martin, 1993) or acting out (Swan, 2002). Triseliotis et al (2000) reported that witnessing behavioural and emotional problems disturbed them. However, in research carried out by Sinclair et al (2004) natural children espoused a belief that witnessing and experiencing such behaviours has taught them important lessons in how to behave and exercise tolerance.

In Spears and Cross (2003) study some participants' mentioned that they could not have friends around because of a foster child's behaviour, which might include violence towards them. In some circumstances natural children also found that sharing friends can upset their friendship group. They feel torn by, on the one hand, not wanting to exclude a fostered child, and on the other, being embarrassed or excluding themselves because of the behaviour of their foster sibling when they are with their friends. Sometimes they simply don't know how to explain the presence of a foster child in the family. They may be aware of the need to

protect the child's confidentiality but not sure about what they can say by way of introduction and explanation (The Fostering Network, 2003).

3.7 Involvement of Natural Children in the Fostering Process.

At present, best practice (Chapman, 2009, The Fostering Network, 2010) suggests that natural children should be intrinsically involved in the whole process from initial assessments through to reviews. It can be argued that there is very little literature on this aspect of foster care. Few studies that are available have reported that natural children were not given enough information and preparation for the realities of fostering (Younes and Harp, 2007, Thompson and Mc Pherson, 2011). In Spears and Cross (2003) and Younes and Harp (2007) study, participants' reported that there was no sense of them being consulted by people outside of the family, but within the family, there was generally a degree of consultation and discussion before the decision to foster was made. While discussions about fostering took place, the decision seemed to be mostly made by the parents. The extent of feedback sought from the children seemed to vary with age. It was reported that younger children were less involved in the fostering process. Despite their efforts, natural children of foster parents reported varied results about the effectiveness of the preparation they received from their parents and professionals. Many stated that the reality was quite different from the preparation they received. Children stated "you don't know what it is like until you do it", or "they didn't tell me how it really would be like" (Younes and Harp,2007:36).

Similarly, there are few studies on the involvement on natural children in the fostering process. Martin (1993:17) study found that there is rarely any systematic involvement of the whole family prior to becoming a fostering family... and a lack of on-going consultation and support". Similarly, in terms of review meetings, the researcher felt there was a gap in the literature. One study available is Ryans (2000) study. This study found that whilst many foster care departments review foster carers annually and elicit the views of foster carers at regular child care reviews, rarely do natural children participate at these reviews. The author agrees with Ward (1996:32) that the "social worker should make a point of communicating with the natural children of the family and learning about their feelings on the introduction of a foster child into the home". However, the author feels it is difficult to ascertain how involved natural children are in the fostering process due to lack of research in the area.

In relation to sources of support for foster carers' children, studies reported that many natural children found their parents a good support during the fostering process (Pugh, 1994, Spears and Cross,2002, Younes and Harp,2007). Siblings were also mentioned as a source of support. There was evidence in Pugh (1994) study that contact with other natural children in informal groups can be beneficial for natural children particularly during the fostering process when they can at times feel isolated and need reassurance. Groups can provide a safe environment to vent frustrations when young people feel worried or resentful about less parental attention (Spears and Cross, 2003).

However, in relation to professional support, few studies that are available found that natural children did not have access to professionals for support. Reed (1997) found that there was little support from professionals for natural children. Natural children rarely met with social workers except in passing. (Gilligan,2000) found in her study that Barnardo's Psychology Service, worked with young people in care, however, there was no professional or at least very little professional involvement with natural children.

However, Ryan (2000) study revealed that natural children felt they were adequately supported by their parents and generally did not feel a need for social work or other professional support such as psychology services. This reflects similar findings by Reed (1999) study where natural children appeared unconcerned about whether or not they had contact with social workers from the fostering agency (Reed, 1999).

Similarly, support for foster families when foster children leave appears to be a gap in the literature (Stover,1999, Triseliotis et al, 2000, Buckley 2002, Fahlberg, 2006). Preston (1993) identifies that a period of preparation is "crucial to a more successful move" and points out that a family who is very attached to a child can find it difficult to let go.

Conversely when a placement ends natural children are often left with a strong sense of guilt and failure. Tully, (2000) finds that there is limited (if any), one to one support for natural children when a placement ends and specifically comments upon the psychological issues of separation and loss on natural children. Triseliotis et al (2000) notes that 10% of foster carers' say their sons and daughters experience strong feelings of sadness when a foster child leaves. Finally, Fahlberg (2006) in discussing the support required by fostering families in expressing their emotions about placement moves states, "commonly there is no one to work with members of the fostering family after a child leaves their home". Parents and other children in the home are left to grieve by themselves.

The literature search in totality reveals a lack of attention generally to the role that natural children play within the fostering environment and particularly in relation to addressing the impact of separation and loss when placements end. The need for emotional support when placement ends needs to be recognised. As without such support, it can have a negative impact on foster families.

3.8 Policy/Legislation Review in Ireland

The main laws and policies that serve to protect children are as follows:

- The Child Care Act 1991
- The Child Care Regulations, 1995
- UN Convention of the Rights of the Child
- Protection for Persons Reporting Child Abuse Act, 1998
- The Children Bill, 1999
- Child Care (Amendment) Act 2007[12]

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[12] See Appendix I for summary of the legislation

However, while there is a myriad of policies that serve to protect foster children in Ireland, there is little that directly relates to enhancing the welfare and securing the protection of natural children of foster carers. *The Child Care Regulations 1995* makes reference to natural children of foster carers' stating "a Fostering Link Worker is to carry out an assessment of a foster carers suitability for fostering". This involves an in-depth and structured assessment of potential foster families. In making the assessments, the applicants household as a whole should be examined and where there are other children in the household they should be involved as appropriate having regard to their age and reason (Ireland,1995). However, this research aims to establish if this is being adhered to in practice.

3.9 Guidelines and Standards

3.9.1 National Standards for Foster Carer 2003

The National Standards for Foster Care 2003 form the main basis for best practice and quality in the provision of foster care services. In addition, these standards have a role to play in ensuring that children in foster care are receiving the best possible care (Department of Health and Children, 2003). These standards do not make direct reference to natural children; however, they are referenced indirectly. For example in the assessment of foster families section of the standards it states according to Department of Health and Children (2003:17) "children, their families and others involved in their care [foster child's care] are encouraged to participate in the assessment process". Similarly, in the placement review section of the standards it states according to Department of Health and Children (2003:38) "review meetings are attended by link workers, foster carers and other members of the household as appropriate".

Therefore, while natural children are not directly referenced in the standards, it can be argued that they are mentioned indirectly in the assessment and review sections as the words "others" and "other members of the household" quoted in the standards may include natural children.

3.10 Agency Policy

This research will now focus on one of the main assessors of fostering in Ireland which is The Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA). IFCA policy guarantees the right for each family involved in fostering including natural children to have access to a Fostering Link Worker whose role is to provide support on a regular basis (IFCA, 2010).

IFCA also have a policy that counselling would be available to the foster carers' whole family after a breakdown or other critical incident. Natural children of foster carers' can find it challenging to access this service particularly in rural areas, however, it can be said that it is a positive step in the right direction (IFCA, 2010).

In 2004, IFCA launched a training course, *New Beginnings* and *Foundations for Fostering* for the children of foster carers'. The training was developed by young people who have grown up as part of a foster family, foster carers' and social workers and aims to help natural children achieve an overall understanding of foster

care in a fun and interactive way (Department of Health, 2011). This is a positive step as foster carers' children play an important role in the foster care service and up until now have often been overlooked.

3.11 Comparison of Fostering Policy/Support for Foster Carers Children in the UK

Contemporary foster care in the UK is influenced by the provisions of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)*, the three main categories of articles of which are provision, protection and participation. The four main principles are based on the four articles of survival and development (Article 6), non-discrimination (Article 2), best interest (Article 3) and the right to be heard (Article 12).These principles have been incorporated into legislation such as the Children Act 1989, the Children Act 1995. These issues are further developed in policy such as England's *Fostering Services Regulations* (DH,2002) which comprise a series of minimum standards applying to both local authorities and independent sector foster care provisions. Also in the UK, *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) states there is a need to provide foster families with the training and support they require to meet the increasingly complex needs of children in their care. In England, natural children are given opportunities to take part in training (The Fostering Network, 2008). It illustrates the complexity of negotiating and maintaining family boundaries within fostering families. Similarly, natural children have access to support. This might take the form of support groups, having their own support worker, training on dealing with some of the traumas and behaviours that foster children can bring with them. The Fostering Network (2010) have 59 sons and daughters groups in England. Similarly, a number of other influential support groups including The British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) have been established.

The UK National Standards for Foster Carer (NFCA, 1999) refer explicitly to natural children as having needs in their own right. They highlight the need for their inclusion in the assessment process and on an on-going basis throughout the placement, through clearly identifying a role for Supervising Social Workers in relation to them. Many assessors speak directly to natural children and include their views in the assessment report. Some fostering services in the UK provide a preparation session for children of prospective foster carers', using the relevant "Skills to foster" module and some provide them with age-appropriate written information. The UK National Standards (NFCA, 1999) clearly outlines the way in which the role of natural children can be taken into account in the day to day practice and policy of fostering agencies. They recognise the vital role played by natural children and acknowledge that they will face challenges during the fostering experience. Finally, BAAF recognises that despite the positive aspects of fostering, there is also negative aspects (BAAF,2011). BAAF recognises that these problems can be reduced by taking small measures such as having conversations with natural children and by providing support mechanisms which gives natural children a space to talk about their difficulties and share experiences with other children in the same situation (BAAF,2011). These support mechanisms have been established.

3.12 Conclusion

This literature review examined literature that is linked to my research topic. In doing so, it provided a comprehensive examination of books, articles, electronic articles and legislation and provided a snap shot of the foster care system in Ireland. It firstly gave a brief historical overview of the Irish foster care system. It then discussed a theory that is very relevant to natural children. The literature was examined under four headings namely, the characteristics of placement success and failure, the effects of contact with birth parents, the positive and negative effects of fostering on natural children and finally, the involvement of natural children in the fostering process. Following a review of the literature, it then focused its attention of the policies that are in place for natural children in Ireland and compared this to policy in the UK. A limitation to this literature review is its reliance on recurring theorists due to lack of literature in the area.

Chapter Four: The Experiences of Living with Foster Siblings

4.1 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter will illustrate the findings of the research by exploring and analysing the meanings of the findings in relation to available literature and research. The names of participants' have being replaced with pseudonyms and any identifying information has being omitted to respect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants'.

4.2 Theme 1 : Positive Effects of Fostering on Natural Children

4.2.1 Insight into Parenting

The majority of participants' revealed that fostering provided them with an insight into parenthood. In some cases, natural children learnt how to 'parent by watching strategies used by their parents". This finding is comparable to research carried out by (Spears and Cross, 2003). For example John mentions:

"My sister has her own children now, little values you learn and you use them with your nieces and nephews, like how to stop them from crying. Like I know how to stop a baby from crying. And my sister as well learnt a lot about parenting before she was a parent".

Other participants' mentioned that they were more aware of the commitment having a child is. This is reflected in Jenny's response:

"it also brought a level of understanding of how parenting actually is", (Jenny).

However, while the majority of participants' mentioned that fostering gave them an insight into parenting, some participants' felt it was their role to 'parent' too and many participants' spoke about becoming overly involved in the parenting role at a young age.

"I took on too much of responsibility at a young age. I tried to be helpful but I became over involved and I wasn't really able to kick back and just be a kid to a certain extent" (Deirdre).

It is hypothesised that the unique experiences of natural children parenting and caring for their foster siblings may result in "premature growing up" (Martin, 1993).

4.2.2 Fun Aspect

The 'fun' aspect of fostering was a key finding in this research. The majority of participants' made reference to this. This is comparable to (Spears and Cross, 2003,Doorbar,1999, Hojer,2007) research which revealed that natural children regarded fostering as a fun experience. They used words such as *"having a big family"*

(Conor), *"I always have company and someone to talk to"*(Jenny), *"it was always great fun"* (Patrick) to express themselves. Typical comments were:

"It was fun having babies around. For the most part the kids themselves were great fun". (Deirdre).

" It's good enough fun and all. Like it is good fun, I love kids. I get on really well with kids yeah (Susan).

"I like going out kicking a ball with them like or soccer and having sports and hobbies with them like" (Catherine).

4.2.3 Altruism

One very interesting finding from this piece of research is all participants' gave an altruistic answer when talking about the positive effects. This included being more accepting, appreciating your own circumstances, helping.

4.2.3.1 Fostering Helps Natural Children Appreciate their Own Circumstances

Natural children of foster carers frequently gained some understanding of the difficulties foster children have been through and therefore learned to appreciate their own circumstances:

"Just I suppose knowing how bad their [foster siblings] *upbringing was, it made me appreciate how lucky I am"* (Aisling).

"It [fostering] *makes you cop on to yourself in terms of your childhood. You know the way you have a thing 'oh I didn't get this when I was a child', you then realise then how good things actually were"* (Jenny).

This finding is also reflected in a study conducted by Watson and Jones (2002).

While the majority of participants' mentioned that fostering made them appreciate their own circumstances, a minority agreed that while fostering made them appreciate their own circumstances, they also felt that whatever challenges they faced in their daily lives were minimised and seemed trivial compared to the problems of their foster siblings. One participant comments:

"Do you know like my parents saying you should be so lucky now look at these poor kids [foster children]*, that can go too far the other way. That was my difficulty and that's not minimising what they* [foster sibling] *went through, but at the same time their experiences can't minimise what I went through"* (Deirdre).

This finding is comparable to Kaplan (1988) study which asserted that foster carers' often minimised their natural children's struggles and challenges.

4.3.3.2 Caring Role

The narrative strands of the transcripts portray a deep concern for the welfare of each member of the participants' families. All participants' see themselves very much in a caring role, not simply a passive member of a family who foster. The participants' all displayed an enjoyment of helping their foster siblings. This is evident is John's comment:

"I like when I help those that aren't as lucky as me and put them on the straight path" (John).

Social learning theory may help to explain this finding (Bandura, 1986). In accordance with this theory, individuals develop altruism through internalising societal norms, one of which would be the responsibility to help those less fortunate than themselves (Bandura, 1987).

The participants' all displayed sincere empathy when speaking of their foster siblings. An attitude of maturity and empathy was evident particularly when speaking about their foster siblings unwanted behaviours. In such instances, participants' offered explanations as to why the foster child was behaving in such a manner, so as to remove blame. In the following quote Jenny talks about a foster child leaving her home because of placement breakdown.

"He turned around to me and said I really f***ed up here and I remember feeling really sorry for him. It's difficult especially with their life history". (Jenny).

Emotional literacy is also an essential precursor to altruism, a quality clearly evident in this finding (Joseph and Strain, 2003). As natural children develop the ability to maintain lower ego-centrism, they begin to view the world from another person's perspective, attempting to understand the effective state of the person (Bar-Tal et al, 1980).This evidences the participants' ability to think of the foster child's behaviour as the product of their past experience, not just a reaction to the present situation. The fostering experience creates a context in which natural children encounter more opportunities to experience a broad range of emotions both personally and vicariously than they would in a non-fostering family (Humphrey et al 2007).

Natural children not only show a caring nature to the foster children they extend this caring role to their parents, too, most notably, only mothers are mentioned. Their protective nature was also seen in more subtle ways such as worrying that their parents were not receiving enough support or time off- a finding common in previous research (Watson and Jones, 2002). Mary comments:

"Sometimes I would look at my mother and I would think that it is a hard job, it is tough going, it's not babysitting, this is hard work like. I worry like is she going to tear her hair out after a week because of being so stressed" (Mary).

It is perhaps not surprising with this exposure to caring for others, of the eight participants', three participants' work or are studying to become a professional in a caring profession. One could therefore argue

that the participants' choice of career may reflect the self-efficacy and confidence gained through their role from being part of a fostering family (Bandura, 1986).

4.3 Theme 2: Negative Effects of Fostering on Natural Children

4.3.1 Loss

The majority of natural children of foster carers' consistently shared the view that the removal of foster siblings from the foster family was the most difficult part of the process. These findings are comparable with previous research (Sinclair et al., 2004; Younes and Harp, 2007). The most tangible feeling for most participants' during this time was one of sadness and upset. This is also reflected in Younes and Harp, (2007) study. The following quotes from participants' clearly sum up the sense of loss and sadness:

"I remember been quite upset at that stage" (Jenny),

"I was really upset I would cry a lot" (Deirdre),

One participant spoke about the end of placement like a death in the family.

"There was a child called John. I can still remember his name and he was going back to his mother and I remember thinking to myself it's like dying, like I am never going to see that child again. It was an empty feeling, it was something that I never felt before and I felt it every time a child went". (Patrick).

However, while the majority of participants' reported feeling sorrow when a placement ended, one participant recalled feeling *"relief"* and *"was feeling delighted"* (Susan) when a foster child left. The participant experienced such feelings as that placement had been particularly difficult and it put a strain on all family members.

"I was relieved and delighted to be honest yeah, because with them two boys, they came from an absolutely nuts home and they were just crazy" (Susan).

This study also found that natural children would like to stay in contact with their foster siblings, however, they recognised that this is often not possible. They often thought about the foster child on a regular basis and wondered how they are getting on in life.

"I met a guy recently and he says he was adopted and I was kind of going what's your date of birth. Do you know what I mean? I wanted to know if that was one that we've had. You know? There is always that part of me that would have loved to know where they went and what happened to them and where they ended up. Yeah, I would be thinking of them at times" (Deirdre).

The author argues that Kubler-Ross (1973) five stage of grief and Bowlby's (1969) four stages of loss is applicable to placement ending. One stage which the author argues is particularly relevant is Bowlby (1969) searching and yearning stage. In this stage of grief, natural children yearn for the foster child.

For those participants' who appeared to have positively integrated the experience of loss, a period of rest between placements seems to have been an integral part in successfully completing this transition- a theory put forward by previous studies (Swan, 2002, Watson and Jones, 2002). The descriptive thread of this dialogue demonstrates how participants' used this time to remember and consolidate their own personal and family identities- a strategy similar to findings by Aldgate and Bradley (1999):

"Because we have a break between placements for six weeks it is nice to do things with my family that we could not do when we had the foster children" (Deirdre).

This period of rest may allow space for exploring and making sense of the placement ending and the feelings that accompanied this stage of the fostering process. However, one participant struggled with his feelings and did not avail of this opportunity. He described how he preferred to get another foster child as soon as possible. This participant chose to concentrate on the next person rather than process the residual feelings from the previous placement:

"It's a horrible feeling, but I prefer when a new foster child comes into the home as soon as possible because you have something new to put in its place" (Patrick).

This illustration could help demonstrate the manifestation of Pugh's (1996) hypothesised problems with attachment, loss and emotional harm, resulting from placement endings. Littleton et al (2007), in a meta-analysis of coping styles following psychological distress, found a consistent association between avoidance coping and distress. They found that while an avoidance strategy may reduce short-term distress, it may prove to be maladaptive should a person become reliant on it. Further, unresolved grief and perception of vulnerability to loss has been linked to increased psychopathology (Edmans and Marcellino-Boisvert, 2002). Similarly, the author argues that a possible hypothesis to explain why this participant disengaged from his feelings of grief is that he may not expect to feel grief after the loss of a foster child. What this participant may be experiencing is 'disenfranchised grief': the assumption that a natural child's- foster child's relationship is not strong enough to warrant grief upon its dissolution, or that, since the natual child knew that the relationship was temporary, placement endings should not elicit grief (Anderson et al, 1989, Doka, 1989, Doka, 1996).

4.3.2 Negative Behaviour

For all participants' in the study, a negative effect of having foster children in the home was the difficult behaviour they displayed. This is echoed in other research (Hojer, 2007, Watson and Jones, 2002, Thompson and McPhearson, 2011). Such behaviours include hitting, name calling, damaging possessions in the home. Patrick reported serious aggressive behaviour from his foster brother when he wasn't allowed to stay up past his bedtime:

"If he wasn't allowed stay up and watch television after twelve, he would walk over and kick the door and put his foot through it, and then that door had to be repaired" (Patrick).

However, while aggressive outbursts and negative behaviour is a negative effect on natural children, many of the participants' in the study showed a high level of understanding of such difficult behaviour. This is also reported in Hojer (2007) study. Susan comments:

"It was crazy at the beginning, it was tough and we did feel sorry for them [foster siblings] *knowing about the home they came from and we knew it was going to be tough"* (Susan)

The negative effect of the foster child's behaviour on other family members was another difficulty reported by participants'. This finding is comparable with research carried out by Reed (1994) and Hojer (2007) and suggests that the foster siblings behaviour and conduct can have wider implications for the whole family. Participants' spoke openly about the affects the foster child's behaviour was having on their relationships with other family members. Patrick comments:

"I could see the stress their behaviour had on our family, I was a lot older, you could see the effect it [foster siblings behaviour] *had on the marriage, the effect it has on other relationships between mother and brothers and sisters. My sister was scared of what would happen to her own children when they visited because of their behaviour"* (Patrick).

4.3.3 Different Rules

A consistent negative effect of living with foster siblings revealed in this study was different rules for foster siblings and natural children. The majority of participants' in this study reported that their parents were stricter with them than their foster siblings. Many of natural children felt that their foster siblings *"got away with a lot more than what we* [natural children] *got away with"* (Patrick). The following comments clearly demonstrate that foster children were treated in a less strict manner than natural children.

"Mam and dad would be a good deal less hard on them [foster siblings]*"* (Jenny).

"I wouldn't have gotten away with that. They could be little things. Thinking back now, I wouldn't have gotten away with a lot when I was younger that they get away with, that wouldn't have happened me"(Jenny).

Discrepancies in rules between natural children and foster children also became a significant theme in this research. This research finding is reflected in other studies (Thompson and McPherson, 2011, Hojer, 2007) which highlight differential treatment between foster children and natural children. Susan's quote demonstrates the discrepancies in discipline between natural children and foster children:

 "yeah there would be completely different rules. They [foster children] *would get away with so much murder and he* [foster child] *leaves food all over the place and he doesn't get given out to like. Like we would have been murdered when we were younger if we left like food anywhere, you weren't allowed eat anywhere but*

the kitchen but he'd [foster sibling] *be eating everywhere, and he would be leaving banana skins out in the couch and just stuff like that. Like he gets away with murder and it just drives me nuts"*(Susan).

This statement paints a picture of frustration and annoyance on natural children when they speak about their foster siblings having less stricter rules.

4.3. 4 Lack of Parental Time

Previous research (Ellis, 1972, Kaplan, 1988, Twigg, 1994, Sinclair, 2005, Hojer, 2007) highlights competition for parental attention as a significant challenge for natural children. However, in contrast to other research, in this research none of the participants' spoke about lack of parental time as a present challenge for them. The participants' positive outlook and the fact that they were over 18 years may have aided their integration of this potentially negative event.

"*Now because I am off in college it doesn't really matter now, because I come back from college at the weekends and we have our chats then*" (Susan).

However, participants' did cite competition for parental attention as a stressful experience when they were younger. Foster children absorbed a great deal of carers' attention, leaving little time for their own children. One participant comments:

"*I remember feeling jealous because she* [foster child] *was taking time and attention away from myself and my sister*" (Deirdre).

However, a recurring response from participants' and one that demonstrates great awareness and understanding from natural children was an acknowledgement that fostering is a demanding activity and they were aware of this. They knew that it was important for their parents to make their fostering assignment a success, and therefore they usually accepted to stand back and let the foster children be the first priority of their parents.

"*Like you are going to have cases that do need more time and the mother has to give them* [foster child] *more attention, sit down with them a lot, talk to them, and you just have to accept that*" (Ciaran).

This acknowledgement is supported by Wilkes (1974) study. Attachment theory may be relevant to analyse this finding. It highlights the importance of secure attachment relationships from which children can explore, develop and grow (Bowlby, 1969). In the participants' families, this attachment security was integral in enabling natural children to share parental attention with a stranger, the foster child. Secure attachment allows natural children the confidence to test and develop important coping strategies. These strategies enable the positive resolution of trauma and they facilitate future secure relationship patterns.

However, while most participants' did not feel that lack of parental time was a challenge for them at present, most spoke of familiar patterns of family activity being upset by the foster child as challenging. Trips away,

visiting other relatives, going on holidays- all these activities are altered by the presence of another child. Typical comments were:

"It [fostering] *curtailed us as a family because we could not take holidays and stuff like that"* (Jenny).

"When a foster child came, there was less time to go on bike rides, trips away or whatever" (Deirdre).

The findings of this study are in line with Wilkes (1974) qualitative study which found that having a foster child in the home curtailed family activities.

4.3.5 Contact with Natural Parents of Foster Siblings

Natural children gave evidence during the interviews that contact with natural parents of foster children affected them directly, through visits to the foster family's home and indirectly through the parents' actions towards their children.

Many of natural children worried about what their siblings were exposed to while they visited their parents.

"Access is not supervised properly; the father can say what he wants. I brought him [foster child] *to a soccer match and some of the things he would come out with are just like, things his father told him that he shouldn't have"*(Conor).

Natural children were also preoccupied about the ability of natural parents to keep their promises. There were frequent comments about natural parents disappointing foster children by not keeping promises of visits or other kind of agreements. Many respondents found it very difficult to see their foster siblings being let down by their own parents. For example Deirdre comments:

"Their mother [foster child's birth mother] *would ring her* [foster child] *and she would say, 'I'm coming up now, I'm coming up in the car now. I'll be up to you soon'. And every time the foster child would be bawling for one or two hours after"*.

At the more extreme end of the difficulties they face, natural children of foster carers' would have experienced violent verbal outbursts from foster children's natural parents. Some participants' in this research have witnessed their parents being verbally abused by their foster sibling's parents. They spoke about the lack of control when the natural family comes to visit:

"There would have been threats and stuff at times. One family they were quite violent and they were quite threatening and just kind of I suppose the fear that would bring in as a child, you can't control that, you really can't do much about that. I saw the upset it caused to my parents, it was upsetting seeing my mum get treated like that" (Deirdre).

These finding are comparable to research carried out by (Pugh, 1994, Younes and Harp, 2007, Hojer, 2007, Swan, 2002) who all report that the contact with natural parents of foster children affects the lives of natural children, directly through visits from the natural parent. Developmental psychology can usefully be

extrapolated to offer some understanding and explanation of this finding. By living with a foster child whose experiences of being parented are completely different, natural children were exposed to difficult life events and different upbringings. One possible understanding from developmental psychology that can be used to explain this finding is Martin (1993) hypothesis that the unique experiences of foster siblings may result in 'premature growing up'.

4.4 Theme 3: Powerless/ Exclusion

4.4.1The Process of Becoming a Child who Fosters

Some of natural children of foster carers' were too young to remember life before fostering, but those who were older when their family began fostering recalled having discussions with their family prior to becoming involved in fostering. The majority of natural children reported having a discussion with their parents about bringing foster children into the home. Mary comments:

"We had lots of discussions, yeah it was years of discussion".

This finding is comparable to (Spears and Cross, 2003 and Younes and Harp 2007) study which found that all famillies reported having a discussion about fostering prior to the arrival of foster children. It is evident from the narratives that their right to expression was exercised. This right is reflected in the Irish Constitution which guarantees every individual the right to freely express their opinions. For example, article 40.6.1 of the Constitution states the "State guarantees liberty for the exercise of the right of the citizens to express freely their opinions" (Oireachtas,1937). This right is also upheld in Article 11.1 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights which states "everyone has the right to freedom of expression" (Regan,2003). However, one participant in the study mentioned that she was excluded from any family discussion about becoming involved in fostering. It is evident from her narrative that this is something that she resented:

"I was annoyed. Mam just said we are going ahead fostering. I did resent that I wasn't even consulted. I would have liked a discussion even just to say this is what we are doing and so on, because there were huge changes" (Jenny).

However, Jenny mentioned that even if her family had a discussion prior to becoming involved in fostering, she feels she would be powerless. For example, Jenny states:

"They should have ran it buy me. Not that I was in a position to say no anyway. There wasn't anything they ran by me".

Jenny's narrative clearly captures a sense of powerless and exclusion from the initial stage of the fostering process as a result of a lack of discussion with her parents prior to fostering.

4.4.2 Powerless During the Assessment Stage

It became evident from reading the narratives of the participants' that the majority were excluded from the assessment stage. John mentions:

"A Fostering Social Worker came and they never spoke to me. Ya unless you ask them their opinions [natural child] *then you don't really know how they are feeling about becoming involved in fostering"*.

This finding is striking as *The Child Care Regulations Act 1995* and *The National Standards for Foster Carers* (2003) states either directly or indirectly that natural children should be involved in the assessment process. However, the majority of natural children interviewed in this study stated that they were not consulted by a Fostering Link Worker during this stage. This finding is comparable to Martin (1993:17) study which found that "there is rarely any systematic involvement of the whole family prior to becoming a fostering family".

However, while the majority of natural children of foster carers' reported being powerless and voiceless during the fostering stage, a minority mentioned that they were included in this stage and met with a social worker. Mary comments:

"I remember being asked by a social worker and we had meetings with them and stuff. We met with a social worker and stuff and we were interviewed and they were very lengthy".

It is clear that Mary had a consultation with a social worker during the assessment stage. However, while Mary had "lengthy meetings with a social worker", she felt the social worker geared the interview towards how suitable her mother was for fostering. Her feelings, opinions and views were excluded:

"It was all geared towards whether my mother was suitable [for fostering]. *You don't know based on one interview am I happy. It was all towards my mother, that's what I felt."*

4.4.3 Powerless During the Fostering Process

A similar finding emerged when natural children were asked whether they were consulted by a social worker during the foster placement. All children expressed feeling voiceless during reviews. They felt they were ignored from social workers during review meetings:

"They [social workers] *don't know. I know Rachel best because I am living with her and they don't take any attention to my concerns or opinions about living with her* (John)."

This finding is comparable to Ryan (2000) study which found that while many foster care departments review foster carers annually and elicit views of foster carers at regular child care reviews, rarely do natural children participate at these reviews, nor are their views sought.

From reading the transcripts of the interviews, it appeared that many natural children were largely ignored and undervalued from their involvement in the fostering family. Many participants' recognise that the social workers role is to promote the welfare of the child, however, many participants' feel they should also consult with natural children. John comments :

"Sometimes a social worker comes in and ignores natural children and everything is about the foster child and you are nothing in their system. All they care about is the child. I know that the foster child is their main priority but they should at least consult with the rest of the natural siblings. The most important thing is for the social worker to see how fostering is affecting the whole family" (John).

This quote is very interesting on a number of levels. The choice of words chosen by John to express his frustration of not being consulted by social workers' is striking. John spoke about "being nothing in their system," and social workers' only "care about the child" is very interesting because it clearly demonstrates his frustration and anger of being invisible in the social workers' eyes.

However, while natural children were not consulted by social workers, some participants' mentioned that they had a discussion with their parents prior to reviews. Their opinions were thus brought to the review meeting. Patrick comments:

"Yeah, I would talk to my mum before the review and I presume she would bring my concerns then to the review".

A very striking finding is from Susan. This participant was voiceless throughout the fostering process. However, she took it upon herself to meet with a social worker to express her concerns:

"I had to ask for the social worker to come into the house, I was not putting up with it [fostering] *any more. So the social worker came and he chatted with me. But I can honestly not remember any other person coming in chatting with me"*.

This finding is very striking because it clearly demonstrates the extraordinary lengths the natural child has to go to in order to be heard.

However, participants' showed understanding about their lack of involvement. Many recognised that social workers have a heavy case load. Participants' used this to explain why they may be invisible in the eyes of social workers'. Jenny comments:

"A lot of social workers have forty cases on their case load. They barely have time to pick up the phone and talk to the foster child yet alone talk to natural children. I agree with you that best practice states that you should take their views on board, but I do understand where they [social workers] *are coming from* (Jenny).

Jenny raises another interesting point when she discusses why social workers exclude the voice of natural children. Here Jenny speaks about the social worker being *"terrified"*, and having *"too many actors in the case"*.

"They [social workers] *are terrified of natural children saying I want them out of my house, and that's another problem for the social worker. That is the impression I get from social workers, they just don't want to know. They have too many actors as it is, they are sure as hell not going to go looking for more actors"* (Jenny).

It is interesting to mention that while Jenny and other participants' are aware that social workers' should met with natural children, they have learned to somewhat accept being excluded during the process because of their awareness of social workers' heavy case load and for fear of hearing something negative from natural children.

Theme 4: Support and Training for Natural Children

4.5.1 Support for Children who Foster.
This study revealed that many natural children felt it was primarily their parents' role to support their own children during the fostering process. Many felt the support they received from their parents' was adequate and enabled them to cope with any eventualities that arose throughout the fostering placement. Comments include:

> *"I think my parents' were really good people, they were really supportive"* (Patrick).
> *"My own parents' were a great support"* (Aisling).

Many of natural children were satisfied by the level of support they received from their parents' and felt there was *"no point meeting with social workers as they just don't have the time* (Jenny). Others were unsure *"what social workers could do?"* (Patrick). For example, Conor comments:

"You have your parents and if you want to get something off your chest, you say it to them. I don't know what a social worker would do that would make it any easier".

This finding is comparable to Ryan (2000) study which found that there was very little professional involvement with natural children. Reed (1999) study found that foster carers' children appeared unconcerned about whether or not they had contact from social workers' from the fostering department. However, a minority of natural children mentioned that there would be something to be gained from involving professionals from the social work department. They felt by meeting with a fostering social worker on a monthly basis would be a good source of support. Deirdre comments:

"just to have someone there you could have contact with. Like they [fostering social worker] *could bring you off for an ice-cream or somewhere for an hour. Like if you were saying why is this child* [foster child] *doing x, y, z or why are the natural parents saying this to my mum, you know at least there is support there from the fostering team of talking through with someone who knows* (Deirdre).

However, a striking finding is that all natural children highlighted the benefit of a support group for natural children. Many participants' mentioned that fostering can be an isolating experience and by meeting other natural children they can gain reassurance that they are not alone in the fostering process. Deirdre comments on the benefits of a group:

"You could meet other natural kids in a group and you could just kind of say how you are finding it. Even knowing that there are other people out there in the same situation as you and your not alone can be quite therapeutic in itself".

Natural children also spoke about meeting other natural children in a group can be beneficial because it can provide a safe outlet for venting frustrations. This finding is also comparable to Pugh (1994) study. For example Susan comments:

"Like I wouldn't say it to any social worker that the children [foster children] *are really pi**ing me off because then the social worker could say it to my mam and da. Sometimes you just want to vent, you don't necessarily want anything done about it. There were times I was up to my ears with the girls and there were behavioural problems and I just wanted to vent. I did not necessarily want the kids moved"* (Susan).

4.5.2 Lack of Training

A final theme that emerged was lack of training available to natural children. All natural children reported having no training since their families commenced fostering. The author is aware that The Irish Foster Care Association provides training for fostering families including natural children. These training courses include *New Beginnings* and *Foundations for Fostering*. However, despite such training being available for natural children, this study revealed that natural children were not made aware or were involved in this training. All natural children recognised that training could have helped them to better understand and cope with being part of a fostering family. For example Conor comments:

"It is better for the family as a whole to get the training that my mother got. If you have a child with behaviour problems it is hard to get natural children prepared for it. I don't need to know their past [foster child's]*, but it is relevant to get the training. I would have gladly have sat down and done the modules"* (Conor).

Many of the children felt that it would be beneficial to have training on topics such as boundaries, general information on what fostering is, the reasons why children come into foster care, challenges they may come up against such as disclosure of sexual abuse, dealing with challenging behaviours. For example, Jenny comments:

"I had no idea in terms of how foster children would be in terms of attachment or even inappropriate boundaries, like going around hugging everyone, or even dealing with challenging behaviours, like training would be good in that sense".

Therefore, it is clear from the above quotes that many natural children feel they would benefit from training prior to becoming part of a fostering family.

4.6 Limitations

In presenting the findings of this research, the author was very aware of the need to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants'. At times this proved to be challenging as often the researcher found that within verbatim transcripts which revealed interesting findings, it was easy to identify the individual involved. Therefore as suggested by Ritchie and Lewis (2003), it was necessary to alter the descriptions participants' gave or change insignificant points of detail in order to incorporate the findings of the study without compromising the anonymity of the participants'. In this way the researcher carefully chose the findings presented and delivered the confidentiality promised to participants'.

As this is a small scale study using qualitative research methods and approaches the researcher is aware that the findings may be only applicable to the small sample of participants' involved in the research. It is not necessarily representative of all natural children who foster. Further, all participants' in this research were members of families who fostered from a public organisation. The experiences of families fostering with private agencies may be somewhat different. A study employing a larger and more heterogeneous sample would be beneficial in obtaining a more representative picture and would aid the reliability and validity of the current findings.

Due to ethical considerations, natural children who took part in this study are over 18 years. The author feels that further research is required that would include the views of natural children who are over eighteen years old. This would give the study increased depth and increase the validity of findings.

Finally, two of the eight participants' were over eighteen years when their family commenced fostering and they reported to the researcher that they lived away from home and would have periodic contact with their foster siblings. Therefore, because of the limited contact this imposes a limitation on the findings.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the main themes that arose for the researcher after conducting semi structured interviews. In doing so, both the positive and negative effects of fostering on natural children were discussed. It also discussed how involved natural children are during the fostering process. The researcher then

analysed these themes in relation to literature and previous research on the topic. Finally, the chapter considered the limitations of the study.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications for Future Social Work Practice

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the core research questions of this study. It will then propose recommendations for social work practice.

5.2 Part One: Discussion of the Research Questions

5.2.1 What are the Positive and Negative Effects of Fostering on Natural Children?

This study revealed that fostering has both positive and negative effects on natural children. Most of natural children gave an altruistic response when discussing the positive effects. This includes helping the foster child, appreciating your own circumstances and giving the foster child stability in their lives. Natural children also mentioned fun and having a companion as a positive effect of fostering. However, this study also revealed that there are negative effects associated with fostering on natural children. The main negative effects this study found was placement endings, less parental time, witnessing the foster child's negative behaviour, witnessing aggressive behaviour from natural children's birth family, and different rules for the foster child and natural child.

5.2.2 How involved are Natural Children throughout the Fostering Process? Are they Part of the Initial Assessments through to Reviews?

In terms of the fostering process, it is evident from this study that there was generally a degree of consultation and discussion within the family before the decision to foster was made. Most participants' had a family discussion. However, the majority of natural children were not included in the family fostering assessment carried out by fostering social workers. Many of the participants' expressed hurt and upset at the lack of consultation from social workers at this time. However, a minority of natural children were involved in this stage. They felt that the assessment was geared towards their parents' suitability for fostering instead of how they felt about the decision. A similar finding emerged when natural children spoke about reviews. This study revealed that many natural children were excluded from review meetings. Many natural children resented this, however, some mentioned that they had a discussion with their family prior to reviews and their opinions where thus taken to the review meeting. Most natural children expressed a desire to meet with a social worker during the placement to discuss any concerns they have and to express their opinions on how the placement is impacting on them.

5.2.3 What Supports (both formal and informal) do Natural Children feel would be Beneficial During the Fostering Experience?

This study found that the majority of natural children felt that they were adequately supported by their parents throughout the fostering process and generally did not feel a need for social work and other professional support such as psychology services. However, in comparison a minority felt that it would be

beneficial to have support from a social worker. They felt it would be beneficial to have someone to answer their questions and be of support to them.

It was agreed unanimously in this study that natural children would gain mutual support from meeting other children who foster in a group setting. There appears to be a consensus about their potential benefits to natural children who at times feel isolated and need reassurance. Finally, all natural children reported having no training since their families commenced fostering. The author is aware that the Irish Foster Care Association provides training for fostering families which includes natural children. However, despite training being available for natural children, this study found that natural children were not involved in training. All natural children recognised that training would have been beneficial to them before and during the fostering journey.

5.3 Recommendations

The findings of this study both from the literature and qualitative research highlights that natural children are making important contributions to the foster placement. Fostering uses the home and the family as a way of helping the foster child. However, the inherent intimacy of family life may cause difficulties for all involved in the foster home. This study highlights the need for foster care practice to reflect that fostering is a family activity. It is not only foster parents that foster, natural children are also involved. However, the author agrees that they are often the 'foot soldiers of the foster care system' (Cregan and Kennedy, 1999 as cited in Kennedy, 2002).The author argues that in order to support natural children during the fostering process age appropriate information about different topics should be given to natural children to help improve natural children's understanding and knowledge about fostering. This could be available in the form of DVD's or information packs. These mechanisms have been established in the UK and have proved to be very useful and effective for natural children (Fostering Network, 2011).

The findings of this research suggest that there is a need for on-going support for all foster families particularly when a foster child leaves. The majority of natural children in this study experienced a sense of loss when their foster sibling left. Natural children need to be supported and helped to understand and work through the impact that placement endings can have on them, rather than expect them to accept the loss. The researcher argues that fostering social workers' and psychologists' should provide this support. Supporting them during placement ending is likely to lead to more positive outcomes for all concerned.

It is in my view that support groups for natural children need to be considered by fostering agencies. There appears to be a consensus about their potential benefits to natural children who at times feel isolated and need reassurance. Groups can provide a safe environment to vent frustrations about the negative effects of fostering. Such groups can combine functions of mutual support with educational and social activities. Fostering agencies need to have a great knowledge and understanding of the experiences of natural children so as to develop more adequate and appropriate support for natural children.

The Irish Foster Care Association provides training programmes for fostering families. This training includes *New Beginnings* and *Foundations for Fostering*. However, from this study it is evident that none of the natural children participated in this training. The author believes that providing training opportunities for natural children would prepare them to take on the challenges that will come their way.

Finally, foster care professionals need to identify ways of showing recognition and appreciation of what Kennedy (2002:104) refers to as the "unsung heroes in the fostering partnership". Natural children need to be empowered through representation of their interests and needs in foster care policy and practice at all levels. At present, best practice suggests that natural children of foster carers' should be intrinsically involved in the whole process of fostering from initial assessments through to reviews. However, in practice, as can be seen from this research, such involvement is largely tokenistic and not valued by foster agencies. Routine, meaningful inclusion of natural children from the first point in assessment of a potential foster family through to involving them in reviews could directly benefit natural children, as well as help to raise general awareness about their role. Most of natural children in this study were not consulted by social workers during the fostering process. The author argues that to ensure best practice fostering link workers should meet with natural children regularly and include them throughout the fostering placement. The findings of the study revealed that there are negative effects of fostering on natural children. It is in the author's view that social workers' should meet with natural children on a regular basis to offer support to them, particularly in relation to the negative effects of fostering. This would provide natural children with the opportunity to express their feelings and would enable them to be heard by agencies.

The researcher also argues that natural children need to be more visible in policy and guidelines. This is something that requires consideration by agencies so that their contribution to fostering is acknowledged and actively reviewed. It is in the researcher's view that guidelines and legislation needs to make reference to natural children in more of a direct way to ensure that they are fully included in the fostering process.

5.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has fulfilled its aims and objectives and answered its core research questions. This study employed an interpretive and qualitative research approach. This approach enabled the researcher to clearly interpret the participants' experiences of being part of a fostering family. It also enabled the researcher to answer the research questions and at the same time represent the voice of participants' in the study.

The literature review conducted for this study gave the researcher an overall view of fostering in Ireland. The findings of the literature review informed the researcher of some of the positive and negative effects fostering has on natural children. It also enabled the researcher to establish how involved natural children are throughout the fostering process. The literature review contributed to the formulation of research questions and interview questions. The analysis of interview transcripts allowed the researcher to identify dominant themes that arose across all interviews and construct findings. The main findings of this study related to the positive and negative effects of fostering on natural children. This study also found that many natural

children are excluded throughout the fostering process. However, to ensure best practice they need to be included during all stages of the fostering process.

The quote "it's not just parents who foster, it's the whole family"(Martin, 1993:17) sums up the researcher's learning from this research and represents for the researcher that as social workers we must recognise that fostering involves the whole family- including natural children. The researcher also learned that fostering impacts either positively or negatively on the 'whole family not just on foster parents'. Therefore, at the end of this research journey, the author recognises the importance of including natural children in all aspects of the fostering journey and recognises the importance of acknowledging and honouring the important contributions they make to the fostering process, as fostering impacts on all family members including natural children.

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Appendix A

Literature Review

The researcher carried out a comprehensive literature review on the chosen topic area. This enabled the researcher to analyse existing research on the topic and also allowed her to identify gaps in the literature. This assisted in the formulation of research questions where the data could be tested and was then reformulated in the analysis to compare with the findings from the interviews. In order to ensure the document analysis undertaken was credible the researcher was mindful that documents accessed were from authentic and credible sources (Flick, 2006). The researcher used online and hardcopy literature search protocols to design a research strategy. The main literature identified were academic publications, government reports, official publications, legislation. The researcher also availed of the UCC library catalogue for access to books, electronic journals and databases. The main databases used in this research were EBSCO, SAGE,J-STOR using key words that are relevant to the research topic such as "fostering", "impact", "biological child", "birth child", "foster carers children", "natural child", "children who foster" "support", "involvement", "process". The author also used Google Scholar which is a free database. This provides a way to broadly search for literature across many disciplines and sources (Creswell,2009).

Finally, the researcher completed a module on Fostering and Adoption in February 2012 and the bibliography from this module was used to offer a broad perspective and understanding on the area of fostering.

Appendix B

Introduction

Go through the consent form with participants' and explain the process eg: the recording of the interview, confidentiality and what will happen with the transcripts. Time will also be allocated for concerns/questions to be answered.

Introduction questions

- Tell me about your family's fostering history
- What type of fostering is your family involved in? –
  - -short term? Long term?

Questions

- Can you tell me about the good things about having a foster child in the home?
  Prompts: What do you like about living with foster siblings?
- Can you tell me about the negative aspects of having a foster child in your home?
  Prompts: What do you not like about living with foster siblings?
- Can you tell me about the assessment process
  Prompts: Can you tell me about the assessment process before your family was accepted as a fostering family? Meetings? Social workers? Interviews?
- How involved were you in the decision making process
- Who made the decision in your family?
- Did anyone consult you? If so who?
- Were your decisions taken on board?
- What information and preparation did you receive?
  Prompts: Did you attend information evenings? Did a social worker give you information?
- How did your family prepare you for the challenges of fostering?
  Prompts: Did you have family discussions?
- What professionals such as social workers, support workers, link workers etc helped you prepare for the challenges of fostering?
- How did they prepare you?
- How beneficial was their preparation?
- How do you feel the preparation stage could be improved?
- Overall, how prepared did you feel you were for fostering?
- Can you tell me about the foster placement reviews?
  Prompts: what is your understanding of placement reviews?
- How involved were you in reviews?

- During the course of the placement, what support did you receive from professionals?

- How was this of benefit to you?

- Do you feel this was adequate?

- How do you deal with endings?

  - What support did you receive during the course of course of the placement

    - Before, during and after

  - How was this of benefit to do?

  - Do you feel it was adequate?

  - Did you have a link worker? How often did you meet with one? Benefits

  - Were you involved in any support groups specifically for foster carers' children? In what ways were these groups beneficial?

  - What emotional support did you receive when the placement ended?

  - How beneficial was this?

  - How could this be improved?

Is there anything else you want to say that I missed?

Appendix C

17 Sheares Gate,
Glasheen Road,
Cork
16/02/2012

To Whom it may concern,

My name is Claire Duffy and I am a student at University College Cork were I am in my final year of my Masters in Social Work. The Irish Foster Care Association (Waterford Branch) and social workers from the fostering team in Waterford approached University College Cork to carry out research on the effects of fostering on natural children. I have been assigned to carry this out. You have been identified as a potential participant for this research and I hope that you will take part in the research I will carry out. The aim of the research is to focus on the positive and negative effects of fostering on natural children. This research will be used for Irish Foster Care Association (Waterford Branch) to support other foster carers' children. I will also be basing my final year dissertation on it.

I would like to gain an insight into your experience by having an interview with you and 7 other participants'. This study will involve an hour maximum of your time. The interviews will take place in early March.

Your responses and any information discussed will be kept completely confidential. I will use the comments given in the semi-structured interviews to write my dissertation, however, omitting any identifying information. Please be assured that your replies will be made anonymous. Based on the response I receive from this letter, I will randomly select eight participants'.

You are under no obligation to partake in this research and should you decide that you do not wish to proceed with the research at any stage, you can opt out without any sanctions. However this research would be of benefit to other natural children living with foster siblings and it gives you the opportunity to express your views and opinions on your experiences.

My only connection with IFCA is to carry out the research. I have no past involvement and will have no future involvement with them. I have enclosed an information sheet that I would like you to read prior to giving consent to be part of this research. If you are willing to participate in this research, the attached consent form is required to be signed prior to me beginning my study. **I would be grateful if you could you please post the consent form (attached) by next Wednesday 22nd February 2012 using the self-addressed envelope provided.** I will be in contact with you once I receive your letter.

Thank you for your time and please contact me should you wish to discuss any detail of the project or consent form. My contact details are at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely,

_____

Claire Duffy

Telephone: 087-4119545

Email: 110221143@umail.ucc.ie

Appendix D

Information Sheet

Purpose of the study

As part of the requirements for the Masters in Social Work degree at University College Cork (UCC), I have to carry out a research study. As part of this research, students have the opportunity to carry out research for an organisation. The Irish Foster Care Association, Waterford Branch and social workers from the Waterford Fostering Department approached UCC to carry out research on the effects of fostering on natural children. I have been assigned to carry out this research. The study is concerned with the positive and negative effects of fostering on natural children. It will also aim to establish how involved and supported natural children are throughout the fostering process.

What will the study involve?

The study will involve a semi structured interview. It will involve me interviewing you and other natural children who have experience of living with foster siblings. This study will involve me interviewing you for approximately thirty minutes to an hour maximum, asking you a number of questions about your experiences of living with foster siblings.

Why have you been asked to asked to take part?

You have been asked because you are suitable to provide data for my study. You meet my research criteria in that you are a natural son/daughter of a foster carer. You are over 18 years and you have experience of living at home with foster siblings.

Do you have to take part?

No participation is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to partake in this research and should you decide that you do not wish to proceed with the research whether before it starts or while you are participating you can opt out. Participants' can also withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

Will your participation in this study be kept confidential?

Yes! I will ensure that no clues to your identity appear in the thesis. Your identity will not be revealed to the organisation and all of the research will be anonymised to ensure this. Once your responses are transcribed your name will be replaced with pseudonyms and I will ensure that any identifying information such as your name, age, address etc will be omitted from the final report presented to the organisation. The organisation/my college tutor will be prevented from seeing my research until the names are replaced with pseudonyms and the identifying information is excluded.

What will happen to the information in which you give?

The data will be kept confidential for the duration of my study. I will save the transcripts of the interviews in Google Docs within umail.ucc.ie, making sure that the sharing function is turned off. The dictaphone will be stored in a locked cabinet in my house. The key to the cabinet will be stored in a safe place and I will only know the location of the key. I will have access to the audiotapes and transcripts for 5 months (February-June 2012). The decision to set such a time table was taken in the undesirable circumstances that the researcher may have to resubmit the piece of work. In the beginning of June, the data on the dictaphone will be deleted appropriately which will make it inaccessible to any individual. The transcripts will be shredded appropriately within this timeframe.

What will happen to the results?

The results will be presented in the thesis. They will be seen by my supervisor, a second marker and the external examiner. The Irish Foster Care Association (Waterford Branch) and research participants' will have a copy of the results. The thesis may be read by future students on the course and it may be used in future presentations and publications. The results will also be presented at a research conference in April 2012.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

I don't envisage any negative consequences for you taking part. It is possible that talking about your experience in this way may cause some distress.

What if there is a problem?

At the end of the interview, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. A designated contact person has been allocated. Participants' are encouraged to contact this person if they are feeling upset after the study. Her details are as follows:

Yvonne Power,

Social Work Team Leader,

Waterford Fostering Department

087-62797125

Subsequently if participants' feel distressed outside of office hours, the following 24 hour helplines are available:

- Samaritans 1850 60 9 0 90
- HSE Counselling Service 1800 235 234
- 1 Life 1800 247 100
- Aware 1890 303 302

- Out of hours doctor if the participant isn't registered with one 1850 334 999

Who has reviewed this study?

Approval must be given by the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee before studies like this can take place.

Any further questions?

If you need any further information you can contact me on: Telephone: 087-4119545 Email: 110221143@umail.ucc.ie

Appendix E

Participant's Consent Agreement

1. I am aware that my participation in this interview is completely voluntary

2. I understand the intent and purpose of this research

3. If, for any reason, for any time, I wish to stop the interview, I may do so without having to give an explanation.

4. I am aware that the interview will be recorded using a dictaphone and understand that this recording will be destroyed within a safe time frame of the project completion date.

5. Therefore, I am willing to allow the interview to be recorded.

6. I am aware that this recording will be transcribed after the interview and that this transcript will also be accordingly destroyed within a safe time frame of the project's completion.

7. I am aware that the project, and therefore the data produced, may become available in the School Off-Print Library and/or Boole Library on University College Cork Campus.

8. The data gathered in this study is confidential with respect to my personal identity and group identity, unless I specify otherwise.

9. If I have any questions about this study, I am free to contact the student researcher.

10. I am aware that I may at any time withdraw all data collected from the interview prior to the submission of the project.

11. I understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form that I may keep for my own reference.

12. I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in any subsequent publications if I give permission below.

I have read the above from and, with the understanding that I can withdraw at any time without having to express a reason. I consent to participate in the interview (UCC, 2012).

Participant's signature:

Researcher's signature:

Date:

Claire Duffy,
School of Applied Social Studies,
UCC

24th January 2012

Dear Claire,

Thank you for submitting your revised research (project entitled *The impact of Fostering on the Foster Carers Biological Children #102*) to SREC for ethical perusal. I am pleased to say that the amended proposal is acceptable and we are happy to grant approval

We wish you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

S Hammond

Sean Hammond
Chair of Social Research Ethics Committee

http://carl.ucc.ie

Appendix G

Statistics

Based on statistics for December 2011, there were a total of 6,160 children in the care of the HSE This can be divided into 443 (7.2%) children in residential care, 3776 (61.3%) children in foster care, 153 (2.5%) children in other care placements (this includes separated children seeking asylum), 1788 (29%) children living in foster care with relatives (HSE, 2012) (see Figure 1). In December 2011 of the 6,160 children in care of the HSE, 1971 (32%) live in foster care with relatives and 4189 (68 %) live with foster carers' (see figure 2). Figure 3 shows that over half (54.20%) of children are admitted to care because of family problems (HSE, 2012). The main family problems include substance misuse, followed by the parent not able to cope, family difficulties and re-housing. 38.50% of children are admitted to care as a result of abuse. The most prevalent form of abuse being neglect, followed by physical abuse, sexual abuse and finally emotional abuse. Finally 7.3% of children are admitted to care as a result of child problems. This includes children with emotional/behavioural problems, mental health problems, physical illness, child pregnancy (see figure 4) (HSE, 2012).

**Figure 1: Total Number of Children Living Away from Home, in the Care of the HSE, Living in Foster Care with Relatives.**

- Residential Care
- Children in Foster Care
- Children in Other Care Placements
- Children in Foster Care with Relatives

7.2%
29%
61.3%
2.5%
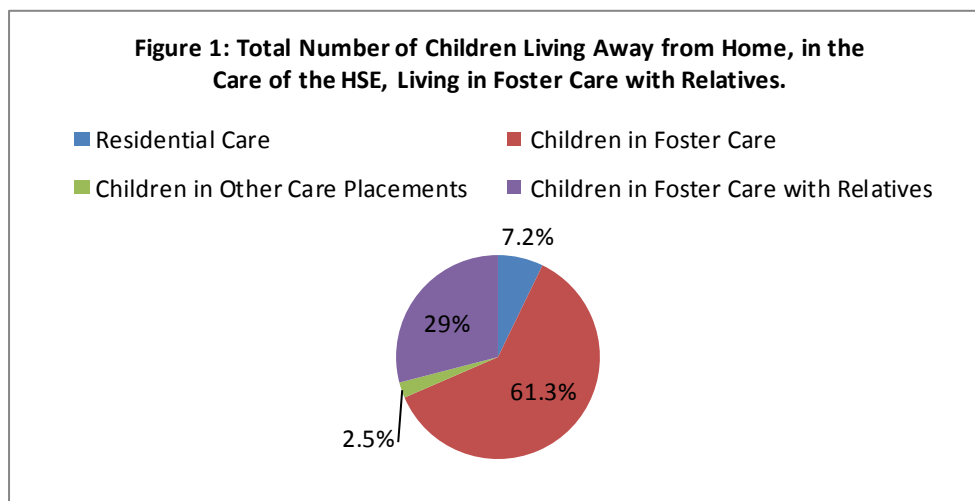
(HSE,2012)

Figure 2: Percentage of Children Living with Foster Carers/ Foster Relatives

■ Foster Placement with Relatives ■ Foster Carer ■

0% 0%

32%

68%
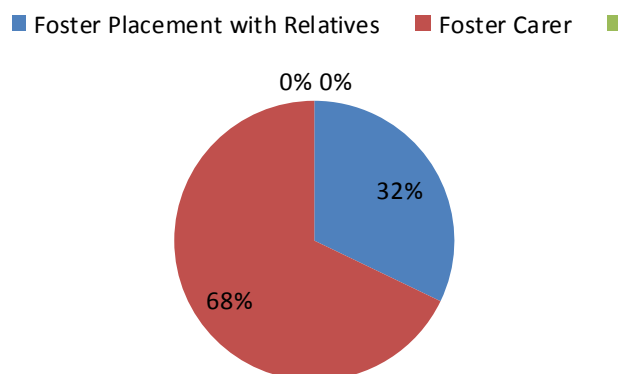
(HSE, 2012)

Figure 3 :Number of Children in Care at 31 December 2011, by Principal Reason for Admission to Care

7.30% 0

38.50% 54.20%

■ Family Problems

■ Abuse

■ Child Problems

■

(HSE,2012)

Appendix H
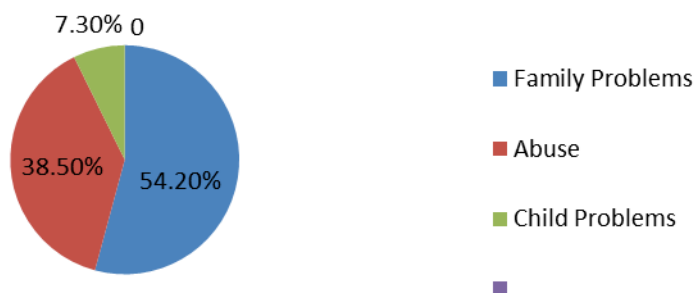
What is Foster Care?

According to HSE (2008:1) "fostering is caring for and sharing your home and family life with children who, for various reasons, are unable to live with their own families, for a short or long period of time. By becoming a foster carer you provide a stable, secure and loving environment for children in a time of need (HSE, 2008).

Who Needs Foster Care?

All parents set out with the best intentions to care for their children. However, the tasks of parenting are sometimes too much and some parents are unable to manage for a variety of reasons-physical or mental health problems, alcohol/substance abuse or learning disabilities. These difficulties are often added to by other stresses in life such as unemployment, poor housing, lack of support or separation from their country of origin (Gilligan, 1990, Horgan, 2002). When it is no longer possible for children to remain at home with their parents, they may come into care of the HSE, either with the agreement of their parents or through the intervention of the Courts.

There are different types of foster care to met the different needs of children. The types of foster care placements include:

Relative Foster Care

According to the HSE (2008:5) "relative foster care is when another family member for example grandparent, aunt/uncle or family friend becomes the foster parent of the child". In this situation, the relative carers' will be assessed by the HSE to establish their capacity to meet the needs of that particular child or children (Aldgate et al, 1997).

Day Foster Care

Day foster care is an alternative form of care, which provides a support system in the community. The child is spared the upset of separation from their family, can go home each evening, yet benefit from the additional care offered in the foster home. There is minimal disruption to family life, while the parents can obtain practical help, advice and support from the foster parents (HSE,2008).

Short Term Foster Care

Short term foster care provides temporary care for a child separated from their birth family. Being short term the child will, after a period, move back to their family or move on to a long term family or an adoptive family (HSE,2008).

Long Term Foster Care

Long term foster care is needed for children who are unlikely to be able to live with their birth family, and who, for a variety of reasons cannot be adopted. Many children in long term care become so much part of

their foster family that they continue to live with them until their independence, just as the natural children of the foster family do (HSE,2008).

Respite Care

Respite care is provided by some foster carers to provide a break for a child's family or foster carers.' Here a child's family is under stress and the child may be displaying very difficult behaviour. Respite care gives breathing space to all concerned. Where a child is in foster care and the placement is at risk of breaking down, a respite family is identified and it enables both families to work together in the child's best interest (Aldgate et al,1997).

Emergency Care

Emergency foster care is provided for children who need care in a crisis situation with no advance notice. The children may come into care from their own home or from another placement (HSE, 2008).

Payment

Foster carers in Ireland receive 312 euro per week for children under 12 years and 339 euro per week for children over 12 years. After 6 months they are eligible for child benefit (Citizens Information, 2011). It can be said that the level of payment is low. Furthermore, there is a concern from some quarters about the implications of moving from fostering as a voluntary undertaking to a paid occupation. There are those who question the motives of foster carers who are paid and say that it is not right that a foster carer should be paid as they foster out of their commitment to children's lives (Oldfield, 2007). The availability of payment is often the determining factor of whether a foster carer can afford to foster, while many others endure financial hardship in order to look after children in need. No other profession that works with children is expected to do so altruistically and no other profession has the responsibility to look after a child who is not their own for 24 hours, 7 days a week, 52 weeks of the year. Foster carers' are being given increased responsibility and are asked to perform more tasks on behalf of the child. Yet in many cases fostering is not seen as a job of work (Fostering Network, 2007a). Foster carers' are not properly recognised for the role they play in looking after the child, nor accurately perceived as performing a professional role with a right to professional levels of remuneration.

A fee payment system that equates with comparable employment in the children workforce would aid the recruitment and retention of foster carers as would a framework that ensures payment of 52 weeks of the year. If we expect foster carers' to continue to provide homes and support to children in care, we need to ensure their skills, commitment, abilities and experience are appreciated, re-compensated and rewarded (Fostering Network, 2007b).

Appendix I

Policy/Legislation Review in Ireland

The main polices that serve to protect fostered children are as follows:

The Child Care Act 1991

The purpose of the Child Care Act 1991 is to update the law in relation to the care of children, particularly children who have been assaulted, ill-treated, neglected or sexually abused or who are at risk. Section 3 sets out the fundamental principles of the Act. It places a statutory duty on health boards to promote the welfare of children who are not receiving adequate care and protection. In carrying out their functions the boards are obliged, having regard to the rights and duties of parents under the Constitution, to regard the welfare of the child as the first and paramount consideration and in so far as practicable to give due consideration to the wishes of the child, taking into account his or her age and understanding (Department of Health and Children,1991).

The Act also obliges the boards to have regard to the principle that it is generally in the best interests of a child to be brought up in his or her own family. The focus of the services is therefore on maintaining children within their own families. However, there will always be exceptional circumstances in which children will have to be placed in alternative care arrangements. The Act provides the legal framework for the provision of these services, including foster care. It is in this context that policies in relation to foster care and other alternative care arrangements have been developed (Department of Health and Children, 1991).

The Child Care Regulations, 1995

Under sections 39 and 41 respectively of the Act, *The Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations and The Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations* were brought into operation in 1995. The Regulations provide for:

- Promotion of welfare of the child

- Pre-placement Procedures

- Monitoring of Placements

- Removal of Children from Placements (Department of Health and Children,1995)

Under *The Child Care Regulations 1995* a Fostering Link Worker is to carry out an assessment of a foster carers suitability for fostering. This involves an in-depth and structured assessment for potential foster families. In making the assessments, the applicants household as a whole should be examined and where there are other children in the household they should be involved as appropriate having regard to their age and reason (Ireland,1995).

UN Convention of the Rights of the Child

Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992. The underlying principles of the Convention may be summarised as follows:

- Non-discrimination (Article 2): All rights apply to all children without exception. The State is obliged to protect children from any form of discrimination and to take positive action to promote their rights.

- Best Interests of the Child (Article 3): All actions concerning the child shall take into account of his or her best interests. The State shall provide the child with adequate care when parents or others charged with that responsibility fail to do so.

- Survival and Development (Article 6): Every child has the inherent right to life, and the State has an obligation to ensure the child's survival and development.

- The Child's Opinion (Article 12): the child has the right to express his or her opinions freely and to have that opinion taken into account in any matter of procedure affecting the child (United Nation,1989).

Protection for Persons Reporting Child Abuse Act, 1998

The purpose of the Act is to provide protection from civil liability to persons who report child abuse "reasonably and in good faith" to a designated officer of a health board or to any member of the Garda Síochána. The other main provisions of the Act provide protection to persons reporting child abuse from being penalised by their employers and also creates a new offence of the false reporting of child abuse (Department of Health,1998).

The Children Bill, 1999

This Bill places additional responsibly on health boards in relation to children whose behaviour is such that it poses a real and substantial risk to their health, safety, development or welfare and who are in need of special care and protection. The Bill contains new legal provisions under which children can be taken into care, and if necessary detained in special care units. The boards will also be empowered to provide accommodation other than special care units in respect of children for whom special care orders are made. One of the alternative forms of care that may be provided is foster care (Oireachtas,1999).

Child Care (Amendment) Act 2007

The final piece of primary legislation relevant to foster care is the Child Care (amendment Act 2007).Under Section 4 of the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2004, the foster parents or relatives who have been caring for a child for a continuous period, or at least five years, may apply to the Court for an order to grant them broadly the same rights as parents have to make decisions about their children. The consent of the HSE and

the child's parents or guardians is required before such an order can be made. Under such an order, the foster parent, can for example, give consent for medical and psychiatric examinations, treatment and assessments and sign forms for the issuing of a passport (Oireachtas,2007).