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

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### **Abstract**

Fostering is an activity that involves the whole family and has an impact on all family members. While research has been carried out on foster care, most of the research concentrates on foster carers and foster children (Sinclair et al, 2004, Bollard 2009, Cleaver, 2000). There is little research that focuses on the impact of fostering on birth children in a fostering family<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, this research aims to fill a gap in the literature as it explores the impact of fostering from the birth child's perspective. It also investigates how involved birth children are throughout the fostering journey. This article presents the findings of a qualitative study that was carried out using semi-structured interviews with eight birth children in a fostering family. The results of this study reveal that fostering has both a positive and negative impact on birth children. It also found that birth children are relatively voiceless and powerless throughout the fostering process. The findings of this small scale study have implications for social work practice. The author argues the importance of acknowledging the contribution birth children make during the fostering journey and the importance of their involvement throughout all aspects of the fostering process. It is in the author's view that training and support groups need to be established to support birth children

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<sup>26</sup> In this research birth child/children are those children who are born into families whose parents are foster carers.

in their role in a fostering family. Finally, the researcher argues that birth children need to be more visible in policies and legislation.

**Keywords:** fostering, birth children, positive and negative impacts, involvement in the fostering process.

## **Introduction**

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). The relationship between foster children and birth children in a fostering family has been investigated in many studies within foster care. For example, literature suggests that birth children may have an impact on placement outcomes and that one contributing factor to a placement breakdown is the presence of foster carers' birth children (Bebbington and Miles, 1990). This suggests that birth children in a fostering family have a major influence in the success or failure of a foster placement.

However, limited research has been published on the experiences of birth children in a fostering family. Lemieux (1994:13) study reports a link 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 birth children as well. Berrick et al (2000:157) emphasise the importance of taking the birth child's opinion into account, they assert, 'children are the primary child welfare system, yet their voices are muffled by an array of difficult impediments'. Therefore, this research aims to give birth children who are often the 'unsung heroes in the fostering partnership' an opportunity to speak about their experiences living with foster siblings (Kennedy, 2002:102).

## **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).

This research is part of this initiative on behalf of the Civil Society Organisation (CSO), a fostering support group<sup>27</sup>. The fostering support group 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 birth children. As discussed, birth 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 birth children's lives permanently, so it is only fair to consider their views.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions played a vital role in this research as they ensured a focus at all times, they also guided the researcher throughout the research process. In order to design relevant research questions, the researcher examined the synopsis of the fostering support group, and spoke with both the CSO workers and her college tutor so as to ensure the research questions would be relevant to the organisation. This part of the research process enabled the researcher to come to a conclusion that appeared achievable and justified.

The research questions are:

- What are the positive impacts of fostering on birth children?
- What are the negative impacts of fostering on birth children?
- How involved are birth children throughout the fostering process? Are they included in all aspects of the fostering process from initial assessments through to reviews?

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<sup>27</sup> The name of the fostering support group has been changed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

### **Methods and Methodology**

The methodology adopted in this research is based upon qualitative research. Ritchie and Lewis (2003:236) 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’. The aim of this study is to investigate from birth children the impact fostering has on them. Therefore, a qualitative research design was proposed as appropriate as its methods focus on the views of people involved in the research and their perceptions and meanings of that experience (Burns and Grove, 1993).

Interpretivism was chosen as the research paradigm for this study. 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’ (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003:54). This research paradigm enabled the researcher to gain an insight into participants’ experiences. This approach also argues that ‘events and experiences may have different meanings for different people’ (D’Cruz and Jones, 2004:87). Therefore, this study acknowledges that everyone’s experience of living with foster siblings is different.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study. The researcher chose this method because it enabled the researcher to be flexible in her approach throughout the interview as it gave her the opportunity to formulate questions and determine the order of questions (Sarantakos, 1994, Krueger and Casey, 2009, Wellington and Szczerbinski, 2007). This ensured all the relevant information would be gathered. Semi structured interviews also 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 actors (Pole and Lampard, 2002) though as Mason (1996) argues not at first hand but their personal recollections. This reflects the interpretivist position of the study.

### **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 would be in contact with them. A database was provided from the CSO to the researcher containing contact details of all birth 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. An information sheet was also sent to all participants'. Those willing to participate in the research were asked to complete the consent form and return it to the researcher using the stamped addressed envelope. A sample for the research was picked from the first eight replies. A small sample was chosen because 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).

### **Data Analysis**

The taped interviews were analysed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. According to Smith and Osborn (2003:46) 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis aims to explore how participants' make sense and understand their personal and social world, in particular, the meaning they attribute to experiences, events and states of mind'.

### **Ethical Considerations**

According to O'Leary (2010:153) 'ethics tend to be based on moral obligations but put a professional spin on what is right, wrong, fair or just'. In order to ensure the researcher protected the interests of participants, an information sheet and letter was sent to all potential participants 'explaining 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) as well as informing participants' that they are under no obligation to continue involvement and they can drop out from the research at any stage (O'Leary, 2010:87). Those interested in taking part in the research were asked to complete a participatory consent form. 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

audiotaped. Interviews were not conducted until such time as full permission had been granted to each participant.

As this research is sensitive in nature and may potentially cause psychological harm to participants, the researcher applied to the UCC Research Ethics Board prior to commencing the research for ethical approval to ensure appropriate research methods were being used. Additionally, the researcher was mindful that this research had the potential to cause emotional distress to participants. If a participant became distressed during the interview, the researcher allowed the participant to terminate the interview. Social workers were organised to be available to spend time with participants' if they became upset. At the end of the interview, the researcher checked in with all participants' and gave them a list of 24 hour help lines and contact details of a designated person that they could contact if necessary.

Finally, all aspects of confidentiality were outlined to research participants' in both the initial letter, the consent form and at the beginning of the interview. Confidentiality and anonymity was preserved by guaranteeing all participants' that their identity would not be revealed to the organisation and that 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](mailto:umail.ucc.ie), making sure that the sharing function was 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. Participants were informed that the transcripts and audiotapes would be destroyed in June 2012.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Impact of Fostering on Birth Children in a Fostering Family***

This research will now review literature on the positive and negative impacts of fostering on birth children in a fostering a family. Initially, the focus will be on the positive impacts of fostering. The personal development of birth children is one of the main positive impacts highlighted in the literature. Many studies reported that fostering impacts positively on birth children's communication and social skills (Spears and Cross, 2003, Triseliotis et al, 2000, Watson and Jones, 2002). Similarly, there is evidence from Watson and Jones (2002) study that children who foster had increased self-confidence and displayed more empathy.

Altruism was also a prominent positive theme in the literature. Many studies revealed that birth children all gave an altruistic answer when talking about the positive impacts of fostering. Some altruistic responses include meeting new people, helping their foster sibling, being more appreciative of what they have in life (Pugh, 1994, Spears and Cross, 2003, Hojer, 2007, Hojer, 2004, Watson and Jones, 2002).

In contrast, one of the main negative impacts of fostering on birth children is loss. Both Poland and Groze (1993) and Twig (1994) found that loss of parental time impacted negatively on birth children. Participants in these studies also reported that fostering 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'.

Themes of loss were also reported in terms of their personal space and belongings. Loss of privacy experienced by birth children was reported in Part (1993) study as one of the three negative aspects of fostering. This finding is comparable to other studies (Reid, 1997, Swan, 2002, Younes and Harp, 2007). This is evident when birth children in a fostering family have to share their bedroom with their siblings, in order for the foster child to have a bedroom. Similarly, sharing their belongings with their foster siblings was difficult for birth children. However, the literature suggests that many birth children do not like sharing their possessions as many had their belongings stolen or damaged by their foster siblings (Martin, 1993, Reid, 1994, Watson and Jones, 2002).

Most of the literature consulted mentions that coping with the loss of their foster sibling when they leave is a major negative impact for birth children particularly if they formed a close bond with them (Spears and Cross, 2003, Younes and Harp, 2007, Watson and Jones, 2002, Kaplan, 1988, Part, 1993, Swan, 2002, Twigg, 1995). In all studies participants mentioned that the most challenging part of the fostering process was when their foster sibling left their family as it led them to experience loss and sadness (Younes and Harp, 2007, Watson and Jones, 2002, Hojer, 2007). A discussion within the literature about the impact of separation and loss for birth children is that the relationship between birth children 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’.

However, the literature also argues that this loss also had positives as it enabled birth children in a fostering family to have more family time, it gave them a sense of control over their house and it enabled them to partake in family activities that were often curtailed when they had foster siblings (Younes and Harp, 2007).

Finally, research has found that witnessing foster children’s conduct such as sexualised behaviour and bad language (Martin, 1993) and aggressive behaviour (Swan, 2002) had a negative impact on birth children. Some studies revealed that birth children in a fostering family could not have their friends over because of their foster siblings violent behaviour which might include violence towards them (Martin, 1993, Swan, 2002). It’s reported that witnessing such behavioural problems disturbed birth children (Triseliotis et al, 2000). However, Sinclair et al (2004) argue that exposing birth children to such behaviours has taught them how to behave and exercise tolerance.

### ***Involvement of Natural Children in the Fostering Process.***

Best practice (Chapman, 2009, The Fostering Network, 2010) states that birth children in a fostering family should be intrinsically involved and included throughout the fostering process. The researcher argues that there is very little literature on this aspect of foster care and therefore, feels it is difficult to ascertain how involved birth children are throughout the fostering process. Few studies that are available have reported that birth children generally had a family discussion and consultation prior to becoming a fostering family (Spears and Cross, 2003, Thompson and Mc Pherson, 2011), however, there was no sense of them being consulted by people outside of the family. This 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... and a lack of ongoing consultation and support’. Despite family discussions taking place, birth children reported that the final decision was made by their parents. Despite their efforts, birth children in a fostering family reported varied results about the effectiveness of the preparation they received from their parents and professionals. Many stated that nothing could have prepared them for the fostering experience. Participants 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, in terms of review meetings, the researcher felt there was a gap in the literature. One study available is Ryans (2000) study. This study revealed that ‘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’ (Ryan, 2000:54). The author agrees with Ward (1996:32) that the ‘social worker should make a point of communicating with the children of the family and learn about their feelings on the introduction of foster siblings into their home’.

### ***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
- The Children Bill, 1999
- Child Care (Amendment) Act 2007

However, while there are many policies that serve to protect foster children in Ireland, it can be said that there is few, if any that directly relates to securing the protection of foster carers’ birth children. One of the few policies available is *The Child Care Regulations 1995*. These regulations makes reference to birth children of foster carers stating ‘a Fostering Link Worker is to carry out an assessment of a foster carers suitability for fostering’. This involves a comprehensive assessment of potential foster families. In making the assessment, 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). This research aims to establish if this is being adhered to in practice.

Similarly, *The National Standards for Foster Care, 2003* does not make direct reference to birth 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’. Additionally, 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’.

### ***Agency Policy***

This study will now focus on agency policy. Its focus will be on The Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA) which is one of the main assessors of fostering in Ireland. IFCA policy upholds the right for foster carers and birth children in a fostering family to have access to a Fostering Link Worker for support on a regular basis throughout the fostering journey (IFCA, 2010).

IFCA also have a policy that guarantees the right for foster families to have access to counselling after a breakdown or other critical incident. It has been reported that some birth children have had difficulties accessing this service particularly in rural areas, however, despite this, it can be argued that it is a step in the right direction (IFCA, 2010).

In 2004, IFCA launched a training course, *New Beginnings* and *Foundations for Fostering* for fostering children. This training was developed by birth children in a fostering family, foster carers’ and social workers. These courses aim to give birth children an overall understanding of foster care, taking into account their age and maturity (Department of Health, 2011). This is a positive step as foster carers’ children play an important role and up until now have often been overlooked.

### **Findings and Analysis**

The findings of the research will be presented and analysed through the lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)<sup>28</sup>.

#### ***Theme 1: Positive Effects of Fostering on Birth Children in a Fostering Family***

##### ***Insight into Parenting***

The majority of participants’ revealed that fostering provided them with an insight into parenthood. In some cases, birth 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).

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<sup>28</sup> The names of participants’ have being replaced with pseudonyms and any identifying information has being omitted to respect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants’.

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 birth children parenting and caring for their foster siblings may result in 'premature growing up' (Martin, 1993).

### ***Altruism***

It is evident from the research findings that all participants gave an altruistic answer when talking about the positive impacts of fostering. All participants in this research see themselves very much in a caring capacity, not simply a passive member of a family who foster. The participants all spoke about the satisfaction they gained from caring for their foster siblings.

This is evident in John's comment: *'I like when I help those that aren't as lucky as me and put them on the straight path'* (John). This finding is echoed in other research (Pugh, 1994, Spears and Cross, 2003, Hojer, 2007, Hojer, 2004, Watson and Jones, 2002).

Social learning theory is helpful when analysing this finding. 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, 1987:56). Similarly, all participants displayed an empathic attitude when speaking about their foster siblings negative behaviours. This is particularly evident when they spoke empathically about their foster

sibling's negative behaviour 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).

A quality clearly evident in this finding is emotional literacy. This also an essential precursor to altruism (Joseph and Strain, 2003). As birth 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, 1980:101). This enables birth children to understand their foster siblings behaviour as the product of their past experience, not purely a reaction to the present situation. Thus, fostering provides birth children with more opportunities to experience 'a broad range of emotions both personally and vicariously than they would in a non-fostering family' (Humphrey et al, 2007:56).

It is evident from the research transcripts that participants extend this caring/empathic attitude not only to their foster siblings but also to their parents. This attitude is also visible in less obvious ways such as being concerned that their parents weren't supported enough or received enough time off- a finding common in previous research (Watson and Jones, 2002). For example, 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 interesting to mention that of the eight participants, four participants' work or are studying to become a professional in a caring profession. Therefore, the self-efficacy and confidence gained through their role of being part of a fostering family may have had an impact on their career choice (Bandura, 1986).

## ***Theme 2: The Negative Impacts of Fostering on Natural Children***

### ***Loss***

This study revealed that all birth children in a fostering family unanimously agreed that the most difficult part of the fostering process was the removal of foster siblings from the foster family. This finding is comparable with previous research (Sinclair et al., 2004; Younes and

Harp, 2007). The most prominent feelings for most participants' during this time were sadness and upset. This is also reflected in Younes and Harp, (2007) study. Deirdre's quote clearly sums up the sense of loss and sadness: *'I was really upset I would cry a lot when the foster child left'* (Deirdre). A striking quote is from Patrick who described the end of placement like an 'empty feeling' which is similar to the feeling you experience when somebody dies:

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).

This study also found that birth children regularly thought about the foster child 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 [foster child] 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 about them at times (Deirdre).

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

For those participants' who appeared to have positively accepted the loss, this stage in the foster journey enabled them to have a period of rest between placements which is an integral part of completing this transition - a theory put forward by previous studies (Swan, 2002, Watson and Jones, 2002). The following quote demonstrates how participants' used this time to have quality time with their family, 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).

Many participants used this period of rest for exploring and making sense of the loss of their foster siblings and the emotions that accompanied this stage of the foster process. However, one participant did not avail of this opportunity and struggled with his emotions. He described how he chose to concentrate on the next foster child 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).

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 when a foster child leaves. What this participant may be experiencing 'is 'disenfranchised grief': the assumption that a birth child's-foster child's relationship is not strong enough to warrant grief upon its dissolution, or that, since the natural child knew that the relationship was temporary, placement endings should not elicit grief' (Anderson et al, 1989:103).

### ***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 birth children in a fostering family. 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. Susan comments: *'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).

A recurring response from participants' and one that demonstrates great awareness and understanding from birth 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 their parents' first priority:

*'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 is 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 birth children to share parental attention with a stranger, the foster child. Secure attachment allows birth 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.

### ***Theme 3: Powerless throughout the Foster Journey***

This study revealed that the majority of birth children in this study were powerless and excluded during the fostering journey.

While most birth children had a family discussion prior to becoming a fostering family, the majority of participants in this study were excluded from the assessment process. John mentions:

A Fostering Social Worker came and they never spoke to me. Ya, unless you ask them their opinions [birth 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 birth children should be involved in the assessment process. However, despite this, the majority of birth 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 revealed that 'there is rarely any systematic involvement of the whole family prior to becoming a fostering family'.

However, while the majority of birth children in a fostering family reported being powerless and voiceless during the fostering stage, one participant mentioned that she was included in this stage and met with a social worker. Mary comments: *'I met with a social worker and stuff and I was interviewed and it was very lengthy'*.

It is clear that Mary had a consultation with a social worker during the assessment stage. However, what is interesting, Mary comments that while she had lengthy interviews with a social worker, she felt, to an extent that her opinions and views were not taken on board as 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 [to become a fostering family]. It was all towards my mother, that's what I felt.

Similarly, during review meetings all participants expressed feeling voiceless and ignored from social workers. From reading the transcripts of the interviews, it appeared that many participants' recognise that the social workers' role is to promote the welfare of the child; however, many participants' felt they should also consult with the birth child during review meetings. John comments:

Sometimes a social worker comes in and ignores the birth child and everything is about the foster child and you are nothing in their system. All they care about is the



child [foster child]. I know the foster child is their main priority but they should at least consult with the rest of the birth siblings because they know their foster siblings best because they live with them. Yet social workers take no attention to our [birth children] concerns or opinions about living with them [foster siblings]. The most important thing is for the social worker to see how fostering is affecting the whole family' (John).

A very striking finding is from Susan. This participant was voiceless throughout the fostering process and during review meetings. 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 birth child had to go to in order to be heard.

This finding is also comparable to Ryan (2000:73) study which found that 'while many foster care departments review foster carers' annually and elicit views of foster carers at regular child care review, rarely do birth children in a fostering family participate at these reviews, nor are their views sought'.

### **Limitations of the Research**

The researcher is aware that this is a small scale study incorporating qualitative research methods and may only be applicable to this research sample. Therefore, it may not be representative of all birth children of foster parents. Furthermore, all participants' in this research were members of families who fostered from a public organisation. The experiences of families fostering from private agencies may be somewhat different. The researcher argues that in order to aid the reliability and validity of the findings, the study should be repeated involving a more heterogeneous sample.

Due to the time and word limit of the dissertation, it was only feasible to conduct a small scale study involving eight participants'. Only participants' over 18 years old were included

in the research, this excluded the views of birth children under 18 years. Therefore, the time frame and age profile of participants' limited the study. The author feels that further research is required that would include the views of birth children who are under eighteen years of age. This would give the study increased depth and increase the validity of findings.

Finally, the researcher aimed to have equal representation from both males 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.

### **Recommendations**

The findings of this research both from the literature and qualitative research highlights that birth children are making important contributions to the foster placement. This study highlights the need for foster care practice to reflect that fostering involves the whole family. It is not only foster parents who foster, birth 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 researcher argues that in order to support birth children in a fostering family throughout the fostering process, age appropriate information about different topics related to fostering should be available to natural children. This will help improve their understanding and knowledge about fostering.

The findings of this research suggest that there is a need for ongoing support for all birth children of a fostering family particularly when a foster child leaves. The majority of birth children in this study experienced a sense of loss when their foster sibling left. Birth children in a fostering family 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 birth children during placement endings is likely to lead to more positive outcomes for all concerned.

The findings of the study revealed that there are negative, as well as positive impacts of fostering on birth children in a fostering family. It is in the author's view that social workers'

should meet with birth children on a regular basis to offer support to them, particularly in relation to the negative effects of fostering. This would provide birth children with the opportunity to express their feelings and would enable them to be heard by agencies.

It is in my view that support groups for birth children in a fostering family need to be considered by fostering agencies. Groups can allow birth children to express and vent frustrations about the negative impacts of fostering in a safe environment. Such groups can combine functions of mutual support with educational and social activities.

Foster care professionals need to identify ways of showing recognition and appreciation to what Kennedy (2002:102) refers to as the 'unsung heroes in the fostering partnership'. Birth children need to be empowered through representation of their interests and needs in foster care policy and practice at all levels. This study revealed that most participants were not consulted by social workers' during the fostering process. Involving birth children in a routine and meaningful way throughout the whole fostering process could positively impact birth children in a fostering family. The author argues that to ensure best practice fostering link workers should meet with birth children regularly and involve them throughout the foster placement.

Finally, the researcher argues that birth children need to be more visible in policy and guidelines including social work departmental guidelines. This is something that requires consideration 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 the birth child in a more direct way to ensure that they are fully included and heard throughout the fostering process.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study has fulfilled its aims and objectives and has answered its core research questions. This study adapted 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 while at the same time represent the voices of the participants who took part in this study.

The literature review conducted for this study gave the researcher an insight into fostering in Ireland. It informed the researcher of some of the positive and negative impacts fostering has on birth children. It also gave the researcher an insight into how involved birth children are during the foster placement. The main findings of this study relate to the positive and negative impacts of fostering on birth children in a fostering family. This study also revealed a striking finding that birth children of a fostering family are often excluded throughout 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 birth children. The researcher also learned that fostering has an impact (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 and involving birth children in all aspects of the fostering journey and recognises the importance of acknowledging and honouring the important contributions they make to the foster placement.

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