

“I FEEL LIKE THEY’RE MY FAMILY”:
CHARACTERISTICS OF ONE SUCCESSFUL RESOURCE COUPLE
WHO FOSTERS HIGH RISK TEENAGERS

by

MATTHEW A. LOEHR

B.A., Benedictine College, Atchison, Kansas, 1985
M.S.W., University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, 1987

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Family Studies and Human Services
College of Human Ecology

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2012

ABSTRACT

The focus of this qualitative case study was to examine the qualities and characteristics present in a successful resource family who parents high-risk teenagers. Perspectives were gathered from the resource parents, their birth children, a foster teen living in their home, and professionals that work with these resource parents. Utilizing Family Systems Theory and content analysis of the data, themes were identified as contributing to the success of this resource family. Themes identified were inclusion, communication, boundaries, humility, and a willingness to be hurt as well as positive attitude. Implications of these themes are discussed with the literature, theory, and the use of the pre-service training that resource parents are provided. A perspective was gained from both inside and outside the resource family for analysis. A discussion around implications of these findings as well as the need to explore additional areas is outlined.

“I FEEL LIKE THEY’RE MY FAMILY”:
CHARACTERISTICS OF ONE SUCCESSFUL RESOURCE COUPLE WHO
FOSTERS HIGH RISK TEENAGERS

by

MATTHEW A. LOEHR

B.A., Benedictine College, Atchison, Kansas, 1985
M.S.W., University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, 1987

A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Family Studies and Human Services
College of Human Ecology

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2012

Approved by:

Major Professor
Karen S. Myers-Bowman Ph.D.

COPYRIGHT

MATTHEW A. LOEHR

2012

ABSTRACT

The focus of this qualitative case study was to examine the qualities and characteristics present in a successful resource family who parents high-risk teenagers. Perspectives were gathered from the resource parents, their birth children, a foster teen living in their home, and professionals that work with these resource parents. Utilizing Family Systems Theory and content analysis of the data, themes were identified as contributing to the success of this resource family. Themes identified were inclusion, communication, boundaries, humility, and a willingness to be hurt as well as positive attitude. Implications of these themes are discussed with the literature, theory, and the use of the pre-service training that resource parents are provided. A perspective was gained from both inside and outside the resource family for analysis. A discussion around implications of these findings as well as the need to explore additional areas is outlined.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ix
DEDICATION	x
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of Problem.....	4
Purpose of Study.....	8
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	11
Family Systems Theory	11
Concepts in Family Systems Theory	15
Historical Overview of Child Welfare.....	18
Collaboration/Alliances	20
Birth Family Alliances	22
School/Educational Collaboration	25
Mental Health Provider Alliances.....	28
Court and Legal Collaborations	31
Agency/State Case Manager Collaborations	33
Conclusion	35
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS.....	37
Research Questions.....	37
A Qualitative Family Systems Theory Approach.....	37
Researcher as a Measurement Tool	38
Case Study Approach and Participant Selection.....	38

Data Collection	41
Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Resource Couple	41
Semi-Structured Interview Questions for the Birth Children	42
Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Professionals	43
Data Management	44
Analysis	45
Conclusion	46
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS	47
Treated Like Family/Inclusion.....	47
Inside the Family.....	47
Outside the Family	51
Effective Communication.....	53
Inside the Family.....	53
Outside the Family	54
Boundaries/Household Rules.....	56
Inside the Family.....	57
Outside the Family	59
Humility/Willingness to be Hurt.....	60
Inside the Family.....	60
Outside the Family	61
Flexibility/Adaptation.....	62
Inside the Family.....	62
Outside the Family	63

Self Care	64
Inside the Family.....	64
Outside the Family.....	65
Conclusion	66
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	67
Consistency Inside/Outside the Family	68
Themes, Theory, and Meaning	68
Implications for Practice.....	75
Implications for Research.....	79
Conclusion	81
REFERENCES	83
APPENDIX A - PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWED.....	92
APPENDIX B - RESOURCE PARENT TIMEOUT FORM.....	93

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Bill, Millie, and their two beautiful birth children for participating in this study. Their willingness to share their successes and struggles is appreciated. They serve as role models to all people in the child welfare system.

I also want to express deep appreciation to Amy, the foster child, who shared her feelings and thoughts so that I might learn more about the foster care system and helping teenagers.

I would also like to thank the professionals who took of their time to share insights for this study.

I will always be grateful to my major professor, Karen Myers-Bowman, for all of her encouragement and support. She has been a true role model for me.

I also want to acknowledge the PhD students enrolled in the advanced qualitative class who took of their time to serve as co-analysts.

I owe special thanks to my lovely wife Linda and my children. Their support has been invaluable to me.

DEDICATION

To all resource families:

Thank you for caring for some of the most
fragile children in our society.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“If I would have been different, I would have given him back to the system. Somebody else would have got him and he would have jumped from place to place until he was dead.” -Resource Parent of a Young Man (Partners in Parenting Training Video, 2007)

I worked with Mary [pseudonym] for nearly one year. She was 15 years of age and had been living with her resource (foster) parent for about six months prior to my involvement. Mary was going through the process of having her biological parents' rights terminated. Her father had sexually abused her and her mother was suffering with drug and alcohol dependency. Mary's resource parent was a single mom who had no adopted or biological children of her own. My task as the therapist was to assess the adjustment of Mary and the potential of this placement as her adoptive home. I felt my job was not difficult because this parent had excellent rapport with Mary's teachers at the high school, case management staff, and with me as the mental health provider.

This resource parent also was supportive and helped facilitate supervised contact with Mary's mother. This contact allowed correspondence and direct communication to occur among Mary, her biological parent, and the resource parent throughout her time in placement. Mary's biological mother would later voluntarily relinquish her rights and the resource parent agreed in court to continue to allow visitation after the adoption. The resource parent's stance was that Mary needed to know how her mom was managing and felt that this relationship needed to be continued but supervised. As the resource parent explained to me, she felt it was good for Mary's and her mom's overall mental health and well-being that they have contact. Mary has since moved beyond high school graduation and attended college to be a school teacher.

Coincidentally, her resource parent was also an educator and school administrator. Mary had multiple placements prior to arriving in this resource family home. Thankfully, she found stability, love, and a permanent place to grow up.

Donny [pseudonym] was 17 years old and living in a shelter for teenage boys. I led group therapy there once a week and would meet individually with some of the kids, particularly when returning home (reunification) with a birth parent was not an option. Donny was looking at going to an independent living program that allowed for a supervised apartment. He had been in foster care from an early age due to abuse and neglect. He had lived for periods of time in resource homes, hospitals, and residential treatment programs. Donny was going through the process of acquiring skills that would help him move into an apartment setting. His placements had been numerous and his plans for independence seemed to have been constantly changing. This was the result of frequent moves that meant new schools, therapists, and case management staff. Donny would later “age out” of the foster care system. I had heard from another staff member some years later that Donny had been incarcerated in state prison for assault and battery.

The time that a teenager spends in the foster care system most often will include placement into a resource family. The opportunity for youth to be successfully parented in a resource home can have a dramatic effect upon the eventual outcome and adjustment into young adulthood. These personal encounters illustrate both the positive and negative outcomes of youth I have known while working in the foster care system. The resource parents’ ability to work with these teens can have a great influence upon a stable placement.

I still remember the conversation I had with a resource parent that occurred many years ago. I recall the exchange as if it happened yesterday. I was suggesting to Wendy [pseudonym] about the need for her to take respite. This would have meant that her foster children would be

placed into other settings so she could “take a break.” Wendy routinely had three to five teenage boys living in her home at any one time, and I felt she needed a “mini vacation.” Although she appeared to be on top of things, I knew she never took respite as I had seen other resource parents take. Also, I saw that Wendy had more difficult and challenging behaviors from her children than those who took time away. The boys might have been able to stay together during the respite, or may have had to be split up, given availability of other resource families or emergency group homes. I wanted her to take some time off from the stress of managing all of these teenage boys. Wendy is someone who I am very close to and I respect her as a mentor and role model. Wendy was busy preparing the evening meal for her boys when I made this suggestion. She stopped and looked up at me. She remarked as if she were puzzled, “Matt, I know you and Linda (my partner) have several children. Do you ever have them placed out of your home to go on respite?” There was a long pause. I thought for a moment and told Wendy, “It was just a silly thought that I had,” and I quickly moved the conversation into how her newest young man was adjusting to her home.

I have worked in the child welfare arena for over 20 years. Much of my knowledge and practical wisdom that I have gained has come from the hundreds of resource families with whom I have worked. Almost half (46%) of all youth who are placed into the foster care system live in resource family homes (Child Welfare League of America, 2005). These are non-relative placements for children who have experienced abuse or neglect. I use the term resource parent or resource family instead of foster parent or foster family, because the term foster is too limited. Resource families can be involved in traditional foster care, pre-adoptive placements, kinship, relative, or emergency out-of-home care.

I think about families like Wendy's who take high-risk teenagers into their homes. I admire and appreciate the fact that they make themselves available to care for some of the most fragile young people in our society. As a family life educator, social worker, and administrator, I know that the preponderance of my caseload was "taken up" by managing this teenage population. Many of these youth needed to be removed from their resource family homes and placed into another setting. However, I saw stability in some families who parented these youths successfully. I began to take an interest in these families that maintained high-risk youths in their homes. I have focused much of my professional career examining what makes these resource families successful. I also have reflected upon my own family and how my partner and I have managed teenagers in our home. I am forever grateful and appreciative of Wendy's conversation and comments to me. She was so polite and kind while I seemed to be "missing the mark" completely in my attempt to help her in her efforts.

Statement of Problem

There are over a half million children in the foster care system in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for Children and Families, 2004). The majority of those youth are living outside their biological family homes due to parental neglect and/or abuse. Our nation has seen a continual rise in the number of children placed into foster care since the 1980's. In fact, the number increased by 63% from 1980 to 1995 (Curtis, Dale, & Kendall 1999). Numerous reasons are presented for this increase, such as higher poverty rates, alcohol and drug abuse, and homelessness.

Today, with the increasing numbers of children in foster care, the need for recruitment of resource parents is paramount. The high demand for resource family homes has been accompanied by a chronic shortage. This lack of placement resources is prompting professionals

to examine strategies to increase the recruitment of resource homes (Rhodes, Orme, Cox, & Beuhler, 2003). The focus of this study is on a particular resource family that has been successful in parenting high-risk teenagers in the foster care system. The literature notes that adolescents in the foster care system often experience at least seven different placements on average (Curtis, et al, 1999). This foster care disruption rate is especially alarming given the short length of time until these youth reach adulthood. Multiple placements for a child over the age of 12 are a concern when these youth can be emancipated at the age of 18 years if they are still in the foster care system.

Studies have shown that foster care placement disruptions are related to children's length of time in out-of-home care. In fact, there is a strong correlation between children who have multiple placements needing to be in the foster care system longer. Conversely, fewer disruptions of placement for children correlated with them getting homes sooner (Fein & Staff, 1995). This lengthening of time in the foster care systems makes permanency harder to achieve. Permanency is a term used in the child welfare system that is the goal for all youth placed in out-of-home care. This concept means that a child will have a stable home with a family that is permanent. This often implies a legal commitment to the child's well-being. Permanency is a place where the child belongs and is loved, nurtured, and valued (Child Welfare Institute, 2003). Also, the mental health needs of youth are often negatively impacted by placement disruptions (Smith, Stormshak, Chamberlain & Bridges, 2001). Developmental delays have been shown to increase the need for multiple placements and the increased placements may further negatively impact the developmental capabilities of youth in care (Horwitz, Simms, & Farrington, 1994). Additionally, research suggests that increased disruptions in foster care produce lower outcomes on overall life domains for youth when compared with children who have greater placement

stability (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). These domains included educational achievement and positive relationships with adult caregivers. After a little over a year and a half in foster care, placement disruptions were associated with increased behavioral problems (Newton & Litrownik, 2000). These increases in behavior problems have been correlated with having an impact on a child's belief that he or she may not be able to be maintained in a home (Martin & Breezly, 1993). Also, the influence of multiple placements and disruptions for children is associated with these youth exhibiting behavioral and emotional problems including adjustment problems, physical aggression, decreased coping skills, and poor self esteem (Smith, et al, 2001).

Placement stability allows resource families to demonstrate caregiver engagement to foster children in their homes and is related to placement success. The greater the number of placements that the child has, the less engaged the resource families were (DeGarmo, Chamberlain, Leve, & Price, 2009). The frequent movement or disruption of placements does not allow for continuous services and relationship supports to develop with the resource parent. The forming of a strong adult relationship in the resource family home, with a child in foster care, is critical to having permanency achieved for a youth (Leathers, Falconnier & Spielfogel, 2010). Engagement cannot occur if the child is frequently moving.

Gaining greater understanding regarding the influence of placement stability in successful resource homes for youth is vital to this study. This continuity of care includes the school system, the mental health system, the legal system, and affects the ability to bond with a resource family in the community. Sadly, it is reported that we can expect approximately 25,000 children annually to age-out of the foster care system having never experienced any permanent

connection either through adoption or returning to their biological home (National Conference on State Legislatures, 2000).

The large demand for placement resources, shortage of resource homes, and lack of stability for high-risk teens make this area a great concern to child welfare professionals. With such high numbers of children being placed into foster care and disruptions among adolescents being so high, the need to address placement stability is critical. Each time a placement is disrupted for a child, not only does the family setting change, but so do the service providers with whom the teen interacts. This means that often the child will attend a new school, have a new therapist, and need to establish new case management supports when placement is disrupted. This “starting over” for the child often means that the time in the foster care system will be extended, and that reunification with his/her parents will be delayed. New relationships will need to be formed with school, the resource home, and community providers when a child is moved. Additionally, there will need to be a period of time to assess and evaluate the youth’s adjustment in the new resource family setting. Placement stability is a major area in child welfare and for resource family success. Family life educators, social workers, and other professionals need to look at this need for stabilization if we are to look at longer-term options for youth. Particularly those youth who are on the cusp of aging out of the system.

I want to underscore that all children have the right to be reintegrated into their birth/adoptive families if safety can be maintained. Returning to the biological home is the first goal to examine when a child is removed. However, I know firsthand that there are too many children who are placed into protective services for whom going back to their home of removal is not going to be an option. I firmly believe and have worked tirelessly as a family life educator and social worker to have all children be placed into a resource family when birth or kinship

placements are not an option. I have spent many years working in institutional settings, hospitals and group homes, and have learned that prolonged placement into these facilities sometimes makes “stepping down” into a family unit more difficult. I also am aware that some youth require higher levels of care in order to be safe and successful. For children in institutions, it is paramount that we look at how we can find placement options in family settings so that they can have a chance at “normalcy.” I feel that the vast majority of the kids with whom I work seem to return to their birth families after “aging out” of the system. Collins, Paris, and Ward (2008) validate my experience as they noted many youth leaving foster care reconnect and even reside with members of their family of origin. Their homecomings are made difficult if these youth have not lived in a family setting for an extended period of time. If youth return to their biological families at age 18, my experience indicates that their adjustment is made easier by having lived in a resource home. The opportunity of living in the community and managing themselves in a family setting is a valuable experience.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to gain greater understanding of the characteristics of a successful resource family who parents high-risk teens. The importance of communication with the multiple players in the foster care system will be examined. How does a successful resource family communicate in a system plagued with silos? The definition of a silo is a separate entity that operates independently but shares in the treatment and care of youth in the foster care system. Problems around relaying information and communication were highlighted in a study conducted by Zetlin, Weinburg, & Shea (2010). Their research used focus groups that included interviews with foster care agency staff, educational professionals, resource families, and the youth in placement. Their findings detailed problems with communication and lack of

coordination of services. These authors also noted in their study that each of these entities appeared to operate independent of the other with little information being shared or integration of their work. Reportedly, this was causing great frustration. This invites the question: How does a successful resource family operate in such an environment?

This study will include the entire resource family as a source of information. Historically, much of the research has focused upon the foster mother and rarely has included the perceptions of the foster father as well as the birth children in the home (Gilligan, 2000). This lack of input from the resource fathers and birth children is especially important, not just because they are partners in the success, but the family members do not always report the same perceptions. Birth children may share the same event but experience and report the information quite differently (Dekovich & Burst, 2005). Birth parents also have been absent in the literature regarding their impressions and perceptions of how the foster care system operates (NASW, 2009).

It will be my aim to examine and gain greater understanding from the stakeholders that operate to make placement stability possible for children. I want to utilize a strengths approach by examining successful resource parents who are navigating systems and integrating the various resources and professionals in child welfare. Including the entire resource family (foster mother, father, and birth children) in my research is important because these components are lacking in the literature. They will be a vital part of my study.

Societal well-being can be enhanced by gaining greater knowledge as to the aspects that promote successful resource parenting. By beginning to explore this phenomenon of success with resource families that take high risk adolescents – I want to know if we might give greater opportunities to some of the most vulnerable children in our society.

Since the early 1900s in the United States, family life educators have looked at concerns regarding communication among professionals and the need to have stable resource families caring for youth. My efforts are to provide an extension of the work done in identifying characteristics of a successful resource family and the importance of collaborating and sharing of information. These partnerships and alliances seem to be an important theme that keeps coming up when we look at what constitutes success with a resource family.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The foster care system can be an obstacle for high-risk teenagers living in resource homes because of the numerous members and groups involved in this endeavor. Case management staff, court systems, teachers, and mental health providers working with youth and resource families hold the consensus that the care and treatment of foster children is uncoordinated and lacks integration and sharing of information among providers (Corcordora, 2008). The ability to be successful as a resource family hinges on how these parents navigate in the larger foster care system. The resource family must often serve as a link between multiple providers and may need to advocate for services for the youth in their home. It is critical to positive or successful outcomes for the high-risk youth that resource families perform these roles (McGuinness & Dyer, 2007). This literature review will explore the phenomenon of resource family success by giving a framework to analyze data in Family Systems Theory. I will provide and explain key concepts and terms in Family Systems Theory and identify how these may help in understanding how resource families operate. I will give a historical overview of child welfare in the United States to give context as to how the system has struggled with similar issues over time. I will then introduce the different component parts of the child welfare system to include birth parents, educational staff, mental health providers, court officials, and case management staff. The need for collaboration, alliances, and coordination among these entities are seen as a crucial aspect to successful parenting by resource families.

Family Systems Theory

I approach this study from a Family Systems Theory perspective. Successful resource families operate in a manner that can be understood as a system. This theory originated in the

field of communications and garnered widespread usage and appeal after World War II. The communication aspects were adapted later to understand how families operate similarly (Klein & White, 2002). The theory is unique in that it can be applied to both living and nonliving objects. It is rooted in Systems Theory which started in the field of communications (non-living) and was adapted to understanding how families (living) work (Klein & White, 2002). Systems Theory is grounded in the idea that understanding can be achieved only by looking at the whole. Individual component parts are useful in how each interacts with other components or members. The system's response is affected by the environment and the environment is affected by the system. This interplay is key to understanding how operations occur.

Resource family members must function with tremendous change occurring both inside and outside the family unit (McGuinness & Dyer, 2007). In examining the resource family as a system, I start with a definition. Boughner, Hecker and Mims (2003) wrote:

A family system includes family members, the unique attributes of the family members, and the relationships between family members. This small group of closely interrelated and interdependent individuals is organized into a unit with specific purposes, functions, or goals (p 42).

Klein and White (2002) pointed out that, "a system is a system because it affects the environment and can be distinguished from the environment" (p. 158). The system is viewed as separate from the environment, and maintains stability by allowing and limiting information to enter their system. The system then can process and make decisions based upon its prior experiences.

A resource family is a system that functions in this same manner. The resource family system takes in a foster child (input); then, the family attempts to make the best decision with

regard to maintaining placement stability as an output. The successful resource family who can bring together providers in the foster care system to aid children in their home display a quality that researchers need to know more about. Family Systems Theory provides a framework to organize data and observations of these families. The task of having these high-need youth live in their home and manage the coordination and integration of services required will be examined by looking at many of the players. These include the resource parents, case management staff, educational personnel, mental health professionals, as well as the birth and foster children living within the home. I want to better understand how they perceive the characteristics of successful resource parents.

Family Systems Theory allows for the focus upon collaboration and inclusion of all the parts of the foster care system. Again, the system has to be understood as a whole. The premise of the theory is that the parts must be synthesized and viewed as being connected. What occurs in or to one part of the system will have an effect upon the whole system (Klein & White 2002). In essence, what occurs between the resource parent and the youth placed in the home will affect other parts of the system. In this case, supra-systems are the other component parts of the larger child welfare system and include the school, mental health providers, court personnel and child welfare agency staff. Family Systems Theory is an approach that focuses upon all aspects of a system, and emphasizes that they are all interconnected.

Family Systems Theory is used and widely accepted in the social sciences because of its universal appeal in examining relational phenomena. This theoretical lens is especially helpful when examining resource family success with high-risk teenage youth because of the need to look at many of the component parts that make up the foster care system. Focusing upon a single

part of the foster care system for study is not compatible from this perspective. Therefore many parts of the system must be examined to better understand how they operate.

The importance of viewing the resource family from a systems perspective is helpful especially when we examine these families in the larger context of foster care. The resource family is a sub-system (or smaller part) of the foster care system. Family theorists have found Family Systems Theory useful in explaining how individual members and groups function, operate, and adapt when interacting with one another. The theory recognizes that families undergo significant periods of change as well as stability. This requires the resource family to adapt in order to maintain homeostasis or the status quo (Bukatko, 2008). This is achieved by balancing inputs and outputs so that the system can be stable.

Homeostasis is described in families as they develop recurring interactional patterns to maintain stability and balance (Boughner et al., 2003). Resource families must often parent children for whom this balance may have been maladaptive in the child's birth home. The resource family's ability to regulate inputs and outputs via boundaries is key to maintaining equilibrium and placement stability for youth. The system is able to be self-reflexive, which means it is able to learn from experiences and make informed decisions by considering these factors. Resource families who are successful in having these high-risk youth must have the ability to absorb rapid changes in their environments to keep these children in their home. Their system must also be able to assess prior events and to learn from these previous courses of action.

The benefit of this approach is that researchers can examine the individual's separate functioning as well as that individual's response when seen in relation to a larger whole.

Concepts in Family Systems Theory

As mentioned before, all systems have *boundaries*. These boundaries are viewed as having degrees of permeability upon a continuum. An entirely open boundary would allow complete information into the system from the environment. On the opposite extreme, a closed boundary would not allow any information from the environment. Boughner et al. (2003) noted that most families fall between these extremes and allow a degree of permeability. Either extreme (open or closed) could produce difficulties in the system's functioning. If a family were to operate at either end of the continuum with regard to boundaries stress can ensue. Open systems, on the extreme, would have few boundaries and be overly lenient; closed systems would be overly rigid in their functioning. Additionally, it needs to be established that boundaries also exist between individuals in a family system. The concept of boundaries could be useful in looking at resource family parenting styles as it relates to success. How does a resource family system take in a new member and manage boundaries?

Rules of transformation are also an important concept in Family Systems Theory. Families take information from the environment as input and transform the input into output from the system (Klein & White, 2002). Inherent in this process is the need for families to allow some degree of input from the environment. The family's interpretation of data that permeates the system is the concept viewed as rules of transformation. Families also use their experiences to guide them in the direction of output. An extreme example might be a closed family system that does not allow transformation to occur. In this instance, a closed system might not allow the family access to media. If a hurricane was to hit, they might perish because of the lack of this input into the system. In this example, a completely closed system would have few transformation processes occurring. The need for allowing input is made in this basic example to

illustrate how transformation of input information can be critical. How does a resource family determine what information is allowed to permeate the system? Why does the family allow some information over others? Do successful resource families limit information?

Variety is another key concept in Family Systems Theory. Klein and White (2002) described this concept as the extent to which the system has the resources to meet new environmental demands or adapt to changes. A system that has a large array of diverse resources would have more options (variety) available to meet the diverse adaptations required by a dynamically changing environment (p. 159).

This is important with regard to resource families being successful. The family's access to resources may help in having youth of different cultures and values, stay in the resource family home. Hipgrave (1983) looked at some of the characteristics of families that had high-risk youth live in their home. The findings pointed to the need for understanding on the part of caregivers of the child's cultural and identity issues. The author stressed the issue of self responsibility as an important factor in forming the child's identity. For children in placement, this might be seen by the resource parent assigning them chores and responsibilities around the house as a means of increasing their investment in the household.

Hipgrave (1983) indicates that birth families of the children placed in the resource home, that share a strong partnership and collaboration with resource families, have opportunities to relay information and strategies that may be useful for the resource family to employ. Resource families also have the means to share insights and parenting practices with the birth family that they have utilized to help the child feel invested. This can be helpful if the teen returns back to the birth home (Child Welfare Institute 2003). Each birth family has its own unique identity. Their priorities and overall functioning may differ substantially from how a resource family is

accustomed to acting. This speaks to the need to have an increase in variety within the resource family home to accommodate the uniqueness of each child's experiences. In short, placement stability appears more likely to occur when the inclusion of a diversity of views is allowed in the resource family home.

In helping to establish these partnerships and collaborations, it is important for the resource parent to have a broad view regarding socialization techniques for children placed in their homes. Arnett (1995) looked at socialization in the context of broad and narrow dimensions. The broader the techniques used by parents, the more tolerant and inclusive was the family's system of cultural diversity. The more narrow the family's socialization regarding culture, the less tolerant parents will be of members who do not conform to their strict rules. Arnett (1995) wrote:

I make a distinction between two general types of culture socialization, broad and narrow. Cultures characterized by broad socialization encourage individualism, independence, and self-expression, not just through socialization in the family but through other socialization sources as well (p.617).

Resource families who utilize a broad socialization approach to parenting of high-risk teenagers in their home may produce outcomes where placement stability is enhanced.

Greater variety may also aid families to access services such as therapy, medication, or educational programs aimed at the child's needs. According to this tenet of Family Systems Theory, the greater the variety of resources within a family system, the more likely they are to have success with youth adapting in their home.

The concept of *roles* in Family Systems Theory is described as "individually prescribed patterns of behavior reinforced by expectations and norms of the family" (Boughner et al., 2003,

p. 60). If resource families are not clear with their roles and expectations, then having a child who may have issues with role confusion may be problematic upon and during placement. Foster children often come from environments where they had adult responsibilities or privileges. Roles are a key aspect when the resource family negotiates expectations of the youth placed in the home. The role will be influenced in large part by the parenting style that the resource parent employs. In a series of observational studies, Diana Baumrind (1971, 1972) looked at how parents interacted with their children. Her focus was centered upon the child rearing practices they displayed. Baumrind observed patterns of behavior in parenting that she categorized into three groupings. The authoritarian parent who relied on coercion and low levels of nurturance, the permissive parent who set few limits or demands on children, and the authoritative parent who had expectations but utilized positive rewards as opposed to punishment to parent their children. Resource parents must play the role of disciplinarian, teacher, and counselor. Their parenting style will have a profound impact on high risk children living in their home (Baumrind, 1991).

These concepts in systems theory are utilized when examining the phenomenon of resource parent success. It is the resource family system that is my unit of study. Observing successful resource families through the lens of family systems theory will allow focus as well as a means for interpretation and understanding the phenomenon.

Historical Overview of Child Welfare

It is important to begin with a historical look at how our nation's child welfare practices have evolved in regards to contemporary child welfare. The first White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children was held in 1909 during the administration of Theodore Roosevelt. The focus was on how our nation was to address the needs of the 93,000 children who were

living in institutions. This number did not account for the additional youth living in boarding houses and foster homes (CWLA, 2010).

The need to establish an organization aimed at increasing collaboration to share information and resources was identified. The early efforts from this conference included the creation of the Bureau for the Exchange of Information Among Child Helping Agencies in 1915. The emphasis upon collaboration among the various organizations and groups was seen as a priority by the early policymakers and organizational leadership. The idea that our nation needed an agency to share information points to problems with providers operating independently. Emphasis was placed upon looking at how they could get better results and efficiencies by talking/sharing among themselves. This was clearly reflected in the name of the organization. This group would later become the Child Welfare League of America which is seen as the premier leader in matters involving children in out-of-home care in the United States (CWLA, 2010).

This early child welfare movement also embraced the notion of having alternatives for the care of youth as opposed to utilizing only institutions. In the late 1920s, the CWLA joined forces with the American Legion in an effort to emphasize the importance of a strong, permanent, and loving home for children who were orphaned, abused, and/or neglected (Children's Voice, 2010). It was also around this same period of time that the CWLA began to survey its members. CWLA set performance standards for the care and treatment of youth. It was these best practice standards that they used as an evaluation tool during their surveys.

The Great Depression and the advent of World War II led the CWLA to begin to examine the need to emphasize adoption as preferable to youth living in facilities. This effort led to performance standards and practices aimed at approving or certifying families to care for

children who were left without caregivers due to abandonment during this economically troubling time in the United States and because of the casualties of World War II (CWLA, 2010). This effort was one of the earliest formalized practices of identifying resource families as opposed to orphanages and institutions caring for out-of-home youth.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a large number of institutions began to close across the U.S. There was a big push to move away from institutional care and to reallocate those resources into efforts aimed at keeping individuals out of facilities. This initiated a movement toward community-based care and resource families becoming an increasingly large piece in the child welfare system. The CWLA outlined standards of care for resource homes and compliance was required for membership within their organization. This led to the creation of the Council on Accreditation of Children and Family Services or COA.

What started at the turn of the century as an effort to share information and collaborate among the 60 institutions invited to the 1909 White House Conference has evolved into an 1800-member organization which includes a large number of programs aimed at resource/foster care as an alternative to group care. The success of resource families is still influenced by the ability to share information and collaborate among professionals and families.

Collaboration/Alliances

The development of good working relationships among the components or participants in the child welfare arena is crucial to having stable placements for children. These stakeholders include the child, the birth family, the resource family, case management staff, school personnel, and mental health providers (Brown, 2007). In terms of retention of resource families - positive relationships with healthcare providers, school, social work staff, and the various agencies are all tied to resource families maintaining their willingness to foster youth (Brown, 2007).

Conversely, negative relationships among professionals that include issues of mistrust, miscommunication, and lack of teamwork are all directly linked to foster families wanting to discontinue placement (Rogers, 2001). The need for working together on behalf of the youth is directly impacted by how all the service providers relate with each other.

Families who successfully foster high-risk youth noted the importance of making the children the priority (Rogers, 2001). They saw this as being achieved when providers are working to have better communication and sharing of information among the players (resource family, foster child, his or her birth family, and providers) that are in the child welfare arena (Concodora, 2008). Also noted is having a case plan and being able to communicate that plan (and the responsibilities) to the resource parents, birth parents, child, and case manager. Having a clear plan has been associated with an increase in the readiness of resource families to accept placements confidently (Aldgate & Hawley, 2005).

Working as a collaborative team to help high-risk children live in the resource home is important. It is the resource home that is a better representation of a family setting when compared to an institution or facility (Saxe, Ellis & Kaplow, 2007). This team consists of the child, his or her caregivers, and others within the social environment where the child resides. It is by examining the positive interactions, relationships, and alliances among these players and in the presence of a successful resource family that greater understanding of this phenomenon might be gained. I will now examine some of the important component parts that make up the foster care system.

Birth Family Alliances

Birth families are key players in the care of youth who are placed outside of the home. The birth family's involvement in initial treatment planning, engagement in the treatment process, and in discharge planning to return home is critical (PS-MAPP, 2003). The resource family (and other entities involved in the care of these youth) must collaborate with the child's birth family to increase the likelihood of high-risk youth living in the resource home.

In 2008, the United States Health and Human Services identified the number of children in the foster care system at approximately 510,000 young people. In recent years, many child welfare agencies have endorsed policies that employ a strengths-based approach to working with and involving birth parents (N.A.S.W., 2009). This means that practitioners and family life educators should focus upon the positive attributes and accomplishments of birth families as opposed to their deficits. Emphasizing a strengths approach is apt to keep families engaged in the reunification process which is aimed at their children going back to the birth home (Malaccio, 1981; Zamosky, Sparks, Hutt & Sharmon, 1993).

The foster care system may be working to emphasize a strengths approach, but that is difficult to assess when research has not included the insights and attitudes of the birth families involved. Birth families are often affected by these policies and are understudied in the literature (N.A.S.W., 2009). Their insights into resource families who are successful is seen as lacking in the research.

The collaboration between the resource and birth families is important to understand as we explore the phenomenon of successful parenting of children in foster care. Resource families in many states are trained in the "Partnering for Safety and Permanence-Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting," also referred to as PS-MAPP (Child Welfare Institute, 2003). This

program is administered over a 10-week period. Families meet with facilitators one time per week for three hours each time. In total, the families receive 30 hours of training over the 10-week time frame in PS-MAPP.

The program utilizes an Alliance Model which emphasizes teamwork, partnership, and collaboration (Leader's Guide PS-MAPP, July 2003, Handout 2 p. 4). The Alliance Model emphasizes the need for resource parents and birth parents to be seen by the child (placed in foster care) as being aligned. This alliance will encourage the child to focus his or her attention on being a child. The program defines this activity (being a child) as "growing into a healthy and strong adult" (Handout 2, p. 2). This notion of an alliance uses the idea that if a child senses a conflict between caregivers, he or she will act out and draw attention to him or herself. This tension can be attributed to the lack of collaboration between the resource family and birth parent; thus, the child often will react negatively in response to this lack in collaboration. Acting out is often the response of the child in order to keep family cohesion when boundaries in the birth home may have been blurred. If boundaries were not clear in the child's birth family, then he or she may have adjustment difficulties functioning in a resource home with firmer boundaries. The child will respond in a fashion to keep the family system in a state of status quo or homeostasis and may respond as his or her history dictates. The birth parent(s) will unite around the child's acting out behavior and focus their attention toward the child as opposed to the needs of the resource family. This concept of appearing as a united front (or an alliance) is addressed in the PS-MAPP training program. This attempt to "fix" the family dynamics by the child is done by the youth often moving into a more parental role (PS-MAPP Handout 2, p. 1).

One of the most extensive evaluations of children in foster care placement was conducted by Smith (1986). The Kent Family Placement Services Study looked at factors that

interfere with placement stability in resource family homes over an 18-month period. Smith noted that 64% of the youth studied in the Kent project were successfully discharged over the 18-month time frame. The factors that contributed to the disruptions were noted to be “parental (especially maternal) attitude toward the resource family as being outwardly in agreement but inwardly undermining” (p. 29). The findings highlight the importance of the birth parents having an alliance with the resource family so that both the internal and external attitudes might be congruent. This collaboration is key to understanding success.

The contact between birth families and their children is important to maintaining stability in the resource family home and in moving toward reintegration. Chipman, Gibbons, Barth and McCray (2003) found that parents who had more frequent visits with their children were more engaged in the process of returning their children home. This was compared with children who had less contact with their birth families and remained in foster care longer. Birth parents must also feel that they are being listened to and understood in treatment planning meetings. Those parents who report feeling that their perspective and opinions are valued reported better attitudes toward the process, in contrast to those families that felt they were not heard or not involved in the child’s plan. Additionally, these parents perceived a greater likelihood of the youth returning back to them (Corby, Miller & Young, 1996).

This engagement is critical in a system that is largely punitive. Alpert and Brittner (2005) noted that caseworker bias and attitudes regarding the family’s ability to rehabilitate and to protect children who they have abused or neglected prompt feelings of ambivalence and doubt causing them to rethink or question bringing youth back to their home. Birth parent perspectives are understudied (NASW, 2009). Child welfare professionals cite the reasons for this dearth in the literature regarding the birth parent as resulting from researchers having difficulty addressing

such a sensitive area regarding abuse and neglect. Additionally, the birth parents may see the researcher as another person with expectations in a long list of requirements and feel overwhelmed when approached (NASW, 2009).

Contact between the birth parent(s) and resource family is going to help form a collaboration between the two parties. Resource families who engage and support birth parent involvement in the parenting of the youth have a likelihood of increasing the success in placement stability when compared to cases where contact, engagement, and support are minimal between resource families and birth families (Corby et al., 1996). This concept of an alliance with birth families and the resource family is paramount in placement success.

School/Educational Collaboration

Prior to the adoption of new guidelines for children in foster care by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2000, the child welfare system did not define success in foster care in relation to how youth achieved progress in school (Jacobsen, 1998; Parrish, Dubois, Delano, Dixon, Webster, Berrick, & Bolus, 2001). Children in foster care were to achieve outcomes in each state in the category of well-being. This included services aimed at addressing the educational needs of youth (Harden, 2004; Reed & Karpilow, 2002).

The importance of having collaborative and working relationships with child protective agencies, special education services, families, and youth is seen as contributing to the success in the school setting (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2009). In their study of interagency collaboration, Zetlin et al. (2009) found that engaging the school in partnerships with resource parents and the child led to better outcomes for the foster care youth. The authors noted that having an advocate for the foster child led to an increase in educational success. This advocate, in many instances, is the resource parent, but can be a case worker or school personnel. The school's perception as to

characteristics of successful resource parents addresses this area noted in the research, and also lends attention to the influence of working in a collaborative effort. Youth spend a significant part of their day in the school setting. Therefore, the perceptions of educational staff are an important perspective to include when examining successful resource placements.

One of the most difficult aspects of adjustment difficulties for children in foster care is the high frequency in changing placements (Eckenrode, Rowe, Laird & Brathwaite, 1995). This mobility issue makes the continuity of education nearly impossible to maintain and is a struggle that is carried on into the next placement. As a result, research indicates foster care youth drop out of school at a rate of 66% – this is stark when compared to a rate of about 10% of their counterpart youth who are not in the foster care system (Blome, 1997; Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Joiner, 2001). When compared with children not in foster care – foster care youth have more behavior problems, more suspensions from school, and lower scores on standardized testing (Aldgate, Colton, Ghate & Heath, 1992; Courtney Terao & Bost, 2004; Crozier & Barth, 2005; Kendall, Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996; Kurtz, Gaudin, Wodarski & Howing, 1993; Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, George & Courtney, 2004). The need for professionals in the foster care system to be attuned to the possibility of special educational services for these youth is great. Thirty percent of foster care youth between ages 6 and 11 need special education services compared to less than 10% of the general education population (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). If these services are not assessed early in the placement process, these children often will go unserved and face struggles in the classroom setting. The outlook is not altogether bleak. Studies have found that if agencies, families, and staff work together and have goals and plans that are shared, success can be achieved (Johnson, Zorn, Tarn, LaMontagne & Johnson, 2003).

The educational component is so important primarily due to the large amount of time children spend at school. The PS-MAPP program emphasizes the need for families to communicate effectively with school personnel. Families are evaluated on their effectiveness with regard to communication as a requirement of the program. It would appear that the more school personnel have regular communication with the resource family, the greater possibility of placement stability. Additionally, the more the child maintains regular attendance at school, the more placement stability is enhanced. The Kent study noted that regular attendance at school was present in the resource families that had placement stability with youth placed in their home (Smith, 1986).

Issues regarding the need for flexibility in the educational system are highlighted in the literature. Many educational professionals embrace a systems view for assessing families and to aid with interventions with the child. Extremes in disengagement and enmeshment within the family setting have been noted as key to understanding when working with youth in the school setting. Turnbull and Turnbull (1990) described disengagement as occurring when caregivers are overwhelmed or want to deny the existence of a learning or behavioral disability. Conversely, the process of enmeshment happens when families are over-protective and/or over-involved with the child. This often results in the family not wanting to take risks with regard to the child's educational plan. The youth may suffer due to the parent being fearful of the youth being mainstreamed into the regular school setting. The parents who are overly enmeshed are often afraid of their child being teased in other settings that are less restrictive (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990).

Emphasizing the need for cohesion and adaptability in educational settings is important. Families do best when they can respond positively to increases in stress. It is critical that there is

a need for balance in managing enmeshment and disengagement throughout the educational process (Olsen, Russell, and Sprenkle, 1980). Resource families that have an ability to keep from the extremes of enmeshment and disengagement are better able to meet the educational needs of children placed in their home.

As noted, the important issue in families working with the school is that they are not operating on the extremes of enmeshment or disengagement with school professionals. A consistent approach to communicating directly with school personnel by the family will help in creating an atmosphere where risk is tolerated and failure is handled with reassurance. It is from this approach that strategies to improve school performance are based (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). The authors highlighted that the children are not taught in a vacuum and that parental involvement is critical. The need for parents to communicate consistently with school personnel may have a positive influence on placement stability.

Mental Health Provider Alliances

The next area of importance in collaboration with the resource family is with the mental health providers who serve the child in the resource home. This alliance also includes mental health providers who are working with the resource parents and foster children. Like the birth family and educational domains, collaboration with the mental health providers often increases placement stability. In fact, the instability of placements for youth in the foster care system hampers the effective delivery of mental health services (Pufahl, 2007). These frequent moves make the idea or notion of a therapeutic relationship difficult, if not impossible, to establish. The need for a therapeutic relationship to occur between the therapist and family is paramount when addressing the difficult issues of abuse and neglect (Saxe, Ellis & Ludwig, 2007). The mental health domain is critical because approximately 40-60% of all children in the foster care system

have mental health needs (Burns, Phillips & Wagner, 2004). Data also indicate that children in foster care have 20 times the utilization rate of mental health services when compared to youth living outside of foster care (Gordon, Menelan, Michelmore & Gunger, 2005). Obviously, communication aimed at an alliance between mental health providers and the resource families is crucial given the high incidence of mental health services required.

If the resource parents collaborate with mental health providers and these collaborations are viewed positively, then placement stability may be enhanced. These providers include case managers, therapists, and psychiatrists.

A strong system of care is essential to help families who are maintaining S.E.D. (Severely Emotionally Disturbed) youth in their home (Kendziora, Burns, Osher, Pacchiano & Mejia, 2001). The reality of the high needs that these youths present not only requires knowledge of resources within the families' communities, but also the ability for families to access these services. The wraparound concept has been practiced in Kansas for nearly two decades and, anecdotally from this researcher's direct experience, has been a tremendous success. The wraparound concept is based upon provision of mental health services that are largely community based. These services include in-home therapy, case management services, respite for the resource parent, one-on-one counseling, group therapy, and mentoring programs. These services are designed to keep children who have severe mental health needs within their home communities (Journal of Policy, Practice, and Program, 2005).

Children in foster care have many unmet mental health needs due in part to the abuse and neglect they have suffered. Foster care youth have behavioral, emotional and developmental problems at disproportionately higher rates than youth in comparison groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The importance of a collaborative and highly integrated system where

partners are all “on board” with the goals of treatment and working together is needed.

Additionally, this coordination and communication help to minimize negative effects of abuse and trauma (Hornberger, Martin & Collins, 2006).

I have attended several wraparound meetings regarding youth in foster care and have been trained by mediators as to the goals of the concept. Essentially, area mental health facilities throughout Kansas employ trained mediators or negotiators on the wraparound philosophy. The idea behind this initiative is to have all relevant community members involved in the life of the child/family come together to have a planning session. The goal is to have the family and child state their wishes, dreams, and desires. The mediator then allows the family and child to outline a wraparound plan to achieve the child’s and family’s needs. It is important to note that practices of least restrictive interventions (no more services than necessary) must be demonstrated. This is not an effort to “smother” families, but to allow self-determination and self-directedness of their plan. These initiatives are more successful when services are directed by the families (Kendziora, et al. 2001).

Clark, McDonald, and Prange (1996) looked at access to and continued support of wraparound services post permanency. The study included 244 children in placement. The authors concluded that “support after permanent placements into adoption or reunification is desirable; a continuum of resources is essential” (p. 379). In sum, if children can access wraparound services, then stability in the resource home may be greater. It is also important that the services follow the youth back into the birth home if reunified. This can lead to an increase in placement stability when systems of care and communication are both in place and working. It is important to assess the resource families’ ability to access community based (wraparound)

services. The families' capabilities and alliances with mental health providers, and having adequate resources available can help achieve greater placement stability.

The need for early intervention (upon placement) is a key variable when accessing mental health services (Pufahl, 2007). The removal of a child from his/her home is often a traumatic event. The child loses, in many cases, all connections. These are not only connections to the family, but also to the school, friends, neighbors, and extended family. Because children may initially be in a state of shock upon placement, it may be difficult to see outward behavioral issues manifesting with them (Raghavan, Inoue, Ettner, Hamilton & Landsverk, 2010). Mental health professionals cite that there are symptoms that warrant immediate assessment if observed by the resource family. These symptoms might include verbal and physical aggression, nightmares, and trouble sleeping. It is also highlighted in the training manuals that the ability for children to self-regulate might be impaired. This would be seen in soiling clothes or bedwetting (Partners in Parenting, 2007). Training with resource families on advocating for early testing and intervention may be crucial in the child being successful in placement.

Court and Legal Collaborations

The fourth life domain area that I wish to address is in regard to a court alliance. The need for resource families to have a strong and positive relationship with court personnel is pivotal. It is the court that has placed the children into out-of-home care, and it will be the court that allows the children to return home, if that is deemed appropriate. It also will be the responsibility of court systems to sever the rights of birth parents, if reunification is not an option (Christian & Ekman, 2000).

The passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, or AFSA, in 1997 was seen as the most significant federal legislation for moving children to permanency in decades. The

Executive Summary from the National Conference of State Legislatures pointed out that not only were children staying in out-of-home care too long, but, in many cases, reasonable efforts were not made to look at other permanency outcomes if reunification was not viable. AFSA was refreshing because it made all parties more accountable to either get the child home or adopted. The phenomenon of children lingering in the foster care system for years was going to be met with possible cuts in federal funds if reasonable efforts to move children back home were not being sought. The report noted that this is financially costly to the American taxpayer. In the United States, we spend over \$7 billion a year maintaining children in the foster care system. Financially, this expenditure outweighed all other areas of funding including family support, child protection, and child abuse and prevention services.

The courts now must make a determination regarding reunification of children with their birth families if they have been in out-of-home care 12 of the last 22 months. If a child meets this criterion, then the court must hold a reasonable efforts hearing to determine if parental rights need to be terminated. This creates a great need for resource parents to be in communication with court personnel and vice versa. Courts must have confidence in resource families' impressions and opinions of how the children living in their homes are doing. The PS-MAPP training outlines the need for resource parents to provide courts with written documentation regarding how the child is managing in and adjusting to the home.

Many courts appoint a special advocate or CASA worker. These volunteers are trained and assigned to work with individual youth in the foster care system. They are volunteers who are provided with in-service training on dealing with grief and loss issues for children. They serve as mentors and help to "speak" for the children at court hearings. The Child Welfare League of America published *Someone There for Me* (2004) which explains how the program

operates. The booklet outlines that CASA volunteers are often assigned the most difficult cases, those that are at risk for placement disruptions. The need to have CASA volunteers keep in close communication with the resource parent is important. Regular contact between CASA and the child placed in the resource home, as well as with the resource parent, appears to be an important element in successful parenting of high-risk teens

Agency/State Case Manager Collaborations

The last area involves collaboration with case management services. This includes the case manager who is assigned to the resource family home as well as the case manager assigned to the child who is in the resource family's home. Case management support is critical to placement stability. This is particularly important when we know that for most families having foster children in their homes is not a normative event. Normative events are seen as naturally occurring in life. These include coupling, having children, death of older family members, etc. (Arcus, 1990). Special circumstances or non-normative events include unexpected death or loss of a job. Resource parenting is another non-normative experience and requires researchers to examine this unique situation and how taking vulnerable children into their home will impact them based upon where they are in the life span.

In the process of becoming a resource parent, a pre-service training program is required in most states. Potential resource parents often are introduced to the case manager assigned to their home during the sessions. The case manager assigned to the home is responsible for screening potential placements into the resource home. This means that the caseworker assigned to the family must assess the family's ability to take children and be able to meet their needs.

The importance of a strong curriculum and training program is outlined in the PS-MAPP as crucial to the effort to maintain placement stability. As part of the licensing process, the

potential resource family is introduced to the agency staff that will work with them post licensure. This means that this case manager assigned to the home must assess the abilities of the families to take children and have a successful foster-parenting experience. PS-MAPP is built upon the premise that all families have limitations with regard to foster placements. It is incumbent upon the case manager to build rapport so that s/he can assess families' abilities to meet the needs of youth. These include symptoms from soiling to fire-setting (PS-MAPP, Handout #3, p 2).

The case managers should have knowledge of the PS-MAPP curriculum so that they are aware of what the resource families have been offered. If the case managers are seen as knowledgeable on the training curriculum taught to the resource family, then placement stability is enhanced. This understanding of the curriculum by both the worker and resource parent can lead to a more positive attitude between the two parties (Rodger, Cummings & Leschied, 2010). The more the resource family views the case manager as an expert, then the more placement stability is enhanced (Rogers, 2006). This partnership between the resource family and case management staff is essential. In fact, partnership is discussed as a primary reason for why families discontinue the placement of a child or leave the foster care system (Rhodes, Orme, Cox, & Buehler, 2003).

Infertility is an important area to focus upon in the formation of an alliance between the case manager for the resource family and the resource parents. While not all families that take pre-service classes to become resource parents have infertility concerns, the numbers are high enough that it is addressed in the curriculum (Child Welfare Institute, 2003) . A profile section, or a detailed report, for families is mandatory for completion, if infertility issues are present. This addresses the infertility issues and directs families to additional services if there are any

unresolved infertility concerns. If infertility issues are present it can be helpful for perspective resource parents to begin to address before taking children into their home (PS-MAPP Handout #6, p 1).

In the Standards of Excellence, published by the Child Welfare League of America (2005), this relationship between the child's case manager and the resource family, is presented as vital. The role and responsibility of the case manager for the child to the resource family are outlined in the training manual. These include providing support, offering full disclosure, and helping the family with needed resources and information in the management of the child, in the resource home (pp. 60-61). Therefore, the more the case manager for the child demonstrates a positive attitude toward the resource family, then the greater the alliance and the greater placement stability. It appears that if the child's case manager practices full disclosure to the resource family, the greater the alliance. Lastly, if the resource family views the case manager of the child as an expert, then their confidence and willingness to work through difficult encounters with the youth may be increased (Rodger, Cummings & Leschied, 2010).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the need to examine multiple parts of the foster care system is required to understand resource family success. We have examined collaboration with regard to different aspects of the child welfare system as viewed within the Alliance Model. This study explores the Alliance Model and Family Systems Theory not only with regard to the family unit, but also with the educational, mental health, and case management systems that are also an integral part of foster care. These other players and their feedback/perceptions will help structure the framework to analyze successful resource parenting.

By having a holistic approach and addressing the gaps in the research by including the resource father and the biological children in the resource family, I hope to move closer at identifying qualities and characteristics of resource parents who foster high-risk teens.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Research Questions

My overarching research question in this study was: What are the characteristics present of resource families who successfully parent high-risk teenagers in foster care? In order to arrive at this larger question, I needed to examine more specific research questions. 1: What processes occur within the family unit to facilitate success? 2: What processes occur outside the family unit to facilitate success?

A Qualitative Family Systems Theory Approach

To gain a greater understanding of what we might learn from resource parents regarding the phenomenon of placement stability for difficult-to-manage teenagers, I approached this effort by using qualitative methods. These are rooted in naturalistic inquiry. In this approach individuals are studied in their own or natural setting – as opposed to in an office or laboratory. Naturalistic observations “have the distinct advantage of examining real- life behaviors as opposed to behaviors that may emerge in response to some contrived laboratory manipulation” (Bukatko, 2008, p. 43).

The value of having the theoretical lens of Family Systems Theory is that the phenomenon is looked upon as a whole; individual efforts are not a primary consideration. The emphasis is on the processes that contribute to success in parenting high-risk youth in foster care.

Therefore, I included not only the resource family system (parent, birth children, and foster child) but expanded into the supra-systems that interacted with the resource couple. These participants included a school counselor, case management staff, and a mental health provider.

The Family Systems Theory framework encourages these component parts to be examined in an integrated and functioning whole.

Researcher as a Measurement Tool

One of the most valuable assets to qualitative research is the researcher's own experience (Patton, 2002). I have spent nearly 25 years working in the foster care system as a social worker, therapist, administrator, and trainer. It is important that I note these aspects of myself in order to guide the reader as to my own personal frame of reference. I approached this study with a wealth of experience working with resource families. I feel that this is a strength, but I needed to be cautious not to confuse my researcher role with that of a case manager or therapist. Abuse and neglect are terrible things that happen to anyone, much less a child. I am deeply shaken when I reflect upon the diabolical things that caregivers have done to children. As a researcher, my aim was to gain the perspective from the participants in the foster care setting. It is important that I acknowledge my prior roles and work diligently to keep them separate from that of a researcher. I was there to gain perspective, not to intervene.

Case Study Approach and Participant Selection

I used a case study design in my research. A case study can be particularly useful when looking at unique or unusual happenings in an individual or family unit (Bukatko, 2008). Case studies are defined by Merriam (2001) as a "design employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than confirmation" (p. 19). This fits well with the holistic approach of gaining perspective regarding the processes inside and outside the family unit that contribute to success.

I interviewed a resource couple, Bill and Millie (individually and together) with an open-ended interview guide. The couple had been married for almost twenty-five years at the time of the interview and they had been resource parents for approximately seven years. Both worked outside the home full-time in addition to their duties as resource parents. This couple began their journey as resource parents by fostering their two nephews. Bill and Millie made the decision to accept teenagers and to focus solely on the female population. It is very common for resource families who take adolescent youth to not typically accept both genders. The reasons for this are many, but the most profound is the liability of the youth sexually acting out. They report having at least two dozen children placed with them since being licensed.

In this study, I interviewed the couple's two birth, adult, children as well as an eighteen-year-old foster child who lived in the home and was in her senior year of high school. I interviewed a mental health professional who works with the family, a school counselor, a case manager for the foster child and a case manager for the resource home. Appendix A provides a brief detail of the pseudo name and the role attached to each participant. This made a total of ten interviews that were audio recorded and transcribed. All of these interviews were conducted over a sixty day period from October 1 to December 1, 2011.

The resource couple and the foster child were interviewed at their home. I spoke with the birth children via Skype. I met with the mental health provider at her home (she often works from there), and I interviewed the school counselor, case manager for the child and the case manager for the resource family at their offices. Inclusion of participants beyond the resource couple allowed for the greater consideration regarding the impact of these other systems for the resource couple.

The recruitment of the resource family to participate in the study was purposeful. The intention was to recruit a family who would give rich information and who had experience with teens in order to better undertake an in-depth case study (Patton 2002). I worked with foster care staff assigned to numerous homes to help identify a successful resource couple who parented high-risk teens. The resource family was required to meet the following criteria:

- 1) The resource parent(s) had been certified for at least three years. This allowed a minimum amount of time as a base line to have formed relationships with professionals and to have gained experience to provide responses.
- 2) The resource parent(s) currently had a teenager in their home who was in foster care and had been placed with them for at least six months.
- 3) The teenager had at least two other placements within one year of being placed into the current home.
- 4) The teenager placed in the home was seen as currently well adjusted and feeling optimistic about the setting. This was the perception of the resource couple, the teenager placed in the home, and the case managers assigned to the couple and child.
- 5) The family must have a mother and a father in the home.
- 6) Birth children who live or lived in the home during the placement of a high-risk foster teen was also a requirement to participate.

Once identified, the family was contacted by the case manager to explore participation. After they gave permission to the case manager, I contacted them. The family agreed to allow me to contact their children and to interview their foster child as well as professionals with whom they interacted. I worked with the resource family in identifying the professionals they saw most consistently

Consent forms for participation in the research study were signed by all participants. Additionally, the resource couple provided written permission to interview case management staff, school personnel, and mental health providers.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews allowed me to focus upon how a resource couple operates within the greater context of the child welfare system. My effort was to bring about a deeper understanding of resource family success.

The resource couple responded to questions aimed at gaining data to understand how they parent successfully. This was accomplished by having them respond to open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allowed for participants to expand upon an area, topic, or concept (Patton, 2002). This exploration allowed areas to be explored that involved the strategies and relationships (collaborations) the couple developed and utilized in parenting these youth. These relationships were examined by looking at collaborations with educational staff, a mental health provider, and agency case management professionals.

The following questions were used in the semi-structured interviews. The interviews occurred in a setting that was viewed as desirable or most comfortable to the informant – their home. Open-ended questions were used as an outline during the interviews. This format was designed to elicit responses from the participants in their own words that allowed the participants to elaborate on their perceptions and experiences from their own reality.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Resource Couple

1. What has helped you to allow your foster child to grow up in your home?
2. What has helped your family to allow your foster child to grow up in your home?
3. What resources in your home have helped you and your foster child?

4. What resources outside your home have helped you and your foster child?
5. How would you describe what this child has brought to your home and family?
6. What advice would you give families looking to take high-risk teens?
7. What are some of the things you do to promote success? What things do you do as a family to promote success?
8. What are the things you love most about your child who is living with you?
9. What have been your greatest rewards?
10. How can we get more families like you to participate in this effort?
11. Pretend you are the governor. What would you change or do differently to help foster children who are living in family homes?
12. Is there anything you want me to know that I did not ask?

I gathered insights from the birth children of the resource parents. The birth children in this study were adults who lived outside of the home. Their perspectives were included because the resource parents felt they played an active role in the placement success for kids in foster care. Additionally, the perspectives of birth children were neglected in the literature. The following questions were used in the interviews.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for the Birth Children

1. What qualities/characteristics do you see present in your family that help make parenting successful?
2. Resource parents have to communicate with a lot of people about a foster child. How important is your parent's ability to communicate when looking at success in fostering? For example, with you, school personnel, casework staff, mental health professionals, court officials, birth parents of kids placed in your home, others...?

3. What would be the single most important quality/characteristic for your family that makes them successful?
4. Tell me about a time when a complement was given and how your family responded?
Tell me about a time when a concern has been expressed and your family responded?
5. If you were in charge of the foster care system, what would you recommend to promote/increase the number of successful resource homes like yours?
6. What else do you want me to know about what you think makes your home successful for high-risk teens?

A similar procedure was done with the professionals to gain their perspective on parenting success. The following guide was used for their interviews.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Professionals

1. What qualities/characteristics do you see present in the (Name) resource family that help make that family successful?
2. Resource parents have to communicate with a lot of people. How important is a resource family's ability to communicate when looking at successful parents? For example, with school personnel, casework staff, mental health professionals, court officials, birth parents, others...?
3. How do you see the (Name) family's communication relating to successful resource parenting?
4. What would be the single most important quality/characteristic for the (Name) resource family that makes them successful?
5. How do you think the (Name) resource family responds to a complement (Example)?
How do you think the (Name) resource family responds to a concern (Example)?

6. If you were in charge of the foster care system, what would you recommend to promote/increase the number of successful resource homes like the (Name)?
7. What else do you want me to know about what you think makes the (Name) resource home successful that we have not talked about?

Data Management

All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. I also made notes at the end of each interview to record my personal observations and of the interactions - primarily nonverbal – that I observed. Special attention was given to the content to assure that discussion was congruent with the affect and tone of voice by the participants. The classroom meeting with the PhD qualitative students and me was also audio-recorded. The transcribed data given to the students was returned to me along with their notes which identified themes they saw emerging from the interviews.

Audio recordings of each interview were stored in a locked file cabinet in my office. The last names of participants were omitted and pseudonyms were given to participants. Also identifying characteristics of participants were omitted to maintain confidentiality.

I created three clusters of the ten interviews I conducted to capture the perspectives of the resource parents as the primary unit of analysis as one cluster; therefore, the first cluster included the three interviews with the resource couple – the two individual interviews and the joint interview. The second cluster focused on the “child’s” perspective. Therefore, it included the birth children (who had lived in the home) and foster child who was currently living in the family resource home. The third cluster focused on the professional perspective. It was comprised of four professionals who interact with the family on a consistent basis. These included a mental health professional, a school counselor, the case manager for the resource

family, and the case manager for the foster child that I interviewed. By examining these clusters individually and comparatively I was able to see emerging patterns or themes as to what constitutes a successful resource couple.

Analysis

The organization and analysis of data followed flexible guidelines that allowed me to examine the phenomenon. My analysis consisted of listening to all of the audio taped recordings during my transcription of each interview. Listening to the recordings provided familiarity with the data early in the process. Following that, I focused on each of the research questions to guide my analysis. What processes occur within the family unit that facilitates success? And what processes occur outside the family unit to facilitate success?

I used the specific research questions during the analysis. 1: What processes occur within the family unit to facilitate success? 2: What processes occur outside the family unit to facilitate success? I was careful to place responses into either an inside-the-family process or an outside-the-family unit process category. Through this analysis themes began to emerge from patterns in the data, regarding parenting success.

After categorizing the responses, I used triangulation of analysis. Triangulation, according to Patton (2008), is ideal in conducting qualitative research in that the process allows for independent reviewers to examine data that had been collected by the researcher. These co-analysts in this study were five PhD students enrolled in an advanced qualitative methods course. Independently, the students analyzed and identified themes that they saw in the data. I compared those findings to my own analysis. All of the themes identified in this study were seen by both the qualitative graduate students and by me. This triangulation was invaluable to my study in that it verified and added confidence in the themes that emerged.

My intention was to identify these themes and concepts using an indigenous approach: the categories are identified by the terms used by the participants. Patton (2002) wrote about how indigenous concepts are particularly useful in inductive analysis. He points to the fact that people create categories to make sense of their world. I chose to use the language of the participants as they described the themes that emerged. I felt this approach aided in a better understanding of the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives. In other words, I used the language of the informants as opposed to labeling the emerging themes myself.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative approach was not to validate or to gain greater understanding of theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998). The goal of this research was what Strauss and Corbin defined as being “drawn from data and likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action” (p.12). The use of naturalistic inquiry and qualitative methods are set in rigor that utilizes the scientific method. Bukatko (2008) defined this as “use of objective, measurable, and repeatable techniques to gather information” (p. 40). Employing a scientific method was utilized so my study can be replicated.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Family Systems Theory provided a lens through which the data were analyzed. The research questions gave me a framework with which I approached this phenomenon. The overarching research question was: What are the characteristics present in resource families that successfully parent high-risk teenagers in foster care? Specifically, I asked: What processes occur within the family unit to facilitate success? What processes occur outside the family unit to facilitate success? A very interesting result was that the same themes emerged for both of the specific research questions – the same processes are important within and outside the family. Therefore, I present each theme with sub-headings based on indigenous concepts (terminology drawn verbatim from participant interviews) to denote the processes within the family and outside the family as appropriate. The six main themes are: Treated Like Family/Inclusion, Effective Communication, Boundaries/Household Rules, Humility/Willingness to be Hurt, Flexibility/Adaptation, and Self-Care. The results with the “strongest” themes emerging from the data are presented first.

Treated Like Family/Inclusion

The presence of being treated like family was essential when examining the success of this resource couple. New members were not given “trial” periods with limited privileges. Foster children were included as full members of the family.

Inside the Family

The foster children were treated like family and included in the family. Bill, the resource dad, said,

This is our home – you are a part of our family while you are here and we treat them

like our own kids – the main part is that we treat them like a member of our own family. It is about the relationship so our family gets a little bit bigger each time a child comes in.

The need to bolster family inclusion incorporated a need to make time for one another. The resource mother, as well as the birth children, made numerous statements about how they had family nights, outings, and time together to promote inclusion. Bill and Millie’s efforts also included opportunities to do things spontaneously. Millie stated:

While I know they want to do their own things, we try to have enough family things together that’s just “fun.” It has nothing to do with their appointments. It has nothing to do with therapy. It’s like today – we took a road trip. We went out of town just to visit another city.

The biological children echoed the theme of being treated equally and that membership in the family meant a commitment to spend time together and form positive relationships. Cindy stated:

[My parents have] a genuine love and care for all of us at the same time, and no really partiality...I mean me and my brother as birth children – it would be pretty easy to be partial to me or my brother with our foster siblings, and I think they did a really good job of just like – communicating, you know, care and concern.

Cindy also reflected about how the acceptance of foster children and the importance of inclusiveness were promoted both in word and deed. She added:

[Bill and Millie] they made a really big point for us as a family to be together, I mean there were times when we would have, you know 4 or 5 foster kids and so we were all together...it was like Thanksgiving every day (laughs). We always ate dinners together and talked about our day. [We] made times for family nights. We would play games, or you know, watch a movie together and just have that “togetherness” – I think that has made

them [the fosters kids] really successful. Kind of showing all of us the need for community and just that unity of a family – it was that relationship of a family, I guess.

Ryan touched upon the same themes as his older sister. He also saw prioritizing family inclusion as a key to his parents' success. However, he explained how the acceptance started with his father's willingness to support him (and others) in what their future goals and aspirations.

My dad never had expectations like, 'Hey, you are gonna do baseball,' or like, 'You have to be an all-star quarterback,' or anything like that...I had the freedom to be whoever I wanted to be...but in the context that you had to be part of this family.

Ryan summarized the concept of being a family and making family a priority by stating, **I think they always showed that they cared. I think that's the biggest thing. My dad was there!! Um, my parents were there. We had a lot of family time.**

I would say just by spending the time (parents with kids) – because that implies that they love and care. When you make time for someone that says you care. That means, you know, that you want to be part of their lives...I think that's important – to me it was – growing up.

Amy, the foster child living in the home, also discussed feeling included as a family member. She compared her current experience to previous placements that she had stating:

Well they, I mean they just have fun with us, like – I feel loved. I feel like they're my parents. They don't treat me like a foster kid. They're really happy with me. Like they say that they are proud of me – and Bill like would talk to me about it (troubles) and like ask me if I was okay. He went upstairs, and he didn't let me just sit in my room. He said that we should all have family time so they actually cared. They allow themselves to become attached to us, and that's a big deal. Like I know we come in and a lot of us just come and

go. They don't just treat us like we're gonna leave. They treat us like a member of the family.

Millie, the resource mother, emphasized the importance of family even to the point of serving as their surrogate parents when biological parents were unable or unwilling.

We have one girl in particular. We're getting ready to start family therapy. Her parents are not in the picture and haven't been since she has been in our house, and so her case is not for reunification. So, we've become her family and are starting family therapy.

Bill noted the importance of treating the foster children as his own because of the many responsibilities he is required to do in his parental capacity. Bill frequently provides transportation for the girls and attends doctor and therapy appointments, which can be very difficult for the children. He indicated how he often goes into the examination room with his foster child, **"Just like I did with my own daughter."** He discussed that the medical news can sometimes be troubling for the children to hear, and that he might also need to probe the medical professional to ensure clarity and compliance with directives.

The importance of children coming into their home and being accepted for who they are and what they might contribute to the family was best summarized by Bill and Millie when interviewed together. Bill stated,

What has helped our family is having her [the foster child] become part of our family. I think it opened our eyes to other things, and there's other ways to do things, and I think our kids keep up on what's going on [with the foster kids], and it helps. I think our kids are actually gonna be better parents because of us being foster parents.

Millie reiterated, **"I think that, too."**

Bill revealed that treating the foster children like "their own" was key to their success.

I'm not trying to 'toot my own horn.' These kids don't get treated like a member of the family in the homes they've been in!! Well I think, a lot of times, that's why they get disrupted. To see them start opening up and when they feel like a part of our family that is huge. That is huge for me!!..."I was pulling into the driveway with her [foster daughter] and her friend was waiting on the porch. She said to her friend, 'Who's that?' She answered (in front of me), 'Oh, that's my dad.'"

Millie added, "She used to call us foster Mom and Dad to other people, but now she calls us Mom and Dad to everyone."

Participants in the home and professionals outside of the family contributed to Bill and Millie's successful parenting to their willingness to include all family members.

Outside the Family

Not only did Bill and Millie treat the foster children like family when they are home, but they also represent these children as their family members in interactions outside the home. This theme of inclusion was emphasized by the family members and by people outside the family system who interact with them on a fairly consistent basis.

Julia, who serves as the case manager for foster children placed in Bill and Millie's home, stated:

I think when they bring teenagers into their home they treat them like family. You don't see the difference between them being a foster child and their biological children. They treat everyone equally.

Another professional who interacts with this resource family is Rosemary, their placement coordinator. In her role, she is responsible for facilitating and integrating foster children into a resource home while also working to ensure the family's compliance with

regulations and training requirements. Rosemary discussed how Bill and Millie's commitment to these children not only means creating a place for them in the family, but also serving as the surrogate parent. She noted,

They are just so good with these kids. Each kid has their story, and they take time to listen and hear it and to do what is best for that child. ... Man, you think, 'They are great parents.' I get emails, and Bill wrote one to the judge about his kiddo and at the bottom he wrote, "Amy's Dad." It is like, you can't teach someone that!!

Rosemary, the placement coordinator, noted that the idea of being treated like family extended to the foster children's biological parents.

When a child is placed into their home, birth families are allowed to call, to come over, and to be a part of the family as well. They allow that in their home so there is not a divide. I think in foster parenting, you have to know that there is a birth family, and that these kids love their birth families . . . They need to be included in the family. . .Bill and Millie have always allowed that to happen.

Another aspect of family inclusion occurred as Bill and Millie discussed the public perception of foster care as an area which needs to be presented in a more favorable light. Millie commented how everything in the media and on prime time television seemed to place foster care in a negative light. Bill discussed the importance of framing fostering in a positive light by talking with colleagues, people at church, and friends in other circles about how positive the fostering experience has been for him. Bill noted that his effort to create a positive perception of fostering has enabled his family to grow larger and to be healthier. Bill works as a quiet advocate for others to engage in the fostering effort so that more children can find a home. His experience surrounding the inclusion of the children into his family is a success he is quick to pass along to others as a benefit of fostering.

Effective Communication

The theme of communication was another central key to successful parenting. The resource parents viewed effective communication as ongoing, open, and honest dialogue in and amongst all of the players involved in the foster care system.

Inside the Family

The parents gave special attention to including the children in the communication as a teaching tool to help move them into young adulthood. Bill emphasized involving the girls in discussions that pertain to their lives. He said:

They've not seen how Mom and Dad work together. We have girls, and I am the only guy in the house. I know I have to take them to their doctor's appointments and things like that, and so we talk about stuff.

He underscored the need to be open to having discussions even around uncomfortable topics.

We talk with them up front. We are honest with them. We don't try to embarrass them. You gotta talk to them about sex and stuff like that, and I take a lot time to tell them if they have boyfriends, how they should be treated. I have taken them and shown them, 'this is how a date should go'

The resource parents noted how important it was to be a role model for how parents should talk and treat one another. Bill stated:

A lot of them need to see how a family works... I mean there are so many of these girls that come in and say...or see my wife and I hug or kiss each other. You know; you know like a butterfly kiss, and they say 'oh – that's so sweet'...We just had to understand this a long time ago because the reason they are in foster care is that something was

‘messed-up’ in their home...We have to tell them, ‘This is our house; this is what we do in our home.’ We get some kids who have never had that.

It was also noted that concerns were dealt with in a very open and inviting format. Problems are dealt with swiftly. Cindy also relayed how important it was for members of the family to “speak up” when they have a concern. She noted how issues really do not “fester” in their home because members talk openly and honestly with one another.

We’re gonna talk it out. I said that communication was key already, but, I mean, that some families just ignore situations, and just let it go. You know, my parents kind of were like, ‘Let’s have a meeting.’ If it was a big decision they’re gonna make, ‘Let’s see what everyone thinks about this.’ If we were having an argument or someone was upset, then it was, ‘OK – give em’ time to breathe – but we’re gonna talk about it.’ We were gonna talk about why we were having this argument instead of just blowing-up randomly because you kept it all inside.

Outside the Family

The foster child, and to some extent, the birth children, saw the communication in terms of advocacy on behalf of the children placed in the home. Amy, the foster child living in the home, pointed out how communication plays an important role with her resource parents in building rapport and advocacy. She stated:

They pretty much speak for me. Sometimes they actually have to be able to talk for me and know how to help me, and they are good at talking.

Cindy, their birth daughter, told of how the ability to communicate has led to success especially in the school setting, given the fragmented educational background of many of the girls.

Communication is very important because it is obvious that these kids come from really difficult situations. I think that this communication tool needs to be developed to really do what they do. They have to enroll [kids] each year. They communicate with teachers on how to help them be successes in class when they do come in really late into a school season. Continuing that communication is essential to graduate, especially with some of the older kids because they have a tendency to be less ambitious to complete their education.

Professional staff viewed effective communication as the resource family's ability to understand the roles and responsibilities of the professionals and how the resource family accesses and utilizes the players so effectively. Linda, their mental health provider, spoke of communication as being an asset to these resource parents. She remarked about how understanding the child welfare system and utilizing the supports and resources as instrumental to their success.

I think one of the single most important things is their understanding of the system and the players in the system. A lot of times our resource families are very overwhelmed with the mental health center and child welfare agencies, even the different parts of the child welfare agencies, and the visits and court and CASA. They have such a good understanding of how each of these people takes on which roles. They understand why they are there and why it is so important to communicate with all of us, and I think that they utilize those people in a way that they are supposed to, for their support. If a child is struggling with mental health, they know where to go. They know where to start the process. So, I think for them, the reason they have been so successful is that they know the players and utilize those players in their proper roles.

Professionals also noted this family's ability to keep everyone on the same page. Julia,

the case manager for foster children placed in the home, saw communication of Bill and Millie being helpful because they are proactive on issues and keep parties informed.

They send me e-mails and phone calls about everything that is happening. If there's an incident in the home where my kid gets in a fight or something with another kid, then I know all the details of what happened and how they resolved that situation. I know when appointments are made, when appointments are cancelled, when they think something is going on in the home and just need someone to check in, they communicate very well and it makes my job easier as a case manager.

Bill highlighted the concept of communication as I was leaving their home after the formal interview. He relayed why he has all the case managers over once a month for their monthly visits in the home – all at the same time. Many families would meet individually with each case worker and child. He stated that they wanted each case manager to know what is going on with their specific child as well as the other kids in the home, and that information was important to the overall placement stability of each child. Bill felt the case managers have to know what is happening with the other girls as well. He gave the example of Rex, a boy down the street who had sex with one of the girls and was also having sex with another girl in the home – yet was acting like he was being exclusive and committed to just one of the girls. Those issues about how they run into conflicts and are able to keep all of the case managers informed about what all of them are doing is critical to success according to Bill. The behavior or actions of one of the girls affects all of the others in the home.

Boundaries/Household Rules

Managing a household with many teens has required that the parents have a fair amount of structure and routine in order to operate such as a set curfew and time-out slips. The family

referred to their household rules as boundaries.

Inside the Family

Within the family, this included having to get permission for outings as well as being accountable by having consequences for when rules are broken or protocol is not followed. Bill stated:

We have boundaries set in place that we had clear back whenever our kids were in high school. We started doing foster care whenever – maybe junior high? – and we found we had to have some really good boundaries when we started doing high school kids. We had our kids in high school and another (child in foster care) also in high school. We had three high school seniors all going different directions (laughs) so we thought, ‘Time out!’ All of the sudden you’re like, ‘Where are you going?’ and they’re like, ‘Mom, Dad we told you this.’ So we came up with a form, a time-out request form. (See Appendix B) We had this set up like so you’ve got to turn this in 24 hours in advance because we’ve gotta know where everyone is going, and that has helped us.

The importance of these time-out request forms was also noted by Amy, the foster child living in their home. These forms are much more than simply paperwork or permission slips. Understanding boundaries helps serve as a way to communicate care.

When we ask to leave, they have sign out sheets so they actually know where we are, and they don’t just let me run wild; like they know my friends, and they get involved in my life so they know where I am, and that I am safe. I think that is a good thing.

Bill remarked how these boundaries are helpful. When they are made known and kids understand the consequences, this can be a learning opportunity. As young people approaching adulthood, he believes these girls need that level of autonomy to make decisions for them and to

live with the results.

The kids need boundaries like I said before, but you have to stick to those boundaries because they test those boundaries almost immediately, and it's really easy to start out with those boundaries in place and be pretty hard on them at first. Being able to say, 'No – it's all about choices' and that's why we have posters in the bathroom that Millie and I say that more than anything. 'It's about choices. I am not the one who made that choice. You made that choice; so therefore, this is the result of your choices you have made. You chose to do that.'

Sometimes this accountability means the entire family may need to adjust to meet the demands of the youth. This can make the whole household uncomfortable.

We encourage them to study, to get their studying done before they turn on the T.V. They like that. We've gone as far as – lately we had some girls that were hooked on some cable T.V. shows, and we turned the cable off. That's hard on everybody (laughs) you know, but on the same token we, we've gone back to learning, adjusting, and we found out that some of the girls have never had anyone hold them accountable for going to school.

These boundaries also may lead to conversations that are also uncomfortable but necessary. Bill stated:

I tell a young lady you should go change your shirt because I am not comfortable with the way you are dressed. You know, sometimes just being honest with them. Kids thank us. They say, 'Thank you that is the first time anyone told me that.' They need boundaries. One of them literally said, 'Thank you. You've given me boundaries which I've never had before,' and she thanked us for it.

Outside the Family

Millie discussed their limitations as being an important boundary. She and Bill know they are not the right placement for every child, and that they have to consider not just the potential youth coming to the home, but how their placement will affect the entire system.

We know our boundaries and we've done it [fostered teens] long enough. They tell you that in MAPP class, 'You need to know what you can and can not handle and what you will or will not accept in your home.' We had a pretty broad idea, but as we came down to it, it's that did not work out very well because of those behaviors. So when they call us with certain things, it's like – 'We cannot really handle that [certain behaviors].'

Millie spoke about how this process involves communicating with her placement coordinator. If she and Bill felt that a child was not a good fit, then they started communicating their concerns to the case manager. Millie indicated that she also worked with staff on helping to assess her family's strengths and weaknesses in order to make good placements. Bill and Millie see the support staff as valuable in helping them set limitations, but also in obtaining additional services and resources to assist them if a concern for disruption is presented.

This theme of boundaries was one that was echoed repeatedly by professionals outside of the family unit. Linda, the therapist added:

I think one of the barriers for kids when they've been with a family for a long time is when they are getting ready to go back with their natural parents – the foster parents are grieving.

Bill and Millie are able to form attachments with the kids but they are also able to have a sort of separateness that allows them to move the children back with their families successfully. Their boundaries allow for this to occur. They prepare for this, according to their therapist.

Linda also noted the idea of understanding their responsibilities in the process. Bill and

Millie know the roles of the many players, so this allows them to focus upon being the parents. They do not have to be the therapist, educational advocate, or the case management staff. The clarity or boundaries around what their role is - and is not - is important to their success.

Lastly, Julia, the case manager to the home, spoke about how Bill will take the girls on “practice dates.” Bill does this practice in an effort to have the girls set appropriate boundaries for boys that take them out on dates. Julia spoke about the importance of the girls having limits and expectations for how they should be treated. Boundaries extended beyond the family unit and were an acceptable standard or practice for the youth to have regarding these life skills.

Humility/Willingness to be Hurt

The goal for many of these youth is to move into some type of independent living situation. The trail of workers and staff who interact with the kids can be overwhelming. The need to always keep the youth in the forefront and approach their goals with objectivity is difficult, especially when the resource parents care for them day in and day out.

Inside the Family

Sometimes letting youth make choices that the resource parent would rather not see them choose, can be both hard and hurtful. Bill stated,

With all these different people, you're gonna have all these people in and out of your life, and it stinks; but you gotta do it, because that's what's in these kids best interests. You're gonna have feedback from people that you may not really like, but it's kinda part of the deal and the process. We are all learning along the way different stuff about different things, and you have to be open to that. You have to be flexible; you have to be willing to do things in ways that you might not have done them. Like with your own kids, you have to be willing to get hurt. It hurts when you welcome these kids into your home,

and to love' em and to care for' em, and then let them go.

Being humble can mean that one gives love unconditionally. This can be a challenge in that many resource parents go into this endeavor because of self satisfaction and the rewards that come from helping others. However, these youth have been hurt and often struggle with being able to articulate their appreciation. Their appreciation often comes through in nonverbal ways and by behaviors that youth display. It is important that a resource family be observant in order to recognize these nonverbal communications of appreciation. Bill stated,

You've gotta be able to open your home and open your heart to these kids, and expect nothing in return. (Pause) It's – it's sometimes a two-way street that at some point they have to function as part of the family and be able to follow the house rules, but that doesn't mean they're ever gonna be able to reciprocate the feelings or the love or anything else you give to them um – you gotta be able to kinda have thick skin sometimes.

Millie added, **'It's to keep us humble, I'm pretty sure.'**

Outside the Family

Ryan, the resource family's birth son, talked about how his parents remained humble, although they are often complimented or praised by others for their parenting. Ryan relayed how humility plays an important role in their family.

You know they (other families) would say, 'We just love your family.' And they would also say, 'You are such good kids and a blessing to our church.' And you know, I think the way I remember is that we took it humbly. You know, it wasn't like we wrote it off or anything, but we would not like sit on it either. Or be like, "Oh!! We are so awesome.' I think we take compliments – you know, my Dad is a very humble man – I don't know if you've got to know him but – I have learned a lot about the importance of being humble from

him. Yes, I guess I would say we were very humble about compliments we were given as a family.

Meredith, the mental health therapist, noted how humility and “checking your ego” is an asset with these parents. She spoke of how this is a tough job and requires a great deal of maturity. She noted how parents must have a willingness to work with others for the best interests of the youth even if one may not be in full agreement.

Humility, but I think above all else our resource families can't take things personally. They have to be willing to know that it is not personally about them. That there's things that they're gonna do really well with some kids. Things they're not necessarily gonna do well with other kids, and be ok with that. They have to be able to accept feedback from other people and be willing to adjust what they are doing, even if their gut instinct or their moral or their ethics or whatever it is that makes them think, 'This is the worse thing to do.' They are working with a group of people who are recommending this is something that needs to do to help this child, given the history and circumstances. They need to be able to say 'ok' and work with those professionals and be able to make those adjustments, and that is hard!

Flexibility/Adaptation

The theme of flexibility/adaptation was also seen in the data. What emerged was an ability to adjust to each child's specific needs. This resource couple embraced change when appropriate to help with acclimation into the new home setting.

Inside the Family

The ability to be open to change was noted by Bill as he stated:

Like I said in my interview, you've got to be flexible and adaptable. You know, 'Oh,

that didn't work,' so you change that. You know every time we think of something or we've seen it all, they come up with something else.

Millie concurred, **"Oh yes!"**

The resource Mom talked about being flexible on one occasion because she needed the child in her home to help educate her on what her experiences of home life and customs entailed.

And I think while at Christmas time there's that same kind of problem, but I think Christmases for high-risk teens are not a whole lot different from general public. It's a high-stress time. It's a time of year where they had trauma situations happen in their homes. We had one girl, one time, she almost refused to open her Christmas presents. She didn't want to participate in Christmas. She stayed in bed (pause).

Bill followed up, **"And so, we've learned from that. We start out each year saying, 'This is what we do at Christmas time.'"**

Millie stated, **"And start to incorporate maybe things that seem to be important for them. We start traditions and –"**

Bill stated, **"We ask them of their traditions"**

Millie relayed, **"And we try to incorporate their traditions into our Christmas."**

This experience was very difficult for this couple to talk about. It seemed to make them feel sad that they had assumed their foster teen would welcome her presents and this special day. They learned that by being open and flexible they could better meet the needs of kids placed in their home. They also gained a greater understanding of the need to understand these children's past traditions.

Outside the Family

Flexibility also extended to the birth parents of the foster care youth living in their home.

Their case manager spoke of how this couple's willingness and flexibility to expand their family to include the youth's biological kin as a key to their success.

So when a child is placed into their home, birth families are allowed to call, to come over, and to be, you know, a part of that family as well, and they allow that in their home. So there is not a divide. So I think in foster parenting, you have to know that there is a birth family, and that these kids love their birth families – no matter what – and they need to be included in the family if it can be safe. Bill and Millie have always allowed that to happen, they want that for the kids. They want their families to heal so that they can go back to them if at all possible.

Understanding that these kids have connections that need to be acknowledged and honored speaks to the maturity and flexibility that Bill and Millie display.

Self Care

The idea of self care relates to how people meet their needs when giving of themselves to others. Self care can take many forms, for Bill and Millie, self care meant being optimistic and being willing to reframe situations which may appear bleak or sad.

Inside the Family

The last main theme which emerged from the data was a positive attitude and the use of humor in difficult situations. Jason discussed how his parents' created a strong family bond by facilitating simple and enjoyable ways to spend time together as a family.

We would have family game night or, you know, sometimes – on the holidays we would all play board games and so – you know that might sound kinda lame – but we had a lot of fun. We use and have a lot of humor in the family and we just have that kinda bond. Yes.

Bill and Millie frequently laughed or joked during the interviews. The topics we discussed can be overwhelming and difficult because many of the origins are rooted in abuse and neglect. Having humor and a positive attitude about this journey served as a source of strength for this couple. When I asked Millie how we might get other families involved in this effort to take high-risk teens, she stated to Bill, **“I think he means besides hog tying them.”** When I asked what advice they would give to families looking to take high-risk teens, Millie laughed and stated, **“Run”** after which she commented that parenting high-risk teens requires having strong level of commitment and compassion.

Outside the Family

While they went on to give sincere responses, their use of humor is a part of their makeup that seems to give them strength. Bill talked about how this fostering effort was going over the last year and the many challenges they were facing.

This year has been a really, really, really rough year for us – we were joking with our social worker in that we may have set the record for the most ‘critical incidents’ (laughs) this year, but you know, I don’t know; anyway – like right now we’ve only got two and its kinda quiet around the house – you know, we don’t mind having a house full of kids. We’re like ‘what else are you gonna do?’

Their sense of optimism and positive attitude centered in on their need to leave their mark when reflecting on what they are doing for these young girls. Bill stated,

I mean, some people – we feel like in this life you – it’s not all about what you had, but about what you did and you know you’re gonna leave a legacy one way or another. Rather you did do something, you know?

Conclusion

One resource family was examined for both the internal and external components contributing to successful foster parenting. Each of the main themes was seen as unfolding both within and outside of the family unit. It is important to note that this was the perception of the family members, as well as the professionals who were interviewed. This provides strong evidence for the importance of these processes as we examine successful resource family characteristics.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The overarching research question in this study was: “What are the characteristics present in resource families that successfully parent high-risk teenagers in foster care?” In order to better understand this phenomenon, I interviewed the members of the resource family and their foster child to get their perspective, and I interviewed professionals who work with the resource family to gain an outside-the-family-system perspective. Together, these insights helped to identify characteristics of the successful couple who parents high-risk teens. The over-arching research question was explored by addressing two specific questions. What processes occur within the family unit to facilitate success? What processes occur outside the family unit to facilitate success?

My initial intent was to look at the entire resource family as my unit of analysis. However, during the participant interviews, it was apparent that the resource couple was seen as primary. I did not anticipate this emphasis on the resource couple. The focus upon the resource couple may have been influenced by the fact that the birth children interviewed were grown and had moved out of the home. More emphasis upon the family unit might have been present if the youth were currently living in the home.

Perspectives from both inside and outside the resource home were useful when looking at the question through the lens of Family Systems Theory. Resource family members must function with tremendous change both within and outside the family unit (McGuinness & Dyer, 2007). This expanded examination beyond the resource family members to include outside-of-the-home perspectives helped to complete the picture. In this chapter I will discuss each of the emerging themes and provide implications for practice and research.

Consistency Inside/Outside the Family

The consistency of the inductively derived themes both within and outside the family was unanticipated and especially notable. As I analyzed the data to answer each research question, the same indigenous themes were seen both inside the resource family and outside the resource family unit. This indicates that the family was consistent both within the home and in the family's outer environment. These themes reflected more than just actions by the resource couple; they also indicated a strong belief system that incorporated the themes.

Consistency inside and outside the family may be explained when we look at authoritative parenting. Baumrind (1971) described how authoritative parents were effective in setting limits and communicating their expectations clearly. Additionally, authoritative parents were able to apply consistent responses across different situations. Bill and Millie displayed authoritative parenting styles in the application of the themes. The consistency that the couple demonstrated inside and outside the family is indicative of an authoritative parent.

Themes, Theory, and Meaning

Each theme that emerged from the data can be viewed through the lens of Family Systems Theory. It is also important to examine the meaning of each theme beyond the context of theory and to view the phenomenon as each compares to the literature.

When I viewed the theme of Treated Like Family from a Family Systems Theory perspective, it seemed natural that the members of that family felt as though they were part of a unit. Boughner, Hecker, and Mims (2007) wrote, "A family system includes family members, the unique attributes of the family members, and the relationships between family members" (p. 42). This aspect regarding being family members was evident when the respondents relayed how children placed with the couple are treated like members of the family. Boughner et al. (2007)

indicated that this is important because the Family Systems Theory framework looks at membership in the family unit as to how “this small group of closely related and interdependent individuals [is] organized into a unit with specific purposes, functions, and goals” (p 42).

Children placed with this couple were considered to be members of the family unit. Those inside and outside the family unit emphasized this theme. Bill pointed out that the children are treated as a part of his family. Amy, a foster child, added that she felt as if Bill and Millie were her own parents. Moreover, the case manager noted that Bill and Millie see no difference between their foster children and their biological children.

The couple noted that being treated like family was a key aspect as to why they are successful at parenting this high-risk population. Family Systems Theory is grounded in the understanding that what occurs in or to one part of the system will have an effect upon the whole system (Klein & White 2002). The strong desire for this couple to include foster children into family membership affects the entire system and supra-system. Supra-systems included the case management staff, school, and mental health providers. Bill and Millie’s intention for the children placed with them to be included was felt by other members within the family unit and by those outside of the family unit. Abraham Maslow (1954) wrote about how individuals need to feel a sense of belongingness. In his “Hierarchy of Needs,” Maslow placed belongingness only after the need for food, water, shelter, and safety. It was apparent in the interviews from the perspectives of all the participants that a sense of belongingness was characteristic of this couple’s parenting success.

“Treated like family” was an indigenous theme that had not been previously highlighted in the literature as contributing to successful resource parents. However, it is closely associated with other concepts such as “inclusion” or “cultural competence.” Inclusion means an acceptance

of new members that is often unconditional. Cultural competence explains how a families ability to understand the background and experience of others that can move them to be accepting of differences. Being treated like family often requires that inclusion and the ability to be culturally competent to be present. Themes that are closely related can be explained by similar concepts. I used the interview participants' words to label the themes. This gave voice to their world view as to what the family saw unfolding and leading to success. If I had labeled the emerging themes, I might well have chosen to use a concept found in the research literature.

Family Systems Theory explains how families maintain homeostasis or the status quo as they develop reoccurring interactional patterns (Boughner et al., 2003). In an effort to maintain stability and balance, the family relied heavily on their abilities to communicate. This theme of communication was occurring both inside and outside the family system. The couple's success was dependent on how well they were able to communicate, not only with the children living in the home, but also with the many aspects of the child welfare arena. This couple was often the link between multiple providers and was sometimes called upon to advocate for services for youth. The ability for them to communicate with so many parts of the system addressed one of the biggest obstacles in foster care. Corcordora (2008) noted how the foster care system often frustrates resource parents. The author noted that resource families, who viewed the care and treatment of foster children as uncoordinated and lacking integration, cited this as a primary concern in their efforts. There is often difficulty in sharing information among providers, and this creates tension. The parents in this study made communication and sharing information a priority. They emphasized the need to keep professionals informed, and how they need to have the lines of communication open with the girls living in their home.

Communication was not only verbal and through written emails with other members, but

also through their modeling and nonverbal actions. This couple wanted to demonstrate to the girls how they worked together as a team. It was important that they showed affection with one another, and that they showed the girls how a couple works together to accomplish goals. Those goals might be a doctor's appointment that needs to be made or needing to address concerns over a girl's failing grades. This ability to communicate can be understood when seen in the Family Systems Theory framework. The interactions and recurring patterns that the couple established and maintained were central to the concept of homeostasis and to this family's success.

Communication was seen in the literature in the form of collaboration. The development of good working relationships among the components or participants in the child welfare arena is crucial to having stable placements for children (Brown, 2007). The research emphasizes how successful families are able to form positive relationships with professionals, the foster child, and birth families. The theme of communication is highlighted in the collaboration efforts of a successful resource family. Effective communication not only leads to better outcomes for placement but also enhances the retention of resource families because of the positive relationships formed in the process.

Family Systems Theory can help explain how a family regulates inputs and outputs into the system. This is accomplished via boundaries (Boughner et al., 2003). This idea is key because resource families must manage the inputs and outputs of their family unit. The resource dad noted this theme of boundaries during his interview. He spoke of the importance of having rules and procedures for the girls to follow in order to maintain a sense of stability or equilibrium in the home.

Much of the foster parents' interviews centered in on this theme of boundaries. An example provided by Bill was a time-out request form. This form was developed by Bill and

Millie and is required by all the teens living in their home to fill out 24 hours in advance to go on an outing. The couple spoke of how this one tool has brought structure and focus into a home that can feel like it is sometimes full of chaos. They both held strong to the consequence that no teen is allowed to go out to the movies, spend the night with friends, etc. without having completed a form.

The importance of this procedure can be seen from a Family Systems Theory perspective. A change in one part of the system will affect all parts of the system (Bukatko, 2008). This one component seemed to reverberate into helping structure many other aspects of the parenting process for Bill and Millie. The form allows for planning on the part of the teens and creates an opportunity for the parents to consult their schedules to see if they need to arrange transportation or being at home during a certain time. The form was seen as a sign of care by the foster child Amy because she felt good that her parents wanted to know where she was or who she was with when out for the day or evening. Most importantly, it seemed to bring focus to the couple when they can get so distracted by the activities of the kids. Sometimes the form helped avoid splitting behavior (asking one parent if the other says no) or just being so overwhelmed with the happenings of so many people. The form provided a boundary for everyone in the family.

This theme of boundaries meant that the family used natural consequences when the children made a poor choice. This meant sometimes that everyone had to suffer when the cable was shut off. This theme was also echoed when Bill would take the girls out on practice dates so that clear expectations of how “boys are to treat you” would be understood.

Boundaries around the couple’s understanding of their limitations regarding acceptance of placements were also evident. It was often done in concert with their placement coordinator to help make a good fit for placement. The family saw professionals helping them in this area of

limitations because of the strong rapport they had built through their relationships.

The couple spoke about humility and being able to be hurt as useful in parenting high-risk teens. This was a theme mentioned by many of the participants. Both Bill and Millie believe that what they are doing is of great service to the children. However, they also noted that they have girls who they have taken into their home and have not been able to maintain. So, they seem to celebrate their success with a sense of caution and reticence. They were as moved emotionally by the kids who have done well as they were by those who have had to move on because of the family system's inability to maintain them in their home.

Bill and Millie's variety of skills and parenting styles has meant that this couple has had to reexamine their own upbringing, traditions, and customs. It is important for families engaged in working with this population to learn and understand the backgrounds of the youth from the child's perspective. Allowing the child to relay experiences and traditions is also vital. The need to be upfront and clear with a foster child about how customs are celebrated and acknowledged in the resource home is key. This couple makes no assumptions about how holidays and special occasions should be approached. They were informed by each child and incorporated the child's customs as best they could.

Variety is an important feature in looking at success. Kline and White (2002) defined this as "the extent to which the 'family system' has the resources to meet new environmental demands" (p. 159). The authors also noted that the greater and more diverse the options (variety), then the better equipped the system is to adapt to change.

This family gained flexibility and variety by learning from the children who live in their home. The couple genuinely was appreciative for their relationships, their own upbringing, and their experiences when introduced to those of other people. The family seemed to be very

humbled in their handling of compliments and praise. It appeared that if they took credit for the success, then they also needed to accept a certain responsibility for those who were not able to stay with them in their home. The family felt that they gained as much as they gave, and that truly this effort involves getting something in return that is not monetary.

The theme of self care can be viewed from a Family Systems Theory perspective. Self care can be seen in the concept of rules of transformation. Klein and White (2002) describe this concept as families taking in information from the environment and transferring this input as an output from the family system. Rules of transformation are important when I look at the theme of the couple having a positive attitude, reframing, and their use of humor. They employed these as self-care techniques. The couple used their humor and positive outlook to help reframe many of the challenges and obstacles that they encountered as being resource parents. This population requires that as a parent, “You gotta be able to kind of have thick skin sometimes,” stated Millie. The case manager relayed numerous trips to the emergency room, police being called out to their home, and physical destruction (holes in their walls) that sometimes occurred in the home. This family seemed to handle these past negative encounters with ease and they held little weight when compared to the successes they have had in their effort in fostering. Bill and Millie wanted every child to have a better life, and this goal seemed to overshadow the few negative episodes that had occurred. The couple frankly saw them as a learning experience as to how they could operate differently or make adjustments in the future.

This positive outlook was coupled with a sense of humor that was very apparent in the interview. The humor seemed to mask what can sometimes be very difficult for people to understand when working with abused and neglected children. This couple became tearful a number of times during the interview when talking about the children and their success. It was

seen as even a greater victory for the children to achieve when they had to overcome so many tragedies in their past according to the couple. I saw their use of humor helping them to manage in an environment that could be overwhelming given the magnitude of some of the youths' traumatic histories. The couple seemed to focus only on opportunities with each child placed with them. The opportunity for the child to have new experiences was a chance for their family to grow. They also saw that being resource parents will help their own children. Despite the numerous challenges, the family was optimistic.

Resource families need to see the importance of self care because of the high level of trauma that many of the youth in the foster care system have experienced (Pufahl, 2007). Families need to take time for their own needs given the nature of the intense work they are asked to perform. Saxe, Ellis & Ludwig (2007) discuss secondary trauma which is the negative effects that trauma can have for caregivers. Families engaged in this work will be routinely exposed to children who have experienced traumatic events. Because this trauma can vicariously transfer to the resource parents, it is important for couples to incorporate this theme of self care into their lives.

The themes discussed as emerging from the data are linked closely to Family Systems Theory and to the research literature. The application and impact for Family Life Educators in the area of Child Welfare offers promise in both practice and in research efforts.

Implications for Practice

Family life educators ought to consider the importance of being treated like family and inclusion when recruiting and training prospective families to foster high-risk teens. During the initial selection process, trainers should assess a potential family's willingness to allow full inclusion of high-risk youth. Moreover, the family's birth children also need to understand that

all members must be treated like family. For Bill and Millie, there was no distinction between how they parented their biological and foster children. Prospective families need to know of this level of commitment and how it can positively impact success.

The ability to use couples such as Bill and Millie to serve as mentors is another implication for practice. New families could benefit from seeing how their experiences with their own birth children facilitated success. Bill and Millie had to gain the “buy-in” of their birth children. Potential families may need to further explore the level of commitment with their birth children to this theme of being treated like family and inclusion. Families need to know of the importance of this finding, and if this theme is something that is a fit for their situation.

Education and training regarding the importance of communication should be emphasized to prospective families as their level of competence is explored. Developing assessment tools that are aimed at identifying families’ communication capabilities might also prove useful. Some families may need additional assistance and training in order to be the conduit of much of the information to others. Unfortunately, some families may not see the importance of communicating to others and how their efforts in this area might enhance success. They might not be the best fit for this high-risk population. Bill and Millie achieved great success by ensuring all aspects of their system be fully informed in a timely manner. Bill and Millie made communication a priority, similar to the degree as of being treated like family and inclusion. Again, if families are informed and educated as to the importance of this theme of communication, they can make a better decision around accepting high-risk teens into their home.

Specifically, communication can be addressed early in the training process by having families visit with the area schools, community centers, and youth group organizations before

they consider a placement. Families that are proactive in meeting with school staff, because they are looking to take youth, are going to be better received as opposed to those who take a child to the high school soon after their arrival. Letting the educational staff know that you are in a training class and anticipate the youth attending at their school will help set a tone that emphasizes the importance of communication and their vital role in helping the kids succeed.

Family life educators must continually work with resource families that take high-risk teenagers into their home. This is an on-going process of training, not a one-time event. Bill and Millie spoke of the strong relationship that they have with the worker assigned to their home. The family processed potential placements with their case manager to help better ensure a good fit for placement. This included looking at the children currently in their home in relationship to new referrals. If we can help families to assess their strengths and limitations around certain behaviors that children present, then we enhance the likelihood of success. Bill and Millie sought the counsel of their worker and saw value in getting their feedback. This is an important implication for practice as we train staff and families on helping parents identify their strengths and limitations in the context of all the children living in the home.

Case management personnel are not required to attend resource family training courses in many agencies. These staff members work closely with resource families and would benefit from attending the foster parent training classes. It is important for professionals to know what resource parents are taught because of the high number of children on any given caseload that live with resource families. The training provides a common skill set that the professional can connect back to issues and struggles that families may encounter. For example, the training covers stages that occur when a disruption of placement happens. Staff can address a certain stage with families to help them better understand where they are at in the process. Professionals

who have had exposure to the training can better make this connection. Case management staff will have added credibility because they are able to point back to sections in the curriculum and remind resource parents of skills needed to develop or areas for them to address.

Child welfare providers owe a level of responsibility to these youth to have a good understanding of what their placement providers are taught. Since the training is not a workforce mandate, consideration for the resource family training course to be taught at colleges and universities would be helpful. The class could be an elective or become a core requirement in many programs. This would allow for earlier introduction of the material and would open the possibility for the student to become a licensed resource family.

Practitioners need to introduce the component of humility to prospective families. Bill and Millie got a great deal of praise and thanks from professionals for their efforts in fostering. The theme of humility echoed in their response by giving credit to all of the players involved in the foster care system. It would be helpful for families engaged in taking high-risk teens that they understand success is dependent on multiple professionals.

Fostering also brings occasions of sadness. The theme of a willingness to be hurt must be part of the preparation in taking this population. The prospective families need avenues to interact with these older youth in an effort to want to make the investment and open them to possible heartache. In getting to know the youth, it may mean that families have to gain a greater understanding of these children's life experiences. These experiences are often filled with trauma and abandonment. Informing parents of the need to understand the child's perspective may start with assessing their skills in listening to youth, but then thinking about how they could make adjustments given the new information. These accommodations by this family seemed to allow for placement stability. A recommendation to allow role playing and having practice vignettes of

such examples as Bill and Millie relayed might help families decide if this is a capacity they have or can develop.

Other recommendations include taking high-risk placements on a respite basis or even on an emergency situation. This would allow for experience without a long-term commitment for placement. It would also be helpful for families to simply meet these youth in informal situations who are being successful in their placements. These can be arranged by workers and would allow for prospective families to see these youth outside of a written referral for placement. If families are able to see for themselves what potential rests with many of these youth, than their perception and willingness to accept them may increase. These efforts all include an opportunity or willingness to hear the stories of these children's journeys. A longer term commitment to take a high-risk youth may be more successful when families can draw upon these earlier experiences in the short term. There will be hurt and sadness in this endeavor. These are some preemptive steps that may help families deal with these feelings.

This study highlighted many points from the themes developed. The consistency of these themes being seen within and outside the family was key. As child welfare professionals look to develop more families to serve this group of youth, this consistency of perspectives from inside and outside the family may be present. Assessing both inside and outside the resource family and finding similar and consistent perspectives is something to look for in families that can be successful.

Implications for Research

Qualitative research helps us develop “reasonable conclusions and generalizations based

on a preponderance of the data” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 139). As I look at the themes that emerged in this study, I know that these findings are a small step toward identifying characteristics present in successful resource families. The need to explore this phenomenon of success needs to be researched in greater detail. What this study did was to look at one successful resource couple that has parented high-risk teens in foster care. While some of the supra-systems were explored to gain greater perspective beyond the family unit, many other aspects of the child welfare arena exist and need attention. These include the court systems, neighborhoods, and the resource family’s extended family and friends, as a few examples. It is also important to note that this is one family was comprised of a resource father and mother. There are a number of other forms of resource families who are successful with this population such as single and same sex couples. These other family constellations merit investigation as well.

Geographically and economically, this family was from the Midwest and is of moderate income. Studies that would look at other families from different categories need to be done. This couple was also white, which limits the perspective. Insights from families of color are needed.

I chose this couple to address gaps in the literature that included missing the perspectives of resource fathers and birth children. However, this study did not include the perspective of the birth family of the foster child, because the birth family had no contact with the youth I interviewed. Further studies that would include birth family perspectives, other resource family make-ups, and other supra-systems involved in the foster care arena are needed.

While offering the resource parent training as a college course may be one approach to professional exposure, another would be to study the effects of the training of staff members who have completed the course. Is the placement stability of youth increased by having the case manager complete the same pre-service training as the resource families? Is there less employee

turnover for those who have had the resource family training? Agencies may see a financial incentive to send their staff to the training if research indicates better outcomes for youth in care and having a more stable work force.

Studies that would replicate the current project would be helpful. The consistent reporting by the informants of these themes occurring inside and outside the family was remarkable.

Would another family share these same consistencies? This successful resource couple presented the same both within and outside the family in their actions. Future studies could examine this consistency for added validation.

Conclusion

This study highlights some preliminary thoughts and concepts that must be developed further. Placement stability of high-risk teens is an important issue as we look to recruit and train more families to meet the needs of children who are at risk of aging out of the foster care system without a permanency option. An increase in resource homes who can be successful parents for high-risk teens in foster care is a lofty goal. Family life educators working in child welfare need to examine how we can identify, train, and recruit placement resources for this fragile population.

I started this study with the example of Mary who was successfully parented within a resource family. The benefits gained from having Mary's foster mother serve as a mentor to other resource families could be tremendous. I told of another youth, Donnie, who was imprisoned as an adult and had been moved from placement to placement while in foster care. Could his life course have been less troubled had he lived with a resource family that provided him stability? I want to think his outcome could have been more hopeful. This research is a small step in the direction of helping to create more positive outcomes for these teens. Having worked

with so many of these young people, and the families that parent them in foster care, the effort is well deserved. The analysis revealing that these themes emerged from within the family, and outside the home, gives greater merit to their importance. These characteristics were present in this family who was successful parenting this population. These aspects should be developed more fully as we work with child welfare professionals to create brighter futures for this fragile population.

REFERENCES

- Aldgate, J., Colton, M., Ghate, D., & Heath, A. (1992). Educational attainment and stability in long-term foster care. *Children in Psychology*, 6(2), 91-103.
- Alpert, L. T. & Britner, P. A., (2009). Measuring parent engagement in foster care. *Social Work Research*. 33(3). 135-145.
- Alpert, L. T. & Britner, P. A., (2005). Writing *amicus curiae* and policy briefs: A pedagogical approach to teaching family law and policy. Special issue: Teaching family law and family policy. *Marriage and Family Review*, 38(2), 5-21.
- Arcus, M. (1990). *Introduction to family life education*. Minneapolis, MN: National Council on Family Relations.
- Armstrong, D. (2008). From foster care to fostering care. *Children's Voice*, 17(3), 10-14.
- Patton, M. Q. "Quality in Qualitative Research: Methodological Principles and Recent Developments." Invited address to Division J of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, April 1985.
- Arnett, J.J. (1995). Broad and narrow socialization: The family in the context of a cultural theory. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 617-628.
- Baumrind, D. (1971). Current patterns of parental authority. *Developmental Psychology Monographs*, 4(1, Pt. 2).
- Baumrind, D. (1972). From each according to her ability. *School Review*, 80, 161-197.
- Baumrind, D. (1991). The influence of parenting style on adolescent competence and substance abuse. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 11, 56-94.

Blome, W. (1997). What happens to foster kids? Educational experiences of a random sample of foster care youth and a matched group of non-foster care youth. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Social Work*, 14, 41-53.

Bombeck, B., Rosenthal, J., & Schmidt, D. (1988). Parents' view of adoption disruption. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 10(2), 119-130.

Boughner, S. R., Hecker, L. L., & Mims, G. A. (2003). *An introduction to marriage and family therapy*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Clinical Practice Press.

Brown, J D., & M Campbell. "foster parent perception of placement success." *Children and Youth Services Review* 29.8 (August 2007). *ASAP*. Web. 8 May 2010.

Buehler, C., Rhodes, K.W., Orme, J.G., & Cuddeback, G. (2006). The potential for successful family foster care: conceptualizing competency domains for foster parents. *Child Welfare*, 85(3), 523-559.

Bukatko, D. (2008). *Child and adolescent development: A chronological approach*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Burns, B.J., Phillips, S.D., Wagner, H.R., Barth, .R.P, Kolko, D.J., Campbell,Y., & Landsverk, J. (2004). Mental health need and access to mental health services by youth involved with child welfare: A national survey. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 43, 960-970.

Chamberlain, P. (1998). A treatment of foster care model for adolescents with delinquency. *Family Connections*. Eugene, OR: Northwest Media Inc.

Chapman, M.V., Gibbons, C.B., Barth, R.P., McCrae, J.X., & the NSCAW Research Group (2003). Parental views of in child welfare workers? *Child Welfare*, 82, 571-596.

Christian, S., & Ekman, L. (2000). Adoption and guardianship for children in foster care. *A Place to Call Home*. Washington, D.C.: National Conference of State Legislatures.

Clark, H., Lee, B., McDonald, B., & Prange, M. (1996). Children lost within the foster care system: Can wraparound service strategies improve placement outcomes? *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 5(1), 39-54.

Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care. (2000). Developmental issues for young children in foster care. *Pediatrics*, 5, 106, 114-1150.

Concodora, S. (2008). Serving youth through systems integration. *Children's Voice*, 17(4), 14.

Corby, B., Millar, M., & Young, L. (1996). *Parental participation in child protection work: Rethinking the rhetoric*.

Courtney, M.E., & Dworsky, A. (2005). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 19*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children.

Courtney, M.E., Terao, S., & Bost, N. (2004). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster care youth: Conditions of youth preparing to leave state care*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children.

Crozier, J.C., & Barth, R.P. (2005). Cognitive and academic functioning in maltreated children. *Children in Schools*, 27(4), 197-206.

Curtis, p. A., Dale, G., & Kendall, J.C. (1999). Translating research into policy and practice. *The Foster Care Crisis*. University of Nebraska Press.

DeGarmo, D.S., Chamberlain, P., Leve, L.D., & Price, J. (2009). Foster parent intervention engagement moderating child behavior problems and placement disruption. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 19(4), 423.

Dekovic, M., & Buist, K.L. (2005). Multiple perspectives within the family: Family relationship patterns. *Journal of Family Issues*, 26, 467-490.

Delaney, R. J. (1998). Treating attachment-disordered foster children. *Fostering Changes*. Oklahoma City, OK: Wood “N” Barnes Publishing.

Delaney, R. J., & Kunstal, F. R. (1997). Unconventional strategies for helping disturbed foster children and adopted children. *Troubled Transplants*. Oklahoma City, OK: Wood “N” Barnes Publishing.

Fein, E., & Staff, I. (1995). Stability and change: Initial findings in a study of treatment foster care placements. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 17(3), 379-389.

For the Child: Information on Mental Health and Advocacy for Resource Parents (2007). DVD, Parents Action for Children.

Gilligan, R. (2000). Men as foster carers. A neglected resource? *Adoption and Fostering*, 24, 63-69.

Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.

Harden, B.J. (Winter, 2004). Safety and stability for foster children: A developmental perspective. *Children, Families, and Foster Care*, 14(1), 31-47.

Hipgrave, T. (1983). Adolescence and fostering. *Adoption and fostering*, 7(4), 39-43.

Hornberger, S., Martin, T., & Collins, J. (2006). *Integrating systems of care: Improving quality of care for the most vulnerable children and families*. Washington, DC: CWLA Press.

Horwitz, S., Simms, M., & Farrington, R. Impact of developmental problems on young children’s exits from foster care. *Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* (1994) 15: 105-10.

Isaac, S., & Michael, W. (1981). *Handbook in Research and Evaluations* (2nd Edition). San Diego, CA: EdITS publishers.

Johnson, L. J., Zorn, D., Tam, B. K., Lamontagne, M., & Johnson, S. A. (2003). Stakeholders' views of factors that impact successful interagency collaboration. *Exceptional Children*, 69, 195-209.

Journal of Policy, Practice, and Program. *Child Welfare League of America*. Vol. LXXXIV, (March/April 2005).

Kendall-Tackett, K., & Eckenrode, J. (1996). The effects of neglect on academic achievement and disciplinary problems: A developmental perspective. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 20, 161-169.

Kendziora, K., Burns, E., Osher, D., Pacchiano, D., & Mejia, B. (2001). Promising practices in children's mental health systems of care-2001 Series: Volume 1: Wraparound: stories from the field. Available online at http://cecp.air.org/AIR_Monograph.pdf.

Klein, D. M., & White, J. M. (1996). What is a theory? In D. M. Klein & J. M. White, *Family Theories* (pp. 1-30). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Klein, D. M., & White, J. M. (2002). *Family Theories*. (2nd Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Krebs, M., Kriebel, D., Marklin, J., & Whigfield, A. (2002). Preparing for change: Results from a therapeutic intervention with foster children in the midst of permanency planning. *Adoption Quarterly*, 6(2), 59-65.

Kurtz, P.D., Gaudin, J.M., Jr., Wodarski, J.S., & Howing, P.T. (1993). Maltreatment and the school-aged child: School performance consequences. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 17, 581-589.

Lawler, E.J., Thye, S.R., & Yoon, J. (2008). Social exchange and micro social order. *American Sociological Review*, 73(4), 519-543.

Leathers, S.J., (2006). Placement disruption and negative placement outcomes among adolescents in long-term foster care: the role of behavior problems. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 30(3) 307.

Leathers, S.J., Falconnier, L., & Spielfogel, J.E. (2010). Predicting family reunification, adoption and subsidized guardianship among adolescents in foster care. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 80(3), Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1939-0025.2010.01045.x/abstract>

Lehr, W. & Kantor, D. (1975). *Inside the Family*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Martin, H., and Beezly, P. Behavioral observations of abused children. *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology* (1977) 19:373-87; and Dubowitz, H., Zuravin, S., Starr, H., et al. Behavior problems of children in kinship care. *Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* (1993) 14:386-93.

Maslow, A. (1954). *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper and Row.

McGuinness, T.M., & Dyer, J.G. (2007). Catchers in the rye: Treatment foster parents as a system of care. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 20(3), Retrieved from <https://login.er.lib.k-state.edu/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1327677751&Fmt=3&clientid=48067&RQT=309&Vname=PQD>

Merriam, S.B. (2001). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Newton, R., Litrownik, J (2000). Children and youth in foster care: Disentangling the relationship between problem behavior and number of placements. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 24(10): 1363-74.

Olsen, D.H., Russel, C.S., & Sprenkle, D.H. (1980). Circumplex model of marital and family systems II: Empirical studies and clinical intervention. In J.P. Vincent (Ed.), *Advances in Family Intervention Assessment and Theory, 1*, 129-179. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Parrish, T., Dubois, J., Delano, C., Dixon, D., Webster, D., Berrick, J.D., Bolus, S., (2001). Education of foster group home children: whose responsibility is it? *Study of the Educational Placement of Children Residing in Group Homes*.

Partnering for Safety and Permanence – Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting. *Child Welfare Institute*, (2003). Duluth, GA.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Patton, M. Q. (1985). *Quality in qualitative research: methodological principles and recent developments*. Invited address to Division J of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago.

Pufahl, E. (2007). Effectively addressing mental health issues in child welfare practice: the family connection. *Child Welfare*, 86(5), 75.

Redding, R., Fried, C., & Bitner, P (2000). Predictors of placement outcomes in treatment foster care: Implications for foster parent selection and service delivery. *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 77, 212-36.

Reed, D.E, & Karpilow, K. (2002). *Understanding the child welfare system in California: A primer for service providers and policymakers*. Berkeley, CA California Center for Research on Families.

Rhodes, K.W., Orme, J.G., Cox, M.E., & Buehler, C. (2003). Foster family resources, psychosocial functioning, and retention. *Social Work Research*, 27(3), 135.

Rodger, S., Cummings, A., & Leschied, A.W. (2006). Who is caring for our most vulnerable children?: The motivation to foster in child welfare. *Child Abuse and Neglect*. 30(10).

Saxe, G.N, Ellis, B.H, & Kaplow, J.B. (Ed.). (2007). *Collaborative treatment of traumatized children and teens*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Sherman, R. R., & Webb, R. B. Qualitative Research in Education: A Focus. In R. R. Sherman and R. B. Webb (Eds.), *Qualitative Research in Education: Focus and Methods*. Bristol, Pa.: Falmer Press, 1988.

Smith, D., Stormshak, E., Chamberlain, P., & Bridges, R (2001). Placement disruption in treatment foster care. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*. 9(3) 200-05

Smith, P. (1986). Evaluation of Kent placements. *Adoption and Fostering*, 10(1), 29-33.

Smithgall, C, Gladden, R.M., Howard, E., I, R., & Courtney, M. (2004). *Educational experiences of children in out-of-home care*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children.

Staff, L., & Fein, E (1995). Stability and change: Initial findings in a study of treatment foster care placements. *Children and Youth Services Review*.17(3):379-89.

Standards of Excellence. *Child Welfare League of America*, (2005). Washington, D.C.

Strauss, A, and Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Sage Publications: London.

Thibaut, J.W., & Kelley, H. H. (1959). *The Social Psychology of Groups*. New York: Wiley.

Turnbull, A & Turnbull, R, (1990). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: A special partnership*, (2nd Edition). New York. Macmillian Publishing Company.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs (2009). 28th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2006, vol. 2. Retrieved October 17, 2009, from www.ed.gov/about/reports/annual/osep/2006/parts-b-c/28th-vol-2.pdf.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families. *National survey of child and adolescent well-being* (NSCAW). One-Year Foster Care Report. Washington, DC: DHHS, 2001.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families. *National survey of child and adolescent well-being* (NSCAW). Wave 1 Child Protective Services Report. Washington, DC: DHHS, 2003.

Wade, J. (2008). The ties that bind: Support from birth families and substitute families for young people leaving care. *British Journal of Social Work*, 38, 39-54.

Zamosky, J., Sparks, J., Hatt, R., & Sharman, J. (1993). Believing in families. In B.A. Pine, R. Warsh, & A. N. Maluccio (Eds.), *Together again: Family reunification in foster care* (pp. 155-175). Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

Zetlin, A. G., Weinberg, I. A., & Shea, N. M. (2006). Seeing the whole picture: Views from diverse participants on barriers to educating foster youth. *Children and Schools*, (283), 165-174

APPENDIX A - PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWED

Bill – Resource Father

Millie –Resource Mother

Cindy – Birth Daughter

Ryan – Birth Son

Amy – Foster Child

Rosemary – Case Manager Assigned to the Resource Family

Julia – Case Manager Assigned to Their Foster Child

Linda – Mental Health/Therapist Who Works with the Resource Family

Marie – High School Counselor That Works with the Resource Family

APPENDIX B - RESOURCE PARENT TIMEOUT FORM

Time Out Request

Date & Time Submitted to M&D _____ Rec'd _____

Name _____

Date Out Requested _____

From Time _____ To Time _____ Total Time _____

Where (address)

Contact Names & Numbers: _____

Activity: _____