“Don’t Look at My Eyes”

Foster Care: A Look into Communication Patterns in Foster Family Units

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The individual experiences of foster parents and foster children have an impact on how they communicate with each other. This study aims to learn how foster parents can better communicate about their foster children and with their foster children.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

- Structuration Theory
- Family Communication Patterns Theory
- Socialization Theory

**METHOD & DATA COLLECTION**

- Convenience Sampling & Snowball Sampling
- Semi-Structured Interview
  - Populations: Foster Parents, Foster Children
  - Interviews: Recorded and transcribed on Zoom, stored securely on OneDrive
- Thematic Analysis

**SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

- “Tell me about your journey through the foster care system.”
- “Describe a time you experienced negative communication between you and your foster child.”
- “What is one thing you wish your foster parents would have done differently regarding communication?”

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Research Question 1: How is the utilization of outside sources related to the health of familial communication within foster families?

Research Question 2: What elements create positive communication between foster parents and foster children?

Research Question 3: How is a family identity created within foster families?

**RQ1 RESULTS**

According to foster parents:

- Inconsistency of communication with support workers (social workers, caseworkers) is directly indicative of negative communication between parents and workers.
- Communication with fellow foster parents was consistently positive for foster parents.

According to foster children:

- Foster youth that had support from either a teacher, foster care specific program, counselor, or case worker had significantly more positive experiences in foster care than those who did not.
- Former foster youth also mentioned the importance of these outside adults being open and honest and “keeping them in the loop.”

**RQ2 RESULTS**

According to foster parents:

- Being intentional to nonverbally communicate in positive ways is crucial to creating good communication between foster parents and foster children.
- Communicating with trauma in mind requires patience and listening, and it results in positive communication between foster parents and foster children.
- For positive communication to exist, foster parents must respect the birth families and understand their foster child’s view of their biological families.

According to foster children:

- Every single interviewee communicated their need to be cared for. Multiple interviewees wished their foster parents had simply asked “how are you doing?”
- Harmful communication occurs when foster parents villainize birth parents. The home life they came from may have been chaos, but “that chaos was what I knew... that chaos was safety.”

**RQ3 RESULTS**

According to foster parents:

- Establishing repeated family structures and routines allows a shared identity to form in foster families.
- Giving foster children freedom to decide what to call their foster parents is essential to build a shared family identity.
- In families with two foster parents, both must be equally dedicated to fostering for the family to function well.

According to foster children:

- One of the best things a foster family can do to nonverbally communicate support for a child is to fight for siblings to be placed in their home as well.
- Being uprooted and living with complete strangers is anything but normal. Thus, establishing normalcy and routine is crucial for foster children.
- The ability to choose when and who to tell their story to is crucial to empowering children in the foster care system.

**LIMITATIONS & IMPLICATIONS**

- Every foster parent, child, and family is different. Results cannot be generalized.
- Sample size was small (10 foster parents and 10 foster children).
- All foster parents interviewed were mothers. Diversity in gender should be explored.
- Half of the foster parents mentioned their faith. It would be interesting to examine differences in experiences between those with different faith traditions.

The personal stories, experiences, and memories shared by each foster parent and each former foster youth are valuable. Understanding how members outside the home have critical effects on communication within the home is important. Nonverbal communication, trauma-informed communication, respect for birth families, and genuine care all contribute to positive communication between foster parents and foster children. To create a family identity with temporary and/or nonbiological members, it is beneficial to repeat structures and routines, provide freedom for children, encourage placing siblings together, establish normalcy, and empower foster kids. As almost every interviewee stated, the system is broken. Despite this, learning to communicate well provides hope.