

Public Abstract

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Title: FOSTERING FAMILY: HOW COMMUNICATION SUSTAINS AND FUNCTIONS IN FOSTER FAMILIES

Foster families are prevalent and serve a critical role in our society. However, little is known about the communication that occurs in foster families. As such, the goal of this thesis was to understand not only how foster families communicate, but also how foster parent-child communication impacts foster children as well as the parent-child relationship. Current foster parents (N=158) completed an anonymous online survey in which they were asked to report on their communication and relationship with a current foster child.

Several significant findings emerged. First, foster parents who viewed themselves and their foster child as part of the same family reported feeling closer to their foster child. Additionally, parents who were more open to discussing a wide array of topics with their foster child also reported feeling as if they were part of the same family as their foster child. Second, open communication about the circumstances surrounding the child's placement in foster care had positive effects on feelings of foster parent-child closeness and children's perceived adjustment. However, the positive outcomes of openness on child adjustment diminished if foster parents emphasized conformity in their communication with their child. Finally, foster parents who were both highly open and highly conforming reported feeling closer to their foster child. On the other hand, foster parents who were not very open and who did not emphasize conformity reported feeling less close to their foster child.

These findings provide valuable theoretical contributions and ultimately help to establish a foundation for future research on the foster family form. Implications for understanding how shared family identity emerges and the role of openness in the foster family form are discussed.