Needs and Experiences of Biological Children of Foster Carers: A Scoping Study

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Over the last 5 years, within the ACT and across Australia, there has been a significant increase in the number of children requiring out-of-home care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014). As a result, the demand for foster carers has risen and the need to recruit, support and retain quality family foster carers poses a significant challenge to child protection agencies around the country (Community Services Directorate, 2014; Osborn et al., 2007).

Over the last two decades, an increasing amount of international research has been conducted to better understand the foster care environment and uncover ways that we may be able to improve the fostering experience for both foster children and foster carers (Duffy, 2013). However, the majority of these studies have overlooked the experiences of biological children of foster carers, and the needs and experiences of these children have largely remained absent from policy, research, legislation and practice (Moslehuddin, 1999; Younes & Harp, 2007 cited in Targowska, Teather, & Cavazzi, 2013).

The absence of biological children's experiences and perspectives of fostering is concerning, given that many foster carers are worried about the effects that fostering may have on their own children (Poland & Groze, 1993 cited in Hojer, Sebba, & Luke, 2013). This concern, combined with research indicating an increased risk of foster care placement breakdown when foster carers have biological children living at home (see Hojer et al., 2013), reinforces the need for further investigation into the experiences of biological children of foster carers.

To date, only a small number of studies have endeavoured to speak directly with the biological children of foster carers to uncover the experiences of these 'unacknowledged caregivers'(Tadros 2003 cited in Targowska et al., 2013). In these studies, researchers have found that biological children experience a range of benefits and challenges as a consequence of their families' decisions to become foster carers (Hojer et al., 2013; Osborn, Panozzo, Richardson, & Bromfield, 2007). However, despite their important role in fostering, Australian commentators have noted that biological children remain undervalued and unprepared for fostering, and that they receive limited formal support (Targowska et al., 2013). Therefore, researchers in the field have noted that there is a pressing need for further research to investigate the impact of foster caring on carers' biological children (Osborn et al., 2007), and to understand how they can be better supported (Hojer et al., 2013).

Purpose and scope of the research

This scoping study aimed to deepen our understanding of the experiences, and impacts, of fostering on biological children of foster carers, by answering the following key research questions:

1. What are the needs and experiences of the biological children of foster carers within the ACT?
2. What are the policy and practice implications of these children's needs and experiences for the ACT foster care sector?

The study was conducted by two social work students under the supervision of researchers from the Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University, from August to November 2014.

Although the study was limited in time and scope, the study included three distinct research phases. Phase one included a systematic and targeted literature review on the issue of biological children of foster carers. Phase two allowed for consultations with key stakeholders to identify the current policy and practice responses for biological children of foster carers in the ACT and Australia (see Appendix 1 for list of key stakeholders consulted in the study). Phase three involved the research team conducting a series of focus groups with foster carers and their biological children (aged 8-18 years) in the ACT. This report presents the findings from the third phase of the research project and poses implications for future policy, practice and research in this important, but previously neglected, area.

Background

Due to increasing numbers of children requiring out of home care (AIHW, 2014) and a limited supply of foster carers (McHugh, Pell, & Street, 2013; Osborn, Panozzo, Richardson, & Bromfield, 2007), services within the ACT and across Australia, are being placed under increased pressure to recruit and retain quality foster carers (Community Services Directorate, 2014; Osborn et al., 2007). Research has indicated that one of the significant challenges to foster care recruitment and retention remains addressing the perceived impacts of fostering for the biological children of foster carers (Osborn et al., 2007). For example, many studies have found that one of the reasons foster carers cease fostering is the negative experiences and impacts that fostering has had, or may have, on their biological children and family (Clare, Clare, & Peaty, 2006; Moslehuddin, 1999; Osborn et al., 2007; Poland & Groze, 1993; Thompson & McPherson, 2011; Twigg & Swan, 2007). Within this environment, it is critical to gain a better understanding of the real impacts that fostering has on biological children, and how they themselves experience and perceive their role within foster care families. Although three pioneering studies of this issue were undertaken in the 1970-80s (Ellis, 1972; Kaplan, 1988; Wilkes, 1974), it has only been over the last two decades that researchers have begun to address this much neglected area of research, and endeavored to understand the direct perspectives and experiences of biological children of foster carers.

The targeted literature review conducted for this project uncovered twenty-six studies worldwide, which have specifically examined the issue of biological children of foster carers. Only five of these studies were conducted in Australia (see Clare et al., 2006; Nuske, 2005; Tadros, 2003; Targowska et al., 2013). The majority of the studies undertaken in this area have been in the UK, and most have been small in scale, using qualitative methods, such as interviews, discussion groups and focus groups. The focus of previous studies in this area has largely been to examine the benefits and challenges of fostering, as well as to gain an understanding of the practical day-to-day experiences and impacts of fostering.

Perhaps as a result of beginning to talk directly with children, many studies have now begun to demonstrate the significant role and contribution that biological children play in the success or failure of foster care placements (Nuske, 2005; Pugh, 1996; Tadros, 2003; Walsh & Campbell, 2010). For example, Reed (1994) found that older children took an interest in, and identified with, the parents' caring role if the foster children were sufficiently young enough for them to assume some responsibility for their care. Pugh (1996) highlighted that biological children of foster carers often act as role models of acceptable behaviour, are a bridge between parents and foster children, and support their parents emotionally and practically. Pugh (1996), along with many others, suggested that these extra responsibilities resulted in children growing up quicker than would otherwise have been expected, and she described this as the children experiencing a 'loss of innocence'.

The research in this field demonstrated that fostering not only brought new roles and responsibilities for biological children, but also a vast array of other changes and challenges. These changes in day-to-day life, family dynamics, and roles and expectations were reported in many of the studies and are noted as being a continual source of stress for the foster family (Poland & Groze, 1993). Other significant challenges reported by biological children across studies included a lack of privacy and having to share their home, personal space and possessions such as toys (Martin 1993; Reed 1994; Watson & Jones 2002). Sharing their parents' time and attention was one of the most consistent and difficult challenges that children faced (see: Clare et al., 2006; Höjer & Nordenfors, 2004; Nuske, 2005; Poland & Groze, 1993; Tadros, 2003; Younes & Harp, 2007).

Loss was also commonly discussed across studies, with one Australian study emphasising that children experience loss as a cost of sharing (Nuske, 2005). Although there was a sense that they were helping, children often felt resentment and loss around the family they once had. This feeling of loss was also apparent as biological children coped with foster children leaving their home, which was particularly hard to deal with if they had formed a close bond with the foster child (Duffy, 2013; Part, 1993; Twigg, 1994; Walsh & Campbell, 2010; Watson & Jones, 2002; Younes & Harp, 2007).

Despite these changes and challenges, many studies conducted with foster carers and their children have highlighted the many positive aspects of fostering, including lasting changes in the way biological children view themselves, their families and the world (Clare et al., 2006; Nuske, 2005; Spears & Cross, 2003; Sutton & Stack, 2013; Watson & Jones, 2002; Younes & Harp, 2007). For example, Younes and Harp (2007) found that despite the challenges, children stated that fostering made them better people, expanded their understanding of the complexities of life and gave them a deeper appreciation for their parents. Many studies also described how fostering had a positive impact on the personal development of biological children (Clare et al., 2006; Spears & Cross, 2003; Watson & Jones, 2002). For example, in one Australian study, children indicated that they had learnt empathy for foster children, including how to be patient and tolerant with their difficult behaviours (Clare et al., 2006).

Although these changes, challenges and positive effects of fostering have been unanimously reported across studies, the literature highlights that a significant proportion of biological children feel unacknowledged for the important contribution they make to the foster family and to foster children's wellbeing (Clare et al., 2006; Pugh, 1996; Twigg & Swan, 2007; Watson & Jones, 2002). Many of the children who have participated in previous research have reported that they are not given information about their families' fostering, and this is apparent from the very beginning phases of their families' fostering experiences. The literature shows that the extent of consultation children received prior to fostering depended solely on the initiative of the parents (Heidburrt, 1995; Moslehuddin, 1999; Tadros, 2003; Thompson & McPherson, 2011; Younes & Harp, 2007). In 1993, Martin emphasised the need for professionals and parents to involve children in the decision to foster, a view that has more recently been shared by many others (Höjer, 2007; Martin, 1993; Part, 1993; Spears & Cross, 2003; Twigg & Swan, 2007).

A recent Australian study identified a number of gaps that exist at policy and practice levels, in relation to the level of support that biological children of foster carers require. The authors of this report stated quite plainly that, "despite their unique contribution to fostering, biological children are often undervalued and unprepared for fostering, and receive limited formal support" (Targowska et al., 2013: p. 6). To remedy this, it has been suggested that biological children require policy and practice change which can provide them with recognition as being a part of the fostering team; information to assist them to understand what is going on within their families; and support to assist them to overcome or manage the difficulties associated with fostering (see: Clare et al., 2006; Martin, 1993; Moslehuddin, 1999; Nuske, 2005; Part, 1993; Pugh, 1996; Tadros, 2003; Watson & Jones, 2002; Younes & Harp, 2007).

There are pockets of service provision around the world where this recognition, information and support has begun to be provided to biological children, however, in Australia these responses are currently thin on the ground. Where support has been provided for biological children, it has usually taken the form of either: training provided to biological children to help inform and support them with their fostering experiences; or peer support, either face-to-face or through web based information and support groups. However, these responses are recent developments and not widespread, and as such their adequacy and effectiveness remains largely unclear (Pugh, 1996; Spears & Cross, 2003; Younes & Harp, 2007).

Methodology

This scoping study was conducted with the approval of the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Australian Catholic University. The research design reflects the commitment of the Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) to the rights of children, including the importance of listening and responding to the perspectives of children on issues that directly affect them. This commitment is consistent with the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNICEF) and theoretical understandings gained from the field of Childhood Studies, which emphasise that children are a diverse group of active and competent social agents (Corsaro, 2011). This approach supported the study's premise that biological children of foster carers have a unique perspective on fostering and also have the right to have their voices heard and experiences acknowledged.

To develop an understanding of the needs and experiences of biological children of foster carers, the research team took a qualitative approach to the research study. Three focus groups were conducted. Two focus groups were held with biological children of foster carers (aged 8-18 years) and one focus group was conducted with foster care parents, who have biological children living in their household. Focus groups can provide an open, supportive environment in which participants can talk in-depth on sensitive issues (Wilkinson, 1998 cited in Braun & Clarke, 2013) and are also particularly beneficial in conducting needs assessments (Padgett, 2008). As such, the focus groups allowed us to elicit an in-depth understanding of the needs and experiences of the biological children of foster carers.

To facilitate age appropriate discussion and activities, children were allocated into one of two focus groups. The first group was for children aged 8-13 years and the second group for young people aged 14-17 years. Each focus group used a range of child-centred research tools previously developed and/or used by ICPS (Moore & Layton, 2007; Moore, McArthur, & Noble-Carr, 2008; Moore, Saunders, & McArthur, 2011; Noble-Carr, 2007). These tools included child friendly consent forms, an interactive mind map exercise, talking cards and sentence stems, and the use of Kimochis (soft toys which depict and name emotions) to explore and describe feelings in relation to certain issues or experiences. Children chose which topics or issues to focus on within the groups, and how they wanted to explore these concepts (see Appendix 2 for the full outline of questions and activities used in the children's focus groups).

The focus group with the parents was also structured around the same themes and topics discussed in the children's groups (see Appendix 3 for the full outline of the focus group). This focus group aimed to build upon the children's experiences and perceptions, by asking parents about the impact that fostering has on their biological children. To ensure that the children and foster carers were adequately supported, follow-up support was offered through their fostering agency and participants were also provided with a copy of their rights, and the phone numbers of 24 hour support services. Children and foster carers who participated in the study were also provided with $30 gift vouchers to compensate them for their time and thank them for their contribution.

With permission from all the participants involved, the focus groups were digitally recorded. Once the focus groups were completed, they were fully transcribed by the researchers. A thematic content analysis of the data was conducted (see Sarantakos, 2013: p. 379), and assisted through the use of NViVo, a qualitative software program. Important key themes, patterns and issues that emerged from the data were identified through this process. The key themes identified through this process form the basis of the findings section below.

Participants

Nine families, recruited from one foster care agency in the ACT, participated in the study. All the families included one or more biological children, and the composition of the families was diverse and included both sole parent and two-parent families. The families had varying foster care experiences, with the length of time they had been involved in fostering ranging from 6 months to 10 years. The families who participated had also provided a range of foster care placements, including: respite, crisis care, short and long term placements, and permanent care. The foster children placed within and across these families varied in number and age, ranging from infants to those who had stayed with families until they had aged-out of the system.

Nine children, including 5 boys and 4 girls, aged between 8-17 years participated across the two focus groups. Two of these children were siblings. Six children (3 boys and 3 girls) participated in the younger focus group for 8-13 year olds. The second children's focus group, for 14-17 years, included three participants (two boys and one girl). However, one of the participants in the older children's focus group was 11 years old, and was accepted into the group because they could not attend the younger group. The parents' focus group included eight participants, all from different families. Seven of the participants were female and one was male.

Throughout the findings section of this report, quotes from children and parents have been used to illustrate some of the key themes and issues that emerged from the focus groups. However due to the small size of the study, all references to gender and age have been removed from quotes in this report, to ensure that participants cannot be identified.

Findings

Information and expectations prior to fostering

There are many pathways into foster caring, and making the decision to foster is not something that most people do lightly. The foster carers who participated in this study had varied reasons for deciding to foster. Many stated that their decision was largely based around making a difference in the life of a child who doesn't have a family, or who is more disadvantaged than themselves and their own children. Some participants made the decision to foster because they thought that it would be beneficial to their own children. For example, some parents talked about fostering providing a sibling for their biological children who did not have biological siblings:

> *My [child] was three when we started and it was important for us to give [them] the experience, of having another child that was around. (Parent)*

For others, the decision to foster was influenced by their desire to help their children understand the complexities of the world, and to promote altruistic behaviours:

> *I suppose we wanted them [our kids] to understand the complexity and diversity in the world and understand that they are in a very privileged position and that they can contribute and support and help others. (Parent)*

Although the parents' reasons for fostering were consistent with the best interests of their children, the majority of children stated that they had not been involved in the decision-making process to become a foster caring family. This may have been because many of the children were very young when their parents had decided to become foster carers. However, regardless of age, it seemed that fostering was primarily the parents' decision, and once they had decided they informed their children:

> *I don't really remember them telling me or kinda have [a] vision of my mum telling me are you OK with other kids coming to live with us for a while. I was only five so it was like yeah whatever. (Child)*

> *I was eight or nine when we started fostering… I think my mum just told me on the spot as it happened… I don't really remember [who provided me with information about what it may be like] but I think I just already knew about foster caring. (Child)*

The content and timing of the information that children received prior to fostering also varied and appeared to be dependent on their age at the time of fostering. Most children received some information about fostering and what it might be like from their parents. However, this information appeared to centre on the reasons for deciding to foster and the potential positive impacts that fostering may provide. Some of the children also received information from foster agencies, family friends who fostered and extended family. Regardless of the information source, it seemed that

very few children felt they had an accurate picture of what it would be like in their home once a foster child arrived.

In light of this, many of the children talked about feeling 'excited' prior to the arrival of a new foster child, or prior to their family fostering for the first time. This excitement related to the possibility of having someone to play with, with some children stating that they expected that they would get a foster child who was a similar age to themselves.

> *I thought it would have been like fun to have someone to play with. (Child)*

> *I would have a best friend at my place. (Child)*

Some children thought that having a foster child would be just like having another sibling. For example, one young person who had younger biological siblings stated:

> *I didn't think it was going to change much 'cos I already have … younger [siblings] so it was just kinda another child running around. (Child)*

The children's positive feelings are similar to, and perhaps mirrored, their parents' feelings prior to fostering. Many of the foster parents said that they had thought fostering would be a positive experience and that it would have a positive impact on their own children's lives.

Some of the other children talked about feeling 'curious' about the foster child that would enter their family, while others felt 'scared' of not knowing what to expect. Perhaps due to the limited information they had received, there were also some children who said they had not considered what fostering would be like at all. As such, these children either didn't really know what to expect or had not thought that fostering was going to be 'a big deal':

> *I didn't really think of it. (Child)*

Discussions in the parents' focus group also demonstrated that while most parents thought that they had prepared their children as best they could, they all agreed that there were some things they didn't know they needed to prepare them for:

> *We didn't realise, um, I think we were a bit fairy about it, we thought that [our child] would just be OK. We didn't realise we would have to put self-care skills in place for [our child] like really strict rules … and you know making sure, um, that [our child] was supervised when [our child] was talking with older [foster] children. (Parent)*

Although a few children had received some specific training designed for biological children of foster carers, it was a little unclear whether the training was given prior to, or during, their fostering experience. Therefore, it was not possible to ascertain what impact, if any, this training had on children's expectations of, and preparation for, fostering.

The experience of foster caring

Many of the children stated that their expectations of fostering did not match up to their actual experiences of fostering. Once they began fostering, they found it wasn't as simple as what they had thought, and they felt that they weren't really fully prepared for what it was actually like:

> *Well I thought it was going to be like just another friend, but it was completely different.*
>
> *(Child)*

Although this experience was common amongst the children, each and every foster care experience was unique and as such presented its own unique challenges and rewards. All of the children indicated that at times, fostering could be a challenging and tumultuous experience. As such, many of the children expressed mixed emotions when discussing their fostering experiences.

The children's fostering experiences and their impacts were dependent on a number of factors, but the things that the children talked about as making the biggest difference to their experiences were: the type of foster care their family provided (i.e. respite, short term or permanent care); the age of the foster child (particularly if they were younger or older than them); the behavior of the foster child; and the length of time the foster child was with their family.

Despite the significant variations and complexities in foster care arrangements of the children who participated in the study, there was one aspect of the children's experiences that was present for all individuals, across all focus groups. All the children, and their parents, talked about the contribution that children made to caring for the foster child in their care. For some, this caring role and responsibility stayed with them throughout and beyond their foster caring experiences, and impacted their life in a variety of ways.

Caring roles and responsibilities

Children, and their parents, felt that biological children contributed in a very real and tangible way to the caring of the foster child within their family, particularly with practical day-to-day caring tasks. This was particularly evident as the biological children grew older, and is reflected in this quote from one of the parents:

> *So now [my child] is more of a carer [themselves], so rather than having a playmate which is*
>
> *what it was in the beginning, [they've] now taken on a lot more of the caring role. (Parent)*

However, this caring role was also evident in all of the households where younger foster children were being cared for:

> *[My caring includes] having to get up in the middle of the night to get [them] a drink*
>
> *of water. (Child)*

Some of the children felt overworked and said that they had less freedom and time to themselves as a result of their caring responsibilities. For example, some children talked about "having to look after children instead of doing something else," and, "being hassled to play with them when you just want to go to your room and do your own thing". However, overwhelmingly the children talked

about their caring role in a positive light. Children understood the importance of their caring contributions and felt immensely proud that they were able to help someone else who was in need:

I feel like proud that I gave a child that needed a family, a family. (Child)

I feel proud and kind just in general that I'm doing it and that I'm helping this person. (Child)

In addition to feeling good about themselves, children also stated that they thought fostering had taught them parenting skills that would be valuable to them as they got older:

Yeah I babysit all the time so. Like it's just for future. I guess if you have foster children around you will be a better parent. (Child)

Some children also talked about how they thought that their fostering experience had 'matured' them quicker than other children their age:

But I guess I like matured really fast with foster caring like it, by the time I was seven I had already changed a baby's nappy and like. (Child)

Others indicated that it wasn't necessarily about maturity, rather, their foster caring role provided them with increased knowledge and skills that other children their age would not normally have access to:

Not mature quickly, just be more educated about foster caring. (Child)

Yeah I think so – just not as early on and not [um] as well, like you would still have life experience you just wouldn't have as much. Like, you would still have parenting knowledge, just not as much. (Child)

The caring provided to foster children extended well beyond practical care tasks, with many of the children also providing a high level of emotional support to foster children, such as listening and being attuned to their particular needs and concerns. Some children mentioned that they were actually the person that foster children were more likely to talk to about their problems or concerns, because they said that children often find it easier to talk to other children, rather than adults:

It apparently makes them feel more comfortable and all the time like kids talk to me and tell me stuff. And then my mum will be like they never said anything about that happening. (Child)

You didn't really have to talk, they just wanted to tell someone… I guess they didn't want to tell an adult and they felt comfortable sharing it with a child rather than an adult. (Child)

[There are] things that you don't really see on the outside that happened on the inside that no one can see. (Child)

This placed a lot of responsibility on biological children, as they had a keen sense that some of the information being shared with them either should, or should not, be shared with a responsible adult. It seems that many of the children had to make regular 'judgement calls' about how serious the information being shared with them was and what they may need to tell their parents.

Yeah, yeah depending on what it is… Like if they told me like in the past like I didn't want to tell anyone this but this happened when I lived with my parents and I have to tell my mum. (Child)

Some children worried about the wellbeing of foster children whilst they were in their home and also well after they had left their home:

If they are going back to their parents I'm scared, like maybe they are going back to their parents and is it going to be just as bad for them? (Child)

Positive impacts associated with fostering

Within the focus groups, children spoke about the positive and negative aspects of fostering. However, the majority of the children stated that the positives outweighed the negative experiences. The positive experiences highlighted by the children included broadening their worldview, building family and friendships, having access to more fun and shared activities and the development of new skills.

Broadening their worldview

Many children stated that fostering gave them a more balanced view of the world. They were exposed to issues they had not considered in the past, and although they may have found this confronting at the time, many reflected that this had changed them for the better.

Umm when we started it kind of took a new look on things like to see the things that happen to some children it's umm yeah, [pause] quite bad. (Child)

I think also um kids with foster children are a bit more educated about um, more educated about some of the tough times that kids have … having a foster kid as well teaches you to be a bit more respectful I guess. (Child)

[Without fostering] I wouldn't have gotten much life experience. (Child)

Some children, particularly those who were the only child in their household prior to fostering, stated that they were in a position of privilege and had very little knowledge of what it was like for other children prior to the fostering experience:

You kind of learn that to not be so snarky or whatever like some people they are an only child they grow up with a silver spoon in their mouth, they kinda like they don't really know anything about people who are suffering or have a hard time. (Child)

Building family and friends

Most of the children talked warmly about the relationships they had with foster children, with many referring to foster children as their foster siblings or brothers/sisters. Many children, particularly those whose families were providing permanent care, mentioned that fostering had provided them with a sibling that they would otherwise not have had.

I feel really happy 'cos I got like, I wouldn't have my brothers and sister. (Child)

Some children also talked about keeping in touch with foster children who have aged out of the system, stating that they are still treated as family members who are invited to family celebrations.

They are still part of our family, they come to Christmas dinners, my grandparents are their grandparents, so they are still part of our family even though they are out of the system. (Child)

In addition to gaining a sibling, some children also reported that fostering had enabled them to extend their family members and to build new friendships beyond their pre-existing family and friendship networks. In some cases, some of the family members of the foster child were considered as newfound extended family members. For example, one child remarked:

Well I guess it is good having an extended family 'cos you know more people. (Child)

A majority of the children also reported that they had made new friends and spent more time with new and different children due to their family being foster carers. These friendships included formal and informal meetings with other foster carers, such as through camping trips.

Fun and shared activities

Many of the children commented on how "we wouldn't have as much fun" if their family didn't foster. Some indicated that they had travelled more to see friends they had gained through fostering, whilst others mentioned that when they have kids in their care their families tend to engage in more shared activities and go on more 'family outings' together which they enjoy:

Well we usually only do big family activities on school holidays instead of just weekends so we do it more often than we would if we didn't have foster children. (Child)

For some children, family activities were appreciated because it provided them with a chance to escape the one-on-one demands of the foster child:

> *Well I feel positive when we're doing activities because that means that [the foster child] is not like bugging me to do something, like that includes the whole family. (Child)*

Some children also commented on how they are "never being bored" when they have foster children in their home, because they always have someone to play with. This was particularly the case for children who happened to get a foster child placed within their family who enjoyed playing with the same toys:

> *And she came and stayed for a week and that was really fun, cos we just played Barbies the whole week. (Child)*

New skills

For many children the fostering experience presented opportunities for them to grow as individuals and build new skills that they wouldn't necessarily have gained if they hadn't fostered. As mentioned above, this included many practical caring tasks, which the children often referred to as parenting skills:

> *I think it has provided me with good parenting skills. (Child)*

Other children felt they had enhanced their social emotional skills and grown to be more confident. The children expressed that these skills were often developed through the emotional support and care that they provided to foster children in their care:

> *It changed me for the better, I used to be shy and really unbrave, now I am strong and confident and good with people. (Child)*

> *It kind of gives you a good idea about how people think. Cos sometimes you can kind of just tell like when you see a lot of people who have been through hard things you kind of like read emotions. (Child)*

Parents also commented on the new skills their children had learnt since fostering. Many talked about how their children had been challenged and provided with opportunities to engage in active play with other children:

> *I love it when they play well together, like I mean my [child] is learning skills in play… [they're] actually learning quite a lot of skills that I think are really important... They might not always be easy but when I see them playing beautifully I just go aahh that's great. (Parent)*

[The foster child] is actually pushing [them] in some ways and [they're] becoming more physically adventurous. (Parent)

Another child also stated that they had been forced to learn valuable coping skills due to the stress of foster caring:

Through all the stress I went jogging and found out that I really liked it. (Child)

Challenges associated with fostering

Although children stated that fostering was mostly a positive experience, there were a number of challenges involved in being part of a foster care family. Challenges which the children spoke about included: problematic behaviours of foster children; sharing people, time and toys; feeling jealous, ignored and left out; changing family dynamics; increased levels of family stress and conflict; and loss and worry.

Problematic behaviours of foster children

Some children talked about how they had 'got on' with some foster children better than others. This was sometimes related to the difference in age between the foster child and the biological child, with some children disclosing that it was particularly difficult if the foster child was the same age as them and others stating that they liked to be the eldest in their family. Apart from these changing family dynamics, the thing that appeared to have the most bearing on whether biological children 'got on' with foster children was the level of challenging behaviours that the foster child displayed.

It depends on what child, cos umm with my first one I enjoyed him a lot more than the second one, because the second one was really rough and I couldn't play with him very much. (Child)

Children, from both focus groups, talked about how the behaviour of some foster children affected them in a variety of ways. Some felt hassled and annoyed:

If I've already showed him how to do something and he doesn't listen, so I have to do it for him over and over. (Child)

He wakes me up in the middle of the night. (Child)

Other children, who had to deal with persistent and on-going challenging behaviours from foster children, felt differing levels of resentment towards the foster child and their parents for how their parents responded to these behaviours. The behaviours mentioned as the most difficult to cope with included when foster children broke commonly understood and accepted 'family rules'. The children gave examples of these things which included foster children 'saying no' and 'refusing to do things asked of them around the house'.

However, it was not necessarily the anti-social or rebellious behaviour that was the problem, but the differentiated parenting responses that the children experienced. The biological children were acutely aware of, and annoyed by, their parents having two different rules or approaches to discipline between them and their foster caring peers. As such, children found it difficult to accept that sometimes the foster child didn't get as harshly disciplined as they did for the same incidents.

[It is hard when] he does bad things he doesn't get punished as I would if I did them. (Child)

The children explained that their parents would almost always explain why the foster child was being treated differently and children were able to recite these reasons to the researchers. For example, children stated that some foster children may not have previously experienced having household rules; did not understand the 'normal' boundaries that operated within a family home; or did not understand that what they were doing was wrong. However, this knowledge did not always appease the resentment and annoyance that biological children held towards the foster child.

[The hard things about fostering include] them not getting into trouble for things they do because they don't know it is wrong. (Child)

Parents also realised that this was difficult for their children and they also experienced this as one of the main challenges in their fostering experience:

Most foster children have behaviour that not only has our child never experienced but would never be tolerated from them, so trying to let them understand why you're tolerating this from somebody else when your expectations would never let that happen for them. (Parent)

Some parents who participated in our study stated that prolonged exposure to challenging behaviours could also result in their own children's behaviour changing and becoming more difficult to manage:

We have a [child] who now hits, which we did not have before. There was no hitting in our house until [the foster child] arrived. (Parent)

Foster parents seemed to be continually monitoring the impact of the foster child and their behaviours on their own children. When parents thought that the impact on their children was too great they had sometimes decided to take a break from fostering altogether, or had changed the type of foster care they were providing. The safety of their children was often the catalyst for such a decision. Parents stated that they would end a placement, or even cease fostering, if they thought that the safety of their children was compromised:

At this point it was probably more the safety of, you know, seeing [my child] in tears because [they have injured]… from [toys]… being flung around. (Parent)

It's nice to have some attention for the biological children because that's the key in whether we're fostering and what kind of fostering we do… We were always told that your family comes first and I always keep this in the back of my mind. (Parent)

All our changes are based on our children. Like a barometer for what's going on with them and you try to figure out what's going on and really you don't know and as soon as you get a sign that 'hang on there's an issue' you just change it. (Parent)

Some children were relieved when parents had made these decisions and stated that they were pleased when some foster children, particularly those with aggressive behaviours, had left their care:

Suddenly [the foster child] would change the channel to something random that [they] didn't even like, [they] just wanted to change it to start an argument and that was the only time it ever, this has happened, but by the time my mum came out we're in this really physical brawl on the ground and then right after that about a week later we were like no. They said that [the foster child] had to leave, I was glad that [they] left 'cause [they] was just mean. (Child)

Sharing people, time and toys

Both children and parents spoke of the impact for biological children of having to share their time, space, people and toys. Parents validated their children's concerns by stating that there was a very real risk that their children's possessions or toys may be broken or destroyed by foster children. One parent stated that they had to learn this lesson from past experience:

There are some things we could have avoided if we'd actually… [been] logical and that would have made it easier on our child, if we'd separated out what was exactly [my child's] from what wasn't. (Parent)

While another stated:

[My child's] the one that's got to share the [toys] that gets destroyed when the destroyer comes for the weekend. If that [toy] was not packed away quick enough, or [the foster child] got into [my child's] bedroom where [my child] had lined them up on the wall, yeah, [my child's] the one that suffers. (Parent)

Sharing their own time was an issue for some children who just wanted time to themselves and felt that the foster child wanted their attention all of the time. One of the children stated that they were "constantly asked questions, when you want to be on your own".

Sharing significant people, such as parents, was also very hard for some children. Some children, particularly those in the younger focus group, felt that it was unfair that they had to share their own parents with other children who should have their own parents to provide them with love. One child wrote that it was hard "seeing someone get love x 2".

Feeling jealous, ignored and left out

At times, children could feel 'jealous' of their foster sibling. Jealousy seemed to be related to the foster child being treated or 'parented' differently to them. Some children talked about "being ignored" or "not getting that much attention" and of often "being alone" because the foster child became the centre of attention in the home. The children thought that foster children were more visible to their parents, perhaps because of their challenging behaviours, and the children deemed that this was unfair. One child complained that their parent is always "doing everything for [the foster child] and not me".

At times, fostering also restricted the activities that families could undertake. One child spoke of their disappointment at seeing friends enjoying holidays while they stayed at home. Sometimes, special activities were on offer to foster care families, such as Christmas parties provided by community-based services. However, the parents mentioned that their biological children were often left out or ignored at these events that their whole family had been invited to.

> We went to one of the Christmas parties… and our boot was full of presents for our foster child and we had one box for my [child] and like I get that these kids come from disadvantaged backgrounds but when you've got a boot full and my husband could not see out the rear vision mirror and we got home and we had to explain to our biological [child], yeah, that's just how it is because [they're] in care so [they're] disadvantaged, you're not disadvantaged. You can't say that to a kid, you just can't. (Parent)

Changing family dynamics

Children and parents were acutely aware of the changing dynamics that foster caring bought to their family. For example, both children and parents discussed the tensions and issues that arose as a result of their biological child losing their sibling position within the family. This seemed to be more of an issue for those who provided permanent care and where the biological child lost their status of being the only child or the eldest child in the family. One child described this experience as, "it just kind of immediately strips your authority away". Another child said:

> You never ever ever adopt a child that is older than your eldest biological child. Cos I made that mistake, to be honest that was a really bad decision… because I wasn't the dominant person anymore and I only realise now that I didn't like that. (Child)

Many tensions around changing family dynamics did not resolve themselves with time. New tensions could arise for biological children as foster children began to 'settle in' to homes:

In the last week for [our child] to go 'Oh my God this [foster child] is here forever and my mum and dad love [them],' like [they're] starting to build an attachment and to be an only child … and then the penny drops… [they're] emotionally struggling big time. (Parent)

Because this is a permanent placement... like this is forever and ever, sort of thing and its sort of like and it sorted started to hit [my child] like this is not just the kid that I am being nice to that has just come in, this is like my [sibling]. My mum and dad love [this child] probably as much as they love me sort of thing. Like [they're] really here, [they're] my equal … we then had a rough patch with [our child], I guess that change in dynamics started to sink in. (Parent)

Another parent commented that their child wanted to know if their parents loved them more than the foster children who were now living permanently in the household. The parent said that they thought their child was "a little bit heartbroken" when they had replied that all of the children were loved exactly the same.

Sometimes, the impacts of changing family dynamics were felt differently by different members of the family. For example, one child explained how for them, fostering had gotten easier over time, but their sibling experienced the situation differently and disagreed:

Well each month [the foster child] sort of, err gets a little rougher so I feel like [they're] getting to know us more so [the child] feels like [they] can do worser stuff. (Child)

Having different people in the house also meant that biological children had to modify their own behaviours and actions:

We never told our daughter to lock the toilet or the bathroom door before that but if you've got [an older] boy in the house that you don't know, you can't just let your [young] daughter sit in bath with the door open and you know, running around the house naked anymore that's finished … we also had to teach her those self-protection skills so that we could play that role. (Parent)

Family stress and conflict

Although children said that they rarely talked to their parents about it, they knew that fostering put extra stress and pressure on their parents and sometimes on themselves also. Some children stated that they did not talk to their parents about these concerns because they didn't want to cause them further worry.

When [they're] angry or complaining and then I feel regretful ... Because I start thinking that it's my fault it's hard for them... but I don't want them to feel bad. (Child)

Having another person to feed and look after... my mum would find having another mouth to feed harder than I would. (Child)

Parents talked about how they tried to alleviate or cope with stress and conflict caused by fostering by swapping between differing types of care or even taking a break from fostering. These decisions were largely influenced by how parents perceived their children to be coping with fostering, as the majority of parents always had their own children's needs foremost on their minds. As one parent commented:

We've had to switch back to respite because my youngest... That's why we've kind of floated in and out and I kind of feel like a part-time foster carer, because we've had to manage it in and out, depending on the house and the rooms and children. (Parent)

Making decisions to change the type of care being provided, or to cease certain placements, were not taken lightly by foster carers. Some foster carers talked about the difficulty of trying to balance the sometimes conflicting and complex needs of both their foster child and their own children. This was particularly tough for parents who had made a commitment to provide a permanent care placement.

Loss and worry

Parents and children spoke of various losses that biological children experienced as a result of fostering. These included their loss of position in the family; privacy; freedom, time and opportunities; attention; and ultimately sometimes the loss of relationships when foster children moved on from their households. Many of these losses have already been discussed in this report.

Some of the biological children found it particularly difficult when children left their care. For some this was about the loss of someone who was significant and loved by them:

We were told just a few days before. That was like one hard one, I was just remembering was just like a little baby and [they] came straight from the hospital to us and like [they] were very young when [they] came and [they] stayed with us for a few months and [this child] was hard to leave... Yeah, like I saw [them] grow and everything and it was kinda like, yeah. (Child)

Children explained that these losses were made even harder to deal with because they never saw or heard from some of the children ever again:

This sounds really bad but when they leave you never see them again so. (Child)

I don't think I have ever saw any of them again. Like sometimes they stay with us for a long time and like I still think it was kind of weird cos like some people would stay with us for like half a year and the second they leave you never saw them again. (Child)

However, others accepted that this was 'just the way it was':

And he left, oh well, you know, things happen people go. Just how life works. (Child)

The uncertainty and concern around what was happening, or could happen, to children once they had left the foster care home was particularly difficult for children to manage. Many of the children struggled with feelings of guilt and worry about children who had been returned to their family of origin:

Oh yeah [that child] was really hard to leave, but with all the things that happened to [them] [That child] would you know get locked outside and things like that and wouldn't be fed… [They] had a really bad life and [they] didn't seem to really enjoy it. I feel guilty though for letting them go… going straight back there. (Child)

I'm scared like maybe they are going back to their parents and is it going to be just as bad for them. (Child)

They moved to the other side of Australia and I was really scared they are going away, like what does this mean? They were obviously like, they are trying to get away from the authority of the people looking after their kids here, so who's going to watch out for those kids now? (Child)

Needs of biological children

As demonstrated above, biological children of foster carers experience many unique challenges and situations as a result of their families' decisions to foster, although these challenges did not mean that the children wanted to cease foster caring. They were proud of the role they played in providing foster care and many of the impacts of their families' caring were positive. However, to help ensure that the experience was positive, biological children and their parents both felt that support provided to them could be improved and extended. When asked about what support they might want and need, the biological children and their parents focused on the biological child's need to receive appropriate information and support and to be acknowledged and included. Interestingly, the children also discussed the need for widespread changes in regard to how we view and talk about fostering within the wider community.

Wanting to normalise their family experiences

Above all else, the biological children we spoke to wanted to share positive stories of fostering. The children seemed acutely aware of the fact that 'foster children' are quickly labelled and often viewed by others as being difficult, different or as outsiders in their family. Therefore, many of the children were cautious of disclosing their foster care status, as they would get annoyed at other people labelling or stigmatising their foster sibling and their family situation:

> *One thing that I hate people saying 'so they're not actually your family'. Like that's why I don't tell people cos that's what they would say every single time, that's what I hate. (Child)*

As this child alluded to, this stigma often stopped biological children from talking to their peers about their fostering experiences. Despite the challenges posed with fostering, most of the older age group said that they had not mentioned their fostering status to their friends, peers or teachers at school. Children felt that fostering was a private concern, and many, particularly the older children, did not want to discuss their foster caring status with anyone.

> *Most of them [my friends] just found out this year 'cos they don't really need, there's nothing where I really needed to go I am a foster carer. (Child)*

Some of the parents also shared similar views about the stigma of foster caring, with one stating that they didn't like the term 'foster care':

> *Over the years we have avoided using the word foster care, it is a terrible word its more about someone's coming to stay with us for a while cos their mum can't look after them right now, you know, someone's visiting, someone's having a sleepover, all of those words that make it more natural rather than a, I mean, foster care just sounds so fake and like its clinical or you know, like being taken to the vet or something. (Parent)*

Just as they didn't like their foster siblings to be labelled, the majority of children also did not like being referred to as a 'biological child'. Many children did not want to be differentiated from their foster siblings, as they saw them as just being a part of their family. The children seemed to agree that most important to them, was being treated the same as the foster children in their families. This included being treated the same by their parents, particularly in regards to discipline and boundaries in the family.

Information and support

Although the biological children did not want differentiated support, the children agreed that they would benefit from some more practical information and strategies to cope with the daily aspects of being a member of a foster care family. The children stated that in the first instance, they would prefer to get this information and support from their parents, rather than having any formal support provided by an outside agency or service. However, while the children did not want to

receive ongoing formal support such as counselling or peer support, they said that receiving more training would be beneficial, particularly prior to fostering, so that they understand what it was going to be like having a foster child in their home.

One of the foster care agencies in the ACT recently began to provide training specifically for biological children. This training occurs once every six months and about half of the children included in this study had attended the training. Other children had not attended because they were either too young to attend; they didn't know about it; or they could not attend on the dates provided.

Those who did attend the training had mixed feelings about it. Some felt that the training had concentrated too heavily on the negative aspects of foster caring:

Yes they really do do that, they focus on the negatives all of time when really there are positives. (Child)

I don't think we really talk about it, cos not many things are really that hard. (Child)

Others felt uncomfortable about the way that the foster care agency was differentiating between them and their foster siblings. As stated above, the biological children often preferred to view their 'foster siblings' as just 'siblings'. As such, they did not appreciate workers picking out differences and difficulties within their families. Training was also criticised for having a focus on those who provide respite or short-term care, instead of permanent care:

I feel they are focusing on short term and talking about the kids that I have like they are short-term placement doesn't feel nice… I reckon I feel it's different for me from other children because mine are on permanent orders so mine are more like my family. (Child)

Instead like they should do both for people who are keeping them long term and short term. (Child)

Peer support based on fun

When asked by researchers whether they wanted some form of peer support, the children stated that instead of having to meet with other biological children in settings which concentrate on the negative aspects of fostering, they could have groups just to 'hang out' and have fun with other biological children their own age. Some indicated that foster children should be included in these fun activities as well. Another child suggested that they could all go on a camp.

One parent mentioned that they knew a biological child from a foster care family who had been on an ACT Young Carers camp and that they had found this beneficial. However, when she tried to access the same program it appeared that her daughter was not considered eligible:

A friend's daughter went to a Carer's ACT camp, that's designed for and it's based

on children who are carers. My daughter said 'I would really like to go on that' and I rang up

and nobody seemed to know anything about it which is really strange... She must have got

through in a back door way. (Parent)

During this conversation one of the parents mentioned that their child had accessed sand play therapy provided by Carers ACT, but only because the child met their criteria due to the foster child in their care having developmental delays, and therefore their child had to spend a significant amount of time assisting them.

Acknowledgement and inclusion from foster care agencies

All parents agreed that their children need more support from foster care agencies. Parents reported that support for biological children is currently provided in an ad hoc manner, at the discretion of individual workers. One parent spoke about having a support worker who acknowledged their biological child as much as the foster child, for which the parent was very grateful:

The carer support worker was very good, she always bought something for both

of them and stuff and it's like well I'm here for you, this is special time for you. (Parent)

Every parent who participated in this study agreed that biological children miss out and need recognition for the role they provide. One of the children mentioned with pride that they had received a Youth Week Award as a result of their fostering. However, this seemed to be an isolated incident and was not indicative of the other families' experiences.

Although parents readily acknowledged that their own children contribute to and provide care for the foster children in their home, it appears that few other people acknowledge the role played by biological children. Parents also emphasised that their biological children were central to families' decisions about whether they start or continue to provide care and what type of foster care they can provide. Therefore, due to the significant role that they play in fostering families, it was felt that biological children should be acknowledged and included more by foster care agencies who are funded to support their family.

Younger children were particularly at risk of being left out of information and support provided by foster care agencies. One parent criticised the practices of their foster care agency, which excluded their child from the training program on offer to biological children because they were under 8 years of age. This child was also deemed to be too young to participate in this research project, which only further reinforced the parents' concerns about his voice being left unheard. This parent felt particularly disappointed and let down by these policies and practices, because they stated that this child was the one most impacted by the family's fostering. The parent stated:

[My child] has not been old enough to do the training the last two times. [This child] knows all

the conversations; [they're] up with what's happening. The younger ones seem to be left out.

In a lot of ways they are there more often, because the older ones kids are in school. (Parent)

Parents thought that foster care agencies could easily provide certificates to biological children as a reward and recognition for their contribution, or an annual event that was just for them (although if asked, the children may want to include their foster siblings in such an event). Parents also mentioned that their children needed more age appropriate training and possibly clubs (for all ages) that can connect children with others children in the same situation as them. Other suggestions floated by parents included a Facebook group just for biological children of foster carers, and free counselling outside of the foster agency.

Implications

This scoping study has highlighted the important contributions that biological children of foster carers make within their families. The biological children who participated in this study emphasised the positive aspects of their role, detailing how fostering had provided opportunities for them to broaden their world view, build family and friends, enjoy fun and shared activities with their family and develop new skills. Biological children and their parents spoke confidently and proudly of the practical and emotional care tasks that the biological children undertook for foster children in their care. Parents also consistently highlighted the caring role that their children provided.

However, as indicated in the broader literature, there were both positive and negative impacts for biological children. The challenges experienced by children in this study included dealing with problematic behaviours of foster children; sharing special people, time and toys; feeling jealous, ignored and left out; changing family dynamics; family stress and conflict; and coping with worry and loss.

This study has highlighted that despite the active role of biological children within the fostering family and the many challenges they experience, these children largely remain unrecognised and unsupported. Within the ACT, biological children remain invisible at a policy level, and more often than not they are excluded from foster care processes and support. These policies and practices can result in children being left on their own to deal with their concerns or challenges related to families' fostering. Children were acutely aware of the many changes and additional stress that fostering brings to their parents. Many of the children went on to say that, due to this extra pressure, they were unlikely to talk to their parents as they did not want to further burden or worry them. Due to the stigma and misunderstanding that others held about their foster family, children were also unlikely to talk to their friends, peers or teachers at school about their fostering. Therefore, this study supports the findings of previous researchers in this area, which indicates that biological children may require formal support to alleviate their sense of isolation in coping with fostering concerns and challenges.

The children who participated in this study had some clear ideas as to how any additional information and support could and should be provided to them and their families. Contrary to the existing literature which has largely focused on the need for individual support or peer support groups specifically designed for biological children of foster carers, the children in this study wanted to be recognised and included, first and foremost, as part of the foster caring family. As such, they wanted to be included in the support already provided to their family, including the provision of foster care training, particularly prior to the beginning of their families' fostering journey. This study was somewhat unique in that many of the biological children who participated in our focus groups had already attended training from a foster care agency. This enabled the biological children to reflect on what was good about this training and what could be improved. The children felt that training needs to be offered to children of all ages, and needs to be specific to the type of foster care they provide. They thought that the training should also provide them with a good understanding of what fostering was going to be like and provide them with some strategies to cope with the challenges and issues it could bring to their families.

In addition to training, children and parents felt that the current supports provided to foster care families needed to be extended, to actively include biological children. Support which is oriented to a whole of family focus (including children within the family) would mean that children's needs would be considered and assessed, and parents could be enabled and supported to meet the needs of their own children. Children clearly indicated a preference to access support from their parents,

and parents in the focus group also agreed that they required more support to assist their biological children to cope with fostering.

Foster parents in the study stated that they had not had the opportunity to talk to other foster carers with biological children about the challenges fostering provided to the whole family. Therefore, parents found participating in the focus group for this study valuable, not only because they had a say, but also because they learnt a lot from the more experienced foster parents. The parents agreed that a peer support group for foster parents with biological children would be very helpful to share their experiences with each other.

The findings of this study highlight the critical importance of recognising the role and challenges faced by biological children of foster carers. However, recognition is just the first step and needs to be followed by the provision of more holistic whole-of-family support, which can assess and address the needs of all members of the foster care family. Our findings indicate that this approach would be beneficial not only to biological children themselves, but to all stakeholders in the out-of-home care system. Our study supports the growing evidence base pointing to the significance of biological children in parents' decisions to commence or cease fostering, and adds further understanding to their importance in the day-to-day provision of foster care. Pugh (1996) referred to biological children of foster carers as being 'a bridge between the foster child and foster parent'. This study extended this notion by uncovering that foster children often confide in their foster siblings and seek support from them. As such, biological children are required to make active, independent decisions as to what information or 'secrets' need to be shared with adults. The significance of the relationship between biological children of foster carers and foster children is an under-researched area. Further research into this important relationship and into the sorts of supports and services that can best meet the needs of biological children and their parents is urgently required.

Conclusion

This small scoping study had some obvious limitations. The sample size was small and all participants were from one foster care agency in the ACT. Despite these limitations, the focus groups that were held with biological children and their parents reinforced the existing literature and highlighted that biological children of foster carers make a unique and often unrecognised contribution to foster caring in Australia. The study also highlighted that fostering brings with it many changes and challenges for all family members. To ensure that foster carers can continue with providing care for vulnerable children, the needs and experiences of biological children must be recognised and incorporated into appropriate family-centred information and support.

Biological children of foster carers have unique perspectives to offer policy makers and practitioners, which if listened to, could help inform the growing evidence base around foster care in Australia. It is hoped that this small study has gone some way in starting to hear these voices and in encouraging others to enable them to be heard. Further research that can highlight these children's roles within their families; explore how these experiences may influence foster care recruitment and retention; and also explore the meaning and impact of relationships between biological children and foster children would build on the limited knowledge base currently available in this area.

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Appendix One: List of stakeholders consulted for study

The following are a list of stakeholders who were consulted in this study:

- Australian Foster Care Association Inc.
- Barnardos ACT
- Berry Street Childhood Institute in Victoria
- Marymead ACT
- Wanslea Family Services

Appendix Two: Focus groups for children

Time	Session	Overview	Data	Resources
Start 4.00pm **10 mins**	Ice-breaker:	Kids will be asked to put on a name-tag. Facilitators will introduce themselves and briefly describe the purpose of the study and the nature of the focus group. Talking cards: Kids will be asked to pick a "talking card" and then to introduce themselves and to complete the "talking card" sentence. Facilitators should begin, asking a child to pick a card for them. If the card isn't relevant they should obviously show the kids that they've chosen another – to demonstrate that this is OK.		Name Tag stickers and Markers Page 33 of Kids Central Toolkit (Section 5)
4.10 to 4.15pm **15 mins**	Understanding rights in research	Rights in research cards will be placed face down on a table with the "rights" words face up (i.e. confidentiality, benefit, choice etc.) Children will be asked to pick a word and guess what they think the word means and what having that right might mean for how the group works. After offering a guess they will be invited to turn the card over and read the clarifying statement. Facilitators may provide examples or further clarify the right. Children will be asked about any other worries they may have or any other rules they want included		Rights in research cards Charter of Rights for Children and Young People Sheet
4.25 to 4.30pm **20 mins**	Before Fostering	Starting questions: Who told you that you were going to foster? What information did you receive before fostering? Who gave the information to you? Mum/Dad? Foster Care Agency? Other Foster Carers??		Kimochies Textas Butchers paper

		What did you imagine it was going to be like? What did you think it was going to change about your family (if anything)? What did your friends think or say when you told them that you were going to become a foster family? What were some of your feelings when you knew it was going to happen **(Use Kimochies)**	
4.45 – 4.55pm **40 mins**	During Fostering	Questions about during fostering/ currently: Now that you have foster children in your family can you tell us what some of your main feelings are about being in a foster family? **(Use Kimochies)** How do you think your life is different from other kids your age? **Activity:** Now we are going to do an activity. Now we are going to ask you to tell us and write down on the sticky notes three things that have been hard for you being in a foster family and three things that have been good about being in a foster family. **Put sticky notes on a scale** from 'really hard' to 'not so hard' and then discuss: Are any of the ones that are at the easy end for some people harder for others of you? Why? What makes things easier or harder? If we asked your parents to do this do you think it would look different? Would they have agreed that these are hard or easy? Do this ranking exercise for the good things as well. **Mind Map** Now that you have written down what is hard about being in a foster	Kimochies Butchers Paper, sticky notes, Textas, Pens Rating scale drawn on butchers paper Copies of individual mind maps for each child as well as one large one.

family. We want you to pick what is the hardest thing and write this in the middle of the mind map.

Ask kids if they want to all do this exercise together or if they want to do one each.

We are going to ask you some questions you can answer in the boxes around this. The will be numbered from one to six

(1) How does this make you feel? Worried??
(2) When is this hardest for you?
(3) Why do you think it is hard?
(4) Who do you think should/could/is able to help you?? Foster care support agency/mum/dad/friends/relatives
(5) What should, could they do, do that is helpful?
(6) What do they sometimes do that is not very helpful?

Now same mind map exercise for the good things about fostering. Read them out and talk about them:

Eg: How does this make you feel? **(Kimochies)**

What is the best thing about it?

Do some of these good things help you to deal with, the hard things? How? Why? When?

Do you think you would have got that if you had not been fostering?

| 5.25 to 5.35pm 15 Mins | Placement Ending | Questions around placement endings: Have any of you had a foster child move on from your house? What was it like? How did it happen? How do you find out when a child is leaving your family? What is it like when they leave? Do you ever see them again after they leave your family? Do you want to? How does it make you feel when they leave? **Kimochies** | Butchers Paper, Textas, Sticky Notes, Kimochies |

Butchers paper, textas,

Kimochies

| 5.35 to 6.00pm
20 Mins | Concluding
Activity/Closer | Group exercise on butchers paper
Third person scenario – If you were giving somebody advice about fostering (other kids, foster care agency, parents) what do you think they should know and what do you think they should be doing?

Finally if time permits:
What are your hopes from this project? (Cloud activity) participants can use as many clouds that they would like to. They can choose to share these with each other.
Ask kids if there is something they would like to write on the cloud, that they do not want to share - this can be placed in the shoe box.

Thank kids and ask if anyone has any questions they would like to ask us before we all leave?

Check how they are feeling before they leave: Kimochies? | Butchers paper,
Textas,
Sticky Notes

Individual clouds
Shoe Box |

Appendix Three: Focus group for parents

Time	Session	Overview	Data	Resources
6.30pm **15 mins**	Welcome/ introduction about the project Understanding rights in research	Foster parents will be asked to put on a name-tag. Facilitators will introduce themselves and briefly describe the purpose of the study, a little bit about the ICPS and the nature of the focus group. This will be further considered in the next part of the session. Facilitators to talk about Rights in research.	None Discuss the 'rights in research'	Sticky labels Butchers paper Coloured pens Blu Tack Pre-made rights poster
6.45pm **10-15mins**	Ice-breaker:	Facilitator should begin by asking parents to introduce themselves and answer these questions: 1. Ages of their own children; 2. How long have they been fostering; 3. What are the ages of the foster children they have looked after; 4. How many children they are fostering at the moment; 5. What type of foster care, long term, short term, respite Talking Cards: Then ask parents to pick a talking card/ sentence stems and answer them	Tape recorder Responses generated to statements Demographic information	Butchers paper Coloured pens Blu Tack Pre-write questions
7pm **45 mins**	Before fostering, during and placement endings	Facilitator to explain the structure of the session First we will start by opening discussion talking about what it is like for kids through all stages of the fostering experience – before you began fostering or get a child placed with you, then during and then after a placement ends. Second we will ask you to think about some of the positives and challenges of fostering for your children and finally, talk about support they may need.	Audio files from discussion group Needs of biological children of foster carers	Butchers paper Coloured pens Blu Tack Kimochi feelings toys Service promotion

Starting questions:

Facilitator will begin to ask a series of open ended questions to parent about their hopes and expectations of fostering prior to fostering:

What were your concerns and hopes for your children prior to fostering?

How much did you/do you now consider your children in the decision to foster and keep fostering? Foster care retention?

What information did the children receive prior to fostering? Who gave the information? Were you expected to give this information or did the foster care agency provide this?

Activity – Kimochi feelings toy

Facilitator to empty bag on the table and ask the parents to choose one kimochi, answering these questions-

How do think your children may feel just before having a foster child stay with your family/or before you started fostering?

Is this different to how you feel just before having a foster child stay with your family?

Why would there be differences?

Facilitator to begin with the next series of questions asking parents about what is happening presently in their families with regards to fostering :

What things, now that you are fostering, do you think you should have known to tell your children prior to fostering?

What do your children tell you about fostering? Or what do you hear them say or know they have said from others?

Have your family relationships/dynamic, roles and expectations changed since fostering? What has changed the most?

How do they perceive the relationship between the foster child

and their child?

Facilitator to begin with the final series questions asking parents about coping with foster placement endings:
Have you ever had to end a placement because of concerns for your own children?
Would the safety or any other concerns of your children make you think about stopping fostering altogether?
How do your children find out about a foster child leaving?
How much notice would you say you have?
Do your children talk about any feelings they might have about the foster child leaving?
Do you think that your children get enough support around placement endings?

7.45pm **15mins**	Activity: Ranking scale of positive and challenges that biological children may experience as a consequence of fostering as seen by the their parents	**Activity – ranking scale** In thinking about all of the things we have discussed so far we would like to do a little activity 1. Can you please write the three biggest challenges that your children may experience on post it notes. And then stick them on a ranking scale. A little challenging/ challenging/ very challenging 2. Then discuss- (write on butchers paper) Why would these being the most challenging/least for them? Compare challenges – are there any that are the same? Why? 3. Then write three positives things that your children might experience from fostering 4. Then discuss (write on butchers paper) Do these outweigh some of the challenges Would they have been able experience these things if they weren't fostering? Or is only through fostering that they are able to?	Impacts of fostering on biological children of foster carers Take photo of ranked post-it notes	Butchers paper Sticky tape Coloured pens Post-it notes different colours Pens

8pm **20 mins**	Activity: Mind Map	Discuss the supports currently received by their children and support that they think their children may benefit from. Facilitator will write up what the parents say using the mind mapping method with points to consider such as who, why, when, what, how Important questions to be acknowledged are: Is there any support for their children? What kind of support? Is it effective? Why? Who supports them? Informal and formal If they were given funding - What kinds of support would they like to see for their children? E.g. other agencies around Australia have recourses for biological children, tell them what they are Should supports/ services be directed to you only or to them and their children? Do they think that their children might like formal support? What kinds of support additional support would they like to see?	Needs/supports for biological children of foster carers	Butchers paper Coloured pens Blu Tack
8.20pm **10 mins**	Concluding activity/ closer: Key messages from the session	What do they hope to get from the project? – (give them a paper with a cloud in the middle and they can write in it what they think, and any additional stuff that they want to write in it) Also if time ask the the question: What would be your one key bit of advice you would give to your foster care agency, or other potential foster parents in regards to the needs of biological children? Activity – Kimochis feelings toy Check in with parents to ask if they are going ok and how they are feeling at the end of session.	Notes from feedback	Butchers paper Coloured pens Post it notes A4 coloured paper Pens Kimochi feeling toys