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We care about care: advice by children in care for children in care, foster parents and child welfare workers about the transition into foster care

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ABSTRACT

Twenty children in foster care, ages 8 to 15 years, provided advice to children in care, foster parents and child welfare workers about ways to assist service delivery during the transition into foster care. The children discussed the importance of tending to experiences such as foster home expectations, the importance of time and information, the new foster/parent–child relationship, coping with stress, the ability to be engaged in decision-making, the benefits of foster care and the need to build a trusting and personal relationship between children in care and their caregivers. The importance of listening to children's experiences of the transition into foster care and incorporating their advice into future research, policy and practice will be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have noted that relatively few studies address children directly about their perceptions of being in care (Johnson *et al.* 1995; Gilligan 2000; Whiting & Lee 2003). The existing research on children's experiences on foster care is primarily based on the perspectives of social workers and foster parents, and secondary data analysis (Palmer 1996; Leathers 2003; Wulczyn *et al.* 2003). Gilligan (2000) stresses the importance of listening to the voices of children in care, 'listening to children not only respects their rights and dignity, encourages their capacity for self-expression and promotes their development, it also provides important evidence for assessing the impact and value of services provided' (p. 42).

The value of learning about children's views is evident when one considers the specialized insider knowledge they bring as experts into their own experiences. Many have expressed the importance of having their voices heard (personal communication, Promoting Resilient Development in Children Receiving Care Conference 2004; Mitchell 2008). By interviewing children in care, Whiting & Lee (2003) found that most children were confused about what would happen to them and the reason for placement into care. In the study conducted by Johnson *et al.* (1995), 95% of children reported they missed their (original) family. These findings illustrate how third party perspectives can overlook critical experiences held by children in care and emphasize the importance of speaking to children directly about their experiences.

This study highlights the 'Sharing Ideas' section of the Transitioning into Care Project (TICP; Mitchell 2008). The TICP is a hermeneutic phenomenological research study that examined children's lived experience of an under-researched foster care phenomenon: the transition into foster care. One of the objectives of this study was to seek out children's advice about ways to improve children's experiences during the transition into care. Children in care were asked to share advice with children transitioning into care, foster parents preparing for the arrival of a child in their home and child welfare workers (CWWs) assisting children with the transition into care. It was anticipated that the dissemination of this information could inform policy-makers, CWWs, foster parents and the original parents about ways to improve service delivery and meet the unique needs of children and families during the foster care transition.

METHOD

Twenty children (seven males, 13 females) who had been in regular foster care for 6 to 36 months and who were 8 to 15 years of age participated in this study. These criteria were based on the rationale that the children would have had some time to adjust to their placement into foster care and could also recall the experience of transitioning into care. All the children at the agency who met the sample criteria were invited to participate in the study. The approval for this study was sought from a Children's Aid Society in Ontario, Canada, the children's legal guardians (i.e. children services workers) and the children themselves. The research protocol was approved by the university Research Ethics Board.

The participants were invited to discuss the advice they would share with children, foster parents and CWWs preparing for a child's transition into care during an individual interview with the researcher. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a neutral location, which is a location outside of the social services agency and their foster home. Three scenarios were presented to the children:

1. Let us say I am about (child's age) and I am getting ready to move into another home. I am a little nervous and not quite sure what to expect. What advice would you give me?
2. Let us say I am a foster parent getting ready to welcome a child into my home. What could I do to make the child feel welcome and comfortable in the home?
3. Let us say I am a social worker who is getting ready to move a child to a new home. What can I do to make the child feel comfortable during the move? Is there anything that might be helpful?

The children were advised that the information provided would be used to help inform policy and practice, and create an information booklet for children transitioning into foster care.

RESULTS

Advice for children transitioning into care

Three main themes emerged from the children's reports when offering advice to other children transitioning into foster care: foster home placement expectations, communication of emotions and coping with stress.

Foster home placement expectations

Types of families. Through the children's reports, it was inferred that many children were aware that there was no 'prescribed' type of foster family and that the dynamics of a foster family may differ from a child's original family. Some children expressed:

> It could be very different than your other house that you've lived in the past . . . or it could be a lot similar or could be in between. (female, 10–11 years)
>
> The possibility of meeting a nice family exists so you don't have to expect meeting a mean family. (female, 12–13 years)
>
> All foster families are different people. You may like where you are living at, and you may not like it so much. But it's not very nice, it's not very fair to you cause I am sure they're just as nervous of having you there as you're nervous of going there, so I'd just say, be as nice as you can and just tell them how you feel if they're doing something you don't like. (female, 12–13 years)

What is noteworthy about the latter report is that this child has taken into consideration how both the child and foster parent may experience feelings of nervousness at the time of placement. In an effort to minimize the experience of nervousness, the child expressed the need for politeness and open communication of any feelings of discomfort.

Adaptation over time. Time was considered a contributing factor to adjustment to the foster home placement. Some children stated:

> It really sucks and it gets easier with time. (female, 14–15 years)
>
> Usually what people have always told me is that things have to get worse before they can get better. You might not necessarily like it, but, it will work out for the best, hopefully. (female, 10–11 years)

Children who discussed the need for time to adapt to the foster placement expressed that the placement became less stressful with time.

Keeping occupied was considered another means of passing time during the adjustment period. One child stated:

> Do things that will keep you occupied. Keeping yourself busy will help keep your mind off of things you not ready to think about. Figuring things out is a gradual process. (male, 12–13 years)

Another child expressed how some children may not adapt well to their first placement but may adapt better to successive placements. She stated:

> It's going to be tough at the first time but it will get better the longer you're there . . . And if the first place doesn't go well

> and you really hate it and it's really bad and you can't stand it, try to ask your worker to go to a different place. Talk to them about it, and tell them how it's like and maybe they'll move you to a different place. And if that one's not good, if you go to a next one it should be really good because the first one might not go good . . . It depends on who you are and what kind of foster parent you have. (female, 14–15 years)

As this child expressed, sometimes it takes more than one placement before children will find a placement where they get along with their foster parents and feel like they can adapt comfortably. Ultimately, most of the participants considered adaptation to their foster placement as a gradual process. Children transitioning into care were advised to keep themselves occupied and find comfort in knowing that their situation would improve over time.

Benefits. Some children reported that meeting new friends and peers was a positive outcome to placement into care. The children's reports included comments such as:

> Don't worry . . . It's great. I would encourage them. Tell them that you get to do activities in the summer. You get to meet a bunch of new people around their age, you get to do things that like you wouldn't probably do if you were with your real parents. And I'd tell them that it might seem hard, but like, you're not going to regret it later. (female, 10–11 years)
> It's cool being in foster care. You can meet new friends. (male, 8–9 years)
> It's great. It's a lot better than what you could have with your parents – cause that's why you're there. (female, 12–13 years)

As these reports demonstrate, placement into care was perceived by some children as providing opportunities that they may not have otherwise experienced.

Communication of emotions

Some children discussed the treatment of foster parents and how to manage emotions. One child stated, 'Try not to get your foster mom to hate you before you get there. Don't tell her to shut up' (female, 14–15 years). Another child stated:

> Don't freak out and stuff . . . Like if you are more calm about it, then they'll be more calm to you and listen to your ideas and stuff. Don't be all like nuts and lose it, freak out. Try and like see what you can do, if you can, before you do anything dumb. (male, 12–13 years)

Being respectful and remaining calm was considered by some children to be important strategies for increasing the chances of an open dialogue and communication with foster parents.

Some of the children expressed the importance of having a positive attitude and respecting their own feelings. One child advised that it is alright for children to honour their own feelings, even if they are not considered nice or 'appropriate'. Some of the other children stated:

> Go with the flow. Express your feelings. (female, 12–13 years)
> Do your best and if something happens do your best to control it or not be so mad. Think happy thoughts. Try and trust the people, and believe in the people. (male, 12–13 years).

The importance of tending to one's feelings was illustrated in the following excerpt:

> If they're being taken away from their mom or dad, or both of them, right, cause they did something wrong, I'm sure they're sad cause they love them and they don't think they did anything wrong but, in reality, they did, so of course they're going to want to cry and think they are just these mean people taking you away, but it's actually for a reason and it's okay to cry. Like, you should cry 'cause that makes you a better person when you cry . . . It's better to let it out than to just keep it inside of you because then you are a very unhappy person, and that's not very good. (female, 12–13 years)

As discussed by these children, being calm, respectful, expressing one's emotions in a positive manner and giving foster parents a chance were considered to be important to the foster parent–child relationship and to a child's transition into foster care.

Coping with stress

Sentimental possessions. Some of the children considered it helpful to have items of sentimental value during the transition into care. The children advised:

> Bring a stuffed animal if you are worried. (male, 8–9 years)
> Bring something that his/her parents gave to him/her. (female, 12–13 years)
> If you don't like know them or anything, bring something that gets you to be calm. (female, 14–15 years)

Items that carried personal significance were considered essential items that could assist with stressful experiences associated with the foster care transition.

Pets. Pets were also believed to have the potential to assist children during moments of sadness and periods of adjustment. The children reported:

> Moving into foster care can make you sad. You can take the pets for a walk to make yourself not sad. (female, 14–15 years)
> To make themselves feel comfortable, they can spend time with a pet. Animals are very good friends. (female, 12–13 years)

Social support. Support from friends, foster parents, and counsellors was considered an important resource for children. Some of the children advised:

> If you have a cell phone you might want to get some minutes on it so you can text your friends and stuff . . . Like if you didn't want to talk on the phone you'd be able to text messages to them and stuff. (female, 10–11 years)
> Make as many friends as possible. If there's nothing to do, try to find something to do. (male, 12–13 years)
> Find a kid or something. Hang out with some kids. (male, 12–13 years)

When discussing support from foster parents, the children stated:

> I would tell them what made me feel more at home . . . Like knowing that there's someone out there that cares about me and my feelings, like, um 'cause . . . a lot of foster parents do. (female, 10–11 years)
> It's going to be okay and that they're going to be nice to you. (female, 10–11 years)

These children discussed how knowing they were cared about and treated nicely assisted them in feeling more comfortable at the home.

The children also discussed how counsellors could assist them during the foster care transition. One child stated, 'You're gonna get a worker and ask your worker for a counselor and you can tell a counselor how you really feel' (female, 10–11 years). It was suggested that by seeking out a counsellor, a new child in care would have someone with whom they could share their feelings. From these reports, it was inferred that social support was considered an essential factor that minimized the stress that children experienced as a result of being placed into care.

Relationship building. The children discussed the importance of becoming familiar with one's foster parents immediately upon placement into the foster home. Various strategies were provided to assist children in building a more intimate foster parent–child relationship during the transition into foster care.

When asked what he might suggest to a child who was nervous about moving into care, one child stated, 'It's scary. [What would be some things I might be scared of?] Scared of the people. [Yeah, and what could I do to try and help myself not be so scared?] Say hi' (male, 8–9 years). This child expressed that children may be scared of the people with whom they will be living. Considering the resolution to alleviating this fear involved saying 'hi', it could be inferred that the child believed this fear was evoked from children not knowing their foster parents. Building a relationship with someone involves engaging in a process of familiarity, with the first step usually involving introductions. As this child's report illustrated, the fundamental first step in building a relationship is by saying 'hi'.

Some of the other participants provided more elaborate responses that addressed how children could pursue relationship building, 'Maybe if I knew the person's foster mom. I could tell her that' (male, 8–9 years), and 'Meeting your parents might make you more comfortable' (female, 14–15 years). These children expressed that familiarity with one's foster parents may provide comfort to children during the transition into care.

Another issue raised by the children involved the need to inform foster parents of personal likes and dislikes. One child stated:

> Try to get to know the foster parent. Talk to her and tell her what you like and think that you don't like. And maybe if you tell her those things that you don't like she won't give you anything that you don't like and if you could tell her what you like and she'll probably make you what you like and stuff. (female, 14–15 years)

By advising their foster parents of their likes and dislikes, experiences of anxiety and discomfort may be minimized. This approach may also positively serve the parent–child relationship in the foster care context by developing a closer bond between parties through familiarity and respect for individual interests and objects of significance.

Many of the participants discussed ways children could get to know their foster parents by building a more intimate relationship. Sharing information about one another could assist with a smoother transition and more comfortable rapport between children and foster parents.

Diversion from worries. One child provided advice about ways that children could divert their worries. He expressed:

> You will be upset leaving your family . . . You wouldn't see your family until they got visits set up which could take around a month or two. Watch movies and stuff to keep you occupied, or play video games because if you listen to music then it's just gonna make you think more about foster care. Like it still does sometimes. Bring a stereo so that at night-time it's easy to go to sleep because you worry about your family. (male, 12–13 years)

This child discussed how children can experience the transition into care as a stressful experience

because they may not get to visit with his/her parents for some time after the placement. He suggested that engaging in activities that keep children occupied could help them when they miss their families. Although diversion from worries was only discussed by one child as a piece of advice, as was found in the larger study (Mitchell 2008), this strategy was used by many children who were coping with ambiguous loss.

Advice for foster parents

Two main themes emerged from the children's reports about advice for foster parents during the foster care transition: foster home orientation and relationship building.

Foster home orientation

Introductions. Children suggested that foster parents should familiarize the child with the home, the people at the home and the benefits of the home. The children advised:

> Show them around the home. Introduce them to everyone. (male, 12–13 years)
>
> Welcome them in. Show them where they're going to be for awhile, like where they're going to sleep, where's the washroom, introduce everyone to that person or introduce that person to her. (female, 12–13 years)
>
> I would probably think like telling her about . . . a bunch of stuff that is good about foster care. Like, tell them that you get to do two weeks of activities in the summer. (female, 10–11 years)

Pets. Children expressed the importance of knowing whether pets resided in the home. One child stated, 'If you have a dog or cat you might wanna let them know before they come into their house' (female, 10–11 years). Considering the children expressed varying comfort levels with pets residing in the home (Mitchell 2008), providing children with information about pets in the home may be helpful to their adjustment to the foster home.

Rules and responsibilities. Some of the children discussed the need for rules, responsibilities, and structure in their foster home. The children stated:

> Ask the child to do some chores, the foster parent should know their bedtimes, to do their homework at a certain time, ask them if they have any homework, and treat the child with respect and good care. (male, 8–9 years)
>
> Ask the youth if they need anything, if they have any questions, if they want to go somewhere, if they are hungry, and tell them if there are any rules. (male, 12–13 years)

In addition to suggesting that foster parents should advise children of the rules at the home, the children mentioned that foster parents should make an effort to ensure that children felt comfortable in the home by asking them if they needed anything and by responding to any questions or concerns they may have.

Relationship building

A critical piece of advice offered to parents interested in fostering children involved the need to build a personal relationship with the child. Foster parents were advised to be sensitive to a child's feelings. One child expressed:

> They're probably like really nervous about meeting you too, and maybe they are excited, but I'm sure they don't like being taken away from their family so they're probably like really scared so I'd be as nice as you can to them and if you ask them to do something and they don't do it, then confront them nicely . . . I'm sure that you might be angry and you might want to yell at them but try not to as hard as you can 'cause that'll make them feel a lot worse about you and I'm sure that you want them to like you. (female, 12–13 years)

Many of the children discussed the importance of providing a welcoming and comfortable atmosphere for children transitioning into a new home and the need for foster parents to familiarize themselves with the child. They advised that the best means to accomplish this task could involve activities other than discussing the transition itself. One child stated:

> Maybe ask if they even want to talk with them. Like it doesn't necessarily have to be, because I am sure they wouldn't really want to talk about all what just happened and stuff. Maybe you wanna ask them if they wanna go out. Maybe you can go and get some stuff. Clothes, get a few things, it doesn't have to necessarily be clothes . . . get an ice cream . . . and just like introduce yourself to each other and tell each other a little bit about each other. (female, 10–11 years)

Another child expressed:

> Don't talk to children about their birth parents. Play sports or comfort them. Ask them if they have a favourite thing to do and then do that with them; shopping maybe. Talk to the child and do 'a favourite list thing' to see what they have in common. (female, 12–13 years)

As suggested by these children, parents could encourage familiarity by engaging in activities such as sports, shopping or a 'getting to know you' conversation.

Quite a few of the children expressed engaging in an activity of 'getting to know one another'. One child

stated, 'I would tell you to ask her what she likes and what she doesn't like' (female, 14–15 years). Another child expressed:

> Maybe like get to know them a bit like sitting on the couch watching TV. During commercials you can ask them questions like what's their favorite animal, what's their favorite color, what's their favorite food. Get to know them a little bit better, so they can know what they like. 'Cause like when I first came to foster care I was a bit shy. She didn't ask me anything and I ate something that like made me throw up after. I was like, 'I hate this stuff'. (female, 10–11 years)

When asked what a foster parent could do to make a child feel comfortable, one child replied:

> First you bring her out for dinner . . . Then say, 'What's your favourite colour?' and ask her questions about her life and tell what you think about, so the foster mom tells the kid about her life and how it's alike. And tell her how she felt when she was a little kid too. (male, 12–13 years)

The children discussed the importance of foster parents and children getting to know each other by asking each other questions about their likes and dislikes and sharing experiences with one another. This approach could be interpreted as an activity that promotes intimacy between foster parents and children and helps establish a bond of understanding and an investment in trust. Activities to promote intimacy within the foster/parent–child relationship have been proposed by Mitchell (2008) in the form of a welcome package for children transitioning into foster care.

Some of the children thought that physical activity, rather than a 'getting to know you' conversation, would be a good way to assist a child with feeling comfortable in their new surroundings. One child expressed, 'take them out and do something really fun with them' (male, 12–13 years). Another child stated:

> Take them out somewhere . . . shopping or something that they like to do. Talk to them and ask them what they would like to do for a week or what they would like to do today . . . Try to show them their room and show them their house. Tell them that they could get food, that they can eat anything. (female, 14–15 years)

Physical activity and comfort food were considered important ways that a foster parent could make a child feel comfortable. Buying children toys or items of significance were also considered an effective means to assist with this task. Some children stated:

> Give them a toy. Have a party for them. (female, 12–13 years)
> Buy a pet. Find out what the youth likes. Have something expensive for them. Find out what their favourite animal is and buy them a stuffie [stuffed animal] or photo of that animal. (female, 12–13 years)
> Make supper and take the youth shopping. (female, 14–15 years)

Emotional support and sharing were other factors considered to assist children with feeling comfortable at their home. One child stated:

> Help them through whatever is going on in their life. If they want to be alone, you should leave them alone and stuff like that. Share your stuff with them or something. Make them feel happy. (male, 12–13 years)

The need to respect children's personal space when they desired to have time alone was also discussed.

Lastly, some children emphasized the importance of giving children choices when they entered their new home. One child advised:

> Let them choose what they want for supper. Let them have video game things if they like video games . . . Get them new clothes for the first day or something like that. And then ask them what colour they'd like their room or something and then paint it that colour. (male, 12–13 years)

This child provided some useful suggestions about ways to engage children in the decision-making process.

Advice for child welfare workers

Five main themes emerged from the children's reports regarding advice for CWWs during the foster care transition: basic needs, relationship building, active participation in decision-making, provision of information and time, and the need for compassion and social support during the home transfer.

Basic needs

CWWs were advised to make sure that the children would be provided with the bare essentials such as clothes, food and accommodations. The children's reports included statements such as:

> Make sure the child is fed, has clothes, a hat, pants, and a room. (male, 8–9 years)
> Take the youth to meet the foster parents. Go shopping for new clothes and shoes. (female, 14–15 years)

Relationship building

Similar to the advice offered to foster parents, some children expressed the need for CWWs to establish an understanding relationship with children. One child stated, 'Allow them to do whatever, like, don't boss them or anything. Try to make them feel comfortable

. . . Tell them they are free to whatever except run away' (male, 12–13 years). Another child stated:

> Pretty much the same thing as a foster parent, like tell them about what you do, what you do for a living, tell them a lot of good stuff about foster care, and tell them that they won't regret this and all that. (female, 10–11 years)

As this child expressed, becoming familiar with one another and providing information about the 'good stuff' in care could minimize stress and may assist them with an understanding of the positive attributes of foster care. Lastly, one child discussed how CWWs could serve as a means of social support during times when a child may need some emotional support. This support could be provided by listening or assisting the child in whatever way needed (male, 12–13 years).

Active participants in decision-making

Some children indicated that children transitioning into care should have the opportunity to be active participants in making decisions about issues related to their placement. One child suggested that CWWs should ask children what type of family they would like to live with: that is, what age they would like their foster parents to be and if they would like other children to be residing at the home (female, 12–13 years). Some of the other children expressed:

> Ask them any questions . . . Say like how my lawyer does. She lets you say anything that if you want to for foster care, like have a visit, or something like that. (male, 8–9 years)
>
> Give the youth an opportunity to visit a whole bunch of different schools and then choose which one they want to go to. (female, 12–13 years)
>
> Ask that person if they need to get anything from that house. (female, 12–13 years)

CWWs were advised to consult with children about their placements and ask them for their opinions about issues such as the foster placement context, visitations with original family and preferred school. It was also suggested that children be asked if there is anything they need from their original home during the foster care transition. This suggestion is understandable because a CWW may not know or be aware of objects of significance beyond those founded on basic needs (i.e. food, clothing, etc.).

Provision of information and time

Notification of placement into foster care. One child discussed how being informed of having to move would have been helpful. She stated:

> At least told me that I was moving, instead of me having to run into my house and cry . . . Like saying, 'Girls, Hi. Told me our names. Said, 'Hi, my name is blah, blah, blah' and said, 'You're moving'. Then we would have known and we would probably be okay. (female, 10–11 years)

As this child stated, children may better adjust to foster care if they are notified of the decision to place them into care.

Information about the meaning of foster care, foster parents and the foster home. Many of the children agreed that being provided with information about the foster home placement could be helpful to a child transitioning into care. One child stated:

> Maybe just tell them what's going on and stuff first . . . Like you're going to be taking them and just give them a brief example of what's going to be happening and stuff I guess. (female, 10–11 years)

Another expressed:

> Well I'm sure that [CCWs] know the foster parents so [they] could tell them all the great things about them, about the foster parents and just let them know what kind of people they are, and what they expect from you, and what they don't really mind – if you do this or do that – and just tell them if they have any animals or anything, and stuff. (female, 12–13 years)

Another child suggested:

> It would be good if a kid had like their worker or someone to drive them to their foster home – so they can fill them in, so that way they won't be like, 'What's this lady like?' You know, give them a little piece of paper – what the foster mother's like- and that kind of thing. Tell them about the great opportunities they can have. (female, 12–13 years)

The children advised CWWs to provide children with information about the benefits, people, expectations and pets at the foster home. Providing this information may result in a child being less susceptible to interpretations of ambiguity and evaluating the placement into foster care as less stressful to their personal well-being.

Processing time and information about the reason for foster care placement. Some children advised CCWs of children's need for time to process the notification of placement into care. One child discussed the importance of not rushing children before placing them into care. He stated:

> Say, 'Do you want some time to grab your stuff? . . . If you are going to come with me, say goodbye to everyone'. And don't rush them . . . Getting rushed out makes you like mad because you are already bad, trying to keep up . . . Depends

> what kind of kid you get too. Like if you get someone who's like . . . if they don't like it at their house. They're like, 'I need out of here', then you can do that stuff. They're not going to be mad but you get someone who's sitting there and they look like they want to freak . . . they know what is going on, then try not to say too much. Like be easy on them. Don't be rushing them like they were with me. That got me like right, Oh! (male, 12–13 years)

These child discussed how some children may need time before being placed into care. He advised that although some children may not mind being apprehended immediately, others may perceive immediate placement into foster care as threatening and may need time to collect their things and say goodbye.

Another child expressed that the meaning of foster care, the reason for placement into care, and the provision of 'family time' should be provided to children who are transitioning into care. She stated:

> You could like talk to like the whole family around . . . Like tell them the reason and everything and try to make it they know the reason and take them out for a drink or something and let them spend time with their family for a little bit before they go. Let them go somewhere with the family for a day and then take them the next day and let them hug and kiss and talk and still say that they'll still be able to see each other but as long as it's supervised or depends on what it is. They could ask the child if, Are they upset about what's going on? And if they are, then say, 'Why?' and like the kid will answer and then try to fix it and say, 'Well we don't really want to do this but this is our job and we could probably try to get you to go back with your family. Depends on the court' or whatever it is. 'Hopefully you can get back with your family but if not, we're hoping that you get along with your foster parents. (female, 14–15 years)

These children suggested that children transitioning into care should be provided with the opportunity to have 'family time' after being notified that they will be placed into care. By providing this time, children may feel less rushed and may evaluate placement into care as less threatening. CWWs were advised to be explicit in explaining the process of foster care and provide children with information that might help them better process the experience of being placed into care. The children also advised CWWs to discuss their role as workers, to discuss the efforts they would make to assist the reunification of the child's family and to advise children that some decisions are made by the court and are out of their hands. Regardless of the situation, it was advised that children should be informed that their best interests are in mind and CWWs are there to support them.

Although some of the children suggested that CWWs should speak to children about the foster home and the reason for placement, others advised that in some cases, the child may not want to be informed of the reason for placement. When asked if they should talk to children about why they are leaving, one child expressed:

> Actually, no, that only made me worse. Like they could but . . . like if they already know about everything why they're here, why they're going there, then don't bring it up again because if I already knew and they brought it up again, it kept running through my mind. I was like, 'Oh man!' I was losing it. (male, 12–13 years)

These findings suggest that although some children may want to talk about the reason for their placement at the time of apprehension into care, this may not be the case for all children.

The home transfer: compassion and social support

A final piece of advice involved the need for compassion and social support during the home transfer. One child stated:

> Like if they're sitting there freaking out, try to get them to cool down before they go and all this stuff. 'Cause if they get in the car and they're losing it, they're going to be a lot worse when they get near that car. [What do you think they could do to help them cool down?] Talk to them. (male, 12–13 years)

The child suggested that talking to a child may be beneficial during the home transfer, but, as he expresses in the following excerpt, special care should be taken with how the child is addressed. When asked if it would have been helpful to him if a CWW talked to him when he was feeling mad, the child responded:

> It depends what they were saying. Like, 'It's not bad. You're just going to a foster home'. That's like when I would have lost it. Or if they said like, How can I say it? . . . (What do you mean? . . . Do you feel that when they say, 'Oh you are going into a foster home. It's no big deal', they are kind of downplaying how you are feeling?) Yep. Yeah. It's like, 'How about me and you trade lives for a bit and you can see what it's like.' (male, 12–13 years)

It could be inferred that the child believed that CWWs should respect and acknowledge the difficulty and stress children may be experiencing during the home transfer. The child then offered a thought-provoking suggestion that involved having a mentor who informed and guided children during the apprehension transaction. He stated:

> You could like even get like a person who has been in a foster home and say like, 'I've done this and stuff. It's not as bad as you think in the end. It's alright. You are allowed to go and make your own choices and do this, do that. It will work out fine.' (male, 12–13 years)

As expressed by this child, children may benefit from having a former child in care be present during the home transfer. Having someone who understood the experience of being placed into care could be helpful to children during the foster care transition. The former child in care could serve as a mentor to children transitioning into care by answering any questions they may have and tending to any anxieties they may be experiencing.

SUMMARY

Consistent with Articles 12, 13 and 25 in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is essential that children are given the opportunity to express their views about experiences and circumstances relevant to their placement. This study provided children with an opportunity to share their views about the transition into foster care, a phenomenon that has received little attention in foster care research and Canadian child welfare policy. The objective of foster care is to reunify children with their original families and, therefore, is intended to be a temporary experience. This may explain why the focus of the majority of foster care studies and policy have been on the services offered to children either before or after the transition into foster care rather than on the transition itself. To assist policy-makers, CWWs, foster parents, children and all invested parties with an understanding of how services may be improved during the foster care transition, children in care were invited to offer their advice and insider knowledge about this under-researched phenomenon.

As illustrated by their reports, most of the children experienced the transition into foster care as abrupt and confusing. The children identified various situations and experiences that require attention during a child's transition into foster care. These concerns included the importance of preparation time, provision of information during the home transfer, familiarity with the foster home, interpersonal communication and social support upon entrance into the foster home.

Children expressed the need for time, time to process the notification of foster care placement and time to spend with their families before relocation to the foster home. In some cases, the provision of time may provide children with the opportunity to collect their belongings, speak to their families about any concerns and/or fears and make preparations for the upcoming home transfer.

The need for compassion and understanding during the home transfer was repeatedly expressed by the children in this study. One child suggested that it might be beneficial to children if they were accompanied by a former child in care during the home transfer. It is possible that a former child in care could provide a child with encouragement, information, support and hope during this potentially stressful period. Elaborating on this concept, it may be helpful to children if they were assigned a former child in care mentor throughout their time in care (i.e. from the time of placement into care to the time of emancipation from care).

Children in care require a secure base, stability (e.g. remaining in the same placement), continuity (e.g. consistent relationships) and mentors in their lives (Gilligan 2001). Providing children in care at the onset of the foster care transition with a mentor who has also been in care may be beneficial to them in a variety of ways. At the most initial level, children may benefit from recognizing that there are people who 'make it through' this event. The former child in care mentor could also serve as a means of continuous social support throughout their time in care by providing them with encouragement, information, support and hope.

The children also discussed the need for information about the meaning of foster care, the people who would be caring for them, the context and dynamic of their foster home and depending on the child, the reason for placement into care. Providing children with information about foster care and their new home environment may assist children by minimizing ambiguity and subsequent stressful appraisals (Mitchell 2008).

The children indicated that children in care should be advised of foster home expectations and how their basic needs will be met. Foster parents were advised to familiarize children with the home, pets, routines and responsibilities, whereas CWWs were advised to introduce children to their foster parents and ensure them that their basic needs would be met (e.g. the provision of clothes, food and a bedroom). Children in care were advised to be respectful towards their foster parents, remain calm and to communicate their emotions openly and honestly.

The need for social support was one of the most prominent themes of advice offered by the children in

this study. As their reports illustrated, having a social support network was considered a vital resource for children who are transitioning into foster care. Other child welfare researchers have also discussed the importance of social support in the lives of children in care (Silva-Wayne 1995; Gilligan 2001; Schofield 2002). Foster parents and CWWs were advised of the importance of building a personal relationship with children in their care. Children suggested that a personable foster/parent–child relationship could be established through 'getting to know you' conversations, physical activities, gift-giving and decision-making opportunities. Lastly, time was considered key to adjustment and adaptation to being placed into care. The children expressed the benefits of being in foster care and that being in care gets better with time.

The transition into foster care is a significant turning point in children's lives that deserves further research and attention. It is recommended that the children's advice about service delivery during the transition into foster care be considered and incorporated into future research, policy and practice. Many of the children expressed they felt helpless and frustrated when their care providers did not take their opinions and ideas into consideration. These findings suggest that children believed their voices were of little value to the people with whom they were trying to communicate. If we are to understand children's values, we must first make an effort to listen to them. This research does not imply that care providers do not listen to children; rather, these findings suggest that children believe they are not being heard. More efforts are required by policy-makers, researchers and practitioners to demonstrate to children in care that their values and voices are acknowledged, heard and considered. When it comes to caring for our children, we are continually reminded . . . 'We need to be talked to, listened to, and loved a lot' (youth in care, Pelletier Homes for Youth 2006).

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