

Foster family resources, psychosocial functioning, and retention

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The chronic shortage of foster families is exacerbated by the fact that many families discontinue during the first year. This longitudinal study examined the effect of family resources and psychosocial problems on retention. Almost 50 percent of families who started preservice training did not complete it. Of the 131 families who completed training, 46 percent had already discontinued or planned to discontinue at six-months. Families with more resources, especially income, were more likely to continue. African American and single-parent families were less likely to continue, but not when controlling for income. Families with more psychosocial problems and fewer resources were more likely to express uncertainty about continuing. These results have important implications for recruitment and retention of foster families.

Key words: drop out; foster care; foster families; foster parents; retention

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Three-fourths of the 568,000 children in foster care live with foster families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2001). Even with the rise in the use of kinship homes, agencies place approximately two-thirds of children in nonkinship families (DHHS, 2001). However, national data based on reports from 38 states indicate that there were only 133,500 licensed nonkinship foster families (Child Welfare League of America [CWLA], 1998). Up to 40 percent of foster families discontinue fostering during the first year (Baring-Gould, Essick, Kleinkauf, & Miller, 1983; Casey Family Programs, 2000; Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Pasztor & Wynne, 1995; Ryan, 1985; U.S. General Accounting Office [GAO], 1989), and another 20 percent plan to do so (Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001). Consequently, there is a chronic shortage of foster families.

Parenting competence in general and foster parenting ability in particular result from the cumulative effects of social and economic resources and parental and familial psychosocial functioning (Sameroff, Bartko, Baldwin, Baldwin, & Seifer, 1998; Seaberg & Harrigan, 1997, 1999). The number of family resources has been associated positively with willingness to provide placements for children with special needs and with measures of foster home utilization (Cox, Orme, & Rhodes, in press). However, little research exists concerning the effects of such resources or psychosocial functioning on families' decisions to foster. In addition, there is little research on what influences individuals to become foster parents (Baum, Crase, & Crase, 2001; Cox, Buehler, & Orme, 2002), and no earlier research on why some families discontinue fostering during the first year, despite documentation of high dropout rates during this time.

RETENTION RESEARCH

Only a small percentage of agency-recruited families ultimately become foster parents (Friedman, Lardieri, Murphy, Quick, & Wolfe, 1980; Rodwell & Biggerstaff, 1995; Siegel & Roberts, 1989). Many families discontinue after their first few contacts with agencies (Friedman et al., 1980) or self-select out during preservice training (Pasztor, 1985). Other families complete training then decide not to pursue fostering. Agencies eliminate some applicants because of age, poor health, criminal background, or other reasons. Yet, the percentage of rejected families is small compared with those who discontinue voluntarily before approval (Kadushin & Martin, 1988). Drop-out before approval might screen out unsuitable applicants (Smith & Gutheil, 1988), but this has never been examined empirically.

What we know about why families discontinue fostering has come from a few cross-sectional studies. Some studies have found that foster parents were more likely to discontinue if they were dissatisfied with agency relationships or had poor communication with workers (Baring-Gould et al., 1983; Rhodes et al., 2001; Triseliotis, Borland, & Hill, 1998) or if they had concerns about children's behavior, children returning to undesirable circumstances, agency red tape, low reimbursement rates, or the fostering role (Denby & Rindfleisch, 1996; Rhodes et al.; Rindfleisch, Bean, & Denby, 1998). Other self-reported reasons for quitting have included stressful interactions with birth families (Baring-Gould et al.; Rhodes et al.; Triseliotis et al.), problems between foster and birth children (Baring-Gould et al.; Triseliotis et al.), and being named in allegations of abuse (Rindfleisch et al.). Wilson, Sinclair, and Gibbs (2000) associated such stresses with lower foster parent well-being and, for new foster parents, the intent to discontinue fostering.

Foster parents intending to quit have reported different support needs than families who plan to continue. Families planning to quit fostering reported needing day care, transportation, and financial services (Rhodes et al., 2001). Compared with foster parents who quit, foster parents who planned to continue reported being trained better (Rhodes et al.; Ryan, 1985; Urquhart, 1989) and having foster parent mentors (Rhodes et al.; Rindfleisch et al., 1998).

Retention efforts begin with engaging interested families in a process of education, assessment, and informed decision making about fostering. Some viable families who might foster successfully decide not to continue after completing preservice training. Other families follow through with the application process, but quit shortly after approval. To engage families in fostering, assessment needs to focus on families' resources for overcoming difficulties as well as the problems and needs they might have that could interfere with fostering.

FAMILIAL RESOURCES AND PROBLEMS IN PSYCHOSOCIAL FUNCTIONING

For the most part, retention research is atheoretical. Resource theory can provide a foundation to explain retention. Derived from social exchange theory, resource theory has been used to understand family relationships (Foa, Converse, Tornblom, & Foa, 1993; Foa & Foa, 1974) and decision-making processes (Lee & Petersen, 1983; Rank, 1982; Warner, Lee, & Lee, 1986).

In the context of familial relationships, Hesse-Biber and Williamson (1984) defined a *resource* as "anything one individual family member can offer another to help that person satisfy needs or attain goals" (p. 262). According to Foa and Foa (1974), there are six categories of resources—love, services, goods, money, information, and status—and "the larger the amount of a resource possessed by a person, the more likely it is to be given to others" (p. 93). In their study of foster families, Cox, Orme, and Rhodes (in press) found family resources associated positively with willingness to care for a child with special needs and with having a child placed in the home. We suggest that foster families with more resources find it easier to meet the demands of parenting children in care and thus are more likely to continue. However, like many families, foster families have psychosocial problems, such as limitations in parenting or problems in marital or family functioning (Orme & Buchler, 2001a). Such limitations may offset the advantages of resources for fostering and decrease the likelihood of continued fostering.

Foster Family Resources

Using theory and research to guide selection (as detailed later), we focused on 11 family resources: (1) higher education, (2) higher income, (3) being married, (4) having time for fostering, (5)

having parenting experience, (6) having fostering experience, (7) belonging to a place of worship, (8) having social support from family, (9) having social support from friends, (10) working in a helping profession, and (11) being European American. These are not the only possible resources, but they include a wide range of resources typically assessed by agencies that are likely to influence foster family retention.

Higher Education. For families in general, studies have linked higher education and income with better behavioral and emotional adjustment in children (Chase-Lansdale, Gordon, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1997; Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1997; Lipman & Offord, 1997; Sameroff et al., 1998). More educated parents are presumed to have access to more extensive information about children and their needs, as well as information about available resources to deal with problems they might encounter. Thus, foster parents with more education and income might have less difficulty fostering children with behavioral and emotional problems. Parent education is also important, given the complex concepts covered in foster parent training (Child Welfare Institute, 1987; Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 1993), completing applications, and working with diverse bureaucracies.

Higher Income. Family income might influence retention for diverse reasons. Lack of economic resources has been linked to maltreatment of children in family foster care (McFadden & Ryan, 1991). Also, out-of-pocket expenses often are involved in fostering (Kricner & Kazmerzak, 1994, 1995). When combined with low board payments and inadequate levels of family income, these additional expenses might place additional stress on families, contributing to families' decisions to discontinue (Brown & Calder, 1999).

Being Married. When marriages are stable and relatively free of hostile conflict, marital relationships provide emotional support and instrumental assistance to spouses or partners as they function in a variety of roles (Cutrona, 1996). In two-parent families the challenges of fostering can be shared, whereas in one-parent families the challenges of parenting are handled by one person, unless an extensive social support network exists.

Having Time for Fostering. Providing quality care for a child with multiple needs can be time

consuming and exhausting. New foster parents often are surprised by the amount of time involved in fostering (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Cautley, 1980; Denby & Rindfleisch, 1996). Parenting any child is time consuming, but fostering involves added time because the children often have multiple problems and require frequent services and because time must be spent in agency-related activities such as training and meeting with workers. CWLA (1995) has encouraged families to consider the time they have available to devote to caring for children. If a foster parent is not employed outside the home or is employed less than full-time, more time can be invested in caring for foster children.

Having Parenting and Fostering Experience. Foster parents with their own children have reported more realistic, flexible attitudes about children's behavior (Cautley & Aldridge, 1975). Similarly, families who have fostered before probably have a clearer understanding of what fostering demands and are better prepared to meet the challenges.

Belonging to a Place of Worship. Many foster parents have reported being religious (Buehler et al., 2003; Fine & Pape, 1991; Le Prohn, 1993) and attending worship services (Kirby, 1997). One motivation for fostering has been to fulfill religious beliefs by helping children (Le Prohn). Foster mothers have identified their churches as sources of support for fostering (Soliday, McCluskey-Fawcett, & Meck, 1994). Belonging to a place of worship can provide families with a sense of purpose and spiritual well-being to sustain them in difficult times and provide practical assistance and social support.

Having Social Support. Social support has been linked with family well-being (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), better adaptations to life crises (Holahan & Moos, 1986), and more satisfying and effective parenting (Simons, Lorenz, Conger, & Wu, 1992). Social support also is associated positively with better individual well-being for individuals in nontraditional parenting relationships such as same-sex partners (Lott & Tully, 1993), single parents, and stepparents (Marks & McLanahan, 1993; Richmond & Christensen, 2000). Soliday and colleagues (1994) found that community support was positively associated with foster parent satisfaction. Titterington (1990) reported that foster parents relied more on friends,

family, and neighbors than on foster care workers. Such support may augment the formal supports provided by child welfare agencies. Extended family members' acceptance of a foster family's efforts also is important to fostering success (Molin, 1994). Finally, having supportive mentoring relationships with more experienced foster families can help retention (Rhodes et al., 2001).

Working in a Helping Profession. Individuals who work in a helping profession (for example, nurses, teachers, social workers, and day care workers) have been trained to handle many of the challenges presented by foster children and may have experience with a broad range of problems that foster children experience. Professional experiences also might increase their awareness of children in care and exposure to the problems of children and families, such as poverty and maltreatment, that result in out-of-home care for children. Consequently, agencies have recruited nurses to care for special-needs foster children, especially medically fragile foster children (Appathurai, Lowery, & Sullivan, 1986; Cohon & Cooper, 1993; Groze, McMillen, & Haines-Simeon, 1993; Siegel & Roberts, 1989; GAO, 1989).

Being European American. One barrier to recruiting and retaining a racially and ethnically diverse pool of foster parents has been perceptions that social services models are based on white family norms and middle-class values, which can produce racist attitudes among agency workers and administrators (Brunton & Welch, 1983; CWLA, 1991; Neilson, 1976). African Americans have been less likely to be approved as foster parents (Hasenfeld, 1987; Ougheltree, 1957) and have reported more difficulty relating to agencies (Downs, 1986) than European Americans. African American homes are three times more likely to close involuntarily than European American homes (Denby & Rindfleisch, 1996). Discussions about recruitment and retention have suggested that African American foster parents might be unfairly denied opportunities to foster because of white-biased criteria and culturally insensitive practices (CWLA, 1991; Denby & Rindfleisch; Schroeder & Lightfoot, 1983).

McIntosh (1998) proposed that being white in U.S. society provides some unearned privileges. She defined these privileges as "an invisible knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, com-

pass, emergency gear, and blank checks" (p. 95). Given that foster families must navigate bureaucratic organizations, European American families might have unearned advantages that function as a resource independent of socioeconomic status, income, and education when asking for services for foster children and for themselves.

Parental and Familial Psychosocial Functioning

Extensive research on children and families in the general population has identified parental and familial characteristics that contribute to children's behavioral and emotional adjustment (Bradley et al., 1998; Buehler et al., 1997; Downey & Coyne, 1990; Orme & Buehler, 2001a; Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994; Simons, 1996), including the quality of parenting, the quality of family functioning, the quality of marital functioning, the quality of the home environment, and parents' mental health. Research also has indicated the importance of some of these factors among foster children and families (Orme & Buehler, 2001a).

We refer to these areas collectively as "psychosocial functioning," with the understanding that this term refers to functioning in particular areas related empirically to children's behavioral and emotional adjustment. Problems in these areas are termed collectively as "psychosocial problems." We suggest that foster families with fewer psychosocial problems have less difficulty fostering the children with behavioral and emotional problems, and thus are more likely to continue fostering.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There are several plausible ways in which familial resources and psychosocial problems might be related empirically to retention. With each additional resource the probability of retention might increase by some constant amount (a positive linear relationship), and with each additional psychosocial problem the probability of retention might decrease by some constant amount (a negative linear relationship). Or, with each additional resource the probability of retention might increase by some constant amount only up to a certain number of resources, beyond which the probability of retention is relatively high and additional resources no longer affect retention (a curvilinear relationship with a threshold existing at a certain number of resources). Similarly, with each additional psychosocial problem, the probability of retention might

decrease by some constant amount only up to a certain number of problems, beyond which the probability of retention is relatively low and additional problems no longer affect retention. Also, resources might only increase the probability of retention for those with a greater number of problems (number of resources might moderate the effect of problems). Finally, how resources and problems are related to retention might differ based on when the family decides to discontinue. This study considered each of these possibilities and examined the following research questions:

1. What percentage of families are retained at different points following recruitment?
2. Is there a relationship between the number of familial resources and retention? If so, is the relationship linear or curvilinear?
3. Is there a relationship between the number of psychosocial problems and retention? If so, is this relationship linear or curvilinear?
4. Do the number of familial resources moderate the effects of psychosocial problems on retention?

METHOD

Sample

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger study of successive cohorts of foster family applicants recruited during preservice MAPP (Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting) training (Child Welfare Institute, 1987) in three large counties in a southeastern state (Orme et al., in press). MAPP consists of 30 hours of training over 10 three-hour sessions. At the time data were collected, state policy required that all nonkin foster parents complete MAPP. Agencies have used MAPP nationally since 1991, and, as of 2000, 12 states trained foster parents with the MAPP curriculum (personal communication with someone at the Child Welfare Institute, 2000). MAPP was required of all nonkinship family foster care applicants. All families in this study completed MAPP.

At the second MAPP session, a member of the research team was introduced, families were asked to participate voluntarily in the research, and consent forms were distributed. Each family was offered a \$25 gift certificate for participation.

Applicants to adopt and to foster were recruited for the larger study because many adoptive applicants foster before adopting. In two-parent fami-

lies, both parents were required to consent and participate in MAPP. Kinship foster families were not included because they were not required to undergo MAPP. Therapeutic foster families were not included because they received training from contract agencies rather than from the state.

A subsample of 131 families was selected from the sample of the larger study ($N = 161$). Families from the larger study were excluded if they were rejected by the agency (8.7 percent); they were interested only in adoption (3.1 percent); the agency did not complete the home study within six months after training (4.3 percent); they were approved but could not be located for the six-month follow-up interview (1.9 percent), or they declined to participate in the follow-up interview (one family).

Slightly fewer than two-thirds of families included married couples, and slightly more than one-third of families were female-headed. Thirty-nine percent reported annual incomes below \$35,000; 31 percent had incomes between \$35,000 and \$55,000; and 24 percent had incomes over \$55,000. Sixty-four percent had previous parenting experience (that is, had or were currently parenting a child), and more than 80 percent belonged to a place of worship. About 15 percent of men and 27 percent of women were African American. Few parents had less than a high school education, and approximately 25 percent of women and 30 percent of men had a bachelor's or advanced degree. About 88 percent of men and 75 percent of women were employed full-time. Almost 40 percent of women and 10 percent of men were employed in helping professions. Fewer than 10 percent of the participants had previous foster parent experience.

Measurement

Measures used to assess parental and familial psychosocial functioning were selected after a search of relevant research and collections of measures. Criteria included reliability, validity, normative data (especially criterion scores that could be used to determine the presence of problems), ease of use (that is, time for completion, reading level), and relevance to foster parent applicants (for example, measures not assuming children already in the home).

Foster Family Resources. Eleven resources were measured: (1) having a bachelor's degree or

higher; (2) having an annual family income above the median (at or above the \$35,000 to \$44,999 category), not adjusted for family size; (3) being married; (4) working less than full-time; (5) having parenting experience; (6) having previous fostering experience; (7) belonging to a place of worship; (8) working in a helping profession; (9) being European American; (10) having social support from family; and (11) having social support from friends. Social support was measured using the family and friends subscales of the Social Support Behavior Scale (Vaux, Riedel, & Stewart, 1987) completed by the applicants during MAPP. Social support was considered a resource if a subscale score was in the top 75 percent of the distribution (Sameroff et al., 1998).

Eleven family-level binary resource variables were computed, each coded 1 (resource present) or 0 (not present). For married respondents, the family was counted as having a resource if either partner had the resource. This method was used so that the potential range of resources for a couple was the same as for an unmarried individual.

The total number of resources was counted for each family. Retention was examined as a function of the number of resources because the sample size in the present study was not large enough to model the individual resources simultaneously, especially given the interest in curvilinear and moderating effects.

Foster Family Psychosocial Problems. During MAPP both parents in two-parent families independently completed the following measures: (1) Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976, 1989); (2) Family Assessment Device—General Functioning Subscale (Kabacoff, Miller, Bishop, Epstein, & Keitner, 1990; Miller, Epstein, Bishop, & Keitner, 1985); (3) Partner Abuse Scale (Non-physical) (Attala, Hudson, & McSweeney, 1994); (4) Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis, 1993); and (5) the four subscales of the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory: developmental expectations, empathy toward children's needs, alternatives to corporal punishment, and parent-child roles (Bavolek, 1984). Single foster parents did not complete the Dyadic Adjustment Scale or the Partner Abuse Scale. Single foster parents living alone did not complete the Family Assessment Device.

Coefficient alpha was computed separately for women and men for each measure of psychoso-

cial functioning. The reliability of these measures was good and comparable to estimates obtained with nonfoster parents in previous research. Coefficient alpha was .80 or greater for 82 percent of the measures, and in no case was coefficient alpha below .70. (More detail concerning the characteristics of these measures, including their reliability, is available from the second author.)

For an unmarried applicant, the number of family problems equaled the number of measures on which he or she scored in the problematic range. For married applicants the family was counted as having a particular problem if either partner had the problem. Unmarried individuals were coded as not having a problem in marital adjustment or marital conflict, and unmarried individuals living alone were coded as not having a problem in family functioning. Retention was examined as a function of the number of family psychosocial problems because the sample size in the present study was not large enough to model individual problems simultaneously, especially given the interest in curvilinear and moderating effects. The number of family-level problems had a potential range from 0 to 8.

Foster Family Retention. Six months after the family completed MAPP training, the worker assigned to each family was contacted to determine if the family was rejected, not approved because they withdrew voluntarily before completing the application process, or approved. Approved families were interviewed by telephone at this six-month juncture. The foster parent was asked "Are you planning to continue providing placements for foster children with the Department of Children's Services?" Response alternatives included "no," "undecided," or "yes."

In addition to examining how family resources and problems are associated with retention status, we were interested in the point when families decide to continue or not. To determine how resources and problems are associated with when families are likely to drop out (after preservice training or after approval), we included families who withdrew voluntarily before completing the application in the analysis. In the larger study, families who withdrew before completing the application process did not differ from approved families in terms of the number of psychosocial problems.

Two variables were used to operationalize retention. A dichotomous variable was created and

coded 0 if a family withdrew without completing the application process or if they did not plan to continue, and 1 if a family was undecided about continuing or planned to continue. Families who withdrew before completing the application were included with approved families who decided to quit, because both of these families failed to engage with fostering. This was used to examine the basic question of whether a family was retained. A four-category variable was created and coded as (1) withdrew without completing the application process; (2) approved and at six months planned to discontinue; (3) approved and at six months undecided about continuing; and (4) approved and at six months planned to continue. This coding system was used to get a more detailed picture of retention.

Data Analysis

Binary logit (that is, logistic) and probit regression are appropriate for modeling binary (that is, dichotomous) dependent variables (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000; Orme & Buchler, 2001b). However, the choice between these two models is largely one of convenience and discipline-specific convention because the substantive results are generally indistinguishable (Long, 1997). Binary logistic regression was used in the present study to analyze the binary retention variable.

Multinomial probit and logit (that is, logistic) regression (also known as a polytomous logit or logistic regression) are appropriate for modeling multicategorical dependent variables (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000; Orme & Buchler, 2001b). The multinomial probit and logit models are extensions of binary probit and logit models, respectively, and with a binary dependent variable the multinomial models reduce to their binary counterparts (Long, 1997). As with binary probit and logit models, the choice between the ordered probit and logit models is largely one of convenience and discipline-specific convention. Multinomial logistic regression was used in the present study to analyze the multicategorical retention variable.

In addition to examining direct, independent effects, the research questions involve testing hypotheses about interaction and curvilinear effects. For binary and multinomial logistic regression, interaction and curvilinear effects are tested in the same way they are tested in linear (OLS) regres-

sion. Product terms (for example, the product of two or more variables) are used to test interactions, powered terms (for example, the square or cube of an independent variable) are used to test curvilinearity, and the product or powered terms are entered hierarchically in the regression equation (Long, 1997).

RESULTS

First we examine descriptive statistics. Then we examine how familial resources and psychosocial problems relate to retention. Throughout, $\alpha \leq .05$ was used to test hypotheses. Two-tailed tests also were used.

Foster Family Resources and Family Problems

The most frequently reported resources included social support from family and friends, belonging to a place of worship, being European American, and having completed four years of college or more (Table 1). The number of resources ranged from 2 to 11, and the mean was 6.6 ($SD = 1.9$). The number of problems was negatively skewed and ranged from 0 to 5; the median was 1.0 (Table 2).

Foster Family Retention

Only families who completed MAPP were eligible for participation in this study. Forty-eight percent of the families who attended at least one session did not complete MAPP training. Of the 131 families who completed MAPP, 46 percent either withdrew without completing the application process or at six months planned to discontinue fostering. More specifically, 24 percent withdrew without completing the application process, and at six months 22 percent planned to discontinue, 12 percent were undecided, and 42 percent planned to continue.

Dichotomous Retention. To examine whether a linear or curvilinear relationship existed between the number of familial resources and retention, a model was estimated in which the number of resources was entered first, followed by the number of resources squared (see model 1 in Table 3). The relationship was linear rather than curvilinear. As expected, the more resources, the greater the probability of continuing six months after training (see Figure 1). The probability of continuing was about .30 for families with two resources, .50 for families

TABLE 1—Foster Families' Resources

Resource	Total Families (<i>n</i> = 131) %
Social support from family	87.8
Social support from friends	84.7
Belongs to a place of worship	81.7
Being European American	72.5
Education level	67.9
Parenting experience	64.1
Married	62.6
Total annual income	60.3
Employed in a helping profession	42.7
Employed part-time or less	27.5
Foster parenting experience	9.2

NOTE: Families with an annual family income above the median (at or above the \$35,000 to \$44,999 category), not corrected for family size, were categorized as having this resource.

with six resources (approximately the median number of resources), and .75 for families with 11 resources.

To examine whether a linear or curvilinear relationship existed between the number of psychosocial problems and retention, a model was estimated in which the number of problems was entered first, followed by the number of problems squared (see model 2 in Table 3). Neither model nor any individual variable was statistically significant.

To examine whether the relationship between the number of problems and retention was moderated by the number of resources, a model was estimated in which the number of resources and the number of problems were entered first, followed by the product of these two variables (see model 3 in Table 3). There was no statistically significant interaction between resources and problems.

Multicategorical Retention. For the multicategorical retention variable, the same models were tested as for the dichotomous retention variable (Table 4). Participants who planned to continue were the reference group against which participants in the other three groups were compared (for example, the effect of resources on those who

withdrew without completing the application versus those who planned to continue).

As with the predictors of the dichotomous measure of retention, the relationship between the number of familial resources and retention was statistically significant. The more resources, the lower the odds of withdrawing during the application process. This relationship was linear (see model 1 in Table 4). Also, the number of resources moderated the effect of the number of problems on the probability of being unsure about continuing (see model 3 in Table 4). Specifically, for families with few resources the probability of being unsure about continuing increased considerably as the number of problems increased, for families with many resources the probability decreased, and for families with moderate resources the number of problems had relatively little effect (Figure 2).

Retention and Type of Resources

Given the relationship between the number of resources and retention, it is useful to explore the relationship between individual types of resources

TABLE 2—Percentage of Numbers of Foster Family Resources and Problems in Psychosocial Functioning

No. Resources	Families (<i>n</i> = 131)	
	Resources % (Cumulative %)	Problems % (Cumulative %)
0		49.6 (49.6)
1		21.4 (71.0)
2	1.5 (1.5)	13.0 (84.0)
3	5.3 (6.9)	5.3 (89.3)
4	9.2 (16.0)	8.4 (97.7)
5	9.9 (26.0)	2.3(100.0)
6	21.4 (47.3)	
7	18.3 (65.6)	
8	18.3 (84.0)	
9	9.9 (93.9)	
10	5.3 (99.2)	
11	.8 (100.0)	

NOTE: Possible range for resources was 0 to 11. Possible range for problems was 0 to 8. Problems in psychosocial functioning included problems in marital adjustment and conflict, family functioning, psychological status, developmental expectations, empathy for children's needs, alternatives to corporal punishment, and parent-child roles.

TABLE 3—Relationship between Foster Family Resources, Psychosocial Functioning, and Dichotomous Retention

Variables	B	Odds Ratio	Wald	p	χ^2_{Model}	p	χ^2_{Step1}	p
Model 1								
Resources	.21	1.24	4.92	.03	5.17	.02	5.17	.02
Resources ²	-.05	.95	1.46	.23	6.66	.04	1.49	.22
Model 2								
Problems	.03	.97	.06	.81	.06	.81	.06	.81
Problems ²	.04	1.04	.16	.69	.22	.89	.16	.67
Model 3								
Resources	.22	1.24	5.02	.02				
Problems	-.05	.95	.18	.67	5.34	.07	5.34	.07
Interaction	.07	1.08	.75	.39	6.12	.11	.78	.38

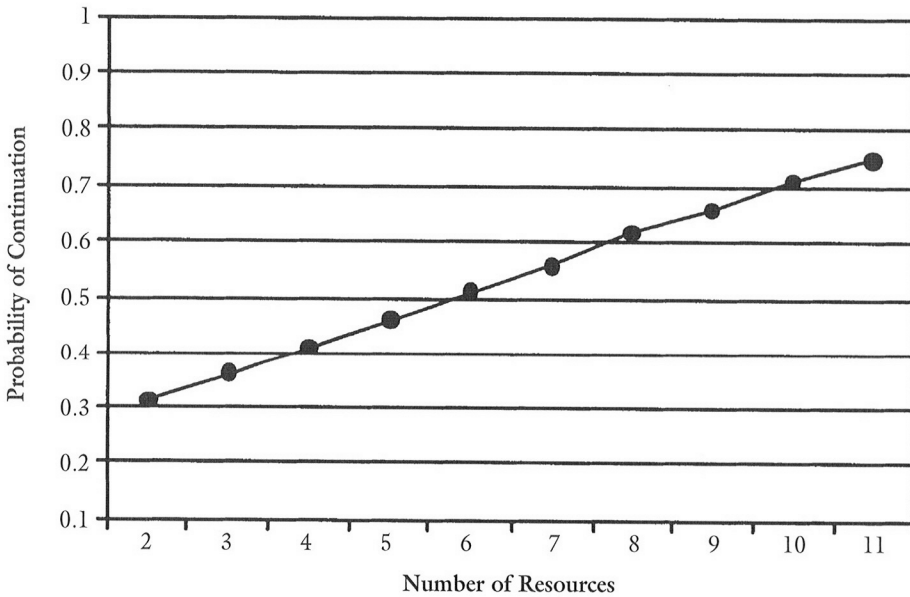
and retention. It might be that some families who discontinue, or consider discontinuing, could foster effectively if given additional resources, or that particular types of families should be targeted for retention.

Dichotomous Retention. Individual dichotomous resource variables were regressed separately on the dichotomous retention variable using binary logistic regression. Families were more likely

to continue if their income was above the median (odds ratio [OR] = 3.34, *Wald* = 10.47, *p* < .01), they were European American (OR = 2.36, *Wald* = 4.57, *p* = .03), or they included a married couple (OR = 2.38, *Wald* = 5.54, *p* = .02).

Given that income, race, and marital status are intercorrelated (*r*s range from .37 to .53) a binary logistic regression model was estimated, which included these three variables. This was done to

FIGURE 1—Number of Foster Family Resources and Probability of Continuation



NOTE: No family had fewer than two resources.

TABLE 4—Relationship between Foster Family Resources, Psychosocial Functioning, and Multicategorical Retention

Variables	χ^2_{Model}	<i>p</i>	χ^2_{Step}	<i>p</i>	Withdrew Application (<i>N</i> = 31)		Planned to Discontinue (<i>N</i> = 29)		Unsure About Continuing (<i>N</i> = 16)	
					Odds Ratio	<i>p</i>	Odds Ratio	<i>p</i>	Odds Ratio	<i>p</i>
Model 1										
Resources	5.96	.11	5.96	.11	.76	.02	.83	.12	.91	.53
Resources ²	9.96	.13	4.00	.26	1.05	.32	1.01	.87	.89	.21
Model 2										
Problems	4.54	.21	4.54	.21	1.22	.20	.81	.27	1.00	.98
Problems ²	7.18	.30	2.64	.45	.86	.19	1.01	.94	.85	.32
Model 3										
Resources	.74	.02	.83	.14	.91	.53				
Problems	11.00	.09	11.00	.09	1.27	.13	.82	.32	1.02	.94
Interaction	19.14	.02	8.14	.04	.81	.08	.88	.35	.68	.01

determine if these three variables had independent effects on retention. This overall model was statistically significant [$\chi^2(3) = 12.15, p < .01$], but only income had a statistically significant independent effect (OR = 2.57, *Wald* = 4.46, *p* = .03).

Multicategorical Retention. Individual dichotomous resource variables were regressed separately on the multicategorical retention variable using multinomial logistic regression. Again, participants who planned to continue were the reference group. Income was the only statistically significant predictor. Families with income below the median were over three times more likely to withdraw without completing the application (OR = 3.56, *Wald* = 7.12, *p* = .01) and over three times more likely to plan to discontinue (OR = 3.61, *Wald* = 6.99, *p* = .01). Families with income below the median were no more likely to be unsure about continuing (OR = 1.33, *Wald* = .21, *p* = .65)

DISCUSSION

Almost 50 percent of families who started preservice training did not complete it. Forty-six percent of the 131 families who did complete training either had already discontinued or planned to discontinue six months after training. Families with more resources, especially income, were more likely to continue. African American and single-parent families were less likely to continue, but this effect disappeared when the effects of income

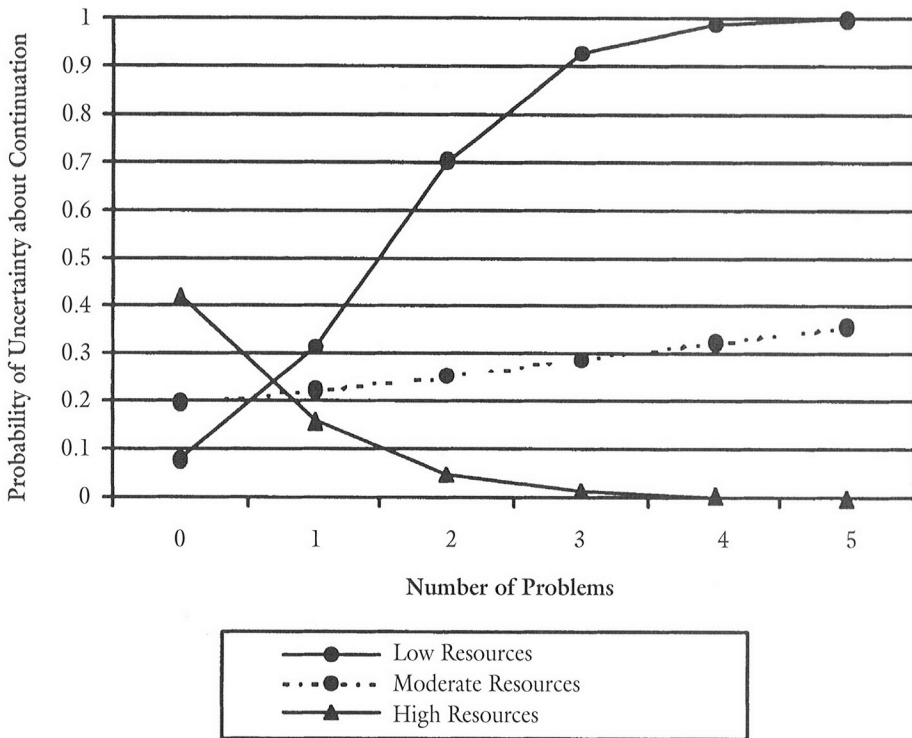
were included. Families with more psychosocial problems and few resources expressed greater uncertainty about continuing.

Implications

The recruitment, training, and assessment of foster families are time-consuming and expensive. It may be that families who discontinue early would not provide effective family foster care. If so, in a sense the selection process is effective, although it may be inefficient. Perhaps unqualified families should be identified early and encouraged to withdraw before completing training. Agencies can screen applicants by observing health status, briefly assessing income stability, helping families identify time limitations that could interfere with fostering, and expediting criminal background checks for early identification of unqualified families. However, in the larger study of which the present study was a part (Orme et al., in press), families who were rejected by the agency had more psychosocial problems than families who were approved, but families who withdrew before completing the application process did not.

Most likely some families who discontinue early could provide effective family foster care, especially if offered adequate resources. Results of the present study suggest that families with incomes below the median are at high risk of dropping out either before completing the application process

FIGURE 2— Problems as Moderated by Foster Family Resources



NOTE: The probability values refer to the probability of being unsure about continuing relative to continuing. Low resources equal 2.8 (2 SDs below the mean), moderate resources equal 6.6 (the mean), and high resources equal 10.4 (2 SDs above the mean).

or shortly thereafter. The nonreimbursed costs of fostering increase financial stress on lower-income families (Brown & Calder, 1999). Families with income below the median might be encouraged to continue if agencies identify and address concerns about the costs of fostering and make resources available at the time families apply.

Findings of this study support recruitment trends for early identification and elimination of barriers that exclude families who, with support, could be effective caregivers (Casey Family Programs, 2000). Lower income might reflect a lack of other resources or demographic differences that are important for retention. For example, in this sample, a higher percentage of families with below-median incomes lived in apartments and duplexes. Families who rent might perceive themselves as unable to make physical modifications to their homes to accommodate a child. In addition,

income related negatively to maternal age ($r = .22$, $p = .01$) and positively with being European American. Older applicants might question whether their health limits their abilities to be foster parents. Motivations also might vary. Gillis-Arnold and colleagues (1998) found that older applicants were motivated by replacing grown children and identified less with foster parent roles than younger applicants and that applicants of color were more motivated by the desire for companionship than were European American applicants. Early identification of resources such as the home environment and physical health as well as motivations for fostering while families are still in preservice training would allow agencies and foster parents to address potential barriers and to plan what support services are needed.

It is important to attract and engage applicants during assessment and preservice training and to

offer alternative ways families can contribute to helping children in foster care. Families who decide not to foster still can be valuable resources for children. As trained applicants, they can be encouraged to enlist as respite care providers even if they are not able to take on full-time parenting responsibilities for a child. Having a pool of respite care providers can support foster families and thus improve retention (DHHS, 1993; Pasztor & Wynne, 1995).

It is generally agreed that foster families need resources from agencies to continue fostering (Pasztor & Wynne, 1985; Soliday, 1998). Results of this study suggest that an accumulation of familial resources is as important if not more important than any other resource. Findings are consistent with the Double ABC-X model of family stress (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). This model theorizes that family stressors, such as integrating a foster child into the family, interact with other stressors, chronic family conditions (that is, psychosocial problems), and family resources. Theoretically, the potential exacerbation of stressful effects because of inadequate resources is also influenced by family members' perceptions of their life circumstances.

Supporting families through comprehensive services, especially during the first year, can add to families' existing resources and might prevent qualified families from discontinuing. This may be especially true for families with more problems, who might be more susceptible to the stresses of fostering, become discouraged or disillusioned, and lose interest in continuing. Agency activities that affect foster parents' satisfaction, such as encouragement from foster care workers about the benefits of their fostering efforts, inclusion in decision making, experiences with agency red tape, and understanding foster parent roles (Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999; Fees et al., 1998; Sanchirico, Lau, Jablonka, & Russell, 1998), might affect the way foster parents perceive and respond to fostering stresses. Future research should include foster parents' perceptions of fostering roles and perceptions of anticipated and experienced stresses.

Methodological Limitations, Strengths, and Directions for Future Research

Results of the present study should be considered with regard to sample size and the popula-

tion sampled. The sample size is insufficient to detect small effect sizes, which might explain the failure to detect some of the relationships examined. The sample was from a public agency in one state, and we do not know the extent to which these results generalize to other states and private agencies. The population was limited by design to the families who completed preservice training. Families who do not complete training most likely have fewer resources and more problems, so the obtained results might underestimate the effects of these variables on continuation. This study did not include kinship family foster care applicants. Given the growing importance of kinship care (Hegar & Scannapieco, 1999) and questions about the resources and psychosocial functioning of kinship caregivers (Gaudin & Sutphen, 1993; Gebel, 1996), future research on continuation should include kinship families. Finally, this study did not include therapeutic foster families. Given that therapeutic foster families often care for children with even more behavioral and emotional problems than do nontherapeutic foster families, it is important that future research on continuation examine the resources and psychosocial functioning of therapeutic foster families.

The way in which retention was operationalized in the present study also needs to be considered. Approved families were asked if they planned to continue, were unsure about continuing, or had discontinued or planned to discontinue. Intention does not necessarily mean that these families did discontinue, although it does indicate families at risk of leaving foster care. Additional follow-up would be needed to see if or when at-risk families discontinue. However, it is difficult to know exactly when families discontinue fostering. Reports indicate that as many as one-third of foster homes do not provide care for children at any time (CWLA, 1998, "MFLPA Survey Initial Results," 1994). Moreover, families may decide to discontinue fostering but appear on agency rolls of open homes for some time (Ryan, 1985). Time-to-discontinuation, analyzed using event history analysis, might be more informative than relying on data from foster parents or agencies alone.

This study focused on foster families. Thus, a limitation of this study is that we did not have information about the reasons children were placed in care and their level and type of existing adjustment difficulties.

Results of the present study also should be interpreted in view of the types of resources measured and the methods used to measure them. In this study the resource of working in a helping profession was determined by subjective judgment of applicants' occupational titles. In future studies this measure could be improved by using a standardized method such as Standardized Occupational Classification to collect occupational data (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000). Having time for fostering was measured by at least one parent being employed part-time or less. Future research should consider the construct of time for fostering and if it could be better assessed using a valid and reliable measure such as the Family Resource Scale (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988). Measures of the general quality of the home environment (for example, Berrick, 1997; Gaudin & Sutphen, 1993; O'Hara, Church, & Blatt, 1998; Simms & Horwitz, 1996; Smith, 1994; Wallace & Belcher, 1997) and of the neighborhood (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994) also should be included as family resources. Future research also should consider measures of parent health status and general well-being.

Results of the present study should be interpreted in view of the methods used to measure psychosocial functioning. Although a broad array of indicators of psychosocial functioning were examined using measures with demonstrated psychometric properties, other measures of these constructs might yield different results, as might other methods for measuring these constructs (for example, observations by independent observers, workers, or significant others).

Although the present study has limitations, it also has notable strengths. These include a longitudinal research design, a relatively broad array of resources, and a relatively comprehensive battery of established measures of psychosocial functioning. Foster families in the study had the same level of training. The sample was large enough to detect at least medium effect sizes with adequate statistical power, was demographically diverse, and included foster mothers and fathers.

Despite documented difficulties of retaining foster families, we know very little about why families discontinue at various stages. We know even less about family characteristics related to retention. This study represents an initial effort to examine relationships among families' resources and psychosocial problems and retention. Given

the essential role foster families have in providing safe environments for children, it is time to undertake a sustained and methodologically rigorous program of research designed to examine why so many families discontinue and what we can do to retain effective foster families. Understanding the families who foster provides agencies and policymakers with information needed to better advocate for support services and improve retention efforts. ■

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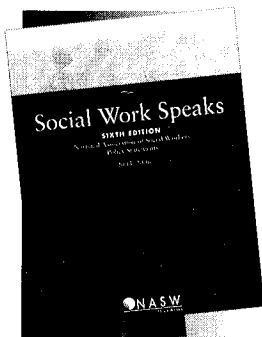
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