Challenges and strengths in parenting foster-to-adopt children: Perspectives of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual foster-to-adopt parents

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This study examined the perceptions of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual foster-to-adopt parents. Participants were interviewed 3-4 months post-adoption placement about the challenging and positive aspects of their children's background and personalities. Thematic analysis was used to qualitatively analyze the data. Parents expressed challenges associated with their children that included a history of neglect and abuse, emotional/behavioural problems, medical concerns, and homophobic attitudes. Parents also highlighted positive qualities of their children, including being healthier than expected, their pleasant personalities, and their ability to same-sex couples. Findings are useful to adoption professionals who provide pre- and post-adoption support services.

Abstract

Method

This study utilized data from an ongoing longitudinal study on the transition to adoptive parenthood. The current sample consisted of 94 foster-to-adopt parents (members of 17 lesbian couples, 15 gay couples, and 62 heterosexual couples). Participants were 38.38 years old on average (SD = 6.30) and had been in their current relationships for a mean of 3.70 years (SD = 5.86). Eighty-eight percent of the sample was White; the remainder was Latino/a (3%), African American (1.1%), and multiracial (1.1%). Participants lived in diverse regions across North America (Table 1).

Participants

Results indicate that the majority of participants perceived challenges related to characteristics of their children. Parents described challenges in the following domains: neglect and abuse, the child's emotional and behavioural problems, and the child's significant medical history (Table 4). In addition, some same-sex couples in the study expressed that their child's homophobic attitudes were a challenge to overcome. Notably, many participants also described their perception that children possessed positive qualities, such as the child's lack of physical problems, pleasant personality, and openness to same-sex couples.

Challenges

In addition, 23 parents (25%) reported that their children were "acting out" or engaging in violent behaviors (e.g., physical altercations with peers or family, breaking objects, assault). Some parents expressed significant distress related to their child's aggressive behaviors. For instance, Sherry, a lesbian mother said:

"She had a few meltdowns in the beginning that scared me to death, because I just didn't want to deal with it...I expected different behaviors, that when we got this one, I was like, "Well that's not the one I prepared for".

At times, parents attempted to explain and understand their child's behaviour, thereby soothing their own distress over such behaviors. Nevertheless, at other times, parents said:

"I'm sure he was acting out because he does have ADHD and then his mother abused him, which was really a problem; and then he lived with a foster family for two years...and his behavior got completely out of control.

On the other hand, some parents did not understand why their children were behaving with aggression, and therefore perceived such behaviors as their own shortcomings, such as expressed emotion such as "it was simply something I did not expect."

Medical History: Children's presentations were also often complicated by a problematic medical history, as reported by the foster-to-adopt parents. Twenty-three percent of participants perceived health-related challenges, which may have been due to bad birth complications. Furthermore, twenty-four percent (29%) noted chronic health issues stemming from a range of conditions (e.g., hepatitis, asthma). Medical conditions were perceived as challenges by foster-to-adopt parents, who had to struggle, and accommodate their children to, appointments.

Homophobic Attitudes: Five lesbian participants noted specific challenges related to their children's homophobic attitudes and/or use of homophobic language, which children had typically learned prior to the placement in their current family. Kate described a situation in which her daughter had a negative reaction to learning that her lesbian parents were married:

"She was at the dinner table one night and [my partner] said that we were married and she said, "Oh, that's weird." You know, we had to have a conversation with her around it's not wrong for two women to be married. She said, "Somebody in school told me this is wrong." We said this is not wrong. We were like, this is what it means to be a family..."

In addition to challenging aspects of their children's history and presentation, participants also described positive aspects of their Children (Table 5).

In conclusion, eleven percent of participants indicated that their children were much healthier than they expected. Because they were adopted from the child welfare system, parents often thought that their children would be afflicted by health problems. Gary, a gay father, noted:

"The children were not in drug situations or alcohol abuse issues, no impairments. It's a little bit like adopting a unicorn. We got very lucky in the health domain, previous neglect or abuse of this child was expected skewed diverticulitis after her child's good health, "I can even believe it."

Pleasant Personality: Additionally, 11% of participants described their children's likeable personality and temperament. They noted that their children were easygoing, happy, affectionate, loving, and empathetic, and sometimes even their adoptive parents could be surprised:

If someone cries in the house she'll go up to them and draw them. She'll lick back and look at you and if she's still crying, she'll keep hugging you, and repeating that it's just us now.

Openness to Same-Sex Couples: Lastly, two lesbian participants described their children as being immediately, accepting of same-sex couples, which was perceived as an unexpected positive experience of parenting foster-to-adopt children. Anna understood her daughter's own openness on her parents' relationship in the following way:

I think the fact that she has memories of a different family and things that she's gone through is useful for her. It gives her kind of a sense of global perspective—she's had a number of different parenting experiences and this is just one among them.

Thus, in the midst of challenges during the first months of parenting, many participants also perceived strengths associated with their children and reported positive bonding experiences as they worked together to form a family.

Conclusion

This study highlights some of the salient perceived challenges – and positive experiences – but a sample of foster-to-adopt parents (who are rarely the focus of research) encountered during the early stages of parenting. Our findings have implications for professionals who provide foster-to-adopt services for some of the experiences they may face post-placement. While it is clear that parents who adopt from the foster care system may perceive challenges associated with their children's physical, emotional, and behavioral difficulties, they often also enjoy positive aspects of their children, which may contribute to positive perceptions of parenting overall and ultimately, less distress.

References


