



Key factors and characteristics of successful resource parents who care for older youth: A systematic review of research



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ABSTRACT

There is growing recognition that competent, committed resource parents are a critical component to the effective delivery of foster and adoptive services for teens placed in out-of-home-care. This study implemented a systematic review process to identify the personal characteristics, skills and abilities of successful resource families that maximize foster and adoptive parent retention and maximize placement permanency of teens placed in out of home care. Starting with an extensive search of the literature across the last two decades and outreach to locate studies, the authors systematically analyzed research that used permanency and placement stability as the primary dependent variables and personal characteristics/attributes, knowledge, skills and abilities as independent variables. Of the 838 total documents identified, 48 were original research studies that focused on one or more of these variables. Although rigorous and systematic, this research was hampered by differing definitions, samples, measures, and the type of analysis utilized among these studies. Personal characteristics that promoted permanency and placement stability included having a tolerance for rejection, flexible expectations, having a sense of humor, having a belief in a higher power, belief in self-efficacy, having higher education, having sufficient economic resources, having healthy family and marital functioning, having access to support systems, and being motivated to foster/adopt. Knowledge, skills, and abilities resources families acquired that promoted permanency and placement stability included the ability to communicate effectively, maintain attentiveness to the parent/child relationship (i.e. using routines and structure while also offering children a variety of experiences), understand the effects of trauma and teach socio-emotional health, provide culturally competent care, recognize, express and process grief, take care of oneself, valuing and participating in life-long learning, training and education, and valuing a connection to the child's birth family.

1. Introduction

Although adolescents in the child welfare system significantly benefit from living in family settings, approximately 50% of those in care will enter a congregate care setting at some point (U.S. Children's Bureau, 2015). Adolescents represent 69% of the youth in congregate care, with 24% entering congregate care as their first placement (U.S. Children's Bureau, 2015). One reason for this overrepresentation is it can be difficult to recruit and retain foster, adoptive, and kinship caregivers (hereby referred to as *resource parents*) for adolescents. Resource parenting of children of any age involves balancing multiple responsibilities, including meeting the youth's daily physical, social, and emotional needs; nurturing a trusting relationship; responding to

behaviors appropriately; advocating; engaging the youth's biological family when appropriate; providing transportation to appointments; and communicating with the foster care team (e.g., social workers, lawyers) (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004). Resource parenting of adolescents often comes with additional challenges because the majority of adolescents have experienced trauma resulting in complex needs (Chamberlain et al., 2006; Cook et al., 2005; Salazar, Keller, Gowen, & Courtney, 2013). Despite these complex needs, limited training has been available to prepare resource parents to care for adolescents. As a result, many of these placements fail; 55% of adolescents who have been placed in out-of-home care have experienced three or more placements (NFYI, 2017). Placement instability impedes the ability of older youth to build sufficient relationships needed to

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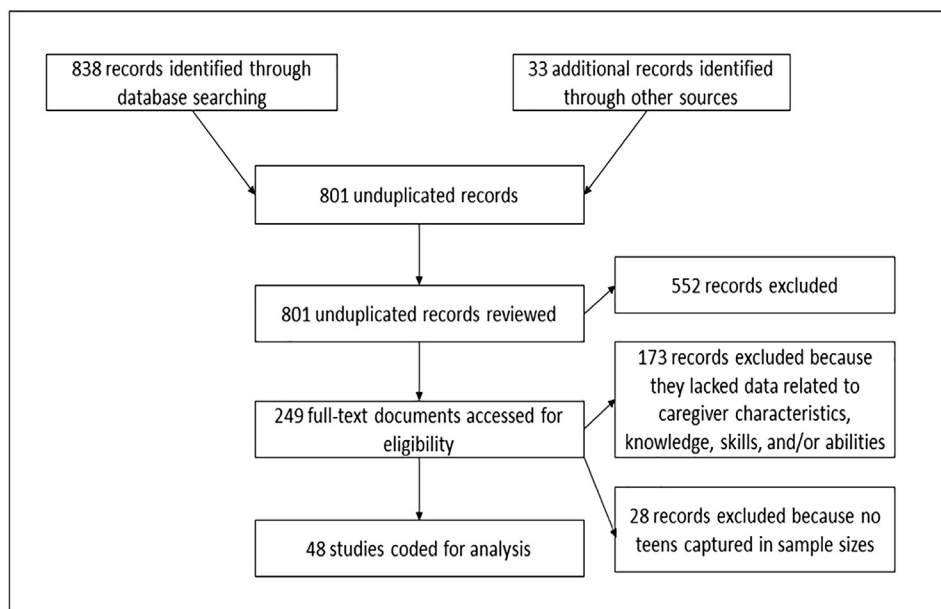


Fig. 1. A flow diagram for study inclusion.

successfully transition to adulthood (Buehler, Orme, Post, & Patterson, 2000; Harden, 2004; Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007). In addition to reducing the ability of children to develop secure attachments (Gauthier, Fortin, & Jeliu, 2004) placement instability has been associated with greater emotional and behavioral problems (Leathers, 2002). The intensification of existing behavioral and emotional difficulties developed through placement instability than make it more difficult for children to establish subsequent relationships with foster parents and contribute to further placement breakdown and rejection (Sigrid, Landsverk, & Slymen, 2004).

The over use of congregate care settings due to the lack of qualified foster parents willing and able to parent older youth (U.S. Children's Bureau, 2015), and the high number of placement changes that older youth in care experience due to the inadequate training provided to prepare resource families to parent older youth (Connell et al., 2006) can negatively impact the long-term well-being of older foster youth. These adolescents are at increased risk of substance use disorders, mental illness, delinquency, sexually transmitted infections, teen pregnancy, and low academic achievement (Day, Edward, Pickover, & Leever, 2013; Griffin et al., 2011).

An Office of Inspector General report (2002) suggests that child welfare agencies across the United States experience problems recruiting resource families with the skills and abilities needed to promote permanency and well-being of older youth placed in out of home care, and asserts that the federal Department of Health and Human Services could do more to address these concerns. There is a need for a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics, skills, and abilities of resources families that enable them to successfully provide placement stability and permanency to older youth placed in out-of-home care. The purpose of the current study is to address this important gap in the existing literature.

2. Methods

2.1. Search strategy and selection of studies

The broader systematic review searched for and retrieved published studies, including peer reviewed journal articles, books, government reports, and other sources identified in the gray literature, dated between 1987 and 2016, through web-based searches on Google Scholar, Elsevier, ProQuest, and SpringerLink as well as personal correspondence, reviews of annotated bibliographies and reference lists. Key

search terms for the web-based searches were provided to the research team from a panel of national experts who informed the development of the study. Key terms/phrases included: treatment and therapeutic resource/foster parent curriculum/training; resource/foster/kinship/guardianship parent curriculum/training; behavioral and educational problems that increase length of foster care placement; effectively managing youth/adolescent behavioral challenges; foster care youth and congregate care; intensive in home interventions for youth with complex and challenging behaviors; foster parenting approaches and strategies for adolescents; characteristics of successful foster and adoptive parents; resource parent parenting skills; foster placement stability for youth/adolescents; trauma informed foster parenting; unique needs of older adolescents in care; best practices in youth service coordination/advocacy for youth; preparing adolescents for guardianship; preparing teens for adoption; cultural competency in fostering/adopting; co-parenting with birth/resource families; child characteristics that impact placement stability; and trans racial adoption of teens. Studies were included if the sample met the inclusion criteria of foster, adoptive or kinship caretakers and the study included a focus on permanency and/or placement stability. Studies were excluded if the report was redundant with other studies, or if after initial review, the study was determined not to meet the inclusion criteria.

Following a comprehensive search, 838 documents were located. After excluding documents due to duplication and a lack of relevance, 249 documents were selected for in-depth review. After more intense examination against the inclusion/exclusion criteria, 173 documents were excluded because they lacked data related to caregiver characteristics, knowledge, skills, and/or abilities. An additional 28 documents were excluded because the samples utilized in the study did not include adolescent populations leaving a final sample of 48 studies for review. Fig. 1 depicts the selection process. Studies selected for the final sample were reviewed and classified into the thematic categories depicted in Table 1. Definitions associated with each thematic category were captured from the studies and recorded in Table 1 as well. Each of the studies selected for analysis were reviewed by two reviewers. A third reviewer who was most familiar with the literature reviewed the coded information to ensure studies were appropriately classified. Percentage agreement was computed as the sum of the agreed upon ratings divided by the number of units that were coded under each theme. All themes reached an inter-rater reliability score of 90% or higher. Final categorization codes were determined through consensus.

Table 1
Variables and associated definitions.

Variable	Definition
Personal characteristics/attributes	
Tolerance for rejection, negative feelings	Depersonalizing a child's behavior; rewards of fostering are not immediate (reward comes after youth leaves the home and comes back for a visit)
Flexible expectations	A caregiver's ability to expect powerful and negative feelings in themselves in reaction to and understanding that those feelings are normal and transient
Sense of humor	Incremental improvements in a child's functioning are celebrated; being ok with a child that will never be/become perfect
Belief in a higher power	A tool that foster parent described as a way to cope with stress and diffuse emotions
Self-efficacy	Being religious, spiritually attuned
Having a higher level of education	Believing in one's ability to effectively parent
Sufficient economic resources	Foster parents with higher education levels tend to be more flexible which promotes stronger relationships
Healthy marriage and marital functioning	Income or other <i>resources</i> available to meet the needs of the foster/adoptive/kinship family
Access to support systems	Healthy marriages are "mutually enriching" and both spouses/partners have a deep respect for each other; Factors such as commitment, satisfaction, communication, conflict resolution skills, were identified as integral components of a healthy marriage
Motivation to foster/adopt	Spouse/partner, foster care agency, extended family, other foster parents, respite, can also include child's teacher, personal/child's therapist
	Altruistic desire to help children in need of a home; desire a "sibling" for one's own child for the betterment of both children; mothers who desire to stay home with their own children decide to foster so they can supplement their income; desire to eventually adopt; had experiences (abuse, neglect, dependency) similar to those of children in foster care
Knowledge, skills and abilities	
Attentiveness to the parent/child relationship	Defining boundaries, setting rules (chores, curfews, study habits), instilling structure in the home, maintaining quality in the physical environment, utilizing verbal praise, positive consequences, social praise, hugs, smiles; being consistent, ability to be an advocate for the child to ensure his/her needs are being met (i.e. health care needs, school, youth employment searches, organizing visitations with siblings)
Self-care	Successful caregivers seek help for themselves, as well as the children in their care, by routinely accessing services (including counseling, respite care, support groups) to maintain perspective, relieve tension, and remain strong and healthy
Socio-emotional health	Caregiver has the ability to understand the effects of trauma and teach socio-emotional health
Connection to birth family	Caregiver is willing to promote continuity of relationships (i.e. encourages contact between child and birth family, also visits with blood relatives, and former foster parents); is able to help youth process through feelings after a visit
Recognizes the need to express and process grief	Ability to help child cope with separation and loss, develop and build self-esteem
Provision of culturally competent care	Ability to promote cultural identity, understanding and sensitivity; this is especially important for resources families engaging in transracial fostering/adoption & those caring for youth who identify as LGBTQ
Participation in training & education	Values and supports education; Willingness to be a life-long learner
Effective communication	Open communication with foster child/adolescent (i.e. listens to child's opinions and feelings); uses active listening, I-messages; ability to communicate effectively with child welfare workers; being an active participant in a service delivery team

2.2. Sample description

The 48 studies were published between 1987 and 2016. Sample sizes included in these studies ranged between 5 (Hall, 2012) and a large nationally representative study that included a secondary data analysis of 76,952 foster parents (Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001). Methods utilized in these studies ranged from quantitative methods (including survey designs and administrative data analysis) ($N = 20$), to qualitative methods (including individual interviews, case studies, and focus groups) ($N = 17$), and mixed methods studies ($N = 5$). Other types of papers considered in the analysis included policy analysis/government reports ($N = 4$), and other types of gray literature ($N = 2$). The methods of each study are highlighted in Table 2.

2.3. Dependent variables

Twenty seven studies identified permanency as a dependent variable in their analysis. Nineteen studies identified placement stability as a dependent variable factor in their analysis. Of these studies, 3 included both variables in the analysis. Permanency was defined as a legal, permanent *family* living arrangement, that is, reunification with the birth family, living with relatives, guardianship, or adoption. The goal of emancipation is not included in this definition of permanency because it does not provide for a legal permanent family for the child (U.S. DHHS, 2005). Placement stability was defined as having been in foster care less than twelve months from the time of the latest removal and had no more than two placement settings (U.C. Davis, 2008).

Due to significant differences in study methodologies, it was not possible to conduct a meta-analysis procedure to compare the specific factors that affect permanency and placement stability; instead the

team used a method to synthesize results by categorizing findings by personal characteristics/attributes and knowledge, skills and abilities.

3. Results

Results are summarized in relation to personal characteristics/attributes and knowledge, skills and abilities. Personal characteristics identified in the literature that promoted permanency included: having a tolerance for rejection ($N = 11$), flexible expectations ($N = 16$), having a sense of humor ($N = 1$), having a belief in a higher power ($N = 3$), belief in self-efficacy ($N = 3$), having higher education ($N = 1$), having sufficient economic resources ($N = 2$), having healthy family and marital functioning ($N = 1$), having access to support systems ($N = 3$), and being motivated to foster/adopt ($N = 15$). Findings categorized by personal characteristics/attributes can be found in Table 3.

Knowledge, skills, and abilities identified in the literature that successful resources families acquired that were linked to the promotion of permanency included: the ability to maintain attentiveness to the parent/child relationship ($N = 22$), take care of oneself ($N = 18$), understand the effects of trauma and teach socio-emotional health ($N = 11$), value a connection to the child's birth family ($N = 14$), recognize express and process grief ($N = 27$), provide culturally competent care ($N = 12$), value and participate in life-long learning, training and education ($N = 5$) and communicate effectively ($N = 6$). Findings categorized by knowledge, skills and abilities can be found in Table 4.

4. Discussion, implications and conclusion

The literature highlights key areas that can help maximize

Table 2
Methods utilized in the studies.

Article citation	Quantitative methods	Qualitative methods	Mixed methods	Policy analysis government reports	Gray literature
Akin (2011)	X				
Barth et al. (2008)		X			
Belanger, Copeland, and Cheung (2008)	X				
Boyd (2013)				X	
Brooks and James (2003)	X				
Brown, St Arnault, George, and Sintzel (2009)		X			
Chamberlain et al. (2006)	X				
Chambers, Zielewski, and Malm (2007)		X			
Coakley and Orme (2006)		X			
Collins, Spencer, and Ward (2010)			X		
Courtney, Terao, and Bost (2004)	X				
de Haymes and Simon (2003)		X			
Diehl, Howse, and Trivette (2011)	X				
Foster (2008)				X	
Fraser et al. (2014)				X	
Grotevant, Wrobel, Van Dulmen, and McRoy (2001)			X		
Hall (2012)		X			
Hess (1987)	X				
Hyde and Kammerer (2009)		X			
Johnson, Yoken, and Voss (1995)		X			
King, Kraemer, Bernard, and Vidourek (2007)		X			
Kools (1999)			X		
Leathers (2006)		X			
Leathers, Falconnier, and Spielfogel (2010)	X				
Leticq, Bailey, and Porterfield (2008)		X			
Mares (2010).			X		
McDonald, Propp, and Murphy (2001)	X				
McFadden (1996)				X	
Mennen and Trickett (2011)	X				
Metzger (2008).		X			
Meza and Lopez (2016)		X			
Newton, Litrownik, and Lansdverk (2000)	X				
Ornelas, Silverstein, and Tan (2007)	X				
Perry (2006)	X				
Purvis et al. (2015)	X				
Rhodes et al. (2001)			X		
Robinson, Kruzich, Friesen, Jivanjee, and Pullmann (2005)	X				
Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, and Localio (2007)	X				
Sanchirico and Jablonka (2000)	X				
Schatz and Horesji (1991)					X
Schwartz (2008)		X			
Simmel (2007)		X			
Smith and Howard (1991)	X				
The Reviewer (2010)					X
Thibodeau (2013)		X			
Van Camp et al. (2008)		X			
Warde (2008)	X				
Zanghi, Detgen, Jordan, Ansell, and Kessler (2003)	X				

placement stability and permanency of older youth placed in foster/adoptive homes. Of the then major characteristics identified in the literature, motivation to parent and having flexible expectations surfaced as the primary characteristics that contribute to the successful parenting of teens. It seems that parents find comfort and perspective in their values regarding caring for others, in particular for abused and neglected children. Resource parents also find comfort and strength when their significant others (i.e. family, friends) that make up their support system understand this ethic of care and the effect it has on their lives (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003; Coakley, Cuddeback, Buehler, & Cox, 2007). Thus, it seems that a deep concern for the need to parent teens placed in out-of-home care, however motivated, needs to be regularly discussed and supported during foster parent and worker interactions. Revisiting motivation regularly can keep families together during particularly challenging moments in the caregiving process. Another characteristic prominently found in the literature was tolerance for rejection. Foster parents must be able to help foster children deal with the various feelings they have about their birth families, being fostered, and their future (Buehler, Rhodes, Orme, & Cuddeback,

2006).

Understanding the impact of foster parent knowledge, skills, and abilities on placement stability and permanency can maximize the development and implementation of foster parent training and recruitment initiatives. The findings of the importance of the parent-child relationship and effective communication cannot be overstated. When resources parents actively engage their youth in decision-making, it increases the youths' motivation to stay and make the placement work and increases feelings that the placement is 'right' for them (Pitchal, 2008). Another critical skill foster parents believed was critical to successfully parenting teens was the ability to recognize and process grief. Complicating the grief and loss process for adolescents is the primary task of this age: identity development (Herrick & Piccus, 2005). This means issues of independence, resistance, and separation are already occurring. Removal from home confuses this already challenging stage of life. Teens may respond by self-medicating with substances, developing eating disorders, or becoming depressed (Mulvihill, 2009). Additionally, for current foster parents, trainings can be designed to incorporate cultural competence. As stated earlier parents are

Table 3
Personal characteristics and attributes of successful resource parents.

Article citation	Tolerate	Flexible	Sense of humor	Belief	Belief in self	Level of school	Resource	Healthy bond	Access	Motivation
Akin (2011)		X								
Belanger et al. (2008).				X						X
Brooks and James (2003)										X
Brown et al. (2009)	X	X								X
Chambers et al. (2007)		X								
Coakley and Orme (2006)										X
Collins et al. (2010)							X			
Courtney et al. (2004)	X									X
de Haymes and Simon (2003)										X
Diehl et al. (2011)		X								X
Foster (2008)		X								
Grotevant et al. (2001)	X	X								
Johnson et al. (1995)		X								
Leathers (2006)	X	X								
Mares (2010)					X					
McDonald et al. (2001)		X		X						
McFadden (1996)										X
Meza and Lopez (2016)									X	X
Newton et al. (2000)	X									
Perry, et al., (2006).		X								X
Purvis et al. (2015)	X									X
Rhodes et al. (2001)										
Robinson et al. (2005)										
Rubin et al. (2007)										X
Sanchirico and Jablonka (2000)									X	
Schatz and Horesji (1991)	X	X							X	
Simmel (2007)		X								
Smith and Howard (1991)	X	X								X
The Reviewer (2010)	X	X			X					X
Thibodeau (2013)	x	X			x					
Zanghi et al. (2003)	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X

Note: Tolerance = Tolerance for rejection, negative feelings; Flexible = Flexible expectations; Sense of Humor = Sense of Humor Belief = Belief in higher power, Belief in Self = Belief in self-efficacy; level of school = having a higher education level; Resource = Sufficient economic resources; Healthy bond = Healthy marriage & marital functioning; Access = Access to support system; Motivation = Motivation to foster/adopt.

requesting additional trainings to help them navigate cultural differences (Samuels, 2009) and foster connections to biological families (Leathers et al., 2010). A service that could be employed to promote culturally competent care for transracial foster/adoptive families could include connecting these resource families to a “cultural mentor” or “culture guide” family of the race or ethnicity of their adopted/foster child to serve as a cultural educator and provide links to individuals and organizations in their child’s racial and ethnic community (Samuels, 2009). To enhance connections to birth families, resource families described the need for a co-parenting approach so that children see both the biological and adoptive/foster parents as supports (Leathers et al., 2010).

4.1. Limitations of the study and need for further research

The information gathered in this report has been specific to promoting permanency and placement stability of foster/adoptive parents who are caring for teens. The strength of this review is limited to the quality of the studies that were identified and included in the analysis. Many of these studies did not contain the sample sizes or the rigor to be generalizable. As the search criteria included key phrases and was not limited to key search terms, there is a risk that there may be some additional literature available that did not surface in the current study. Additional research is required to determine if the characteristics, knowledge, skills and abilities that support permanent and stable placements can be learned through trainings or if it is critical for foster parents to possess them before becoming a foster parent. Understanding the needs of biological parents and how to promote permanency among reunified families was also not captured in this review. As partnerships with biological families are critical to promoting placement stability and permanency, additional research is needed in this area. Little is

known about the types of services, if any, that biological families receive after reunification. It is critical to know if better child and family outcomes can be achieved with intensive services that target reunified families. Finally, this study did not capture the impact of caseworker turnover and how that can cause disruption to resource families and be a trigger for planned or unplanned moves (Bass, Shields, & Behrman, 2004). Access to resources, including access to one’s caseworker is paramount to the promotion of self-care as caseworkers are often the conduit to connecting resource families with critical resources such as respite care and support groups. This phenomenon also warrants further study.

4.2. Conclusion

The importance of clear and consistent structure, along with a need for flexibility, patience, and empathy demonstrates the complex nature of successful fostering. Caring successfully for teens placed in out-of-home care requires a myriad of characteristics, knowledge, skills and abilities that blend together to meet the challenges. These particular demands that surface in caring for teens include norms related to normal adolescent development coupled with socio-emotional difficulties associated with trauma exposure, and other past life history.

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Table 4
Knowledge, skills and abilities of successful resource parents.

Article Citation	Attentive parent/ child relationship	Self-care	Socio-emotional health	Birth family connection	Express & process grief	Cultural competent care	Training & education	Effective communication
Akin (2011)							X	
Barth et al. (2008)	X	X	X		X			
Belanger et al. (2008)	X	X			X			
Boyd (2013)	X	X		X	X			X
Brooks and James (2003)								
Brown et al. (2009)						X		
Chamberlain et al. (2006)		X			X			
Coakley and Orme (2006)						X		
Collins et al. (2010)					X	X		
de Haymes and Simon (2003)						X		
Foster (2008)	X	X	X					
Fraser et al. (2014)						X		
Grotevant et al. (2001)					X			
Hall (2012)	X	X	X		X			
Hess (1987)	X	X		X	X			X
Hyde and Kammerer (2009)			X	X			X	X
Johnson et al. (1995)	X	X	X	X	X			X
King et al. (2007)	X	X	X		X			
Kools (1999)				X				
Leathers (2006)	X	X			X			
Leathers et al. (2010)			X					
Letiecq et al. (2008)	X			X	X		X	
McDonald et al. (2001)					X			
McFadden (1996)	X				X			
Mennen et al. (2011).	X			X	X	X		
Metzger (2008)					X			
Ornelas et al. (2007)				X				
Perry (2006)	X			X	X			
Purvis et al. (2015)				X	X			
Rhodes et al. (2001)	X		X		X			
Robinson et al. (2005)	X	X			X			X
Rubin et al. (2007)					X			
Sanchirico and Jablonka (2000)			X	X		X	X	
Schatz and Horesji (1991)					X	X		
Schwartz (2008)	X	X			X			
Simmel (2007)	X	X		X	X		X	
Smith and Howard (1991)	X	X		X	X			
The Reviewer (2010)						X		
Thibodeau (2013)	X	X	X	X	X			
Van Camp et al., (2008).	X	X	X	X	X			X
Warde (2008)	X	X				X		
Zanghi et al. (2003)	X	X		X	X	X		

the views or policies of the funders.

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