

Abstract in English

Coping with Conflicts Faced by Long-term Foster Parents: Mixture of Family Context and Social Welfare Context

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Introduction and Research Method

A foster parent is a person who works through a public child welfare project to care for a child whose parents are unable to raise him/her. As the increase of child abuse has become a social problem, foster parents are now one of most important resources to support child rearing. The foster care system has been underutilized in Japan; therefore researchers have been exploring why the foster care system has not been accepted as well as measures to promote the system mainly in context of social welfare. On the other hand, recent research to interpret the experiences of foster parents as a type of unrelated family mostly considers that foster parents would become the parents of children entrusted to their hands on the emphasis of family context. Therefore, little research is based on the viewpoint of both the family and social welfare contexts.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the experiences of foster parents are organized from the viewpoint of family context and social welfare context by analyzing the narrative of foster parents.

For the purpose of analysis, we established two concepts about foster care characteristics. First, foster care has a characteristic different from “parenthood” in the sense that a time limit is set in relation with the child. We defined it as the “time definitiveness.” Second, a foster parent is restricted in terms of less discretionary involvement in a short-term nurturing policy and long-term life design in comparison with “a parent.” We defined it as the “relationship definitiveness.”

To attain the purpose of this paper, I examined the experiences of foster parents by developing the following research questions.

1. When foster parents are conscious of “time definitiveness,” how do they recognize their own roles? In addition, how do they deal with conflicts among roles when they occur?
2. When foster parents are conscious of “relationship definitiveness,” how do they recognize their own roles? In addition, how do they deal with conflicts among roles when they occur?
3. When the foster parent-child relationship ends, how do foster parents recognize their own roles and relationship with the child?

A qualitative research approach was adopted. Our data are based on semi-structured interviews with foster parents who had brought up foster children constantly for a minimum of one year. They basically had no intention of adoption. We gathered twenty-three cases, all of which resided in the capital region.

Results

Responses to research questions:

(1) Conflicts among roles and coping with “time definitiveness” are mainly discussed in Chapter 4. First of all, when foster parents faced difficulties in nurturing halfway or nurturing foster children such as problem behavior, they kept it in mind to refer to the growth career of the individual child, without forcing on the child the general image of a child. On the other hand, however, there was also a context to attempt explanation of a foster parent and child based on the image of a child suitable for that age, as well as on the image of a biological parent and child or of a family. When the outlook for the period of the child placement was uncertain, foster parents often went through a dilemma between preparation for return to the biological parents’ home or independence and construction of attachment relationship with the foster parents’ home.

(2) In Chapters 5 and 6, I considered conflicts and coping mainly on the “relationship definitiveness.” Foster parents are forced to reconsider their positioning when parties outside of foster homes are involved, regardless of the child’s biological parents, social workers and staff of child welfare institutions. Particularly, when the involved parties are biological parents who maintained interaction, foster parents were troubled between the ideas of “whether they are parents or supporters of biological parents (homes).” When they compared it with children’s welfare specialists, they tended to find values in “family characteristics.” Foster parents defined themselves reflexively through interactions with biological parents and children’s welfare specialists.

(3) Foster parents perceive the end of the legal foster parents-child relationship have two results: a turning point in nurture responsibility, and a passage on transition to adulthood. However, foster parents are often older than the biological parents of the child, and it is difficult to continue care. Foster parents desired continuation of a supportive relationship such as that among adults and directed their intentions to the child. However, it was sometimes difficult for them to continue the intention, to measure outcomes by an objective standard, and to be confident of contribution to the growth of the child. In such a case, they acknowledged among peers that they had done all they could.

Conclusion and Implication

This study analyzed the experiences of foster parents with the concept of “family context” and “social welfare context” as well as with “time definitiveness” and “relationship definitiveness.” We addressed conflicts and coping with “time definitiveness” and “relationship definitiveness,” and added consideration to the “unlimited intention toward the child.” Based on research questions, we examined the difficulties faced by foster parents in performing their roles of care characterized by “no definitiveness” within the frame of institutional limitation to foster care. Finally, we discussed on the outcome and new insight as a result of establishing the concept of “family context” and “social welfare context.”