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## Foster Parent Retention

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### Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences contributing to foster parents leaving the service in the South Fraser Region in British Columbia and better understand how the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) can enhance foster parent retention. This study is in response to MCFD's concern that more foster parents are leaving the service than the number of homes available for children. A literature review was conducted to gather insight into the existing body of research regarding the retention and recruitment of foster parents. The literature review described the motivations of foster parents and the importance of positive professional relationships with social workers. Some factors that led to foster parents leaving the child welfare system included insufficient funding, a lack of respite care, and limited support services for foster parents. The theoretical frameworks used in the research included family systems theory and ecological theory. Ecological theory was used to examine how child welfare system, workers and policies influence foster parents (Leffler & Ahn, 2022). We used an exploratory approach guided by ecological theory. Our research study utilized purposive, non-probability sampling techniques. Our data was collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 45 minutes to 60 minutes with five individual participants. The median duration of time fostering was 11.2 years. The number of placements ranged from two to 1300 children, although not all participants could recall the number of placements they had. The children and youth in care's (CYIC) ages ranged from 6 months to 19 years of age. The study uncovered four themes. This included retention of foster parents; relationship with agency; strengths, relationship with agency; deficits and desired changes. Our findings discovered that although foster parents had honorable motivations, positive experiences, and strengths; the systemic issues outweighed the positive aspects of their experience and led them to decide to leave fostering. This study revealed implications for practice that MCFD can implement to improve foster parent retention. Practice recommendations include ensuring that social workers are trained and assessed to demonstrate positive characteristics identified by foster parents. Ensuring transparency about the complex needs of CYIC, as well as mandating assessments for mental health and behavioral needs would help aid foster parents to be aware of the support needed. Including and valuing foster parents as members of the care team can contribute to retention. Requiring social workers to follow policies consistently is also integral to retention. There are suggestions for future research to enhance foster parent retention. Interviewing current foster parents to take a proactive approach to maintain retention is also critical. Overall, this study has provided valuable insights into the needs of foster parents. The implications for practice can guide future policy recommendations for MCFD and research moving forward to enhance retention.

**Keywords:** fostering; foster parent; retention; motivation

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## Introduction

MCFD has identified a decrease in the number of foster parents in the South Fraser Region in British Columbia. Therefore, there is a need to understand the experiences contributing to foster parents leaving the service, and how MCFD can enhance foster parent retention. Learning about these insights could inform further directions for MCFD to implement any necessary changes to promote long-term caregiving. This concern is relevant to social work practice because there are more children entering care, than foster homes available.

This is also problematic for social workers because they may experience barriers to upholding their professional duties within the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics including the “Pursuit of Social Justice” and “Service to Humanity” (CASW, 2005, p. 5). The Pursuit of Social Justice advocates for service users to receive suitable services and treatment to support and protect them, whereas Service to Humanity posits that social workers must use their influence to best serve vulnerable populations (CASW, 2005). The decreasing rates of foster parents can place social workers in a challenging position where they are unable to maintain these values or the proper protection of children. Above all, the minimal number of foster parents compromises the safety and security of children which is integral to social work.

## Literature Review

The decreasing number of foster parents within MCFD in the South Fraser Region of British Columbia has prompted an exploration into the reasons surrounding this issue. With 5,259 children and youth in foster care in BC as of 2020, it is crucial that we understand what contributes to foster parent retention and breakdown (Government of British Columbia, 2021). The purpose of this literature review is to examine the common themes contributing to limited foster parent retention on a broader scale, while also addressing research gaps.

### **Contributing Factors for Foster Parent Retention**

Many themes throughout the literature arose regarding why foster parents start fostering and why they choose to continue. An often-mentioned factor that contributed to successful and lengthy placements

was the foster parent’s characteristics such as kindness, love, patience, empathy, commitment, and confidence in their role as a foster parent (Brown, 2008; Crum, 2010; Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; Hanlon et al., 2021; MacGregor et al., 2006).

Flexibility was identified as a critical personal characteristic for foster parent retention, with foster parents who were too firm and inflexible experiencing more issues. These findings point to the need to better assess potential foster parents’ characteristics during the interview phase (Crum, 2010; Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; & Hanlon et al., 2021).

In MacGregor and colleagues’ (2006) study, foster parents identified wanting children in their home after their biological children had grown up and believing they have a calling to help children in need and make a positive difference in their lives. For those who still have biological children in their homes, fostering can be a learning opportunity in which biological children must adapt to a new situation and learn how to share (MacGregor et al., 2006). However, if a foster child begins to display aggression and violence towards the family (and specifically towards the biological children) or the foster child’s behaviours become too difficult to control, this may override the motivational factors and result in placement breakdown (Brown & Bednar, 2006). Interestingly, Ahn and colleagues’ (2017) survey of 385 current and exited foster parents found that only 11% of those who stopped were primarily due to the child’s behaviour.

The child welfare agency and the training that is provided to foster parents was also identified as potential protective factors that could prepare and support foster parents in successful placements (Hanlon et al., 2021; MacGregor et al., 2006). When the training and relationships with the child welfare system were positive, foster parents described not “feeling overburdened by their parent role” (Crum, 2010, p. 188). Hanlon and colleagues (2021) identified specialized training on topics such as supporting teenagers or children of a different cultural background as factors that increased retention. MacGregor and colleagues’ (2006) findings showed that many foster parents felt they had a positive relationship with their child welfare workers and identified specific skills their

workers showed such as good communication, answering questions quickly, and making parents feel heard.

Research also suggests that having foster parent peer support which could include having a formal foster parent organization run by foster parents or some way to easily network with one another would increase retention (Brown, 2008). MacGregor and colleagues (2006) suggest implementing something more informal such as a coffee club, having a buddy system, or a support group. Foster parents who had a peer support system in place were found to be more likely to continue fostering as opposed to those who wished to quit (Hanlon et al., 2021). Therefore, agencies should prioritize arranging ways for foster parents to connect and create their own community.

As Brown and Bednar (2006) reported, for most foster parents to end a placement it means that they have exhausted all options. Therefore, child welfare agencies can intervene and make changes before a foster parent reaches their breaking point. The gaps in the literature illustrate future directions for research to encourage and assist long-term fostering.

#### ***Contributing Factors for Foster Home Breakdown***

Common themes cited for foster home breakdown included a lack of funding, issues with the child welfare system, as well as a lack of respite care and support services for foster parents (Hudson & Levasseur, 2002; Brown, 2008). Financial compensation (or lack thereof) was a major issue identified in numerous studies (MacGregor et al., 2006; Hudson & Levasseur, 2002; Hanlon et al., 2021; Brown & Bednar, 2006). Hudson and Levasseur's (2002) research found that 70% of participants stated they needed more money to continue being foster parents. Low compensation also negatively affected how foster parents perceived they were valued by the organization, with limited funding leaving foster parents feeling devalued and unappreciated for the hard work they put in (Hudson & Levasseur, 2002).

However, authors including Leathers and colleagues (2019), Mullins-Geiger and colleagues (2013), and Brown (2008) did not detail the higher rates of pre-existing poverty among certain groups such as Indigenous foster parents (Brown et al., 2012), and

single women (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). The literature suggests that the use of an intersectional lens (Hankivsky, 2014) is a gap in research. The use of an intersectional lens (Hankivsky, 2014) to consider how class, race, and gender converge to perpetuate income disparities could provide insight about how monetary strain impedes retention. Additionally, the literature did not specify the financial issues that may require the most attention, such as supplies or the increased cost of housing, food, or transportation.

Interestingly, MacGregor and colleagues (2006) found that 4 out of 9 groups of foster parents they interviewed felt they were fairly compensated. Though Hanlon and colleagues (2021) found discrepancies on whether a family's income affected retention, Brown (2008) found that foster families with higher income were associated with longer lengths of fostering and satisfaction. Foster families report further feeling this divide through limited funding which does not allow them to fully integrate the foster child into their family (Brown, 2008). Therefore, families with higher incomes may be more likely to feel satisfied with the funding due to not having as many financial constraints.

Many foster parents also reported not receiving enough respite (Hudson & Levasseur, 2002; Hanlon et al., 2021). However, the idea of accessing respite was in contention for some foster parents, as some believe it continues to further the gap between the biological family/children versus the foster children, while others see it as a needed break to spend time with their "own" family (Hudson & Levasseur, 2002).

According to Hanlon and colleagues (2021), more than 25% of home closures were due to issues with the child welfare agency, with their systematic review finding this as the top factor influencing retention. Some examples included a lack of a consistent worker assigned to the parents, not feeling supported and recognized, or feeling that the worker did not think they were competent (Brown, 2008; MacGregor et al., 2006). Foster parents felt distrusted by the system as it seemed that regulations and surveillance continue to increase without equivalent support services (Hudson & Levasseur, 2002). Other problematic issues with the agency were identified as feeling frustrated with the bureaucracy of the system and having issues and

disagreements arise in which the foster parents didn't feel heard or respected (Brown & Bednar, 2006).

### ***Theoretical Perspectives on Foster Parent Retention***

Some authors apply family systems theory to illustrate how effective communication between workers and foster parents could contribute to longer-term caregiving (Nesmith, 2020; Denlinger & Dorius, 2018). The purpose of family systems theory is to contextualize how the actions of foster families and child welfare workers influence each other's behaviour and emotions (Nesmith, 2020; Denlinger & Dorius, 2018). For example, communication such as a worker's timely responses to messages, inclusion in decision-making, and checking in regularly can boost satisfaction and improve retention rates. Denlinger and Dorius (2018) focused on communication but relayed the perspectives of foster mothers. Interviewing foster fathers may have presented different perspectives, which could influence the results.

Some literature utilized ecological theory to analyze how appreciation for foster parents can contribute to stronger retention (Leffler & Ahn 2022; Piel et al., 2016). This theory suggests foster parents' feelings are not only influenced by others, but describe how social, economic, and political contexts can shape their experiences and relationships with workers. The foster parents in these studies acknowledged the busy roles of workers, and how time constraints within child welfare can inhibit their ability to demonstrate gratitude. However, the research overlooked the larger systemic issues impacting child welfare workers such as government cuts to social spending, or less regard for helping professions and female-dominated fields among a variety of factors (Christen, 2018). By assessing political influences in more depth, the research may address some root causes of what prevents workers from devoting time to appreciate foster parents more consistently.

### **Research Questions**

Considering the issues outlined in the empirical literature, this research study examines whether these issues are also factors in the retention of foster parents in the South Fraser Region in British Columbia. As such, the research questions are as follows:

1. What experiences contribute to foster parents leaving the service in the South Fraser region?
2. How can MCFD enhance foster parent retention in the South Fraser Region?

This research explores the experiences of foster parents in the South Fraser Region to understand the factors contributing to their retention in the service. Our study is important in the context of the increasing number of children entering care, which poses a challenge due to the decreased number of foster homes. The paper also highlights the relevance of foster parent retention for the well-being of children, families, and social workers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that guided our research was ecological systems theory. This theory recognizes that foster parents are part of larger systems that have their own policies and regulations. These systems such as spouses, children, neighbours, other foster parents, and caseworkers, can influence the functioning of the foster family in beneficial and detrimental ways. Overall, the foster parent exists within the microsystem that is impacted by these larger systems (Leffler & Ahn, 2022).

Ecological systems theory guided the exploration of various structures that impact the functioning and well-being of foster families. Therefore, ecological systems theory is well-suited to analyze foster parent retention as it identified factors that impacted foster parents. It also provided a framework for understanding their experiences within larger social contexts. By utilizing this theory, researchers gained a deeper understanding of the complexities of foster care and the factors that contribute to foster parent retention.

The study's findings will contribute to the existing knowledge of factors that influence foster parent retention and provide insights for MCFD to implement necessary changes to promote long-term caregiving. Ultimately, this study aims to enhance the well-being of vulnerable CYIC by improving their placement stability, reducing the number of breakdowns in foster homes, and enhancing retention.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for our research is

centered on the best interests of the child which includes the child's safety, physical, emotional, cultural needs, and their views. MCFD is responsible for child protection services and oversees the entire child welfare system in the province. CYIC refers to children who are in care under MCFD due to safety concerns and need a temporary living arrangement. Foster parents are contracted by MCFD to provide temporary care for CYIC until they can be reunited with their families or permanency is established. Guardianship workers collaborate with the child or youth, their family, and the foster parent to establish a care plan that meets the child's needs. Resource workers manage, maintain, and support MCFD-approved child and youth living resources, and they will also be referred to as social workers in this context. The overall goal of the child welfare system is to ensure the safety and well-being of children and provide a stable and nurturing living environment that supports their growth and development.

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the ecological systems theory which posits that individuals are influenced by multiple systems that interact with one another (Leffler & Ahn, 2022). In this study, the CYIC is the central focus, and the foster parent, MCFD, and community supports are seen as the different systems that influence the child's well-being.

It is important to note that participants used the term "social worker" to refer to their resource worker, child protection worker and guardianship worker under MCFD interchangeably.

## **Methodology**

### ***Sampling and Recruitment***

Our research study utilized purposive, non-probability sampling techniques. Purposive sampling is non-probability sampling in which units are selected because they have characteristics that are needed for the sample. In other words, units were selected "on purpose" or "for a purpose" in purposive sampling. The student researchers used purposive sampling techniques due to the necessity of selecting a sample population that would effectively share insights and further knowledge in exploring and understanding participants experiences. The benefit of this method is

that it is easy to access but consequently it increases sampling bias. The student researchers utilized non-probability sampling as there was no available list of foster parents who have left the South Fraser Region from which to draw a random sample from. This research acquired approval from MCFD Research Ethics and UBC Ethics Review.

The recruitment plan involved contacting the Fraser Valley Foster Parents Association (FVFPA) representative to circulate a recruitment poster. The representative from the FVFPA shared the poster in their monthly newsletter through a mass email, through their closed Facebook group page twice, and in a stand-alone email to their contact list which participants consented to be on. The rationale behind including FVFPA to facilitate contact is because they are a separate organization from MCFD. Therefore, MCFD does not oversee any communication from FVFPA sent to its members which supports confidentiality. Another purpose of the FVFPA facilitating contact was to limit any coercion that may have been interpreted if MCFD were to contact participants directly to participate in the study.

Inclusion criteria required participants to have been a foster parent within the last five years and had at least one placement for a minimum of six months to ensure they have more extensive experience fostering. Their homes must have closed for reasons unknown to MCFD to understand what steps MCFD could have taken to prevent foster home breakdown. For example, they are excluded if the home closed due to adoption, protocol investigation due to a child protection concern, or if the foster parents shared their reasons for leaving MCFD. They must have completed the screening, recruitment, and Parent Resource for Information, Development and Education (PRIDE) training process. Participants who did not fulfill the criteria as outlined were excluded from the research.

### ***Data Collection***

Semi-structured, virtual interviews of 45 to 60 minutes in duration were completed for five interviews. We asked six demographic questions to gather the length of time fostering, the volume of placements, the ages of the children fostered, and if the children had any complex needs. Interviews consisted of open-

ended questions (Appendix A) designed to allow the participant a full opportunity to express their experiences with foster parent recruitment and retention.

### **Method of Analysis**

Qualitative research methods were chosen for this study as it allowed for the expression of experiences and lived realities of foster parenting. This method reflected the voices of the participants and helped the student researchers consider that the process of data gathering included interpretation by the student researchers based on their existing knowledge and experiences. The research utilized an exploratory approach as there had not been a substantial body of research completed on the topic within the South Fraser region.

To conduct initial coding, the student researchers used descriptive coding. With descriptive coding, the student researchers first reviewed the data to understand the content and identify the initial codes by assigning one to three words per code to the selected passage or text. Once the initial coding was completed on all transcripts, student researchers went through the data again going line by line and expanded on the descriptive coding. This approach generated codes that reflected the content of the text which we then began to thematically organize.

The student researchers engaged in a discussion to address any discrepancies in their coding and ultimately arrived at a consensus about the codes to generate themes. Throughout this process, the student researchers used thematic analysis. Conducting a thematic analysis helped the student researchers to identify common themes, topics, ideas, and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process helped to ensure that the themes were accurate and consistent based on the researchers' shared perceptions. This allowed us to learn from the participants' experiences and participants were seen as the experts rather than imposing their own understandings and thoughts.

### **Findings**

#### **Sample Description**

Of the five interviews completed, 2 of the participants were from single-parent homes and 3 of the

participants were from two-parent homes. The participants fostered between 4 – 26 years, with the median time fostering being 11.2 years. Not all participants were able to recall the exact number of CYIC fostered through MCFD, however, it ranged from 2 to 1300 children. The respondent who had up to 1300 children did emergency care but also stated that it was around 80-100 children which were long-term placements. The ages of CYIC ranged from 6 months – 19 years old. All foster homes except one had sibling placements. Every participant stated that the children they fostered all had complex needs. Some of the complex needs encompassed complex PTSD, trauma, as well as cognitive, mental, emotional, and behavioral needs, among others.

#### **Key Themes**

Through conducting a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), four key themes emerged. This included retention of foster parents, relationship with agency: strengths, relationship with agency: deficits and changes needed. These themes will be further examined to provide insights into participants' experiences and how to improve MCFD service delivery and retention.

**Retention of Foster Parents.** The first theme that emerged is the retention of foster parents. This theme uncovered three subthemes including motivations to foster, positive qualities of foster parents, and “forever home.”

**Motivations to Foster.** Participants identified various reasons behind their decision to care for CYIC. Among the disclosed motivations were a desire to assist families in crisis, not having children of their own, a wish to expand their family, already having financial stability to care for children, a desire to give back to the community, or a personal history of difficulties growing up. One participant shared “my motivation for fostering was to be a part of the support network for families and children in crisis, and specifically to provide a safe, nurturing, and therapeutic space for children as their families went through whatever crisis.” Having these motivations met contributed to retention among foster parents.

**Positive Characteristics of Foster Parents.** Positive characteristics refer to the strengths and qualities of the individual foster parent that contributed to retention.

Some of these traits consisted of dedication to supporting CYIC despite agency dysfunction, dedication to providing a fun experience for children, and treating the CYIC as they would their own children. To support this notion, one participant discussed; “if you came to my home, you’d be hard-pressed to find a child – which one was mine and which one belonged to somebody else. And that’s what I was told as a foster parent was how to raise them. And that’s what I did.” The strengths of foster parents prevailed for some time, but eventually, the agency’s dysfunction ultimately became too much to bear leading to their exit from fostering.

**Forever Home.** The subtheme of a “Forever Home” emerged throughout participants sharing their experiences. This refers to CYIC being a part of their family extending beyond the child’s time living at their home. Participants mentioned continuing the relationship even as the CYIC became an adult and started their own family. To illustrate, one participant recalled,

We have some pretty cool, extended families that we still connect with, and kids that we still see, that are in different homes, and have more siblings and we run into bio parents on the street and say, Hi! And help them out with whatever they may need at that point.

Another aspect of “Forever Home” also includes the joy and excitement of being a part of the CYIC’s first experiences. One participant shared this concept when talking about the CYIC’s first trip that a CYIC got to go on. They stated “oh yes, it was about all the ‘firsts’... but they were all firsts. This sort of thing. There’s nothing better than that. It doesn’t matter what we do. There’s nothing better than the rewards.” These experiences highlighted the meaningful and committed relationships that were cultivated with the CYIC throughout the fostering experience.

**Relationship with Agency: Strengths.** Despite the challenges that many participants faced while fostering with MCFD, participants were able to identify several strengths within MCFD which included positive relationships with their social workers, system navigation, and resource support.

**Characteristics of a Positive Social Work Experience.** Participants identified various positive qualities that

they valued in their social workers which included good communication, transparency, follow-through, respect, and inclusion as a member of the team. This was illustrated by one participant who said, “my resource worker was amazing, and she helped me navigate the difficulties of the system and become comfortable with the balance of me achieving my goal and understanding the systemic limits as well.”

Trust and collaboration were two main characteristics highly valued by the participants. The importance of building trusting relationships was highlighted by one participant who said, “trust builds the relationship between the foster parent and the social workers”, while another participant was grateful for their resource worker “bringing a team together collaboratively and still staying within systemic guidelines and finding success with reunification and intervention.”

**System Navigation.** System navigation refers to the social worker helping the foster parent digest the policies, procedures, and understand the complex systems within MCFD. For example, it was stated “my [resource worker] did a really, really good job of translating system speak for me. And translating foster parents speak to social workers, and she did a really great job of bringing us together in the beginning.” System navigation is a critical part of helping foster parents feel prepared and understand the expectations and rules of MCFD, so that positive relationships and good communication can be built and maintained.

**Resource Support.** Participants spoke about resources and services offered through MCFD which included support groups, trainings, and receiving support which helped prepare them to begin their fostering journey. Regarding the training provided by MCFD, one participant shared, “there was so much training, so much logical, psychological, trauma-informed training.” When participants were asked if they felt prepared to foster, one replied “I can’t think of anything that anybody could have done to have us be more prepared.”

**Relationship with Agency: Deficits.** A major theme that emerged was the relationship with Agency – Deficits. This refers to MCFD’s shortfalls within the system. The subthemes that emerged from this theme included systemic issues within MCFD, punitive issues, lack of

recognition and respect, lack of trust and resource support.

**Systemic Issues.** Systemic issues within MCFD were a major contribution to foster home breakdown. High staff turnover, burnout, and overcapacity among social workers led to communication issues, hindered positive relationship-building, and resulted in ineffective support for CYIC. One participant stated “when you have 7, 8, 9 social workers, there is no follow through, there is no follow-up because you don't know what's happening. One of the guardianship workers that was attached to my child quit. No one told me, and then I couldn't get a hold of her.” Another participant stated, “at some point, someone's got to stop putting a band-aid on a hemorrhage” when referring to MCFD's continuously changing workers.

Participants also brought up multiple examples of policies and rules being inconsistently followed, which included infrequent home visits. However, foster parents were able to recognize that it was often not the fault of the individual worker but rather due to the systemic dysfunction with one participant stating, “it's untenable for them to visit our home because you can't visit 60, the homes of 60 children, and do the kind of work that you need to do.”

Many participants spoke about the fundamental issues within MCFD which resulted in foster parents viewing MCFD as a dysfunctional agency. One participant described their experience by saying “the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing.” Others felt that MCFD had no intention of changing and that the agency will continue to uphold outdated and unfair practices. For example, one participant shared, “In 11 years, it never once changed; never changed. [It is] never going to change, because they don't want to hear [it].”

**Punitive Systems.** When discussing their experience with MCFD, participants often described it as a “punitive, kind of splintered” system. Participants felt criticized and punished if they reached out for help, or if they did not follow MCFD's requests despite these expectations often being outside of the foster parents' responsibilities. If participants took initiative after their needs were not responded to, they may have encountered criticism or punitive measures despite

attempting to check in with their social worker.

Negative relationships with MCFD workers led to many participants reporting feeling criticized, unheard, and judged with one participant recalling times in which they were “shamed in front of the children – [which] had happened multiple times”. Fostering in a punitive system led to some participants getting unjustly disciplined or accused of wrongdoing without the opportunity to fully understand what happened or having the opportunity to defend their actions. The politics and bureaucracy within the agency distracted from providing the best care for CYIC with one participant stating “it was not about the children a lot of times. A lot of times it was about the relationship between the social worker, the resource worker and myself, the caregiver.”

**Lack of Recognition and Respect.** All participants discussed how a lack of recognition and respect negatively impacted their relationship and retention with MCFD. This subtheme encompassed many aspects including not being valued and experiencing a lack of transparency, professionalism, and compensation from MCFD. Participants described how their time and schedules were often overlooked, and they were not considered professionals or important members of the team. For some, the lack of respect led to them ultimately leaving with one participant saying, “I wasn't valued, so why would I do it anymore?”

Lack of professionalism was an area of major concern, which included social workers not conducting themselves in a respectful manner. Participants reported social workers using derogatory language towards them, with one saying social workers “speak horribly to [foster parents] in front of them” while another recalled a time a resource worker told the participant “most of our social workers just see you guys as welfare recipients.”

Participants expressed concern around MCFD not being transparent about “what they do and why they do it” as well as withholding information about a child's diagnosis, complex needs, and other critical information a foster parent needs to know so they can best support the CYIC. One participant summed up their overall experience by saying “it has never, ever been the children that have annoyed me. It's always been the



professionals. So lack of transparency, lack of follow through, lack of them just doing what's in the best interest of the children, lack of them doing that in a timely fashion.”

Despite all the training, dedication, and time foster parents put into CYIC, participants shared they did not receive adequate funding for the care and supplies they were required to provide with one participant stating that their foster child “straight up, cost me more than I was getting reimbursed”. Participants wanted the compensation to match their level of expertise which was illustrated by one participant sharing, “pay them for their education, pay them for their knowledge, pay them for the skills.” Others brought up the fact that if they provided the CYIC with access to sports, recreational activities or if they joined a family vacation, MCFD “paid for none of that”.

**Lack of Trust.** Lack of trust between the social worker and foster parent was another prominent issue experienced by the participants. Participants reported that despite their efforts and hard work, they were treated poorly in the documentation and throughout workers’ conversations within the agency. One participant revealed when the trust was broken by stating, “we did a freedom of information request and got our file. We found that the relationship that we thought we had with our team is not, in fact, the way that we were being portrayed and talked about within the office”.

Lack of trust also referred to the social worker sharing information with biological parents that the foster parent had told them in confidence. One participant stated that after disclosing some problems that were arising in the home, the social worker told the biological parent. This resulted in the participant being put in an uncomfortable situation, in which the social worker “create[d] friction” when they should have instead been a source of support. Others spoke about how a lack of trust and “fear of the system” led to social workers automatically and at times unjustly siding with CYIC, while not taking into consideration the participant's perspective and rationale for the choices they made.

**Lack of Resource Support.** Participants shared how the lack of effective resource support prevented them from

ensuring proper care of CYIC in their homes. Participants also reported that poor access to resources such as recreational activities, uncertainties about who to contact, and insufficient crisis intervention responses contributed to low retention. Participants became defeated by the lack of support and mixed messages about the availability with one participant stating, “there's no support available, or the support worker has a long wait list.”

Although there were times when participants acknowledged being offered resources and support from social workers, many recalled having to find and initiate it themselves, as it was inconsistently offered. This was illustrated by one participant stating, “any training I got was because I went out to get it.” Because of the insufficient help, some participants had to go above MCFD to receive services to help CYIC get the support they needed. One participant spoke about their frustration around this issue by stating “we should not have to reach out to various arms of government to get kids in care things that they were promised.”

**Changes Needed.** This theme encompassed the adjustments required to improve foster parent retention rates. The subthemes included MCFD accountability, implementation of proactive and preventative approaches, collaboration and supportive relationships with social workers.

**MCFD Accountability.** Accountability referred to MCFD re-examining various policies, approaches, and ensure they are being adhered to. Participants shared how MCFD needs to take responsibility for certain communication or organizational issues that occur, rather than blaming or criticizing the foster parents. One participant stated, “I think that they could standardize the practices that are happening and follow the policies and procedures that they have in place and not let social workers pick and choose which policies they want to follow.”

Other participants corroborated that there are inconsistencies in social workers following policies and procedures. Another participant stated “if you have this worker, these are your policies that you follow. But if you have this worker, these are your policies. So, I think that having standardized policies and having those policies followed would be good.” Participants spoke at

length about the need to have MCFD practices standardized without deviation or interpretation by social workers to improve outcomes for CYIC. This would help ensure that social work practice is structured, consistent, and predictable for the clients they serve.

***Implement a Proactive and Preventative Approach.***

Participants described how providing preventative measures for children and foster families to avoid placement breakdowns would be helpful for retention. Ensuring that services such as therapy, adequate funding, consistent home visits, response times, and effective communication and organizational skills could contribute to stronger retention. One participant stated, “the more money you put into prevention, the less money you have to spend in post-vention, they know that they're choosing not to do it.” Intervening with preventative resources can potentially limit the need for more costly interventions later on.

Participants emphasized the need to work with the families as a unit to prevent children from coming into care. One participant stated “go work with the families. Teach them how to be parents. Teach them what they need to know. But don't make it our fault that these kids come into care, and they have all these challenges and now they're not successful. There's no independence here”. This approach can help families address any issues before they escalate and prevent children from entering care in the first place. By working with families, MCFD can help to promote independence and success for children rather than perpetuating a cycle of dependence on the child welfare system.

Participants emphasized the importance of enacting resources to promote the best interest of the child as a proactive, preventative measure. One participant stated, “it consistently amazes me how best practice is rarely a thing that happens for kids.” Other participants corroborated that CYIC have outstanding needs that need to be addressed as they deserve better support and care which is often overlooked. They also described how allocating budgets for assessments, counselling, transportation, and providing accurate information about the child and support for when they age out of care are all pivotal to ensuring the success of children and retention of foster parents. One participant stated

“those assessments should all happen without having to ask for them. Because how do we support kids If we don't know the support, they need.”

Participants acknowledged the challenging roles of social workers, biological parents, children, and themselves and the need for supportive resources for everyone, not just foster parents. One participant stated, “there needs to be a peer support group for everyone who's part of the team”. Participants also suggested implementing services such as support groups for foster parents, reliable access to therapy and recreation for CYIC, counselling, and resources for biological parents to help with reunification.

***Collaboration & Supportive Relationships with Social Workers.***

Participants described the need to work as a team where they are treated as professionals and their perspectives are also included and valued. Open communication, transparency, respect, clarifying and explaining terms and policies, and the ability to be vulnerable without appearing incompetent is a key consideration in promoting retention. One participant stated, “I think it's got to come to a level where you and I, you involved in social work and me involved in foster parenting, should be able to see eye to eye and be able to talk at the same level”. This participant along with others stressed the importance of effective communication to create a mutual understanding to achieve a common goal of the children's safety. Another participant acknowledged the need for openness and vulnerability to build strong working relationships. In practice, this may look like “a mixture of players on the team being able to be open and vulnerable, so that you can build good relationships”. As described, when the team can be open and vulnerable with each other, it can enhance effective teamwork, casework, and better decision-making.

**Discussion**

The interpretations of our findings suggest that although foster parents have honourable motivations and care deeply about the children, their relationship with the agency, workers and the desired changes that have not been addressed contributed to them leaving the system. This was consistent with previous research (Hanlon et al., 2021; Hudson & Levasseur, 2002) which

found that the positive characteristics of foster parents and positive experiences with social workers prevailed to an extent, but ultimately the system deficits and agency dysfunction led to the decision to end fostering.

From an ecological perspective (Leffler & Ahn, 2022), the findings illustrating how foster parents are influenced by the systems surrounding them such as MCFD, social workers, and external resources. The ways in which these systems impact foster parents can contribute to their retention. Establishing positive relationships with workers, accessing support services for both foster parents and children can contribute to long-term fostering.

Foster parents raised the importance of receiving accurate information about the CYIC and any complex needs they may have. The participants emphasized that without ensuring that CYIC have the proper assessments, there will be uncertainties about how to support the CYIC which can lead to stress and impede retention. Brown (2008), Brown and Rodger (2009) also asserted how the need for assessments and accurate diagnoses were necessary to uphold the needs of CYIC. There is a strong need for child welfare agencies to ensure that assessments for complex needs are conducted and information is shared with the foster parents so the CYIC can be supported effectively.

One unexpected finding was that many of the participants stated they would foster again despite the challenges and negative experiences they had with MCFD. However, participants stated that to foster with MCFD again they would need proper support and would need social workers to treat them better by giving more respect, quicker and more consistent communication, and transparency around decisions. This is consistent with Brown's (2008) and MacGregor and colleagues' (2006) results which found that foster parents need a strong relationship with the agency to continue fostering, including trust, communication, and emotional support. Some participants stated they would also now advocate for their needs instead of blindly following all expectations.

Through conducting the research, we were alarmed by how common it was for policies to be inconsistently followed by workers. Although our study included five participants, the estimated 1,338 individual foster care

placements suggest notable findings. It is important to note how mandatory home visits are not conducted as frequently as they are required. According to MCFD Resource Policies – Chapter 8, regular monitoring of caregivers and the foster home is essential to ensuring the safety and well-being of CYIC (MCFD, 2023). A monitoring plan includes regular contact by phone, email, and in-person visits, as mandated by MCFD (MCFD, 2023). This can help to ensure that caregivers are providing the necessary care and support to the children in their care and that any concerns that arise are addressed promptly. By failing to conduct mandatory home visits as required, social workers may be missing important opportunities to monitor and support caregivers and to ensure the safety and well-being of CYIC.

It was concerning to learn how foster parents frequently experience distrust from social workers. For example, foster parents reporting that the social worker automatically sided with the CYIC without considering the perspective of the foster parent contributed to a breakdown of trust. These findings were similar to MacGregor et al., (2006) whose research noted a bidirectional lack of trust between both worker and foster parent which ultimately led to foster home breakdown.

An important finding was that participants extended beyond their role to provide CYIC with experiences such as vacations and activities. Participants described the difficulty of providing CYIC with their basic needs with the allotted funding. For participants to fully integrate children into their homes, they had to pay out of pocket for these experiences. This speaks to the inequity if they are lower income but would like to provide these experiences.

In our research, compensation did not arise as a significant reason for foster parents leaving MCFD, in contrast to Baer and Diehl (2019), Brown (2008) and MacGregor and colleagues (2006). However, our research found that the relationship with the social workers, the punitive system, and agency dysfunction ended up being more of a significant concern in retention. When a lack of compensation was brought up by participants, it was framed in the context of not being valued or seen as professionals, as participants

felt they were unfairly paid for their expertise, knowledge, and commitment to their CYIC.

Surprisingly, participants in our research did not bring up respite relief or talk about it in the context of changes needed to MCFD's policies and practices. This is in contrast with other studies such as Brown (2008), Brown & Rodger (2009) and MacGregor et al. (2006) which cited respite relief as something foster parents were requesting and needing for higher retention rates.

### **Limitations**

Our research is limited in its ability to be generalized due to three factors which are 1) insufficient sample size, 2) sampling selection bias, and 3) errors in recall.

The first limitation of the research is the insufficient sample size due to only having five participants. Because of this, the findings cannot be generalized or representative of the entire foster parent population or even to the entire MCFD foster parent population.

The second limitation is sampling selection bias as participants were able to choose whether they wanted to participate in the study. This can limit the external validity of our study because it could potentially lead to a biased sample of foster parents who may have strong perspectives about foster parent recruitment and retention. In turn, this could lead to biased results which do not reflect the general foster parent population.

The third limitation is that participants may have errors in recall which can impact the accuracy of their responses and the themes that were identified. The student researchers used semi-structured interviews to use prompts which may have helped participants to understand and recall their experiences as foster parents. Nevertheless, the risk of recall cannot be mitigated entirely and therefore the findings cannot be represented as entirely factual.

Despite encountering limitations, the response rate of participants exceeded initial expectations. These challenges prompted the formulation of recommendations and implications for future practice.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Throughout our research, the characteristics of a social worker were brought up as a contributing factor for retention. To implement this in practice, it may be

beneficial for employees to complete workshops that detail how important these traits are. Secondly, prioritizing more diligent oversight on behalf of management to ensure that these qualities are being demonstrated could ensure consistency and promote retention. Creating opportunities where foster parents can provide feedback to management about their interactions with social workers could help evaluate performance and areas for development. Instituting these suggestions could demonstrate that social workers are being supportive.

Another implication for practice includes establishing transparency and diligence from social workers when placing CYIC with complex needs with foster parents. Foster parents felt underprepared for caring for CYIC with severe trauma and varying cognitive and behavioural needs because assessments were either withheld or not completed. Participants expressed how dishonesty or incompetency on behalf of social workers contributed to them leaving. Therefore, enacting a regulation that requires therapeutic assessments, detailed information sharing about complex needs, appropriate matching, training, and resource support for foster parents to accommodate these needs is crucial to preventing placement breakdown.

A key policy recommendation involves the inclusion of foster parents as members of the team in a professional capacity, rather than treating them as only care providers. Seeking and implementing their input for decisions related to the child's care plan would help maintain retention. This could include inviting foster parents to meetings and regular communication initiated by the social worker about any updates in the home. Clarifying their inclusion in meetings within the foster parents' contract would be helpful. In addition, considering the foster parents' perspectives rather than automatically siding with CYIC's views in times of conflict would be appreciated. In practice, this could be achieved by social workers receiving conflict resolution training, and seriously listening and considering the perspectives of foster parents.

Ensuring that children, biological parents, foster parents, and social workers have access to support such as counselling and peer groups can help improve retention. Participants recalled how they had to initiate

resource navigation, or social workers were either misinformed or untruthful about waitlists for therapeutic services. MCFD needs to allocate resources to provide therapy for biological parents, foster parents, and children both during and after their placement in foster care. In addition, reducing strenuous caseloads and creating support groups for social workers so they are not extended beyond their capacity could also contribute to effective working relationships.

A final policy recommendation includes ensuring social workers are following policies consistently. Therefore, requiring workers to regularly review, sign off on policies, and ensure they are being adhered to can improve cohesion. Having workers share and explain policies would help the foster parents understand the services they are entitled to, and the procedures workers are required to uphold. Social workers must take responsibility for ensuring that foster parents are informed about mandatory timelines for home visits, as well as their rights under the prudent parenting guidelines (MCFD, 2013), which may include allowing CYIC to participate in social activities as determined by foster parents' judgement. It is critical for workers to respect the rights of foster parents who are following the guidelines set forth by MCFD, rather than interfering with the foster parents' decisions.

### **Future Recommendations for Research**

One of the largest gaps we encountered while completing our literature review was a lack of research conducted locally in the South Fraser Region as well as British Columbia. In turn, it was difficult to explore research on foster parents' experiences specifically with MCFD. Research on this topic was often from the United States and other countries. When Canadian research was reviewed, the vast majority originated from Ontario's child welfare system which is different from British Columbia's. Therefore, funding further research including a significant sample size of foster parents and their experience with MCFD would help to better understand factors contributing to retention.

To prevent foster home breakdowns, having research conducted with current foster parents to assess needs could be useful to avoid more foster parents leaving MCFD. During our recruitment phase, we were

contacted by current foster parents who requested to join the study. It is important to include current foster parents' perspectives. This could act as a preventative, proactive approach to maintaining retention.

An area of focus for research could also build upon the specific supports prioritized by foster parents. Participants in our study talked about support in more general terms. It would be helpful to conduct research that aims to discover the most pertinent needs among foster parents. This could be peer support groups, resource navigation, relief care, transportation assistance, therapy for children, or higher compensation.

### **Conclusion**

Our research aimed to address two key questions 1) What experiences contribute to foster parents leaving the service in the South Fraser Region, and 2) How MCFD can enhance foster parent retention in the South Fraser Region. Through our research, it was determined that positive relationships with social workers, recognition and respect, addressing systemic issues, and implementing necessary changes to the system are key factors that would enhance foster parent retention.

Although foster parents have similar motivations, having these motivations unmet or their efforts going unappreciated contributes to the rapidly decreasing rates of foster parents. Our exploratory research was guided by ecological systems theory. This allowed us to explore how foster parents were influenced by systems at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels and see how these factors contribute to retention.

Addressing systemic issues, such as lack of communication and inconsistent policies, is also essential to promote foster parent retention. By implementing changes to the child welfare system, such as providing proper training and support to social workers, foster parents can be better equipped to provide stable and nurturing homes for CYIC. While foster parents have similar motivations for providing care, such as a desire to make a positive impact on CYIC's lives, their efforts can go unappreciated if their needs are not met or they feel unsupported. Overall, the success of the foster care system depends on the collaboration and partnership between foster parents

and child welfare agencies to ensure the best interests of CYIC are prioritized.

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## Key Terms

**Best Interests of a Child:** “All relevant factors must be considered in determining the child’s best interests, including for example:

- (a) The child’s safety;
  - (b) The child’s physical and emotional needs and level of development
  - (c) The importance of continuity in the child’s care;
  - (d) The quality of the relationship the child has with a parent or other person and the effect of maintaining that relationship;
  - (e) The child’s cultural, racial, linguistic and religious heritage;
  - (f) The child’s views;
  - (g) The effect on the child if there is a delay in making a decision
- (2) If the child is an indigenous child, in addition to the relevant factors that must be considered under subsection (1), the following factors must be considered in determining the child’s best interests:

- (a) The importance of the child being able to learn about and practice the child’s indigenous traditions, customs and language;
- (b) The importance of the child belonging to the child’s indigenous community.

Refers to ensuring the child’s views, safety, physical, and emotional and cultural needs are met” (Child Family Community Service Act, 2023, p. 9).

**Child and Youth in Care (CYIC):** “These are children and youth are under the guardianship of the provincial director of child welfare” (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2023, p. 1).

**Foster Parent:** “Foster parents give needed care, safety and stability to children and youth who are unable to live with their own families” (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2023, p. 1).

**Guardianship Social Worker:** “Are responsible for the day-to-day guardianship decisions for a child throughout a child’s stay in care. Guardianship social workers work with the child or youth, their family (when appropriate) and the foster home care provider to develop a plan of care” (Government of British Columbia, n.d., p. 1).

**The Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD):** “MCFD’s primary focus is to support all children and youth in British Columbia to live in safe, healthy and nurturing families and be strongly connected to their communities and culture” (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2023, p.2).

**Resource Social Worker:** “Recruit, develop and maintain a range of options for children’s placement in care. Frequently these resources are identified as foster homes, group homes and specialized/staffed residential placements. Resource workers work in collaboration with child protection social workers when a placement is required to meet the individual needs of the child in care” (Government of British Columbia, n.d., p. 1).



## Appendix A Questions - Interview



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
School of Social Work  
Vancouver Campus



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### Demographic questions:

Thank you for agreeing to take part in our study. We would like to explore some of the reasons why foster parents have left the system in the last five years to help improve rates of long-term caregiving, and to ensure foster parents are supported. The questions we will ask you today are ones that we will ask every foster parent who chooses to take part in our study. First, we would appreciate if you could tell us a bit about your time as a foster parent. For example:

- Were you fostering as a single or two-parent home?
- Did you have any children of your own at the time?
  - Ages of the children?
- How long did you foster for?
- How many children did you foster?
  - Ages
  - Were any of the placements siblings?
  - Did any of the children have complex needs?

### Semi-structured open-ended Interview Questions:

Thank you. We'd now like to ask some more specific questions about your preparation for and experience fostering.

1. How was your overall satisfaction with the recruitment and application process?
2. Did you feel prepared for fostering after this process?
3. What were your motivations and expectations going into fostering, and were these met?
4. Were you offered support or training by MCFD after you started fostering?
  - a. Did you engage in this support?
  - b. If not, why?
  - c. What kind of support did you access, if any?
  - d. What support would have improved your experience, if any?
5. What was your relationship like with the MCFD workers, and other professionals and agencies involved with the foster children? (MCFD, education, health, mental health, behavioural, contact services).
  - a. What went well in the relationship?
  - b. Was there anything that was challenging?
6. What were your main reasons for leaving fostering?
7. What could MCFD do to increase the number of foster parents and support them to be foster parents for longer?
8. What were the positives in your fostering experience?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share with us before we conclude our meeting?