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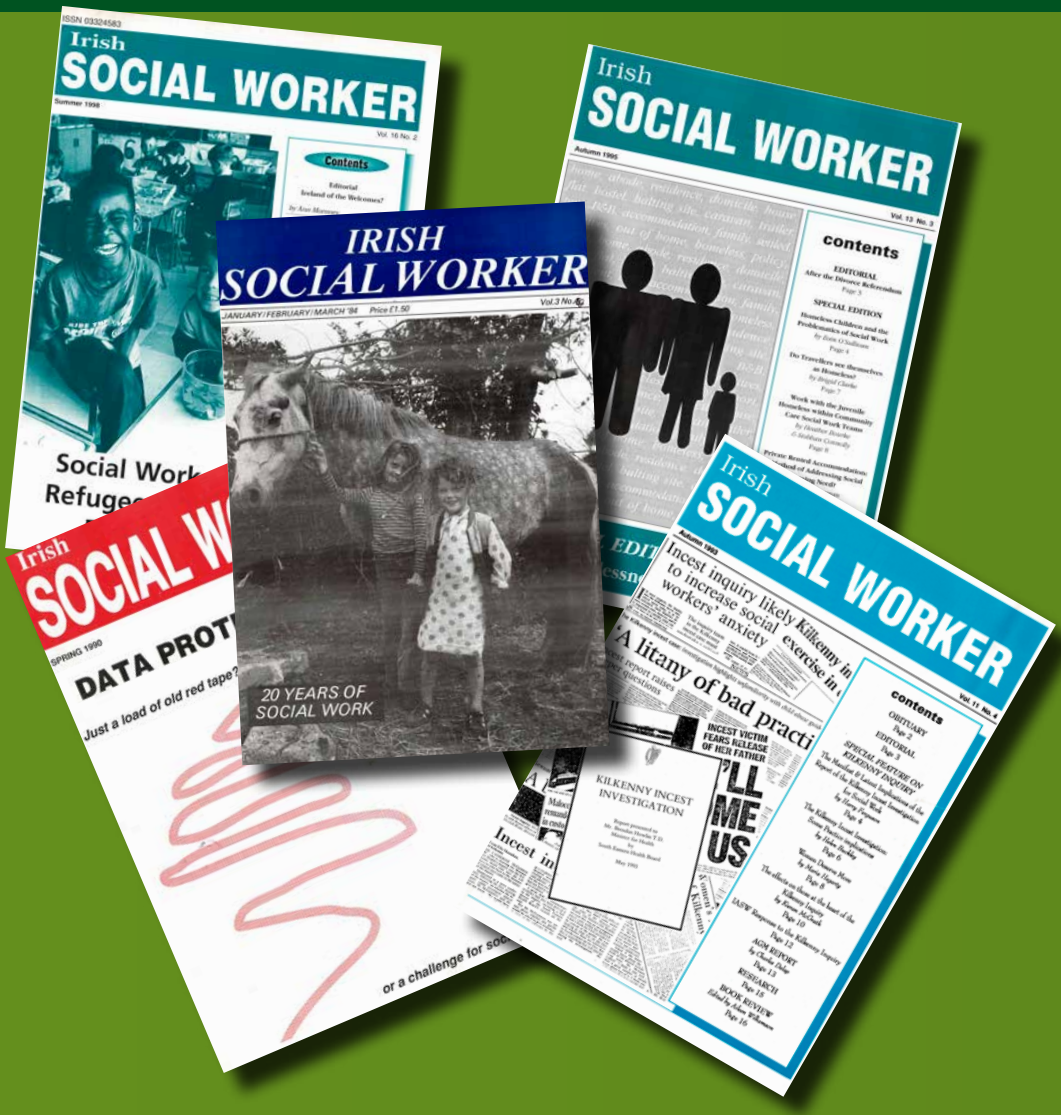
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FINDING THE COMMON GROUND: FAMILIES, RELATIONSHIPS, AND CHILD-FOCUSED PRACTICE IN FOSTER CARE.

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About the Author

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Abstract

For children, their parents, and their foster carers, the challenge in maintaining relationships, managing interactions, and varying loyalties can bring a wide range of complex and intense emotions. This often-overlooked emotional complexity within the foster care system lies at the heart of challenges that may arise. This paper explores this complex and uniquely fostering situation of supporting a child in being part of two families. We firstly examine the literature in relation to this issue and then explore the perspectives of the foster carers, multidisciplinary practitioners and the views of parents drawing from recent Irish research. In examining the differing sides of a complex situation for children in foster care, we then explore how we can find some common ground and how to support practices that help children to integrate and make sense of these varying relationships in the interests of their development and wellbeing.

Key Words

foster care; relationship-based practice; trauma-informed; collaborative practice; care; parents of children in care.

Introduction

Fostering often involves a complex position for a child as they are part of two families. When a child enters foster care, they are already part of a family and go on to be 'placed' with another family. The aim of a foster family is to nurture the child through developing loving relationships and supporting the child to feel integrated into their 'foster' family, however, this is no easy task. It involves caring for children with complex and often challenging needs. Despite foster carers' motivations to provide nurture and security, many children

are unable to experience a sense of safety and security owing to their past experiences. This is not surprising given children's experience of separation from their familiar environment and/or their experiences in care, such as living with a sense of uncertainty or impermanence about their future (Lewis, 2011; Mennen & O'Keefe, 2005), together with the internal conflict that arises when negotiating living between two families (Baker, Mehta & Chong, 2013; Dansey, John & Shbero, 2018). Thus, the process of adapting to an unfamiliar environment and developing a relationship with new foster carers can be challenging and may take time (Bentovim, Vizard & Gray, 2018; Marinkovic & Backovic, 2007). Furthermore, with the distress of ruptured attachments, loss and removal from their family, children often experience feelings of betrayal and disloyalty as they integrate with their foster family (Dansey et al., 2018; Fargas-Malet & Mc Sherry, 2020). Children and young people may experience feelings such as shame, guilt, hurt, anxiety, embarrassment, frustration, resentment, turmoil, confusion, distrust, detachment, stress, fear, insecurity, and uncertainty. While children may be experiencing this inner turmoil, outwardly manifestations can include distress before or after access, being withdrawn, acting out/defiance, impact on forming relationships, insecurity, emotional outbursts, and impact on self-concept/identity, all of which may compound their recovery from past adversities. The child needs to be supported to become part of their foster family, as they continue to maintain their connections and emotional links with their own family as appropriate. In this paper, we explore how we can find common ground and support children to integrate and make sense of these relationships while drawing from the authors' work and research in this area.

Stability and Connection

For children in foster care the ultimate goal is permanency, whether that involves reunification to their family, long-term foster care or adoption (Lotty, 2019). The root to permanency is placement stability. This experience of stability is rooted within children's feelings of connectedness and belonging which can be characterised by emotional attachments to adults and siblings (Schofield et al., 2012). For children in foster care, connections with family that are maintained, experienced positively and safely, have important benefits (Biehal, Sinclair, & Wade, 2015). These benefits include development of identity and resolving experiences of grief and loss (Boyle, 2017). According to Sen and Broadhurst (2011), for children in out-of-home placements, good quality contact with family members, in conjunction with other positive professional intervention, is likely to promote positive outcomes for children, including successful return to parental care (from short-term placements) and placement stability. This family connection is important for the child's wellbeing and their short- or long-term adaptation to permanent (or not) placements (Salas Martínez, Fuentes, Bernedo, & García-Martín, 2016). When reunification is not an option, research indicates that children have better outcomes when positive contact is maintained with their parents (Salveron et al., 2010). Where possible, parental involvement in child raising tasks and school activities has been found to be beneficial to children (Poirier & Simard, 2006). Maintaining contact between children in care and their parents is covered by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Unicef, 2012). Children in foster care thus, have a right to be supported to maintain relationships with their parents and best practice should facilitate this when it is in the best interest of the child.

When foster carers support children in maintaining safe relationships and emotional connections, this promotes attachment security (Andersson, 2009) and in turn supports more positive experiences of contact (Boyle, 2017; Salas Martínez et al., 2016). Where relationships or emotional connections are validated and maintained, children can be supported in the integration of experiences which may reduce of feelings of anxiety, shame, and guilt that the child may experience when living away from their family (Agosti, Conradi, Halladay Goldman, & Langan, 2013). Connections that are not experienced safely may retraumatise children and young people who have experienced developmentally traumatising experiences prior to coming into foster care (Lotty, Bantry-White and Dunn-Galvin, 2021) and undermine healing, recovery, and placement stability (Collings and Wright, 2020).

Separation and Loss

Children's experiences of loss and grief in the foster care system are all too often left unattended, especially if a child is deemed to be 'functioning' or adjusting well to their new home. The ambiguous loss of one's family, among other losses, can produce grief responses that may affect the emotional, behavioural, spiritual, social, physical, and psychological dimensions of a child's life (Mitchell, 2016). While the loss experienced by children is well documented, the loss experienced by parents may not receive the same focus or response from services (Morriss, 2018). The removal of one's child can be described as a primal wound, however, parents who lose custody of their children are at risk for a grief reaction that is unlikely to be accompanied by sympathy from society (Hooyman et al, 2008; Morriss, 2018). Hinton (2013:13) highlighted the negative impacts experienced by parents in the child protection system: 'a sense of grief, loss and stigma, dealing with the financial implications, coping with the impact on family relationships and attachments in the longer term can all turn lives upside down'. The literature identifies a wide range of complex and intense emotions and issues for this group of parents including loss, grief, unresolved or complicated grief, sadness, anxiety, depression, anger, shame, embarrassment, guilt, loss of role and purpose (Buchbinder & Bareqet-Moshe, 2011). Where children remain in long-term foster care or with relatives, the focus of professional services is again on reviewing the child and supporting his or her permanency placement. Parents will be kept informed of a child's progress, but services will be reduced once reunification is ruled out. This is because child protection services are primarily focused on children and only tangentially concerned with the needs of parents. Unlike many losses, such as death and divorce, there is virtually no ambiguity to the loss of one's children or one's mothering role, i.e., it is hard to find a "silver lining" that could offset all the negative feelings and thoughts, and it is unlikely to be socially validated (Hooyman & Kramer, 2008:8).

Foster care and family connections

A collaborative relationship between parents, child protection services and foster carers, based on the best interests of the child, is essential (Hojer, 2009; Kenrick et al., 2006). Despite the noted benefits, these relationships are often very challenging and a source of stress (Gribble, 2016). Developing positive relationships is challenging for both parents and foster carers (Chateauneuf et al., 2018). When these relationships are conflicting and oppositional, children find negotiating living between or in two families more challenging

(Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012). Foster carers may find it problematic to see the benefit of developing this relationship for the child. It is of note that foster carers seldom report difficulties when parents are absent in the child's life (De Wilde, Devlieghere, Vandenbroeck, & Vanobbergen, 2019). Several obstacles that impact the foster carer's relationship with parent's have been highlighted such as difficulties around access arrangements (Boyle, 2017). Direct contact with parents can be emotive for many reasons and foster carers have noted the challenge in supporting the child's emotional and behavioural needs before and afterwards (Sen & McCormack, 2011). Foster carers have also noted the difficulty in managing children's disappointment and distress when access is cancelled, or parents do not attend a scheduled visit (Sen and McCormack, 2011). When access is not experienced positively, this may further compound children's trauma and attachment related difficulties (Kiraly, 2016), which is linked to placement instability (Taylor and McGuillian, 2014) which is in turn concerning for foster carers. Furthermore, there often are tensions within the differences in child-raising, values, household rules and cultural differences between foster carers and parents (Moyers, Farmer and Lipscombe, 2006). The loss of credibility and influence experienced by foster carers has been noted if they are discredited in front of the child (Moyers et al., 2006). Planning visits, transportation, and accompanying the children can all present difficulties for the foster carers in addition to concerns such as intimidating or inappropriate behaviour when facilitating access (Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, 2011; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000).

The Irish Context

In Ireland, the promotion of access and family contact for children in foster care is underpinned by practice guidance laid down in the Child Care Act 1991, Child Care Regulations 1995, and National Standards for Foster Care 2003 (Tusla, 2014). The current climate of decision making around access in Ireland has becoming increasingly challenging particularly where court directed access is in place (Lotty, 2019). Decision making on access is notably a difficult task where social workers are faced with the practice dilemma of balancing child and parental rights (Miron, Sujan and Middleton 2013). Here, we draw from two recent studies to explore the current climate, the differing perspectives involved in navigating the space of how best to support and maintain family connections towards supporting children's development, mental health, and well-being.

Parents Experiences

Lynch and Hynan (2020; 2019) undertook a qualitative study which focused on the experiences of seven parents who have/had a child in foster care. This study comprised of a focus group and individual interviews which were thematically analysed. Within this research, parent's personal sense of powerlessness was evident and communication, both in positive and challenging terms was emphasised. Parents also relayed the barriers that they experience in establishing relationships with those involved in their children's care which will be the primary focus of this paper.

Challenges faced by Parents:
the little things?

For parents, navigating supports that are primarily focused on their child was a significant barrier. As their child settled into their new foster family, parents spoke of the difficulties that began to emerge. As noted by one parent: *"my life was flipped upside down; my kids were*

gone, and I saw people taking over my role as a mother". Several parents spoke of hearing their children call foster carers Mam/Dad and the distress this caused them. *One parent stated: "Foster carers should not be calling themselves mam or dad or even answering to it. No matter what happens, the child has a Mam already. I'm not saying it's done on purpose but it's so upsetting. I remember being in the park and the foster carer was there. My son was saying mam and the foster carer kept on saying "yeah" to him. I think it's so confusing for a child.* Subsequent accesses were discussed the majority of parents discussed noticing changes in their children's hairstyle and clothing which they found upsetting. Though it may seem trivial to some, noticeable changes in their children whether physical or in terms of their interests and activities was a significant stressor for parents and represented their experience of loss, both physically and symbolically.

Reviews and Meetings

Parents within this research spoke of attending reviews and meetings with carers and professionals present and how difficult these meetings are for them. One parent noted: *"You go and sit in those meetings and get put down in front of strangers. It felt like they talked over me or down to me. It's not hard to show someone humanity and give some hope".* The number of people involved in their child's care was overwhelming as captured by this parent *"Working with so many people can be tough, especially when you have no say in who you're involved with. You're doing all that's needed to get the kids home and trying to keep your own recovery too".* Another parent discussed attending review meetings and alluded to masking her true emotions "*Sometimes you're sitting there nervous, and people are like "are you okay? you look pale"- what do they want me to say? I'm depressed off my head; I miss my children, I'm a mother but I'm not there for them. You just answer. I'm fine".* Several parents spoke of the small gestures from foster carers being important during this meeting such as 'small talk and updates'. Parents also spoke of finding out things about their child for the first time at a meeting and the supports available to foster carers while attending reviews:

> *It's different for the foster carers. They've Link Workers and if things are hard, they get support. Link workers are even at the review meetings with the carers to support them. I found out things at reviews that I should have known a lot sooner, but the Link worker would have known already. Is this fair? I know people are busy but an hour out of someone's diary to share information with a parent is not too much to ask.*

Permanency and Care-Planning

Reunification or long-term planning for a child in care is an emotive and distressing time for all involved in a child's life. Understandably, tensions can be high while care planning is before the courts. This parent discussed the change in her relationship with the foster carers when a reunification plan was devised:

> *Before that, we had small talk and got on. When the overnights with me started, things just became business-like but when we got the date that [child] was coming home it became horrible; the small talk stopped. They were really short with me at access, and it felt like they began to belittle me as a parent and were raising all different things to make me look bad. They stopped going to the meetings*

and said it was hard to face me knowing [child] was coming home". At the time, I couldn't have asked for better carers but the way it all ended made me question things.

Another parent spoke of their trepidation regarding upcoming reviews and their interaction with foster carers:

If I'm honest, I always felt weary around them because I never knew what they would say. I was always afraid that they would make up a story just to keep my child in care". I was doing everything I could, like going to my meetings, counselling, and things but it was a constant worry about what would be said next.

This parent spoke of her intention to build relationships:

I want to work with the foster carers. It's so hard when you see your kids head away after access; it's upsetting, we're only human… the reality is that the kids will be 18 in no time and most come back to their family home anyways. It's important that we work together.

Equity of Supports

Parents with a child in care are a group whose needs may not always met by universal or even targeted parent supports in community settings. The difficulty in accessing suitable supports was discussed, as was the experience of attending one not suited to their specific needs as outlined by this parent:

Social workers tell you do a parenting course but there's nothing for parents of children in care. So, you end up going along to one with parents whose children are at home, and you work around it with your imaginary child at home. You hear the parents talking about theirs and the usual banter comes up and they're giving out about their behaviours in a jokey way. Then you're asked about the homework from last week and bringing your learning back from your imaginary family. I'm on eggshells there. Parenting? Who am I parenting? I have access once a week for an hour. It's so isolating just sitting there, you really feel it.

Another parent referred to the supports available to Foster Carers and stated:

They're great at sending foster carers off to trainings and courses that get our kids to bond with them. Why not support the parents? With [child], if there was a psychology appointment or play therapy session, it was the foster carer that went. The psychologist helped the foster carers in managing tantrums and stuff. Its things like that I wanted to be involved in. If parents' got proper support like that early on, it might save a lot of kids from going into care.

Parents highlighted the lack of specialist supports available for them and reflected on seeing other parents lose hope in the process:

It's hard when you see others in recovery with kids in care and they're fighting hard and doing everything that's asked of them and suddenly a parenting [capacity] assessment is put on them and then they're back to square one. Trauma is a huge thing, but you could get a vulnerable parent who thinks I've fought so hard for this and

just gives up and relapses. Instead of a parenting assessment, why not assess parents and actually work with them. Get the therapies, get the experts in not just to assess but to actually work with the family. We need more than just assessments

Relationships

The importance of forming and maintaining of appropriate relationships between parents and foster carers was highlighted, as was the benefits to all involved when this worked well. When reflecting on relationships with foster carers, many parents discussed the limited opportunities for this: *"I always wanted to get on with the foster carers, but we never sat around the table in meetings or access. They would always meet the social workers beforehand and then I would be brought in. We'd never sit-down face to face.*

This parent spoke of 'being angry' all the time following the court order and not wanting to engage with social workers or carers. This parent went on to describe making an effort to 'get on with the foster carer' after several years and noted:

> *One day my daughter said, 'mam you made me the happiest daughter ever. I was dumbfounded, and she goes' cause you're getting on with [foster carer]'and for a child to see that. Does that not show an example of the way it's supposed to be?*

Foster Carer's Experiences

As part of a recent doctoral study (Lotty, 2019), twenty-seven foster carers', and multidisciplinary practitioners in foster cares' perspectives of foster carer's needs and existing practices in Ireland were explored to inform the development of a trauma-informed care foster care intervention. This component study within the larger PhD research used a qualitative approach that involved purposive sampling, focus groups and thematic analysis. The findings highlighted several areas relevant to this current discussion: lack of training, resources and supports to meet the child's needs; access arrangements; impact of foster caring; relationships with social workers and the need for the integration of a trauma-informed approach in foster care services (see also Lotty et al., 2021).

Children' needs

The study highlighted the complexity of children's needs in foster care often involving high levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties. Foster carers described feeling overwhelmed by the level of the children's needs and how the children's behaviour often pushed them to their limits. They expressed their frustration particularly in terms of not being equipped to help the children. The perception of not being supported reinforced these feelings of frustration and helplessness. Practitioners also talked about children's emotional and behavioural difficulties being very challenging for foster carers. They identified various challenging behaviours such as bedwetting, encopresis, hoarding food, overeating, symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and Autism Spectrum disorder (ASD), out of control behaviours and the constant pushing of boundaries as being particularly challenging for carers:

> *The biggest challenges that I would see is trying to cope on a day-to-day basis with the behaviours that are very challenging and don't make sense to the foster parents a lot of the time. (Practitioner).*

Practitioners highlighted children's difficulties were often compounded by experiences in foster care such as the ongoing experience of impermanence (uncertainty about their future), multiple placements and children having to manage being part of two families. Practitioners talked about these complex and severe emotional and behavioural difficulties of children being beyond the capacity of foster families described as ordinary families.

Relationship with families

The study illuminated that foster carers were often challenged by negotiating relationships with parents. Whilst a common view was shared in the necessity for foster carers to develop respectful relationships where possible with the child's parents, to support placement stability, this was often very difficult in practice. The study found that foster carers felt that they should be supported in developing skills to become more equipped to cope with the challenges of this relationship in the best interest of the child:

> *managing the relationship with biological parents can be so challenging for (foster) parents, I think with the best will in the world it can be such a contentious relationship and it is such an important part of it for foster parents to be able to have some kind of functioning relationship with the biological parents, but there is huge emotional aspect to it, and it is a very difficult one at the best of times. (Practitioner).*

Access arrangements

Foster carers meeting the child's needs in experiencing safe access was also highlighted in the study as very challenging and complex. This often involved supporting the child to go on access and then coping with the child's behaviours after access. Foster carers identified that inconsistency in parents attending access was a real source of frustration for them as it caused the children great distress and they felt compounded the child's emotional and behavioural difficulties. Further to this, foster carers talked about the when access arrangements are decided and/or changed they are not consulted and so the practicalities are not considered. Such as the child's commitments to established extracurricular activities and schoolwork, another child's access in the same placement and with foster family commitments such as work schedules.

The study also illuminated that practitioners felt that foster carers understand the important of children having access with their families. However, court directed access was often challenging for them as well as foster carers. Practitioners expressed often feeling conflicted themselves in by adhering to court directions and balancing the needs of the child and the rights of the parents:

> *I see foster carers struggling with access and even though they understand the theory behind children seeing their families of origin and completely get that and put themselves in their shoes. You wonder whose needs are being met; it is the parents or is it for the good of the child… and the Area team social worker, she completely empathises with the situation (Practitioner).*

Practitioners talked about children being traumatized owing to their experience of access and yet having to adhere to court decisions. This often led to real difficulties in their relationship with foster carers:

court directed access can be very difficult for carers to manage, those children are being re traumatised, or it is triggering trauma, it is damaging relationships between the foster carer and child, foster carers really struggle with that (Practitioner).

Practitioners described this being particularly difficult in the context of no clear Tusla, Child and Family Agency policy or guidance in place to support their recommendations on access arrangements.

Impact of fostering

The study highlighted the effect of caring for children with complex needs on the foster carers. Coping with the uncertain nature of fostering, carers found particularly stressful. They highlighted the changes in the child's care plan as being particularly stressful, both from the perspective of plans changing to the child returning home or remaining in foster care:

You are told, 18-year care order on a child, me automatically that's it, the child is here definitely and then it changes, there is a different care (plan) and for the child it must be unbelievably traumatic like, like how do you deal with that? Especially if they are happy and content? (Foster Carer).

The exposure to secondary trauma was also highlighted as being a source of emotional stress and challenging for foster carers. This involved foster carers' daily exposure to the children's trauma related emotional and behavioural difficulties and ongoing difficulties associated with access arrangements:

The secondary trauma on themselves as well, on their own emotional well-being, their own marriages, their own children's lives, being with the child on that level of trauma can be very difficult for an entire family system. (Practitioner)

Further stress on foster carers were identified such as social workers blaming of foster carers for children's difficulties remaining unresolved and for placement breakdowns. This undermined the confidence of foster carers, and such practices are likely to impact the success of future placements:

I would say from a child protection perspective that when placements disrupt or breakdown, that there is a lot of blame or criticism at them (the foster carers) being considered a failure in relation to their care at the time of the child, that can be very undermining, can affect their confidence in relation to future placements. (Practitioner).

Relationship with social workers

The need to develop better working relationships between foster carers and social workers was also highlighted in the study. Foster carers expressed their desire to have positive working relationships with social workers. They were often dissatisfied with how they were treated by social workers, for example by not feeling included in meetings regarding the children, not feeling respected and feeling that their contribution was not valued:

I would rather not have resentments or anything, this whole team thing…the whole idea for team to work everyone needs to have should kind of have nearly an equal part. In our last (child in care) review they did not read our part... they read the kids point, read the social

workers point, and they said that's the foster parents (feedback form) we'll put that away! (Foster Carer).

Similarly, practitioners felt that foster carers often endured negative experiences in their contact with social workers, which included often having difficulties getting information on the children:

They do their social worker work from the head up, they do it defensively, it is this them and us attitude. It is this: 'we're the professionals and ye are the carers!' They even use those terms; they are already set up to keep the foster carers out here. The foster carers do the babysitting, and we do the real work. So, we need to break down those attitudes as well as train people up. (Practitioner).

The need for supports for foster carers

Navigating relationships with families, relationship with social workers and the impact of caregiving in a fostering context were all viewed as a challenging area for foster carers as discussed above. The study also revealed high levels of support for developing a trauma-informed intervention for foster carers. This included a need to promote foster carers' understanding and awareness of the impact of trauma on families. Participants felt this may promote more empathetic relationships between carers and parents that would in turn benefit the child:

The intergenerational piece, I think is quite important to bring the (foster) parent to a place where they can empathise, seeing that they (birth parents) are doing the best they can. And blaming and shaming the biological parent is not helpful for the child… it is about being curious and empathetic and that this is the best they (birth parents) are doing now even if they are not able to meet the needs of the child at this time. That is why the child is in foster care! (Practitioner).

Practitioners felt that developing foster carers' capacity to provide children with trauma-informed care would need to involve promoting carers' understanding of how children need their support in managing the experience of having two families:

The confusion for the child in that and the emotions that come with that, the guilt and confusion and trying to make sense of a world that is constantly shifting with the key caregivers in their lives. I certainly feel that is a huge role of the foster parent of trying to have a functioning relationship with the child's biological parent and seeing it from the child's perspective. (Practitioner).

Discussion

This paper highlights the complex practice area of supporting children in making sense of being part of two families. Drawing from two separate studies from the Irish context we highlight the findings that illuminate perspectives of parent, foster carers, and practitioners in the foster care system.

Relationships that promote the well-being and permanency of the children in foster care appear inconsistent between parents, foster carers, and practitioners. Both studies highlight difficulties in these relationships. Interestingly, the parent's experiences echoed the foster carers, where there were inconsistencies in practice with many participants feeling excluded from care

planning, negative experiences of child in care review meetings and lack of supports that would enhance their perspective role. Consistent with other research, foster carers often felt left out of decision making regarding the children in their care (Cooley and Petren, 2011) and feeling a sense of blame for placements breaking down (Tonheim & Iversen, 2018) was also raised by practitioners. It must be acknowledged that building these relationships requires considerable expertise and a commitment to relational practices that place the child's needs at the centre. Considering the role of social workers' and foster carers in caring and supporting child's welfare in a statutory capacity, this is a difficult context in which to build relationships with parents (Connolly et al, 2016; Regan et al, 2010). Lynch and Hynan (2020) identified the challenges faced by parents in navigating supports and services that are primarily focused on their child. Such child-focused practice contributed to a particular conceptualisation of parents and parenting. Salient points are highlighted by parents in relation to the need to feel supported as part of their child's family.

Lotty (2019) found that foster carers need to be trained and supported in how to manage relationships with parents, consistent with other studies (Sanchirico et al., 2000; Mehta and Baker, 2013). These relationships are often a source of stress for foster carers (Gribble, 2016) and thus, likely to increase the risk of placement instability. Foster carers may feel frustrated and resentful towards families whose behaviour may have been responsible for the child's difficulties. Children may experience a conflict of loyalty between their parents and foster carers that is likely to impact on the child's mental health and wellbeing (Mitchell 2016; Iyer et al, 2020). Foster carers that hold a respectful and compassionate view, a more trauma-informed perspective, of families can only serve the child well in promoting integration of experience and reduce the child's anxiety, sense of shame, and guilt the child may feel living away from family (Agosti et al., 2013). This is likely to promote the child's positive sense of identity, self-worth, and self-esteem.

The issues relating to children's access are also identified as a particularly challenging aspect of fostering for parents and foster carers. Parents remain integral to the lives of their children in care at a conscious or a subconscious level (Kenrick, Lindsey & Tollemache, 2006). Contact with family context (not just parents) is very important because it is perceived as a way for the child to be connected with their family history and identity (Fuentes et al., 2018). Consistent with other research, Lotty's (2019) findings highlighted that access arrangements can be a source of disagreement when foster carers and social workers views on access differ (Boyle, 2017; Fuentes, 2016) and foster carers get frustrated by the inconsistent nature of access and the impact of this on the children (Salas et al, 2016, Farmer et al, 2005).

Lotty's (2019) study also found that the impact of access on children's' emotions and behaviour was difficult for carers to manage, particularly when there was a lack of safety around access and how it was experienced. Similar to other jurisdictions professionals view that the relationship between parents and foster carers impacted the child's access experiences and that poorly experienced access was harmful to children (Collings et al., 2021). Whilst, when access is positively experienced by children there are important benefits to the child by ensuring connections with their family is maintained (Smariga, 2007, McEvoy et al, 2011, Mc Sherry et al, 2008) and is also linked to placement stability (Sen & Broadhurst,

2011). Positive access experiences have been particularly associated with collaborative approaches between foster carers and parents (Boyle 2017). Focusing on developing these relationships thus are likely to support children's experience of access. This is important also, given more collaborative relationships are linked to positive outcomes for children in foster care (Boyle, 2017) and in supporting placements stability (Taylor and McGuilligan, 2014).

Currently, there is no systematic approach to decision-making around access or access policy in operation in Ireland. Practitioners have the difficult task of ensuring contact with family is always safe and meaningful, consider its purpose, assess risk, and consider creative ways for family connection to be sustained (Iyer et al., 2020). A recognition of practice in this complex area involves ongoing processes that are dynamic and changing. Children experience changing emotions with regard to their families and need support over time to navigate these relationships (Fargas-Malet & McSherry, 2020). At all times their wishes and feelings must be considered in the context of not placing too much, inappropriate, responsibility on them to make complex decisions (Iyer et al, 2020). Practitioners require training in decision making around access arrangements, supervision, and ongoing review to navigate this complex task. Some children subject to care orders may have court directions regarding access arrangements. These directions in effect determine access frequency, venue but may not consider the emotional needs of the child or consider the potential for trauma rearousal. Lotty (2019) found that some practitioners felt conflicted by their obligation to adhere to court directions and the needs of the child and were concerned that children risk retraumatisation. Collings et al., (2021) highlights the need to address rigid agency processes for contact and negative attitudes towards contact that limit parents the opportunity to heal relationships with their children during access. The Covid-19 Pandemic has provided an opportunity to re-examine how access is approached in practice. During Covid-19, access arrangements was forced to be consider differently and many creative means of supporting connections between children in foster care and their families emerged in practice (Neil, Copson and Sorensen 2020). This may provide an opportunity to develop these practices that offer connections beyond traditional direct access fora.

Social work practice must pivot towards a more trauma-informed perspective that considers the parental experience of trauma and an understanding of the impact of adversity on engagement with child protection services (Gibson, 2019). Further to this, a trauma-informed approach is needed to help all foster carers developing skills that that support them in managing relationships with families, access arrangements and developing collaborative working relationships with social workers (Lotty, 2019). Such training should include developing foster carers' understanding of intergenerational trauma, to support the foster carers to bring a trauma-informed care lens to the parents' experiences, the impact of caregiving a child who has experienced adversity, as well as the child's experience of being part of two families (Lotty et al., 2021). Advocacy and tailored supports are essential in supporting parents with a child in care. This group have particular needs that are not always met through universal services and presently, there is a geographical inequity regarding access to these. The Mid-West of Ireland has such tailored supports available through agencies such as Limerick Social Service Council, Clare Care and North Tipperary Development (Regan et al, 2010). Such services can provide

an environment of acceptance and support, while enhancing parental engagement and participation. Furthermore, through individual sessions and peer groups, parents can reflect on their experiences of loss, grief, stigma and the collateral consequences of court ordered child removal (Broadhurst and Mason, 2017; Slettebo, 2011). Interestingly, The Children's Rights Alliance has recently been contracted by Tusla to carry out a scoping exercise of the needs of parents with children in care and to run the tender process to secure a service provider who will deliver and evaluate a model of supports to meet these identified needs. The Children's Rights Alliance state that 'the service that will be provided is intended to be part of a developmental process that once proven effective, will move towards the development of a larger national service (The Children's Rights Alliance, 2021:3).

The policy that underpins practice in foster care is the National Standards in Foster Care (Department of Health and Children, 2003). A timely major review is currently being taken by the Health Inspection and Quality Authority (HIQA, 2021). Tulsa's application of policy into practice guidance have included the publication of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014), and the *Alternative Care Practice Handbook* (Tusla, 2014). However, more explicit policy and practice guidance is needed to address inconsistencies in practice (Lotty, 2019). In recognition of the policy and practice gaps, Tusla has stated it aims to develop a practice handbook on permanency planning as part of Tulsa's Business Plan (Tusla, 2018), however, this as yet has not been operationalised. Such policy and practice guidance needs to explicitly reflect a trauma-informed perspective and thus, explicitly state the importance of these collaborative practices and benefits in order to support placement stability and children's outcomes (Lotty, 2021). In Ireland, the implementation of trauma-informed care in child protection and welfare services is currently not supported by a systematic strategy (Lotty, 2021). Gaps in foster carer training and practitioner training in trauma-informed care have been highlighted elsewhere (Lotty, 2019). The development of *Fostering Connections: The Trauma-informed foster Care Programme* represented a new departure in foster care practice and the pilot evaluation has produced promising results (Lotty, Dunn-Galvin and Bantry-White, et al., 2020). This programme is currently being implemented in one area of Tusla.

Social workers require expertise to navigate the ongoing dynamics of the complexity of the relationships involved with children in foster care. They require expertise in paying attention to supporting safe and meaningful experiences of access for children and supporting children to rebuild relational safety. Whilst also they require expertise in considering parents experiences of engagement with services and the foster carer's role in supporting connections with family. Cognisant of the different positions and perspectives parents, foster carers and practitioners may come from, they share the common ground of aiming to supporting the child. Further to this, children have a right to maintain relationships with their parents and this works best when collaborative practices are in place. Children also have a right to be protected from harm (and future harm) and afforded the opportunity of stability and security to enable healing and growth. It is the practitioner that has the core responsibility to facilitate these relationships and balance the needs and rights of the child. Incumbent on this, we highlight some key messages for practice to support navigating this complex area that seek to ensure

the child remains at the centre of practice:

- Child centred practice is family-focused practice; by supporting parental engagement and the development of positive relationships between parents and foster carers, this supports better child outcomes,
- Give the child the message both relationships, with parents and foster carers, are important and are of value; children can be part of two families,
- Remember, children have a deep fundamental need to feel loved by their family – a collaborative approach will support making sense of their experiences,
- First and foremost, advocate for safe access and an individualised approach, review contact plans often, every child's situation is different and is evolving,
- Support parents for access through preparation, managing what is expected during access and de-briefing afterwards,
- Support foster carers to develop skills in navigating their relationship with parents and skills to support children in managing feelings of being part of two families through trauma-informed foster care training, link work and support groups,
- Support the child in expressing mixed emotions towards their parent (s)/foster carer(s),
- Be mindful of the messages the child receives from all parties -verbally and non-verbally-focus on the strengths of the parent/ foster carer,
- Support foster carers in honouring the child's connection to their family through photos, conversations, thoughtful gifts/cards as the child wishes,
- Support foster carers to take care of belongings that come from the child's family coming into foster care, in foster care and moves in foster care,
- Manage your feelings towards parents/foster carers and express them in the appropriate place such as supervision, reflective group/ support group,
- Use and model a trauma-informed foster care lens underpinned by empathy, understanding and a mentalising stance in practice.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the relationships surrounding a child in foster care. We have drawn from two recent studies to illuminate the differing perspectives of parents, foster carers, and practitioners. In our discussion we highlight the need for policy, practice guidance, supports and training to support practice in this area. We also offered some key messages for practice in navigating this complex place to support children in making sense of being part of two families in the interest of their wellbeing, identity formation and the promotion of positive outcomes.

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