

Successful Academic Achievement Among Foster Children: What Did the Foster Parents Do?

Citation: Dag Tore Skilbred, Anette Christine Iversen & Bente Moldestad (2017) *Successful Academic Achievement Among Foster Children: What Did the Foster Parents Do?*, *Child Care in Practice*, 23:4, 356-371.

Abstract: Children who spend part of their childhood in foster homes have, as a group, lower academic achievement than their peers. However, some of these children do well and succeed in higher education. Resilience is about positive development enhanced by protective factors despite adversity. Protective factors may be both positive qualities in the children themselves and their social contexts.

The purpose of this article is to explore how young people who spent part of their childhood in foster care succeeded in higher education. We interviewed 13 foster parents and 16 young adults with ongoing or completed university studies. Two main themes emerged as particularly important: the young adults' motivation and effort, and qualities in the foster home. In this article, we focus on the qualities in the foster home.

The analysis showed three main themes related to the foster home that supported school achievement: the promotion of a feeling of belonging in the foster home; core values such as taking schoolwork seriously and giving one's best; and providing order and structure in the foster children's lives.

Method: This study was based on qualitative face-to-face interviews with 16 young adults who have experienced foster care and who have begun or completed university studies and 13 foster parents of this target group. A semi-structured interview guide was used; this follows the timeline from primary school to university. Interview topics included the adolescents themselves, their foster homes, their school(s) and spare-time activities. Each interview lasted between 1.5 and two hours and was recorded and transcribed.

Table: General Characteristics of the Young Adults.

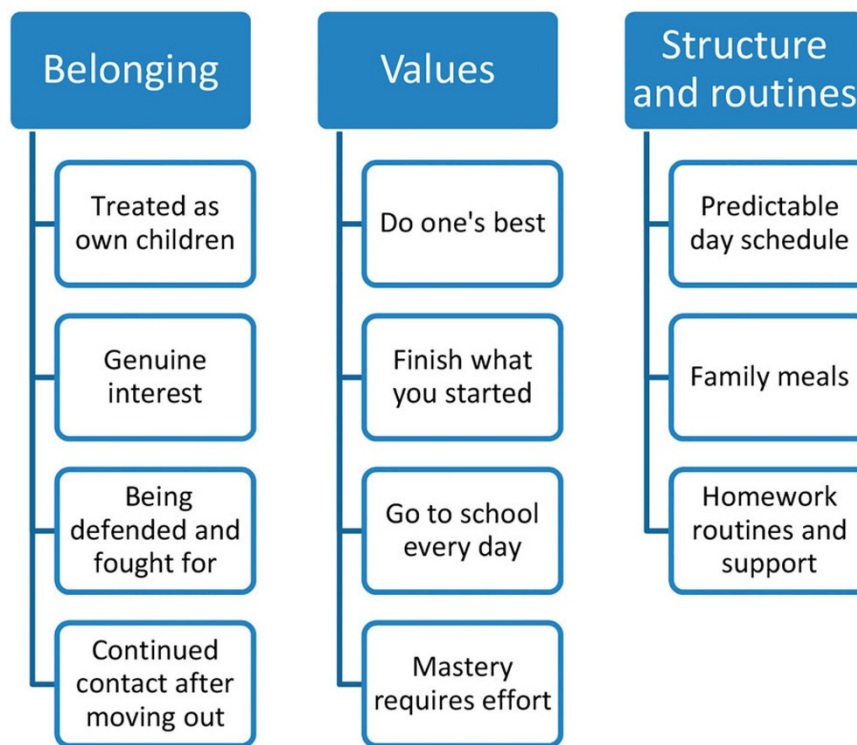
Demographics		Foster care		Education	
Gender	<i>n</i>	Age on entering	<i>n</i>	Bachelor's level	<i>n</i>
Female	12	3–10 years	9	Preschool teacher/teacher	5
Male	4	11–16 years	7	Social worker	2
Age		Length of stay		Nurse	1
22–25 years	4	3–10 years	7	Music/sport/art	3
26–31 years	12	11–17 years	9	Economy	2
		Number of moves		Master's level	
		0	11	Pedagogics	1
		1	2	Psychology	1
		2	2	Law	1
		>2	1		

The sample of young adults consisted of 16 university students or recent alumni from different parts of Norway. All lived or had been living in foster homes for at least three years. Thirteen foster parents from 10 families were interviewed.

The interviewed foster parents included three couples, six foster mothers and one foster father. When we also considered the spouses of those who were interviewed, the majority had vocational education or no formal education beyond compulsory school. Six of the foster parents had a bachelor's degree and one had a master's degree. All had considerable experience as foster parents, both with regard to duration (number of years) and with regard to fostering several children.

Findings: In our presentation of findings, we will focus on the research question for this particular article: *how foster parents and young adult's perceptions of factors related to the foster home environment have contributed to achieving higher education.*

Graph: Main Themes and Sub-themes.



Nearly all of the interviewed young adults began to feel included in their foster family. Three-quarters of the group confirmed feeling and being treated as if they were the biological children of their foster parents. After being asked about promoting factors for the academic achievement of foster youth, one female student provided the following advice in reference to foster parents: *I think that the most fundamental factor is to treat the foster child as their own child.* With reference to her own foster parents, she continued: *They have always done that. Now I never think of them as not being my parents.*

One foster mother had a foster son with a particularly well-completed university education and a good job. She described the relationship that is needed by foster children as follows: *When he came to us, they [the child welfare service] said: "You should not let him get under your skin". That is the silliest thing I have heard: he absolutely needed to get under the skin. He needed it, and foster children should have it! You have to open your heart and everything. If you don't, they will recognize it. I am absolutely convinced of that.*

When the young adults had moved out of the home, they remained in contact with their foster parents. The young adults currently talked to their foster parents very often, visited them during holidays and considered them their family. Furthermore, the foster parents reported that their foster children contacted them both for positive and negative events in their lives, which the foster parents were thankful for... These children experienced the support of their foster parents during their education, both through advice and, in certain cases, through financial support. This support created a feeling of safety.

The foster parents stated that they had done the same for both their foster children and their biological children; that is, parenting all children equally without putting emphasis on the foster situation: *It actually was the same as having your own child. And that might be the reason for her calling us her parents. We talked about education and work, sure. All parents do that. They want their children to have an income and a job and that they should manage to become good citizens in every possible sense.*

Additional Themes: There was a common agreement among both interview groups that giving one's best in all life situations is a fundamental value and attitude and that successful education requires work commitment and endurance. Although most of the foster parents did not have higher education themselves, they represented values that motivated the children to make an effort at school.

The young adults in our study described chaotic and conflict-laden relationships, inadequate daily routines and an insufficient organization of schoolwork in their original homes. Hence, all emphasized the importance of strong routines in everyday life in general, and in school homework in particular. Daily routines and rituals can support children and adolescents after having experienced challenging environments before their placement in foster homes. A typical example referred to by both foster parents and adolescents was having family meals. Here, the adolescents were seen, their joys and worries were shared, and further plans for the day were discussed.

Conclusion: The young adults interviewed in this study expressed that their school achievements were supported by contributions and support of foster parents. Hence, it is important to recruit foster parents who, in addition to creating a safe environment for the foster child, have an understanding of education and competence as a central element in today's knowledge society and who have an understanding of educational stimulation as a natural part of foster parents' contribution to the upbringing of foster children.