

# The key messages of successful foster parents

May 18 2016, by Bert Gambini

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Language is a powerful tool that can ease the transition into a new home for foster children and enhances the possibility that it will be a successful placement, according to new research from the University at Buffalo.

When [foster parents](#) say, "This is our house; this is your room," to a foster child, they're relaying an important message: "You are part of this family – the whole family," and that's a strong statement, says Annette Semanchin Jones, an assistant professor in the UB School of Social Work.

Researchers refer to this as "claiming language" and its consistent use by foster parents plays a critical role when foster children are adapting to new homes.

The same is true, Semanchin Jones says, when foster children feel a sense of belonging and know that their foster parents will advocate for them and help with the adaptation to different schools and neighborhoods.

The findings come out of research published in the latest issue of the *Journal of Public Child Welfare* by Semanchin Jones, with her colleague Barbara Rittner, UB associate professor of [social work](#), and Melissa Affronti of Coordinated Care Services Inc., a human service agency in upstate New York.

Although successfully adjusting to foster care has long-term positive

effects on children, little research has been done exploring the link between foster parent characteristics and the developmental outcomes of children in their care. Services are available for children to help them maintain their placements and this study, she says, complements that approach by providing important insights that highlight strategies foster parents use to successfully transition children in new placements.

The researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with 35 experienced foster parents to explore how they contributed to a "functional adaptation" that helped their children transition successfully and sustain their placements.

"This study really speaks to helping to make sure that foster parents are well prepared," says Semanchin Jones. "Every jurisdiction has pre-service trainings, but our research shows the need for ongoing support once kids are in foster homes."

There is a nearly 50 percent turnover rate of foster parents and nearly 90 percent of children in foster care experience at least one disruption, according to Semanchin Jones.

"When we think about kids who have already been removed from their homes of origin, placement disruption can be a re-traumatizing experience," she says.

Research also shows that children who experience frequent disruptions tend to have poor psychosocial outcomes.

"Even kids who didn't come into foster homes with behavior problems end up having both internalizing behaviors like suicidal ideations and externalizing aggressive behaviors such as physical aggression," she says.

This can set up a perpetuating cycle of instability for [children](#) as their

continuing poor behaviors force each new set of foster parents to request the child be moved to a different placement.

Foster parents also need to understand the multiple dimensions of [foster care](#) created by the existence of a foster family, a birth family and the child.

"Foster parents should be respectful in honoring the birth family," says Semanchin Jones. "That can be difficult because not every situation is going smoothly, but kids have multiple senses of loyalty and foster parents should not be talking down about the birth family."

Showing foster parents research that identifies what's important also can help a child's transition, she says.

"Our research can really help child welfare agencies. Those agencies that are responsible for licensing foster homes and training foster parents can use this information in an ongoing way," says Semanchin Jones.

"Foster parents need to know there are areas for continued improvement: skills building-pieces. Some of these things may come naturally to foster parents, but it doesn't mean you can't build capacity."

Provided by University at Buffalo

Citation: The key messages of successful foster parents (2016, May 18) retrieved 13 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-05-key-messages-successful-foster-parents.html>

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