

research report

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Research Section
Department of Social Welfare
Wellington
New Zealand

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PRESERVATION

**EXPERIENCING FOSTER CARE:
THE VIEWS OF CHILDREN,
NATURAL FAMILY AND FOSTER PARENTS**

**LYNNE WHITNEY
BRYONY WALKER
JANE VON DADELSZEN**

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors, and do not necessarily coincide with those of the Department of Social Welfare.

Copies of this report may be obtained from:

The Research Section
Department of Social Welfare
Private Bag
Wellington
NEW ZEALAND

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1 BACKGROUND

The intensive foster care scheme research

In 1981 a research project was begun to evaluate the intensive foster care scheme (IFCS), a pilot scheme designed to provide specialist foster care for children who would not normally be placed in foster care. Two interim reports were produced as a result of this research: "Interim Report on the Intensive Foster Care Scheme" in 1983 and "The Views of Foster Children and their Natural Families on Two Fostering Systems Operated by the Department of Social Welfare: The Intensive Foster Care Scheme and Conventional Foster Care" in 1984.

The research is now complete and three short reports have been produced: "The Intensive Foster Care Scheme Research: A Final Report on the Scheme" focusing on the scheme itself; "The Characteristics of Children in Five Common Placements used by the Department of Social Welfare", which examines intensive foster care and conventional foster care alongside a range of other placements; and the present report "Experiencing Foster Care: The Views of Children, Natural Family and Foster Parents", which focuses on foster care generally.

As part of the research, information was collected about a sample of children who were placed in conventional foster homes. These children were of the same age as those in the scheme and resident in the same areas as the scheme was operating, the Auckland region and Christchurch. This information was collected for comparative purposes, to identify similarities and differences between the intensive foster care scheme and conventional foster care. These results are discussed in the report "The Intensive Foster Care Scheme Research - A Final Report on the Scheme". The information on conventional foster care is of interest, however, to a large number of people who may not necessarily be interested only in the intensive foster care scheme. The present report has been produced to make this information available to a more general readership.

The information provided in the report is in the nature of descriptive data on a large sample of children placed in foster care and their foster parents, as well as detailing the views of the children, their natural families and their foster parents about fostering. It should be useful to those with an interest in fostering and alternative care of children generally.

The samples

The samples of children in foster placements were defined according to the following parameters:

Conventional foster care ~ all children aged between 7 and 14 resident in the Auckland region and placed in non IFCS foster placements between April 1982 and October 1983, and all children of this age resident in Christchurch and placed in non IFCS foster placements between May 1982 and July 1984 - 122 children.

Intensive foster care - all children placed in IFCS placements in Auckland between November 1979 and June 1983, and all children placed in IFCS placements in Christchurch between May 1980 and March 1985. This comprehends all children ever placed in the scheme in Auckland and the majority placed to date in Christchurch - 54 children.

Table 1: Number of children in the sample placed in conventional and intensive foster care in Auckland and Christchurch

	Conventional foster care	Intensive foster care
AUCKLAND	61	24
CHRISTCHURCH	61	30
TOTAL	122	54

The data collection

The information was collected from a number of sources.

* Child recording forms

Forms collecting detailed background information about the children were completed for all the children in both samples. For the children in the conventional foster care group, research staff read the personal files and completed questions about the demographic characteristics of these children. The district office social worker of the child then completed the small number of questions about each child which required social work judgements. For the children in the intensive foster care scheme, the social workers completed the entire forms.

* Foster parent questionnaires

All foster parents (of children in both samples) were sent questionnaires to fill in. These covered the demographic characteristics of the foster parents and their views on foster care. Questionnaires were returned by 71 foster mothers and 48 foster fathers in the comparison group and by 41 foster mothers and 34 foster fathers in the intensive foster care scheme. At least one foster parent completed a form for 82 (67%) of the children in the comparison group and for 43 (80%) of the children in the intensive scheme.

* Child interviews

Interviews were conducted by research staff with the children to find out their views on foster care. Ninety-nine (81%) of the children in the conventional foster care group were interviewed and 46 (85%) of the children in the intensive foster care scheme were interviewed.

* Natural family interviews

Interviews were also conducted by research staff with the children's natural families to ascertain their views on foster care. Sixty-five natural family members were interviewed for the children in conventional foster placements. This group comprised 39 natural mothers, 21 natural fathers, one stepmother, one stepfather and three grandparents. In each case, the person interviewed had played the role of "caregiver" to the child at some point. At least one natural family member was interviewed for 65 (53%) of the children placed in conventional foster homes.

Forty-one natural family members were interviewed for children in the intensive foster care scheme. Of these, 22 were natural mothers, 10 were natural fathers, one was a stepmother, three were stepfathers, two were sisters, one was a brother, one was a grandparent and one was an aunt. Again, in each case the person interviewed had been a "caregiver" to the child at some point. At least one natural family member was interviewed for 30 (56%) of the children in the intensive foster care scheme.

Although the natural family members who were interviewed were rather a mixed group in terms of biological relationship to the child, most were parents and all were people who had acted to some degree "in loco parentis". Thus, in the following, the terms "natural family member" and "natural parent" will be used interchangeably to refer to the members of this interview sample.

2 DESCRIPTION OF THE CHILDREN IN CONVENTIONAL FOSTER CARE, THEIR NATURAL FAMILIES AND FOSTER FAMILIES

The children and their natural families

A detailed description of the children placed in conventional foster care is contained in a separate report entitled "The Characteristics of Children in Five Common Placements used by the Department of Social Welfare" which allows comparisons of these children with those in the intensive foster care scheme and other types of placement made by the department. A brief summary of the main characteristics of the children in conventional foster care and those of their natural families follows. Unless otherwise stated, the data for the two districts, Auckland and Christchurch, have been combined.

- * The average age of the children at the beginning of the foster placement sampled in this study was eleven and a half years.
- * There were more girls (59%, 72) than boys (41%, 50).
- * The proportions of children in the sample who were Pakeha/European and Maori/part-Maori were quite different in the two districts:
 - in Christchurch the children were predominantly Pakeha/European (64%);
 - in Auckland the children were predominantly Maori/part-Maori (61%).
- * For most of the children (80%), the natural mother had been the main mother-figure in the child's home.
- * The natural father was also most likely to have been the child's main father-figure, but for a smaller proportion of children (63%).
- * The number of children in the child's natural family ranged between one and nine.
- * The main reason, as it appeared from departmental records, for the children coming into care was conditions in the child's home (75%). Fourteen per cent of the children were recorded as coming into care mainly on account of their misbehaviour and 11% mainly because of their offending.
- * A minority of the children (29%) had not had any previous placement with the department before being placed in conventional foster care, and the remaining 71% of children had had one or more previous placements.
- * Of those children who had been placed by the department before this foster placement, half had and half had not experienced at least one placement which broke down (or ended in a way which was unplanned).

The foster parents

One hundred and nineteen foster parents completed questionnaires, 71 foster mothers and 48 foster fathers. Some of the foster parents had fostered more than one of the children that were included in this study. A brief summary of the main characteristics of the foster parents follows.

- * The mean age of the foster mothers was 39 years, while that of the foster fathers was 42 years.
- * The majority of both foster mothers (79%, 31) and foster fathers (77%, 24) were Pakeha/European; a fifth of the foster mothers (21%, 8) and 13% (4) of the foster fathers were Maori/part-Maori and the remaining 10% (3) of foster fathers were of Pacific Island origin.
- * The average number of children in the foster parents' natural family was higher in Auckland (average of 4.5) than in Christchurch (average of 3.3) with an overall average of just under four.
- * Forty-eight per cent (34) of the foster mothers reported that they had never fostered before and 52% (37) reported they had fostered at least one child. Previous fostering experience of the latter group ranged from 1 to 25 years, with an average of 9 years.

In order to avoid over-representing the views of foster families where questionnaires from two parents were returned, relative to other families where there was only one foster parent questionnaire, the view of the foster father group has only been reported where it was substantially different from that of the foster mother group. Thus the following results are generally based on the responses of foster mothers.

3 ISSUES

The information described in this section of the report was collated from the interviews with the children and with their natural parents, and from the questionnaires completed by foster parents. This information has been subdivided into a number of issue areas structured around the questions that the three sets of respondents were asked.

While this section reports only the comments of those who were part of the conventional foster care group, where there was any major discrepancy with the reactions to these issues by those in the intensive foster care scheme, these differences are noted.

Why the child was taken into care

During the interviews the children were asked what they thought was the main reason for them being taken into care. Their responses to this question were then compared with the main reason for care indicated on their personal files.

Records from the sample of children in conventional foster care (including those who had not been interviewed) indicate that the main reason the majority (75%) of children were taken into care was related to conditions in their home. Fourteen per cent were recorded as being taken into care mainly due to misbehaviour and 11% mainly due to offending. Reasons for care orders were therefore divided into two areas for the purposes of our comparison, those primarily relating to the child's behaviour (misbehaviour or offending) and those primarily relating to the home conditions of the child.

Of the 97 children (98% of those interviewed) who responded to this question, 14 (14%) had a view of the care order which was not reconcilable with what was recorded on file. Thirteen of these children thought they had been taken into care because of their behaviour when the file indicated the main reason was the home conditions of the family, while the other child thought the reverse was the case. There were 57 (59%) children whose view of the care order agreed with that recorded in the file, while the remaining 26 children (27%) were unable to say why they had been taken into care.

Over all, not many more than half of the children interviewed had a good understanding of the reason they had been taken into care. This was not generally because they had mistaken views, but because they were likely simply not to know why the care order had been made.

Natural family members were more likely to give a reason for their child being taken into care than were the children themselves. Only 6% (4) of the family members interviewed did not give a reason for the care order. However, although all the remaining family members were able to supply a reason for the care order, there were inconsistencies between their perceptions of the reason and what was recorded on file. While records show that 75% of the children were actually taken into care because of their home conditions, only 53% of the natural family members reported

this as being the case. Conversely, 41% of natural family members thought their children's behaviour was the reason for the care order, while records show that only 25% of the children were taken into care for this reason. As a group, natural family members tended to over-exaggerate the extent to which care orders were made on account of the children's behaviour and de-emphasise the role that home conditions had in this event.

About three-quarters (74%, 73) of the children thought that the care order had been the best thing for them at the time. Most (22) of the remaining 26 children expressed negative feelings in this respect.

Foster parents were not asked to give their perception of the reason the child had been brought into care.

The child's relationship with the foster family

On the whole, the children expressed positive feelings about living with their foster families. Relatively few of the children expressed either mixed (9%, 9) or negative feelings (8%, 8).

The positive response from the children was reflected in the views of both the natural and foster parents. Of the 89% (58) of natural parents who were able to say how their child felt about living with the foster family, 77% (50) said their child was happy with the situation, while only 9% (6) considered that their child was not happy. The vast majority of foster mothers were of the opinion that their foster child either liked living with them 'very much' (37%, 26) or 'quite a lot' (45%, 32). The remaining foster mothers reported that it was either too early to tell (10%, 7) or that the child did not appear to like living with them (8%, 6).

The overall picture gained from these interviews was that the majority of children were relatively happy living with their foster families. This picture was examined in more detail.

The children were specifically asked how they related to particular members of the foster family. It was clear from their responses that most of the children (over 80% in each case) felt positive towards their foster mother, foster father and/or other children in the family. Of the children with foster mothers, 91% (86) expressed positive feelings about their relationship with her; of those with foster fathers, 86% (65) expressed positive feelings towards him; and of those with other children in their foster family, 81% (68) felt positively about them.

Foster mothers commented on how well they got on with their foster child and, in addition, how well the foster child fitted into their family situation. The general impression gained from the foster mothers was that they got on either 'very well' (52%, 37) or 'quite well' (44%, 31) with their foster child, and that most of these children fitted into the family situation well (91%, 65).

Natural family members confirmed the foster mothers' impressions. Over three-quarters (77%, 50) of the natural family members expressed positive feelings when asked if they thought the child liked living with the foster family, while only 9% (6) expressed negative feelings.

As an additional measure of how the children related to their foster parents, they were asked how easy and how helpful it was to talk to their foster parents. The general consensus was that it was either easy (66%, 64) or easy sometimes (19%, 18), with only 15% (15) of children expressing any difficulty in this area. As well as finding it relatively easy to talk with foster parents about different things, most children (77%, 76) found talking things through helpful.

When it came to talking about aspects of the foster home that they did not like, three-quarters (75%, 74) of the children admitted that they did not discuss such matters with their foster parents. Of the remaining 25 children, 22 reported that they did talk such things over with the foster parents. While a third (9, 36%) said they found these discussions easy, half (13, 52%) said they did not. So while the majority of the children could discuss most topics quite easily with their foster parents, when it came to talking about aspects of life in their foster homes they did not like, this proved to be a more difficult topic to broach.

The foster children were asked what was the hardest thing for them to get used to when they moved into the foster home. The biggest group (51%, 50) identified social aspects of behaviour, such as getting used to people and 'fitting into' the family, as being most difficult to adjust to initially.

The child's contact with the natural family while in foster care

How regular was contact with the natural family?

Two-thirds (66%, 65) of the foster children were in regular contact with their natural family, while just under a fifth (17%, 17) of the children had little or no contact. While this pattern describes contact for children in conventional foster care, it does not hold for children in intensive foster care placements. A lower proportion of children in intensive foster care (50%, 23) were in regular contact with their natural parents and a higher proportion of children in intensive foster care (37%, 17) had little or no contact.

Those children who had contact with their natural family were asked if they enjoyed that contact and whether they wanted to see more of their family. The clear majority (82%, 77) reported enjoying contact with their family and only relatively few children said they did not enjoy (9%, 9) or were indifferent to (5%, 5) such contact. As for seeing more of their natural family, half (51%, 50) agreed they would like more contact, 38% (37) were satisfied with the amount of contact they already had and only 7% (7) said they would prefer to see their family less.

A similar pattern of responses was obtained from the natural parents themselves with respect to this issue. Natural parents were roughly equally divided over whether they wanted to see more (49%, 32) of their children or were satisfied with the amount of contact that they had (46%, 30). Only one parent would have liked to reduce the amount of contact with the child.

To assess whether the children's views about contact with their natural parents could have been influenced by what others thought about this contact, the children's perception of social workers' and their own foster parents' approval of such contact was canvassed. Some children did not know how their social worker (19%, 19) and/or foster parents (17%, 17) felt about them being in contact with their natural family. However, three-quarters (73%, 71) thought that the social worker would approve of this contact and two-thirds (67%, 66) thought that their foster parents would approve. Over all then, it appears that the children would not have felt discouraged from maintaining contact with their natural parents because of social worker or foster parent disapproval.

The question of the child's return to her or his natural family.

Another issue is that of the child's return to live with her/his parents. Both the foster mothers and the children themselves were asked if the child wanted to return home, where feasible, to live with their natural family. The proportion of children (32%, 30) who said that they would not want to go back to live with their natural family was very similar to the proportion of foster mothers who predicted a negative response to this question by their foster child, (30%, 21).

When it was a matter of wanting to return to their natural family, children were more definite in their response than the foster mothers seemed to imagine. While only one fifth of the foster mothers (22%, 15) thought the children would like to return to their natural parents, nearly half (45%, 42) of the children said they wanted to go back. Rather fewer children (19%, 18) expressed mixed feelings about this than foster mothers thought (35%, 24).

Member(s) of the child's natural family were also asked if they would like to have the child back home with them again. The majority of family members (61%, 39) who responded to this question reacted positively to the idea of having the child back in their home. A quarter (25%, 16) expressed negative feelings about such a possibility, 11% (7) expressed mixed feelings and the remaining two family members (3%) did not respond.

The foster mothers were asked to predict how family members of their foster child would react to the question of their child returning home. Foster mothers tended to underestimate the proportion of family members who would have reacted positively (15%, 10) and were more inclined to predict a mixed (32%, 22), a neutral or indifferent (13%, 9) or a negative response (35%, 24).

How successful might a return home be?

The feelings of the children themselves and of the members of their natural families differed markedly on this issue when compared with the predictions of the foster mothers. Half the children (52%, 33) responding to this question and almost half the natural family members (47%, 44) said that they thought that returning to the natural family would work out. About a third (38% of the children, 34% of the natural family members) of both groups did not think that the return of the child to the natural family would work out.

In contrast, only four (6%) foster mothers thought that if the child returned to the natural family it was 'very' (3%, 2) or 'fairly' (3%, 2) likely to work out. The vast majority of foster mothers (74%, 51) thought that it was either 'very' (49%, 34) or 'fairly' (25%, 17) likely not to succeed.

The natural family's relationship with the foster family

The relations between foster and natural family groups were explored in a section of the questionnaire filled in by the foster family and in a section of the interview with members of the child's natural family.

One issue related to the level of contact that the two groups had with one another and how they felt about this. Foster parents were asked whether they felt they saw enough of the natural family. About half (45%, 31) seemed satisfied with the amount of contact they had, while a quarter (26%, 18) thought they would like to see more of their foster child's natural family. Few (4%, 3) wanted to see less of the natural family, but quite a large proportion of foster parents (25%, 17) did not respond to this question. This last group included foster parents who had not met any members of the child's natural family.

When it came to natural family members' views on whether they would like to get to know the foster parents better, most (40%, 26) expressed positive feelings. However, a substantial group (29%, 19) said that they did not wish to increase their contact with the foster family and another quarter (23%, 15) expressed reservations. A small number (8%, 5) did not respond to this question and this group included those natural parents who felt that they knew the foster parents well enough already.

Responses from the two groups indicated that the natural family members felt more positive about their contact with the foster family than vice versa. Over two-thirds of the natural family group expressed positive feelings about how they got on with the foster family, only a small number describing negative feelings. Of the remaining quarter of the natural family group, 9% (6) had mixed feelings and 15% (10) did not respond. The latter included people who had not met the foster parents.

A fifth (19%, 13) of the foster mothers described themselves as feeling 'very comfortable' when meeting the child's family and a similar number (22%, 15) described themselves as 'fairly comfortable'. A quarter (26%, 18) of the foster mothers said they felt neutrally disposed to the natural family and 13% (9) that they felt 'a bit uncomfortable'. Only one (1%) foster mother described her reaction to meeting the foster family as 'very uncomfortable'. Ten (15%) foster mothers had not met the child's natural family, and three (4%) did not respond.

Finally, the foster parents were asked how they thought the natural family felt about them looking after their child. Very few (4%, 3) foster mothers did not know how the natural family felt or did not respond (9%, 6), and only two (3%) thought that the natural family felt negatively about them caring for the child. The biggest group (32%, 22) believed the natural family had mixed feelings about them looking after the child, a quarter of the foster mothers (25%, 17) said they felt the natural family 'did not care either way', and just over one-quarter (28%, 19) said that the natural family felt positive about their caring for the child.

How much support did the social worker provide?

The level of social work support was one area in which conventional and intensive foster care differed. In the intensive foster care scheme it was planned that social workers would allocate more time to individual cases than under conventional foster care. Therefore it was of interest not only to see how the children, foster parents and members of the natural family felt about their social worker and the frequency of visits, but also to test whether those who were involved in the intensive foster care scheme differed in any way from those fostering or fostered conventionally.

The natural and foster families were asked how often the child's social worker visited them. In both cases there was a difference in the regularity of the visits for the intensive and the conventionally fostered groups.

First, visits by social workers to IFCS foster parents were generally more frequent than those to non-scheme foster parents. All foster families in the intensive scheme (41) reported that the social worker visited them at least once every month and often more frequently. Half (50%, 36) of the non-scheme foster parents were visited as regularly as the IFCS parents, but 17% (12) were visited less regularly and 6% (4) seldom or not at all. Quite a high proportion of the non-scheme foster parents (27%, 20) did not respond to this question.

Secondly, looking at members of the children's natural families, just over a quarter of both IFCS (28%, 11) and non-scheme (28%, 18) family members were visited at least once a month by the child's social worker. However, 12 (18%) non-scheme family members saw the child's social worker seldom or not at all compared with only one (3%) of the IFCS family members.

Following on from questions about how often they had been visited by the child's social worker, both natural and foster families were asked if they were satisfied with the amount of time they were able to spend with the social worker. Most of the IFCS (93%, 38) and the non-scheme (79%, 56) foster parents felt that the amount of time the social worker spent with them was adequate. While 16% (11) of the non-scheme foster parents felt that they did not get enough of the social worker's time, no foster parents in the intensive scheme expressed such an opinion. In fact, two (5%) IFCS foster parents said they felt that the social worker came too often!

Half (50%) the members of the natural families of conventionally fostered children were satisfied with the amount of time the social worker was able to spend with them, but a third (33%) would like to have seen more of the social worker. Thirteen per cent did not want to see the social worker as much as they did. These proportions did not differ from those for the families whose children were in the intensive foster care scheme.

As well as being asked about the amount of time spent with the social worker, the children and both natural and foster families were asked to comment on how helpful it was for them to talk with the social worker. Most children (71%, 68) and foster mothers (97%, 69) expressed positive feelings about talking with the social worker. Only one foster mother did not find this helpful. More of the children had mixed views (11%, 11) or did not think that talking with the social worker helped (17%, 16).

When natural family members were asked to comment on this, fewer expressed positive feelings than their children had done about the helpfulness of talking to the social worker (46%, 30), but about the same proportion expressed negative (20%, 13) or mixed (8%, 5) feelings. A quarter (26%, 17) did not respond to this question.

It is usually considered important for children who are fostered to have the opportunity to discuss things with their social worker on their own. The children were therefore asked how often, if ever, this happened. If the responses from the children in the Auckland and Christchurch districts are considered separately, it appears that a higher proportion of children in the Auckland area (43%, 19) were able to spend some time on their own with their social worker than children in the Christchurch area (27%, 15). A third (32%, 14) of the Auckland group said they never saw the social worker on their own compared with half (51%, 28) of the Christchurch children.

Would the foster home turn out to be a good thing in the long term?

The children and their natural families were asked if they thought the foster home would turn out to be a good thing in the long term. Three-quarters of both the children (78%, 77) and their family members (72%, 47) were positive about the long-term effects of being fostered. Of the remainder, 15% (15) of the children and 17% (11) of the natural family members expressed negative feelings about the outcome of fostering for the child, and 5% (5) and 11% (7) of children and family respectively expressed mixed feelings. Two children (2%) did not respond.

Participation in planning for the future

The topic of planning for the child's future was explored with the children, the foster family and the members of the child's natural family.

The foster mothers were asked how big a role they saw themselves as having played in planning for the child's future. Responses ranged from those who considered that they had played a major part in decision-making (37%, 17) to those who did not consider they took any part in the decision (9%, 4). Half the foster mothers who responded to this question felt that they had either played some (41%, 19) or a minor (9%, 4) part in the planning decision. Whatever role they had played, three-quarters (78%, 36) thought they had been sufficiently involved in the planning process, and only 4% (2) of foster mothers believed that they should have been a lot more involved.

The children and members of their natural families were asked who they had spoken with about planning for the child's future. Most of the children (63%, 62) had attended a planning meeting and roughly a third of the children had spoken with their social worker (39%, 39), their natural family (32%, 31) and/or their foster parent(s) (41%, 41) about planning for their future. When asked who they thought would make the decision about them leaving their foster home, the children thought the social worker (37%, 34) the most likely person, themselves (34%, 32) the second most likely and their foster parent(s) (30%, 28) the third most likely people to make this decision. Only 12% (11) of the children thought that their natural family would make the decision about them leaving their foster home.

The natural family were asked with whom they had discussed the planning of the child's future. The majority (59%, 38) had attended a planning meeting, and about half (54%, 35) had talked the matter over with the child's social worker, the foster parent(s) (46%, 30) and/or the child (49%, 32). Most natural family members (63%, 39) thought the social worker would make the decision about the child leaving the foster home. About one-third (31%, 19) thought it would be the child who made this decision, one-fifth (21%, 13) nominated the foster family, and only a few thought either they (11%, 7) or another natural family member (8%, 5) would make such a decision.

4 SUMMARY

Information used in this report was collated from a variety of sources: background information from departmental files about children in conventional foster care, interviews with children being fostered and with their natural families, and questionnaires filled in by foster parents. Findings were based on the responses of 99 children who were interviewed out of the 122 children in the conventional foster care sample, 71 foster mothers and 65 members of the child's natural family. Some comparisons were made with relevant information from the intensive foster care scheme.

Why the child was taken into care

- * Both the children and their natural families tended to overemphasise the role of the child's behaviour in contributing to the issuing of the care order and to underestimate the role of conditions in the family home. A quarter of the children (26%, 26) were unable to say why they had been taken into care.

The child's relationship with the foster family

- * The general impression gained from foster parents, the natural family and the children was that the children seemed to be happy about living with their foster parents. Consistently few of the children (8%, 8), natural family members (9%, 6) and foster mothers (8%, 6) reported that the child did not like living with the foster parents.
- * The children mainly expressed positive feelings towards their foster mothers (91%), their foster fathers (86%) and other children in the foster family (81%).
- * Most children found talking things over with foster parents easy (85%, 82) and helpful (77%, 76), although most (75%, 74) admitted they did not discuss aspects of the foster home they did not like with the foster parents.

The child's contact with the natural family while in foster care

- * Two-thirds (66%, 65) of the foster children interviewed were in regular contact with their natural family, and a high proportion of the children (82%, 77) enjoyed contact with them. Half the children (51%, 50) and the natural family members (49%, 32) said they would like more contact with each other. Most children did not experience social worker or foster parent disapproval over contact with their natural family.
- * There were discrepancies between:
 - (1) the proportion of foster mothers (22%, 15) who thought that the foster child would want to return to her or his natural family and the proportion of children (45%, 42) who stated that they wanted to return;

between:

- (ii) the proportion of foster mothers (15%, 10) who thought that the natural family members would want their child back and the number of natural family members (61%, 39) who stated that they did want their child back;

and between:

- (iii) the proportion of foster mothers (6%, 4) who thought their foster child's return to the natural family would work out and the proportion of natural family members (47%, 44) and children (52%, 33) responding to this question who thought that such a return would work out.

The natural family's relationship with the foster family

- * About a third (29%, 19) of the natural family members and just under half (45%, 31) of the foster mothers seemed satisfied with the level of contact between the foster and natural families. More natural family members (40%, 26) than foster mothers (26%, 18) wanted to increase the amount of contact.
- * Over two-thirds (68%, 44) of the natural family members expressed positive feelings about their contact with the foster parents compared with 41% (28) of the foster mothers. Only two (3%) foster mothers thought the natural family felt negatively about them caring for the child.

How much support did the social worker provide?

- * The child's social worker visited:
 - (i) a higher proportion of intensive foster care scheme (100%, 41) than non-scheme foster families (50%, 36) at least once a month;
 - (ii) the same proportion of intensive foster care scheme (28%, 11) and non-scheme (28%, 18) natural family members at least once a month;
 - (iii) fewer intensive foster care scheme (3%, 1) than non-scheme (18%, 12) natural family members seldom or not at all.
- * No intensive foster care scheme foster families stated they did not see enough of the social worker, compared with 16% (11) of non-scheme foster families.
- * Fewer natural family members (46%, 30) than children (71%, 68) or foster families (97%, 69) expressed positive feelings about talking with the social worker. A similar proportion of children (17%, 16) and natural family members (20%, 13) did not find it helpful to talk with the social worker.

- * A higher proportion of children in the Auckland district (43%, 9) generally spent some time on their own with the social worker when he or she visited than was the case in the Christchurch district (27%, 15).

Would the foster home turn out to be a good thing in the long term?

- * Only 15% (15) of the children and 17% (11) of the natural family members expressed negative feelings about the long-term effects of fostering. Three-quarters of both the children and their natural families thought that foster care would turn out to have been a good thing in the long term.

Participation in planning for the future

- * Three-quarters (78%, 36) of the foster mothers thought they had been sufficiently involved in the planning process. Only 4% (2) would have liked a lot more involvement.
- * The majority of children (63%, 62) and natural family members (59%, 38) had attended a planning meeting.

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Date Due

20 JUL 1992

3/6/97



