

# Collective Wisdom from Kentucky's Foster Parents

*Alecia Hatfield*

*LifeSkills Center for Child Welfare Education and Research  
Department of Psychology, Western Kentucky University*

*David Roehm*

*LifeSkills Center for Child Welfare Education and Research  
Department of Psychology, Western Kentucky University*

*Austin Griffiths, Ph.D., CSW*

*LifeSkills Center for Child Welfare Education and Research  
Department of Social Work, Western Kentucky University*

*Simon P. Funge, Ph.D.*

*Department of Social Work, James Madison University*

## **Abstract**

Foster parents serve an integral role in the lives of children every day. In this article, qualitative data from a statewide sample of foster parents from both public and private agencies offered insight into the reasons that they may leave the agency, barriers they reported as influencing the timely permanency of children in care, ideas for the retention of foster parents, and specific requests for additional training. A thematic analysis revealed the inability to continue, various dissatisfactions, and the related emotional impact as key factors that would result in leaving their positions as foster care providers. Foster parents identified challenges with state's child welfare workers and the justice system as the main barriers that are keeping children in care from achieving timely permanency. Additionally, they requested increased services and support, and they gave examples of additional trainings that would improve their effectiveness as foster parents (e.g., behavior management skills and self-care techniques). The present study provides a thorough exploration of these important areas, as foster parents share their wisdom and contribute potential solutions to issues that have long been faced by the child welfare system. Limitations and conclusions are discussed.

**Keywords:** child welfare, foster parents, retention, training

## **Introduction**

In the federal Fiscal Year (FY) of 2020, a total of 407,493 children were reported to be in foster care nationwide, with 216,838 children reported to have entered foster care during FY 2020 (AFCARS, 2020). Additionally, within FY of 2020, there were an estimated 117,000 children in care who were waiting to be adopted (AFCARS, 2020). While the reasons for children entering foster care may vary, foster care was designed to serve as a temporary solution and place of respite for our nation's most vulnerable population.

Healthy, dedicated, and stable foster parents are integral to providing effective foster care, and since they have daily engagement with child welfare, their views and insights can provide invaluable information to address and solve current issues that have long been faced by the child welfare system. The overarching purpose of foster care is to provide a safe and temporary place of care for children as they move towards achieving permanency, and since the end goal of foster care is achieving a timely and healthy place of permanency, hindrances to reaching permanency must be addressed. Foster parent turnover, barriers to permanency, foster parent retention, and additional trainings have been identified as vital domains that impact

care (Griffiths et al., 2021). While previous research has addressed some of these domains from an outside perspective (Buehler et al., 2006; Hanlon et al., 2021; Osterling et al., 2012; Wulczyn et al., 2018), foster parents from the public and private sector are in a critical position to contribute new and important insight to the existing body of literature surrounding foster care.

Unsurprisingly, research suggests that the stresses and strains associated with being a foster parent can affect satisfaction, motivation, and competency (Cooley & Thompson, 2019; Cooley et al., 2019; Gouveia & Pinto, 2021). However, little is known about understanding the experiences and views of foster parents' perceived barriers to permanency for foster children, perceptions of methodologies to aid retention of foster parents, perceptions of gaps within current trainings for foster parents, and perceptions of effective recruitment for fostering. As of now, there is a significant gap within the existing body of literature concerning analyzing foster parents' perceptions of barriers to permanency, and since foster parents have a unique, critical, and inside perspective of foster care, their insight can directly answer urgent questions many areas of child welfare are likely to be asking. While these questions are likely to be conversations agencies frequently have, the current study improves the existing body of knowledge through utilizing a public and private sample to provide rich, qualitative data concerning foster parent turnover, barriers for achieving permanency for foster children, foster parent retention, and additional trainings for foster parents. By expanding the existing body of literature in child welfare with the present study, it is also possible there will be a greater understanding of foster parents' perceptions of ongoing issues within the child welfare community, which may serve as a catalyst for solving problems, moving forward, and improving our child welfare communities.

## Literature Review

### Turnover

The foster care system within the United States continuously struggles with exceedingly high turnover rates among foster parents, especially among newer and relative foster parents (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; Wulczyn et al., 2018). Foster parents serve an average of 8 to 14 months, and foster children spend an average of 20 months in care, which means many children experience moving to multiple placements while they are in foster care due to the exceedingly high turnover rates among foster parents (AFCARS, 2020; Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007). Research addressing reasons why foster parent turnover is exceedingly high postulates that the decision to become a foster parent is heavily influenced by motivational factors, personal and family characteristics, individual values and beliefs, social context influences, placement challenges, satisfaction, and perceived familiarity with the child welfare system (Strickler et al., 2018; Gouveia & Pinto, 2021). Further, within the context of fostering children, being guided primarily by intrinsic motivation, rather than extrinsic motivation, leads to higher levels of satisfaction, retention, and proficiency (Cleary et al., 2018). However, previous studies suggest that a small, vital group of seasoned foster parents tend to disproportionately provide a significant amount of foster care to the most vulnerable children (Miller et al., 2019; Cherry & Orme, 2013; Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; Orme et al., 2017).

Research from foster parent focus groups yielded five domains of the foster care experience which affect retention: birth family, motivation, agency influences, relationship impacts, and attachment (Broady et al., 2009). However, foster parent perceptions of their own limitations, the ability of the foster care system to function fluidly, sufficiency of funding concerning cost of services to foster a child, and the relationship between foster parents and the agency have been identified as critical components that affect foster parent turnover (Hanlon et al., 2021). Individual foster parent actions such as attendance of pre-service training, attendance of in-service training, and having peer support from other foster parents positively contributed to caregiver retention (Hanlon et al., 2021). Though, foster families also discontinue fostering due to reduction in reimbursement rates, decreases in quality services available for the members of the foster family, difficulties with the child welfare system, and individual family changes (Mullins et al., 2013). Foster parents have additionally reported they would consider ending a placement if their own health deteriorated, personal circumstances changed, lack of external support, issues with the foster agency, unsuccessful attempts to make the placement work, problematic behavior from the child, and lack of competency (Brown & Bednar, 2006; Cherry & Orme, 2013; Hanlon et al., 2021).

Personal attributes of the foster parents and foster parent self-care have also been identified as significant influencers on foster parents' decisions to continue or discontinue providing fostering services (Mullins et al., 2013; Hanlon et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2019). Research suggests foster families are positively impacted to continue fostering by their locus of control, emotional supports, and practical supports (Mullins et al., 2013). Personal attributes among foster parents such as flexibility, confidence, and motivation have been suggested to be significantly connected to foster parent retention (Hanlon et al., 2021). Additionally, foster parents who engage in self-care strategies are strongly associated with reports of excellent health and having extra money leftover at the end of the month, but research suggests foster parents infrequently engage in self-care (Miller et al., 2019).

Foster parents are frequently thrust into situations where they are required to meet the specialized needs of a diverse group of children while simultaneously navigating bureaucratic systems and legislative mandates. While caregiver characteristics and experiences significantly affect foster parent retention, the behavior of children in foster care serves as a significant moderator between foster parent supports and foster parent satisfaction (Cooley et al., 2015). Negative foster child behaviors have been identified as a potential risk factor for negative foster parent outcomes, such as dissatisfaction or the decision to discontinue providing foster care (Cooley et al., 2015; Broady et al., 2009).

## **Barriers to Permanency**

The goal of all children entering the child welfare system is to achieve permanency within a timely manner, which has been demonstrated to act as a critical factor for healthy child development (Osterling et al., 2012). There is a vast amount of research concerning barriers to achieving permanency for children in out-of-home care, and scales have been developed to measure child permanency barriers (Murphy et al., 2012). However, there is no research analyzing foster parents' perspectives concerning barriers to permanency. Leaving foster care for the purpose of adoption, reunification, kinship care, or guardianship are examples of permanency, and permanency serves as one of the primary goals of foster care (LaBrenz et al., 2012). However, during the time spent in foster care, children will, on average, experience three school placements, multiple placement changes, and numerous difficulties in achieving permanency (Pears et al., 2015; Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2022). Previous initiatives have been conducted to examine and prevent foster children from experiencing long stays within foster care and to achieve timely permanency into safe, supportive, and stable home environments, but the results have been less than encouraging (Akin et al., 2012; Testa et al., 2019). While foster children spend an average 20 months in care, there are significant barriers to achieving a timely permanency for foster children (AFCARS, 2020).

Lack of agency and systemic support has been identified as a significant barrier to achieving permanency for children who are in foster care (Atkin et al., 2012; Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2022). Child welfare and foster care agencies provide a host of services that are invaluable to the foster families, and a lack of family-centered services for children and families acts as a significant barrier to achieving positive outcomes for permanency within the child welfare system (Atkin et al., 2012). Recent research suggests limited access to resources, supports, and services from child welfare agencies hinders successful reunification of families and does not promote positive mental health outcomes (Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2019). Many services are perceived to be integral to successful transition into foster care and eventually into permanency - namely collaboration among service providers, access to social, emotional, and mental health supports in and out of schools, trainings for foster parents, and family supports (Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2019; Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2022; LaBrenz et al., 2021).

While lack of services available from child welfare agencies negatively influences the achievement of timely permanency, the lack of family engagement also acts as a significant barrier concerning outcomes for permanency as well (Akin et al., 2012; LaBrenz et al., 2021). Children in care who reported experiencing genuine support and connection also reported more extensive, emotionally connected, and meaningful relationships, which, in turn, affected the children's mental and emotional health (Ball et al., 2021). Therefore, children in care who do not experience positive family engagement and support developed more mental and significant emotional health issues, which has been negatively related to achieving timely permanency (Ball et al., 2021; Atkin et al., 2012). The quality of relationships while in foster care has been strongly associated with a higher

likelihood of achieving permanency and to a child's ability to achieve relational permanency (Ball et al., 2021; Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2022).

Individual characteristics have also been identified as contributors to achieving timely permanence within out-of-home care. Research suggests 82% of foster parents would consider adopting a child over the age of three, but only 35% of parents within the foster care system would consider adopting a child over the age of seven (Wilson et al., 2005). Older children in care have been associated with higher rates of reunification, however, they are less likely to be adopted (LaBrenz et al., 2021; LaBrenz et al., 2021; Akin et al., 2012). An estimated 25% of adoptions and reunifications are resulted in disruptions for children between the age of 12 to 17 (Ball et al., 2021). A child's age, health status, and behavioral characteristics are significant predictors of placement deterioration (Brown & Bednar, 2006). However, children with strong, positive relationships with other people have been strongly associated with a higher likelihood of permanency than children who display acting out behaviors, emotional disturbance, and a lack of strong relationships (Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2022; LaBrenz et al., 2021).

Racial disparities, cultural factors, and overrepresentation of minority groups are suggested to be present across all levels of child welfare, which may impact to the goal of achieving permanency for children in foster care (Cénat et al., 2021). Specifically, children of color, especially non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic Native American, and non-Hispanic multiracial, continue to be disproportionately overrepresented across every decision point in the U.S. child welfare system (Murphy et al., 2023). The child welfare system has long been criticized for their lack of intervention and action concerning addressing the deficits in achieving permanency for racial and ethnic minorities in child welfare (Detlaff et al., 2020). Existing research has largely focused on the documentation of racial and ethnic disproportionalities within foster care and child welfare, while there has been less focus on the development and implementation of interventions and/or approaches specifically designed to reduce these disparities and achieve permanency (Barth et al., 2020; Barth et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2023).

Severe emotional disturbances were identified as the most influential predictor for achieving permanency among children in foster care (Atkin et al., 2012). The cause of removal has also been linked to reunification for foster children, with removal causes such as parental illicit drug use and neglect being linked with lower rates of reunification (LaBrenz et al., 2020). Removal due to sexual abuse and the presence of an emotional/behavioral disorder have been linked to delays in achieving permanency (Connell et al., 2006). Additionally, racial bias has been identified as a significant barrier concerning outcomes for permanency (Atkin, 2011). Historically, African American, American Indian, and Multi-racial children have faced racially inequitable outcomes within the child welfare system related to adoption and reunification (AFCARS, 2020; LaBrenz, 2021). Given the host of research concerning barriers to permanency, there is a lack of research surveying foster parents themselves concerning their perspectives of barriers to permanency.

## **Recruitment**

Foster parent recruitment is a multi-faceted, difficult, and complex process that child welfare agencies continue to pursue (Hanlon et al., 2021). With exceedingly high foster parent turnover rates, difficulties with recruitment and retention of foster parents have been an ongoing issue for some time within the United States (Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2018; Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007). Most foster children spend an average of 20 months in care and experience living in multiple placements, and due to the high foster parent turnover rate, there is an increased need for quality foster parent recruitment (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007;). Due to the high rate of foster parent turnover, foster parent recruitment is an integral part of maintaining an active and competent child welfare system.

Previous research has suggested there are many barriers that affect recruitment and retention of foster parents within the United States (Baer & Diehl, 2019; Hanlon et al., 2021). The decision to become a foster parent is heavily influenced by motivational factors, individual characteristics, values, beliefs, the licensing process, social context, agency factors, and association with the child protection system (Gouveia & Pinto, 2021; Cleary et al., 2018; Strickler et al., 2018; Hanlon et al., 2021). However, negative perceptions of foster care from the public, general concerns regarding foster care, misunderstanding of the function of foster care,

difficulties in training, and misunderstandings of social service agencies have been labeled as deterrents for foster parent recruitment (Baer & Diehl, 2019; Hanlon et al., 2021). Previous research asserts in most states within the United States that foster parents are inadequately reimbursed for expenses associated with the duties of this position (Ahn et al., 2016). Unsurprisingly, research additionally suggests the perceived stresses and strains connected to being a foster parent position can affect motivation and recruitment of new foster parents (Cooley & Thompson, 2019; Cooley et al., 2019; Gouveia & Pinto, 2021).

Between 2013 and 2016, more than 50% of states within the United States experienced a decrease in foster parent recruitment while the number of children entering foster care gradually increased (AFCARS, 2020; Hanlon et al., 2021). However, due to the high rates of foster parent turnover, especially among newer and relative foster parents, child welfare agencies have utilized the following general strategies to increase recruitment: administrative support, improved public perception of child welfare, increasing reimbursement for foster families, leveraging current foster families, using media, establishing partnerships, sponsoring special events, and training foster parents (Hanlon et al., 2021). The Department of Health and Human Services previously reported that the most active foster parents within the child welfare system are white, married, and heterosexual individuals (AFCARS, 2020). Therefore, child welfare agencies have recently started utilizing targeted recruitment through increasing cultural competency and cultural humility training to welcome, recruit, and equip foster parents from diverse backgrounds to meet the needs of an ever-growing, diverse group of children in foster care (Hanna et al., 2016).

## Training

Within the United States, foster parent training and licensure is a legal requirement for foster parents to take on the responsibility of caring for a child. Additionally, children in foster care are more vulnerable to issues related to school, developmental, medical, and mental health than the general population (Cooley et al., 2019). Therefore, foster parent training is essential for equipping foster parents with the necessary knowledge, skills, and support needed to provide effective care (Buehler et al., 2006). In-service trainings that produced the best results are multi-session programs, which are the least frequently offered trainings for foster parents (Festinger & Baker, 2013; Benesh & Cui 2017). Additionally, a lack of adequate training and support was identified as a significant reason for foster parents deciding to discontinue fostering children (Gilbertson & Barber, 2003).

Foster parent training has been perceived as an addendum to case management rather than an essential component of effectively fostering children (Barsh et al., 1983). A quantitative systematic literature review concerning foster parent training indicated that foster parents are generally satisfied with current trainings, but a synthesis of qualitative studies indicated foster parents desire more advanced trainings for fostering diverse groups of foster children (Kaasbøll et al., 2019). Recent research encourages the development of trainings for trauma-informed foster parenting among diverse populations to increase foster parents' knowledge of the impact of trauma on foster children, increase positive mental health outcomes, and reduce traumatic symptoms for diverse foster children (Konijn et al., 2020).

In out-of-home care, 16% of children identify as LGBTQ (Erney & Weber, 2018), and 61% of these children in out-of-home care are youth of color (Dettlaff et al., 2018). Additionally, LGBTQ children and youth of color in out-of-home care are at a greater risk to experience bias, discrimination, rejection by peers and caregivers, homelessness, truancy, poor health outcomes, and a greater risk of mental health issues (Dettlaff et al., 2018). Although the child welfare system is composed of diverse groups of people, research suggests foster parents are uncertain concerning their competency to foster children from diverse backgrounds (Cooley & Petren, 2011; Erney & Weber, 2018; Kaasbøll et al., 2019). Further, research has shown that foster parents are less willing to accept the placement of LGBTQ youth (Griffiths et al., 2021).

## Purpose of the Study

In response to an expressed need, the research team partnered with the state's child welfare agency and multiple private foster care agencies to launch a statewide mixed methods study and examine various factors related to the foster parent experience, longevity, well-being, and capture their suggestions for improvement.

The quantitative portion of this study has been published (Griffiths et al., 2021) and this manuscript will explicitly examine the following qualitative research questions:

1. What is the primary reason you would stop being a foster parent?
2. What barriers have you seen that interfere with foster children achieving timely permanency?
3. Please provide any ideas you have that may help your agency keep its foster parents.
4. What additional training do you feel you need to be a more effective foster parent?

## Methodology

### Design and Data Collection

The research team utilized a descriptive research design to collect feedback from foster parents from both public and private foster care agencies. A total of 14 out of 26 private foster care agencies in Kentucky and the state's child protection agency committed to participate in the study. An electronic survey was developed and distributed through Qualtrics. For foster parents contracted with the public agency, an agency administrator used a listserv to forward an IRB approved cover letter and the embedded hyperlink to the survey to the foster parents. A one-time reminder was submitted two weeks later. For foster parents contracting with private agencies across the state, administrators from each private foster care agency agreed to forward the IRB approved cover letter and the embedded hyperlink to the survey to the foster parents. A one-time reminder was submitted two weeks later as well. Inclusion criteria required that individuals were active foster parents within the state's child welfare agency or located at one of the 14 participating private foster care agencies.

The research team did not communicate directly with any potential foster parent participants, as they were not affiliated child welfare system or the private agencies. For that reason, they were unable to determine the response rate of the foster parents participating in the study or the representativeness of the sample. The study was approved by both the research team's university and the state's child welfare agency. While paper copies of the survey were available to be distributed at the request of a respondent through their agency administrator, only one individual utilized this method of participation.

### Sample

A total of 255 foster parents were recruited to participate by public and private foster care agencies across Kentucky. The mean age of these foster parents was 41.67 years ( $SD = 10.26$ ). The average number of years experience as a foster parent was 4.12 ( $SD = 3.87$ ). The majority of participants ( $n = 147, 57.6\%$ ) were contracted with private foster care agencies and the remaining foster parents contracted with Kentucky's public agency ( $n = 89, 34.9\%$ ) or with agencies classified as "other" ( $n = 19, 7.5\%$ ).

When examining demographics, the sample revealed little diversity amongst foster parents with respect to gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality. Foster parents who participated in this study were primarily female ( $n = 214, 84.6\%$ ), Caucasian ( $n = 228, 89.5\%$ ), and heterosexual ( $n = 213, 90.9\%$ ). Still, there were 38 (15.0%) male participants and 1 (0.4%) participant who identified as transgender. Several foster parents also described themselves as Black/African American ( $n = 21, 8.2\%$ ), Asian/Pacific Islander ( $n = 3, 1.2\%$ ), Native American/American Indian ( $n = 2, 0.7\%$ ), and Hispanic/Latino ( $n = 1, 0.4\%$ ). While an overwhelming majority of participants were heterosexual, 22 (8.7%) identified as Gay/Lesbian or Bisexual and one participant (0.4%) identified their sexuality as "other."

In terms of the highest level of education completed, 123 participants (48.2%) did not have a college degree, while 68 participants (26.7%) reported having a Bachelor's degree and 14 participants (5.5%) reported completing vocational/technical school. Some participants had completed a graduate degree ( $n = 50$ ). Of these participants, 39 (5.3%) reported having a Master's degree, 6 (2.4%) a Doctoral degree, and 5 (2.0%) a Professional degree (e.g., MD, DDS, RN, JD).

### Data Analysis Process

Thematic analysis allows researchers the ability to systematically link qualitative data to a series of broad

concepts, or themes (Braun and Clarke, 2012). As such, a qualitative thematic analysis, following the six-phase guidelines set forth by Braun and Clarke (2006), was conducted by the research team in order to analyze the open-ended responses gathered from participants. These survey items included, “*What is the primary reason you would stop being a foster parent,*” “*What barriers have you seen that interfere with foster children achieving timely permanency,*” “*Please provide any ideas you have that may help your agency keep its foster parents,*” “*What additional training do you feel you need to be a more effective foster parent?*” Each response was coded using the qualitative data analysis software, MaxQDAPlus12, and several themes emerged from the data.

## Results

A total of 865 items were extracted from the four open-response items, as 155 responses were missing. Only relevant contributions, meaning those which answered the research questions, were included. Responses containing irrelevant contributions (e.g., “I don’t know,” “N/A,” etc.) were excluded from the thematic analysis. The remaining responses (n = 760) were analyzed, with some contributions fitting more than one theme per item. These contributions were counted more than once, dependent on the number of themes they met.

**Table 1. Thematic Analysis Results**

Theme	N (%)
1. Primary reason to stop being a foster parent	231 (90.6%)
Unable/Not Permitted to Continue	120
Dissatisfaction with System	119
Emotional Impact on Foster Parent	41
Foster Child(ren) Behavior	40
2. Barriers to achieving timely permanency	220 (86.3%)
State Workers	145
The Justice System	128
Biological Parents	56
3. Ideas to improve retention	181 (70.9%)
Improve Services and Support	91
Adjust Requirements	10
4. Additional training	129 (50.6%)
Parenting/Behavior Skills	30
Coping/Self-Care	11
Navigating the System	10
Increased Resources	5

### Research Question 1: Primary Reason to Stop Being a Foster Parent

For the first question, “*What is the primary reason you would stop being a foster parent,*” 231 (90.6%) participants responded. A small portion of responses (n = 15, 5.9%) indicated that they did not plan to stop. All other responses were categorized into four major, broad themes, including (1) Unable/Not Permitted to Continue, (2) Dissatisfaction with System, (3) Emotional Impact on Foster Parents, and (4) Foster Children Behavior.

#### **Theme 1: Unable/Not Permitted to Continue (n = 120 responses)**

Foster parents overwhelmingly reported an inability to continue fostering as one potential reason why they might discontinue. Of these responses, there were four subthemes which described the inability: health concerns and aging (n = 40 responses), adoption (n = 39 responses), full home (n = 34 responses), and financial reasons (n = 7 responses).

Several foster parents briefly mentioned “health” and “age” as being two major reasons why they would be

unable to continue, with some participants describing this in more detail. One foster parent revealed, "If our health or family situation changed, we would take a serious look at our ability to continue fostering." Another foster parent said they would quit fostering "if my physical health no longer allowed me to do so." Other participants mentioned that they did not want to stop, and they would only stop if their age no longer allowed them to care for children. One foster parent indicated, "I never want to stop. The only reason I would stop would be due to old age, or health reasons." Another foster parent agreed, stating, "Most likely I will age out before I want to stop."

Other foster parents mentioned "adoption" as being a key component to their ability to continue. A few participants suggested that they would be unable to continue their role as foster parent(s) once their foster children were adopted. One foster parent described this, stating, "We will stop fostering once our adoption is finalized. We may consider it again later in life." Another simply said they would be unable "when we finally adopt a child/children."

Aside from adoption, foster parents also revealed that they would be unable to continue once their "home is full." Several participants elaborated on this, with one foster parent revealing that they would be unable to continue after "reaching capacity either legally or our best abilities as parents. We want to help as many kids as we can, but not take on too much so our kids get what they need from us." Another foster parent said they would stop fostering when they "will be at capacity and we won't be able to accommodate any other children."

A few foster parents mentioned their "financial" capabilities as impacting their ability to continue fostering. One foster parent clearly suggested that they would discontinue due to a "lack of financial to support them!" With this, several foster parents mentioned their small stipend and lack of benefits as playing a considerable part in their finances. One foster parent elaborated on this, stating, "We could not handle more children financially with just one income, since private [foster] care does not pay for child care services." Another foster parent described this in great detail: "The demands for all you have to do and take off work while maintaining your employment status n for such small pay... because when you look at the fact you have to be available 24 hours a day for the children and we don't even make minimum wage."

## ***Theme 2: Dissatisfaction with System (n = 119 responses)***

Following an inability to continue, foster parents reported that they would stop fostering due to their dissatisfaction with the child welfare system. Of these responses, there were four prevalent subthemes extracted: general dissatisfaction (n = 51 responses), lack of support (n = 30 responses), unheard/unable to impact (n = 20 responses), and dissatisfaction with requirements (n = 18 responses).

A majority of these responses described a general dissatisfaction with the child welfare system. One foster parent said they would discontinue because of "the system and how children are treated." Another stated they would discontinue due to "continued failures by [state foster agency] in providing care for children in care." Several foster parents included their own previous experiences with the child welfare system as explanation for their dissatisfaction. One of these participants revealed that they would discontinue due to their "pure aggravation with the system. Far too often I see state return children prematurely then I watch the children decline after being returned home because the biological family just wasn't ready." A different foster parent revealed that they had a "terrible experience with the foster care agency that was supposed to be helping us."

In addition to the general dissatisfaction, many participants pointed out the "lack of support" from the child welfare system as being one major reason why they would discontinue fostering. Some foster parents specified this lack of support, often by describing their own personal experiences with the system. One respondent revealed, "I had two foster children. One infant and a 9-year-old boy with issues that were not provided to us when he came to us. We were the only ones advocating for him at school, with his medical, with his behavioral issues . . . It became exhausting. And the state provided no assistance for tutoring or activities to assist with his behavioral issues." Another foster parent indicated that the support received from the public child welfare agency may vary greatly. They revealed, "I feel really unsupported by my regional office. I've found that the level of support you receive varies GREATLY by region." Others pointed out notable figures in the child welfare system that they feel have not supported them. One foster parent said, "Not enough support from



[state foster agency]. Justice system doesn't make decision for what best for the child." A few participants also specified a lack of support from their state workers. One foster parent said, "Having poor state workers. Who did not come out and check on the children and continue to neglect the child just like the parents did." Another foster parent described a "lack of support from the state. The state does not do things that are in the best interest of the kids. State workers do not listen to foster parents."

In addition to their general dissatisfaction with the system and lack of support, foster parents revealed that they would discontinue fostering due to feeling that they are unheard or unable to make an impact on their child(ren). Many foster parents described feeling that their voice does not matter to the child welfare system. One foster parent stated, "I don't feel as if I matter to the state. My opinions and concerns are quite often dismissed. We clean up a lot of messes that could be avoided if the state had the children's best interest at heart. In our current case the parents are being advocated for more than the children." Another simply said, "State workers do not listen to foster parents." One foster parent described feeling like their "concerns are never taken seriously."

Foster parents also mentioned a dissatisfaction with the requirements provided by the system. One foster parent responded, "Constant training demands, physicals, paperwork, etc." Another foster parent agreed and, in addition, reported that the training requirements are not useful: "Foster parents are also required to do a lot of training each year, but the training is not at all sufficient to help foster parents in the day-to-day job of parenting children with trauma. The trainings are a waste of time, and at best, bring awareness and at worst, bring discouragement with no hope of bettering the situation." One foster parent also mentioned how the requirements for childcare given by their agency limit them. They described having a "lack of decent health care providers who will accept Medicaid in [removed county name] County. Requirement to use [name of provider] only for mental health care."

### ***Theme 3: Emotional Impact on Foster Parents (n = 41 responses)***

The emotional impact of fostering children was another reason why foster parents stated they would discontinue. For this theme, there were two subthemes of note that foster parents revealed: grief and loss (n = 27 responses) and burnout (n = 14 responses).

Of the responses for this theme, over half described the process as being emotionally taxing and leading to significant feelings of grief and loss. One foster parent stated they would discontinue "if it was having an overly negative impact on my family or causing undue stress. We tend to foster more troubled youth and at times it can be very draining physically and emotionally." Another foster parent mentioned "the emotional pain after a placement leaves is sometimes hard to process." One foster parent seemed to effectively sum this subtheme up, stating, "It takes a toll on your heart."

In addition to feelings of grief and loss, foster parents said they would discontinue fostering due to "burnout." One foster parent described "the chaos" of fostering, while another revealed they would discontinue due to "not being able to adequately recharge myself enough to BE a help." A few foster parents described their current emotional state and burnout. One revealed, "I am overall annoyed and want out. ... I couldn't handle all the stress from everything." Another respondent stated, "If the cons outweighed the pros, I would stop being a foster parent. It is extremely exhausting & can wear on your emotions, so if I began taking out my frustrations on my foster children, I would need to stop being a foster parent."

### ***Theme 4: Foster Child Behavior (n = 40 responses)***

A few responses pointed to the behavior of their foster children as being one reason why foster parents would discontinue fostering. Two subthemes were found for this theme: children becoming dangerous/hard to handle (n = 24 responses) and negative impacts on current family (n = 16 responses).

Of these responses, over half (n = 24 responses) of foster parents described discontinuing if foster children become dangerous or too hard to handle. Some of these responses implied previous experiences with foster children, with one foster parent describing, "Background info on most recent placement lacked abuse history we were unprepared for, and which caused great chaos in our home." Another respondent simply stated that

they would discontinue “if I get hurt again by one of the kids,” with another stating, “If it became too hard to handle.”

Foster parents also specified that they would stop fostering if the behavior began to negatively impact their family members. One foster parent said, “If it [behavior] were to be harmful to my family.” Another mentioned that they would discontinue as a result of “physical abuse to me, my son or family.” One foster parent described their own current experience, in which a foster child has negatively impacted their relationship with other family members. They said, “It has negatively affected the relationship that I have with my other 3 children. The child that I have in my home right now is very demanding and has behavioral issues due to extreme neglect and abuse.”

## **Research Question 2: Barriers Interfering with Timely Permanency**

For the second question, “*What barriers have you seen that interfere with foster children achieving timely permanency,*” 220 (86.3%) of participants responded. Responses were categorized into three major, overarching themes: (1) State Workers, (2) The Justice System, and (3) Biological Parents.

### ***Theme 1: State Workers (n = 145 responses)***

The largest barrier to permanency for foster children was reported by foster parents to be state workers. There were three subthemes found for this theme: worker issues (n = 91 responses), communication issues (n = 28 responses), and inadequate services (n = 26 responses).

For this theme, a majority of foster parents described having significant issues with the child welfare workers assigned to their case. Several included the “caseworker turnover rate” as one of these issues, along with the “constant change of workers.” One foster parent stated, “The experience of changing social workers mid-placement has also proved to interfere with achieving timely permanency with the children we have in our home.” Others specified certain problems they have had with workers throughout their experience fostering. One foster parent revealed “state workers dragging their feet and not filing paperwork in a timely manner” as one barrier to permanency. Another pointed out the high caseloads, indicating, “Social workers have too many cases, paperwork is behind.”

Several respondents also pointed to “bad communication from State social workers” as one particular barrier to permanency. One foster parent described their own experience with this: “State worker not returning calls or emails! We have seen her 3 times in the year we have had our foster daughter, it has taken up to 3 months to get a reply to an email and is ‘conveniently’ out of the office no matter what day or time I call - even when told (multiple times) to call on X day at X time because she will be there.” Another foster parent described there being “slow communication between offices and states.” Other respondents described the poor communication as being the result of caseworker turnover and changes. One foster parent stated that the biggest barrier to permanency is the “turnover in case workers - causes delay in paperwork, lack of communication, no or misinformation being shared, little or no follow through.”

Foster parents also described the inadequate service, or “lack of services,” provided by state workers as being a barrier. One foster parent described “state workers not doing their job.” A few respondents mentioned their own experiences with inadequate service. One of these foster parents said, “The lack of timeliness of state case workers. Our worker said in December that she had begun the paperwork to change their goal to adoption. This paperwork was not filed until the end of March 2018 and this was after our case manager with our agency started to email her weekly to follow up on the progress.” Another revealed, “State social workers who don’t follow through with what they have said. I currently have 2 foster children who do not have health insurance cards after 2 months in foster care, even though the state social worker said I would have them over a month ago. Also, the system works way too slow. It has taken 2 months for my special needs foster son to be assigned a therapist & his therapist has no experience working with a special needs child.”

### ***Theme 2: The Justice System (n = 128 responses)***

In addition to state workers, several foster parents mentioned problems related to the justice system, with

many describing their own personal experiences. These responses were categorized into two subthemes: the justice system/court (n = 89 responses) and time (n = 39 responses).

A majority of the responses within this theme focused on the general justice system as a barrier to permanency. A few foster parents indicated “judges” as playing a significant part in this. One foster parent stated, “Judges giving parents too many chances. GAL not being involved till goes to TPR.” Another suggested that judges provide a “lack of proper consequences. Giving bio parents too many chances. Reunification isn’t always the best.” Other foster parents mentioned lawyers/attorneys being a barrier. One said, “I also would say not having lawyers to file TPR paperwork.” Another respondent revealed that the “lack of attorneys has drastically slowed down the adoption process in [respondents’ region].”

Other responses simply mentioned the length of time spent with the judicial system, with one foster parent responding, “It takes too long to move through the court system.” Many foster parents described there being “court delays” which significantly impact the length of time it takes to achieve permanency. One foster parent said, “THE COURT SYSTEM! We have had a child in our care since December 2014 that has yet to be adopted. It has been an extremely long process and we are still looking at an additional 18 months. Most of the setbacks that we have experienced is facing multiple delays within the court system/attorneys.” Another respondent agreed, and in addition, described several reasons why, in their experience, the justice system takes too long: “Backed up court systems, too many exceptions for parents not following case plans, failed drug screens getting ignored... foster children having to switch social workers or judges.”

### **Theme 3: Biological Parents (n = 56 responses)**

Issues related to the biological parents of foster children were also found by foster parents to be barriers to achieving timely permanency. These include giving biological parents too many chances (n = 39 responses) and holding biological parents to low standards (n = 17 responses).

Of these responses, over half of foster parents responded with statements referring to the number of chances biological parents are given. One foster parent stated that permanency is impacted due to “birthparents given chance after chance, allowed to disappear/not cooperate and re-enter child’s life causing additional trauma and delaying permanency.” Another foster parent added their own experience, stating, “I have seen too many chances given to parents who refuse to work a case plan. Example we have had a child in our home for 1.5 years whose parents have not even showed up for a case plan and have had zero contact with the child. And we are still waiting for TPR. We had another child who was with us for two years before parents started working a plan.”

In addition to the number of chances, several foster parents described the low standards held for biological parents in the child welfare system. One foster parent suggested the system is, “being too lenient on biological parents,” while another foster parent said, “BP having minimal standards to get children back and quality of life not being considered.” Other foster parents included their own personal experiences. One revealed that permanency was affected due to “bio parents just doing enough to get by and extend their timelines. For instance, parents never missed a visitation and participated in their required classes. However, they never took a drug test, and supervised visits proved they did not know how to show age-appropriate care. The judge kept giving 90-day extensions even though the parents weren’t drug testing, which is the main reason their child came into state care in the first place! Passing drug screening should be the first step in bio parents getting any kind of rights or extension, otherwise their unhealthy cycle continues, which hurts the child in the long-run because of delayed permanency timelines.”

### **Research Question 3: Ideas for Foster Parent Retention**

For the third question, “*Please provide any ideas you have that may help your agency keep its foster parents,*” 181 (70.9%) participants responded. Of these 181 responses, 27 (14.9%) said they were satisfied with their current agency. The remaining 154 responses contain suggestions for child welfare agencies. These suggestions were categorized into two major themes, including (1) Improve Services and Support, and (2) Adjust Requirements.

### **Theme 1: Improve services and support (n = 91 responses)**

A majority (59.1%) of suggestions made by respondents indicated that improving services and providing increased support may help child welfare agencies retain their foster parents. These responses were divided into four major subthemes: more or better services and support (n = 42 responses), improved communication/clarification (n = 21 responses), better compensation (n = 16 responses), and provide resources (n = 12 responses).

Several foster parents indicated that increasing and improving the services and support offered by agencies may help increase foster parent retention. Foster parents detailed several ways that child welfare agencies—both private and public—can do this. A few pointed out a need for increased support of foster parents through advocacy. One foster parent said that agencies should “advocate for its foster parents, we need rights too.” Another suggested that agencies should “allow time to give good feedback on the foster parents jobs that they do and not always pointing out the negative so fast.” Other foster parents focused on suggestions for improving service delivery. One revealed that they would like “more online classes. The amount of time required to physically attend training is ridiculous. I learn more from online classes than spending my weekends/evenings in a classroom listening to employees.” Another said, “Online paperwork. More support to foster parents.” In addition to these changes to service delivery, several foster parents described making foster parent collaboration an integral part of the process. One foster parent revealed, “More collaboration between foster parents. I know my agency has great parents but I don’t feel like I really have enough time to get to know and form deep bonds with most of them. It is hard to feel alone as a foster parent. None of my friends are foster parents or parents to teenagers (especially not ones with issues) so it makes it hard. I feel lonely and discouraged at times because I’m not sure that I’m doing everything correctly and would love more assurance. Our agency is great and our agency’s worker helps me tremendously, but it is hard sometimes.”

Improved communication and clarification was also described by respondents as one way to improve services and support, in order to retain foster parents. For some foster parents, this includes simply listening to their feelings, wants, and needs. One foster parent said that child welfare workers should “take time to listen, even when they think that they already have the answers.” Another said that workers should “show them more appreciation, acknowledge them, listen to what they are saying.” In addition to listening, communication extends to the information child welfare workers share with foster parents. One foster parent indicated that workers should “be completely honest with all information that they have on children coming into care.” Another respondent stated that “more communication with foster parents about what is going on” might help to retain foster parents.

Several respondents also suggested that agencies can improve services and support by providing more compensation for fostering. Foster parents provided specific examples for ways that agencies can do this, primarily including an increased stipend. One foster parent said, “Higher pay,” while another foster parent requested “better compensation, day care costs provided, food stamps and clothing allowance when the children are initially received into a home.” Another foster parent said that the public agency should “increase stipend. Other agencies pay higher daily rates. Also they should do medical fragile care as well.” A few foster parents specifically stated that private agencies should compensate for daycare services. One respondent said, “Pay in full for daycare/afterschool care for those parents that work full time and are not trying to abuse the system.” Another foster parent indicated, “The state provides child care that is paid but private agencies do not. I have talked to several foster parents that are through the state and their daily per diem is only less than \$1 than mine with a private agency; therefore the private agency isn’t compensating for childcare expenses. Child care has to be paid out of pocket which could cost roughly \$1200 for two children.”

A few foster parents indicated that agencies can improve services and support by providing more resources to foster families. For many of these respondents, this includes more learning opportunities. One foster parent revealed that “better training and education to handle children with special needs” may help retain foster parents. Another suggested having “more online training opportunities, not redoing so many hours.” In addition to learning opportunities, a few respondents included having other foster parents as a resource. One foster parent suggested having “foster parent retreats, foster parent nights out.” Another said, “More foster parent networks.”

## **Theme 2: Adjust Requirements (n = 10 responses)**

In addition to improving services and support, a few respondents (n = 10 responses) recommended that foster care agencies adjust their requirements in order to retain their foster parents. Specifically, “less paperwork” was a common suggestion given. For a few respondents, this primarily includes “less daily paperwork.” Other foster parents also revealed possible adjustments that can be made to the paperwork process, including “more manageable paperwork” and “more streamlined paperwork for foster parents.” One foster parent also suggested that “online paperwork” may help increase retention.

## **Research Question 4: Additional Training**

For the last question, “*What additional training do you feel you need to be a more effective foster parent,*” 129 (50.6%) participants responded with suggestions. These suggestions were categorized into four major themes: (1) Parenting/Behavior Management Skills, (2) Coping/Self-Care, (3) Navigating the System, and (4) Increased Resources.

### **Theme 1: Parenting/Behavior Management Skills (n = 30 responses)**

In this theme, foster parents reported that they need more training in parenting and behavior management skills in order to be more effective. There were five subthemes extracted from the responses, including basic skills (n = 8 responses), behavioral issues (n = 7 responses), complex skills (n = 6 responses), managing teenagers (n = 6 responses), and crisis intervention (n = 3 responses).

A few foster parents indicated that increased education on basic parenting skills might be beneficial to increase their effectiveness, particularly with new foster parents. One experienced foster parent stated, “Basic parenting skills since for some families this is the first kids in the home.” Several foster parents described specific, basic skills they would like education on. One new foster parent stated, “I have been asking for a carseat training and how properly install one in car and restrain a child in one properly.” Another foster parent indicated that “it would be beneficial to receive additional training on discipline techniques for foster children.” Other foster parents focused on training specifically catered towards children with behavioral issues. One foster parent said, “I would like to see a training or support group to help foster parents deal with the children who have ADHD, anger issues etc. It is very stressful dealing with children that have behavioral problems.” Another foster parent specified, “More training on ODD and PTSD,” and another said, “More training on ... RAD.” In addition, a foster parent requested training specifically aimed at “children who have aggression and hurt others.”

In addition to basic training and training focused on behavioral issues, a few foster parents pointed out a need for training on more complex issues. One foster parent stated that they would like more training on “transgender kids and ethics.” Another asked for “traumatized child training.” One additional foster parent specified that they would benefit from “more training on [...] RAD.”

Other foster parents suggested that having training related to teenagers may help increase their effective with this demographic. For many foster parents, this training includes a wide variety of issues that may arise with teenagers, or that teenagers may experience. One foster parent specifically asked for training on “drug control with teenagers.” Another specified that they would like training on “how to deal with the problems that arise from social media and how to effectively control access to it.” One experienced foster parent described a previous experience with a teenage foster child and how training may have benefitted them. They said, “Our first placement was with a teenage girl, at that time I wished we had more training on how to handle teenage behaviors like internet usage, drama, peer pressure, and bullying.”

Lastly, a few foster parents pointed out a need for training in “crisis intervention.” One foster parent suggested that they would benefit from training on “talking kids down from suicide/self-harm behaviors.” Another foster parent suggested that “more deescalating techniques would be helpful.”

## ***Theme 2: Coping/Self-Care (n = 11 responses)***

In this theme, respondents suggested that the ability to cope and engage in self-care would increase their effectiveness as foster parents. There were two primary subthemes explored: support groups (n = 7 responses) and grief (n = 4 responses).

A few foster parents described a need for support groups in order to cope and increase their effectiveness. One foster parent simply stated that they needed “not so much training as support groups and some kind of foster parent therapy.” Another foster parent agreed with this, stressing the importance of foster parent collaboration in these support groups. They said, “Allow foster parents the chance to collaborate and share ideas on how to respond in challenging situations. [...] We can all learn from each other with FPs sharing ideas.” A different foster parent specified the need for therapy for foster parents, stating, “I feel like instead of having more official training if I were able to work with therapist more within the agency when particular situations arise to learn how to overcome things that I struggle with that would be efficient to help me grow.” Another simply stated, “Grief counseling.”

A few foster parents described needing help with navigating the painful emotions that may come with fostering, primarily grief. They revealed several of the complex and difficult situations that arise with foster parenting, in which the support groups described in this theme would be useful. One foster parent revealed problems coping with “dealing with loss of a placement.” Another mentioned needing help with “how to let go.”

## ***Theme 3: Navigating the System (n = 10 responses)***

In this theme, foster parents described wanting training on how to appropriately and efficiently navigate the foster care system. There were two subthemes: laws, regulations, and rules (n = 7 responses) and biological family (n = 3 responses).

A majority of respondents in this theme mentioned training on how to navigate the many laws, rules, regulations, and expectations that surround foster care as increasing their effectiveness. Specifically, education on “court date(s)” and “expectations of: 1<sup>st</sup> supervised visitation” were named. One foster parent explicitly stated, “Legal knowledge to assist in understanding court hearings, etc.” Another revealed, “I would love some social work training. Training on the laws/regulations/ rules. I’m considering going back to school for it.” In addition, one foster parent suggested, “More info on laws affecting our kids and ourselves.”

As well as information on the legal aspect, a few foster parents also suggested that increased training how to navigate the biological family would increase their effectiveness. One foster parent mentioned wanting training on “garnering a closer relationship with the Childs biological family.” Another asked for training on “how to work better with families/support the child as their family is still being emotionally harmful to the child.” Lastly, one foster parent specified a particular situation that they would like training on: “How to deal with biological parents that are confrontational.”

## ***Theme 4: Increased Resources (n = 5 responses)***

A few foster parents indicated that being provided with more resources would make them more effective. These responses were grouped into two subthemes: online training (n = 3 responses) and want resources (n = 2 responses).

Instead of increasing the trainings required for foster parents, a few participants suggested that foster care agencies increase the resources given to parents. For many of these participants, this includes moving pre-existing trainings to an online format. One foster parent described just this, stating, “Being able to do all online trainings would be great.” Another agreed, suggesting a need for, “More online that can be done at foster parents availability.” For one foster parent, the online trainings already provided are a utilized resource. They said, “I use the online training for anything extra I want to learn about.”

Other participants just simply described a general need for more resources. One mentioned that they have no

resources and would like to have some for reference. They said, “Never given any RESOURCES, but there is always room to grow and become more knowledgeable regarding the foster care system in general!” Another suggested that they would like increased “resources on how to help with the educational neglect most of these children experience.”

## Discussion

Foster care and ways to improve the foster care system have long been a topic of research within child welfare. As such, researchers have examined various issues related to foster parents, including retention, recruitment, turnover, and training, for the purpose of informing change. The present study aimed to examine these areas through the eyes of Kentucky’s foster parents, including their perceptions of barriers to permanency, an integral perspective that has yet to be examined by other child welfare researchers.

With respect to retention, the foster parents in this study noted that they would discontinue fostering due to their dissatisfaction with the child welfare system, the negative emotional impact of fostering, and negative behaviors from the foster child(ren). Many of these areas have previously been noted in the literature on foster parent retention. Foster child(ren) behavior, in particular, has been cited in several studies as being one reason for the high rates of foster parent turnover (Cooley et al., 2015; Broady et al., 2009). Previous literature has also indicated foster parent dissatisfaction with the child welfare system, particularly as a result of issues with the foster agency; lack of reimbursement; and overall difficulties with the system (Mullins et al., 2013; Brown & Bednar, 2006).

Foster parents in the present study overwhelmingly indicated that, if they were unable to continue due to a number of internal and external factors, they would stop fostering. Notably, foster parents mentioned physical health, aging, finances, adoption, and having a full home as being factors at play in their decision to continue or discontinue offering services. These factors align with previous research on the topic, which list health deterioration, a change in personal circumstances, and individual family changes as potential reasons for turnover (Brown & Bednar, 2006; Cherry & Orme, 2013; Hanlon et al., 2009).

When examining ways to encourage retention, foster parents described a few methods that both private and public child welfare agencies could adopt. Primarily, they suggested that improved services, more support, and an adjustment in the strict requirements laid out for foster parents may lead to an overall increase in retention. Their responses specifically indicated a need for more or better services, more or better agency support, improved communication within the child welfare system, better compensation, less paperwork, and increased resources provided to foster parents. Previous research suggests a lack of training and support is a significant factor for foster parents to discontinue their service (Gilbertson & Barber, 2003), which coincides with the results of the present study. Compensation and reimbursement have also been noted by several researchers as affecting foster parent retention, as the ability to effectively raise a foster child can be costly (Mullins et al., 2013; Hanlon et al., 2021).

In addition to retention, foster parents provided valuable input concerning ways to improve their effectiveness. Research has indicated a demand for foster parent competency, particularly to meet the specialized needs of diverse and complex children (Cooley et al., 2015; Hanlon et al., 2021). Foster parents of the present study mirrored this research, describing a need for further training on parenting and behavior management skills. They also indicated a specific demand for increased resources, particularly through online methods or as needed. Additionally, they suggested more knowledge provided on the laws, rules, and regulations of the system and trainings to learn how to navigate situations with the biological families of their foster children may increase their effectiveness as foster parents.

Previous research suggests an increased need for foster parents to frequently engage in self-care behaviors, even though few do (Miller et al., 2019). Foster parents of the present study indicated this need as well, suggesting that engaging in these behaviors might increase their effectiveness. They offered input regarding private and public child welfare agencies encouraging self-care and coping, and several foster parents suggested that the formation of support and grief groups would help them feel more supported and better do their job. They suggested foster care agencies could offer these foster parent support groups to build a sense of

community and validation among their foster parents, increasing effective coping along the way. Several foster parents suggested that this might not only increase their effectiveness, but it might also increase retention among foster parents.

While the topics of retention and training have been examined in previous research studies, the present study is unique in that it also examined foster parent perceptions on barriers to permanency. While previous research has noted that barriers to permanency exist (AFCARS, 2020; Pears et al., 2015; Huscroftd'Angelo et al., 2022; Atkin et al., 2012; Huscroft-d'Angelo, 2019), none have directly examined foster parent perspectives on the issue. Foster parents have consistent contact with their foster children, their child welfare workers, and the child welfare system as a whole. Thus, the findings of the present study add to our overall knowledge of the child welfare system by providing valuable insight into the permanency process.

Foster parents in the present study reported difficulties with the justice system, state workers, and biological parents as being the primary barriers to permanency that they have experienced. For state workers, many foster parents explained how general issues, miscommunication or lack of communication, and inadequate services provided by state workers have contributed to creating barriers to achieving a timely permanency. With respect to the justice system, the time spent in court, as well as the rulings made by the court, were indicated to be barriers to permanency. In addition, leniency provided to biological parents, in terms of both their behavior and court rulings, were also noted by foster parents to be a negative contributor towards achieving permanency. Altogether, the data we collected from foster parents for this study paints an important picture of the permanency process that previous research has not yet examined.

The results of this study are consistent with previous research which illustrates the underlying processes associated with foster parent retention, turnover, and effectiveness. Responses indicate several areas that affect a foster parent's ability to continue providing care, as well as their ability to perform this care effectively. Additionally, foster parent perspectives were gathered on barriers to permanency, granting us valuable insight into the mechanisms which foster parents claim impact a foster child's ability to gain permanency. As a result, the data collected can be used to inform change within the child welfare system, leading to increased foster parent retention and efficacy, as well as timely permanency for foster children.

### **Limitations**

In addition to these valuable contributions, there are some limitations to note concerning the present study. First, the research team did not communicate directly with any foster parent participants. This presents a limitation to the generalizability and projected representation of the findings. Administrators of the foster care agencies forwarded the approved cover letter to the individual agency's foster parents, and due to the nature of this data collection, the research team was unable to determine the response rate of the foster parents participating in the study or the representativeness of the sample. This includes an inability to distinguish between relative/kin foster parents and nonrelative foster parents.

Additionally, it may be difficult to relate Kentucky foster parents' self-reported perceptions to greater foster parent populations, given cultural and organizational differences. As previously stated, the certainty of generalizability of the data is a limitation, and due to the present study being qualitative and not quantitative in design, the data was not collected in a prevalence-seeking methodology. Still, research concerning the rising problems among the child welfare system stands to remain of critical importance to the future of child welfare.

### **Conclusion**

Foster parents are the backbone of the foster care system. This study provides rich insight into the perceptions of Kentucky foster parents for a multitude of issues related to the child welfare system. The qualitative themes discussed throughout this study give public and private agencies throughout the state of Kentucky necessary information on foster parent retention and essential foster parent training. In addition, themes derived from the open-ended questions given to participants address possible barriers to permanency, as seen through a foster parent's lens. This information is necessary to improve a flawed system, and it may be used as a guide for change by policy makers, agency directors, and other child welfare workers.



## References

- Ahn, H., DePanfilis, D., Frick, K. Barth, R. P. (2018). Estimating minimum adequate foster care costs for children in the United States. *Children and Youth Services Review, 84*, 55-67. doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2017.10.045
- Adoption & Foster Care Analysis Reporting System [AFCARS]. (2020). Trends in foster care FY 2011 -2020. [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/trends\\_fostercare\\_adoption\\_11thru20.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/trends_fostercare_adoption_11thru20.pdf)
- Akin, B. A. (2011). Predictors of foster care exits to permanency: A competing risks analysis of reunification, guardianship, and adoption. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*(6), 999–1011. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2011.01.008
- Akin, B. A., Bryson, S. A., McDonald, T., & Walker, S. (2012). Defining a target population at high risk of long-term foster care: Barriers to permanency for families of children with serious emotional disturbances. *Child Welfare, 91*(6), 79–102.
- Baer, L., & Diehl, D. K. (2019). Foster care for teenagers: Motivators, barriers, and strategies to overcome barriers. *Children and Youth Services Review, 103*, 264-277. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2019.06.004>
- Barth, R. P., Jonson-Reid, M., Greeson, J. K. P., Drake, B., Berrick, J. D., Garcia, A. R., & Gyourko, J. R. (2020). Outcomes following child welfare services: What are they and do they differ for Black children? *Journal of Public Child Welfare, 14*(5), 477-499. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2020.1814541>
- Barth, R. P., Berrick, J. D., Garcia, A. R., Drake, B., Jonson-Reid, M., Gyourko, J. R., & Greeson, J. K. P. (2022). Research to consider while effectively re-designing child welfare services. *Research on Social Work Practice, 32*(5), 483-498. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315211050000>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Brown, J. D., & Bednar, L. M. (2006). Foster parent perceptions of placement breakdown. *Children and Youth Services Review, 28*, 1497-1511. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2006.03.004>
- Ball, B., Sevillano, L., Faulkner, M., & Belseth, T. (2021). Agency, genuine support, and emotional connection: Experiences that promote relational permanency in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 121*, 105852–. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2020.105852>
- Broady, T. R., Stoyles, G. J., McMullan, K., Caputi, P., & Crittenden, N. (2009). The experiment of foster care. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 19*, 559-571. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-009-9330-6>
- Barsh, E.T., Moore, J. A., & Hamerlynck, L. A. (1983). The foster extended family: A support network for handicapped foster children. *Child Welfare, 62*(4), 349–359.
- Buehler, C., Rhodes, K. W., Orme, J. G., & Cuddeback, G. (2006). The potential for successful family foster care: Conceptualizing competency domains for foster parents. *Child Welfare, 85*(3), 523–558.
- Benesh, A. S. & Cui, M. (2017). Foster parent training programmes for foster youth: A content review: Foster parent training contents. *Child & Family Social Work, 22*(1), 548–559. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12265>
- Brown, J. D. & Bednar, L. M. (2006). Foster parent perceptions of placement breakdown. *Children and Youth Services Review, 28*, 1497-1511. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2006.03.004>
- Cénat, J. M., McIntee, S. E., Mukunzi, J. N., & Noorishad, P. G. (2021). Overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare system: A systematic review to understand and better act. *Children and Youth Services Review, 120*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2020.105714>
- Cherry, D. J., & Orme, J. G. (2013). The vital few foster mothers. *Children and Youth Services Review, 35*(9), 1625–1633. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2013.07.001>
- Cleary, S. E., Barnett, E. R., Huckins, J. F., Butcher, R. L., & Jankowski, M. K. (2018). A comparison of foster and adoptive parent satisfaction and commitment. *Children and Youth Services Review, 88*, 205–210. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2018.03.010>
- Connell, C. M., Katz, K. H., Saunders, L., & Tebes, J. K. (2006). Leaving foster care—the influence of child and case characteristics on foster care exit rates. *Children and Youth Services Review, 28*(7), 780–

798. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2005.08.007>

- Cooley, M.E., Farineau, H. M., & Mullis, A. K. (2015). Child behaviors as a moderator: Examining the relationship between foster parent supports, satisfaction, and intent to continue fostering. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *45*, 46–56. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.05.007>
- Cooley, M.E. & Petren, R. E. (2011). Foster parent perceptions of competency: Implications for foster parent training. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *33*(10), 1968–1974. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2011.05.023>
- Cooley, M.E., Newquist, J., Thompson, H. M., & Colvin, M. L. (2019). A systematic review of foster parent preservice training. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *107*, 104552–. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2019.104552>
- Cooley, M.E., Thompson, H. M., & Newell, E. (2019). Examining the influence of social support on the relationship between child behavior problems and foster parent satisfaction and challenges. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, *48*(3), 289–303. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-018-9478-6>
- Dettlaff, A.J., Washburn, M., Carr, L. “Christian”, & Vogel, A. “Nikki.” (2018). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth within in welfare: Prevalence, risk and outcomes. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *80*, 183–193. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.03.009>
- Detlaff, A. J., Weber, K., Pendleton, M., Boyd, R., Bettencourt, B., & Burton, L. (2020). It is not a broken system, it is a system that needs to be broken: the upend movement to abolish the child welfare system. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, *14*(5), 500-517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2020.1814542>
- Erney, R., & Weber, K. (2018). Not all children are straight and white: Strategies for serving youth of color in out-of-home care who identify as LGBTQ. *Child Welfare*, *96*(2), 151–177.
- Festinger, T., & Baker, A. J. L. (2013). The quality of evaluations of foster parent training: An empirical review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *35*(12), 2147–2153. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2013.10.009>
- Gibbs, D., & Wildfire, J. (2007). Length of service for foster parents: Using administrative data to understand retention. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *29*(5), 588–599. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2006.11.002>
- Gilbertson, R., & Barber, J. G. (2003). Breakdown of foster care placement: Carer perspectives and system factors. *Australian Social Work*, *56*(4), 329–340. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1447-0748.2003.00095.x>
- Gouveia, L., Magalhães, E., & Pinto, V. S. (2021). Foster families: A systematic review of intention and retention factors. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *30*(11), 2766–2781. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-021-02051-w>
- Government Accountability Office. (2018). Foster care: Additional actions could help HHS better support states’ use of private providers to recruit and retain foster families. <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-376>
- Griffiths, A., Holderfield-Gaither, E., Funge, S.P., & Warfel, E.T. (2021). Satisfaction, willingness, and well-being: Examining the perceptions of a statewide sample of public and private foster parents. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *121*, 105886. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.105886>
- Hanlon, R., Simon, J., Day, A., Vanderwill, L., Kim, J., & Dallimore, E. (2021). Systematic review of factors affecting foster parent retention. *Families in Society*, *102*(3), 285–299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1044389420970034>
- Hanna, M. D., Boyce, E. R., & Yang, J. (2016). The impact of historical trauma and mistrust on the recruitment of resource families of color. *Adoption Quarterly*, *20*(1), 65-82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2016.1149536>
- Huscroft-D’Angelo, J., Trout, A. L., Henningsen, C., Synhorst, L., Lambert, M., Patwardhan, I., & Tyler, P. (2019). Legal professional perspectives on barriers and supports for school-aged students and families during reunification from foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *107*, 104525. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2019.104525>
- Huscroft-D’Angelo, J., Trout, A., Bharwani, S., Brown, A., & Dittmer, C. (2022). An exploratory study of education professionals’ perspectives on the educational needs of students transitioning from foster care to permanency placements. *Education & Treatment of Children*, *45*(3), 263–276. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43494-022-00082-6>
- Kaasbøll, J., Lassemo, E., Paulsen, V., Melby, L., & Osborg, S. O. (2019). Foster parents’ needs, perceptions and satisfaction with foster parent training: A systematic literature review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *101*, 33–41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2019.03.041>

- Konijn, C., Colonnese, C., Kroneman, L., Liefferink, N., Lindauer, R. J. L., & Stams, G.-J. J. M. (2020). "Caring for children who have experienced trauma" - An evaluation of a training for foster parents. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 11(1), 1756563–1756563. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2020.1756563>
- LaBrenz, C. A., Chakravarty, S., Harris, M. S., Choi, M. J., Kim, J., Crutchfield, J., & Bai, R. (2021). Child and state factors in positive permanency: a multi-level survival analysis. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 17(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2021.2004967>
- LaBrenz, C. A., Findley, E., Graaf, G., Baiden, P., Kim, J., Choi, M. J., & Chakravarty, S. (2021). Racial/ethnic disproportionality in reunification across U.S. child welfare systems. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 114, 104894–104894. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104894>
- LaBrenz, C. A., Fong, R., & Cubbin, C. (2020). The road to reunification: Family- and state system-factors associated with successful reunification for children ages zero-to-five. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 99, 104252. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104252>
- Miller, A. E., Green, T. D., & Lambros, K. M. (2019). Foster parent self-care: A conceptual model. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 99, 107–114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.01.014>
- Mullins Geiger, J., Hayes, M. J., & Lietz, C. A. (2013). Should I stay or should I go? A mixed methods study examining the factors influencing foster parents' decisions to continue or discontinue providing foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35, 1356-1365. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.05.003>
- Murphy, A. L., Van Zyl, R., Collins-Camargo, C., & Sullivan, D. (2012). Assessing systemic barriers to permanency achievement for children in out-of-home care: Development of the child permanency barriers scale. *Child Welfare*, 91(5), 37–72.
- Murphy, A. L., Boamah, D. A., Warfel, E. T., Griffiths, A., & Roehm, D. (2023). Ending racial disproportionality in child welfare: A systematic review. *Children & Society*, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12721>
- Murray, L., Tarren-Sweeney, M., & France, K. (2011). Foster carer perceptions of support and training in the context of high burden of care: Foster carer support and training. *Child & Family Social Work*, 16(2), 149–158. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2010.00722.x>
- Orme, J. G., Cherry, D. J., & Brown, J. D. (2017). Against all odds: Vital few foster families. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 79, 584–593. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.07.019>
- Osterling, K. L., Lee, P. A., & Hines, A. H. (2012). The influence of family reunification services on racial/ethnic disparities in permanency outcomes for children in the child welfare system. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 6(3), 330–354. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2012.683372>
- Pears, K. C., Kim, H. K., Buchanan, R., & Fisher, P. A. (2015). Adverse consequences of school mobility for children in foster care: A prospective longitudinal study. *Child Development*, 86(4), 1210–1226. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12374>
- Strauss, B., & Wasburn-Moses, L. (2017). Improving preparation for foster care: Developing a child-friendly training curriculum for families who foster. *Child Welfare*, 95(5), 25–38.
- Strickler, A., Mihalo, J. R., & Celedonia, K. L. (2018). Reducing barriers to using data: A learning collaborative approach to leverage collective knowledge about treatment parent satisfaction and retention. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 95, 300–307. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.11.011>
- Testa, M., Woodruff, K., Bess, R., Milner, J., & Woolverton, M. (2019). Every child deserves a permanent home: The permanency innovations initiative. *The Future of Children*, 29(1), 145–162. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2019.0006>
- Vandivere, S., Malm, K., & Radcliff, L. (2009). *Adoption USA: A chartbook based on the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents*. US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.
- Wilson, J., Katz, J., & Geen, R. (2005). *Listening to parents: Overcoming barriers to the adoption of children from foster care*. Cambridge: John F. Kennedy School of Government Faculty Research Working Paper Series.
- Wulczyn, F., Orlebeke, B., Hislop, K., Schmits, F., McClanahan, J., & Huang, L. (2018). The dynamics of foster home recruitment and retention. The Center for State Child Welfare Data. [https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Foster-Home-Report-Final\\_FCDA\\_October2018.pdf](https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Foster-Home-Report-Final_FCDA_October2018.pdf).

## Authors

**Alecia Hatfield** is a Master of Clinical Psychology student at Western Kentucky University, and an alumni Graduate Research Assistant of the LifeSkills Center for Child Welfare Education and Research. She has a combined five years of clinical experience working in inpatient and outpatient mental health clinics in Kentucky, and she is dedicated to promoting the well-being of children and their families.

**David Roehm** is an instructor at Western Kentucky University and a psychological testing clinician at Seven Counties Services in Louisville, Kentucky. David strives to earn his doctorate in clinical psychology so that he can improve the lives of at-risk populations that experience racial discrimination and social disparities in receiving education, medical services, and mental health services. He is passionate about improving the fabric of Kentucky's most vulnerable communities.

**Austin Griffiths** has over 16 years of combined professional practice experience in both child and adult protective services and in facilitating applied research. He is the Director of Western Kentucky University's LifeSkills Center for Child Welfare Education and Research and is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work. Dr. Griffiths is passionate about improving the lives of families and children. The majority of his research is focused on improving the lives of the professionals who work with vulnerable populations by enhancing their health, wellness, and work life balance.

**Simon Funge** is a former foster parent, is the Academic Unit Head for Social Work at James Madison University, and was previously the BSW Program Director for the Department of Social Work at Western Kentucky University.