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A qualitative examination of the outcomes and impact of foster parent education

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Capstone Approval Page

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ABSTRACT:

Utilizing a qualitative approach, exit interviews were conducted with eight foster mothers who participated in a parent education program called Listening to Children (LTC). LTC is unique in that it mirrors the strengths of predominant models of parent education but is based on a unique set of philosophical and methodological underpinnings that blend parent education and parent support groups.

Analysis of the interviews yielded insight into what participants learned during the intervention, how it affected their foster parenting, whether the LTC program was unique, and if so, in what ways. Results suggest that foster parent education programs can lead to an increased sense of social support and improved parenting skills, particularly in areas related to handling children's misbehavior and improving listening skills. Results also suggest that the structure and content of LTC render it unique among foster parent training programs and that its unique components, if implemented in other training models, might enhance the success and benefit of those programs as well.

Although the sample was quite small, the information gleaned has important implications for practice in that it provides much needed and scarcely available feedback about what is necessary to make foster parent training a viable means through which to improve the fostering experience for both parents and children.

A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF THE OUTCOMES AND IMPACT OF FOSTER PARENT EDUCATION

Foster parent training programs have the potential to address a vital need within the child welfare system. Given that many children are in public care due to abandonment, neglect, abuse, exploitation, emotional rejection, parental incapacity or the child's behavior (Berry, 1988), it is only logical that foster parents should be provided with the training and ongoing support necessary to care well for these children. Unfortunately, such training and support are in short supply and what is available is inconsistent in philosophy and content, unreliable in producing stated goals, and insufficient in meeting the expressed needs of foster parents.

While studies show that there are fewer placement failures when foster parents receive extensive training before their first placement experience (Smith, 1994), foster parents complain of a lack of preparation and support from welfare agencies (Berry, 1988). In a study of 42 foster mothers, less than one-third received any kind of training before accepting their first child and only a few received two or more hours of training (Berry).

Aside from the availability of initial training, foster parents complain about a lack of ongoing social support. As Berry (1999) notes, one problem faced is "a lack of support typically described as a lack of a social network with other foster parents who could provide services such as respite care" (p. 200).

Despite the demonstrated need for foster parent training and support programs, such opportunities are scarce. And among existing programs, there is great variation in content and goals. Research and practice have failed to establish a consistent and effective approach to foster parent training and support. Attempts at foster parent training have included didactic discussion

groups, knowledge and skills enrichment programs, programs that train parents in psychological helping skills to be applied to specific family settings, programs characterized as the systematic skills approach, and behavioral modification programs.

Didactic Programs

One form of foster parent training are didactic discussion groups in which foster parents and agency representatives discuss foster parenting procedures and potential problems. This type of training is also called reflective because parents are asked to reflect on and discuss the causes and effects of problems in foster care. The group discussions follow a structured outline and use associated readings to learn about the issues.

Didactic programs have been provided in the context of pre-service and in-service trainings, specialized workshops on discipline and separation issues, educational consultation to groups, resource centers for foster care literature, community referral centers, and sessions aimed at improving communication, developing responsibility in foster children, dealing with school problems, and understanding behavior (Berry, 1988). One shortcoming of didactic programs is that they lack the ability to provide individualized instruction and guidance to parents concerning specific situations and the unique challenges of particular circumstances.

Knowledge and Skills Enrichment Programs

Another type of foster parent training are knowledge and skills enrichment programs that focus on cognitive and behavioral empowerment of foster parents. This approach, like didactic discussion groups, has the overall goal of helping foster parents to provide better care to foster children. Jacobs (1980) suggests that this type of training "supports foster parents' professional growth and evolving role [which] contributes to better care for foster children." Since these programs focus on increasing foster parents' knowledge in areas such as child development,

foster parents are more prepared to understand children's behavior and developmental needs. Studies have shown that, equipped with this new knowledge, foster parents' intense feelings of lack of control are reduced (Jacobs).

Psychological Helping Skills Programs

A third approach to foster parent training is through psychological helping skills programs. These programs have proven "effective in training foster parents to be more accepting of their foster children, more aware of their feelings and perceptions of children, and better able to respond to children appropriately in ways that reflect sensitivity while providing minimal control" (Guemey, 1977, p. 370). Despite these results, Guemey cautions that short-range positive effects do not necessarily insure duration of the effects or long-term positive impact on foster children.

Psychological helping skills programs help parents to grapple with simulated real-life situations through watching films, role playing, and completing assignments between classes (Guemey, 1977). Guemey notes that such activities help parents "to acquire the empathic and communication skills that they will need in many of the critical situations they will face" (p.370).

Systematic Skills Approach

The systematic skills approach provides training in communication and child-management skills, adapted to the special circumstances of individual foster parents (Levant & Slobodian, 1981). Such programs have the added benefit of including orientation to the foster parent role and providing information that will familiarize the foster parents with agency regulations. Systematic skills programs incorporate didactic and experiential components, as well as homework exercises. A typical 10-week course outline might include the following:

<i>Part I: Communication Skills</i>	<i>Part II: Parenting Skills</i>
1. Attending	6. Accepting
2. Listening and Responding I-Content	7. Structuring
3. Listening and Responding II-Feelings	8. Rules, Limits and Consequences
4. Speaking for Oneself I-Self Awareness	9. Conflict Resolution
5. Speaking for Oneself II-Genuineness	10. Integration-Skilled Foster Parenting

(Levant & Slobodian, Table 1, p. 266, 1981)

In an evaluation of a systematic skills program, no significant effects were found. The researchers suggest that the effects were diminished because of the tremendous life stressors faced by the participants; stress that often invaded on class time and interfered with the planned course of instruction. As the researchers point out, "Common sense dictates that an individual cannot be available to care for another when her basic survival needs are not being met" (Levant & Slobodian, p. 271). This conclusion underscores the need to provide ongoing support and resources to foster parents in order for them to care adequately for the children in their charge.

Behavioral Modification

Foster parent programs with a behavioral orientation use role playing, video tapes of interactions between parents and children, and "behavior rehearsal of effective behavior to increase parents' skills in dealing with difficult behaviors of children" (Berry, 1988, p. 312). In this approach, "parents act as 'therapists' in their own home, selecting target behaviors, and working through a program with support from the group" (Penn, 1978, p. 180).

Behavioral programs are based on operant behavior modification theory, utilizing tools of reinforcement, punishment, and planning and implementation of behavioral change programs. Behavioral programs generally have been found to be beneficial in helping foster parents to be

more capable of dealing with foster children's behavior. Research suggests that foster parents with minimal experience gain the most from such programs (Berry, 1988). After implementing behavioral change programs in the foster home, foster parents have reported significant changes in "sleeping behavior, morning and evening behavior, self-help and toilet behavior, feeding and mealtime behavior, general behavior, and school behavior" (Penn, 1978, p. 177).

THE PRESENT STUDY

The goal of the present study was to inform and improve foster parent training efforts by providing insight about participants' perceived experiences and program impact.. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the study involved exit interviews with eight foster mothers who participated in a parent education program called Listening to Children (LTC).

Several questions guided the research: Does the impact of foster parent training, as perceived by participants, mirror its intended impact? Does the group experience, as perceived by participants, reflect the intentions of the program? Does participation in foster parent training influence parenting practices? Are there unique elements in the LTC program that render it more effective as an approach to foster parent training?

The Parent Education Program

The parent education program used in this study was Listening to Children (LTC). Developed over the past 12 years, LTC derives from Re-evaluation Counseling, a theory of human behavior and an international, lay-led movement focused on improving the lives of individuals and the social context in which they operate. LTC organizes Re-evaluation Counseling ideas about families and child rearing into a parent education framework... A significant departure from behaviorist parent training, LTC mirrors the strengths of Alderian and Rogerian parent education while placing primary emphasis on community, diversity, social

support, and the impact of oppression on family functioning (e.g., racism, sexism, economic inequity).

LTC was chosen for this study because, as a model of parent education, it has been consistently successful in meeting its goals. Research on the difficulties of recruiting low-income parents notwithstanding (Halpern, 1990), LTC groups of Head Start mothers has boasted nearly perfect attendance. Further, at the end of LTC class series, many participants elect to attend ongoing LTC support groups rather than disband and lose their circle of support. Another reason for choosing LTC is that it has proved effective with parents who represent the full spectrum of socio-economic status and a variety of ethnic and cultural groups, and parents whose children range in age from infancy through adolescence. Finally, the program was chosen because studies have found that LTC participation can improve parental attitudes, reduce parenting stress levels, and encourage authoritative parenting practices, all of which contribute to parents' abilities to positively influence children's healthy development and academic performance (Wolfe, 1999).

Program content and structure

The LTC program includes weekly meetings, each consisting of a sequential presentation of information, in-class activities, reading assignments, and homework projects. Each class is built around a theme and ideas are presented about parenting, child-rearing, and emotional healing that reflect and expand upon the theme. In-class activities, discussions, readings, and homework assignments also reflect the weekly themes. Although this structure is typical of parenting classes, three elements form the core of the intervention and render LTC distinctive in its approach to parenting and parent education.

Recognizing the Effects of Parents' Own Childhood Experiences

A primary assumption in LTC is that to think afresh about child-rearing, parents need to distinguish between the demands of the present situation and old feelings, anxieties, fears, and limitations that come out of their own childhood experiences. In LTC, much class time is spent giving participants opportunities to explore the effects of past and current distresses so that these experiences can be re-evaluated and parents can regain lost confidence and insight. By clearing away early tensions and struggles, many of the present difficulties faced in parenting are brought into sharp relief (e.g., feelings about play, learning, physical affection, and discipline). Reflecting RC theory, it is postulated that as parents work through their own childhood distresses, they can better discriminate between their children's feelings and their own, begin to see their children's lives as unique and distinct from their own, and better adapt their parenting to meet the needs and demands of their particular family situation (Wipfler, 1991).

Spending "Special Time" with Children

A second tenet of LTC is spending "Special Time" with children (Wipfler, 1990), reflecting the idea that meeting children's needs for adult attention and adult-child play is analogous to primary prevention, whereas handling children's misbehavior is more of a secondary intervention. Because managing family life tends to consume their full energy, parents often have little attention left over for anything deemed less than urgent or critical. As a result, it is often difficult for parents to remember that playing with children and fostering responsive, trusting parent-child relationships is critical to encouraging children's optimal development. In "Special Time" parents establish weekly opportunities in which they follow their children's lead in play, minimizing distractions, avoiding unnecessary adult direction or guidance, and providing children with an opportunity to contradict the feelings of powerlessness that may color much of

their daily lives. It is postulated that creating such opportunities is directly correlated to increasing children's capacity for pro-social behavior and academic success.

Understanding and Handling Children's Emotions and Upsets

Helping parents understand and meet children's emotional needs is the third focus of LTC. Like adults, children need opportunities to discharge tensions that result from hurtful experiences to regain their inherent tendency toward cooperative, intelligent behavior. It is postulated that parents can play an important role in fostering such opportunities by supporting and encouraging children's efforts to show and resolve emotional tensions, rather than distracting, appeasing, or ignoring them. Learning to handle children's upsets means learning to listen actively when children need to work out feelings of frustration, anger, grief, fear, disappointment, or powerlessness. In LTC, parents are taught to appreciate and take advantage of times when children feel safe to show struggles, rather than requiring compliance or obedience.

LTC Class Agenda

TIME	ACTIVITY
10 minutes	Opening Circle: Sharing 'News and Goods'
10 minutes	Week-in-Review: Listening Dyads
30 minutes	Thematic Presentation of Information
30 minutes	Small Group Reflection/Discussion
30 minutes	Large Group Discussion
10 minutes	Closing Circle: Appreciating Each Other

LTC Weekly Themes

SESSION	THEME
1	Perfect Parenting and Other Impossible Dreams
2	The Emotional Healing Process
3	Treating Children with Respect
4	Three Building Blocks of Effective Foster Parenting
5	A New Perspective on Saying 'No' and Setting Limits
6	Special Time: Learning to Pay Attention to Children
7	Play Listening: A Tool to Build Parent-Child Relationships
8	Course Evaluation, Setting Goals, Reflecting on the Experience

METHODOLOGY

Research design

Modeled on First and Way's study of parent education outcomes (1995), the research design incorporated Roe, Warner and Erikson's (1986) method of collecting stories to describe human experiences. A literature review was conducted to examine what has been tried in the area of providing foster parent training, foster parent education, and foster parent support groups. The literature review rendered information about the strengths and shortcomings of various approaches and offered some direction about what is needed to develop an effective foster parent education intervention.

Individual exit interviews were then conducted with eight of 13 foster mothers who had participated in a pilot series of LTC designed specifically to address the parent education and support needs of foster parents. An evaluation of the impact and effectiveness of the Listening to Children (LTC) program was developed by reading and re-reading the exit interviews for interpretation and to develop a conceptual framework for categorizing the reported experiences. Recurring themes were identified and quotes were pulled out that provided particular insight and representative descriptions of the LTC experience and its impact on the participants.

Interviews

The interviews were based on the work of First and Way (1995) and designed to obtain in-depth feedback about the impact of the LTC program on participants' parenting and overall quality of life, and to enable a conceptualization of program outcomes from the participants' perspectives. The interviews included nine multi-part, open-ended questions, took 45-60 minutes to administer, and were conducted within one month of the conclusion of the LTC class series. The interviews elicited stories about the foster mothers' LTC experiences, reflections about what

they had learned, and examples of how the experience affected them. Questions included: Have you seen changes in your foster children's behavior over the course of the class series? Did participating in LTC make foster parenting any easier or any more difficult? How did LTC differ from other foster parent training experiences you've had? Questions were also included about the effectiveness and impact of the group leader.

Group Participants

There were 13 African-American foster mothers from inner city Chicago neighborhoods who participated in the LTC pilot series, eight of whom participated in the exit interviews. The mothers' ages ranged from 33 to 68; the foster children's ages ranged from six months to 14 years. All of the participants represented low-income, working class families. Nine of the participants foster parent on a full-time basis, two women also work as in-home child care providers, and two women work part-time outside of the home.

RESULTS

Content analysis of the eight exit interviews led to three categories that reflect the distinct outcomes of the LTC parent education program:

1. impact and importance of social support;
2. improved parenting skills (in particular, increased ability to handle children's misbehaviors and enhanced listening skills);
3. LTC compared to other foster parent training experiences.

Impact and Importance of Social Support

Telleen, Hersog, and Kilbane (1989) observe that the social support provided by family support programs includes emotional support as well as concrete, active problem-solving ideas offered by staff in response to the parents' concerns. Underscoring the importance of social

support, the researchers suggest that, "It may be that the [foster parents'] perception of receiving support is more important than the support itself."

Several of the foster parents commented on the importance of the social support they received while participating in LTC. Barbara explained that a bonding took place among the participants and that she came "to treasure that bond." Lolita stated that the group meetings eased a lot of the frustrations she was going through and noted how unusual it was for her "just being able to finally get an opportunity to express myself," since she is typically the one who listens to others rather than being listened to.

Asked about the best experience in the class, Clara said " ... when we were talking, all the ladies together, and we were able to release a lot." Underscoring the significance of the sharing that occurred in the group, Clara said, "We were able to talk and share what our problems were at home. We can't necessarily share them with other people, but we were able to share in class."

Betty also spoke about the impact of the social support she felt during the experience. "A lot of times, a lot of us don't have advocates or a good support system. And [the group] gave us a chance to open up and express yourself and get a chance to listen to other people's problems and other people get a chance to listen to some of the things that you're going through. And it can really take a lot of burdens off your shoulders."

Juanita concurred with the others. "I fell in love with being able to sit and listen to other people." Explaining the usefulness of the support she received, Juanita explained, "We just need a place that we can come and just air out our feelings sometimes, and just have somebody listen who's in the system ... it just makes you feel better."

LTC teaches parents to listen actively to each other while refraining from giving advice or opinions. Cassandra commented on the usefulness of this kind of listening. "If you just listen

to a person, just hear them out, they think you have done wonders. You have really helped them out [even though] you really didn't do or say anything at all." In a similar vein, Juanita observed, "I found that I didn't even have to give my opinion and yet the person felt satisfied, just totally satisfied with what they had told me."

Reflecting the idea that parents can learn from each other as much as from professionals or experts, Lolita noted that, "... in this group we were able to express ourselves and then see others who were going through either a similar situation or the same situation or just to be able to share experiences and give each other ideas."

Improved Parenting Skills - Increased Ability to Handle Children's Misbehaviors

Researchers have noted that successful foster parents seem to be those parents who can manage a wide range of child behaviors (Smith, 1994). Lolita explained that LTC helped her understand that each child is different and that she would have to "meet them at their level." During a particular period, her foster child was constantly Whining. She explained that through LTC she learned to set boundaries so the foster child would "know that there are just times that he cannot get everything he wants. Now he's not as whiney as before."

LTC encourages the development of close, trusting parent-child relationships based on mutual respect.. Toward that end, parents are instructed to spend relaxed, playful times together and to recognize the mutuality of a respectful relationship. Reflecting these ideas, Barbara noted that she and her foster child "... laugh more together now. My foster child talks more with me and she's calmer when I'm calm. You know, you can't always be yelling or [saying,] 'well, I'm the adult,' or 'I'm your mom and you gotta treat me a certain way.' You have to consider their feelings, too."

Clara suggested a connection between playing with her foster child more often and the child's improved behavior. "At night, I do this computer game with her a lot. I didn't used to do it every time, but now I'm doing it with her and she seems to be calmer. And when she goes to bed she's much more calm, and in the morning she's a different child. She's easier, more calm."

LTC encourages the use of limit-setting as a key discipline strategy and helps parents use limit-setting to cope with children's painful emotions and create space in which they can resolve some of those emotions. Gloria spoke specifically about her increased understanding of tantrums. "I really learned at the class about tantrums, 'cause they have them all the time. And I really learned not to get upset when they want to throw things as long as it don't hurt--hurt themselves or anyone else. But to just let them cry or whatever and go ahead and get it out and understand that they might not be crying because I gave them a time out; it could be crying about some past experience that I don't even know about."

Improved Parenting Skills - Enhanced Active Listening Skills

Another unique aspect of LTC is its emphasis on teaching parents to listen to children as they express the emotional struggles that underlie their misbehavior. Clara explained that, as a result of participating in LTC, "I don't get as frustrated when she do something. If she have upset moments, I don't get as upset like I used to. Now I know that she have to have her time and I know that she's going to have good days and bad days. This is what I learned-just to listen and she'll get over it. A cry means something, it really do."

Juanita explains how she is better able to deal with her foster child's misbehavior during mealtimes. "I find now that I'm being a little bit more open to him by stopping and taking time out instead of, like, when something happens just react to it. For instance, I found that when he gets ready to eat, one thing I was doing was I fixed his plate and put it on the table and next thing

I know the whole plate [gets thrown] off the table. Now, just by listening and sitting and asking him first ... after somebody do that so many times, you gotta know something is wrong, but I really didn't see that.. So now I asked him what is it that he wanted? He just didn't want certain things on the same plate together and that's all that it was. Eventually I found out by just stopping and listening to him, before I fixed his plate, to find out what he wanted."

Lolita explained that after attending the classes she learned to stop and listen to her child to see what his needs were. She emphasized that "[his misbehavior] has not actually stopped, but I just happen to know how to handle the situation different to make me at ease. He just does the same things but I know how to handle him a little bit better now."

LTC Compared to Other Foster Parent Training Experiences

Because a primary goal in piloting LTC among foster parents is to develop an effective model of foster parent education and support that can be replicated and disseminated, it is particularly important to gather participant feedback about the unique elements and strengths of the program. Throughout the exit interviews, the foster mothers compared LTC with other foster parent training in which they had participated.

In many foster parent training programs, professionals or experts are brought in to lecture about a particular topic. The foster mothers interviewed had had many experiences with these kinds of programs and complained about the limited opportunity they provide for feedback, interaction, or question-asking.

Cassandra noted that, "In other seminars and classes, it's basically paper material and basically a professor just talking and you're just taking notes." Betty further explained that, "Most of the classes that we attend have a speaker and they do most of the talking. They pass out

a lot of literature and save the questions for last. So really, you don't have time to express yourself and you have questions coming from all corners of the room."

The mothers expressed frustration with trainings that do not provide concrete information about how to deal with specific situations being faced in foster homes. Juanita recalled trainings in which "it would be more like a classroom setting where you had somebody instructing you on what goes on with children with disabilities, the way they act, and at what stage these things were going to come out...but not necessarily anything that you can do about them." Betty complained about presentations being too general and not allowing sufficient time to address individual concerns. "They can tell you a little bit, but you really don't get a lot out of it. They tell you, 'Well, I can talk to you after class ... take my card and call me.'"

Several of the mothers contrasted the warm, interactive tone established in LTC with the atmosphere in other training programs. Noting that she enjoyed the sharing that went on among group members, Birdia said, "...to be able to really open up like we did in this circle ... you don't do that [in other programs] because they want to jump in and get a whole class over in a certain amount of time." Cassandra further explained, "I went through a couple of other workshops and programs but it was quite different in regards to the group discussions. To be able to participate and to be able to say more things and to be able to express yourself about what you're going through ... this was much more personal." Barbara summarized her overall feeling about the atmosphere: "I'll have to say I love the format. I loved the way it was handled. It was just talking, saying, 'Well, this is how this should be done.' The interacting, the 'I'm gonna let you talk' made a big difference."

In contrast to the close-ended structure of other foster parent training, LTC participants lauded the importance of being listened to in a supportive environment without being told what

to do. Gloria observed, "Oh, LTC is totally different 'cause you're able to express yourself here. We were able to talk, to tell another person how we feel, how our week went, and then they were able to tell us how their week went.. And then after we did that, what I liked was, you didn't have to voice your opinion. A person didn't have to go back and say, 'Well, I think you should do this and maybe you should do that.' "

Although LTC participants are presented with concrete tools about child-rearing and handling children's misbehavior, the foster parents remarked on the difference in presentation and tone that made it easier to digest and apply the information, as compared with the didactic nature of other training programs. Juanita appreciated that the information was tailored to the specific needs and issues facing the group members. "This class was a little different.. We got information on how to go home and maybe handle the situation." Reflecting her frustration with previous training experiences, Lolita said, "This was more personal.. Instead of being talked to all the time, like 'Okay, this is how we do this and you're supposed to do this and you're supposed to do that, don't do this, don't do that ...' I'm just like, 'okay - whatever.' It was refreshing [in LTC] to be able to go and learn and then be able to take it home with you."

In that one role of a group leader is to insure a positive group climate, the overall success of a training experience is significantly impacted by the leader's capabilities. Many of the foster mothers commented on the intense impact the group leader had on their experience. Recurring comments described the impact of the leader's personal touch and her ability to mediate respect and allow time for each group member's comments. Clara stated it most simply. "This is what I liked about the class: our leader took time individually with us. And that's important."

Juanita spoke about the leader's ability to convey caring and respect for group members. Comparing LTC to other training programs, she said, "One of the differences I saw ...I couldn't

figure out how, but [our leader] remembered everybody's name and every situation. And that kind of made people feel good. She could put the names with whatever they had to say last time that we were there and she even remembered what happened before. And that kind of made people feel good. It was pretty intriguing to people that she remembered their names and even remembered their situations. She let people know that she's concerned and she cares."

Others praised the leader for insuring that everyone was listened to and no one was allowed to dominate group discussions. Gloria explained that "[the group leader] made sure that everyone got their time and no one did all the talking." Cassandra agreed, noting that, "our leader was very helpful in making sure that we didn't say anything until it was our time and to just listen for the restricted amount of time, which was great.. I liked timing with the stopwatch; that was wonderful.. And you didn't hear a lot of people talking over one another."

DISCUSSION

The ongoing development and dissemination of Listening to Children as a distinct approach to foster parent training has important implications. The interviews reported suggest that foster parent training can have positive outcomes that may lead to more successful fostering experiences. The group setting can provide critical social support. Course content can encourage the acquisition of more effective parenting skills in such areas as handling children's misbehavior and improving listening skills. The overall experience can result in a deeper understanding of children and the role of foster parents in encouraging healthy development.. Group leaders can be important resources and can play a critical role in establishing group safety and fostering open discussion.

The feedback from the mothers in this study suggests a link between increased social support and less stressful, more responsive, more empathic foster parenting. This finding has

implications, in particular, for developing more effective training programs for low-income foster parents, foster parents of color, and other highly stressed populations. While the interviews suggest that providing opportunities for mutual support and emotional healing may correlate with improved foster parenting attitudes and practices, most foster parent education is primarily didactic in nature, providing little opportunity for such sharing and support. In an effort to improve program effectiveness, practitioners might consider incorporating the support elements emphasized in LTC as a way of optimizing their foster parent education efforts. In the long run, practitioners may find that creating supportive settings in which foster parents can openly share, examine their own childhood experiences, and garner mutual support is more important than offering child development or foster care information per se.

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